

**Santa Clara University**  
**2012 Commencement of Graduate Students**  
**Remarks of Dr. Martha J. Kanter**  
**Under Secretary, U.S. Department of Education**  
**June 15, 2012**  
12 – 15 min.

Thank you, Professor Hanson and Professor Murray; President Eng (pronounced ING); Chairman Finocchio (fin OAK ee oh); President Fong (Unconfirmed); Trustees, Regents, professors, staff, distinguished alumni – and – most importantly graduates of the Class of 2012.

I am pleased and honored to be with you here today. I know I am among mentors, friends and advisors, including many who helped me over three decades of service educate and transfer literally thousands of our most talented and able community college students to complete their degrees at Santa Clara University. One of my greatest memories is working with Joyce Gerard and later Ruth Cook in the graduate school of education to provide internships for students like Jeannine Stein and others who went onto become leaders in the field of learning disabilities as a result of their graduate education here. I feel a deep connection to this university and it is good to be home. Thank you all for welcoming me so warmly.

As a lifelong educator, though, let me begin with a little pop quiz. You had to expect that, right? You don't have to get out your blue books, especially on the day of commencement. But I wonder how many of you know what these individuals have in common: CIA Director Leon Panetta, Jefferson Airplane founder Paul Kantner, Fry's Electronics Founders John and Randy Fry, California Governor Jerry Brown, Secretary of Homeland Security Janet Napolitano, Sharon Kugler, the first female chaplain at Yale University, Ambassador Mary Ann Peters, the current Provost of the Naval War College, and the honorable John Vasconcellos, a renowned state senator who served this community and the state of California with distinction for decades?

That's right. At one time or another they all stood where you stand today, as graduates of this fine University. And those are just a few of your fellow graduates. Since its founding, Santa Clara has been an institution where the intersection of values, ideas and action join in unison to empower students, graduates, the community, the state, our nation and the world.

I could spend my entire time with you at this podium reading the list of Santa Clara alums who went on to make a profound difference in our world, as CEOs, entrepreneurs, investors, philanthropists, heads of families, scientists, jurists and respected community leaders; there are literally thousands upon thousands of your fellow graduates who over the years took what they learned here and applied it to their community and the world in ways that continue to have a positive impact on us all.

In fact, one of my favorite stories about this place comes from my friend, your law school graduate, John Vasconcellos, class of '59, who retired from the state legislature

shortly before President Obama was elected and I moved to Washington, DC to accept my current position as Under Secretary of Education.

As many of you know, John played a significant role in helping to build California's legendary system of public and private higher education.

John tells the story of his very first race for political office, which took place right here. He was running for student body president. And, in a pattern that would distinguish his public service for the rest of his years in office, John wanted to do the right thing, the "Santa Clara" thing. So when election day came, after campaigning hard for weeks John looked over his ballot and, worried that he was being perhaps too selfish or self-centered, and in keeping with the values of sacrifice and service to others that is taught and instilled here, he just could not, on reflection, bring himself to do what he had spent weeks asking others to do, which was to vote for himself! So, in an act of self-sacrifice and modesty, John cast his ballot for his opponent. And when the votes were tallied, John lost the election, his first election. By one vote! It was, he often told others, the last time that happened, and, as many of you know, John went on to win more elections than perhaps anyone in the history of this community.

I tell you that story for a reason. Not only to remind you of the many fine women and men who have come before you here, but also to remind you of the importance of believing in yourself and in your dreams.

When I was a young girl, I was moved by the words of Eleanor Roosevelt: "The future," she said, "belongs to those who believe in the beauty of their dreams." We all have dreams. But what sets wishful thinkers apart from accomplished individuals such as those I mentioned earlier is a belief in those dreams, and a belief in their own capacity, your own capacity, to make them real.

And that is the charge I want to offer you today. Believe in yourselves. Believe that the same talent and ability that got you into and through this fine university will carry you further. Believe that you can make a difference and act on that belief and add your names to the honor roll of those who walked these corridors and made positive change happen for decades before you entered these doors. You can do more, you can be more, you can lift others and you can change and improve our world. And as you walk along that path, you will find many others like yourselves ready to help.

I know that is true because I know so many stories now, stories of students who didn't think they could, but did. Graduates who had what they thought were grand ambitions and who ended up doing even more. And I know the other side of that as well, the sadder side, the students and graduates of great promise who got sidetracked, stymied for some reason, thwarted by life's inevitable challenges and who eventually gave up. But the one thing I know for certain, and the message I want you to remember today, is what all those who met with success had in common: They did not give up. They did not quit on themselves or their community or our country. They took each time they got knocked down as an invitation to get back up. And when the time came, they voted for themselves! I wish that for all of you and I urge each and every one of you to step up to the challenge of believing in and acting on the beauty of your own dreams.

