

SPEAKER URGES CLASS OF 2021 TO CHANGE THE WORLD



Angeline Dukes

“The biggest difference that you can make in this world is by being true to yourself and your dreams, because that is what will inspire others to do the same.”

– Angeline Dukes, MSc., President, Black in Neuro

Believe in yourself. Help others. Commit to ending systemic racism. This call to BioSci's Class of 2021 came from commencement speaker Angeline Dukes, MSc., a neuroscience PhD candidate at the school. Dukes drew from her own life and experience in founding the international organization, Black in Neuro, to inspire the audience.

A first-generation college graduate and daughter of Trinidadian and Haitian immigrants “who worked so hard for the little that we had,” Dukes set an early goal of becoming a pediatrician. She later realized the choice wouldn't make her happy, but found it hard to change direction because she didn't want to disappoint her family. Dukes gained a new perspective when she discovered a passion for teaching and mentoring and decided she wanted to be a college professor. “It is okay to try different things and take the time to figure out what makes you happy,” she said.

As she achieved success in higher education, she struggled with impostor syndrome, even thinking her acceptance call from graduate school was a mistake. “That's how much I doubted that anyone who looked like me and came from my background belonged in those spaces,” Dukes said. She told the Class of 2021 that “You have every right to be here, to be in grad school or med school or the workplace that you join.” Dukes called on the graduates to “be a leader and changemaker ... to dismantle systemic racism and to make sure there is a diverse representation of all groups at every new height you reach.”

Dukes, who plans to obtain her PhD in 2022, has often been “the only Black person and sometimes the only woman in the room” in labs, seminars and conferences. She has used this position to advocate for Black people and other underrepresented groups.

A tweet she sent out following the 2020 police killings of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor galvanized response worldwide. It led her to found Black in Neuro to provide mentorship, community and guidance for Black scholars and professionals in neuroscience-related fields. The organization enables members “to find comfort amidst our shared trauma and to have support in fighting injustice and systemic racism at our institutions,” said Dukes, who is its president.

As for the new graduates moving forward, “I hope you take the time to reach back and pull someone else up with you,” Dukes said. “Be a mentor. You can do it now. You are in a position to change the world for the better.”





