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SJU Convocation 2018

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Recommended Citation

Geng, Zhihui Sophia, "SJU Convocation 2018" (2018). *Administration Lectures and Events*. 19.
https://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/admin_lectures/19

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2018 Convocation Address – Dr. Sophia Geng, Languages/Cultures and Gender Studies

Good morning, class of 2022, Johnnies, Bennies, Students of SOT, members of our monastic community, guests, staff and fellow faculty:

Today is a very special day: it marks the beginning of a new school year and what is more exciting, it marks the entrance of class of 2022 into this great community. Saint John's University, founded in 1857, is grounded in the Benedictine tradition, which dates back to the 6th century. Based on the Rule of Benedict, a Benedictine education aims to transform the human mind and heart through cultivation of values such as: listening, hospitality, taking counsel, reverence of all persons, and pursuit of the common good.

In addition to the Benedictine tradition, another pillar of our university lies in our mission: “preparing [our students] to reach their full potential and instill in them the values and aspiration to lead lives of significance and principled achievement.” Over the past 161 years, through their dedication and devotion, generations before us have made St. John's what it is today: a community that offers a vibrant and inspiring environment for learning and living. From this foundation, St. John's has been and will continue to be a place that inspires and leads.

On this special day that signifies the beginning of your new journey, the storyteller in me wants to share with you a different version of college life. I grew up in a village on the Yellow River in North China. In 1994, only three of my high school graduating class passed the highly competitive national college entrance examination. And I was one of the four. It was such a great honor that my whole village—hundreds of people—came to see me off. At college, my five roommates and I lived in a small one-room dorm that could barely hold our three bunk beds. To save power, the college shut lights off at 10pm, so we had to continue our reading under the streetlights outside of the dorm. It was with flying moths that we read Twain, Emerson and Eliot late into the night. Although a life at St. John's is very different from my ascetic college years, the two share the same transformative power.

College is a milestone on the journey to adulthood; it denotes the beginning of independent, full-fledged personhood. You have four years that you can devote fully to the pursuit of intellectual development, skill acquisition and self enhancement. College provides a unique opportunity to explore new ideas, new interests, new perspectives, and new passions. As faculty, we urge you to embrace this beautiful phase of life, to take risks and enjoy successes, yes, but also to learn to accept and even embrace your failures, as they can provide pivotal learning opportunities. Johnnies, go ahead and learn a new language, study abroad, take on a service learning project, conduct collaborative research with your professor... As a community, we will support your endeavors, applaud your efforts, celebrate your progress---and be there for you when you stumble.

As faculty, we encourage you to take advantage of the special partnership that CSB/SJU offers. We hope you will not only acquire merits traditionally defined as masculine---such as loyalty,

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determination and commitment---but also appreciate and practice virtues such as resilience, flexibility, consideration, patience, modesty and sensibility. These virtues are often considered feminine by traditional standards. CSB/SJU's partnership enables you to not only forge special bonds with fellow Johnnies, but to discern and value character traits that Bennies might be more likely to exemplify. In this way, both Johnnies and Bennies can learn from each other and, together, move beyond the narrow binary of masculinity versus femininity. However, this is not the only boundary that I encourage you to cross today. I encourage you to reach out to newcomers, strangers, our out-of-state students and our international students, and talk with them with respectful curiosity and open hearts. It takes all of us to create the Benedictine hospitality and community for which St. John's is known. So please reach out to the strangers among us with goodwill and sincerity.

I set foot in Minnesota when I was a twenty-five-year-old graduate student. In the last two decades, I have met many great Americans. It is their kind deeds, their genuine care for others, and their bravery facing life's challenges that build my faith in our country's future. Empowered with the tradition, knowledge, skills and wisdom that St. John's has to offer, I foresee you, the class of 2022 and returning Johnnies and Bennies, will build on these distinctive characteristics and help lead us to a promising future, here and around the world.