

SPRING 2019

# COMMENCEMENT SPEAKERS

**Shahad Abduljalil**

**Erick Aguinaldo**

**Ruth Calcanas**

**Bianca Diaz**

**Kiano Emami**

**Darius Faulk**

**Claire Freeman**

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**Andrea Poma Hernando**

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**Jacob Vela**

**Alma Velazque**



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## **SHAHAD ABDULJALIL** *M.A. in Gerontology*

Hello, everyone!

I'm grateful for this opportunity of speaking to all of you on this important occasion.

Not long ago, I couldn't have imagined that I would be where I am today.

It just goes to show that:

"All of our dreams can come true if we have the courage and the determination to pursue them."

Getting here took some courage and determination.

It took courage to believe in myself..

I know it will take courage, determination, and knowledge to pursue my goal of helping older adults, not just to improve their quality of life, but with the promises of advancing research in gerontology, to help them make remarkable changes in their lives.

It will take courage to become the professional gerontologist of my dreams.

We are all aging, thank goodness...As they say, growing old is certainly better than the alternative! But as many older people will tell you, it isn't for the faint-hearted! It isn't always a walk in the park!

So many people are living longer now, and that trend will continue accelerating in the future. Many of older adults are fortunate to remain active and healthy. Others are experiencing significant issues that come with age.

Such older adults will benefit significantly from constant advances in the study

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of gerontology, and I am so proud to be a part of that mission.

In my undergraduate occupational therapy program, I had the opportunity to work with different generations, from the youngest to the very old. Older adults were the most in need, and not just for more rehabilitation services. I was able to listen to their stories, needs, concerns... For so many, memory decline was the major issue.

Because of that experience, I decided to go into the field of gerontology to do my research on Alzheimer's disease and brain aging.

With my degree in aging, I will be able to make progress and achieve my goals.

So, here I am...standing tall...proud to be a gerontologist.

Thank you, Dr. Melanie Mallers, Professor Karen Wong and Dr. Karen Fazio for the outstanding knowledge you have shared with me.

Thank you, Dr. Barbara Cherry and other committee members, for guiding me through my successful thesis process.

And, my sincere gratitude for my family's constant support.

Finally, to my fellow graduates... Congratulations!

I look forward to working with you in this critically important field of aging, and to hearing from some of you as we pursue our profession in the future.

Thank you!

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## **ERICK AGUINALDO** *B.A. in Women's and Gender Studies*

Good evening everyone,

Thank you for being here. I'm honored to have the opportunity to speak to you all tonight.

My past five years at Cal State Fullerton have been filled with sleepless nights and unattainable parking spots. Apart from these great things though, the university has provided me an invaluable education and facilitated my growth not only as a scholar, but also as an individual. I am proud to share that I will be continuing my educational journey at the University of Michigan in their joint Psychology and Women's Studies PhD program.

Whether you all are going to graduate school, into the workforce, or taking a well-deserved break, I'd like to congratulate all of my fellow graduates! Tonight though, isn't just about us. I wouldn't be anywhere near where I am today without the help of numerous faculty, staff, family, and friends. I'd like to give a special shoutout to the McNair Scholars and MARC programs, as well as my 6th floor familia for always being there for me. Here's to taking better care of ourselves and prioritizing happiness (if it exists). I'd also like to thank my family. Primero quiero decir gracias a mi abuela para todo el apoyo y amor que me as dado. To my two sisters, Krystal and Gabriela, you all are the inspiration behind most of my work. You all are the future. While that might sound like a lot of pressure for you, I see it as more pressure for me. Pressure to do all that I can to ensure that the world you go out into is better than the one I've grown up in. I love you both more than you know and I will always be behind you in whatever you do.

For everyone else, to paraphrase the English poet John Donne, no person is

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an island. In spite of our generation's obsession with being self-made, we all need help. Whether it was faculty, family, friends, the cute barista from your favorite coffee shop, or the bartender at your bar of choice, I'm sure there was somebody or more likely multiple people that contributed to your success today. I encourage you all to take time to reflect on this wonderful accomplishment and thank those who have helped you along the way.

We're all going off in different directions, but our commonality will always be having a degree from the Department of Psychology at Cal State Fullerton. With that said, I'd like to do one last thing before I conclude. Can I have all the graduates stand up please?

If you've learned nothing else from your academic career here, there should be one thing we are all taking away. I'd like to share a few words and have you all finish the sentence. Your ability or lack thereof will determine whether or not you're actually awarded your degree. Correlation does not imply \_\_\_\_\_.

Alright, you all can sit down now. It seems like at least most of you will be leaving with degrees today.

Your degree means more than the ability to post about being one degree hotter on social media. Stay skeptical and remain compassionate. Share the knowledge you've gained here. Reaching higher isn't always better, I'd say it's more important to know what you're reaching for and ensure that it's something you truly want. Thank you.

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## **RUTH CALCANAS** *M.A. in Sociology*

*Ruth Calcanas is graduating with a Masters in Sociology. During her time here she has worked as a Graduate Student Assistant for the (H&SS) Assistant Dean of Student Affairs, as well as a Graduate Research Assistant for the Department of Sociology while also presenting her research at multiple conferences. Furthermore, she is currently teaching at Mt. San Antonio College and has secured a position as an adjunct professor following graduation.*

Good morning everyone! I would like to begin thanking all our family members and loved ones for sharing this amazing day with us, and I would like to congratulate the sociology graduating class of 2019!

When I found out that I was going to be one of the student commencement speakers for our department, I thought of two things. The first is that I am honored and humbled to have been selected to stand here today, and I would like to thank my parents, family, friends, classmates and professors for supporting me throughout my time here as a Titan.

The second thing I thought of was all of the adversities that everyone here today has overcome to get to these seats and to this stage. All of our narratives are different, and, as sociology graduates, we all know that if I only focus on my narrative, it would not be representative or inclusive of all of your individual stories.

So, to honor all of you today, I will be slightly breaking away from some commencement speaker norms to not focus on me, but on all the hardships and accomplishments we have gone through while learning about and personally experiencing the realities of systematic and institutional prejudice across race, class, gender, and sexuality.

