I am so very grateful to my hosts, particularly Founder and Director of the Asian School of Business Management, Professor Biswajeet Pattanayak, and the Board of Governors.

I support and encourage the agreement between ASBM and NCCU’s School of Business to enhance global education through opportunities for the exchange of visits, collaborative teaching and research.

It has certainly been an enriching experience for me. I come from the State of Arkansas where we pride ourselves on our hospitality.

But I will cherish the memory of your gracious welcome for the rest of my life. Thank you.

Graduates, I have come halfway around the world to congratulate you on your proud achievement! But you know that you did not get here by yourself. You are here because your parents sacrificed mightily so that you could live a better life.

I know something about that kind of sacrifice. I grew up during a time of racial segregation, in a farm community in the Southern United States. I walked five kilometers along dirt and gravel roads to attend a one-room schoolhouse.

The white plantation owners would close the school whenever they needed us to plant, till, or harvest the cotton in the fields. So, we were in school for no more than four or five months in a year.

It was during the Jim Crow era. I drank from “Colored Only” fountains, used the “Colored Only” restrooms and sat in the “Colored” section at the back of the bus.

In my youth in the South, the plantation bosses expected me and my ten brothers and sisters to be field workers not far removed from the generations of African slaves who had gone before us.

I’m enormously thankful that my parents had a very different set of expectations for their children, and their faith proved to be far more powerful than American apartheid. My parents didn’t have a grade-school education but they expected us to go to college. Every night, my mother had us review with her what we’d learned in class that day.

It was not until many years later that I realized she didn’t know what I was talking about! But by then, she had instilled in me the value of education as the engine of opportunity and the confidence that I could achieve. And I attribute much of my success in college, graduate school, and life, to her persistent belief in me.

In the same way, your parents wanted you to prosper and to take your place in the growth industries of India. And they sacrificed so that you could have this chance to attend ASBM. So I would ask you to stand and acknowledge your parents in gratitude for all that they have done for you!

I understand that as graduates of the Asian School of Business Management, you’re guaranteed employment. Congratulations!

In a recent Business Week article, an Indian student told the reporter, “India is a land of opportunities …It's very easy to make money.” And he’s probably right. Despite the loss in exports, India’s economy is still projected to grow at a rate of seven percent this year. But I feel confident in saying that ASBM graduates understand that a career built on a foundation of greed is bound to collapse.
If you want proof, just look at the failure of the American banking system. The investment banks were ruined because they abandoned the principles of social responsibility and accountability. Credit derivatives have been described as poison in the veins of the financial system. But they began their lives as insurance policies against potentially bad loans. To our shame, they became a license to engage in irresponsible lending. After all, if you can insure yourself against the failure of an investment, how can you go wrong?

If you ever catch yourself asking, “How can I go wrong?” take a moment to remember that there is no such thing as an investment without risk. And if you’re not accountable for the risk you’re taking, who is? Is it fair or honest to simply pass it on to unwitting investors?

As American business writer Jesse Elsinger tells the story, investment banks extended lines of credit for much more than they could ever pay out. It used to be the case that to cover exposure, the standard securitization procedure was to bundle the loans, and slice them into tranches for rating and sale.

But the investment banks began to include credit derivatives, particularly credit default swaps, in their loan bundles. Now the tranches were no longer backed with exclusively, real assets, but also these insurance contracts. Retail banks and insurance companies swallowed the tranches, handing cash to the investment banks to be deployed in more, risky ventures.

Selling derivatives became the game of chance that everyone wanted to play and it was completely unregulated. So little actual assets were left in reserve, that even one major default could wipe out an investment bank’s first-loss, equity tranche. The highest and supposedly safest slices weren’t safe at all, and the institutions that purchased them hadn’t set aside nearly enough capital to cover the genuine jeopardy.

And then, the housing bubble burst — and all that recklessly assumed risk that was distributed around the world, came due.

James Lieber wrote in The Village Voice, “Imagine if a ring of cashiers at a local bank made thousands of bad loans, aware that they could break the bank. They would be prosecuted for fraud and racketeering.”

Twenty-five American banks failed in 2008 as compared to three in 2007. And it is likely that no one will go to jail. Unfortunately, it was all too legal.

You represent a new generation of business leaders. Commit now to embracing social responsibility, accountability, fairness, and honesty as the values that guide your work experience. These values must be at the heart of every mission statement of every business in the United States and around the world, because the survival of the many is unquestionably more important than the personal wealth of a few.