To the members of the class of 2012, your families, and friends, congratulations on this important day in your lives. Let's also take a moment to thank those who made your journey here possible, your relatives, families, parents, supporting friends, and the others in your life who stood beside you to help you get to where you are today. Let's take a minute to salute all of them. Some of them are here with you, others are here in your hearts. Let's take a moment to recognize them and give them all a hand!

In our nation, there are many sources of power, but more and more an education like the one you benefited from here today is a prerequisite for success. Today, fewer than eight percent of Americans have a master's degree and only about three percent hold a doctoral degree. So by earning your degrees you are doing more than just building your resume, you are also helping move our nation forward.

Academic excellence, conscience and compassion, engaged learning and service to others characterize the education you, like those before you, have received here.

But Santa Clara offers a much bigger vision – one that includes a commitment to service and sustainability. This university understands that we all have a responsibility to help our planet and to encourage others to develop a more sustainable way of living. By embracing sustainability, Santa Clara and its students continue to further its mission to act as a voice of reason, conscience, and service to society. So what does that mean in real terms?

It means that as students, your education has prepared you to understand that in America a commitment to service matters.

Without that commitment, your community would not be prepared to tackle environmental and food justice in San Jose; or understand the public health problems that are inseparably linked to poverty and marginalization in the Silicon valley; nor would have made the commitment to reduce energy consumption on campus, which serves as a model for others.

Fortunately, here at Santa Clara, you *have been* prepared to look beyond what someone can do for you. You have been taught the value of helping and impacting others and after you graduate, I know you will step up to this enormous responsibility so that you can make our world a better place.

As you know, I work for President Obama and our Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan. I have learned a great deal from both of them and we share many of the same values – values that have convinced us that our nation must once again become the world leader in education.

Shortly after the President took office, President Obama set an ambitious goal for our country. His goal is that by 2020 America will once again lead the world in the proportion of college graduates and have the best educated, most competitive workforce in the world.

We used to be number one – but a generation ago we have fallen to 16<sup>th</sup> place. We're behind Korea, Canada, Japan, Finland and 11 other countries.

We have been working since the first days of President Obama's term to turn that around, to change direction and to reach what we at the Department of Education call our "North Star," the one that will guide us in our quest to make a high quality education a reality for every American. , To make that happen, we have put forward a cradle-to-career agenda that starts with strong, comprehensive, high-quality early childhood programs. It continues by focusing on building a world-class P-12 system, boosting student outcomes with higher standards and better assessments, recruiting and retaining more highly effective teachers, especially in high need schools, and tackling the dropout rate. It culminates in efforts to make college more accessible and affordable, and to ramp up quality and degree completion for students – from teens straight out of high school, to adult learners, workers, unemployed Americans, or new immigrants.

Under President Obama's leadership and the support of Congress, we have done more to increase access to college than any administration since Franklin Roosevelt signed the G.I. Bill. We increased funding for Pell Grant scholarships by \$40 billion over the next decade simply by cutting overly generous federal subsidies to lenders that made student loans. I'm sure some of you wouldn't be here today if you didn't have help from the Pell Grant program when you were undergraduates. In the last three years, we've increased the number of students from America's poorest families by more than 50% to 9.8 million students today who would not be in college without a Pell grant. We also dramatically simplified the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (the FAFSA) by cutting out nearly half of the questions; and with the American Opportunity Tax Credit we want to make permanent, we are providing tax credits of up to 10,000 over four years for undergraduates from low-income and middle-class families. We've also launched programs to help student borrowers manage their debt – from income-based repayment plans, to partial loan forgiveness programs for students who work for ten years or more in public service careers like teaching, health care, government, and law enforcement. And we are also working to improve transparency in college costs and financial aid so that students and families can better compare offers from different colleges and universities, borrow less and only borrow what they can reasonably afford.

Our national challenge is clear: we have to do things differently. Right now, too few students are graduating from high school. Twenty-seven percent of young people are dropping out – that is 1.2 million teenagers a year we are losing, often to the most unforgiving of circumstances. What's more, too few high school graduates and adult learners are enrolling in college. And too few students complete their college and university programs after they do enroll. We are also deeply troubled by America's pervasive racial and ethnic achievement gap which persists today. Black and Latino students trail their white peers by two to three years in achievement and graduation rates. And our skills gap is significant, too. Many workers lack the skills and credentials for high-demand jobs in health care, education or STEM fields. As a nation, we must regain our competitive edge and be first in the world again. And in the Santa Clara

tradition, it doesn't mean other countries can't also be first. But we'd like to share first place with other worthy nations in the decades ahead.

And that's where you come in. All of you are part of the solution. All of you will help us create what President Obama calls "an America Built to Last". To do that, we need an education system that's built to last. That means we have to reinvent higher education for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. It means making sure that our institutions of higher education, places like Santa Clara with its Jesuit conviction that you don't simply educate a part of a person, you educate everything in a person. We must carry that vision into the world, to make sure every educational institution has the capacity, the commitment and the resources to develop our shared potential enriched by women and men of diverse backgrounds, respectful of differences and enlivened by open dialogue. This is the kind of institution we need more of. Because it produces people who are ready and able to help others achieve their full potential.