With that said, I would like to dedicate my speech to three groups of students who do not always get formal recognition for the sacrifices they make to be in these seats today and hold a special place in my heart.

The first group I would like to honor are students who are parents - undergraduates and graduates alike. When I was in kindergarten, my dad

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was finishing his Bachelor's degree and teaching credential. I remember him walking across this stage 19 years ago today and then taking pictures in his cap and gown with me on his shoulders. When I was in middle school, my mom went back to school for her master's degree, and, then again, as I was in high school, my dad went back to school for his master's degree. One of the most inspiring things to see as a child coming of age is to witness your parents seeking a better life for themselves and their children by following their passions and reaching their dreams. I can say with full confidence and experience, that regardless of your child or children's ages, they are or will one day hold the highest respect and admiration for what you have completed today.

The second group I would also like to acknowledge are my fellow graduates who are partners, husbands, wives or children. Getting a college degree, again, undergraduate or graduate alike, takes a significant toll on our personal lives. Our attention to our families and partners are divided at best, and we were sometimes so preoccupied and stressed with our studies, they didn't always get our full attention. However, my partner and brothers also graduated this year. And, as difficult as it can be being in a relationship and being in a family with someone pursuing a degree, it is a beautiful experience to see someone you love complete a project and dream as big as a degree. So, as a partner of a student and a sister to students, I can say that all those times their studies became a priority, it was worth it to see them accomplish something great. And, as a student who has a partner and a large family, I would like to thank all of our loved ones out there today who have been so incredibly patient with us. We know you have been patient, and we thank you and are eternally grateful to you for supporting us through our ups and downs these past years.

Now, last, but certainly not the least, I would like to formally recognize and honor those of you here today who are immigrants, children of immigrants, first-generation, and/or undocumented students. Working with limited legal, economic, social, and political resources, we have beat the odds of society by being here in these seats today. We have contradicted the false overgeneralizing narrative of who immigrants are and what we contribute to this country. We are not a threat to the social fabric of this society, we are an asset - and by being here today, we are letting the world know that one accomplishment at a time.

I would like to once again, congratulate all of you for getting here today despite various adversities. By being here today we have done more than complete

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a degree – we have exceeded the expectations of history and overcome centuries old oppressions that were designed to prevent us from being here. And, in the face of all of this, you may have felt as if the work you have done was not enough for yourself, your professors, your community, or even your family, but as you hear your name being called today as you walk across this stage, remember this: you are enough – you are your ancestors' wildest dreams!

Thank you, and Congratulations Class of 2019!

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## **BIANCA DIAZ** *B.A. in Criminal Justice*

*Bianca Diaz is graduating with a Bachelors of Arts in Criminal Justice and a minor in psychology. She is a first-generation college student and plans to pursue a Master's degree in social work".*

Hello criminal justice majors and congratulations on making it to this big day! It definitely wasn't easy, especially for those who are here today while being a first-generation college student, a single parent, working a full-time job, and coming back to school at a later age. Regardless of the adversity we may have faced along the way, we are here and standing taller than ever.

Many of us may have chosen this major because it encompasses careers conducive to change, protecting others, fighting crime, and everything in between. Some of you will go on to become police officers, firefighters, and paramedics, placing yourselves on the front lines of danger and devastation. Others will go on to become FBI agents, probations and correctional officers, keeping the public safe one criminal at a time.

Careers in this field are ripe with opportunities to make a difference, to be every-day heroes for those around us. However, as passionate as we may be, we cannot turn a blind eye to the injustices that pervade the system we will work for. From the school to prison pipeline that targets disadvantaged youth, to the War on Drugs, that has become a war on women, people of color, and impoverished communities. We must be faithful servers of justice, while challenging the shortcomings of the system to better serve our communities. Our paths beyond this point will be unique, and I wish you all the best of luck in finding one all your own, that provides you with purpose, positive impacts the lives of others, and if I'm being honest, pays enough to live in beautiful Southern California. Thank you!

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## **KIANO EMAMI** *B.A. in Latin American Studies*

*Kiano Emami is a Latin American Studies major graduating after four years at CSUF. He spent much of this past year helping to grow the department's publicity throughout the campus.*

My time at Cal State Fullerton has been one of great joy. I am delighted to have made many friends and to have been active on campus. Aside from being in class, I spent my first couple of years here involved with the Chess Club and the Intramural Soccer Program. Both were a great way to meet people while continuing to enjoy my lifelong hobbies. I was also very excited to join the International Business Club, of which I have been a board member for the past year. Through organizing events and activities that focused on import/export simulations and current events as related to international finances, I formed a close bond with my fellow board members. We also had business and economics professors provide guest lectures to our students on international trade and on career opportunities related to international business. Most of our meetings focused on economic analyses of global events, and much of this past semester was dedicated to the economic struggles in Venezuela and the consequences for the regional and global economies. As the student assistant for the Latin American Studies Department, I held recruiting events to grow awareness of the major and advertised it to local high schools. Through recruiting on campus, I have had the opportunity to meet so many members of the CSUF community. While chatting with students on Titan Walk, I heard about so many interesting experiences. It was great meeting people who dedicated themselves to serving the community. I was able to make connections for the department and to expand our outreach to other organizations. Overall, the job has given me a greater sense of accountability and responsibility.

The Latin American Studies program is arguably the least-known major at CSUF, considering I am the only major in the program this year. It is true. The major is comprised of various departments, providing students with

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the freedom and flexibility to select courses from such disciplines as art, history, Spanish, anthropology, political science, and music. Personally, I most enjoyed the Spanish classes. It has been one my favorite subjects for most of my life. The Spanish department at Cal State Fullerton is unique and full of wonderful, extremely knowledgeable professors. From its linguistics and literature courses to his history and civilization courses, the department offers a variety of exciting subjects for all its students. The Latin American Studies department-affiliated student organization, which is the Latin American Studies Students' Association, helps conduct campus activities for the CSUF community. Such events in the past include the Student Conference, a day where students can present their research on any topic related to Latin America. This past semester, our main event was a Skype lecture in which two university professors from Mexico discussed the role of the Nahuatl language today as well as throughout history. It was very interesting to gain insight into a society that has been forgotten by much of modern history.

