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The Case for College

October 24, 2014

Booker T. Washington High School for the Performing and Visual Arts in Dallas, Texas

As delivered.

Thank you so much. It's wonderful to be here in Dallas, and I so appreciate Richard's words and Molly's words and also the remarkable performance that preceded them. I also want to thank everyone at this school and beyond who made this event possible today. I know it took a lot of work and I am very grateful to be the beneficiary of that.

I am especially delighted to be here with you at a school named after Booker T. Washington. I suspect he would be immensely proud of this school, a pioneer in our nation's struggle for civil rights and now one of the most distinguished arts high schools in the United States. Washington received the first honorary degree that Harvard ever gave to an African-American. It was in 1896. In Washington's time, attending college was a rare achievement, attainable for only a tiny number of Americans and an even smaller number of African-Americans, for whom many obstacles remained.

Yet from the earliest days of our country, we have seen education as the foundation for democracy and citizenship, for social mobility and national prosperity. Higher education opens minds and opens doors. As you approach the end of your high school years, you must decide what role education is going to play in shaping your life. As you consider what comes next, you may be asking yourselves questions about college, questions like:

Can I afford it? How exactly do I get a loan or scholarship, and how much debt is too much? How do I pick the right school? Two-year or four-year degree? What should I study? Can I still stay close to my family if I go away to school? Will I be able to stay in touch with my old friends? How do I best prepare for the world of work? Will my little brother take over my bedroom?

These are all realistic questions. To ask "Is college worth it?" is a fair question too, and a lot of people around the country are asking it. To me, the answer is easy: yes. Going to college is one of the best decisions you will ever make.

In fact, I believe college is more important than ever, and I want to take a few minutes today to explain why.

Let me begin with some benefits that can be clearly measured. There is no doubt that college pays off financially. A wide range of statistics shows the economic advantage of a four-year college education:

Over a lifetime, students who graduate from college can expect to make about 60 percent more than those who do not, well over a million dollars more.

Another study shows that in 2011 a typical college graduate was not only more likely to find a job than a high school graduate, but also made $21,000 more as a starting salary.

And young women, take note: A degree makes an even bigger difference to your earning power. A 25- to 34-year-old female with a bachelor's degree can expect to make 70 percent more than if she had only completed her high school diploma.

College graduates also tend to lead more active lives. They vote more often. They volunteer far more often. As early 20th-century civil rights leader Nannie Burroughs put it, education is "democracy's life insurance." College graduates are also more likely to own a home. They are healthier and less likely to smoke. Their children are more likely to go to college. These are powerful reasons for earning a college degree.

But what about the benefits of college that are harder to measure—ones that I see around me every day? They are equally significant reasons for a college education, and they add up to a lot of value over the course of a lifetime:

First, college will take you to places you've never been before. Some of you will choose a college or university in a different city, or state, or even country, and you will learn a lot from these new surroundings. But even if you go to college close to home, your studies will introduce you to places you've never been, and maybe never even imagined. A university course can take you deep into the building blocks of matter, from the tiniest organisms on the planet to the stardust of the outermost cosmos. Studying public policy can give you an inside look at the workings of Congress, or the U.N., or the Dallas School Board, and can help you see what happens there in a new light. Professors can help unearth the past, ground you in the present, and prepare you for the future you will help shape. An archeological dig outside my office back in Cambridge is revealing what life was like in the 17th century at Harvard—they've found mostly beer bottles (an interesting commentary on what rested at the heart of student life four centuries ago), but they finally found a part of a pencil, and then, miraculously, bits of type that had been used to print one of the very first Bibles in a Native American language. In a lab just across the campus from that dig, students and faculty are inventing the stuff of science fiction novels: 3-D printers that can fabricate a kidney, and self-folding origami robots that might be useful in disaster rescues. College is one of the best chances many of us will ever have just to just our curiosity—to take a course on art, or literature—or political philosophy—or to explore life in another century or another culture.

