



Commencement Speech to the Rutgers University Edward J. Bloustein School of Planning and Public Policy

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Richard Florida**

First of all, I want to join Dean James Hughes in extending my heart-felt congratulations to everyone who is graduating today. I also want to congratulate: Your families and friends, who are here to support you and who are all so very proud of you. Getting a graduate degree takes a lot of time, costs a lot of money, and takes a great deal of hard work. But, it's worth it: Congratulations on completing the very best investment you could make. In your own "human capital." It's not just an investment; it's a privilege to receive a higher education - one that confers important responsibilities, as you become tomorrow's leaders.

I truly hope Rutgers changed your life as much as it changed mine. I credit this university, along with my parents, for everything I am today.

I want to share some of my stories, especially about Rutgers and how it helped me find my passion and find my own course in life. I want you to appreciate the importance of following your own dreams, no matter who says otherwise.

It's a little astonishing and a wonderful honor to be standing before you at an occasion like this one.

I come from humble roots. My grandparents were peasant farmers; they came to the United States from Italy a century ago. None of them had any formal education. My dad was only able to stay in school until the seventh grade, when he had to take up work in a factory to help support his family during the Great Depression.

I was born in Newark and I did most of my growing up in a rough and tumble working class suburb not far from here. I grew up like the Sopranos or Jersey Shore.

Two things put me on the right path: My parents, who drilled into my brother and me the importance of education. They put us in Catholic School. Our Lady Queen of Peace. We were “the Queensmen.” I have scars on both of my hands to prove it.

The big turning point in my life was when I was 17 and I got a Garden State Scholarship, which allowed me to come here and study at Rutgers College.

Rutgers altered my life in ways I could never have imagined. I had always been drawn to the world of ideas, but for the most part, that wasn’t something I shared with my friends growing up. Growing up you either got in a fight or there was the threat of one every day. I had to hide the fact that I was smart for fear of getting beaten up.

When I got to Rutgers, it was an entirely different world. A place for discovery, thinking and learning and for the first time, I felt like I could be myself: inquisitive and curious. I was free to pursue my interests, and I was surrounded by really interesting people.

The intellectual environment was incredible. And not just from classes and professors, there was an amazing cultural scene with incredible live music, from Bruce Springsteen and the E-Street Band to the Gang of Four and Dexter Gordon.

And even more important was the social environment—my friends and peers. I’ll bet you feel the same about yours – some of the connections you have made here will last for the rest of your life.

The great secret of university life is that you learn the most from each other.

Like you, I had an incredible group of friends. One of them was the world-renowned chef Mario Batali, who shared a dorm with my younger brother when he came to Rutgers. I used to get food from him at Stuff Yer Face Stromboli on Easton. We would sit and talk in bars like Patti’s and the Melody for hours on end. Those late night conversations about our passions, his passion for food and restaurants; and mine for cities and urban life will always be remembered.

What may seem like an ordinary night out with friends now, you too will look back on fondly one day. You will see how this campus and its environs shaped your life. Stay true to that - who you are now.

The biggest life changer I experienced at Rutgers was a course I took as a first semester sophomore, Bob Lake’s course on urban geography. He gave us an assignment to track the evolution and transformation of Soho and Lower Manhattan, and you know what? Just like that, I fell in love with urbanism. I took as many courses in urbanism, urban planning, and urban politics as I could.

I went to work with Jim and George Sternlieb and the tremendous group of urban scholars at Rutgers’ great Center for Urban Policy Research. I found my love of cities and I became a

researcher and a scholar. The researchers and faculty took me under their wing. They invested themselves into me. They were mentors and role models.

Bob Burchell would pick me up in his old VW “Thing” without a roof and drive me to the Center for Urban Policy Research where we worked. I bought my first car from our colleague David Listokin. His office was so messy, so stacked with papers, that it was condemned by the fire department.

Cities and urbanism touched a nerve deep inside me I hadn’t recognized before.

Remember, I was born in Newark in 1957. I experienced it in all its Phillip Roth glory. My parents and my relatives were from the Italian neighborhoods of North Newark. My entire extended family gathered every Sunday at my grandmother’s house. Newark’s downtown was teeming with energy and commerce – there were great department stores, Bamberger’s, Hahne’s, Kresge’s.

By the mid to late 1960s, the signs of its decline were inescapable, even for a little kid. I remember that summer day when I was 10 or 12, when my father and I were driving to my guitar lesson and the police stopped us to warn us about snipers. Riots had broken out; there were National Guardsmen and tanks in the streets; I could hear shots being fired and I could see buildings burning.

Not too many years after that, I saw Victory Optical, the factory in the Iron Bound section where my father had worked since he was a boy, close its doors forever. My father used to take me there sometimes when I was little; he told me that it wasn’t the machines that made it work—it was the skills, resourcefulness, and creativity of its workers.

And now it was shuttered and its workers were idle. I wanted to understand. WHY? What happened to my great city, and to my Dad’s great factory?

I combed the library here and back in Newark looking for answers; I wrote my honors thesis on cities.

And I didn’t stop searching. I went on to graduate school at MIT and Columbia, where I got my PhD, and I continued to work summers at the Center for Urban Policy Research here at Rutgers. And now after thirty years of teaching at Ohio State, Carnegie Mellon in Pittsburgh, Harvard, George Mason University in Washington, DC, and the University of Toronto, working at the Brookings Institution, and NYU, I am here before you.

I urge you to find and follow your own passion, like I did, here at Rutgers. It is far and away your best and truest guide.

