



RAMAPO COLLEGE OF NEW JERSEY
Office of Institutional Advancement
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Opening Convocation Features Historian Erica Armstrong Dunbar's Account of a Slave's Struggle for Freedom

MAHWAH, N.J. – The journey for freedom and the struggle to attain it from the grip of the country's most powerful family are the focus of author Dr. Erica Armstrong Dunbar's gripping historical account, *Never Caught: The Washingtons' Relentless Pursuit of Their Runaway Slave, Ona Judge*, which was chosen as the summer reading selection for Ramapo College's first-year students. This year's Opening Convocation which featured a video presentation from Dr. Dunbar was held in the Bill Bradley Arena and livestreamed for remote learners.

In her introductory remarks, President Cindy R. Jebb welcomed the Class of 2025, asking first for a moment of silence for a student who passed away, and then for the 13 U.S. service members and more than 200 Afghans who recently lost their lives in Afghanistan.

President Jebb welcomed attendees by encouraging them to build connections, "Just as we have a social responsibility to further a healthy and respectful environment, we also have a responsibility to further ourselves by building relationships, taking on new challenges, and asking questions---all of these things will further our own development as well as our connection to Ramapo College," adding, "Connections are essential to our health, our society, and our planet, and in these challenging times, making these connections requires intention, patience, and effort."

Addressing the first-year students, President Jebb shared, "You see, I'm new here too... We are moving through this experience together, and today's program provides us with a unique opportunity to connect with history, to connect with literature, and most importantly, to connect with one another."

In Dr. Armstrong Dunbar's presentation, she recalled watching the 1977 Emmy-winning television mini-series "Roots" based on Alex Haley's best-selling book. As a child, the series connected with Armstrong Dunbar. "At that time, there was nothing else like it. I believe the power and impact of 'Roots' and the story it told shaped my professional trajectory."

Never Caught has been described as a “startling and eye-opening look into America’s First Family.” When George Washington was elected president, he left behind his beloved Mount Vernon to serve in New York and then Philadelphia, the temporary seat of the nation’s capital. In setting up his new household, he took with him his secretary and nine slaves, including Ona Judge. Although he was now living in the North, Washington would not readily accept Pennsylvania’s law that required enslaved people be set free after six months of residency in the state. Rather than comply, he circumvented the law by sending the slaves back down south or out of state before the six months’ time passed. Having gotten a glimpse of the freedom she encountered first-hand in Philadelphia, 22-year-old Ona Judge left everything to escape to New England, becoming the subject of an intense manhunt led by George Washington who used his political and personal contacts to recapture his “property.”

Armstrong Dunbar’s research into Ona Judge’s plight not only “uncovered the life of an extraordinary woman,” but also further defined her passion for writing about the history of slavery in our country. Armstrong Dunbar shared with students how her research process and especially her use of primary sources led to discovering and telling the story of Ona Judge.

“There is still a lot of work to do but I am excited about the opportunities that now exist for telling stories about people who have been marginalized,” Armstrong Dunbar said.

Erica Armstrong Dunbar is a writer and historian and currently teaches at Rutgers University where she is the Charles and Mary Beard Professor of History. Her work focuses on the concepts of slavery, racial injustice and gender inequality. *Never Caught* was a finalist for the 2017 national book Award for Nonfiction and received the 2018 Frederick Douglass Book Award.

She was named the National Director of the Association of Black Woman Historians in 2019, an organization dedicated to continuing the advancement for the study of black women’s history. An in-demand speaker on the lecture circuit, Dunbar gives audiences an intimate look at the often-overlooked stories that make our country’s history so richly diverse.

The First-Year Summer Reading selection is one of several important markers for our new students’ transition into the rigorous academic life and community at Ramapo. *Never Caught* was recommended by a committee of faculty, staff, and students to serve as our summer reading. Members of the Class of 2025 were invited to address one of three inquiries focused on this novel. The three essay contest winners addressed the question on presenting a full portrait of George Washington, which includes the negative aspects versus preserving his legendary status as Father of his country. The essay winners were Aafnan Alam, Anne-Marie Daly and Giovanna LaMonica.

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Ramapo College of New Jersey is the state’s premier public liberal arts college and is committed to academic excellence through interdisciplinary and experiential learning, and international and intercultural understanding.

The College is ranked #1 among New Jersey public institutions by College Choice; is recognized as the state's top college on the list of Best Disability Schools by *Great Value Colleges*; was named one of the 50 Most Beautiful College Campuses in America by *CondeNast Traveler*; and is recognized as a top college by *U.S. News & World Report*, *Kiplinger's*, Princeton Review and *Money* magazine, among others. Ramapo College is also distinguished as a Career Development College of Distinction by CollegesofDistinction.com, boasts the best campus housing in New Jersey on Niche.com, and is designated a "Military Friendly College" in Victoria Media's *Guide to Military Friendly Schools*.

Established in 1969, Ramapo College offers bachelor's degrees in the arts, business, data science, humanities, social sciences and the sciences, as well as in professional studies, which include business, education, nursing and social work. In addition, the College offers courses leading to teacher certification at the elementary and secondary levels, and offers graduate programs leading to master's degrees in Accounting, Business Administration, Creative Music Technology, Data Science, Educational Technology, Educational Leadership, Nursing, Social Work and Special Education, as well as a post-master's Doctor of Nursing Practice.