

Remarks from Junot Díaz, Pulitzer Prize-Winning Author and Keynote Speaker at 2011 Convocation Ceremony

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“Here we are the beginning of your education. At the beginning, hopefully, of *you*. As time is short, I wish only to stress a few insights about college that eluded me when I was in your position. I want to talk about what the hell this—this college hoo-haw—is all about.

Our theme today is supposed to be “truth and power.” I’m supposed to say something perceptive and moving about truth and power. In eight minutes. Truth and power. In eight minutes I can’t even hope to touch either of these colossuses in any way that will make sense or be helpful, but I will say that one of the most sure-fire reliable and productive ways to access, to question, to explore truth and to access, question, and resist power is of course education. In fact, one of the best ways to be happy, to be human, is to be educated.

But what is an education? This might seem like a pedantic thing to ask. You’re all in college now; you know what an education is and what is for, right? Well, for those of you who *do* know, you’re lucky. Because if you were like my immigrant ass on my first day of college, I really didn’t have a solid idea what an education really was. No one had really sent me a memo or if they did, I hadn’t read it. Sure I knew getting an education was about learning and going to class and hopefully scoring a degree with which I could get a job that didn’t involve complete humiliation and drudgery. But that’s only the most prosaic elements of an education, and because I didn’t know any better in my first four years of college, I kind of missed the best part—which sucks when you think about it.

An education, you see, is more than classes and grades and future jobs. At its root it’s about you being changed, utterly. Getting an education is at its core the utopian hope that in the course of your studies, you—the student—with the help of your peers and your teachers, will open yourself up to the materials, to the readings, to the lectures, to the discussions, to the ideas you’re being exposed to in such a way that by the end of your time here at Nova, you will be transformed. That’s what an education is. Opening yourself up in such a way to what you’re learning so that you are transformed utterly. An education, at its best, means that the person who walks into Nova will not recognize the person who walks out of Nova. Your job as a student is not only to go to class and do your work and get good grades and graduate. Your job as a student, at a profound level, is to open yourself up to the transformative potential of learning.

I actually didn't know that. I went through my first four years of college scared shitless. I didn't participate. I didn't do much of the reading. I didn't seriously give myself over to the discussions, to the materials. I was so scared because, shit, what did I know? I was an immigrant kid, the first one in my family to go to college. And I was so scared of blowing it, of looking like a fool, that I fell back and played it safe. Which meant, of course, that I went through my first four years of college with my defenses up. I didn't let anything get through. And when you got your defenses up in college, well, there's no way that what you're learning will ever reach your heart or your soul—which is the place that education actually does its best work—and not as you might think, your head. When you got your defenses up, there's no possible way that you can be transformed.

I know I wasn't. I actually got a degree. I even had top grades. But what I didn't get in my first four years of college was an education. I was basically the same scared, narrow minded kid who went into Rutgers. I know more stuff, sure, in my head. But the core of myself had learned nothing new, had not acquired the wisdom and the humility and insight and the strength that comes from the process of having your core beliefs taken apart and you putting them back together in a way that takes into account all that you've learned.

And you know what: I knew it too. Deep down, where you don't lie to yourself, I knew that I had cheated myself. I saw other kids being transformed, and I stayed behind my defenses, and I knew I'd missed something important, something profound.

Luckily for me, I ended getting another chance; I went to graduate school. Another three years of college. And in graduate school I did what I should have done that first time around: I dropped my defenses. I stopped worrying about looking dumb or being wrong, and I just participated. I gave myself over to the material, to the discussions, to the ideas, I gave myself the chance to be transformed—and you know what—I was. What I gained was exactly what education promises all of us: not just extra information or a passport to a job but a profound sense of the world, a depth of insight and a maturity of character that makes you equal to anything the world chooses to throw at you. What I gained was a new self.

I was very lucky to get another chance. But I urge you not to wait as long as I did.

It is a scary thing to be really educated. It means that you have no idea what you will become, where you will end up. To be educated means you've got to drop your defenses. You got to be humble and admit you don't really know all that much. It means letting go of the maps you brought with you, the ones you cling to. An education means to wander out into the wilderness of learning, see what's out there. It means often that for a while you will be lost. But it's in that being lost that you find out how you really are outside of the formulas your parents and this society have set out for you. It's in the being lost, which education—real education—encourages that you will find the real you.

In these days of budget cuts, of shrinking student loans, and slumping job market an education is an endangered thing. Most of us are unwilling to take the risk. Most of us decide what we want to be before we start college, and we never stray from that path. There's too much at stake and too little money to fool around. After all, it's easy for me to sit up here and say "explore, take risks." Well, I'm not the one paying for the school.

And still I urge you to do it, to risk yourself in getting an education. The transformation I've been talking about, the experiences of being pulled apart and then putting yourself back together, will serve you forever. It will serve you when you are truly lost. It will serve you when you are alone, when you are faced with odds and terrible choices. Once you've had that first experience of education you will know that in yourself you have all the resources, all the skills, all the patience, and all the faith to find your way and to make from whatever difficulty confronts you a positive end.

Again, I urge you in these four years: try to drop your defenses. Try to give yourself over to your learning. Seek out that transformation. Michel Foucault says that the main interest in life and work is to become someone else that you were not in the beginning. He says, what is true for writing and a love relationship is true also for life. The game is worthwhile insofar as we don't know what will be the end.

I hope you receive an education. I hope that you seek one out. I hope in the midst of your searching you get lost for a while. I hope you make mistakes. I hope from those mistakes and from that getting lost you find something completely and irrevocably new. I hope that you push yourself to join in all the discussions and all the debates. I hope that you don't just fall back in class. I hope that you allow the words and the ideas of others to enter you. I hope that this here is the beginning of you. And I hope that this journey called your education will be one that surprises. I hope that you will have that opportunity to be transformed utterly by what you learn. I hope that the self that walks out of here will be a stranger to she who walked in. It is really the only reason to put up with all this, the only reason.

Thank you."