When I tell people that I am majoring in Latin American Studies, they sometimes respond with a look of bewilderment, asking me how I plan to use that major in the real world. My major courses have already exposed me to several opportunities. At CSUF, I spent three semesters helping to write news transcripts for *Al Día*, a student-run news program. I was able to conduct my own research and to gather sources on any given week's stories. Similarly, I have spent the past year as a writer for the *Latin American News Digest*, an online journal which seeks to increase more awareness inside the United States of events in Latin America. Having to research so many issues in Latin America made me realize that much of what occurs over there has significant effects in the United States and globally, whether it be the state of the environment, immigration, transnational crime, the abundance of natural resources, human rights, or economic relations. I have been able to use much of this research for class essays, bringing a unique point of view to my work, allowing me to develop a deeper point of view as a writer. The Latin American Studies major has also propelled me to pursue a master's degree in political science. In such a field, I can easily draw on much of my acquired knowledge to research global events and trends.

I have been very fortunate to have Dr. Ishikawa as my undergraduate adviser for the Latin American Studies program. He is extremely supportive of his students' interests and objectives and was even willing to permit me to take an excess number of units on two occasions. I know of many other departments

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throughout campus that would not even consider such an opportunity for their students. I would also like to thank Dr. Perez for her dedication to LASSA this past semester; she helped us expedite our access to club funds and to send out announcements to the Latin American Studies faculty regarding events. Overall, the Latin American Studies major program serves as a special opportunity for those interested.

I would like to thank my parents and sister for always supporting my interests and for guiding me. Congratulations to all my fellow graduates.

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## **DARIUS FAULK** *B.A. in American Studies*

I encountered American Studies long before I ever stepped foot on this campus, long before I knew the words American Studies to describe my fascination and curiosity for why the world and more specifically our society operate the way it does. American Studies is a way of challenging, feeling, and encountering the world with an openness supported by a strong foundation in empathy. All of the American Studies students graduating today were majors before we ever officially declared it. We were American Studies majors because there has always been a little voice in our heads that made us interested in why the status quo is the way it is, when it rarely if ever is in our favor.

And when we sat down in that first American Studies class, it was as if someone offered us the chance to take the blue pill from the matrix, to be introduced to near infinite ways in which our society is interconnected. Slowly building to a more fluid and comprehensive picture of why everything from TV, to monsters, to art and books and even the criminal justice system exists the way it does in our country.

There's a certain level of disillusionment that comes with being an American Studies major. Well there's a certain level of disillusionment that comes with growing up and being twenty two. But American Studies seems to encourage its students to confront this disillusionment, not run away, but embrace that the fact that every time you walk out of an AMST class your understanding of the world around you has changed. And sometimes it can be brutal, for every class that we could sit around and discuss the meanings we find in our favorite tv shows, there was another on the hardships that our fellow Americans face each day. The ways that the powers that be often strip people of their humanity

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and what we might be able to do in our day to day lives to restore it.

The 20th century American novelist and social observer James Baldwin once wrote “to encounter oneself is to encounter the other: and this is love. If I know that my soul trembles, I know that yours does, too, and, if I can respect this, both of us can live. Neither of us truly, can live without the other: a statement which would not sound so banal if one were not endlessly compelled to repeat it, and further believe it, and act on that belief.” These words by Baldwin, written almost half a century ago, still consume me when I think about the children of Flint who still don’t have safe water, or the American citizens of Puerto Rico whose world has been decimated, or the parents separated from their children at the border. I think this is what Baldwin was telling us when he said that even though his statement about encountering and loving each other might sound banal, we are still endlessly compelled to repeat it.

These words maybe more than any others encapsulate how American Studies has not only challenged me to be a better scholar, but more importantly a better person. You have done that for all of us. Thank you.

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## **CLAIRE FREEMAN** *M.S. in Environmental Studies*

*Claire Freeman is graduating with a Master of Science Degree in Environmental Studies. She is a graduate student in Dr. Paul Stapp's Wildlife Ecology and Conservation lab, she worked as a Teaching Assistant for undergraduates in the Ecology and Organismal Biology lab, and focused her graduate research on the conservation of carnivorous marsupials in Australia.*

Good morning faculty, students and guests,

Standing here today is truly bittersweet. As an Environmental Studies graduate student, my time at Cal State Fullerton has been one filled many late nights, agonizing over data, presentations, and papers. But it also has been rich with transformative experiences that have allowed me to grow and collaborate with a group of passionate individuals who will be crossing the stage with me today.

One of my most memorable experience as a grad student was getting to travel to the small island state of Tasmania, south of Australia, to work alongside biologists in the conservation of the Tasmanian devils.

You may have heard of the Tasmanian devil before, but no, it's not just a spinning cartoon character that terrorizes the Looneytoon world. Rather, it's a timid marsupial that is facing extinction due to an aggressive and contagious cancer, known as Devil Facial Tumor Disease. In the two decades since the emergence of this disease, more 80% of the original devil population has been lost.

But there is amazing work happening in Tasmania. There are global organizations, biologists, and community members banding together to work to maintain devil populations. While I was in Tasmania, I was fortunate to play a small part in this ongoing effort, and continue my research after returning to California. I learnt so much during this experience.

I learnt how to monitor wildlife and using camera traps and statistical programs, I learnt the sheer amount of resources and physical energy required to manage a captive wildlife facility, and also how to trap and handle the Tasmanian devil (while keep all 10 of my fingers!)

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While these lessons have given me hard skills that will be useful in future projects and positions, the most profound lesson I learnt was one that will shape the way I will move forward as an environmental professional.

It is here that I learnt of the immense power of collaboration: There is not just one party involved in working to save the Tasmanian devil. There are organizations and individuals, including biologists, government officials, community members, and educators (the list goes on), all pitching in to ensure the protection of this unique and sensitive species.

I learnt that it takes an army of people to work to save just one species from extinction.

And it is the collaboration of all of these parties that has succeeded in slowing the population declines of Tasmanian devils and halted its projected extinction.

