

Unfinished Work
President Eli Capilouto
December Commencement Ceremonies
December 16, 2016

For more than two centuries, the United States Capitol Building has stood as a symbol of American democracy.

Rising 288 feet, at the pinnacle of the recently renovated Capitol Dome sits the 19-foot "Statue of Freedom," designed by American sculptor Thomas Crawford during the 1855 expansion of the building.

Crawford was commissioned by a Kentuckian – then Secretary of War Jefferson Davis – to design the bronze statue.

The original design featured a woman in classical dress holding a sword and shield, and wearing a "liberty cap."

It was a knit cap provided to freed slaves in the ancient Roman empire, and was adopted as a symbol of freedom during the American and French revolutions.

Though many features of the earliest design remain, the statue that stands atop the dome today does not wear the liberty cap.

Secretary Davis – a militant slaveholder – objected to the cap saying, "its history renders it inappropriate to a people who were born free and should not be enslaved."

In his objection, Secretary Davis disregarded Phillip Reid, the African American slave who helped cast the bronzed Freedom. Reid didn't matter as much to Davis because of the color of his skin.

Construction of the Capitol dome was underway when the Civil War broke out. Over a five year period, more than 700,000 Americans would lose their lives.

You would think in this bloodiest of wars, construction of the dome would cease in the face of other priorities.

But President Lincoln, another Kentuckian, demanded that work continue because a completed dome would motivate the troops to keep fighting for a united nation.

An unfinished dome, to Lincoln, conceded to unfinished work on preserving a democracy. He found it unacceptable to a nation that must serve as a democratic beacon to the world.

Today, the laborious and painstaking work over the past eight years to restore the dome is complete. It took an extraordinary talent to manage this project.

The person selected to oversee the renovation, like you today, sat in the audience 30 years ago waiting to receive his degree in Architecture. Eugene Poole, III remembers fondly his time at UK.

His work on the dome defies Jefferson Davis refusal to recognize a people longing to be free.

You see, Eugene is an African American. While at UK, he took interest in minority associations, he sang in the choir. He remembers gratefully those faculty who inspired him to work long hours to master competencies to succeed in the workplace and life. And when he started work he carried with him a noble ethos – never refusing a task, never leaving work unfinished, always asking, “what can I do to help at work and in community?”

It is these values of education, inquiry, and selflessness that we pass on to you as graduates.

Those values you will now take into communities across this country and world as you assume new jobs and challenges and engage in lives of meaning and purpose.

You have passed a series of tests and trials, and today you receive a parchment that signifies accomplishment. In this, you and your families should take pride.

But more than that, your degree speaks to potential ... unfinished work that today you are being called to take up as your own.

Consider the challenges you will be asked to confront:

For the first time in more than two decades, national life expectancy declined this year in the United States.

Not since the height of the HIV/AIDS epidemic has life expectancy declined. It is the result of the combined, chronic maladies like heart disease, diabetes, Alzheimer's, cancer, suicide, and addiction – diseases of despair.

There are deep social cleavages in our society – across income, geography, race, identity, and perspective – that threaten to pull us apart. They make it harder to listen to one another, much less work together.

For many, the American Dream is a more challenging goal than at any point since the Great Depression. Too often, the odds of escaping poverty are determined more by geography and race than talent and hard work.

This year, Stanford economists quantified the American Dream by indexing children's earnings against their parents.

Sixty years ago, there was a high likelihood – 92 percent – that children would out-earn their parents. By 1980, only half of children were likely to make as much money as their parents did.

Parents and students need not be discouraged because college graduates, on average, still earn more than their parents did. But our shared reality is a challenge to each of you, emboldened with the capacity to innovate and adapt in a knowledge economy driven by discovery, technology, and automation.

As you make a good living, remember your duties to the greater good, to the larger community where unfinished work is steep even to a good climber. Do so in the way that Don and Mira Ball, those whom we will in a few minutes bestow our highest honor.

The questions of our day – our unfinished work – will require of all of you a broader understanding of the various identities, experiences, and backgrounds that define us as we share in an economy we shape through our policies and principles. So as not to leave in recent years too many disappointed.

Your capacity to rise to the occasion ... Your intellect is defined by more than a college degree. The accumulation of knowledge is important, but perhaps even more important are the means with which you use that knowledge to generate positive ends.

If intellect is the bronze of the Statue of Freedom atop the Capitol dome, then compassion is the cast in which it was poured, for without compassion, our intellect cannot take shape.

When I spoke with Eugene, he described to me a picture he found inside the Statue of Freedom. The picture, the face of a child, it remains a mystery who took the photo, who enshrined it there we may never know.

At the end of the restoration, Eugene returned the picture to its historic resting place. I like to think it serves as an invisible reminder of the high responsibility we have to the most vulnerable – those who inherit the world we leave to them.

Just as generations of UK graduates before you confronted society's unfinished work, so, too, will you. It is what your education has equipped and prepared you to do.

As you take this journey with others, recognize this: We form a brighter future when we realize it is a shared one. The fate of our humanity is not simply tied to us. It is rooted in our capacity to make decisions rooted of intellect and compassion for a greater, beloved community.

Carry with you the pride that goes with being graduates and recognize and embrace the unfinished work ahead.