Keynote Remarks
Juan F. Carrillo, Ph.D. – Assistant Professor, UNC School of Education

Good morning. First, I want to thank Candice for reaching out to me and asking me to take part in this wonderful event. This is truly an honor. I must admit, that initially, I wondered if I could be here before you. You see, only about two years ago I had to make every important decision. Pay my rent and buy some food or purchase a 1,000 dollar or so, University of Texas at Austin regalia. I decided to rent my regalia, eat, and have shelter. So, now, I realize that I cannot attend many of those other UNC graduation ceremonies until I buy my regalia. But I am glad, that I am, here, welcomed here.

You see, I come from a road painted with lines and struggles very similar to some of you. I am also a first generation college graduate. In fact, I am the first person in my family to graduate from third grade. I am the son of graffiti, poverty, drive-by shootings, pan dulce, and melancholic and often hopeful, bilingual sonnets that were spoken at the dinner table. I know what it means to be the one that the family depends on. I know what it means to have sleepless nights, wondering: how am I going to pay for one more semester? I know what it means to feel like the world is your responsibility. I know what it means to have brothers and sisters that see you as role models. I know that during the last four years, eating chicken ramen noodles was like having sushi for some of you.

While you are the “firsts,” you are not the byproducts of thin air. Let’s not forget that we are many generations in the making. We are the cultural production of history, timing, silences, spiritual legacies, “mistakes,” glory, good times, and bad times. We are here because before, before, something happened. We are connected by energy and dignity from the love that came from people in this room and those who we forget to call and say, “thank you.” As you sit in your chairs and wrestle with the meaning of today, I want to encourage you to consider the power of memory. Leslie Marmon Silko puts it best, “… as long as you remember what you have seen, then nothing is gone. As long as you remember, it is part of this story we have together.”

In remembering, I was faced with the blank page wondering about what to tell you all. I realized that I could not recall one word from any of the ceremonies I attended during my undergraduate graduation weekend. But what I do remember, is that I sat wayyyyyyyyy in the back. Here was a kid that was raised on welfare, a kid whose father was deported from this country once or twice, a kid that was told by a h.s. teacher that Mexican Americans could never publish an article or a book. That kid from the streets of Lynwood and Compton, California was about to get a college degree in the United States. It was real. I felt like Humpty Dumpty with my oversized regalia and I felt alone, scared, and yet loved. Your feelings today, will help to organize your dreams of tomorrow.

Juan F. Carrillo, Ph.D.
This may finally hit you as the end of a very important road and the beginning of new story. So, I want to say a few things about “the road.”

The road to graduation should symbolize many things for all of you. You worked hard for good grades. You played basketball at the gym with friends you will never forget. You spent many hours at the library, trying to write a paper, while at the same time trying to get off of facebook. You met brothers and sisters on campus---people who will be in your life forever. Franklin Street may leave happy and not so pleasant memories. Or maybe you’re that student that could not wait for the Avengers movie to come out---you painted your face and then went on to the online forums to read about the feedback on the movie. In rain and in sunlight, you collected stories that are imprinted in your souls and subconscious-forever.

Let’s talk some more about the road. I never thought that I’d be a UNC professor, in front of this room, sharing, humbly, a few of my thoughts with you all. In fact, my mother has no idea what exactly I do or what a PhD is. She just cares that I take my vitamins and treat people with respect. So, the road that got me here is a bizarre and twisted novel that was all too real, messy, and pleasantly mine. By being the “first,” most of us in this room will surely get “dirty.” Nonetheless, in the road that awaits you, some of you may fit right into a particular role. Others will have to fight for that dream job as you go from position to position. Some of you may be attuned, like me and the Beat writer, Jack Kerouac, to “the mad ones, the ones who are mad to live, mad to talk, mad to be saved, desirous of everything at the same time, the ones who never yawn or say a commonplace thing…” You may, in other words, be like me, happily maladjusted, nostalgic, and guided by the soul wounds of human beings. Some of you may soon be high atop a skyscraper, key figures in a major law firm, surrounded by celebrities that ask for your representation and your “authenticity”—considering how far they may feel removed from a more innocent time. You may look down from those skyscrapers and you will see what Oscar Zeta Acosta refers to as the “cockroach people”—the downtrodden, surviving not on university dreams, but on invisibility and an ungrateful cycle of history. Say hello, call them by name. Connect. Humanize in time, space, and moment by moment. Your accomplishments are windows for your eyes and can serve as stars with infinite light for those that will never enter the confines of this campus.

I am reminded that when I was 18 yrs. old, I rode on a dirty Greyhound bus from south central Los Angeles to the University of Michigan. I had luggage with pink flower print and the infamous, Mexican, San Marcos bed sheets that had big panthers drawn on them. I will admit, those panthers scared at me at night. Someone threw a snowball at me my freshman year and I just stared at the snow...amazed by its formation and disintegration. Once upon a time, you came to Chapel Hill. There was probably not much snow. But, maybe this was your dream school. Maybe you were shocked that you got accepted. You probably started off at dorm. Little by little you may have made your way to an apartment. Little by little
you grew, you took the initial zest of being a freshman and transformed it into your own special journey.

You have the opportunity to take the privilege of these credentials to places where you can help “roses to grow in concrete” (drawing from Tupac Shakur). What you have is an opportunity to be in community—connected to something bigger than yourself. Don’t fear what you don’t know. Don’t assume that you know it all. Don’t be afraid to ask for directions and end up at surreal crossroads. Unless you did something really bad the last four years or so, your loved ones will always have a dirty sofa ready for you, just in case you fall along the way. This is the beginning of a new phase. Perhaps North Carolina will remain home. Perhaps, you are already punching in information into your maps application on your iPhone-ready to face a new type of bumper-to-bumper traffic; a new hymn... is playing in your ear. It’s time. You know it. We know it. Go. Go.

The road that awaits you is one of great responsibility. I encourage you to pursue a road that leads to a conscious life. In many ways, you are part of an elite group. The winners of the education sweepstakes. In this vast country, in this vast world, there are families, communities, and institutions looking for someone who is reflexive, oriented by social justice, and guided by the marriage between the gifts you inherit and the desire to pay it forward.

I end, by saying that we are proud to call you, as first generation students, Carolina Firsts. You have contributed immensely to the diversity of thought and experience on this campus. We also honor your families, many of whom are here today, for their support and sacrifices throughout your journey. We are honored that you have decided to be part of our Carolina First tradition by wearing the Carolina Firsts lapel pin.

We are very proud of every single one of you. A new road awaits you. Don’t fear it, embrace it and I leave you with Gloria E. Anzaldúa’s timely words:

“Voyager, there are no bridges, one builds them as one walks.”

Good luck and Congratulations.