

“The Quest for Quality Education”

**Commencement Address by
The Visitor of the William V.S. Tubman University
H.E. Mrs. Ellen Johnson Sirleaf
President of Liberia
at the
First Commencement Convocation of the
William V.S. Tubman University
Harper, Maryland
June 19, 2014**

[As Delivered]

Dr. Elizabeth Davis-Russell, First President of the William V.S. Tubman University;
President and Members of the Board of Trustees of the University;
Senator [John] Ballot and Senator [Dan] Morias;
Members of the Cabinet and other Government Officials;
Former Presidents of Tubman College of Technology;
Members of the Faculty and the entire Tubman University Family;
Members of the Tubman College Alumni Association;
Excellency Mr. Ambassador from South Africa a special recognition to you;
Superintendent, Traditional Leaders, Chiefs, Elders, Local Government Officials;
Members of the Clergy;
Baccalaureate Speaker;
Honored and Special Guests;
Graduates of the First Class of Tubman University;
Families and Friends of the Class of 2014;
Ladies and Gentlemen:

I am honored to be here to participate in the first Commencement Convocation of the William V.S. Tubman University, named in honor of Liberia's longest serving President and a son of Maryland County; to be its first Commencement Speaker, and to receive its first Honorary Degree, of Doctor of Law (LLD) Honoris Causa.

The Citation that was just read lists the many honors I have received over a long career; but there is nothing more welcomed than recognition that is "homegrown" – one that comes from your own! I am humbled by this recognition, and express my profound thanks and

appreciation to the Trustees of Tubman University for this distinct honor which you have bestowed upon me.

Today is a most extraordinary day, an exciting day, a day to be proud, proud to honor the memory of our country's 18th President, and I refer to him the best leader and not to myself; proud to be The Visitor of the William V.S. Tubman University, proud to celebrate a milestone at this institution which is the pride of Maryland County. We applaud each and every one of you who has made this happen.

Because of you, Tubman University is living testament of its motto, to "provide quality educational experiences that transform the lives of individuals for worthy service." Under the stellar leadership of you, Dr. Elizabeth Davis-Russell, and your dedicated and committed team of faculty and administrators, you have succeeded in transforming this place, in rapid time, from a technical college into a full-fledged four-year institution that is the envy of others that have been around for far longer.

Tubman University is serving as a regional magnet, offering degrees in a host of disciplines so that students can be assured of getting the best education Liberia has to offer. Young people are gravitating towards Harper because they know that they will obtain the quality education that is fundamental for their own success, and for Liberia's economic, social and political transformation, as outlined in our *"Vision 2030: Liberia Rising"* and our five-year development strategy, *"Agenda for Transformation"*. With an enrollment that has grown from 287 in 2009 to 1,000 today, students are coming to TU, with its no-nonsense administration that offers a proper learning environment and is gaining an enviable reputation for quality education.

Many may recall that in 2006 we announced that education would be our number one priority – that we would address the many years of denial to our many children who are now adults. We knew that schools needed to be built; needed to be reconstructed; we knew that volunteer teachers, well intended but lacking the skills, needed to be trained; we knew that books and educational materials needed to be provided.

We have done much of that in an environment of resource constraints that required hard choices:

- how much to allocate to education given the needs for roads and power and hospitals and water and housing and good governance;
- how to meet the needs of thousands of well-intentioned but ill-trained volunteer teachers when there was no replacement?
- what could be done to address the education neglect in the rural counties when similar needs existed in the major cities where over one third of the population reside?
- how do we respond to the social needs of teachers to be replaced and respond to the systemic fraud of those carried on the payroll who did not exist?
- How to balance a right to an education with the requirement for quality education?

More importantly, how do we change attitudes and values so as to recognize and appreciate the sacrifice required by those wishing to obtain quality education and the service demanded by those willing to teach and educate?

How do we instill in the body politic that education requires **sacrifice** and **service**?

We all desire quality education for our children and students. We want them to seize the opportunity to learn; and we want our teachers to acquire quality training in order to impart quality learning to the young minds in their charge. In our "education village," parents, schools and the government have a role in ensuring quality education. Government's role, and goal, as stated in our *Agenda for Transformation*, is "for the education sector to ensure equal access to high-quality free and compulsory basic education and to a variety of post-basic education and training opportunities that lead to an improved livelihood and tertiary education."

But what is quality education? We know a well-educated person when we see one, but how do we get to that point? What are the challenges we must surmount in reaching this objective?

Quality education, by definition, is education that is nationally relevant and globally competitive, built upon a foundation of clearly articulated values and ethics, and presents the learner with diverse opportunities. Its goal is to transform the learner, who is then able to demonstrate new knowledge, skills and attitudes in readiness to serve humankind. This includes passion for learning and the profession, proficiency in oral and written communication, critical thinking, reasoning, the ability to critically search and use information, knowledge and scientific process with attendant skills in quantitative reasoning, and the ability to use technology as an effective tool in all of these processes.