As President Obama said, "we are the people we have been waiting for." We cannot leave this work to others and expect it to happen. We cannot turn our backs on those in need and expect those needs to be met by others. And we cannot refashion education in our country, and include those now cast out or who fall aside, without the work of our own hands.

Santa Clara has an extraordinary record of achievement. It has helped a myriad of diverse students overcome enormous odds in order to graduate. And while I could give you a list of statistics, I think this one additional story illustrates the success that so many Santa Clara students have achieved through their investment in education, despite all the odds, the story of Fabian Castaneda [FAY bee in Cass- ta- NAY- da] who will receive his master's degree in the Marriage and Family Therapy program today, with an emphasis in Latino Counseling. He wrote something that really moved me. During the Department of Counseling Psychology's "First Generation Celebration," honoring first generation students who receive their graduate degrees in their program, he said, he had "beat the odds of many people telling him that college was not for him." When he was young, at a parent-teacher conference, a teacher told his father that his dreams for his son, Fabian, were not realistic, that Fabian wasn't college material. But though Fabian lived with self-doubt, and felt shame and helplessness for many years, he decided to simply work harder and become more determined. He found other teachers, mentors and family and friends who believed in him and this is how he expressed his gratitude: "With their help I began to realize that I *did* have potential. These people were true saviors because not only did they provide me with moral support and encouragement, but somehow they had the capacity to help me visualize my possible future. With hard work and determination I will graduate with a 3.8 GPA and a master's degree. Thank you for believing in my vision and for encouraging me to dream." And now with his degree, he will be helping others in need, and he hopes to go to law school.

Fabian's journey is probably not too different from so many of your own. It illustrates the success that so many Santa Clara graduates like you have achieved through their persistence, their true investment in education and with help from others.

So that is my final request of each of you here today. Be to others the people that Fabian talked about, the people who believed in him and helped him believe in himself.

Remember, life is not a race where your success is determined by the speed with which you cross the finish line yourself. Instead, the measure of your life will not be what you did for yourself. It will be what you did for others. So take some time in the months and years ahead and ask yourself: now that the door has opened for me, who else can I help through that door?

In the years ahead, our country must do better. We must find ways to work together to empower disadvantaged students with financial resources and skills and self confidence that will enable them to make smart investments in higher education and in their own futures.

As President Obama has said, "the prosperity we seek is best achieved when we invest in our greatest resource -- our people and their ability to compete and innovate in the 21st century."

Indeed, our people *are* our most valuable resource and without educating our own citizens, it's unlikely our country will advance at the rate we want it to, and it's doubtful that we'll ever improve enough to meet the President's 2020 goal.

Have you heard about a book by Atul [Ah-TOOL] Gawande [Gah-wahn-day], [\*Better -- a Surgeon's Notes on Performance\*](#)? Gawande [Gah-wahn-day] was born in Brooklyn, New York, to immigrant parents and originally aspired to be a musician, but he eventually excelled academically and became a surgeon and a writer. His book has some lessons that apply to what you will find in the outside world and certainly to what we need to do individually to make higher education available to all who seek the opportunity. He says that there are three core requirements for success in any endeavor that involves risk and responsibility – and all of you know only too well that getting to this point today certainly had both of those ingredients. What is needed first is diligence, "the necessity of giving sufficient attention to detail to avoid error and the ability to prevail against obstacles." Those obstacles are the people who will tell you that you can't succeed. The second challenge is to do right – and that means to make good choices, to provide for others, to help those less fortunate find the way. That means bring along the person behind you and encourage him or her to dream and act on those dreams. And the third requirement for success is ingenuity – what Gawande [Gah-wahn-day] calls "thinking anew". How can we find even better ways to help our fellow man or woman? How can we open doors for our brothers and sisters? How can we embrace innovation? And how can you as this century's future leaders make this world better for all people?

Diligence, doing right, and ingenuity. A tall order. But it is up to you to accept this responsibility and to meet these challenges. It's up to you to set goals, to make the effort and to ultimately make a difference. It won't be easy. But if you try you will find

that you are not alone. Others will help you. In fact, when you set out to do great things, something wonderful happens: you meet others with the same goals, on the same path, and you will all be strengthened by the alliances you create along the way. You will discover, as I have, that you are not the only one out there prepared to go the extra mile, to create the change our country needs. You'll find allies every step of the way, ...like the people sitting alongside you today. So never give up and never give in. I know you have it in you because you have made it this far. You are blessed and fortunate. You are about to become the next class of Santa Clara University graduates. May you live up to all of the possibilities represented in your dreams for yourself, your community and your nation. And may you always remember that the future belongs to those who believe in the beauty of their dreams! -- Congratulations, 2012!