This is wonderful news, but we have to remind ourselves that the Tasmanian devil is only one of 16,000 species globally facing extinction. Right now, we are in the midst of the sixth mass extinction.

We are destroying our open spaces, polluting our oceans, and irreparably damaging delicate ecosystems across the globe. If we have any hope of conserving our wildlife, our cultural and natural resources, and creating a sustainable future, we need people with a wide range of skills and passions to help create the solutions our environment so desperately needs.

We need the collective effort of all of us here today to active steps to address our global environmental crisis. The privilege of our degrees imposes the moral obligation to collaborate with one another to take immediate action.

Today, we will walk out of Cal State Fullerton with skills and ideas that are desperately needed. We should harness these skills, collaborate with our peers, and use our combined expertise to craft a more compassionate, conservation-focused, and sustainable future.

I look forward to collaborating with all of you.

Thank you.

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## VINCENT HUYNH *B.A. in Public Administration*

Hello Graduates, Friends, Family, and Faculty. Thank you for the warm welcome. As mentioned, my name is Ashley Hightower, and I am the Class of 2018 Women's and Gender Studies Valedictorian.

I first wish to congratulate all who have attended this ceremony in celebration of the graduates today. Family and friends, congratulations on supporting this stellar achievement; without your love and encouragement, this may not have been possible. Faculty, congratulations on pushing (and passing) this group; your sharing of knowledge and experience allowed for these individuals to graduate with a more expanded worldview than when they started – and isn't that the point of college? And finally, graduates, congratulations on doing the damn thing! Your perseverance and motivation is certainly something to be admired. I hope you leave today feeling undoubtedly proud of yourself – you definitely deserve it.

When I was told that I would be speaking to you all today, I was overjoyed for about a minute – then I was overwhelmed with ohmygoodness, what do I say?? How do I put into words how wonderful this achievement is? A few Google searches told me that graduation speeches should be inspirational, and that makes sense right? But I thought about it a lot, and I realized that you are all inspirational enough. I can tell you some of the things that make me seem like I deserve to be up here, or I can say that every single one of you deserves to be up here making this commencement address. You all accomplished something that so few people have done.

So when you're listening to these speakers today, remember that they are not here to inspire you – they are here to congratulate you. YOU, the graduating class of 2018, are inspiration enough. Everyone else is here (either in person

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or in spirit) to celebrate you and your astounding feat. We each have our own stories of defeat, strength and triumph. Today, I hope, is one of your stories of triumph.

As you're walking away from this graduation, reflect on all that has propelled you to this peak moment of receiving your degree. The late-night papers, the popping-cough-drops-as-you're-taking-a-final-sickness, the is-that-my-stomach-sounding-like-a-whale-as-we're-taking-notes hunger, the 5AM Starbucks or Coffee Bean runs, and the oh-my-god-i-missed-my-alarm-please-traffic-let-me-through days. There are so many of those moments that reminded us that we are college students. We had a common mindset; we shared common experiences and goals. All of which made us college students. As of today, you are no longer college students – you are college graduates. Whether you're moving on to further your education with a graduate degree or entering the post-graduate workforce, you have now officially ended your #collegelife.

So take that – elementary school teacher who told you your cursive wouldn't be good enough for college. You made it!

If I could take these last 20 seconds to selfishly thank some people without which, I would not have been able to make it to this podium today. Mom, you built me to be responsible; Dad, you built me to have fun; Ralphie, you built me to recognize my own strengths; And finally, to my sisters: thank you for being the most wonderful three best friends ever.

Fellow graduates, I read a Twitter page the other day that asked what is the craziest thing you've ever done for money. Well graduates, you're looking at it! Congratulations, Class of 2018! You should be so proud of yourselves. I know I am. Thank you.

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## **CARLOS JUAREZ** *B.A. in Public Relations*

*Carlos Juarez is a first generation student graduating with a Bachelor of Arts in Public Relations and a minor in African American Studies. He is actively involved with LGBTQ community engagement through San Diego Pride and the San Diego LGBT Center. During his junior year at CSUF, Carlos was selected as the 2017 CSUF Panetta Congressional Intern headed by the Panetta Institute of Public Policy during which he spent time researching legislation in Washington D.C. to better improve the acceptance of transgender military personnel. As a member of Sigma Lambda Beta International Fraternity Inc., Carlos has served as Vice President for his colony and created programs to advocate for students of color on campus.*

Good morning everyone! What an amazing honor it is to share the stage with you all, Thank you so much to the African American Studies Department, Dr. Brooks, for passing on major keys and being a role model for myself and others. This is great honor and privilege, I love y'all so much, what a huge blessing.

Congratulations as well to my fellow graduates here today, as this chapter of our lives closes... I hope each and every one of us continues to pursue that passion that drives us to give back to our everyday communities.

For me, I've always known that passion was to serve.

Not only to those in each space I find myself in, but in my heart to serve the Black community who has given me immense love throughout my entire life and my time on campus these past 4 years.

Being part of AFAM Studies has not only given me a clear understanding of what it means to rise up against injustice, but how to truly elevate my community and take action for them to thrive and prosper.

I was moved and inspired by Black excellence not found in everyday textbooks. By the histories and truths of Queer black leaders, like Marsha P. Johnson and others who like myself knows how it feels like to be underestimated and underrepresented.

I will continue to stand proudly and say what most to this day are afraid to say out loud, Black lives matter. The Trans black women across the country who still face injustice lives matter.

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Thank you again to the entire AFAM faculty and staff and to Cal State Fullerton for being a leader in higher education. Let's continue to operate from a place of love for our people and work towards our dreams.

Congratulations Class of 2019, Thank you!

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## **RYAN TUONG KOYANAGI** *B.A. in Geography*

To start this off, I wanted to let you all in on a little secret. For my entire first year here, I never left the 4th floor of HSS. Never had to, until I started finishing off my GEs. I mean, I'd go home after classes and all, but honestly, that wasn't even that necessary - and during finals week, maybe not that advisable. We're lucky in the Geography Department like that - we've carved out a little niche up on the 4th floor. We have food, fridges, enough couch space to sleep a small family ( - our small family). Those walls are decorated with our pictures, our maps, our research. We've built a home for ourselves in the space provided us and with the friends we met along the way.

