Dean Goodman, distinguished faculty, capable staff, proud parents, and happy graduates, especially graduates.
It is a distinct pleasure to address you tonight.

As academics, we faculty spend a lot of time and energy accumulating honors and achievements. Some we specifically seek. Others, like this one, arrive unbidden and unanticipated and are thus all the more appreciated. I thank you for this singular honor to address you tonight.

But what exactly is this honor?
What exactly is this event, this baccalaureate?
Webster’s Third International Dictionary lists three meanings:

“1. The degree of bachelor conferred by a college or university.”

That’s what you officially got yesterday at Rutgers commencement but we all know you will really get tomorrow at Cook commencement.

“2. A religious or semi-religious service held the Sunday before commencement.”

Well, it’s Thursday, not Sunday; perhaps that is why this service at Cook is no longer even semi-religious.

“3. The sermon or address delivered at this service.”

That is what I am giving now: a sermon.
It is my first.

So tonight we have a trifecta: I am delivering a baccalaureate, at the Cook baccalaureate, to the assembled baccalaureate candidates of Cook College.
Quite an honor indeed.

Bacalaureates of Cook College.
This may be our last opportunity to say this.
You graduates, already special in many ways, will be the last graduating class of Cook College.
For next year, we will all be part of SEBS.
There are big changes afoot, but we hope and expect that Cook, despite its new name, will remain the Cook we know and love.

But what exactly is this baccalaureate, this degree of bachelor?
To answer this question, we again delve into Webster’s Third International.
Noah Webster (or rather his staff) lists four definitions of the word bachelor.
I give them here in reverse order of what Webster considers their etymological importance:

“4. WHITE CRAPPIE”
(“a crappie (Pomoxis annularis) that is typically smaller and more silvery than the black crappie, highly esteemed as a panfish, and often used for stocking small ponds—called also white perch.”)

Hmmm…Although vaguely interesting, this is clearly not the definition we are looking for.

“3 a. An unmarried person of marriageable age. b. A male animal: specifically a young male fur seal when without a mate during breeding time.”

Well about half of you graduates are male, and many of you are without a mate, and of course, it is always breeding time on a college campus, so we seem to be getting closer to the reality on the ground here; but there still seem to be some essential features missing.

“2. A person who has received what is usually the first or lowest degree conferred by a college or university or by some professional school.”

Bingo.

But interestingly enough, there is another definition, considered more primary by Webster.

“1. A usually young knight who was entitled to display his own pennon but who followed the banner of another: KNIGHT BACHELOR; an apprentice or novice knight.”

Or rather, shall we say, a young Scarlet Knight.

Here we come to the etymological root of the word.
Bachelor derives from the Middle English word bachelor, from the Old French, meaning young man or squire.
That word came from the Middle Latin word baccalarius meaning dependent farmer, tenant, young clerk, advanced student.

So tomorrow we will formally certify you as Knights Bachelor of Cook College, ready to make your independent ways in the world, and entitled to display your own pennons.

But what is a pennon? Again, Webster has the answer:

“A long usually triangular or swallow-tailed streamer typically attached to the head of a lance; a pennant.”
We know and still use these pennons today. Rutgers and all other colleges and universities in America sell them to their students, the proud parents of their students, alumni, and sports fans. I have one here today. Be sure to buy one before you leave so that you can proudly display it on your lance as you make your way in the world, informing all those who see you that you are a knight bachelor, a scarlet knight bachelor, of Cook College, Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey.

What we have striven to do here, we faculty and staff and administrators of Cook, is to prepare you to make your independent way in this wide world.

As a mere knight bachelor, however, you will of necessity, at least at first, be in the service of another; you will follow another’s banner. This may be the banner of some great multinational corporation like Citibank, Johnson & Johnson, or Merck. Or it may be the banner of some smaller, local corporation, say WNYC. Or perhaps the banner of some non-governmental organization.

At some point, however, we hope and expect that you will distinguish yourself on the field of honor, and thus be entitled to unfurl your own banner.

Being a knight bachelor, however, is not for the ordinary, not for the weak, not for the faint hearted. For a knight bachelor has duties, obligations, responsibilities. As your speaker tonight, I have one last opportunity to prepare you for them.

Thus we come to the sermon. Although I normally only speak in public about physical chemistry, food chemistry, or candy biophysics, I will do my best to sermonize.

But a sermon must have a text. Or rather, texts: I have chosen three. Call them last minute words of wisdom before you shuffle out the door. Or call them the self-indulgent ruminations of a middle-aged academic. Better yet, call them insignias for your pennons.
For my first text I choose: “We don’t know much, and that’s a fact.”

