

Well Equipped for the Future



*State University of New York, Empire State College
Commencement, 11 June 2011*

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*Remarks by Sir John Daniel on the conferment of the
degree Doctor of Letters honoris causa*

Transcript

Chairman Hayden, President Davis, Graduates, Colleagues, Ladies and Gentlemen:

This is the second time this year that Empire State College has honoured me and I am deeply grateful. On March 23rd I had the honour of delivering the Boyer Family Lecture during your ‘All College Days’. Today you have made me an honorary doctor of ESC. The fact that both events have happened as you celebrate your 40th anniversary makes me especially proud.

In 1971, the year that ESC was founded, I began part-time study for a Master’s in Educational Technology. I had begun my first academic appointment, at the University of Montreal, and thought that since my degrees were in science and engineering I ought now to learn something about education. A year later I spent three months at the UK Open University doing the internship required by the Master’s programme. The Open University had admitted its first cohort of 25,000 students a year earlier and my internship was a revelation of the revolution of openness in higher education that was just beginning.

Thanks to web technologies the dimensions of openness in higher education are now expanding rapidly, but forty years ago just two institutions, the UK Open University and Empire State College, were the prime expressions of openness. The Open University had abolished all academic prerequisites for admission and offered distance learning at scale. Empire State College opened up the curriculum by letting students design their own programmes with mentors to help them achieve rigour and balance. I find it both remarkable and inspiring that, forty years on, each of these two radically innovative institutions tops student satisfaction surveys in its own jurisdiction.

The link with your founder, Ernie Boyer, gives these honours added meaning. Ernie Boyer was a wonderful man. In the 1990s when he was president of the Carnegie Foundation, he invited me to become one of its trustees, so for several years I had the privilege of watching his lively mind explore multiple topics in higher education. His seminal book, *Scholarship Reconsidered*, had appeared in 1990 and we observed its impact in encouraging institutions to put greater emphasis on teaching and in giving colleges and universities the confidence to replace cookie-cutter conformity with their own visions of their roles.

Dr Boyer looked to me as the voice of open and distance learning within the Carnegie Board. Change in the methods of higher education was in the air; change that only accelerated with the dotcom frenzy at the turn of the millennium and the emergence of the web as a multi-directional means of communication.

My message today is that you are well-equipped for the future. By 'you' I mean both you as graduates of Empire State College and 'you' the College itself.

First, as graduates of Empire State College, you are unusually well-equipped for the future. Learning at a distance has reinforced your capacities for self-motivation and self-organisation, which are a great bonus to the knowledge and skills you have also acquired. When I was at the Open University employers used to tell me that faced with two graduates of equal merit they chose the Open University graduate because of these qualities of autonomy. Those of you who have designed your own programmes of study have acquired another important 21st century skill, the ability to find what you need in the maze of knowledge and create order out of it.

Empire State College is well equipped for the future for similar reasons. Now that every institution of higher education is trying to get into distance learning those with long experience, like ESC, should have an advantage. You must realise, of course, that new technologies are changing the game, but you already know that what makes distance learning effective is not the technology but the way that it is harnessed to give good service to students. You know how to do that, which is why you top SUNY's rankings for student satisfaction.

ESC is a global pace-setter in its capacity to help students design your own concentrations and graduate saying that you did 'my degree, my way'. In my Boyer Lecture in March I talked about the growing movement to make knowledge freely available as Open Educational Resources. These resources enhance, in an extraordinary way, the ability of students to construct knowledge themselves and the opportunities for faculty to assemble learning resources of high quality. I am delighted that since my visit in March ESC has linked to an international association of universities that is exploring the notion of an Open Educational Resources University that would implement some of ESC's core principles worldwide.

That is why I am so pleased to be here. I congratulate the graduates on their achievements and wish them well for the future for which they are so well equipped. I thank the faculty of ESC and SUNY most warmly for conferring this honour upon me. I shall be a proud member of the Empire State College Community.