

Good morning everyone, and congratulations to the class of 2019!

Receiving this diploma today is not a small achievement. We had piles of homework to do and hours of classes to attend, all while dealing with everyday problems like how are we going to pay the rent and whether our car will make it through another winter. We did it!

My name is Yexis Hechavarria, and, as President Glenn said, I am a biology major. I was born in Cuba and I came to the United States in 2013, when I was 17 years old.

In my country, there was little technology, no Internet, no calculators, no email. Can you imagine getting by without Google or Wikipedia?

It may sound surprising but I am grateful for that experience. It's what helped me learn to adapt when I came to this country speaking very little English, just some colors, numbers, and "Good morning".

What I discovered as a result of the way I was brought up is that humans are capable of learning anything. There really aren't a lot of tools required, just the human brain and a book or a teacher.

I still remember my first impressions of the United States. So many things were new to me.

I flew into Miami with my mom and my brother. My father, who was in the United States first, picked us up and drove us all the way to Lawrence, because we couldn't afford to fly.

The buildings here were so high that if you looked at them from inside a car you could not see the top.

All of the cars were new, unlike the horses and cars from the 1950's on the streets of Cuba.

In Cuba, the food is rationed, and every family gets a share of rice and cooking oil that is supposed to last a month. Here I could eat cookies and chocolate bars, all the food I never had in Cuba. Yes, I did gain some weight during my first months in the United States.

The pay scale here is also very different. Both of my parents were doctors in Cuba with an education similar to American doctors, but they make a lot less, \$22 a month, sometimes not even that much.

When I arrived here, I realized that my life had drastically changed. Now that I was in a new country, I had to start from zero with a language that I couldn't speak and a new culture.

The first thing I did when I arrived in Lawrence was enroll in high school. I was a junior and I was placed in Level 1, which is the lowest English level.

In Cuban schools, everyone is competing aggressively with each other because jobs are limited and you will have to get better grades than everyone else to get the job you want.

This was my mindset when I arrived here, so it was very hard being the student in my school who knew the least.

It was a turning point for me. I told myself: "Okay Yexis, there is no going back. This is your life now. Instead of worrying about what everyone else knows why don't you just worry about learning stuff."

I focused on learning, and, guess what, in one year, I had the English skills to move to the Math, Science, and Technology High School in Lawrence and, in two years, I was taking college level English classes.

What I discovered is that when you focus on pure learning—and not a grade—magic happens.

I am a Biology major, and my goal is to go to Medical school and cure rare diseases. Many people think that I want to be a medical doctor because of my parents. Although they've influenced me, that is not the main reason I've chosen this career path. What draws me to the medical field is the miracle of life. Our bodies are so complex that it's a wonder we exist. We are made of iron and oxygen, and other chemicals that are part of the soil and nonliving things, and yet we breathe and we walk and we talk and we feel. That is the most fascinating thing to me.

What is it that excites you? Do you love to write? Is your passion caring for others? Do you get a kick out of solving a complex math problem? I hope all of you have found something that delights you as much as the complexity of the human body delights me. **When you have a passion, it gives you a reason get up in the morning, a purpose in life.**

In closing, I want to share something that I know for sure: you cannot accomplish much of anything alone. You need people to support you, and you also need those people that don't support you because they will motivate you to succeed.

I want to thank my family and all my professors, Liliana, Habib, Professor Paul, Emily, Sheila, my physics professor Mr Leaffer, Mike Cross, David and Tracy in the math center, also to Marsha and every one in my work study job **(where was the job)**; I want to also thank my boyfriend Jonathan who helped every time I could not solve a math problem, and his family who has been amazing with me.

Lastly, I want to thank my advisor Professor Sarah Courchesne. Sarah, the word thank you does not begin to cover how much I appreciate all of your help. Thanks for never failing me **(not sure what this means)**. For always replying to my emails on weekends when I was frustrated and didn't know what to do. Whenever I said Sarah you need to take a break from all of us, you will always told me I do not take breaks from my students. You've believed in me, and I hope to make you proud.

Thank you to the committee for allowing me to share my story. Thank you everyone, and now who is ready to graduate?