In the two years I've been on this campus, and I've grown to love the little home we've built - and I'm sure that's a feeling shared by many of us. We have friends here - family, a second home. For some of us, that magic worked fast, and even though we came here as transfer students, two years later we leave as Titans. Others of us have been on this journey longer - four years, sometimes more. Two or four or more years of long days and late nights and now we're here, on the cusp of leaving this home we've built for new ones. Some of us are going far afield - out-of-town, out-of-state, halfway around the world. Some of us, we're staying right here.

Given we're all HSS grads, I'm assuming most of us are looking at the same handful of options: non-profits, local government, grad school. For some of us, that means leaving our parents' home for the first time. For others of us, it means moving back in - just for a while. For some of us, it means leaving behind friends and family for new adventures. We geographers are no strangers to that - we've sent our alumni far and wide - New York, Bahrain, the wilds of Alaska.

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But no matter how far we go, we don't lose home. Home is something we carry with us, like hermit crabs. Home is something we build. No matter where the wind may blow us, we bring pieces of our home with us, and, as we are welcomed into the homes of others, we offer them a piece of ourselves.

Geographers, historians, anthropologists and social scientists: as we prepare to leave this home of ours, remember that we are not alone. We have made it this far with the help of our teachers, of our parents, of our fellow students, of the communities we are part of and the communities that we build. As we make this journey, remember those who have left their homes before us. Remember our parents, who left their homes so they could build us better ones.

Home is something we take with us. Home is something that we build.

As we leave this home for our next one, let us remember what we take with us - discipline, self-confidence, the solidarity and mutual aid we offer to our fellow students. As we leave this home for our next one, let us use these skills to add to the homes of our new neighbors.

Congratulations, Class of 2019.

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## **VY LE** *B.A. in Asian American Studies*

*Vy Le graduated in Fall 2018 with a Bachelor of Arts in Ethnic Studies with an option in Asian American Studies. She organized various community-building events as a student activist, was a founder of our Student Association for Asian American Studies, and is currently working on immigration and human rights issues at Asian Americans Advancing Justice – Orange County.*

Good morning, Class of 2019, families, and friends,

Today I'm going to tell you a love story, but it's not what you might imagine.

This is a story about community, compassion, and resilience. I was born in Vietnam and immigrated here when I was 7 years old with my parents. We made our home in a predominantly low-income Latinx and Asian American community. Growing up, I always felt like I was somewhere in-between: was my home in America or Vietnam? Despite the world telling me what I should be instead of who I already am, I kept resisting and kept yearning to find myself a place to call home.

I found that place in the Asian American Studies Department. For the first time ever, I had faculty who looked like me, read books by authors who understood and uplifted my narratives, and most importantly, I found community. A community of faculty, students, colleagues, and mentors, who taught me about love and compassion.

A love that can be deeply felt when, after a long stressful day Professor Eric Reyes looked at my tired eyes, ran to the office kitchen, and handed me a warm quesadilla he had heated up. A love that can be deeply felt when it's 3 AM and I could hear my dad shuffling through the house getting ready to bend his back delivering newspaper through the night. And a love that can be deeply felt whenever I am going through a tough time, Professor Jennifer Yee would open her office doors and arms to cry with me and uplift me.

And I keep finding strength and resilience in spaces all around me. From the ma-and-pa shops in Little Saigon to the street vendors on 4th Street, Santa Ana, these communities keep on rebuilding and living despite war and trauma.

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Immigrants and refugees keep resisting the attacks on who they are and why they're here. Their resilience has helped me to see my own strength and the strength in others.

So to my low-income working class immigrant community,

You uplifted me when the world weighed down

You inspired me with all your resilience to push forward fearlessly with grace and humility,

And you loved me when I didn't even know how to love myself.

Thank you and may the work that I do be a love story dedicated to you.

To my fellow graduates, congratulations on this milestone and accomplishment. You have overcome many obstacles to be here today. As you embark on your post-graduate journey, may you keep overcoming those obstacles. While doing so, I hope you keep a sense of community in everything you do. However you define community and wherever that may be, in times of struggle and triumph, may you be inspired by their resistance and strength to push forward and thrive. Most importantly, I hope you find a space where you feel accepted and loved, and I hope you will create spaces like that for others.

Thank you.

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## **KIMBERLY MADRIGAL** *B.A. in Chicana/o Studies*

It is an honor to be addressing the distinguished faculty, the proud families, and the Chicana and Chicano Studies graduating class of 2019.

First, let me express the overwhelming pride I feel celebrating this moment with all of you. This moment our graduation, has fueled our passions and made us resilient as we persevered through all of our challenges. We have been consistently tested and we survived! We prepared through the intense exams of final's week, juggled the demands of outside responsibilities and came out victorious in the endless struggle against oppressive stereotypes and imposter syndrome. We all deserve to be here today. Congratulations!

No one can say for sure where our lives may lead or how our decisions will impact the lives of others, but I am hopeful that we all have a good chance of success. We are among those who chose to invest time to improve ourselves in effort to contribute to a better future. After the celebration has ended and anxiety begins to take hold, just remember that you will be fine.

There are many things that we have learned during our time as scholars in the Chicana and Chicano Studies department. Two of which is to be confident in who you are and to be true to your passions. I am confident in your authenticity and highly suggest that you never compromise yourself in any space that you will occupy. Your authenticity is your power and with it you will bring a unique presence to your field and career path.

We should all reflect on how far we've come. It is truly incredible, as the daughter of a poor immigrant Mexican family, never in my life did I imagine standing before you today as the first in my family to receive a bachelor's degree. I honestly don't think I would have survived my time here without

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the help of programs like E.O.P and the McNair Scholars Program. There are several programs on campus that have assisted all of us to get to where we are now and deserve an equal amount of appreciation. Let us not forget to thank those who have believed in our possibilities when we had yet to discover our own.

