

Ibram X. Kendi, “Are You an Intellectual?”

University of Florida Doctoral Commencement Address | December 16, 2016

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What an honor it is to stand before you! I would like to thank President Fuchs for inviting me to speak.

I would like to greet UF’s Board of Trustees. I would like to greet UF’s administrators and faculty and staff and students. I would like to greet my fellow Floridians and fellow Americans.

President Fuchs mentioned my new book, *Stamped from the Beginning*. Well, I have been traveling all over this nation speaking on it the last few months. And when I say all over this nation, I mean all over the nation.

I even spoke in Anchorage, Alaska two weeks ago. Yes, I am still defrosting. So if you see water coming out of my pores during this speech—it’s not sweat, it’s ice melting.

In all seriousness, Anchorage is a beautiful city surrounded by mountains that seem to always be kissing the beautiful blue sky. From the city center, you can see the highest mountain peak in North America, a mountain the natives call Denali. You may know it is as Mount McKinley.

As we gazed up at the mountains one day, my host asked if I ever had a desire to climb a huge mountain. I replied, “I have already climbed a huge mountain. I climbed one of the highest mountain peaks in the world: the doctoral process.”

So I would like to greet all those courageous climbers who trekked up the mountain that is the doctoral process. I am so happy to be standing here at this mountaintop with you and your families and your friends and your doctoral advisers who pushed you and pulled you along the way.

As you stand at this peak about to receive this prestigious doctoral degree from the University of Florida, I suspect you are not only celebrating, but you are also thinking about what is next.

When I say thinking about what is next, I am not talking about you thinking about what is next in your career. I do not want to talk to you about that today. Enough people have talked to you about that already.

I want to talk to you about what is next for your mind now that you are a doctoral recipient. What is next for your mind now that you will have those three letters by your name. What is next for your mind now that some people will call you doctor. I say some people because don’t expect your parents to start calling you doctor. You will still be your mama’s baby, even with a doctorate degree.

The point of my address is to ask you a simple question: Are you an intellectual? I know you have earned your doctorate degree, but I am asking, Are you an intellectual?

I am asking this question because you need to know that having a doctorate does not make you an intellectual. Becoming a professor does not make you an intellectual. Working in a research lab does not make you an intellectual. Thinking at a think tank does not make you an intellectual.

It is so embarrassing, but there are doctorates who are not intellectuals. Just like there are MDs who are not healers. Just like there are JDs who are not about justice. Just like there are Reverends who are not about God.

Isn't that a tragedy walking: a Reverend who is not about God? Isn't that a tragedy walking: a JD who is not about justice. Isn't that a tragedy walking: a MD who is not a healer? Isn't that a tragedy walking: a doctorate holder who is not an intellectual?

Do not become that person.

Today you are joining the illustrious academy of doctoral recipients. But I want to talk to you today about joining the even more illustrious academy of intellectuals. No doctorate degree is required to join the intellectual academy. This is an inclusive academy with all types of people with all types of backgrounds. There are people with only a GED in this intellectual academy. There are incarcerated people in this intellectual academy. There are homeless people in this intellectual academy. There are poor people in this intellectual academy.

When I say intellectual, I am not referring to someone who knows a wealth of information. All of you, I am sure know a lot. You know a lot about your discipline and your field and your research—otherwise you would not be here waiting for me to finish this speech so you can get your degree already and go to dinner. I've learned the hard way that standing in the way of students and their degrees is unwise; and standing in the way of American families and their food is really unwise. But please bear with me.

I do not measure a person's intellect based on how much a person knows. I do not consider myself an intellectual because I know a lot about American history. How much you know has no bearing on how much you are an intellectual.

I define—and many others define an intellectual as someone with a tremendous desire to know. Intellectuals are open-minded. Intellectuals have a tremendous capacity to change their mind on matters, to self-reflect, to self-critique. Intellectuals are governed by only one special interest that is rarely self-serving—the special interest of finding and revealing the truth.

All of you will be getting your doctorate degrees. But how many of you have a tremendous desire to know? How many of your minds are wide open to new ideas? How many of you are searching for ideas that challenge how you see the world? How many of you are willing to look

at the world differently with the blink of new evidence? How many of you are critiquing your own ideas as intensely as you critique the ideas of others?

Intellectuals are a nomadic people, constantly changing their conceptual location, constantly in search of a better conceptual space.

Intellectuals are constantly working out. We have workout warriors of the body, those who pump iron to break down old muscles to allow newer and bigger and better muscles to grow in their place. Well, intellectuals are workout warriors of mind, regularly breaking down old ideas to allow newer and bigger and better ideas to grow in their place.

