

Stockton Holds Baccalaureate Commencement Ceremony with Speech by Patricia Reid-Merritt

Longtime Faculty Member Receives Award as Nearly 700 Earn Degrees

For Immediate Release; with photos on [flickr](#). Graduate list attached.

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Contact: Maryjane Briant
News and Media Relations Director
Galloway Township, NJ 08205
Maryjane.Briant@stockton.edu
(609) 652-4593
www.stockton.edu/media

Galloway, NJ - Instead of urging Stockton University's graduates to build a better mousetrap, keynote speaker Patricia Reid-Merritt, Distinguished Professor of Social Work and Africana Studies, today urged them to "be as slick, as creative and as innovative as that mouse" that she could not catch, one of a series of sometimes humorous, and sometimes serious obstacles in her life.

She said she has been at Stockton since 1976 and heard many Commencement speakers, but "I can't tell you who their names were - I can't tell you what they said." However, she said, the basic message was always: "Go out and do good in the world. Be good to yourself, good to the family, good to the community."

"So I'm not going to say any of that," she said, because others would and she was determined to give a short speech.

Instead Reid-Merritt told about her "own personal struggle" to become a college graduate, the first ever in her family. She grew up in a "very poor family in Philadelphia" and experienced "cultural shock" when she had the opportunity to go to an exclusive all-women's college on the Mainline. The other students "said they were speaking English, but I was speaking English, too, and they said they didn't understand what I was talking about.... But I finally made it."

Later, when she was a young mother in grad school, "I felt there were too many obstacles in my life," but she persevered anyway.

Eventually, she achieved enough success to be sitting in a beautiful, big house with an acreage of land and a high-definition, 55-inch TV, thinking: "I've made it," until she saw something scurry
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across the floor. Her husband, she said, felt “they have to live somewhere,” but that didn’t satisfy her.

So she decided to become “a mouse killer,” and she bought a trap and baited it with cheddar cheese.

But the next morning, “the box was open, the cheese was gone and no mouse!”

“And I thought, here’s the lesson I want to leave with these students.” If you use creativity and innovation as the mouse did: “There are no obstacles that are too big for you to overcome!”

Stockton President Harvey Kesselman presided over the Baccalaureate Commencement ceremony in the Sports Center. Nearly 700 summer and fall baccalaureate candidates earned degrees this month. The candidates from the schools of Arts and Humanities, Business, Education, General Studies, Health Science, Natural Sciences and Mathematics and Social and Behavioral Sciences were presented by Susan Davenport, interim provost and executive vice president of the university.

“Stockton has always been a place where you could plant yourself and grow,” said President Kesselman, a member of Stockton’s first class. “However, our new designation as a university signifies our continuing development as a distinctive institution of higher learning and reflects the university’s growing academic excellence at the baccalaureate, master’s, and doctoral levels.

“The university’s reputation, recognized nationally and internationally, continues to mature as a high-value, high-quality institution. Stockton does this by retaining its fundamental values while also changing to meet the needs of today’s students,” he continued.

“Your Stockton education equips you with the skills to succeed in your workplaces, personal lives and your communities. These talents include the ability to communicate, to collaborate, and to innovate, all critical skills in the 21st century. This is especially true when they are shaped by:

- An understanding of how to gather information and how to create new knowledge;
- An appreciation for the world’s diversity and cultural interconnectedness;
- An exposure to and respect for a wealth of values and artistic expression;
- And the ability to both anticipate and adapt to new opportunities.

“Renowned anthropologist Margaret Mead suggested that a group of thoughtful, committed, citizens can change the world,” Kesselman said. “Before me now, a group of thoughtful and committed citizens stands ready to fulfill Mead’s promise to act responsibly, to promote justice and fairness and to change the world for the better.

“Your graduating class moves forward to face the excitement and challenges of life after Stockton. This will require you to utilize all that you have learned as Stockton students: diligence, hard work, cooperation and an inherent respect for the individuals who comprise the rich tapestry of your life.”

He concluded by saying: “When you leave this graduation today, the lessons you have learned here will inform your life’s efforts moving forward: building communities, raising families,

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supporting social justice and educating others. You are our best hope for a world filled with innovation, imagination and a meaningful future.”

Reid-Merritt was presented with Stockton’s Distinguished Service Award by Trustee Raymond Ciccone, a 1979 alumnus, who cited her “outstanding leadership and service,” and “her respected body of work as an author, educator, scholar as well as her community activism as chairperson of the Fannie Lou Hamer National Statue Committee and founder of the annual Fannie Lou Hamer Human and Civil Rights Symposium.”

The ceremony introduced a re-interpreted alma mater, “Ospreys on Parade.” The project was initiated by Beverly Vaughn, professor of Music and developed by a committee of faculty, staff and alumni including Dean Lisa Honaker of the School of Arts and Humanities. The committee was chaired by Lynne Kesselman, Stockton alumna and wife of President Kesselman. Bud Noble, a Hollywood Hall of Fame composer and adjunct instructor, wrote a new melody while the original lyrics by Stephen Dunn, Distinguished Professor Emeritus of Creative Writing and a Pulitzer Prize winner for Poetry, were adapted with Dunn’s blessing by Joseph Sramaty, a 2015 Vocal Music graduate and member of the university staff.

Sramaty sang it first once through, then Vaughn led the audience and the Commencement Ensemble in singing it all together, as the music and lyrics were projected on giant screens.

Faculty Senate President Brian Tyrrell, associate professor of Hospitality and Tourism Management Studies, noted that today was a milestone but said: “I ask that you consider every day of your life an opportunity to reflect on the past and anticipate the future. Your Stockton liberal arts education can enhance the whole of your life’s journey.”

Carl Archut Jr., president of the Student Senate and a senior from Paulsboro, N.J., gave the student address.

“Take a second and try to remember that first day you drove onto campus as a Stockton student,” he told the graduates. “You entered this campus with dreams so enormous, they almost seemed unreachable. Now, you are able to call those dreams, accomplishments.”

“Today, you accept the responsibility to foster change in every situation you encounter, to create meaning in the lives of those you meet, and to leave behind a legacy,” he continued.

“Whether you realize it, or not, each of you has left a mark here at Stockton University. It is now time to make your mark on the world. In all that you do, please remember to believe in yourself. BE YOU,” Archut said.

President Kesselman had 20 graduates stand to be recognized as “members of our community who have served or are on active duty with the military.”

Trustee Ciccone welcomed the new graduates to join the alumni association, and asked them to applaud the faculty and staff, and then their spouses, family and friends “who have helped make this day a reality.”

Wendel White, Distinguished Professor of Art, author/photographer and recipient of a Guggenheim fellowship in photography, was the faculty grand marshal.

In announcing the recessional, to cheers and applause for the new graduates, Davenport said: “Graduates... now alumni... you have worked hard to earn your degrees. We salute you and your families.”

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