I am so very grateful to my hosts, particularly Ms. Marcelle Pettis, for the opportunity to speak to you on this special night.

Graduates, I congratulate you on your proud achievement!

The Alliance for Excellent Education reports that students with a high school diploma will make one third more money every year than your friends who didn’t make it this far. It’s like the difference between $27,000 and $17,000 in annual income. And no one can ever take this diploma away from you. Every time you fill out an application form, you will check that box that says high school graduate.

I know that getting here has been tough for some of you and I know a little something about tough times. I grew up in the Old South, during racial segregation, in a farm community in Arkansas. I walked three miles along dirt and gravel roads to attend a one-room schoolhouse. The plantation owners would close down the school whenever they needed us to plant, till, or harvest the cotton in the fields. 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 Arkansas, the plantation bosses expected me and my ten brothers and sisters to be field workers not much different from the generations of African slaves who’d gone before us.

Thankfully, my parents had very different plans for their children. And their faith that we could be something greater proved to be far more powerful than Jim Crow.

My parents may have had only 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.

I attribute much of my success in college, graduate school, and life, to her persistent belief in me. In the same way, your parents and your teachers here at Mary Phillips want you to prosper and to take your place in the America of the 21st Century. Stand and give them the applause they deserve!

Education equals opportunity. But education is more than a collection of courses or the contents of books. Education today is about learning how to learn something new, to adapt to and to embrace change.

You have a head start. You’ve experienced so much change already; you don’t know how else to live. You can tell me stories about when you were young, when there was no Facebook, YouTube or Twitter! Already, social media have served a critical role in the creation of democracies in the Middle East, the so-called Arab Spring. Why?

Maybe it’s because real-time communication with anyone, anywhere, over the Internet has shown them what it is to be free.

I can remember a time when you had to pay for a long distance call, by the minute. Now, I can talk to my son in Italy and see him too, on screen, using Skype.

In the same way, you can talk to your video game teammates in places like Egypt or Libya, and tell them about your life in America. And they might send you status updates about the danger they feel confronting soldiers in the streets of Tripoli or celebrating in Cairo’s Tahrir Square.
This revolution in the individual power to communicate will continue to change your world. With all that’s great about technology, I’m concerned too.

On Wednesday, a study by Northwestern University was released showing that black and Latino youth spend four hours more every day, on average, than white and Asian teens, watching TV, listening to music, and playing video games.

Now that wouldn’t be a problem for me if black and Latino students were regularly at the top of their class, too. If blacks and Latinos ruled in the game of academics, I’d say, “Play on brother!” But if you want to compete in this increasingly smaller world, you need to begin to leave the games alone.

As easily as you play video games with other teenagers overseas, those young people can respond to American want ads, offering jobs that can be performed off-site, way off-site. An American business could hire that European or Middle Eastern teenager to answer their customer service email. You may find yourself competing with someone halfway around the world for a job offered out of downtown Raleigh.

How would you fare in that contest?

If you want that customer service job, you need to be prepared to speak and write English better than your competition. Fortunately, English is the language of international business, and you’ve got a leg up. You’re native speakers!

But we all know that simply being raised in America isn’t enough. You need an education to help you to become an effective communicator. Most likely, your competition overseas will be educated.

The U.S. has fallen to 12th place in world rankings regarding the percentage of 25 to 34 year-olds with college degrees. I would love nothing more than to see everyone in this room go on to some form of higher education and not just because I’m a Chancellor of a state university. Why?

Even at the worst of this Great Recession, the unemployment rate for a bachelor’s degree holder was only 5.2 percent. Compared with someone with a high school diploma, a college graduate will earn an average of $22,000 more per year. On average, college graduates live a healthier lifestyle. They’re more active in our democracy and they’re more likely to volunteer in our communities.

But if college is not in your plans, please don’t ever stop learning. Read, read and read some more. And keep up with the world around you, whether it’s online or in an old fashioned newspaper, because the outside world does affect you. And if you don’t stand up and vote for your interests, who will?

Please understand that you’re going to work hard, whether you have a degree or not. You have to work hard no matter what. And it’s just like it is at the bank. You can’t make a withdrawal if you haven’t made a deposit! The only difference is in the kind of work that you get to do.

Will it be work that challenges and interests you? That fulfills you? That makes this world a better place? Will the work you do help you to grow and develop and understand yourself and your community in new and different ways? Will it make you happy?

I can say, with all humility and gratitude to my Maker, that my work does all that for me. And your career can do that for you too.

Dream big.

In the words of Langston Hughes:

Hold fast to dreams

For if dreams die
Life is a broken-winged bird
That cannot fly
Hold fast to dreams
For when dreams go
Life is a barren field
Frozen with snow

When you’ve decided who you want to be, never give up!

I knew from a very young age that I wanted to be the president of a historically black college. It has taken me 40 years. I was Chancellor at two other universities and vice president of a university system before. But my dream was to be Chancellor of a historically black college like the one that took a chance on me.

You see my dream was to give back. I am just one of hundreds of thousands of HBCU success stories. My test scores at the end of high school certainly didn’t suggest that I was exactly leadership material but the University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff took a chance on me. Had it not been for the open access of that college, my life would have been profoundly different. I’m so glad I persisted.

Serving as Chancellor of North Carolina Central University is all that I dreamed it would be — hugely challenging and hugely rewarding too.

Mary Phillips has taken a chance on you. They had faith in you. And to get through this life, you need to have faith in something outside of yourself too. You need to believe in a greater power and honor every minute given to you.

Benjamin Mays said,

I have only just a minute, only 60 seconds in it,

Forced upon me, can't refuse it.

Didn't seek it, didn't choose it,

But it's up to me to use it.

I must suffer if I lose it,

Give account if I abuse it,

Just a tiny little minute,

But eternity is in it.

So I ask you graduates, what are you going to do with your minute? Make it count. Make the world a better place. Godspeed.