We are proud Latinx graduates! We each have a unique story with challenges and triumphs that have defined us as individuals, and which will inspire others to search for their own purpose. As you are here today, remember everyone who has supported you on your journey including those who are not able to join you. As stated by African American novelist, James Baldwin “As you walk forth from this place, the most important lesson I can offer you from my own life is that in order to remain successful, as you walk the path of privilege, you must not forget the less privileged you left behind.” I guarantee that you will have a more fulfilling life and achieve greater success if you use your talents and abilities to serve others to give back what you have been given. For this is how you get success—How you keep success—How you grow success.

In truth, it takes a lifetime to know where our lives will lead or how we will impact the lives of others. But I stand firm in knowing that all of us have a better chance of attaining satisfaction, because we are here today. I hope that you will take my challenge to explore and be confident in your authenticity, to have faith in your calling and the courage to serve. I share in your excitement for today as we celebrate all of our success and our triumphs over our obstacles. Never forget the experiences you had or your journey here at Cal-State Fullerton. We all deserve to be here, thank you for allowing me to be here with all of you. Congratulations Chicana and Chicano Studies class of 2019!

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## **ANNEKE MENDIOLA** *B.A. in Philosophy*

Hello, fellow students, much-esteemed professors and my supportive family,

Some time ago, someone asked me why I was studying philosophy. "What good is that going to do you?" he asked. I got a bit snippy, so I said, "What do you expect me to do at my age, go for a degree in nuclear physics?"

Of course, instead of being snide, I should have said that I wanted to reflect on major ideas and questions, and perhaps find some answers.

Do philosophy students expect answers? No, of course not. We operate in a constant and ever accelerating quest for knowledge. We ask things like, is there such a thing as free will? Do our uniquely individual experiences shape our behavior, and what role does our a priori ability to conceptualize play in this? How did Descartes come to reason that, because he was a thinking thing, he therefore existed? What was Aristotle's "golden mean", and what did Nietzsche mean by our morality being against the instincts of life?

Fortunately, we can study and engage with many living philosophers. John Searle, for example, who has studied the possibility of artificial intelligence becoming "like us" and who concluded that this won't happen. Of course, that's a philosophical question. Perhaps in the future a robot will stand on this podium speaking to students. More likely is however that some of you here are going to be the famous people future student speakers will be talking about.

So, what good is philosophy? As philosophers we are condemned to a way of life that will affect the entirety of our existence. But let's look at the practical side for a moment. There is ample evidence that many employers are looking for people like you, who can think, do research, express themselves well, argue eloquently and convincingly for their viewpoints. If therefore you are being

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pragmatic, you're welcome. If you can make a living while utilizing the abilities you developed as you immersed yourselves in philosophy, then so much the better. But, and this goes for every student here today, I hope you will never forget that the questioning must not stop. No matter how old you are, if you are still wondering about things, reflecting on them, and engaging in debate, you are very much alive.

Thank you

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Hello fellow Liberal Arts students and greatly admired professors,

Why am I standing here again? Well, I'm a double major, which for me resulted in being a commencement speaker for both departments.

Frankly, when I was younger, I really didn't expect to ever graduate from college, much less have the honor of being a speaker on this podium. From the beginning my schooling has been strewn with obstacles and interruptions, the first of these the Second World War when I lived in Holland. School takes on a whole different color when enemy soldiers are bivouacking in your classrooms and there's anti-aircraft artillery on your playground. My elementary school education was pretty sporadic!

Like some of you here, I also immigrated to the US., but we first went to Australia in 1951. The school system there was really bizarre at the time; boys were strictly separated from girls (I hated that!) and they practiced corporal punishment. When I saw a student get beaten on the legs with a cane, I was out of there, for good! I told my parents not to send me back to school because I'd hit back if someone did that to me.

At age 22, in the US, I enrolled in Santa Ana College, but was again interrupted because I worked full time - I kept falling asleep during my evening classes. To those of you who have managed to complete college while working, let me bow to you. You're amazing and I could never have done what you did.

I finally got serious and came to CSUF. Liberal Studies 300 exposed me to the most incredible, interesting and eye-opening topics. I never looked back and just kept taking classes. In what other program can a person study literature, history, art, philosophy, science and so much more? I never would have read a book like Vonnegut's *Galápagos*, for instance, or read *The Making of the Atomic Bomb*, which by the way prompted one of my friends to ask if she should call Homeland Security. I wouldn't have known what flying buttresses are and what their purpose is (If you're not a Liberal Studies graduate, ask one!).

If you are celebrating today because it's all over, please, think about what this education has done for you. How it has opened doors to a very wide world, where your opportunities to succeed are limitless. (We all got through LBST 315 A and B, so we can do anything, right?) The main thing is that, due to your hard-won Liberal Studies education, and the extraordinary professors who guided you, you're ready to be the best professionals, teachers or anything else,

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that any employer could wish for.

Thank you

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**ANDREA POMA HERNANDO** *B.A. in Political Science and Criminal Justice*

*Andrea Poma is a double major in Political Science and Criminal Justice graduating Cum Laude who plans to go to law school after graduation. She is a first generation college student, and during her time at Cal State Fullerton she has been a part of Pi Sigma Alpha, Model United Nations, and Moot Court where she obtained a first place orator award, and a national brief writing award.*

Distinguished faculty, families, and fellow graduates, good evening. My Name is Andrea Poma I am graduating with a double major in political science and criminal justice. Today as we celebrate with our loved ones let us really reflect this momentous occasion. We have all worked and persevered to be standing where we are today. Some of us will be the first in our families to graduate college. Some of us are parents. Some of us are DACA., Greek Life, ASI BUT all of us are Titans and all of us make our campus amazing.

Now I can stand here and go on and on about the amazing things that we have experienced and been a part of here at CSUF but I won't instead I'll follow the lead of one of the greatest pop stars of our childhood, Miley Cyrus.

These are the "7 things I Hate About CSUF.

I hate that hair-pulling-soul-sucking-all-nighters that you had me spend in Pollak Library at the end of every semester

I hate that we're a commuter school but through amazing programs like Moot Court I was able to meet my friends for life

I hate how average I felt in the company of all of my amazing peers

I hate how these four years just flew by as if it was only yesterday when we first arrived here in the fall

I hate how I will always hear Professor Dery's voice screaming criminal law at me.

