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Purchase College, S.U.N.Y.
44th Commencement Speech
May 13, 2016 Westchester County Center

To the Class of 2016- I congratulate you on your accomplishments on this Commencement day. Since you are graduating today, you obviously have demonstrated your successful fulfillment of the requirements in your majors, as well as all the other requirements of the College.

Part of those requirements included some involvement, either formally or casually, in the events on our campus over the last two years that were responses to the injustices that were unfolding in our nation's cities as well as on our campus. We had demonstrations, yes, but more importantly town halls, meetings and speak out events that allowed our community to engage in important discourse about how to make the campus a better, safer and more inclusive place. The legacy of these interchanges is a responsibility to continue the conversation in a manner that is civil; where people commit to respecting others' opinions and to listening to other perspectives. It includes a promise that all views may be shared without fear of repercussion. This is the promise of "Think Wide Open."

But what I would like you to consider as you leave Purchase College is whether you are prepared to take up your responsibilities as an adult and a citizen of the nation. Our nation is a nation of laws and our personal liberties are protected by the Bill of Rights; among the most important is the First Amendment which guarantees us all freedom of speech. Our Constitution assumes people will act in their self-interest and that only through compromise will we make progress. Not a compromise of ideals or values, but a compromise of immediate needs and demands and requests and wants. Recently a columnist in the NY Times wrote, "Liberty...requires certain things. Liberalism demands acceptance of our human differences and the ability to mediate them through democratic institutions. It demands acceptance of multiple, perhaps incompatible

truths.”ⁱ This very liberty is at risk. You need only look at the Presidential election and the inability of government to function in Washington to understand what happens when the ability to speak—which implicitly if not explicitly includes the right to listen— and the failure to reach compromise are thrown to the wind.. It is at risk because of those who refuse to listen to views with which they do not agree, thereby eliminating discussion, negotiation and compromise and the progress that could be achieved. It is at risk because growing income inequality has created a dangerous dichotomy in our society, leading to deep seated anger, dissatisfaction and discontent that prevents the sharing of ideas and goals to propel the country forward—where the resources of the very rich are recycled into creating more wealth for the very rich rather than a better society.

When we look how progress has been achieved in our nation it is rarely by leaps and bounds. Rather it is by small steps. Study Civil Rights history and the contributions of Martin Luther King and Lyndon Johnson. You know as scientists that in research, progress depends upon the small discoveries of those who came before. You know as artists that there are many ways to interpret an author’s or choreographer’s words or directions, or a painting or sculpture. Only in math are there right and wrong answers to those who can comprehend them. But even yesterday’s equations give rise to new findings: perhaps the Black Hole doesn’t just absorb all matter after all. However, quite often today, we read stories of how colleges, organizations and even cities and towns are erasing symbols of the past in order to avoid hard conversations. History may have some distressing and offensive chapters, but those chapters represent chances to learn and to apply the lessons learned to the present and to work towards a better future. To erase those symbols is to reduce the opportunity to learn from the past, to debate and argue, and to measure our progress.

So I would like to challenge you: Never compromise who you are, your values and beliefs. But be ready to listen to those who may have different values and beliefs. My experience has been that most people actually want the same future but see different ways of attaining that future. If you are prepared to listen, to argue, to use the tools that you have been given at Purchase and by your experiences on campus, you will become

an important part of our society which, as we all know, needs you. Our country needs more college graduates-not because of the need to fulfill a statistic. Rather we need you to become involved, to fight for the greater good and make incremental progress day in and day out.

I have enjoyed my experience with you while you have been at Purchase. I have gained immensely from your presence, from your educating me and making me a better President and us a better college. Now it is your turn to do the same in our nation and our larger world which are not “safe and inclusive spaces” that you have tried to establish at Purchase, but rather places crying out with need for people like you. Go forth and God Bless.

ⁱ Roger Cohen, “The Death of Liberalism” (New York Times, April 14, 2016), p.A23