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
graduate studies in materials science and engineering at Georgia Tech and plans on being an active participant in social justice issues in Nigeria.

His prepared remarks are below in full:

“Good morning family, friends, faculty, and fellow graduates.

The advent of technology has led many of us to believe we know it all. With a quick google search and a click on a Wikipedia button, we have access to a world of information. Or by tapping on an app on our mobile phones we can see events that are occurring continents away. This ease of access comes with a special consequence: It has made us very comfortable. So comfortable that we neglect to check the sources of this information, so comfortable that we have allowed fake news to run rampant, so comfortable that we have begun to have allegiances to biased news networks or so comfortable that we have become normalized to the tragedies that occur daily around the world.

But as honors students, we must dislike the word “comfortable.” Why else would we voluntarily apply to take additional classes and perform a yearlong honors thesis? As honors students, we love a challenge. Some of us joined the honors college to learn and perfect the art of independent research. Some joined because they wanted to increase the breadth of their academic studies. Some joined because normal classes were just too easy, and they needed something slightly more demanding and others joined for the amazing housing. Whatever our reasons were for joining the honors college, it is clear we all wanted to challenge ourselves beyond the normal curriculum.

As honors students, we have been trained to question everything. To ask key questions such as: why, what, where, when and how? To understand the fundamental reasons why we agree or disagree on important issues. To be able to discern between fact and fiction. To not settle and be complicit with simple answers. To persist until we unearth the deep truths of the world. To others, it may seem that we are just being difficult. However, we must not allow those who seek simple answers to discourage us. We must continue to pursue knowledge as if it was our salvation. In our curriculum, we have all examined the lives and works of great men and women such as W.E.B Du Bois, Rachel Carson, Mahatma Gandhi and Socrates. These were all individuals who stayed true to their beliefs and proved doubters wrong. They chased knowledge knowing that this was the key to positioning themselves to make real changes to society and even Socrates said, “The only true wisdom is in knowing you know nothing.”

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, it 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."