I hate how I payed over \$200 for parking yet I can never find a spot.

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But worst of all, I hate the way that I don't hate you Cal State Fullerton, not even close. Not even a little bit. Not even at all.

I feel like at this point I should be crying and rushing off the stage but honestly I feel like I've done my fair share of that on this campus. When I look back at my time here my dominant feelings are gratitude and pride.

We should all be ridiculously proud of ourselves. I am the wildest dream of the little girl who came from Peru and didn't speak a single word of English 16 years ago. The person that I am today is first and foremost because of my amazing mother, who brought us here from Peru with just a dream and hope. Mama today is for you. And my amazing family who flew in from all over the world. But I will never take the tools provided by Cal state Fullerton for granted.

Every single professor in the PAJ department has been instrumental in our successes. I'd specifically like to thank Dr. Fiber-Ostrow for everything she has done for me as a first-generation college student. I walked into her office right on the 5th floor one day and never left. Thank you for seeing greatness in me and giving me the opportunity and encouragement to see it in myself.

My wish for all of you is that you look back at the time spent here fondly and that you are all ready to face the future. Shoulders back. Head up high. One step at a time.

Congratulations to the PAJ class of 2019. We did it!

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## **RICHARD ROMERO** *B.A. in Anthropology*

Hello everyone I want to begin this commencement by thanking all of the people who came out in the stands today to show support for the graduates of 2019. I won't be able to stress this enough but without your continued support from Day 1 many of us wouldn't be here today to share this special occasion. With that being said I would also love to thank red bull, Starbucks, and quiz let for always being real ones throughout my journey at Cal State Fullerton. I know many of the students would agree with me that these are a few "crucial" items needed in order for success. All jokes aside college is no joke and awfully exhausting. From dealing with stress of exams, research papers, presentations, and even managing time, we students have a lot on our plate. Regardless we did not waiver from our path and stayed focused and consistent with our journey even if we had to pull all nighters at times. We are titans and as titans we push for more. Every graduate here has experienced their own unique journey and obstacles. But I believe we all share the same mutual experience of hard work and patience navigating through the school. Fortunately for myself, I was blessed with a wonderful counselor. I want to give a special recognition to Dr. Barbra Erickson who has served as a mentor for me throughout my venture at Cal State Fullerton. I appreciate everything that you have done for me inside and outside of class. You expanded my knowledge in medicine and taught me to view medicine in different perspectives. I plan on applying this valuable information as I continue my journey through the medical field. I would also like to thank my Dad who is out there somewhere in the stands. You taught me from a young age if you want something you have to go out and grind for it. You lit the flame and passion in me and this is what I stayed up every single night for. From working ridiculous hours at work and still having to come home to finish a 15 page report or having to study for an exam,

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I never backed down on the challenges and looked for inspiration from you. So I look to the graduating class of 2019 and encourage all of you to reflect on the important things that matter in your life to brighten your flame. That's pretty much all I have to say and enjoy the rest of graduation!

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## **MELISSA SANCHEZ** *B.A. in Sociology*

I am beyond honored to be the commencement speaker this year for sociology. As a first-generation and Chicana student, I never thought in a million years that I would make it this far. Coming out of high school, I had no sense of direction. My first semester at community college was chaotic. It was overpopulated and there were few classes available. Out of desperation, I signed up for an introduction to sociology course .. at 6:20 in the morning. Little did I know I would fall completely in love with sociology. Sociology opened up my eyes. I started learning that there was another world outside of mine. I learned that 1 in 4 college aged women are raped, 2 million people are currently incarcerated, transwomen of color are being murdered at high rates, and there are more vacant buildings than homeless people. There are marginalized communities who are completely invisible and we need to work together to empower these communities. We cannot stand by and accept that innocent people are being caged, families are being separated at the border, and bombs are being dropped on other countries. As humans, we are all responsible for the well-being of each other.

When I received the message that I was accepted into Cal State Fullerton, my world evolved once again. I realized that I had the opportunity to do something extraordinary. At first, I felt guilty that I was accepted. I thought about all the people who don't have the privilege to attend college. I thought about kids who couldn't go to school because they have to work to help their families, kids who live in impoverished areas and don't have access to quality education, kids across the country and globe who have to worry about their next meal. I thought about my dad who was a kid that had unbelievable talent and passion to become an architect but couldn't go because his family didn't have the financial means. I thought about all the people who deserve a seat in a

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classroom and a right to education. I realized that I wasn't only going to school for me, but I'm also going for my community, for my people. It is important that I use the tools I learned here in the heart of classes and take it back home. Through educating others, I can empower myself and those around me.

Although I was accepted into CSUF and transferred with almost straight A's, I didn't feel good enough or smart enough to be here. I felt alone. My first semester at CSUF, I met Dr. Devon Thacker Thomas who was my professor for deviant behavior. She soon turned into my mentor and took me under her wing. I would vent to her all about my insecure thoughts of being a first-generation and Chicana student. She always reminded and drilled into my head that I belong here, that I am more than good enough. That I have the brains and passion to not only succeed in all of my classes, but I can go as far as I want. I thank her for always challenging me to be a better critical thinker and for always being there to make sure that I would never fall. If it wasn't for you, I wouldn't be looking into PhD programs. Thank you for creating the space for me to grow and helping me work to meet my full potential.

Not only has Dr. Thacker Thomas supported me, but I want to thank my family and significant other for always encouraging and reminding me to never give up. Especially my parents. Since I can remember, they have always talked about the need and value of education. This degree not only belongs to me, but it belongs to us. I also want to say I am sorry for ruining a couple of dinners with my rants and debate. But if it wasn't for all of you, I wouldn't be standing here right now.

Sociology has revolutionized my world. It has given me the critical thinking tools to liberate myself and resist the ideologies of patriarchy, white supremacy, capitalism, imperialism, and individualism. It has given me the power to realize the worth we all have in society. Everyday, I am grateful to wake up and be proud of being a strong Mexican-American woman who will speak her mind and make her presence visible to those who try to silence me in any way. I am going to end this with the words of Angela Davis, "I am no longer accepting the things I cannot change. I am changing the things I cannot accept."

