

Kevin A. Rowe
Commencement Speech 2010

Good afternoon.

Congratulations to the graduates of the class of 2010. Among you are some of the most loving, generous, and inspiring people I have ever known, and I can hardly begin to express the debt of gratitude I owe you for the past four years. Thank you.

Congratulations, too, are in order and to the parents and families, faculty, administrators, trustees, and staff who join us today. This is a celebration of your hard work as much as it is of ours. Thank you. We owe to you, above all, the privilege to study at Hamilton.

I am often reminded what a unique privilege our education here has been. No time was this privilege clearer, however, than one night a little more than two years ago when I was sitting in my underwear eating dinner in the apartment I had rented for the summer in Washington D.C. It was one of those August days in the capital when your immediate inclination upon escaping the heat is to drop your pants and sit down next to the air conditioner. I offer these details for no other reason than to paint a pathetic scene for a kind of premature mid-life crisis I was having during an internship at the League of Conservation Voters. Ten weeks before the same Excel spreadsheet felt more like ten years, and I could no longer fight off my disillusionment with the bureaucratic complex turning the slow wheels of our democracy—even at my own quote-unquote progressive political action committee. I knew that politics was more gritty than glamorous, but even still, my work there bore scarcely any resemblance to the vision of a new approach of environmental politics that I had imagined while at Hamilton and that had first inspired me to work there.

At the beginning of that summer after my sophomore year, I was tired of so many problems without solutions and questions without answers raised in my classes, but now I longed to be back at Hamilton writing about all the glaring problems and questions I saw at the League of Conservation Voters and in the mainstream environmental movement more broadly.

As I sat there, this critical impulse—the indelible mark of my liberal arts education—made me realize what an incredible privilege it is to study here. Atop this hill we are removed from the world and all its Excel spreadsheets and bureaucracy in order to get a critical vantage over it. Up here we can uncover its

structures, locate all its inequalities, and imagine what a better world might look like. At Hamilton, we are free to open up the big questions that have no easy answers. We are free to discuss, debate, and argue over issues we will never be called upon to settle. We are free, above all, to think, write, and speak critically about any and everything—no assumption, our professors told us, should be left unexamined and no answer is final.

Many of us will now enter worlds in which our explorations and discussions are bookended by deadlines and bottom lines and in which our productivity is measured not only by the quality of our thinking but also by the tangible outcomes of our decisions. Some of us will go on to study further and or to teach. Even so, most of us will never enjoy the privilege of such critical distance again. After today, we are all compelled to action—whether by a drive to change the world or by the servicer of our student loans. We will act—only can we choose whether to do so for good or for ill.

The worlds we enter are messier and more complicated than we can ever tell from up here, but they are also full of possibilities. So, as we now plunge into our adult lives, it is not only death and taxes, nor spreadsheets and bureaucracy, that lie before us, for we have all the skills not just to reproduce these worlds but to make new ones—worlds that are richer, more diverse, and more inclusive.

Endowed with the unique privilege of a Hamilton education, I believe, we are charged with the lifelong responsibility to raise questions, pose challenges, and engage opposition.

I challenge us today, therefore, to keep space throughout our careers and the rest of our lives for the big questions that don't have easy answers—that is, for the kind of critical thinking that we learned at Hamilton and that will inform all kinds of changes, both big and small, that we can make in the world.

Finally, I implore us to never stop saying thank you to our parents and families, faculty, administrators, trustees, and staff for the privilege of these four years.

Thank you.