

It is a great honor for me to be addressing you today, and I would like to begin by thanking the Foreign Languages and Literatures department and all the professors I have had the privilege to work with. Spring 2014 marks my fourth and final semester here at UNM, and I think I speak on behalf of most when I say it has been one of the most rewarding experiences of my life. My family often asks me what it is exactly that I do, and it is always very hard to explain—not just because of the horrendous academic jargon, but because of the nature of our jobs. Graduate students—professional students—are students who are not taught anything. Rather, we are trained to acquire knowledge, and a knowledge we in turn shape and transmit to others. In a sense, we are taught to disagree and change and create.

What will stay with me as I pursue my academic career is the extraordinary collaboration and mutual aid that the department fosters not only between students and professors, but between students of all majors and research interests. I have spent a good part of my time here at the library with Lauranne, piling books after books and probably using overdue library laptops. I have ruined entire parties arguing over philosophy and postmodernism and Derrida. But most importantly, I have worked with the wonderful people graduating today, or gone already, or still working towards their degree. You will often hear graduate students complain that their time in the program went by too quickly and that as a result, it can be difficult to make meaningful, lasting connections. But what we often fail to see is how this momentum, regardless of its temporality, permanently transforms our intellectual profiles and academic personalities. If you could somehow trace back the conception of certain key ideas of your work, or the reasons why you took certain classes, how many would originate in a discussion (or argument) that you had with your friends over drinks? How many would come from that one presentation given in class? From a casual book recommendation from your professor?

Just last semester, with three of my peers, I have worked in an independent study—for those who don't know, and independent study is like a class except you don't need to use fancy words to impress your professor—anyway we worked together on comic books and graphic novels, and even though we are all working on very different things, we created a material concretization of our research in the form of a zine. This experience forced us to work as a group and more importantly to think in terms of audience and genre in a very tangible way. Yet, this is still too rare an instance for us to be able to see the work that we produce concretely. We often feel that our work is insignificant. Part of this is because the academic culture is perverse in the way it both puts the knowledge we create on a pedestal, and at the same time makes us all feel like imposters. I do not know of any professor, graduate student, or even renowned scholar who does not feel at some point in their career that they are fooling everyone around and that they actually know nothing of what they are talking about. And these people teach your children, ladies and gentlemen. But more seriously, we have to believe that our work is meaningful, if only in the ways in which it betters us and inspires others around us. This is why I will take away from my Master's degree not the content of the classes I took or the ones that I taught, but the ways in which I was inspired to invent, challenge, and hopefully create meaning.

For graduate students, and for undergraduates as well, it is always a matter of convincing yourself that your work does matter, that no matter how small your contribution seems, it is significant. What we try to do when we study languages, literature, or critical theory, is to transform what we know in order to benefit larger communities, and that's what's important. As a teacher of French for the past two years, I can attest to what the smallest piece of information can do to an individual, and ultimately to a whole group of individuals. Some students start a French 101 class as a language requirement, and end up four semesters later studying abroad in Paris and having the time of their life—and that's when learning how to order a baguette becomes significant. One of the most important things that my students have taught me, besides patience, is that it does not matter truly what I teach them or what they study, but how I can help them realize that this goes beyond courses and grades and requirements.

I suppose what I am trying to say here is: don't let anyone tell you that you are worthless, or that your degree is useless, because in the end you will probably never have again in your life the opportunity of learning so much. Every one of you here today has accomplished something amazing and awe-inspiring in graduating. Look back at the you of four or three or two years ago, and consider the you of today: you are amazing and you deserve to be celebrated. Your family has come here today to let you know how proud they are.

This lady sitting here, crying, is one of these incredible people. This is my mom, who has never had the chance to go to college, who does not even speak English, and yet who has crossed the Atlantic to be here today and share with me this experience. She planned to come here two years ago when I announced my decision to go study in the US, and here she is today and I am so proud that all of you who don't have this privilege can witness for yourself how much your graduation matters to your loved ones.

Congratulations to all of you and whatever are your next projects, I wish you all the best.