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**Remarks by First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton  
At Brooklyn College Commencement  
Brooklyn, NY**

MRS. CLINTON: Thank you. Thank you. Thank you very much. Thank you all so very much for making me feel so welcome here at Brooklyn College. (Applause.) I am delighted that I had this opportunity on this glorious day to be part of this commencement celebration. I want to thank President Lattin, the administrators and faculty, the alumnae and trustees all who support this great college. Thank you for being committed to educating all of our people. (Applause.)

But most of all I want to thank the honored members of the Class of 1995 for inviting me to participate in your celebration. And I want to thank and congratulate all of the parents, relatives and friends who are gathered here today. Let's give all of them a big round of applause. (Applause.)

Your support and encouragement are reflected in the degrees that will be awarded today, and the investment you have made in these students' education is one of the soundest and most important investments you can make.

It is also one of the smartest investments any society can make, and I hope that both families and societies will continue to understand that education must remain our most important priority if we want to build strong and good citizens and strong and good societies now and into the future.

I have been asked several times why I am making a commencement address here at Brooklyn College. Well, I think it is self-evident. And every one who is associated with the college knows that this is a great public college.

It is also a college that represents the full diversity and possibility of America. It is a college that takes the education of all people seriously -- men, women, minorities, immigrants, refugees, anyone willing to take responsibility and work is welcome here at Brooklyn College.

I was also delighted to see that Brooklyn College honors its very strong tradition, by having with us today in the very front rows, graduates from fifty years ago.

And I remember a novel written more than fifty years ago, called, "A Tree Grows in Brooklyn". Perhaps some of you do as well. Well, today we see that it is not just trees that grow in Brooklyn. We see that minds grow in Brooklyn, ideals and dreams grow in Brooklyn, and futures grow in Brooklyn. And that is why I am here, because I wanted to thank all of you for doing what you do to educate and build strong students and citizens. Clearly what you have confronted and overcome in reaching this day is considerable. Many of you in this class are older than the average graduating student around the country today. You are already skilled in many ways of the world and you have already paid your dues. Many of you have worked full-time or part-time, have raised families, have taken on all kinds of additional responsibilities. And I think the motto of this college speaks to the reality of a worthwhile life -- "nothing without great effort". Your efforts are what led you to this campus in the first place. Without great effort, without great discipline and sacrifice you would not be sitting here today.

I would like to spend a few minutes talking about why your experiences here at Brooklyn College are critical to not only for yourselves but for those who will come after you. Our society and our nation have historically believed that education was a collective responsibility.

Americans have always understood that education was a gateway to opportunity that could make an important difference in the lives of all our people. I know that you can extend opportunity, and it has to be met half-way by the acceptance of responsibility in order for education to mean anything.

Yet today, we see the opportunity for education under attack. We know there are those among us who would knock down the ladders of opportunity after they, themselves, have already reached the top rung. Today, as we celebrate your commencement we have to be committed to making sure that education does not deteriorate in America today. We have to take a strong stand on behalf of the importance of learning and training, on behalf of universities and colleges like this one.

I know that many of you have already spoken out against efforts to make your educations more costly and less accessible. I hope all of you who are graduating today and all of your family members and friends who have sacrificed to bring you to this point, will continue to raise your voices to safeguard education and the opportunities for the progress it represents in our society.

You know, education is not only important for acquiring facts or knowledge. It is not only important for acquiring skills to prepare oneself for making a living. It is also about learning how to meet the challenges of one's time -- how to solve problems and adapt to new circumstances. It is about building a broader understanding of our world, and building one's capacity for tolerance and compassion and responsible behavior. It is about defining one's place in the world and creating one's personal identity against the back-drop of how others have lived throughout history.

And education is not, if it ever were, a one-shot experience. There are all kinds of people in our society today who need to and to want to learn more. They range from the very young to the old. Just consider Enid Elder who graduates today in the Class of 1995, she is eighty years young. (Applause.) She is earning a degree in elementary education and has already begun teaching at a day care center here in Brooklyn.

There are hundreds and hundreds of stories like Enid's that could be told. So instead of shrinking educational opportunities we should be expanding them, beginning in childhood and carrying on throughout life.

But tragically, as you know, there is a movement afoot in state capitals and the nation's capital, to retreat on education funding. A retreat that is marked by a rather unusual argument. The argument goes that "slashing education funding is for the good of our children." That cutting back on education will enable us in some miraculous way, to provide more and better opportunities than we now enjoy. Nothing could be further from the truth. If we sound the retreat on education in America, we deny the opportunity of pre-school and Head Start to hundreds of thousands of children.

We deny tens of thousands of elementary school students the resources they need to improve their reading and math skills. We deny summer jobs and learning opportunities to young people. We deny the opportunity for college to millions of Americans by shrinking the availability of loans, making them less flexible and raising interest payments and tuition beyond the reach of many working families in America.

