Thank you, General Rosa. It’s a great honor to be here. Graduates, congratulations on achieving one of the most significant milestones of your lives.

I’ve been a business professor for more than 30 years. I’ve enjoyed teaching undergraduate classes, but I’m passionate about graduate and professional education. Much of my focus as a business school dean was on developing graduate programs to help busy professionals advance their careers.

Although I’ve only been in Charleston for 15 months, I’ve known for years about the quality of the evening and graduate programs at The Citadel. I’m delighted that the College of Charleston enjoys a strong and growing partnership with The Citadel. As many of you are aware, we have joint master’s degree programs in computer science, English, and history. We look forward to doing much more together in the years ahead.

This afternoon I’d like to talk to you about some of the professional opportunities that lie before you as graduates of The Citadel, and some of the responsibilities that I hope you will shoulder as your careers move forward.

Our Megaregion
We all live, study, and work in and around Charleston, South Carolina, on “the edge of America.” Our state is beautiful, but it’s small. Only 4.4 million people. It’s also a relatively poor state with no major cities to bolster its tax base.

Charleston is a small, charming, historic, and very livable city. But in many ways, it’s off the beaten path and somewhat isolated. It’s an ideal spot from which to catch the Gulf Stream to Europe. But is it a place where professionals like you can find meaningful career opportunities?
Let me answer that question by describing our location from a regional rather than state perspective.

We live on the edge of what is known as the Piedmont Megalopolis. The term megalopolis means “great city,” and was first used in 1957 by Jean Gottman, a French geographer, to describe the great city that extends from Washington, D.C. to Boston. The Piedmont Megalopolis has also been called the “Piedmont Atlantic Megaregion” and “The Southern Cross.” I’ll use the last name, which is easier to remember, easier to pronounce, and is more descriptive.

The Southern Cross has two emerging spines, or arms, that cross in Atlanta. One spine runs from Nashville through Chattanooga, through Atlanta, and on to Macon. The other spine, the primary spine, runs from Birmingham, Alabama through Atlanta, through Greenville-Spartanburg, through Charlotte, and on to Raleigh-Durham. That spine follows Interstate 85.

The Southern Cross is an economic region that spans cities, counties, and states. Atlanta, Charlotte and North Carolina’s Research Triangle are regional hubs. It includes many cities not directly on the spines, but connected to the spines by transportation networks. Charleston is one of those.

The population along the Southern Cross is exploding! Someday high-speed rail lines will run along both arms, making it possible to, say, live in Greenville and commute to work in Atlanta or the Research Triangle.

**Opportunities Afforded by the Southern Cross**
What opportunities does this megaregion offer professionals in Charleston? Picture a map of the Southern Cross and ask yourself: Where will all those people go to the beach? Where will they build or buy second homes? Where will they retire?

Answer: For many of them, right here on the coast: The Jacksonville to Savannah to Charleston to Myrtle Beach to Cape Hatteras Corridor. And we, here in Charleston, are the bull’s-eye.

Furthermore, we have arguably a better quality of life here in the Lowcountry than many areas of the Southern Cross, a quality of life that young professionals are and will be drawn to.

The upshot: People of both arms of the Southern Cross will continue to discover Charleston and flow toward us. The business opportunities that flow will create are staggering. And you can be the beneficiaries.

Just a few of the economic sectors that will be fed indefinitely by the Southern Cross include real estate, construction, medical services, assisted living, retirement homes, nursing homes, and, of course, hospitality and tourism.
As people flow toward Charleston and the Lowcountry, goods and products flow from the port of Charleston to the businesses and homes of the Southern Cross. Our port was once a gateway to the New World for Europeans, then a gateway to the Colonies, then a gateway to America. Today, it’s a gateway to the Southern Cross... for the entire world. Opportunities abound in transportation, logistics, distribution, importing, and exporting.

Last year, the governors of South Carolina and Georgia forged a deal to jointly run a new port terminal in Jasper County, near Savannah, on the South Carolina side of the Savannah River. This port will boost the state’s economy significantly in the next 10 to 20 years and will give the Lowcountry an edge over nearby ports in Florida, North Carolina, and Virginia. House Speaker Bobby Harrell, who sponsored the bill, said, “The joint port venture will create the biggest import and export potential on the eastern seaboard, even bigger than New York/New Jersey.” I think he’s right!

As people and businesses flow toward Charleston, Charleston is becoming much more than a port and a beach and a carriage ride. The economy is beginning to diversify and develop a cluster of talented professionals. We are attracting and building knowledge-based organizations that engage in higher-level business activities — software development, systems design, financial engineering, biosciences research, and so forth. Our cluster of talent is not large yet, but it is growing.

One example of this evolutionary growth is the Charleston Digital Corridor. In 2001, capitalizing on its growing reputation as a world-class city, the city of Charleston launched an economic development initiative focused on attracting knowledge-based companies to Charleston. That initiative is called the Charleston Digital Corridor.

In 2002, the Charleston Regional Business Journal noted that, despite the lack of a major research university as found in other high-tech communities — such as Silicon Valley, the Research Triangle, Boston, Austin, Texas and Atlanta — Charleston’s lower housing costs, smaller size, and recreational amenities had begun to attract knowledge-based companies. Some 27 had taken up residence in one of four areas that comprise the Charleston Digital Corridor: the Wharf District, the University District, and the Gateway District — which are all on the Peninsula — and the Cainhoy District that includes Daniel Island.

