

# Commencement 2024 Welcome Remarks

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Let me begin with a hearty welcome to the expansive Rutgers-Newark family gathered here today – a family that includes the adoring families and friends and supporters of our stellar class of 2024 graduates, and that then extends to our faculty, staff, and community partners, all of whom have supported and will continue to cheer for you, our newest generation of alumni, as you step forward today and march on tomorrow. You are the ones prepared to take on the world and to set it on a more peaceful, more equitable, more empathetic, and more sustainable course than you have been handed from our generations. But first, before we consider that heavy task of changing the world, let’s just pause a moment now for us to cheer for you. We love you, we see you, and we appreciate you for all that you have accomplished! Congrats to you all!

I am uplifted today because when I think about all *our collective futures*, I know that you all will be out in the world doing what you do best: making a difference in other people’s lives and communities. You will have this societal impact precisely by enacting the magical recipe of our Rutgers-Newark collaborative, expansive, diverse family. That recipe is to take what I call an outside-in approach to the world – asking what the public, the world, the community needs *from us*, and then growing your expertise to match the moment. Yes, you have grown enormous expertise during your time here, but you have also done it in part by fine-tuning the power of *listening* and the empathy that comes from *looking* outward beyond yourself and the campus.

You have looked and listened and asked and that will so prepare you to figure out what you need to know to move the needle on the world’s pressing challenges – and I mean the *world’s* challenges. Consider the experiences of Destiny Ramirez, graduating today with a degree from RBS in Management Information Systems. Destiny took part in our International Leadership Exchange in India and Nepal last year, and here is what Professor Clayton Walton said about her experience: “Exploring and connecting with local change agents, locals, and communities on the ground, she developed a newfound interest in innovative, organic agriculture in Nepal and food systems in South Asia.. and combining her skill set in technology and business, she is preparing to revisit Nepal for an intensive internship opportunity on biodynamic farming at the Kevin Rohan Memorial Eco Foundation after graduation.” How perfectly Destiny’s story exemplifies the positive recursive effect of getting out in communities and then expanding one’s own repertoire to maximize social impact. As Destiny says: “This program instilled a drive towards innovative agriculture, a new level of self-purpose. Doing field work abroad made me realize there is room for everyone and there is always a way to help while still aligning with your goals and personality.” I couldn’t have said it better, which I might add is what I always discover when I hear the stories of our graduates – for you all symbolize the next hope for what my field of social psychology calls action research – as its progenitor, Kurt Lewin

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<sup>1</sup> Remarks delivered at Rutgers University – Newark commencement, May 15, 2024, at the Prudential Center in Newark, New Jersey.

reminded us – “The best way to understand something is to try to change it.” Yes, you are our change-makers, and your words bespeak how much you have come to understand the world, and therefore, yourselves.

Fortunately, for all of us, the world is actually right here. Just look around this grand hall today and listen to the many languages and look at the diverse traditions of celebration. Unlike some cities and states in this country who are closing their doors and whitewashing their classrooms of history and the diversity of roads travelled, in Newark we embrace the travelling spirit and resilience, no matter how rough the road was to get here. And we know that to move forward, we need to look back. That’s what Honors Living Learning Community member, Manuel E. Sosa-Garcia, graduating today on the dean’s list, does when he recalls his time as an undocumented student, even as he is today a permanent resident. He describes how strengthening it has been for him to work as an Undocumented Ambassador for our Intercultural Resource Center, including coordinating an undocumented information session for Newark high school students and so much more. For example, here’s how he describes his experience after receiving a per diem license for the Newark Board of Education that allowed him to teach a class of Newark 3<sup>rd</sup> graders for a week straight: “My presence alone was the representation many students needed; having someone to look up to, confide in, and be supported by is what many students want.” And, that my friends, is not only what you, our graduates, have provided in so many ways in your work in this, our home community, but it is also what Newark and Rutgers-Newark have provided to you – the ability to stand forth as who you are; to have an authentic presence. Indeed, one of your graduating classmates, Avani Jimenez, did her prize-winning Honors College Thesis on precisely the empowerment of presence – here’s her description: “I did my Honors Senior Thesis Project on depicting mindfulness through creative writing, where I wrote a novella that used certain literary devices to portray presence through the protagonist and plot.”

Yes, both Manuel and Avani learned the magic of portraying presence, and its positive influence not only on one’s own life, but how it sends a freeing signal to others. And, thankfully, this room is replete with that presence and the accompanying signals of freedom. We need only look at the path that Efren Mercado and Julie Michaels took to get to this room today, each participating from behind prison walls in our NJSTEP Program and then pushing through them to graduate today with BA degrees and honors in Justice Studies. Efren served 30 years after being arrested at age 17 and now works as an outreach advocate for people at risk of eviction through Newark Community Solutions. On the side, he finds time to mentor local youth through Newark’s Returning Citizens Support Group. Julie served 12 years in the Edna Mahan Correctional Facility soon after giving birth to triplets, committed herself to her recovery and now to others as a Recovery Peer Advocate, and went on to win the top prize in our RU Flourishing Entrepreneurship Program, with an award to invest in her own startup, as she reunited with her family. You can’t define resilience and success much better than they have and this brings me back to hope – the hope that Efren and Julie and our other NJSTEP students graduating today see out there for themselves and for others. It can inspire us all to feel a collective sense of forward motion, together in communion.

Now, as we look around this triumphant room, and watch the spirit of success walk across this stage soon, let’s embrace that spirit of inclusivity grounded in the possibility that our

divided world will come together. We don't need to see the world the same way. There are many different roads that we and our families and communities have travelled. Embedded in our complex personal identities are the connections to many different homelands and histories that emerge especially prominent in our minds and in our hearts as we witness conflicts and displacements across the globe. Those identities, those connections, those heartfelt responses are real and they are critical to our individual and group personas, and we should never be asked to hide them. Somehow—perhaps especially—in this contested and polarizing moment when violent conflict is turning the lives of people we love upside down half-way around the world, we still need to strive for the outside-in perspective I spoke about earlier. Empathy for what others need is key—to acknowledge the possibility that their personas and histories and roads travelled and even their pain, are just as real as our own.<sup>2</sup> It is what we want for ourselves and so it must be what we give to others.

Therefore, I want to close by returning to this moment of collective and individual celebration and suggest that it is precisely in this joyous context that we can all be secure and safe and happy enough to open ourselves to that quest for communion, for intergroup empathy, for collective bonding.<sup>3</sup> Yes, it is hard, hard, work, especially on this day of celebration, yet I am hopeful because you, our 2024 graduates, have all learned a great deal about seeing others as they want to be seen, engaging that diverse humanity, and acknowledging that both difference and interdependence can co-exist. So, as you rightfully take pride in and boast to the world about your accomplishments – very real as they are – also take a moment in this state of well-earned self-confidence to go spread the lesson of empathy as far and wide as you can, and it will rebound for you as your successful futures unfold. Congratulations, my hopeful graduates!

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<sup>2</sup> Henry James Garrett, The Kernel of Human (Rodent) Kindness: What we can learn from lab rats that don't show empathy for other rats, *New York Times*, December 28, 2018

<sup>3</sup> Eboo Patel, *Out of Many Faiths: Religious Diversity & The American Promise*, Princeton, NJ.: Princeton University Press, 2018; John Inazu, Hope Without a Common Good, commentary in Eboo Patel's volume.