On Campus

Convocation Conversation

By
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|
Fall 2013

On a bright morning one week before fall classes, a few miles north of the United Nations, a group of students wearing matching lime-green T-shirts processed through College Walk to South Lawn, each gripping the pole of a flag.

As ceremonial music poured from loudspeakers, the students paused along the pathway, stationing the poles so that the banners created a wind-tousled tunnel for the rest of the procession — a cadre of faculty in academic regalia and a sea of nervous eighteen-year-olds.

“Beginnings are almost always very special and memorable moments in life,” said President Lee Bollinger as he welcomed the Columbia College and Columbia Engineering Class of 2017. “But among beginnings, it’s hard to beat the start of college.”

For many of those students, however, it wasn’t just the start of college: it was the start of life in a new country. Seventeen percent of new undergraduates are international students, and fifty-nine of the different flags carried through campus that morning represented their nationalities.

Four days later, in a fifth-floor room in Lerner Hall, things were a little less formal as a group gathered for an optional orientation session with Kirin Liquori Terni, the director of international student programs and services.

As Liquori Terni got to work setting up a projector that announced the session title (“Life at Columbia. #makeityours”), six upperclassmen in orientation T-shirts (purple this time, to signify their international status) formed a semicircle of chairs at the front of the classroom. Eventually, their audience settled in front of them, pulling out laptops and iPads and munching on the chips and granola bars that had been left

near the door as bait.

The international students had already been through nearly a week of orientation. But this session, just a few days before classes started, was, as Liquori Terni explained, the first in what was intended to be a yearlong series of coffeehouse-style discussions for the group. Older international students would be on hand now and throughout the year to guide first-years through not only choosing classes and dorm life but the more nuanced parts of their transition.

As the advice began, it tended toward the former — general tips for college living that the first-years had likely heard dozens of times already in their short careers as students. Purple shirts and a few clipped accents aside, it could have been any orientation session.

“Use your resources,” said a lanky junior from Singapore.

“Yes, especially office hours,” added the woman to his right, an English major from an Indian family in Dubai.

“Be flexible about your classes,” said a sophomore from Ethiopia. “I came in thinking I was going to be pre-med, but when I had to rearrange my schedule for Lit Hum and Music Hum, I took classes I might not have otherwise, and now I’m undecided.”

Twenty minutes later, when the panel paused for questions, the advice finally started getting more specific.

One upperclassman noted that international students had to make certain to have their Core classes completed by the first semester of their senior year — not to ensure they weren’t stuck with one last swimming test on Commencement morning, but because it was a requirement for work-visa applications.

Liquori Terni recommended, on a similar note, the campus resources, like the Center for Career Education, that would eventually help students to know where many internationals end up working, and which companies are willing to sponsor them for green-card applications. There would be workshops on American work culture, and the office could even lend out interview suits when the time was right.

But for now, the panel guessed that most of the students had more immediate concerns.

“When I first got here, I was so scared of not making friends,” one bubbly junior told the group, “but you have to join extracurriculars. In London, extracurriculars aren’t a thing. You’re just focused on academics all the time. At Columbia I had to learn how to balance those out. But that’s also where I found my best friends.”

A curly-haired junior from Albania nodded enthusiastically, before piping up in a throaty baritone: “But don’t forget about your hallmates, too. In Albania, you’re so pigeonholed by your interests. There’s an attitude that if you’re a visual-arts person, you only interact with people of your own discipline. Meeting people on your floor, you get to know people that are studying engineering, philosophy, computer science, whatever. And that’s what Columbia’s all about.”

“You’re far away from home,” added the Ethiopian woman softly, echoing what was probably on the mind of every student in the room. “Your friends will be your family now.”

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