You can gather a lot of information in college, including about varied and wonderful things. Just south of here, at Texas A&M, you can examine differences in countries' markets and currencies in a course called "International Trade Theory and Policy," or you can explore "The Science of Forensic Entomology" or—my personal favorite—the "Rhetoric of the Civil Rights Movement."

At Baylor, your course list might include "Intelligence and Covert Action," "Aircraft Structural Analysis," or "Music and Urban Society."

College is a passport to different places, different times, and different ways of thinking. It is a chance to understand ourselves differently, seeing how our lives are both like and unlike those of people who inhabited other eras, and other lands.

Second, college introduces you to people you've never met before. This is true both literally and figuratively. Even if you go to a school that is local and continue to live at home, your classes will be full of people you've never encountered, with views and experiences new to you. One of the most important ways in which students learn, at colleges and universities everywhere, is by interacting with people who are different from themselves. If you go to a residential college, your roommate might be from Texarkana, or Toledo, or Taipei. Inside and outside the classroom, you will encounter new points of view—in conversations after a class, on a playing field, or in a study marathon in a crowded dorm room. I recall one student, from an evangelical Christian family in Staunton, Virginia, who was admitted to Harvard but wasn't sure he'd fit in at a school in the Northeast. When he attended the recruiting weekend for accepted students, he found himself part of an all-night discussion with other admitted students from around the world, debating the characteristics that define a genuine hero. Not everyone agreed, but the differences were what made the conversation so exciting, and made him realize all he could learn at a place full of smart, engaging people with a wide range of viewpoints. Diversity is not just a slogan, or something we haphazardly hope for. It's a classroom of its own. And despite differences, you'll forge relationships that last a lifetime. Let me ask the adults in the room: How many of you met a friend or a colleague while you were in college who is still an important part of your life today? That's a lot of hands.

In the figurative sense, you'll "meet" people who have shaped history. You may encounter scientists like Ada Lovelace or Marie Curie or Albert Einstein, authors like Toni Morrison or John Steinbeck, philosophers like Kant or Confucius.

Third, college helps you to discover dreams you've never dreamed before. College can offer you the satisfaction of hard, intellectual work—a paper or a project or an experiment—or play or a musical composition—that you are proud of. It also teaches you the power of imagination. It urges you to dive down deep into yourself, and the results are often surprising. Conan O'Brien came to Harvard expecting to major in government, but his experiences at the Harvard Lampoon, a campus-based humor magazine, offered him a way to translate his observations about the world into cartoons and comedy, and ultimately into a career on camera as a late-night talk show host, making millions of people laugh—maybe some of you—every night.

Zar Zavala, who graduated from Eastwood High School in El Paso in 2007, headed to college convinced he wanted to be a lawyer—a patent lawyer to be exact. He took a class in biology his freshman year, and in the middle of a lecture about something called snare molecules he thought: "This is what I really love. Researching biology, and working at the frontier of medicine is what I most want to do." Now, seven years later, the world has lost one patent lawyer, and gained a doctoral student in neuroscience, working with Parkinson's patients to help understand how the brain affects mobility.

A student named Jordan Metoyer, from Inglewood, California, came to UT Austin to study finance. The foreclosure of her grandmother's home during her sophomore year fueled an interest in learning more about economics and urban studies. And with UT's support, Jordan traveled from Dallas to Detroit, from Africa to China, comparing housing policies in urban centers around the world. By graduation she had earned a Truman Scholarship, and made a documentary on suburban poverty. Today, she is a twenty-something working in the White House, improving housing conditions in communities across the country.

College opens doors you did not even realize were there. It challenges you to think. "Thinking" is a word that can get forgotten, trammeled in our rush to communicate faster and more often, left behind as our brains struggle to keep up with our devices. In the onrush of emails and texts and tweets and images, we may fail to recognize that simply "processing" information is not the same thing as genuine reflection. We may scan a headline without delving into the story, or glance at an email without reaching the end. This is not a path to a deeper understanding.

