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## Commencement Address at Blue Ridge Community College

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## Commencement Address at Blue Ridge Community College

*These remarks were delivered on May 16, 2009.*

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**P**resident Perkins, faculty and staff; proud moms and dads, and family members; distinguished guests; and the graduating class of 2009: good morning.

From my time as a community student through today, I have spent nearly 40 years in higher education. And I've been to a lot of commencements. I have learned is that there are three things a commencement speaker must accomplish:

1. You need to congratulate those in the caps and gowns – and the families that supported them – on a job well done.
2. You need to offer some meaningful insight.
3. And most importantly, you need to be brief about it.

I promise you that I will do my best on all three accounts.

This morning, Blue Ridge Community College is awarding nearly 500 degrees and certificates. That includes the first-ever graduates of the college's innovative Aviation Maintenance Technology program.

As college graduates, you have beaten the odds. Did you know that the percentage of Virginians who pursue and complete a college program has remained stagnant for decades? In fact, only one out of five ninth graders in Virginia will complete a college degree on-time. That is something we need to change if we, and the communities we live in, are going to compete globally. Opportunity is attracted to knowledge, skills and talent – and it will now go anywhere in the world to find it.

That brings me to the question I want to pose to our graduates this morning: What's next for you? We'll get to that in a moment.

### **The Importance of Education**

Let's focus just a bit on how you got to this point. I know it wasn't easy. In 1971, I graduated high school without a single thought about what I wanted from the future. Frankly, I didn't care. I just wanted out of school. I wanted a job. I wanted some money in my pocket.

And so, I got my wish – a job washing dishes in the restaurant in my neighborhood. You know, I had never even considered college. No teacher, no coach, not even a friend of mine had even put the idea of college in my mind. In fact, the word college wasn't even in my vocabulary. Dish-pan-hands, my friend: that was the extent of my aspirations.

My mom – a single parent – was **not** impressed. And I'm grateful she wasn't. She thought I had more brainpower than that – even if I couldn't see it.

So every day – and I mean every day – she would harass me about it. “Glenn, you need to go to college,” she said, while shoving a community college application into my hand. “Fill this thing out,

now. You can do this.” We’d go back and forth about it. But you know how mothers are. I eventually caved in.

I was shocked when my acceptance letter arrived. In fact, I was convinced it was a mistake. Maybe someone in the registrar’s office got my name confused with another. I decided to give it a try and show up for class.

I wasn’t taking any chances, however. I kept the acceptance letter in my shirt pocket because I was certain that someone would eventually spot me, realize the college’s mistake and ask me to leave.

Surprisingly, I found the classes to be engaging and interesting. Soon, I developed meaningful relationships – especially with some of my teachers. Beyond my mom, they were the first people to ever really encourage me.

That changed me. It gave me confidence. And, for the first time ever, it made me wonder how far I could go.

Isn’t it simply amazing how elevating and inspiring a great teacher can be? No doubt, all of you graduating this morning feel that way about, at least, one of the teachers you had here at Blue Ridge Community College. I’m sure you do.

These teachers, in their own way, had a hand in helping these graduates get here this morning. Would you join me now in showing your appreciation for what they do?



If you are lucky, my friends, you will find mentors and people who inspire you throughout your life. I have. And if you will afford me just a moment of personal privilege, I want to tell you about one that is special to me.

### **The Importance of Jim Perkins**

For this person, today’s commencement exercise is the final one in his Blue Ridge career – a significant moment for a man who has loved this community and this college for years. In turn, they have loved him right back. I am, of course, talking about Dr. Jim Perkins, the college’s president. Like me, Jim is a native of New York. As John F. Kennedy would say, he’s become a hybrid, meaning he operates with southern efficiency and northern charm.

Most of my face-to-face encounters with Jim occur in Richmond, amid gatherings of all 23 Virginia community college presidents. There, it has been suggested that Jim is the E.F Hutton of the group: He may not speak often but when he does, everyone listens.

Jim Perkins is a leader who can disagree with you, without being disagreeable. He is a leader who understands that managing others means supporting them, giving them opportunities, and teaching by example. Jim is the mathematician who never forgets the human side of an equation. And, Jim is a personal friend.

Around campus, Jim is known for being actively involved with students. When the SGA, the PTK or the SIFE team has an event, he's there. People around the community will tell you, "You can't say 'no' to Jim Perkins." That's a tribute not only to Jim's work but also that of his lovely wife, Linda. I would be remiss if I didn't thank her for her support of Jim and the good work she has done with the college's foundation.

Jim is also known – or should I say infamous? – for his addiction to the Coffee Corner; as well as that big, beaming smile that comes from watching his grandkids ride the ponies at the college's Arts and Crafts Festival.

Jim's career is a textbook example of how to be an outstanding president. And in retiring, he is leaving us with one of the finest community colleges in the nation. Would you please join me now in showing your appreciation for Jim Perkins and what he has done for Blue Ridge Community College?

I was inspired by my teachers – people cut from the very same cloth that Jim Perkins was cut from. Those teachers inspired me to become a teacher. First, I was a community college teacher, then an administrator in New York, and now I have the pleasure of serving at the helm of the vibrant and dynamic community college system in the country.

I hope that gives you a sense of why education is so important to me – and why I am so proud to see these graduates sitting in front of me today.

### **The Importance of Your Achievement**

So what does it mean to be graduating this morning? The cap and gown; the family and the fuss; the certificate or degree that will soon be framed on your wall – what does it all mean? In a word, it means everything. The ability to think, to reason, to analyze is essential to success. And the degree or certificate you are about to receive is basically a receipt – a validation that you have developed these abilities.

Which brings me back to the question with which I began: What's next? There is something confounding about the human condition. I think it is a spirit of restlessness that's almost paradoxical. You see, the more educated we become; the more we appreciate what it is we don't know. The more progress we achieve; the more we seek. The farther we go; the more driven we become.

That spirit propelled men and women to explore every corner of the world and even to the moon. And today, our need to explore has never been greater. When you become college graduates, you become the keeper of that drive and spirit. See, the generation you follow has accomplished a lot – some good, some bad. But it is leaving you with at least as many challenges as it has solved.

We'll hand you the vaccine to polio, but we don't have the answers to cancer, diabetes or AIDS. We'll hand you the highest standard of living ever known to mankind, but we can't tell you where to

find the energy you'll need to sustain it and improve it. We'll hand you incredible weapons and strategies that can be used to win a war, but hardly any answers on how to prevent one. The book of things we know is simply not as big as the book of things we don't. It may always be so. Filling that next chapter, however, will be up to you.

So, again I ask: What's next? It was our job to prepare you for that question with the education and experience you earned here at Blue Ridge Community College. It's now your job to answer that question: What's next?

Choose wisely. And good luck.