

Welcome to NYU Shanghai

New Student Convocation

Jeffrey S. Lehman

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Members of the NYU Shanghai Class of 2019, family members, and friends, on behalf of the faculty and the administrative staff of NYU Shanghai, it is my great honor to share a few words of welcome this morning.

Family members and friends, I hope you will forgive me. For the next few minutes I will be speaking to our students and not to you. I need to tell them what they can expect from their education here at NYU Shanghai. Of course, I do invite you to listen in, since I suspect you might be a little bit curious about what their lives will be like.

NYU Shanghai students, I would like to start with congratulations. Congratulations for your achievement and congratulations for your good judgment.

You achieved something extraordinary when you were admitted to this class. To be selected from among thousands and thousands of applicants and invited to be one of the 300 in this class, you had to demonstrate to us, through an exceptionally demanding process, that you are smart, that you work hard, and that you are prepared for the special responsibilities that go with being a member of this academic community. Congratulations for your achievement.

You also showed extraordinarily good judgment when you decided to accept our offer. Each and every one of you could have decided to go somewhere safer, somewhere less demanding, but you all chose challenge. You had the good judgment to commit yourself to a process of personal growth and transformation that you could not have accom-

plished as well at any other university, a process that will create special opportunities for you throughout your life. Congratulations for your good judgment.

And now you are about to enjoy an incredible reward for your achievement and your good judgment. You are about to receive an education that is unique in the world, an education that is profoundly different from the education that you have received before, and profoundly different from the education that your friends will receive at other universities.

So what are we trying to accomplish here at NYU Shanghai? How is it similar to what happens at any great university? And how is it different?

The fundamental mission of any great university is to prepare students for satisfying and meaningful adult lives. And it is important to appreciate that this mission cannot be achieved by transplanting wisdom from brilliant teachers' brains into brilliant students' brains.

Think about what it takes to become a pianist or a basketball player. You cannot simply study the theories of Lang Lang or Stephen Curry. You have to practice. You have to discover what it feels like to play beautifully. The same reality applies if you want to become a physicist or a poet, a software engineer or big-city mayor. You have to practice. You have to discover what it feels like to play beautifully, and what it feels like to make mistakes and to learn from them. You have to follow a process of active discovery.

Every great university is committed to this understanding, and here we are no different. We are here to guide you down a path of active discovery. Active discovery is an essential part of a liberal education.

So there it is. I just used a term you have heard before, "liberal education." What, exactly, does that mean? What makes an education a "liberal" education?

Some people make the mistake of thinking a liberal education means having the "liberty" to study whatever you want. Well, that's not it. In fact, a liberal education means systematically acquiring certain

knowledge, mastering certain skills, and developing certain virtues, so that your mind and spirit will be “liberated,” so that you will be empowered to live free and responsible adult lives.

In the twenty-first century, an excellent liberal education has many things in common with what constituted an excellent liberal education in the twentieth century. But it has also evolved. The knowledge, skills, and virtues that are essential to leading a life of satisfaction and contribution have evolved over the past 100 years, because the nature of human society has evolved, and has in fact been evolving at an accelerating rate of speed.

I’d like to take a few minutes now to describe the knowledge, skills, and virtues that we believe are at the heart of an excellent twenty-first century liberal education.

What knowledge must you acquire? You must become intimately familiar with global political history, you must become intimately familiar with the history of cultural expression through literature, art, and music, and you must become intimately familiar with the development of humanity’s most influential ideas in the natural sciences, in moral and political philosophy, and in economics.

What skills must you master? You must learn to undertake rigorous quantitative analysis, to speak several languages proficiently, to use computing technology as a tool, to think creatively and precisely, and to work effectively with people from different cultures.

This morning I want to take a few minutes to talk about two of those skills in particular – the skill of thinking creatively and precisely, and the skill of working effectively with people from different cultures.

To be successful in the twenty-first century, you need to learn how to develop new ideas (to think creatively) and then you need to learn how to step back calmly and determine whether those ideas are good or bad, helpful or worthless (to think precisely). How can you develop your creativity and your precision? That development requires that you develop depth, breadth, and a passion for truth. Depth means you have really mastered what other people know about your field. Breadth means you

have broadened your experiences out into areas that do not seem related to your field, so that your brain has the fuel it needs to see new connections. Passion for truth means you are absolutely committed to understanding the world as it really is, even if that is different from what you thought, or what you hoped. You will need this passion in order to analyze whether your new idea is actually valuable, and not just a clever mistake.