It's not that we all find ourselves racing to keep up; it's that there simply is not enough attention to go around. Ninety-eight percent of young Americans own cellphones, which clamor for your attention: while you sleep, while you are talking with someone else, and I am sure while you are listening to a speech like this one. A year ago, in October 2013, an app company compiled data on 150,000 Americans and found that they were checking their cellphones nine times an hour, or 110 times a day. Some people checked their phones 900 times in a 12-hour period. How many of you have checked your phones since I began speaking?

We consume so much information on our various screens that we don't always take time to consider how we respond. Information goes through our fingers almost without going through our brains—which may be why so many words and even letters seem to be disappearing from the English language, as the spread of OMG, BTW and the ubiquitous LOL suggest. College, by contrast, demands contemplation and reflection that can help restore a balance, and some of those missing letters. In recent weeks, rap artist Prince Ea has called for "conversation without abbreviation." I am with him.

College teaches us to "Think Slow." No one denies the value of speed, connectivity, and the virtual world in an economy that thrives on all three. But college can also help you to slow down. And that, perhaps, is a lesson that you don't hear taught all that often: *Slow your processors down*. College teaches you to sift through an enormous amount of daily information, to assess it, to use it critically. In other words, you learn to reject information as well as receive it. The ability to examine a piece of information skeptically, before deciding whether to accept it or not, is a vital skill in the workplace, and a vital skill in life. A dean at Harvard used to tell students that being able to detect when someone is talking rot was the main purpose of education.

"Information" is everywhere; but real "knowledge" and "understanding" are harder to achieve. That is what college will ask of you.

"Think slow" may never become a slogan, like Steve Jobs's "Think Different," but it strikes me as an attractive claim. A Harvard professor of art history, Jennifer Roberts, has been exploring what she calls "the power of patience" in her classes, teaching students to take time as they look at a work of art. She wants them to penetrate beyond the superficial and the immediate. She wants them to take the time to truly discover.

In business, huge profits can be made by firms that know more, act first, or connect faster. But there is a different kind of profit, a more lasting one, available to those willing to slow down and bear down on a difficult problem. College can help you learn how to think, more than what to think. And you will learn, perhaps, the great value of humility in the face of all we still don't know.

The world of work is changing, and employers increasingly recognize the importance of collaboration and creativity. More and more, organizations are looking for talented young people who not only know how to work hard, communicate well, and manage information skeptically,

but do so with an open mind. To cultivate your power to think is one of the best things you can ask of yourself at a college or university.

Of course, none of us can predict the future. One of the most important features of your lives—the Internet—has only existed a little longer than you have. The only thing we know for certain is that change will be rapid, and it will be constant. To be adaptive, as college teaches us, is to be armed for the challenges we cannot yet identify. At its best, college does more than prepare you for your first job; it helps anticipate, and perhaps even create, your fourth or fifth job, a job that may not even exist yet.

A quality college education teaches you how to begin to educate yourself, a project that will last the rest of your life. It offers a laboratory of possibility.

So, What Happens Next? What will you decide about the role education should play in your life?

One of Harvard's most beloved coaches, a man named Harry Parker, was described by one of his athletes as "making people prove themselves to themselves." "It's like he said, 'This is what you could be. Do you want to be that?'" For some, a coach holds up that mirror. For others, it may be a mentor, a coworker, a parent, a friend. But I want to leave you with this thought: For many people, that mirror is college, a mirror like no other—showing us what is possible, challenging us to raise our sights, asking us: "Do you want to be that?"

I have called this speech "the case for college" because I believe that college changes lives. It opens opportunities, reflected in the statistics I recited earlier. Perhaps even more important, it opens minds and worlds—in ways that stretch us—almost pull us—to become different people. I often ask students as they are approaching graduation how they are different from when they arrived at college. They say they know more. They frequently say they found a passion they had never imagined—a field, a profession to which they intend to devote their lives. But what is most important, they often tell me, is that they have a new way of approaching the world, through the power of learning, analyzing, changing to adapt to what they've come to understand. And so I leave you with a question: "Who can you be? Do you want to be that?" Wherever you go, whatever you do next, take up that challenge. Ask that question. You deserve no less.

Thank you.