It should not be possible for a handful of executives to endanger the livelihood of billions of people on this planet — but this is just what happened.

According to the World Institute for Development Economics Research, ten percent of the world’s adults own 85 percent of the world’s wealth. This is not sustainable.

Mahatma Ghandi understood this when he wrote, “[W]hat belongs to me is the right to an honourable livelihood, no better than that enjoyed by millions of others. The rest of my wealth belongs to the community and must be used for the welfare of the community.”

Several weeks ago, President Barack Obama announced that he was capping the salaries of executives serving in banks receiving government bailout money. Just maybe, we are witnessing the beginning of the end of unreasonable executive compensation in the United States.

I don’t have to tell you that the fallout of the American financial crisis has impacted India. Just ask the diamond workers in Surat, where 80 percent of the world’s diamonds are polished and 70 percent of the units have closed down.
When the waters recede from this tsunami in the financial industry, we may begin to appreciate the true nature and scope of our interdependence. We are no longer a world of isolated nation states. That time is past.

The most serious problems we confront are global problems requiring global solutions, and hanging in the balance is our survival on this planet. There is no longer room in our discourse for petty disputes when humanity’s greatest challenge is at hand.

I am speaking of course, of global warming. The drought, destructive storms, rising sea levels and mass dislocation we all face as a result of climate change, must be forestalled. Negotiations aimed at reducing the carbon footprint must take precedence with sustainability topping everyone’s list of priorities for the 21st century.

Where once there was a race to reach the moon, now I foresee a competition among nations, including India, to invent our way out of this climate disaster. In fact, the race has already begun, with the U.S. dawdling at the starting blocks.

It’s only now with the election of President Obama that we are likely to see a carbon cap-and-trade policy that will spur the development of green technologies in the U.S. Other nations are well ahead of us. Australia has already begun to move forward with solar-thermal generators in the desert. The United Kingdom has wind generators on the banks of Northumberland, and Canada has an underwater turbine off the coast of British Columbia.

And here in India, New Delhi is converting its entire bus fleet to compressed natural gas ordering more than 3,000 new buses just last October. Plans are afoot to increase the volume of ethanol used as a gasoline additive to reduce emissions and potentially eliminate the need for toxic lead. Bio-diesel fuel is gaining research attention as well, as India has plenty of sources of botanical oil.

Will it be your job to bring to market the next great product or discovery? In the search for solutions, you are as much in competition with businesses from around the world as you are with your classmates in this assembly.

As members of the elite in India who are educated and will prosper in India’s growth economy, you bear a heavy burden of responsibility to lift this nation out of poverty.

On February 5th, North Carolina Central University had the great honor and privilege to host Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Muhamad Yunus. Dr. Yunus places the onus to end poverty around the world on the business community. That is truly, a revolutionary idea.

Everywhere I know about, the responsibility for eliminating poverty has been handed to the government, and for the most part, that hasn’t worked out so well. Few governments can afford to give the poor what they really need, and that’s a job.

Other professions have long been tasked with saving the world. We’re counting on the engineers to free us from dependence on carbon-based fuel. We are desperate for the bio-medical scientists to cure HIV/AIDS and to protect us from pandemic flu.

Now it’s business’ turn. Yunus entrusts to you businessmen and women, the mission of eradicating poverty. And as I understand him, he suggests three ways in which you can do it.

The first is to become microcredit bankers. Here and elsewhere, loan sharks have perpetuated indentured servitude. Yunus found that he could free a slave with only $27 U.S., and with that discovery, he became a catalyst for the business aspirations of legions of poor craftspeople and traders in Bangladesh. His Grameen Bank continues to lift millions out of poverty and boasts a 98 percent rate of loan repayment. That’s a rate of return that many American banks couldn’t begin to match right now!

The second way that you can reduce poverty according to Yunus, is through corporate social responsibility — donating a portion of your business profits to the poor.
The third option is another Yunus innovation, the social business. The concept of the social business is part nonprofit corporation, part service organization, and 100 percent self-sustaining. It begins with an initial philanthropic investment that will be repaid but without interest.

Once the start-up expenses are covered, the business supplies the community with the high-need manufactured goods or service, at or near cost.

In this way, Yunus has partnered with multi-national corporations to deliver food, clean water, and healthcare to poor communities.

This is an exciting time to enter the business world, because dramatic change must take place, and with it there will be incredible opportunities. To be successful, you must remain open to seemingly fantastic possibilities.

