

Faculty Speech in 2018 Oxy International Student Graduation

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Hello everyone, it is my absolute pleasure to be here today to congratulate your achievement at Oxy. I especially cherish this opportunity, because for those who know me, you would know that I, too, am an international student myself. I have been in this country for 12 years, and one of my favorite things about the United States is—guess what—is the liberal art education. It is such wonderful experience to learn how to think, debate big ideas, savor knowledge broadly, and cultivate a sense of communal responsibility in the golden age of one's life. In a way, I am jealous of what you've just gone through in Oxy! I did not get such a chance in my education system and had to develop my own liberal education path from chemical engineering, to economics, and finally, to sociology.

Anyway, enough about myself, today, the glory is yours. I want to open my remark by saying that you all completed something quite extraordinary. Pursuing a liberal arts education is an intellectual feast, but it is also hard, even harder when you come from a different country. The common character that bonds all of you sitting here is that you are the brave people to decide to pursue your education in a different country when you were 16, 17, or even younger. By now, this decision is probably become a normal part of your life. But I want to remind you that this is not a small decision, nor an easy decision. With that, you chose to leave your comfort zone and be a total stranger on the first day of college.

I wish to spend my time reflecting what it means to be a “stranger.” Thinking about my own experiences, I tend to think there are a few stages that a stranger learns to live in a new environment. First comes the initial excitement. The air is so fresh, the sky is so blue, the people are super friendly, even the dorms look like “I am on vacation forever”. You probably still have vivid memory of these fresh-off-the-boat feelings. Then, of course, come the cultural shocks: why “How are you?” is not really a question? why people love to describe everything is “awesome”? why do restaurant serve humongous portions? and why do Americans love small talks so much? And for sure, frustration always follows up. There might be no one interested in talking to you in parties; there are jokes based on TV programs you never heard of; there might be moments that you absolutely have no clue what the professor is talking about, yet you feel super nervous that he or she will call on you in the discussion; and there must be moments you feel like you can only express yourself in your mother tongue, English just cannot do it.

Yet, once you get past those low points, a stranger becomes much less strange. You will discover that true friendship transcends languages and cultures; you may suddenly realize you can also make contribution in this community; you must have found that you can still be yourself, even though you're different, but everyone is different.

One thing you probably have not noticed is that—a stranger tends to become a better person. You start to see things differently because you have new reference point. After learning about the race politics in the United States, you may become more cognizant of the minorities groups in your home country. You now easily go beyond ethnocentrism because you know there are many, many ways to live one's life. As you are forced to be in disadvantaged positions—a non-native speaker or a cultural outsider—you can more easily relate to other people's struggles. You learned how to be a global citizen with compassions. I am pretty sure that all of you here have gone through this transformative process, even if you're not fully aware of it.

Finally, let me be bookish for a moment: sociologist Georg Simmel defines stranger as someone “who comes today and stays tomorrow.” Now the tomorrow is about to end. You will soon embark on new journeys. You might be a stranger somewhere again, or you even feel like a stranger back home. Simmel reminds us that strangers, in your case, international students, embodies “closeness and remoteness” at the same time, and can often carry out special tasks that the other members of the group are either incapable or unwilling to do. Down the road, in your new adventures, you, can build the unique bridge that no one else can build.

With that, let's cheer again for your accomplishment at Oxy. I am very proud of you. You should be proud of yourself, and make us even prouder in the future. I wish you all the best.