

Commencement 2022
May 26, 2022

It is now my honor to address the Class of 2022.

- I'd like to start by saying that I am *thrilled* to see you all in person *at last!*
- I started my tenure as Baruch's eighth president remotely—in July 2020—and like all of you, spent the whole following year in the virtual environment.
- Since Fall 2021, it has been so exciting to see students, faculty, and staff return to campus, as pandemic restrictions started to ease.
- And to feel that amazing Bearcat vibe "in real life."

Baruch College—soon to be your alma mater—has always had a special place in higher education. Our origins begin with the Free Academy in 1847. Since then, Baruch has earned a long and storied history of pioneering change in public higher education. And our vision today remains as audacious as ever: to disrupt old notions of prestige and quality in college education.

For too long, our society has conflated quality, prestige and high price. The thinking goes like this:

- If something is expensive, by default, fewer people can have it.
- If something is exclusive in this way, it somehow has to be better.
- If something is exclusive and purportedly better, then it must be prestigious.

In higher education, this flawed thinking has fed the notion that an expensive education is somehow better—more exclusive and prestigious.

- The two do not have to be associated that way. Indeed, they should *not* be.
- I believe—and the faculty and staff at Baruch believe—that excellence should be accessible to anyone who devotes themselves to the privilege of higher education.
- This driving principle—that excellence *should be* accessible—is special because it's not common.

Making excellence accessible has many real benefits. One of which you can see, and feel right here in this arena.

Look around you—the signature diversity of Baruch College is well represented in the Class of 2022.

- Together, you represent more than 130 different countries
- And speak more than 75 different languages in your homes

- You live in the five boroughs of New York City and much beyond
- And more than half of you are the first in your families to graduate from college!
- Historically—and currently—our students have come from all echelons of society, including families of limited means.

A snapshot such as this speaks to the mission and legacy of Baruch College, and it sets *our* Class of 2022 a world apart from most other top institutions in the United States. Through special programming and targeted recruitment efforts, institutions across the country strive to emulate a dynamic, globalized student experience Baruch offers.

A further distinction—one that makes Baruch truly unique—is the outstanding, high-quality education that you have earned here. We demand excellence, deliver value—and open up a world of opportunity for anyone who is willing to work hard.

One of our alumni recently told me, I love Baruch, because Baruch represents everything that is right about America: hard work, opportunity, inclusion, fairness, compassion, and generosity.

Indeed, this is why I came to Baruch after 35 years in academia.

- For a long time, I felt that higher education in the United States is not the best it can be.
- Certainly not for the largest and most prosperous democracy in the world.
- But Baruch has the potential to change not just higher education—but through graduates like you—we have the power to change society for the better.

Excellence and value set Baruch apart from the norm in higher education. It is our differentiator. And in my view, it's what sets Baruch Graduates apart too.

- Our students and alumni have nurtured a special talent for using their own experiences, and their own stories, to enrich and build on the formal education they've received.
- This is by design: Baruch takes pride in nurturing, cultivating, and awakening the unique stories, perspectives, and capabilities in each individual.
- It is fundamental to be comfortable with who you are, and where you are from.
- This confidence is the common thread among the students and alumni I have had the pleasure to meet.

To this viewpoint, let me share with you my own experience. When you hear me speak, you know that I didn't grow up here. Neither did I come up through the traditional path, or what used to be the traditional path.

- Some of you have seen a picture of me on a motorcycle. And there is a story behind it.
- Like many of you, I worked odd jobs to supplement my expenses in college.
- Among my first job was making deliveries on a motorbike in the busy streets and back alleys of Taipei—like an early version of Door Dash.
- In other words, I was a Dasher, before there was such a thing.
- This is when I developed a kinship with people who made the City work—street vendors, sanitation workers, manual laborers, and others.

Later, during my required military service in the Taiwanese Navy, I served on a World War II-era American-made frigate. I lived and worked side-by-side with people from all walks of life and all education levels. When our ship was in the shipyard for several months, one of my jobs was to strip paint and rust from deep in the inner hull of the ship. I still remember that small, dark space, lit with a dim work light, along with the sound echoing from my hammer and chisel. It still occasionally appears in my dreams.

Later, when I arrived in the United States, of course my English was pretty rudimentary. Social gatherings, such as cocktail parties and Friday afternoon happy hours, were a source of extreme awkwardness. Being foreign-born in such settings, it's not just a language problem, it's also a challenge to read social cues. You don't know when you can jump into the conversation, or how to share a nuanced joke.

Some of you may experience the exact same thing when you start your professional life.

And I want you to remember that the challenges and hardships you may have experienced are also the source of your strength. This is exactly what many Baruch alumni—some of whom are now in their 80s and 90s—have conveyed to me.

- Through the ages, Baruch students have not had much handed to them.
- They have worked hard, learned incredible things from their life experiences—and written life stories that are truly remarkable.
- They are original and creative thinkers who took a rare approach to tackling the challenges they faced. Many pursued higher education when others in their families and communities did not.
- Collectively, these Baruch stories provide a window into our future—one in which the possibilities are endless.

I am sure many of you can relate to these difficulties and feelings.

- Even if you were born here, but raised in a different culture, maybe speaking a different language at home, it can be challenging to integrate.

- The same can be true for perceptions of social class, as you enter a workplace where the majority of people seem to come from a very similar background to one another—but not to you.
- There is a fear of an implicit stereotype bias—where you are judged based on how you look, how you sound, or where you come from. Not by who you are, what you can do, and what you have accomplished.

Yet, I believe this perspective as “outsiders” has always allowed Baruch students to think outside the box. Or perhaps they never realized that the box existed—and this gives you the opportunity to see things others do not.

- During your time at Baruch, you have honed an ability to read people from different perspectives and different angles.
- You have developed an understanding that people from different backgrounds may behave and act differently, but have tremendous value to add.
- You will be less likely to fall into the groove too quickly, and this will give you an edge.
- This skillset—this heightened situational awareness—is invaluable. In fact, it is priceless. And it’s what society needs.

Our society is at a pivotal point, following the big reset, brought by the pandemic and the protests that challenged racial and social prejudices.

- Everyone is rethinking how organizations are run, and what people bring to the new way forward.
- This translates into opportunity for those who are agile, adaptable, and situationally aware.
- In the status quo, opportunity is rare. But when everything is a toss-up, opportunity abounds.

With graduates such as you, Baruch is changing the future workforce—to one that increasingly values diversity, fresh perspectives, and a broader spectrum of experiences. Baruch is your superpower. Take it with you everywhere you go. You have earned an education—and a worldview—that sets you apart.

As I congratulate each of you, I ask that you please *stand up* and take a moment to thank all the people who helped you get to this great day. Cheer your parents, family members, bosses, colleagues, professors, and mentors. I am sure the list is long!

[Pause for cheering.]

Life will have many different stages. Your next step is just the first in your long and rewarding journey as a Baruch College graduate. Congratulations for all you have achieved today, and will in the future. I look forward to seeing all of you on campus or around the world at alumni events!

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