Good Afternoon, I would first like to thank the friends and family members in the audience. I am grateful for all the help they provided the classmates that I have come to love and respect. Your love and support has always been the foundation on which we stood during our transition from childhood to adulthood and now as we enter the community of African scholars.

I want to thank my own parents: My father David Carr for showing me what unconditional love actually looks like, my mother Deborah Carr for inspiring me with an inquisitive spirit and genuine respect for all people, and my grandmother, affectionately known as Ms. Bunny, who has been my rock. The person that I can always turn to regardless of what I am dealing with. You are the inspiration for my spirit of service. Your commitment to helping others in need has greatly influenced the man that I am today and who I wish to be tomorrow.

When I look at all of the brilliant and beautiful students in the audience today, I feel overwhelmed with joy and pride. Your faces help me to see that I am a part of something that is so much bigger than me. A part of a force that began when the first captive African who decided to rebel against the oppression of slavery, when the first Black student at San Francisco State University decided to protest for classes that reflected their cultural and historical experiences, and the first Black prisoner who decided to use his time to educate himself about his ancestry and true potential as a Black man. The pioneers of these various fronts created the impetus for this liberating force that we all know as Africana Studies. Today we are being celebrated for our decision to carry on their legacy.

I was not expected to be standing here in front of you today. My family knows that the road I traveled to be here has been dangerous and full of obstacles; in fact it nearly cost me my life. As a Black man growing up in the inner city, there were so many forces that sought to destroy me, to bring me down and keep me down. I was lost in a distorted culture of so many voices shouting messages of my inherent inferiority that I began to believe them.

But moments of grace saved me. My grandmother’s wisdom and a group of friends I made in my darkest hour came to my rescue. A dear friend and mentor introduced me to the work of Dr. John Henrik Clark, Dr. Na’im Akbar, Dr. Fransess Cress Welsing, and Dr. Asa Hilliard. They were my introduction to Africana Studies. I read all I could, and then I read every book in their bibliographies. These men and women provided me with an entirely new vision of a Black man... a different version of who I was, and who I could become.
Since those days, I have longed to immerse myself again in the work of these great African thinkers. I yearned to experience their love, their courage and their commitment as they shared with me the majesty of our ancestry. I confess that I dared to become like them.

When I enrolled in the Africana Studies Department here at SUNY, I finally had my opportunity. The professors were so passionate about their work and so selflessly intent on helping us students realize our potential for greatness. The Africana Studies Department became my community and the faculty became family. This program was hard for me – the professors saw potential in me that I didn’t see in myself, and they expected, they demanded, that I see it too. During moments of discouragement, Dr. Sutherland’s door was always open and her motherly encouragement was always right on point. I can hear her most common words of advice as if it were yesterday “Keep it tight Richard.” When I was confused about future plans, Dr. Slade was right there with wisdom and insight. All of the professors—Professors Taylor, Sarfoh, Ballard, Williams, and Araia--have touched my life. And I want to thank them all deeply. Their love and strength rained down on my classmates and me.

My cohort of fellow students in the Africana Studies department became a family, supporting each other with whatever we needed – food, advice and words of encouragement. Brothers and sister working hard together, complaining together, and today cheering together. We did it!!!

Believe it or not, and sometimes it’s still hard for me to see myself as a “real” scholar, we are the next generation of African thinkers who will stand on the shoulders of giants. I am so proud of you...of us. Never let anyone question what we have done here. We will encounter people who are ignorant of the value of Africana Studies. Tell them that if we have not studied the cultural, historical, and social roots of mother Africa and honored the sacrifices of the African descendents of the Diaspora, we will never understand the truth of our culture today, and what it can become tomorrow.

Tell them that human history is Black at its core. Many of the problems facing planet earth today have their solutions in Africana Studies. As newly graduated African scholars, it is our responsibility to share what we have learned with our leaders, just as our ancestors shared their knowledge with us. No one can teach, legislate, or serve without having this understanding. I would like to quote Dr. John Henrik Clark in regards to the essence of Africana Studies and our African History: “History is a clock that people use to tell their political and cultural time of day. It is also a compass that people use to find themselves on the map of human geography. History tells a people where they have been and what they have been, where they are and what they are. Most important, history tells a people where they still must go, what they still must be. The relationship of history to the people is the same as the relationship of a mother to her child.”
In closing I wish to take one more moment to acknowledge the Africana Studies department, my classmates, and all our friends and families for their support. Thank you