

What Comes after Graduation?

By Dr. Al Roberts

On May 13, 2017, in front of more than 2,500 people, Southside Virginia Community College awarded degrees, diplomas, and certificates to 1,303 students. For the students who crossed the stage to receive their credentials, the occasion may have seemed like a conclusion. It may have felt like reaching the end of a journey that involved hard work and dedication. In reality, the event marked a beginning.

Graduation ceremonies are called *commencements*. The word commencement means to initiate, to start an activity, or to kick off an experience. A commencement is the exact opposite of a conclusion.

Rev. Lawrence Wilkerson's invocation focused on this concept of taking a step into the future. He prayed that each student would discover his or her own amazing destiny, and he asked for divine inspiration "to stir up the determination, steadfastness, and zeal needed to achieve that destiny."

Commencement speaker Stephen E. Parker, a 2005 SVCC graduate and currently Legislative Director of the Education and Workforce Committee at the National Governors Association, also challenged students to embrace their futures. "Today, the class of 2017 sits on the same launch pad that was there for me and my family," he said. "So, my question to all of you is this: what kind of world are you lifting off into?" Parker encouraged graduates to seek inclusive and positive ways to interact with society. He exhorted graduates, "I challenge you to set unbelievably, distractingly ambitious goals."

By tradition, candidates for graduation wear regalia consisting of gowns and caps adorned with tassels. At SVCC, graduates with honors wear gold tassels and others wear black tassels. During the ceremony, one of my duties involved leading students in the customary practice of turning their tassels. Students enter the ceremony with their tassels hanging on the right side. Turning the tassel involves moving it to left side, a symbolic action that signifies a change in status from being a candidate for graduation to being a graduate. Moving the tassel is like turning a page to open the next chapter in a student's life story.

For some graduates, that next chapter will involve more education. Surveys reveal that nearly half of all SVCC graduates plan to transfer to four-year colleges or universities. Others graduates may begin careers, start families or businesses, or enter into military service.

Whatever tomorrow's journey brings, I agree with Mr. Syd Smyth, SVCC's Local Board Vice-Chair, who encouraged the audience and the community to follow the example set by the graduates when he said, "I challenge you to enter our doors and explore the many opportunities that may await you. Give it a try. You can never, never be too old to learn or to enrich yourself."

Dr. Al Roberts is president of Southside Virginia Community College, an institution of higher learning that provides a wide variety of education opportunities to a diverse student population within a service area that spans ten counties and the city of Emporia. He can be reached via email at al.roberts@southside.edu.