Shuaib Balogun '18 Underscores the Power of Knowledge

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This year’s Celebration of Excellence student speaker, Shuaib Balogun ‘18, shares how he was inspired by the Commonwealth Honors College in his speech to more than 1,000 of his fellow graduating seniors and their families at the May 11th ceremony in the Mullins Center.

A chemical engineering major from Lagos, Nigeria, Balogun urges his fellow graduates to utilize their knowledge in order to help mold a better world. At the Undergraduate Commencement, he will be honored as a 21st Century Leader. After graduation, he will move on to his
Today, we live in a world where the pursuit of knowledge has been reduced simply to attaining degrees. Some individuals lack the zeal to read and inform themselves about matters beyond their scope of study. Reading books has become akin to an ancient pastime for most of us, to the detriment of our societal awareness. Many of us plead ignorance at a time where this is can no longer be condoned. We plead ignorance but what we really show is indifference. Indifference to the issues that can make or mar us. In order to prevent this, I suggest you read a book. Read any book; dare to explore regions of knowledge that are foreign to you. It is in this way that we as a society can reject ignorance in its entirety.

Even I have fallen victim to the lure of technology. As an avid reader back in boarding school in Nigeria, I would read at least a book a week because reading was heavily encouraged. However, after attending school in England and then coming to UMass, I lost my way. My favorite hobby aside from sports became scrolling down twitter to view the occasional meme and tweet about the newest celebrity news. It wasn’t until I took Ideas that change the world; a class that all honors students take did I rediscover the importance and the pleasure of reading.

The greatest gift the Commonwealth Honors College of UMass Amherst gave me was a chance to glimpse the problems of the world. The resources to be able to understand the sexism that occurs daily in our lives and therefore giving me the ability to empathize. The statistics to be able to comprehend the depth of racial inequality in our economy, justice and education systems. The ability to decolonize my mind and erase my biases that stem from our binary society and enabled me to open my heart to the LGBTQ community. Most importantly, the honors college gave me the desire to want to dig deeper to unmask more issues and look into ways of solving them.

I know the number of issues that this world presents is frightening. But there is hope! There is a solution to all these problems. There is a way to make the world a more equitable place. The solution begins with every single person in this room. Yes, the solution begins with the honors students of UMass Amherst. There is an array of privilege that sits in this room. But it is a level of privilege that we can use to alleviate some of the injustices the world currently contains. With the training we have acquired and the intellect we all possess, we have a true arsenal to make a real mark on the world!

I implore you all to continue to question everything. To continue to be flexible in the way you learn. Be brave enough to decolonize your mind and open them to new ideas. Dare to stand up for the underprivileged even if that means placing yourself in an uncomfortable situation. Because if there is anything the honors college at UMass Amherst has taught me, is that the change in the world you want to see starts with you.

Congratulations to the Class of 2018! I wish you all the best of luck."