Thirty years ago, the founder of Digital Equipment Corporation, Ken Olson, stated flatly, “There is no reason anyone would want a computer in their home.” Now, more than half of all homes in the United States have personal computers with Internet connectivity.

Thirty years ago, in his seminal work The Third Wave, Alvin Toffler predicted India would see the proliferation of “super-cheap computer terminals for village use and cottage industry.”

Herein lies a tremendous opportunity not yet realized, for India to help more of its rural poor become literate, global citizens and entrepreneurs. According to P.N. Vasanti, director for the Center for Media Studies in New Delhi, although only 40 million of your countrymen and women have Internet connectivity, 325 million have mobile phones. Toffler wrote, “It may be far cheaper, more energy-conserving, and more appropriate in the long run to lay in an advanced communications network than a ramified structure of costly roads and streets.”

No doubt, building communications towers throughout the hinterland of India will be done at a fraction of the cost of the network of telephone poles and landlines that crisscrosses America, not to mention the expense of constructing roads. However, Toffler could not have known in 1980 that the computer would someday serve as the preeminent communications tool of our time.

A simple headset and software enabling voice-over Internet protocol allows my students to talk to other young people all over the world, in real time, often as they are playing a video game together.

The new cell phone towers intended to carry bandwidth for voice should also accommodate sufficient bandwidth for the content of the Internet — voice, data, and video — that has the potential to transform your nation’s isolated communities.

Just as the Internet allows my neighbors in North Carolina and your neighbors in cities like Bangalore to live in one place while serving the needs of customers anywhere in the world, give artisans, farmers, and weavers access to the training to develop needed skills and enthrée to the global marketplace, and you’ll help develop small businesses and generate wealth independent of your city centers. Put the Internet at the disposal of a teacher in a one-room schoolhouse or a doctor in a health clinic in rural India and see what change you can create.

Unfortunately, freelance journalist Frederick Noronha makes clear that it’s not quite as simple as that. Your first and foremost challenge is the lack of educational software in many of the regional languages. Then, there is the problem of inconsistent electrical supply.

But India is home to one of the greatest software capitals in the world, and if you have the will, there must be a way to invent the translation software needed. Why can’t India develop the elusive $100 computer powered by mechanical crank or solar cell?

Until these problems are solved, how much can you cram onto a mobile phone screen?
Kamal Quadir, founder of CellBazaar in Bangladesh, creates marketing material for the cell phone. He promotes using the cell phone as a data entry hub for e-commerce.

In 1980, Toffler believed that high technology would be critical to the future development of nations like India when he wrote that poor nations “should focus instead on one of the key industries of the emerging Third Wave: microelectronics.”

And that is just what India did in Bangalore. Bangalore is the result of an educational strategy that created two dozen engineering schools that graduate 260,000 engineers of every variety. By comparison, the number of engineers we graduate in the United States is closer to 60,000.

But if the future of India’s economy is entrepreneurship, what does that education look like? Again, I refer to Toffler. Why not? He’s been right so far!

In an interview for Edutopia magazine just two years ago, Toffler argued that education should be customized according to the particular interests of the child. He said if a child were interested in sports for example, then he or she would be offered courses in the history of sports, the mathematics, technology, business and culture of sports.

It would be prohibitively expensive to print multiple textbooks that present the same curriculum couched in different ways depending on the child’s area of strength or curiosity; but in an online-world, that begins to be possible.

Toffler suggested that schools should be integrated into the community, particularly the business community, so that the students can access and learn skills that are the state of the art, while they are still the state of the art. I quote, “Businesses have to change at 100 miles per hour because if they don’t, they die. … The schools are changing, if at all, at 10 miles per hour.”

He is promoting more active, engaged, experiential learning and expands the notion of educator to include non-professional teachers who happen to work in the chosen field of interest. That is in part why we asked industry professionals in the biotechnology field to help design our curriculum at our Biotechnology Research Institute and Technology Enterprise (BRITE) facility at my university, NCCU.

The director for BRITE was an industry executive, and the students know that they are working on the development of agents or technology that eventually could be brought to market.

When I was young in the American South, there were only black Christians and white Christians and they didn’t attend the same churches on Sunday. It wasn’t until I moved to the more northern state of Indiana, to a much larger, more cosmopolitan university, that I grew to know people of varied religious and racial backgrounds. And I came to value differences, in appearance, culture, religion, gender, and thought.

