On Campus

Win the Future

President Lee C. Bollinger gives his annual commencement address.

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“Here, whatever your field of inquiry, you’ve seen the best that humanity has to offer,” said President Lee C. Bollinger to the more than 11,000 degree candidates and 20,000 guests who gathered around Low Plaza for Columbia’s 258th Commencement on May 16, “which means you have internalized a standard of excellence against which you can always measure your and others’ efforts.”

In his annual address, Bollinger spoke of a world whose connectedness via the Internet, while improving “the abilities of social movements to challenge entrenched authorities,” brings new responsibilities for its people. In the “open marketplace of ideas,” he said, “you have to win the future every day. You have to participate. You have to speak. You have to make your case against others, especially against dangerous ideas.” The inclusiveness of contemporary public debate, he said, underscores the importance of education: “When everyone can speak, we all have an interest in the quality of mind everyone brings to the discussion. If people are vulnerable to being fooled by falsehoods and deluded by deceits, we all lose.”

Bollinger then conferred honorary degrees on jazz composer Muhal Richard Abrams, former Chilean president Michelle Bachelet, biomedical engineer Shu Chien, Latin American scholar Jean Franco, University of Pennsylvania president Amy Gutmann, and author and activist Gloria Steinem. The University Medal for Excellence, awarded annually to an outstanding alum under the age of forty-five, was presented to Thomas Kitt ’96CC, a musical director, composer, conductor, and arranger on Broadway. Two days earlier, US president Barack Obama ’83CC was in Morningside Heights to deliver Barnard College’s Commencement address and to receive that college’s highest honor, the Medal of Distinction. Bollinger would save his highest praise for the graduates.

“I close by saying in complete candor and with the utmost confidence that you, the Class of 2012, are the most intelligent and attractive graduating class we have ever seen.” Bollinger paused, perhaps to think of the prior 257 classes. “Definitely the most attractive, in any event.”



Guide to school abbreviations

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