Are you an intellectual?

Or will you become the tragedy that is the anti-intellectual with a doctorate degree? You know, those anti-intellectuals who stay close to what was taught to them by their family and friends and favorite teachers and favorite shows. You know, those anti-intellectuals who are constantly seeking to reinforce their beliefs. You know, those anti-intellectuals who have planted themselves so deeply in a position that no hurricane of truth could uproot them. You know, those anti-intellectuals who develop convincing lies that ensure pseudoscience is well funded, convincing lies that ensure corrupt politicians are elected, convincing lies that ensure harmful products are sold, convincing lies that ensure that facts are discredited, convincing lies that ensure that bigots are exonerated for their crimes against humanity.

I chronicle these anti-intellectuals in my book, *Stamped from the Beginning*. The history of racist ideas in America is the history of anti-intellectualism. For nearly 600 years, some of the best trained minds in Western Europe and the American colonies and the United States have been trying to prove that White people have been on the winning and prospering and living end of Western society not because of racial discrimination but because they are superior. For nearly 600 years, some of the best trained minds have been trying to prove that Black people have been on the losing and impoverishing and dying end of Western society not because of racial discrimination but because they are inferior.

You should know that a racist idea as any idea that suggests a racial group is inferior or superior in any way. You should also know that there are only two ways to explain racial inequities and disparities. There were only two ways to explain why Black people were enslaved and White people were free. There are only two ways to explain why young Black men are 21 times more likely to be killed by the police than their white counterparts. Either there is something wrong with Black people—racist ideas—or there is something wrong with society, racial discrimination.

Throughout this nation's history, Americans have dove into the false waters of racist ideas because we do not want to face the reality of racial discrimination. We have not bred intellectuals because only intellectuals are willing to always face reality. Only intellectuals pledge to look for and say the truth and nothing but the truth.

I show in *Stamped from the Beginning* that ignorance and hate did not lead to racist ideas as we have been commonly told, but the production and circulation of racist ideas led to ignorance and hate. We hate because we are ignorant about other groups. Our nation is a racially divided because we attack groups of people instead of the policies that harms us all.

We have been led to believe that Latino immigrants are taking our jobs, even though the hard data shows otherwise. And so, ignorantly, we hate them. We have been led to believe that Muslims and Black criminals are the greatest threat to our security, even though the hard data shows otherwise. And so, ignorantly, we hate them. We have been led to believe that lazy Black people depend on the so-called handouts of welfare and affirmative action, even though the hard data shows otherwise. And so, ignorantly, we hate them.

Racist ideas have suspended reality, drenched us in lies, subjectified standards, misled millions by faulty statistics, and forcibly herded generations of unsuspecting Americans into legal ignorance and lethal hate. We now live in a society where comfort matters more than certainty, where tradition matters more than truth, where labels matter more than logic.

The task of intellectuals is to transcend political labels. The task of intellectuals is to transcend political ideology and economic interests and cultural traditions. The task of intellectuals is to transcend comfort.

The task of intellectuals is to fashion a clear and unadulterated mirror of humanity, so we can see ourselves for what we really are. The task of intellectuals is to investigate the problems of our world. The task of intellectuals is to solve the problems of our world.

Are you up for these tasks doctoral recipients? Are you up for the task of being an intellectual?

We are here at the mountaintop of the doctoral process. So I ask again what is next for your mind? Will you continue the never-ending climb that is being an intellectual? Or will you start making your way down the mountain towards the valley of anti-intellectualism, thinking you know it all, thinking you have the world figured out, thinking you are beyond critique.

It is certainly much easier to be an anti-intellectual, to go with the flow of the academic current, to reinforce what people already think. You can have a nice career as an anti-intellectual, and the energizers of the academic current will certainly reward you.

But know that the academic current will engulf you. Your work will not be remembered. You will not make history.

I want you to make history, not be history. I want your work to be remembered, not be forgotten. I want you to power and steer the academic current, not be engulfed by it.

I want to be celebrating you one day. I want your family and friends to be bragging about more than their child has a doctorate degree. I want your family and friends to be bragging about how your groundbreaking work is changing the world.

But in order to break new grounds, we must break from our old grounds. In order to change the world we must critique the world.

But before we can change or critique something else, we must have the capacity to change and critique ourselves. We must have the capacity to be intellectuals, to be on the perpetual climb towards the always rising peak of truth.

Congratulations on receiving your doctorate degree. But in all honesty, that is not enough for me. I don't want you to leave UF with just a doctorate degree. I want you to leave UF as an intellectual.

Thank you.