Here at this college, the president has told me that more than half of the student body come from families that earn an income of less than \$20,000 dollars a year. More than sixty percent of the student body have some kind of financial aid. I think we should be extending a helping hand, not holding out a stop sign to the children of working families who want to better themselves and build a better future for our country. (Applause.)

Denying opportunities of education to individual Americans also does not help us as a society. It is particularly ironic, that those who profess to worry about the loss of civility and character in our society are on a crusade to cut back federal support for education, and obliterate the national service program known as Americorps that the President kicked off here a year ago at this college. You know about community service at Brooklyn College. Not only was the President's Public Safety and National Service Forum held here but students from this College are tutoring and mentoring children in area schools, helping with programs to reduce violence.

Throughout this community Americorps members are teaching peer mediation, patrolling schools, working with police officers through the Cadetcorps and acting as safety escorts for older citizens. National service is an idea that the President made into a program. It is built on very old-fashioned values of hard work, discipline, sacrifice and community service. It is about rewarding people for being good citizens. The men and women participating in Americorps and other service programs are doing so because they really want to help people in need. They want to serve, and all they get in return is assistance with college tuition. But now there are some that want to tell these young men and women, that their mission of service, helping others and caring about the larger community isn't valued much in our society.

They are being told that education and service are not, after all, noble goals we should stand behind. Well, I think we ought to stand up and say that education and service do matter. They are about building character. Character is one of the anchors of society. And when we talk about character we don't just mean talk, we mean action. Building a civil society that actually lives up to its ideals. It is not that Americans lack character, it is just that society has too often stopped rewarding it. Just look around and you will see the effects of what one political scientist has called, "turbo-charged capitalism". Consumerism and materialism go unchecked, run rampant through our culture dictating our tastes and desires, our values and dreams.

We are fed, through the media, a daily diet of sex and violence and social dysfunction and unrealizable fantasies. We live too often in a disposable, throw-away society, where the yearning for profits and instant gratification, overshadows the need for moderation, and restraint and investing for the long-term.

So the question for us as individuals and as a society is -- "Do we define ourselves by style or by substance?" By the logo on our sneakers or the generosity in our hearts? By the celebrity we crave or the reputation we earn? Every one of us,

especially those graduating will have to ask yourselves these questions. Years from now, as you are faced with decisions about whether or how to make contributions to the larger community, I hope you will think about a young woman who is with us today, a graduate of Brooklyn College, Lisette Nieves, a Rhodes Scholar from Brooklyn College and a member now of the Corporation for National Service in Washington. I hope you will think of all of the distinguished graduates of this College and build on their experience to serve communities.

As you go forward from this college, remember that the path open to you now, is the one you that choose to make. As Gloria Naylor, another distinguished graduate of this college, whose novels have so enriched the American literary landscape, told an interviewer a few years ago, "My father instilled in us the sense that you make your own path and let no one tell you that you can't." You now have the opportunities to make that path. Our society now has opportunities to chart a new path into the twenty-first century. Our choices and decisions do matter, and so does our sense of ourselves.

We were recently reminded by the tragedy in Oklahoma City of the horrendous and horrific damage that hatred can cause. But we also saw a generosity of spirit. We did see our national character at work. We could feel the same sense of responsibility that always comes in time of need -- when the artificial barriers of race, and ethnicity and religion and region are knocked over in a common pursuit to help one another, and to rebuild for each other.

Many of you know that I recently returned from a trip to South Asia with my daughter. I had the opportunity to visit countries that are struggling to become full-fledged, free market economies to provide real opportunity for their own people. There is something very humbling about shaking the hands of men and women who have paid the ultimate price for democracy. People whose husbands, and mothers, and sons and fathers have been assassinated because they worked to bring people together, to build a stronger and freer society. People who have paid the price in torture, exile and imprisonment. It was humbling to know that all over the world today, from the many countries whose graduates are represented here as first-generation Americans, people are trying to build societies based on the ideas we Americans espouse.

When I came home from South Asia, I couldn't help but wonder, "Why do we spend so much time in a bad mood in America today?" We have so much to be grateful for. We have so many blessings in this country. We have so many opportunities to build a stronger, juster, more educated society. Each of us, in our own way can make clear that we value the things that really matter, that make

a difference in the lives of the people we love and care about and work with.

Education matters. Kindness matters. Truth matters. Patience, hard work, tolerance, discipline -- all of these matter. Forgiveness matters and gratitude matters, especially on a day like today.

So now take this education that has opened these doors and decide how you will walk through them, how you will conduct yourselves once you are through them. Value your own education but please stand up in these public debates on behalf of education. Strive for excellence and work for the opportunity for others to do the same. You do have the chance to be part of a generation that puts the civil back in civilization.

Congratulations to all of you not only on your accomplishments, but also the promise you hold for your own lives and also for our country. Congratulations and Godspeed.  
(Applause.)

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