Just as we stress the importance of biodiversity — after all, it could be some endangered species in the Amazon that holds the cure to cancer — I would argue that diversity in thought, culture, and religion, is equally critical to our survival.

The social psychologist Irving Janis invented the term “Groupthink” to describe what happens when there is a lack of diversity of background and opinion among people engaged in a problem-solving process.

We like people like ourselves. That’s only natural. But if we continue to hire in our own image, we can expect to see only our own thoughts and ideas reflected back to us and made sacrosanct by constant agreement. The old adage, two heads are better than one, is true only if you actually have two different heads! And if you don’t, all you’re paying for is another pair of hands.

Embracing diversity doesn’t mean we all have to be friends. But it does mean that we have to commit ourselves to fairness, equity, and respect for people who are different from us, not just because it’s the right thing to do but also because ultimately, it’s in our own best interests.
Janis observed that friends tend to prioritize the cohesiveness of the group ahead of finding the best solution. He discovered that group members tended to censor themselves and others in order to maintain harmony. But the fundamental goal is not to get along famously well; it is to make brilliant decisions.

When the same idea reverberates around the room, who will defy the groupthink and dig deeper into alternatives, question objectives, and more closely examine the risks? Will you?

President Obama offers an object lesson in the assembly of a team that is diverse in age, gender, culture, and even political persuasion. In a reference to former President Abraham Lincoln, Obama is said to have assembled a “team of rivals.”

Former Senator and First Lady Hillary Clinton engaged in a sometimes-acrimonious campaign against Obama for their party’s nomination. Now she is President Obama’s Secretary of State. His vice presidential pick, Joe Biden, was another campaign challenger who has more than 35 years of experience in the Senate and will be another fiercely independent voice in the room.

The Defense Secretary Robert Gates hails from the previous administration but was tapped to remain in his post despite the fact that he is a member of the rival party. And Gates is not alone. There is also a Republican Transportation Secretary, Ray LaHood.

Obama’s Cabinet is diverse in gender and race, with white males forming the minority. There are two women, three Asian, two Latino, and four African-American members. It seems clear that this President is intent on hiring the best talent available, regardless of sex, age, religion, race, or party affiliation. He seems to recognize the dangers of groupthink, and thank goodness: If there was ever a time in history when we needed brilliant decisions, it’s now.

I’d like to make a brief comment about the Lok Sabha elections beginning later this month. At the dawn of the new millennium, India and the United States held the dubious distinction of placing 34th and 35th out of 37 democracies in voter participation. In the 2000 election in the U.S., and the last election here in India, roughly half of all eligible voters exercised their right to participate.

As frustrated as you may be with your politicians, don’t let your displeasure dissuade you from voting. The strength of your democracy is in direct proportion to your participation. According to Vasanti, with 70 percent of your population under the age of 35, new technologies such as mobile connectivity may enable grass roots organization and inspire turnouts like never before.

I challenge you to be wary consumers of media election coverage. Pay attention and object if you begin to see your democratic institutions threatened. Get involved in the political life of your country and don’t let anything keep you from exercising your democratic right to vote.

I hope that many of you become entrepreneurs. Go out and create businesses and jobs that lift thousands of your countrymen and women out of poverty.

Consider the model of Yunus’ Grameen Bank and be the agent of change in people’s lives. Encourage corporate social responsibility to overcome hunger and provide adequate healthcare. If you become an employee of a large corporation, consider giving to the extent that you have more than you need.

And as the chief executive officer of a university, I can’t stress enough the importance of supporting education to ensure the future of your society. Given my life experience, I am confident that an education is the most certain means to break free from poverty and spur economic growth.

It takes the largest pool of trained minds possible to ensure the supply of the brilliant, independent thinkers we need right now. It takes the critical thinking skills afforded by literacy and an education to enable a judicious electorate.

But here as elsewhere, an education is not universally available. I ask you to commit now to an active life of volunteerism, of political engagement, and philanthropy in the service of education.
Douglas Lawson writes about how giving can heal a broken spirit, and relieve the sense of helplessness and hopelessness in a troubled world. I quote: “In a world filled with violence, hatred, and suspicion, giving is an expression of faith, trust, and concern.”

And I leave you with this thought from the late Senator Robert F. Kennedy: “Each time a man stands up for an ideal, or acts to improve the lot of others, or strikes out against injustice, he sends forth a tiny ripple of hope.”

If all of you send forth a tiny ripple, you could create a tidal wave of hope and change that might just lift up a nation.