NYU Shanghai is an unusual university, but perhaps not unique, in its focus on ensuring that you develop your depth, your breadth, and your passion for truth, in order that you develop your skills as creative and precise thinkers. That focus has shaped everything from our curricular requirements to our program on creativity and innovation.

But NYU Shanghai is truly unique in the way it has focused on helping you develop the skill of working effectively with people from different cultures. You chose to come here because, unlike any other university in the world, NYU Shanghai ensures that every talented Chinese student has an equally talented non-Chinese roommate, and every talented non-Chinese student has an equally talented Chinese roommate. Every day you will have the opportunity to immerse yourself in the project of understanding how cultures are similar and how they are different. Every day you will have the opportunity to engage in active learning about how to be an effective bridge person, a voice people will listen to when they are working together in a multicultural environment.

Okay, so I've talked about knowledge and about skills. The last category is virtues. What are the virtues you will develop here? Among other things, you must strengthen your curiosity, your empathy, your humility, your generosity of spirit, your authenticity, and your courage. This morning I want to emphasize two of those virtues: authenticity and courage.

With regard to authenticity, I can be brief. Success in the twenty-first century requires you to speak honestly, in your own voice. Nobody likes a fake. And cheating is the road to failure and disgrace. (At NYU Shanghai, cheating is the road to being sent home in shame. We have

zero tolerance for cheaters.) All great universities cherish authenticity, and we are no different here at NYU Shanghai.

With regard to courage, I want to say a bit more. Twenty-first century life is challenging and stressful. It is intellectually challenging and stressful, and it is emotionally challenging and stressful. As adults you will constantly have to confront ideas that you do not agree with, ideas that make you uncomfortable. And sometimes those ideas will be expressed in ways that are aggressive or rude, without any consideration for your feelings.

I believe that NYU Shanghai is unusually strong in its commitment to helping you develop the courage you will need to manage such challenges and stresses effectively. Before you came to NYU Shanghai, you may have been in environments where your parents, your friends, or even your teachers tried to protect you from aggressive encounters with upsetting ideas, so that you could develop your self confidence. And you should know that some universities, even some great universities, follow that same, protective approach.

Here at NYU Shanghai, however, we have a different philosophy. As adults you will not be protected from these challenges and stresses. For that reason, we believe our priority should be on helping you learn how to manage them effectively. The key is intellectual courage.

Intellectual courage requires you to be completely comfortable with complexity and ambiguity. It requires you to appreciate how many problems, how many questions, do not have only one right answer. To help you gain that appreciation, your professors will be constantly bombarding you with such questions.

In the classroom, we will be helping you learn how to develop sophisticated and impressive answers to our questions. Just as importantly, at the same time, we will be helping you to see that others might give different answers that are equally sophisticated and impressive. But we will also help you recognize that some paths are wrong – that saying something brand new does not make you creative or original if what you say is not also grounded in thoughtfulness, honesty, and intellectual rigor.

One of the most important techniques you will master at NYU Shanghai is the ability to answer a question with the words, “It depends.” Every assertion of truth depends on the assumptions one makes about the world. A community is a group of people who share many assumptions. Intellectual rigor means being careful to make your assumptions clear, and being thoughtful about what would happen if those assumptions were to change.

So intellectual courage begins with being comfortable with complexity. But it does not end there. It also means being able to resist two impulses that most people feel very naturally. First, intellectual courage means resisting the impulse to run away from engagement and disagreement. And second, intellectual courage means resisting the impulse to rush to decide that one perspective is right and another perspective is wrong.

As you learn how to say, “it depends on your assumptions” in a multicultural environment, I promise you, you will be tempted to run away from disagreement. You will be tempted to say things like this: “The answer to that depends on your assumptions, different cultures make different assumptions, we respect all cultures equally, we don’t want to say anything that anyone else might find troubling or upsetting, so let’s just agree to disagree.”

But that would be running away. It would ignore the essential fact that cultures are not frozen in place – they evolve over time. I am an American. In the 1800’s my country’s culture assumed that it was OK for people to own other people as slaves and that it was OK to say that the only people who could vote were men. Today those assumptions are no longer a part of my country’s culture. That is because in the intervening years people were prepared to question those assumptions, to criticize my country’s practices, and to argue in favor of change.

