Welcome!

Welcome to the freshmen, the Class of 2021!

Welcome to the transfer students, the Class of 2019!

Let me tell you a little bit about you. There are 9,500 of you, 6,500 freshmen and 3000 transfer students.

The youngest of you is 14; the oldest is 64.

86 of you are veterans.

You come from 46 counties in California, all 50 states, and 54 foreign countries.

59% of you freshmen and 65% of you transfer students are bi-lingual or have a first language other than English.

There are 120 sets of twins and triplets among you.

Among you are:

* A developer of a robotic arm
* A student who created her own makeup line
* A student who applied to Berkeley and was admitted from prison
* A student who helped build houses in Mexico
* A member of the Bahrain national debate team who competed in the world debating championships
* A student, inspired by the Flint water crisis, who developed a water purification system recognized by google
* An opera singer
* A person who worked in an onion field over summers
* A cartoon artist
* A USA gymnastics judge

You are a remarkable group! We are thrilled to have you here, with your energy, your ambition, your intelligence, your imagination. We are excited you chose Berkeley. And we know you can succeed here.

For all of us who work in higher education, this is the most exciting time of year because we’re surrounded by beginnings—your beginnings.

When I began my career at Berkeley, now decades ago, I fell in love with this place, as I hope you will too. First, I loved you—the students. Each of you has a different story of how you got here, your path to this moment and this place. You’re diverse in your experiences, your aspirations; you’re quirky, you’re smart. I came to love the faculty. Faculty members are studying every subject under the sun—and extending our knowledge of it. And I love the fact that Berkeley is a place that matters. We make history here.

Berkeley is a research university. What does that mean? There is no problem important to humankind or the planet—global warming, advances in biomedical technology, urban growth, the nature of our universe—you name it—where we don’t have faculty working to solve it. We have historians extending our understanding of the past, artists in every medium creating new imaginative worlds.

As students, you will study with these professors, and you can participate in their research. And go on to create, explore, and develop your own research.

How do you get the most out of Berkeley? I sometimes compare different colleges and universities to different kinds of communities. Some colleges, for example, are like small towns, in which everyone knows everyone else. Berkeley is like a city, and it responds to city skills. Find your neighborhoods; find an intellectual neighborhood, find an extra-curricular neighborhood. Knock on doors. People are eager to help. Ask questions.

This community for many of you will be the most diverse you’ve ever experienced. It will stretch you, intellectually and emotionally. That’s challenging. One of the best ways of meeting this challenge is developing your capacity for empathy—learning to see with different eyes, putting yourself in others’ shoes.

The need for empathy is tied to an issue that you’ve likely heard about over the past few months—our campus’s commitment to free speech. This past spring several speakers were invited to Berkeley, but were prevented from delivering their remarks by those who disagreed with what they had to say. I believe that this kind of action is harmful to your learning, and to the idea of the university, so I’d like to say a few words about it.

Free speech—the public expression of many, sharply divergent points of view—is critical to diversity, indeed fundamental both to our democracy and to our mission as a university. Berkeley, as many of you know, was the home of the free speech movement; perhaps you do not know that the free speech movement was a coalition between students on the right and students on the left, between Goldwater Republicans and civil rights activists, united in the effort to fight for the right to advocate political views on campus. Particularly now, it is critical for the Berkeley community to protect this right; it is who we are. That protection involves not just defending your right to speak, or the right of those you agree with, but also defending the right to speak by those you disagree with, even those whose views you find abhorrent. This is not easy. It can conflict with the values we hold as a community. You may feel, as I sometimes do, that some speech attacks your very identity. However, the right response is not the heckler’s veto, or what some call, platform denial. Call it out for what it is, don’t shout it down, for in shouting it down you collude in their narrative—that universities are not open to all speech. We respond to hate speech with more speech. We all desire—indeed, sometimes crave—safe space—space in which we feel we can be ourselves and find support for our identities, and we all have ways of finding that safe space. You have the right to expect the university to keep you physically safe, but we would be providing you less of an education, preparing you less well for the world after you graduate, if we tried to protect you from ideas that you may find wrong, even noxious. You can choose not to attend speeches you find noxious or offensive, you can cultivate your own words, and you can develop your inner resilience, which is the surest form of safe space.

Perhaps it’s fitting that my welcome to Berkeley ends with a paragraph about free speech. It’s a very important topic that we will continue to explore all year, through lectures, discussions and other events.

Let me now close by simply offering you my warmest welcome to Berkeley—a place where we confront difficult issues just as we extend the boundaries of science, seek a more profound understanding of history, create and examine art, rethink societal norms, develop new ideas, found new companies, and cultivate our own best selves, so that we can change the world. We are thrilled to have you here. Fiat lux, and go bears.