

*Remarks for the
Northwest Mississippi Community College Commencement
May 16, 2003*

■ Recognize Dr. Brent Bozeman, Dr. David Haraway, William Dawson

■ (any stories you have of your time at Northwest may work well here – proud to be a graduate of Northwest Community College)

This is truly an important day in your lives – it's the culmination of a lot of work, study, and hopefully, some fun. Some of you may be going on to jobs from here, some of you may be going on to further studies.

Whatever path you take, I urge you to stay focused on opportunities here in Mississippi. Our state is growing like never before, and it's important that we keep our best minds – that we keep each of you – here to help keep that growth happening.

It's an exciting time here – and I want you to be a part of it, part of what's happening across the state. It's a time when Mississippi is changing, and the rest of the world is taking notice.

Everyone has an image of Mississippi in their mind – each of us here has an image of what the state is like, and people around the country have different images of Mississippi as well.

Today I want to talk about a new and different image of Mississippi – an image of a state that is moving faster than anyone else into the 21st century, a state that is competing and leading in the global marketplace, a state that is setting new standards in education and economic development.

Granted, it's not an easy time for any state.

Here at home, we've faced some trials – but with a combination of strong leadership and established priorities, we are coming out ahead.

I believe strongly that we have to protect people in the short term while preparing for the long term – and the best way to do that is through investing in education and creating jobs.

Here's where the new image of Mississippi comes into play.

For so long, the rest of the nation has always thought of Mississippi as being in last place, especially in terms of education. That's no longer true in today's Mississippi.

We've made education a priority – and it's a priority I've had at the top of my list ever since I began in public office as a state senator in 1987. Our schools – from kindergarten through higher education – are the cornerstones of our communities and the key to the success of our economy.

Because we've set priorities, Mississippi has become a recognized leader in education.

We've raised teacher pay.

We're leading the states in preparing for the new “No Child Left Behind” legislation passed by Congress.

We've placed an Internet-accessible computer in every public school classroom in the state.

That's more than 32,000 computers in more than 32,000 classrooms – and we were the first state in the nation to do this.

And this year, at a time when other states are cutting education, we're stepping up our investment.

In my State of the State address in January, I challenged the Legislature to fund education at 62% of budget, and fund it first. I'm proud to say they rose to the challenge, and I signed legislation within next 3 weeks.

We made history with that move.

We were the first state in the nation to pass education funding bills, and as I said, the only state to increase funding from kindergarten through community colleges and other institutions of higher learning. Again, that is significant in light of national recession – and it demonstrates our priority and our commitment to each of you and those coming behind you.

We are making strong progress, and we're proving to the people of Mississippi, and the rest of the nation, that we're serious about education. We're making a strong investment today for strong dividends tomorrow.

As graduates, what does this commitment to education mean to you today? It shows that when it comes to education, we mean business – and importantly for you, business means jobs. We’re making this investment because it’s part of a bigger plan to create quality, high-paying jobs in this state.

Since I took office in January 2000 through the end of February, we’ve grown like never before. I want you to stay in Mississippi – and the opportunities are there. Over the past three years, we’ve brought in 2,103 new and expanded facilities and created more than 50,000 new jobs. The total business investment in that time exceeds \$14.1 billion.

And the trend is continuing. In March and April, we created another 2,800 jobs, saw the opening or expansion of 116 businesses, and brought in another \$763 million in capital investments.

We're putting our people to work in highly skilled jobs with good pay – and you can be a part of it.

As an example, look at the Nissan plant in Canton. The plant is opening May 27 – the only auto plant opening in the nation this year.

Nissan is investing \$1.5 billion in this facility and creating 5,000 direct jobs. Thousands more jobs are being created at suppliers for Nissan and businesses opening to support the plant.

We gained the attention of companies around the world when we landed Nissan – and now, more than ever, Mississippi is being visited by companies looking to locate here.

Jobs are coming to Mississippi because the word is out about what we can do. *Site Selection* magazine has Mississippi ranked as Top 10 location for new companies. We've been recognized as one of the top 10 states for small business survival. In January of this year, *Expansion Management* magazine ranked 4 Mississippi cities in its latest survey of the 50 hottest American cities for expansion or location of facilities.

When companies read these industry publications, they see that Mississippi has something to offer. They realize the image has changed.

And Northwest Community College has a strong role to play in our future growth. I called for the creation of the Mississippi Rural Economic Impact Authority this year, and as a result we now have \$10 million to aid economic development in rural areas and funding to cover workforce training at community colleges.

In the end, we're looking to the future of Mississippi and asking, where do we want to go? I've fought for funding for education and job creation because of the simple fact that good schools attract good jobs, which build good communities.

The image of the Mississippi of 2003 is unlike anything anyone could have imagined. It's an image of people working in highly-skilled, well-paying jobs. It's an image of children in classrooms equipped with the technology to bring the world to their desk. It's an image of global companies looking for a place to do business in the state.

We're making a difference in Mississippi – and I want you to help be a part of that effort.

Will Rogers once commented that “even if you're on the right track, you'll get run over if you just sit there.”

Mississippi's on the right track – on the right career track – and you're right there with us.

I know you've all taken your final exams and believe the testing is over for now – but it's not. I want to give you one last test here today – but don't worry, you're still getting diplomas today. It's a simple test with no essay questions, and there's no grade. It's just a simple test to help us stop and think about what's important in life.

I'm going to ask a few questions, and I want you to think about the answers – you can grade yourself if you like. Here we go...

Name the five wealthiest people in the world.

Name the last five Heisman winners.

Name the last five winners of the Miss America contest.

Name the last five Academy Award winners for best actor and best actress.

How did you do? The point is, none of us remember the headliners of yesterday. These people may be the best in their fields – but applause dies, awards tarnish, and with today's stock market, we may have a new list of the wealthiest people tomorrow.

Here's one more test – see you how you do on this one.

Think of the people in your life who have made you feel appreciated and special.

Think of the teachers who aided your journey through school.

Name your first-grade teacher.

Easier? The simple lesson here is that the people who make the greatest difference in life are not the ones with most money, the most awards or the flashiest lifestyle. It's the people who care, who nurture, who work to help make a difference.

The opportunity belongs to you to forget excuses and focus on solutions – and take calculated risks when the rewards are great.

It's been said that “we tend to overestimate what we can do in one year and underestimate what we can do in ten years.”

Don't underestimate your gifts, your talents, or what you can do with your life. Don't underestimate what you can do in Mississippi.

Let's build our future together based on what our future can be. It's an exciting, daunting prospect, but by virtue of the fact that you're here today, you can do it – and that's good for all of us.

Congratulations on your achievements. Follow your dreams and help build an exciting future.