

2019 University Honors Program Spring Banquet Keynote Speech

By Jennifer La (Biochemistry and Molecular Biology, '19)

Good evening to all friends, family, UHP staff, and faculty who are joining us here today, and congratulations to the class of 2019. We made it! It is an incredible honor to be speaking with you all on this special occasion, and as we enjoy today's banquet, I hope that I can leave you with a sweet, little sentiment that I have come to realize throughout my college journey.

To start off, I would like to mention a brief story about my journey at UC Davis. How many of you know of the Japanese organizing consultant, author, and star of a Netflix show, Marie Kondo? Like a lot of us, I'm sure, I was inspired by Marie Kondo and her love of tidying up and I recently cleaned my apartment for the first time in months. Among my 50-pound notebooks that I've hoarded from my classes but will probably never look at again, I found a journal I kept during my freshman year of college. On the first page, I wrote down three words to myself that I should always keep in mind: "Study, study, study." Like Marie Kondo would say, that does not spark joy, so I slowly got rid of that notion.

During this freshman year of college, I was a completely different person from now. I'm sure a lot of us now would also cringe at our freshman year selves, but for me, not only did I have bangs and looked differently, but I also stuttered whenever I spoke up in class and I shied away from starting conversations with others. It was difficult for me to value my own voice and believe that I could succeed as a low-income, first-generation college student. I used to believe that my success was found inside of a book or hours of podcasts. Especially being in the honors program, where we had to maintain a certain GPA, there was a lot of pressure to succeed. This led me to wonder what college was really for.

Living in Currant Hall and meeting such diverse and thoughtful minds helped me find that answer. I've learned that success comes from building relationships with others and actively involving myself in the world around me. The faculty I learned from and had the chance to work with for my thesis became mentors that helped me during my college journey, and my classmates and coworkers in various organizations showed me the power of what compassionate and empathetic minds can accomplish. My experiences at UC Davis taught me about what I am capable of, having accomplishments that I would not have believed possible beforehand. The people I met at UC Davis gave me this platform to be an advocate for various communities during my future career.

As we leave UC Davis, I would like for us all to recognize the hard work we put in to get to this point. There was likely a lot of stress, as I for one became addicted to coffee before discovering the wonders of Yerba Mate, but look at us now! I would like to thank all the faculty, staff, and peers for making Davis such a welcoming place and a place where students actually help each other thrive. I'm sure you all experienced the Davis phenomenon where you feel that everyone at Davis knows each other either directly or through a friend. If we all linked up with people we knew, we would probably link up the entire room. These two degrees of separation goes to show that Davis is a true community.

That's why today, I urge you to remember the various people that helped us get to this point, like our friends, some of whom we took classes with, lived with, or may be sitting next to us today: in particular, they may be our friends who urged us not to drop out after failing our first midterm, our friends who stayed up late with us to gossip, our friends who studied in the library with us until 3 AM, our friends who dragged us out of bed to party with them, our friends who constantly tagged us in memes. Without them, we wouldn't be who we are today. I look forward to seeing what the future has

in store for all of us, which I am sure will be bright, but I'd really like to just let us soak this moment in. Our time at UC Davis was a time of making mistakes, having fun, and forming relationships and lasting memories that shaped who we have become. These experiences that inspire us and move us out of our comfort zone spark joy.

At the end of the day, I've realized that it's not about studying, studying, studying, like I thought during freshman year, but learning, learning, learning - learning from family who taught us how to love one another, learning from faculty who taught us the possibilities of a college education, and learning from peers who taught us how to support and cheer each other on. Being open-minded, appreciating diversity, and working with others will take us far. When I look around the room, I see our future educators, health professionals, scientists, policymakers, engineers, economists, entrepreneurs, and more. Some of us may not be sure what we're doing yet, and that's okay! We have so much more to grow, learn, and discover. Above all, as we figure out what life has in store for us, I urge you all to find people, places, and activities that spark joy, and nurture what brings you joy.