

Ryan Notti – Scholar’s Day Speech. April 2, 2008

Thank you Dr. Goodstein for that wonderful introduction. It is truly an honor today to have the opportunity to speak as the student representative of such a talented group of my peers, and I’ll join the chorus of voices offering congratulations to our award winning students and their families. Considering not only the caliber of academic excellence required for recognition– a GPA between 3.7 and 4.0 – but also the sheer number of qualified students – 162 Babbidge Scholars and 1154 New England Scholars – I think it is safe to say that Scholars Day speaks volumes about the abilities of our students, our academic preparation to date, and the university as a whole.

What, though, can we infer about our award recipients, based on these selection criteria? Most certainly, such academic success is an indicator of dedication, of perseverance, and of a deep-seeded value of education. It speaks to a willingness to delay gratification – to trek on a Friday towards the Homer Babbidge library for a night of intense studying (or as the students affectionately call them, “hot dates with our friend Homer”) while your peers flood out of the academic buildings for a weekend’s reprieve.

But perhaps most profoundly, these awards are an indicator of potential. I choose this word – potential – very carefully, recognizing full well that its presence is not always welcome in a congratulatory address. “Potential” speaks not to past success, but to the prospect – however uncertain – of some future accomplishment. Consider, though, why we have come to college: Was it to be forever students? To become grade-earners in perpetuity? I would expect the answer to be a resounding “No.” Rather, I think I speak for many of us when I assert that we came to UConn to receive the preparation needed to be successful in our future careers – and not simply “successful,” but wildly and famously successful. So today, I challenge our award-winning students to ask ourselves: How can I go beyond the grades? That is, how can I enrich my education with real world experience?

By forwarding this challenge, I certainly do not mean to suggest that many of UConn’s top students are not already applying their knowledge constructively outside the confines of the classroom. UConn’s top students are stars as laboratory researchers, as artists, as student teachers, as student nurses, and physical therapists. I’ve been especially impressed by a group of 11 students in the business school who manage a portfolio of UConn’s investments worth over one million

dollars. In all respects, these students should be proud of their achievement, and are stellar representatives of our university.

And so today I present a second challenge –a tougher challenge – to our students: that not only might we translate our classroom educations into real world experience, but that we might do so in a fashion that is community-minded and service-oriented.

Beyond the individual traits mentioned earlier, there is little that can be inferred about any of our award winners. We come from varied cultures and ethnicities, a diverse array of family structures, and a multitude of states. Our paths to the university often differ, with some among us courageously overcoming great struggles to prepare for a college education. For example, while some of us were blessed to graduate from high schools adorned with blue ribbons of excellence, others among us persevered through schools labeled by our government as failing. And yet we all share one commonality: We now enjoy the luxury of a publicly subsidized college education.

It is on these grounds that I would argue we are compelled to give back, to share our gift of a college education with the public that has invested so richly in it, as

well as with those in our nation and in our global community not fortunate enough to do so. Yet again, UConn's active student body is rife with examples of such involvement. Extending lessons from a philosophy class to attack real world injustices, the group Students Taking Action Now: Darfur successfully persuaded the UConn Foundation to divest from companies with fiscal ties to the genocide in Sudan. As a result, 1.5 million dollars of investments were realigned away from contentious positions. Since 2005, hundreds of UConn students from all schools and colleges have traveled to the Gulf Coast, often forgoing their own spring or winter breaks, to assist in hurricane relief and reconstruction efforts. To provide an example of a UConn student's international service, just this past weekend I received an email from a friend studying abroad and volunteering in South Africa, in which she described to me her struggles teaching English literacy in a prison for young men. So far she has taught readings on topics ranging from Maya Angelou's poetry to Tupac Shakur's social activism. Undoubtedly, these students exemplify the potential to execute meaningful national and international change that exists within our student body.

To conclude, I believe that Scholars' Day recognizes more than our current achievements, it represents our collective potential: our potential to extend our knowledge beyond the classroom, and our potential to employ that gift in a manner

that betters not only ourselves, but our communities and our world. Today, I challenge our award winners to fulfill that potential, and working together, I believe that we can.

Congratulations again to our students and their families, and thank you all for your attention.