April 23, 2010

Dear Class of 2010:

Congratulations!

This time of year is always exciting. Of the many bright moments in the life of an institution of higher education, one of the brightest is the entry of hopeful, excited and sometimes fearful young men and women. However, the brightest moment is the departure of these same young men and women from the hallowed halls — excited, educated and empowered—to go into the world. That you will enter the worlds of work, further study and independence from Clark Atlanta University portends great things for the future, yours and ours.

History confirms that much has changed in the last century.

In 1910, graduates of our antecedent institutions, Atlanta University and Clark College departed these grounds undaunted by the systematic oppression that had for so long defined—and limited—their citizenship. That year alone, some 67 African Americans were known to have been lynched. Atlanta University Professor W.E.B. Du Bois left his position at Atlanta University where he had built new scholarship in the social sciences, to work full time as publications director for the NAACP, where he also served as founding editor of Crisis magazine.

Fifty years ago, graduates were abuzz about the first lunch-counter sit-ins, initiated by three brave young college students at a Greensboro, N.C., Woolworth’s store. Although the 15th Amendment of the U.S. Constitution guaranteed the right to vote, African Americans were still disenfranchised by flagrant, widespread discriminatory voting practices. And on this very campus, the Atlanta Student Movement gathered to coordinate strategic, direct attacks on racism and discrimination. Elsewhere, the number of U.S. troops fighting against Communism in Vietnam escalated to nearly 16,000, and you could purchase a vinyl record for less than $2.
Today, you can own the lunch counter and franchise it. You can join the ranks of nearly 100 top executives in America’s Fortune 500 companies! You and your peers are largely responsible for the groundswell that resulted in the election of our nation’s first African-American President, Barack H. Obama. And you are likely to keep abreast of military developments in Iraq and Afghanistan, with a combined troop count exceeding 200,000, on your MP3 player, Blackberry or iPhone.

Change is a constant. Nevertheless, society's need for focused, dedicated change agents persists. You must now accept the mantle of leadership to change the world for the better. To that end, I offer this counsel. Your role as a change agent must be firmly rooted in your highest sense of truth, right and good. These three ideals must guide you and, as importantly, will comfort you in difficult moments. Without these ideals, what purports to be “change” often becomes merely selfish intent.

Remember always that change is difficult, as much for those who introduce and implement it as for those who must endure and benefit from it. Therefore, your agenda must never be exacted without integrity and compassion. Your motives must be indistinguishable from the needs of those you serve.

As a leader and a change agent, you must commit and continuously recommit yourself to service. Great men and women are not served; they serve others. This has been a hallmark of Clark Atlanta University’s brand, and certainly that of our parent institutions’, for more than a century. Now it must become yours.

Finally, you have the capacity to comprehend, analyze and articulate great ideas. Use it thoroughly. Whatever your journey, include in your personal, professional and civic regimen the time and space to reflect, to think and, more important now than ever, to dream. Ensure, as well, that you include those who mentor, teach and challenge you in that process.

I wish for you every success. While you graduate in a most difficult time, opportunity is not beyond your creativity and preparation. I bid you peace, health and prosperity. Most important, I bid you the strength and courage to righteously employ them as you change the world.

Godspeed!

Sincerely,

Carlton E. Brown,
President