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## **JACOB VELA** *M.A. in History*

“They really gave this to you?” I’ll always remember the disgust in my teacher’s voice. “Apparently, your student of the month: Jacob Andrew Vela.”

“Excuse me, but him?” one student rang out, standing now, audibly upset. “He rarely shows up, and if he does, he is always late! I’m sorry, but there has to be anyone besides him that deserves this.”

I will never forget this interaction from high school. Always the quiet kid just trying to pass by, I discovered how most of my class and many teachers viewed me: an underachiever not worth much. I knew this was far from the truth, but there it was. I had a choice then: embrace the role that they placed upon me or reject it entirely, proving that I am far more capable than they believed. As you can see, I opted for the latter.

Now their perceptions weren’t without evidence. One only needs to look at my GPA and attendance record to see that. But the question is to why I was in such a predicament. Since before I can remember, my parents were separated, resulting in years of court-meetings, custody battles, and a never-ending source of stress, both physically and psychologically. School was my one escape from hell, and boy did I cherish every second of it. But by the time I was 10, my view of the world changed. Witnessing firsthand the pure hatred each parent had for each other, I realized I was their burden to bare, and shortly after, it was made very clear by both households that I did not have a home.

I won’t get into the details that followed, but long story short, I lost the will to live. School no longer served as an escape, but a temporary distraction that failed to do even that. My grades began to drop, and honestly, I no longer cared. Gone were the childhood dreams of attending Yale or Harvard. I just

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wanted a way out.

I was kicked out of high school after sophomore year for my poor grades, but one teacher, Mr. Brothwell, argued on my behalf. Going before the school board, he proposed were I to join the Academic Decathlon team and continued to achieve high test scores, I would be permitted to stay enrolled. Needless to say, the board and I accepted the terms, eventually winning County, competing at State, and receiving dozens of medals. Yet the greatest award from this compromise was the family I gained from the team.

Once graduated, I kept the promise I made to my 10 year old self, and moved on out. No longer burdened with the stressors at home, I was able to rekindle my love for school. I found strength in my family: Josh Peterson, Hoa Ly, and Domenic Schetter; and of course my baby brother, Jason Paul Hernandez. I discovered the love of my life, Raj Kaur, who has supported me through some of my roughest patches and has seen me flourish like a flower amongst the concrete. And finally Dr. Stern, who encouraged me to pursue the Black Family Fellowship in History and fund my archival research not only at ASU, but Yale as well! From all of this, I was able to rediscover what I thought to have been lost so long ago: happiness.

Opportunities do not come that often, so when they do, you best grab ahold and take your best shot. Learn from your mistakes, for they are our greatest teacher. Embrace yourself, for all of your faults and all of your strengths; love who you are. I never thought I would actually graduate from college. Hell, I never thought I would make it past the age of 20, but alas, I stand before you today, stronger than ever, happier than ever.

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## **ALMA VELAZQUEZ** *M.A. in Spanish*

Good Evening. Friends, family, faculty, and class of 2019. My name is Alma Velazquez and I am incredibly honored and humbled to stand here before you all today, as we close a monumental chapter in our journey.

Looking back, I can honestly say that this has been -without a doubt- the most challenging, yet rewarding experience. Now, I may have lost track of all the breakdowns and anxiety attacks I had along the way, but there is one in particular that I will never forget -you could say it was "life changing". It happened the last semester of my undergraduate year. As I was preparing for what I believed was the end of my academic career - I was presented with an option that seemed completely out of my reach and my reality: Graduate School.

My mind became consumed by this exciting yet terrifying possibility. As I came face to face with a decision that would shape my future -I did the worst thing you could possibly do: I began to doubt myself. I asked myself: "Am I good enough? Do I actually have what it takes to take on a Masters degree?" As these questions replayed in my head, I went to see my parents. Exhausted from a long day of work, followed by school, I now had an 'all nighter' ahead of me -which was part of the usual routine, however, I now also had my future to think about. So, I did the only thing I could do in a stressful situation like this -I had a breakdown. In between sobs, tears, and a quivering voice, I explained my dilemma to my parents. I expressed my love for school, my passion for learning and my doubts and fears for continuing -or better yet, for failing. It was then that my dad looked at me and said "You are my daughter, you are an extension of me -your failures are my failures; your accomplishments are my accomplishments. We are so proud of who you are and what you have

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accomplished. If you decide that you don't want to continue, that's fine, but don't give up because you don't think you have what it takes -You are more than capable" My mom then added "Look at how far you've come. If it were easy, everyone would do it. We will support whatever you decide to do."

They don't know this, but it was at that moment that I made the decision to pursue my Masters Degree. I made it official a month later.

Si fuera fácil, todos lo harían -"If it were easy, everyone would do it" that is something that my mother has always said, and she's right, this has not been an easy journey. Being first generation Mexican-American; being the first person in my family to go to college, being the first person in my family to obtain a Masters Degree- No, this was not an easy journey. For all of us who check into those boxes, this meant navigating a system that was not designed for us, which meant often making mistakes, sometimes taking wrong turns, not reaching deadlines or not following "steps" that we didn't even know existed; this also meant often translating documents from English to Spanish for our parents, only to ask for help about a concept that none of us know anything about. We definitely had our particular set of challenges.

These challenges slowly faded away thanks to the support of our beloved professors here at CSUF. I think I can speak for both the Spanish and TESOL Masters Programs, when I say that we are incredibly fortunate to have you all as not only our professors, but also as our mentors - you are the pillars that make us more than just programs, we are a community. We look out for one another, and we motivate each other because we want to see our community thrive.

Despite all of our challenges, difficulties and obstacles we have endured along the way, we persisted and now here we are, not only leading a path, but creating a road for future generations. May we never forget this moment. May we continue to constantly work towards a better future, and if we ever find that the odds are not in our favor, let us just think of today and remember this Mexican proverb: "They tried to bury us, they didn't know we were seeds".

Congratulations class of 2019 -we did it!

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