Headlines inform us practically daily that “Knowledge is the new power.”
There is nothing new about that idea, however.
Knowledge has always been power.
Ever since humans started making tools over a million years ago, knowledge of how to make a better tool has conferred power to an individual or a group.
Power to hunt a faster or bigger animal.
Power to force another group to do your will.

These same sources inform us that “Human knowledge will double in the next 40 years.”
This claim is, of course, nonsense.
Knowledge will not double in 40 years.
We will not reinvent all of physics, chemistry, biology, geology, or mathematics in the next 40 years.
Nor is it likely that we will generate a new Chaucer, a new Shakespeare, another Dickens, or another Twain.
If you are lucky, perhaps another will come along, but personally I doubt it.

The amount of information, however, will certainly double in the next 40 years.
But almost none of that information will be knowledge.
It will be an endless stream of rules, regulations, laws; of vapid articles about the naughty shenanigans of celebrities; of sports statistics; it will be stock prices, food prices, commodity prices, gas prices, toy prices, clothing prices, etc., etc., etc.: the sometimes useful, often interesting, by essentially trivial information of the endless information age.

But very little of it will be knowledge.

True knowledge is timeless; it is universal; it is important: the laws of physical mechanics, of chemical thermodynamics; the Calculus; the poetry of Walt Whitman; the music of Bruce Springstein.

True knowledge is often simple and often profound: F = ma; conservation of energy and mass; evolution by natural selection.
Knowledge is arrived at slowly and only after much work by many people.
It is often beautiful.
It is never trivial.
It is often purely personal.

But knowledge is more than something you have, it is something that you do, something you strive for.
If you care about knowledge, you realize that the process is just as important as the product.
Indeed, it is often more important how you know, than what you know.
For my second text I choose: “It ain’t over, till its over.”

Many people think that talent is the key to success. They are wrong. The key to success is hard work and perseverance. Talent helps, of course; but without work and perseverance, talent is an empty promise. With hard work, even ordinary people can do great things; make great things; accomplish great things.

But hard work is also smart work. You must not only work hard, you must work hard at the right time, in the right place, and in the right way. Success comes to those who seize the day. Those who are vigilant and resourceful.

One of the reasons, perhaps the original reason, why organized sports is part of education is the opportunity it provides to educate the young with just this idea. You have all heard the catch phrase: Winners never quit; quitters never win. It is trite, but it is true.

Of course, circumstance can change everything. Although I am a big fan of both football and baseball, there is one aspect in which baseball is the far superior sport. Football has a clock: it is thus possible for the game to be over, before it is actually over: if you are down 49-7 in the fourth quarter, you have already lost because it is just not possible to score enough points. There simply isn’t enough time.

But baseball is different. Since there is no clock, it is always possible to win. Even with two outs in the bottom of the ninth, there is always enough time to win. All you have to do is execute the little things, the hard little things, needed to score: keep your eye on the ball, wait, capitalize on any mistake the pitcher makes, run smart.

Well, life is like baseball. There isn’t a clock. You always have a chance to win if you execute and do the little things well.
For my third and last text I choose: “Laughter is serious business.”

Many of you know me personally.  
And if you do, you know that laughter is important to me.  
I think that that attitude is part, perhaps a large part, of why you asked me to speak to you tonight.  

Laughter is not little important.  
Laughter is BIG IMPORTANT.  

Humans are unique in laughing; apparently, no other animal laughs.  
I guess they just don’t get the joke.  
Aristotle, for example, called man “the risible animal”.  

Merriment is too important to be left to chance.  
You need to work at it.  
Now, I don’t mean that you should regularly practice your stand-up comedy routine.  
Stand-up comedy has its place in the world.  
But not in normal human discourse.  
It is too artificial.  
Too self-important.  

What I mean is that you need to cultivate a risible worldview.  
You need to work hard to increase your RQ, your Risibility Quotient.  

You can do this because a high RQ is made, not born.  
Consider, for example, Anthony DeCicco and Edward Ezgilioglu.  

There is even something like a recipe:  
Stop taking yourself seriously; don’t take others too seriously.  
Stop complaining: it’s just not funny.  
Tell jokes, but not too many jokes: monopolizing the conversation is not funny.  
Be optimistic; be light hearted; be generous.  
Laugh at other people’s jokes; laugh at your own jokes; laugh at yourself; laugh with others; laugh whenever you can.  

Why, you may ask?  
Well it’s actually simple:  
Because when you’re laughing, you’re not crying.  
When you’re laughing, you’re not angry.  
When you’re laughing, you’re not pouting, or complaining, or shouting, or fighting.  

Because when you are laughing others will laugh with you.  
But remember, it’s not something that just happens, you have to work at it.  

Thank you.