I got more than just an education at Rutgers. I got my life-purpose.

I'm sure I'm not the first person to tell you this, but do what you love. You'll always need to make a living, but if you want to be happy—if for that matter, you want to be successful—money should never be your biggest goal.

Follow your DREAMS, follow your passion: Not what others tell you to do. Not what simply pays the most money. Do what really truly excites you. What makes you excited to get up everyday. I cannot tell you how many distraught students I hear from, who tell me that they took a job for the money and it took them off their path. How do they get back?

This takes toughness, determination and a sense of self, a true sense purpose, a motivating idea of what you want to accomplish.

Here's my story: My parents wanted me to be a doctor or a dentist. For them, working class people, that was the path to a good job and a good life. When I told them I would not be pre-med they called a meeting of our entire extended family. I wanted to study cities and the urban world. So I fooled them. I told them I would change to "pre-law," a major that did not even exist. They liked that, especially my mother. "Richard," she said, "You'll be good at that, you're a good talker" ... little did she know...

I kept my focus on cities and urban planning. I did well enough that I got a scholarship to MIT and then to Columbia. My mother said when she told her boss at the *Star Ledger*, he said "those are good schools."

Cities were disaster centers back then, they were deindustrializing and they were filled with poverty and despair. And there were hardly any jobs for professors; it was the middle of a deep recession. I didn't care. I loved cities.

My first job at Ohio State paid \$18,000, just a little more than my dad had made in the factory. I lived hand to mouth, paycheck to paycheck, in a small apartment and I loved it.

You never know how times can change. By the early 2000s, cities were starting to come back. People were interested; they became hot.

I wrote a book in which I tried to make sense of all of this, drawing from my experiences in Newark, my memories of my father's factory, and the struggles I had seen in Pittsburgh. Pittsburgh had a lot of good attributes as a city but my students couldn't wait to leave it. I wanted to know what a city would have to do to become a place they would want to stay and work in and build a future—how it could become a more tolerant, inclusive, creative place, where people and businesses would flourish and grow.

I had written several books before, which were read by my immediate family and a few students. That book became a best seller. I got invited to talk to mayors and city leaders all

over the world. I had never stopped doing what I loved, and all of a sudden, the whole world began to share my passion.

There's a reason for that for all of you as you prepare for the future. When you do what you love, eventually it will pay off.

A month or so ago, I joined 20,000-plus urbanists from all over the world in Medellin, Colombia for the World Urban Forum, where I called on the UN to make cities the centerpiece of their new development goals.

All of that—the bestselling book, the global platform for my ideas, a new focus on cities—because I defied what others wanted. I kept doing something I loved – a love and a passion that was stoked right here at Rutgers. More than that, even, I dedicated myself to something that was bigger than me and genuinely important—a project that many of you who go on to careers in planning and public policy will participate in as well.

Fixing the existing cities of the world and building new ones in the developing world is the grandest of all the grand challenges that are before us in the next century. We will be spending thousands of trillions of dollar on city building, and it is absolutely critical that we get it right. When cities are built with the right degree of density, when they are walkable and smart and green and well-organized, when they are resilient and sustainable, they spur creativity and innovation, drive economic growth, and at the same time build civility and tolerance.

You, the next generation of public policy professionals and city and regional planners, will not just bring a much-needed standard of professionalism and science to public health and transportation policy-making, to the challenge of building affordable housing and community, workforce, and economic development, though these are no small things.

This might sound grand, but this is a grand occasion: you are going to be laying the foundation for the future of our economy and culture itself.

Let me tell you about few other things I learned along the way. Here at Rutgers, and as a working class kid back in Newark and North Arlington, NJ.

First of all, every one of you here today is smart. But true success requires hard work. As Thomas Edison said, creativity and success are 1% inspiration and 99% perspiration. Nothing worth doing comes easily.

Take advantage of every opportunity that comes your way. Spread your bets widely early in your career – try lots of things. Venture capitalists make a lot of bets, only a few of which pay off. Musicians write lots of songs, only a few of which become hits. I've written roughly ten books, one of which was a best seller.

Don't be afraid of failure. Embrace it. Learn from it. Humans learn through trial and error, yet we are brought up to believe only success is rewarded. My wife, Rana, likes to remind me that Sara Blakley, the youngest female billionaire in the world said that when she was a child, her father asked her every day after school, "What did you fail at today?" He made it clear that failure was nothing to be ashamed of—it meant that she had tested her limits and tried something new.

Fail fast and recover quickly. Look at it as a time to learn, reflect and grow, and ultimately to push forward in a new direction.

Follow your gut, your instincts and your intuition. When your gut and your intuition tell you something, they're telling you something important. Turn that intuition into hypotheses that you can test. And do test them. Stay true to yourself, your dreams, your intuitions and your innermost desires. Never lose sight of them. They are your truest guideposts.

Most of all: Lead by serving. Up until now, you have focused mainly on yourself. Studying; getting an education; remarkable achievements we are celebrating today. Over the course of your life, you will have to invest in others, your families, your spouses, your children, your colleagues, your communities. The most successful people and the most successful leaders say their truest, purest joy comes from serving, mentoring and developing others. Now that you have knowledge, it's your obligation to share it and pass it down to others. This will make for a stronger and better world.

And that is something for which this great university, the Bloustein School and your own hard work have splendidly prepared you.

Congratulations and best of luck as you embrace this day and take your next steps toward an exciting and fruitful future.

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