

**2008 Honors Convocation Remarks  
Southern Connecticut State University  
Prof. Brian Johnson, President of the Faculty Senate**

**Greetings. We are gathered today, in great numbers, with great pride, to honor our scholars, those who have achieved extraordinary things during their time at Southern.**

**To the parents in the audience, first, let me say: your kids are now officially smarter than you. They may have thought so all along, but now they have the grades, they have the writing and thinking and speaking ability, they have the literary or scientific or political acumen to prove it. So rejoice with them. If they can now outargue you at the dinner table, if they exhibit a frightening independence of thought, you should laugh. Don't gnash your teeth. This is how it should be. After all, it was your wisdom, your encouragement and guidance that contributed to their development. Your child has become your brainchild. And remember too that a little of your money, maybe a lot of it, kept your brainchild growing.**

**To the rest of the family—brothers, sisters, cousins, uncles, in-laws—let me say: the honor of one is the honor of all. These scholars may**

have studied alone, but no one gets through college alone. It is an exciting time, but also overwhelming and often excruciating. You need a family to lean on and go home to. That idea is what got many of these students through the semiannual purgatory of exam week.

And finally, to friends, let me say: you were there during the writer's blocks and you witnessed the moments of panic and self-doubt. You also know that many of the students being honored today perversely resisted your invitations to party; they were immune to the lure of Thursday night. Honors students, after all, are a special breed. They will polish their ideas until they shine like diamonds. They can never bring themselves to say, "It's good enough." Perhaps you admired them, at the time, in spite of their unwillingness to go clubbing with you; now you should really admire them for their four, five, six—maybe more—years of self-discipline and suffering.

And the fact is that great students still resemble their monkish ancestors. Universities evolved out of medieval monasteries; students were considered minor clergy, and wore hooded robes to warm themselves in the unheated and drafty buildings where they

lived and studied. They sat in the freezing pews reading from handwritten copies of the master's handwritten lecture. They spent their nights bent over a sheepskin, scribbling with a quill, until their eyes were poached and bloodshot from too much reading.

Some things have changed in 800 years. The dormitories are warmer now, the sheepskin has been replaced with a glass screen, the quill with a mouse, the hooded gown with a hoodie and jeans. But the university is still a place of learning, a place where troubling questions are put to you, where difficult material is your diet, where the mind is made more flexible, sharper, deeper, quicker. And there is still the hidden truth, the secret, of academia, the sacred grove, the ivory tower that these students entered a few years ago and will soon depart, decked with honors, in shiny polyester gowns, twirling their tassels. The secret is this: the best students are not the smartest. They did not emerge from the womb speaking Latin, with *cum laude* stamped on their foreheads.

No, the best students are the hungriest. That is why we speak of the *hunger for knowledge*, and the *craving for answers*, and the *appetite*

*for reading.* The students we are honoring today had all three—the hunger, the craving, the appetite—and that is why accomplished so much. They asked questions that no professor could conjure up; they proposed answers that came from left field, from right field, from way outside the park. They made our minds go blank, they gave us headaches; we found in them a relish for knowing things, a relish for treating ideas as things, as their favorite things, to be examined, analyzed, improved, loved. They joined us in the pleasurable difficulties and the mutual torments of teaching and learning. For, at its best, education is a very human business: it takes generosity, and faith in one another. They had faith in us, and we had faith in them, and so we all forgot the fluorescent lights and the institutional chairs and the classroom changed, for a few hours, into a limitless country. Now they are leaving us behind, but our aspirations are bound up in theirs. They will come to the stage, smile, bask in the glow of this moment, and rest. But all of us here should recognize that it is their restlessness, their desire to know, that we honor above all. Tomorrow they will shed their gowns, put their honors aside, and go forth with the same undying resolve that brought them here.

**Hunger is what changes the world.**