Quality education requires faculty with integrity, qualified in their disciplines and committed to the learner. The faculty delivers a coherent curriculum with rigorous standards, and specific learning outcomes or competencies that students must demonstrate. These must include theoretical as well as experiential learning.

Quality education must provide co-curricular activities for the learner, with opportunities to develop and demonstrate leadership skills. Quality education must include continuous assessment and quality assurance with the result being used for continuous improvement.

To produce the leaders of tomorrow, institutions like Tubman University must empower Liberia's youth by teaching them not only the theory, but leadership skills, social responsibility, issues about the environment, among other disciplines. A holistic education that engages students in theory, practical learning through service, and social responsibility to the local and global community to protect the environment, and with that you can be assured that there will be no less than students that are informed, educated, and ready to serve humanity.

The greatest gift we can bequeath to our children, and our people, is quality education - the foundation for national development. This must be the business, the attention of every Liberian. For as much as we talk about the urgent need for infrastructure -- our roads, power and ports -- our own national experience is clear. If we lack the education to manage such facilities, they will not last.

What does your government offer in return?

Ultimately, the greatest legacy we can leave our children is a solid foundation, and government's role in that quest is pivotal. Government has an obligation to build an educational system in which every Liberian child has an opportunity to education; education that is equal to grooming them into their potential. However, much of what government does will depend on the cooperation of parents, teachers, school functionaries, community leaders and those public institutions with responsibility for educating and teaching. Government will continue and must continue to do its part to transform our country and make educational opportunities available to all Liberians, recognizing that in education there is no quick fix. It requires consistency, dedication and commitment to improve the entire public education system.

My final word on this is that Education -- quality education -- is not cheap, neither for the provider nor the beneficiary. The best results from this expensive undertaking are obtained only when serious effort and time are devoted to get the most out of the opportunities that are available. The burden in this regard rests on students: those willing to make the sacrifice, to spend time studying, reading, exploring, questioning, exchanging. To the extended audience up there, you can buy a degree but you can't buy an education.

This is why we applaud you, Tubman University graduates, we applaud you for the time you have spent preparing yourself through hard work and through study. As Dean Brown called you, you are indeed the new breed eschewing that temptation to use a learning institution as a shadow national government.

Appointed as President of Tubman College of Technology in 2007, Dr. Elizabeth Davis Russell saw the need for more than a technical college in a region that needed agriculturists, engineers, health professionals, education specialists, business managers and more. Dr. Davis-Russell is a shining and unequalled example of service to our nation. She has demonstrated great leadership skills, as she fulfilled her vision of establishing Tubman University, a first-class institution, providing education and services, contributing to the Southeast, her ancestral home, and to the nation.

Her journey has not been an easy one -- like journeys of all those who serve our country -- not giving in to past habits, but standing tall in principles and commitment. She has had her share of the challenges so prevalent in our society today: protests, demonstrations, false accusations, ingratitude, divisive maneuvering by those who know and should do better.

But she has remained faithful and steadfast to her values and her profession, insisting that students remain students, obtaining the education for which they have made the big sacrifice.

She has chosen education as a profession and a career and she has served us well in this regard. In so doing, she raised the bar of leadership through character, competence, commitment, and courage without fear or favor.

Dr. Davis-Russell your impact on this institution has been significant: your insistence on an institution whose quality would be second to none in Liberia; that would be built upon, and retain, a foundation of core values and would endure on principles of operation free from corruption; that would be a catalyst for development; that would be a center of quality and excellence. This region and our country are deeply indebted to you, and your team.

And now to you, the Graduating Class of 2014 -- all 80-strong – you are the pioneers; you are making history today, because there will never be another “First Commencement Convocation of Tubman University”. You are the first; everyone hereafter will follow in your footprints. Everyone will watch and monitor what you do with this excellent training that you have received. As you move on, to career or to further studies, make sure that you leave footprints that others would want to follow!

It is satisfying today, Liberia can boast of a few more graduates skilled in areas where the country desperately needs expertise. Today, we’ve already spoken about the one that’s missing and given honor to his memory: General Agriculture (18), Nursing (10), Secondary Education (9), Public Health (7), Guidance and Counseling (7), and others in the fields of Public Administration, Accounting, Economics, and Business Administration.

However, there are only 13 females to 67 males in this graduating class. I would call upon all of you to correct this imbalance.

I salute you, 2014 graduates and trailblazers of Tubman University. I congratulate you, on behalf of the Government and in my own name, for your achievements. Now go out and be the best that you can be for you and your country, remain faithful to your calling and to your new name the “new breed”!

May Tubman University, and all those who are associated with it, thrive and prosper, and may God Bless our beloved country.

Thank you.