At this time of year, graduates at many schools are being charged to “go forth into the world.” The image is one of moving from the ivory tower across the commencement stage and out into the “real world.” At SPP, however, our students are already plugged into communities and institutions, both global and local, to an extent that previous generations of students might not recognize.

So if we are not introducing our graduates to the world for the first time, why is commencement this week so significant? First, it is a celebration of years of hard work, exploration and intellectual development. This alone would make commencement worthwhile. At the same time, it also marks a transition to an important new stage of careers and lives. Our graduates go forth fortified with new skill sets, new experience, new ideas, new networks and enhanced drive to make a world of difference. They are already in the world, but now they go out prepared to go deeper.

And go they will! I am pleased that graduates of SPP get jobs coming out of our School at a rate that is the envy of many a school. On average, 70 percent of our graduates have a job lined up by commencement, and 90 percent do six months out, with the remainder largely waiting for security clearances or working out visa sponsorships. This is an extraordinary collective record that speaks well for our students and our School. But the numbers don’t even begin to tell the story. I am particularly gratified that our graduates get and take jobs that can and will make a real difference in the world.

Our graduates this year will have the privilege to hear just what kind of differences they can make from a commencement speaker, Dr. Judith Rodin, who knows just what that can look like. Dr. Rodin, the president of the Rockefeller Foundation, is a serial entrepreneur and innovator who has made change in education, in philanthropy and in policy. She knows how hard it can be, but she also knows it is possible, because she has done it. Indeed, she has redefined the institutions, and even the fields, she has touched.

The Class of 2015 is showing that public good can be advanced from many, many angles. A sampling of this year’s graduates already shows what we know to be the case – our graduates make a difference all over the world, from local to global, and in many different ways.

SPP has long been a leader in securing top-flight federal government jobs for its graduates, and this year is no different. Veena Thangavelu is an analyst at the U.S. Department of State in the Bureau of Human Rights, Labor and Democracy Office of South and Central Asia where she makes recommendations on issues covering LGBT affairs and disability rights. Andrew Flavin is a management analyst at the Treasury Department, where he helps leaders from his bureau make evidence-based decisions by briefing them on relevant research and providing data analysis on management issues relating to employee satisfaction, finance and organizational efficiency. Katy Lafen will serve as a labor and human rights analyst for OPIC, where she will work with OPIC’s private sector partners to ensure that fair labor standards and human rights conditions are respected in the projects that OPIC supports abroad.

Many of our students get jobs that grow directly out of client-based projects and internships that they began while at the School. This year, for example, Alyssia Borsella, an analyst at the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) started her career
there as a student intern during her final year at SPP. Her work involved conducting interviews with executive branch officials and using data from the Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey to analyze changes in employee engagement in the federal government. In June, she will return to GAO to work with their Homeland Security and Justice team. Kelly King, a budget and management analyst for the City of Baltimore, will be continuing her full-time job that she received after successfully completing an internship as an SPP student. She has served in a dual role as a budget analyst with a portfolio of seven agencies with an operating budget totaling $385 million and as a management analyst for the City’s Ten-Year Financial Plan.

Our students are natural border crossers, literally and figuratively. While at SPP, Kahlil Kettering, took advantage of opportunities for hands-on classes in the field with other philanthropy and nonprofit students – both in the Middle East and India. Now Kahlil serves as the Maryland/DC urban conservation director for The Nature Conservancy. He will be working to build momentum for the first-ever stormwater retention credit trading program in DC. This involves creating new green infrastructure that will reduce the impact of storm events on the Anacostia and Potomac Rivers, while creating wildlife habitat. The credit trading model will use market forces to finance construction of natural areas through partnerships between private, government and nonprofit entities. Marcus Gaddy, a research associate at the Urban Institute, is doing applied research on nonprofits, philanthropies and other organizations operating to benefit society and the environment. He looks at where these organizations fit in the big picture, with an eye toward providing the information they need to help them do what they do better.

Finally, we also have graduates who are proving that serving the public good can be done from various perches, including the private sector. Thor Schumacher, a business technology analyst for Deloitte, is currently working for the Bureau of Engraving and Printing. Thor supports the development of a software system that provides the Bureau with insight into its business processes. Thor is also a fellow in the D2international program where Deloitte practitioners work with promising international social impact organizations to support their mission and grow their impact. In this role he directly applies much of the knowledge he learned as part of the nonprofit management and leadership specialization at SPP.

What all these students, and their fellow graduates remind us, is that much is possible. Now. They are already in the world and they are applying what they learned at SPP to go deeper.

At a time when our world, our forests and our very own cities are burning, we need solutions. We need to see a way forward. Luckily, our very own graduates show us the way. They renew our hope, our faith in humanity and the high calling of our School. Let us all renew our commitment to serve the public – serve good, and serve well!

---

Dr. Robert C. Orr
Dean, University of Maryland School of Public Policy

Orr serves as dean of the University of Maryland School of Public Policy and is the special advisor to the United Nations secretary-general on climate change. Prior to joining the University of Maryland, Orr served as the assistant secretary-general for strategic planning in the executive office of the United Nations secretary-general from 2004 to 2014, and was the principal advisor to the secretary-general on counter-terrorism, peace building, women’s and children’s health, sustainable energy, food and nutrition, institutional innovation, public-private partnership and climate change.

Orr joined the United Nations from Harvard University where he served as the executive director of the Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs at the Kennedy School of Government. Prior to this, he served as director of the Council on Foreign Relations in Washington, D.C.

Orr has served in senior posts in the government of the United States, including deputy to the United States ambassador to the United Nations and director of global affairs at the National Security Council, where he was responsible for peacekeeping and humanitarian affairs.