Here at NYU Shanghai, we are unusually committed to helping you learn to resist the impulse to run away from engagement over disagreement. We have designed our university to maximize the opportunity you have to engage deeply with people from different cultures. You will have the opportunity every day not only to notice that another culture

makes different assumptions, but also to explore why it makes those assumptions. You will have the opportunity to discuss whether those assumptions are reasonable.

Of course, having the courage to face and explore challenging ideas on an intellectual level with your classmates and teachers does not mean being insensitive to other people's feelings. For example, honest and effective exploration of challenging ideas requires that you not call other people names. It means you will not call someone who thinks differently from you "stupid" or "immoral," even when you believe that their ideas are completely indefensible.

In addition, your study here will help you strengthen your capacity to deal effectively with situations where someone else has said something that left you feeling personally insulted. For example, you will learn not rush to assume that the other person intended a personal insult just because they said something that would be insulting in your home culture. Moreover, if they did mess up and intend to insult you, you will learn to resist the natural human impulse to call them names in return. Instead you will stay focused on addressing their substantive claims in a calmly analytical manner, perhaps suggesting along the way how you think they might have presented those claims with greater civility and respect.

NYU Shanghai is a community of people who think together, in a spirit of tolerance, respect, and mutual appreciation. As of today, every one of you has become a builder of that community. By remaining committed to these values, we strengthen our ability to find shared perspective and understanding, even when we do not find full agreement.

And this leads me to the second natural impulse that you will need courage to resist. Alongside the dangerous impulse to run away from exploring the sources of disagreements is the equally dangerous impulse to run towards a rapid decision that one answer to a problem is right and the other is wrong.

The English poet John Keats recognized that whenever people face two conflicting arguments, they naturally seek rapid closure. Conflict creates emotional tension, and it is natural to make that tension go away by choosing which argument is right and which is wrong, which is

stronger and which is weaker. Keats wrote admiringly about people who could resist that natural impulse. He wrote about how Shakespeare could “luxuriate in uncertainties and doubts, entertaining two opposing ideas without irritable reaching after fact and reason.” Keats gave a name to this ability to entertain two opposing ideas “without irritable reaching after fact and reason.” He called it “negative capability.”

Negative capability is an exceptionally powerful tool. By putting yourself into that state, you will truly be able to systematically probe and test out where an argument is vulnerable, and where it is robust.

And this is why you showed such wonderful judgment when you chose to be here. Because the largest national community here is only half the class, each of you has the chance, every day, to spend at least part of the day engaged in serious conversation with someone from another nation. Every day! If you do this every day – if not for the entire day then at least for part of the day – then you will capture the most astonishing benefits of being here. If you fail to do so, then we will have wasted a precious seat in this class.

To gather the benefits of being here you must do this. You must engage. You must commit yourselves fully to being not a Chinese class and an American class and a rest-of-the-world class, but to being one single class. We cannot do this for you, but we will watch and we will cheer as you do it for yourselves.

And now, in conclusion, I would like to turn back to the family and friends of our new students. I especially want to say a few words to the parents.

Your children are not the only ones who deserve congratulations. The fact that your children earned the opportunity to attend this remarkable university is a great tribute to you, and you should take enormous pride in their achievement.

The challenge is to accept the fact that, from now on, your children will be defining their own destinies. They will continue to seek your advice, but they will do so on their own terms.

I have gone through this process myself, with three different children. And I want you to know that, I understand just how hard it can be to give up the sense that you can protect them.

Sometimes during this coming year they will make mistakes that last year you might have been able to talk them out of. They will experience the consequences of those mistakes. And it will sometimes be hard to watch.

But in return you will see your years of labor reach fruition. By making their own choices and accepting the consequences of those choices, your children will emerge as adults whom you admire and respect. They will still need you. They will still want to be around you. But they will also be sturdy and opinionated adults who will want to talk with you about your assumptions, and about whether it might be possible to have different assumptions. They will still learn from you, but at least as often they will teach you things.

And so, to all of you, new students and parents of new students, I extend my heartiest welcome as we all, together, treasure the opportunities that come with life at NYU Shanghai.