Skip ahead to 2007. Mayor Riley reported in his annual address that the Digital Corridor initiative had grown to 80 companies, adding 550 new, high-paying jobs in 2006 alone.¹

Today, members of the Digital Corridor range from companies established in the 1960s to companies founded last year. They include some of the city’s most innovative businesses, like Benefitfocus, Blackbaud, Digital Lifestyle Outfitters, and Automated Trading Desk.

At the same time, Google has a new data center project based in Berkeley County. The city is truly emerging as an attractive hub of opportunity for professionals like you.
Challenges in the Lowcountry’s Future

While our economy is currently diversifying and expanding, we face some significant challenges. I’d like to quickly note four potential gaps or disconnects that might prevent us from continuing to build an economy that is capable of taking advantage of the opportunities presented by the Southern Cross.

I call these challenges, but in reality they represent additional opportunities for all of you.

The first challenge is our struggling public K through 12 education system, particularly on the Peninsula. This is, of course, a well-known problem. Both the College of Charleston and The Citadel are training educators at the bachelor’s and master’s levels through our Schools of Education to address this challenge. But all of us need to be involved. It deserves our full attention.

The second challenge is Charleston’s lack of a comprehensive research university, one that produces ideas and innovations, and spins off start-up companies. We have top-notch master’s level institutions in The Citadel and the College of Charleston. Trident Tech is also an important supplier of talent. But only the more narrowly focused MUSC has a full-scale research operation.

By the way, together our four public institutions have 37,000 students, faculty, and staff. We are indeed a college town!

Whether within Charleston’s existing universities or in affiliated “think tanks,” we must do more research. The presence of a research community has a tremendous impact on the growth of innovation and technology and high paying jobs. We need research institutes to support all of the major sectors of our economy, but particularly our maritime trade sector, our ports. The combined ports of Charleston and Jasper could become among the best in the world, with the support of a Maritime Institute.

The third challenge is our need for environmental checks and balances. In order to take our proper place in the megaregion, we need to grow our city, but at the same time, protect it. At issue is resource depletion in energy and land, as well as water, air, and industrial pollution. Sustainability and growth are not polar opposites. Economic growth, coupled with education and good governance, can prove to be a source of solutions rather than problems.

The Citadel and the College of Charleston can play a major role in educating students and professionals in environmental preservation and green business practices. The environmental sector offers huge potential for startup businesses and new green products and services within existing businesses. Regardless of your degree, you could make a good living and make a difference in the world by taking the lead on environmental issues and affairs within your organization.

The fourth challenge that we face is the belief by some that Charleston’s economy is big enough. Some would have us pursue a no-growth strategy.
Speaking of the nation as a whole, New York Times columnist Tom Friedman warned in his book, The World is Flat, that “… if we stop being the world’s dream factory, we will make the world not only a darker place, but also a poorer place . . . In societies that have more memories than dreams,” he says, “too many people spend too many days looking backward.”

“They see dignity, affirmation, and self-worth not by mining the present, but by chewing on the past.” . . . They “cling to [the past]...rather than imagining a better future and acting on [it].” 2

A no-growth mindset will stifle the diversification of our economy and prevent our cluster of talented professionals from growing. We need more than retirees and tourists in the Lowcountry.

Without growth, your salaries won’t keep up with inflation. Your opportunities to move up the ladders in your professions — without pulling up stakes and moving — will be limited or nonexistent. And without growth, we can’t possibly attract and retain young, talented knowledge-workers to our city. Over the long run, we either grow or we die. There is no middle ground.

Our collective goal should be to create a community of opportunity and growing economic diversity; a community of innovation with a highly skilled workforce that enjoys a great quality of life; a community of passion and purpose; a community capable of taking advantage of the opportunities presented by the Southern Cross.

Grow and Protect Your Local Economy
Let me conclude with some advice on how you can help to grow and protect your community.

Keep your eye on the bigger picture. We don’t live in Charleston, we live in a gateway to the Southern Cross. Whether you plan to stay in Charleston or not, always view your community relative to its megaregion and it’s opportunities for growth.

Be an advocate for your local business community. Join business forums. When your Chamber of Commerce goes into a strategic planning mode, get involved. Offer your advice and wisdom. Help your employees develop new skills. Mentor young professionals and support programs that focus on youth employment. Support higher education.

Participate in your local government. Join groups to help strengthen neighborhoods, schools, and cultural organizations.

That’s a full agenda. But that’s what it takes to grow and protect your local economy.

Finally, think of all the classes that graduated from The Citadel before you — both undergraduates and graduate students — think of all their sacrifices and all their accomplishments. Each class that graduates faces its own unique set of challenges. Some faced war, some the Great Depression, or personal tragedies. Others were confronted by the cultural and technological transformations of
the Industrial Revolution, the struggle for civil rights, or the growing pains of the emerging global marketplace.

You move out into an economy that is weak, a housing market that is in disarray, an energy crisis that is affecting every person in this room, and a lingering war in Iraq.

It’s not the best of times, it’s not the worst of times — but it’s your time! Go out there and grow and protect our world!
