



Teachers College
COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

BREAKING NEW GROUND

Where True Change Begins®

May 2025

2025 BREAKING NEW GROUND: DIVERSITY & FIRST-GENERATION CELEBRATION FOR FAMILIES

Thursday, May 22, 2025 | 5:00 p.m.

Lift Every Voice and Sing

Lyrics by James Weldon Johnson

Music by J. Rosamond Johnson

Lisa Lockhart, M.A. '25, Music & Music Education*

Department of Arts & Humanities

Welcome & Student Letter

Rajashi Ghosh, Associate Professor, Adult Learning & Leadership

Department of Organization & Leadership

Remarks

Thomas Bailey, President

Teachers College, Columbia University

Remarks & Student Letter

Haeny S. Yoon, Associate Professor of

Early Childhood Education; Director, Early Childhood Programs

Department of Curriculum & Teaching

Student Speaker

Alex Roman, M.A. '25, Education Policy

Department of Education Policy & Social Analysis

Musical Interlude

My Man's Gone

Music by George Gershwin, lyrics by DuBose Heyward

Lisa Lockhart, M.A. '25, Music & Music Education

Department of Arts & Humanities

Accompanied by Denise Apodaca, Ed.D candidate,

Music and Music Education*

Department of Arts & Humanities

Remarks & Student Letter

Lori Quinn, Professor of Movement Science & Kinesiology

Director, Graduate Program in Motor Learning and Control

Department Chair, Biobehavioral Sciences

Remarks & Student Letter

Matthew Kenney Henley, Associate Professor of Dance Education

Department of Arts & Humanities

Family Roll Call & Concluding Remarks

Jonathan E. Collins, Assistant Professor

Department of Education Policy & Social Analysis; Co-Director, Politics

& Education Program; Director and Founder, School Board and Youth

Engagement Lab; Associate Director, Center for Educational Equity

Janice Robinson, Vice President for Diversity & Community Affairs

Graduates Recessional

We ask that guests remain seated until graduates have exited the auditorium.

CLASS OF 2025

LETTERS TO FAMILIES & LOVED ONES

My dearest familia and cherished friends,

Gracias a todo corazón for walking beside me on this lifelong educational journey. This degree will have my name on it, but it really needs closing movie credits to include all your names. This dream has taken years to fruition, and I could never have done it without your love, encouragement, and tacos y café.

To my mom, my first and forever music teacher, who always reminded us that educación was everything: this Doctorate of Education in Music and Music Education is for you. I carry tus enseñanzas y tu voz with me every single day.

To Ray, my life partner, thank you for standing by me, celebrating every small and big victory, and lifting my spirit through the tough times. You're better than salsa.

To my big brothers, Nick and Javi, my original school buddies. You both were my first mentors since kinder, teaching me how to thrive in school, never stop learning, and save a snack for after school.

To my soul sister, Lorraine, your boundless love and fierce loyalty taught me what it means to love with my whole heart and to always lift up community and family. We're now on to the next challenge of updating my wardrobe. Apparently, my hoodie era is over.

To my dad, who taught me to work with dignity, to be proud of my Mexican roots, and to always stand up for justice for myself and others. Este logro tambien es parte de tu legado.

To Gerti, thank you for all the comfort since the pandemic days and onward. You're forever in my heart.

And to every relative, friend, ancestor, colleague, teacher, and mentor who helped shape this path, this doctorate is just as much yours. I will pay your lessons of strength and caring forward con cariño y agradecimiento, doing my best to honor the sacrifice and love that got me here.

Desde lo más profundo de mi ser,

Ruth Aguirre, ED.d '25
Department of Arts & Humanities

Dear Mom, Dad, Sis, and Friends,

As we celebrate my graduation, I find myself reflecting not just on the papers written or the lectures attended, but on the invisible scaffolding that held me up throughout this journey—you.

I wouldn't be graduating today without you and your support.

This degree bears my name, but it is covered in your fingerprints. It belongs to you—my mom and dad who instilled in me courage and perseverance to ask critical questions, to my sister who supported me through hospital visits so I could continue forward, to my friends who understood when I had to decline invitations yet again, to my dissertation advisor who saw potential I couldn't yet recognize in myself.

The journey of graduate education is often portrayed as a solitary pursuit of knowledge, but the truth is far more beautiful—it is a collective achievement made possible by a community of love. The late-night calls when I questioned my abilities, the celebrations of small victories along the way, the quiet understanding when stress made me less than my best self—these moments reflect the depth of your commitment to my dreams.

As we transition from this season to the next, please know that the knowledge gained extends far beyond academic theories. I have learned the immeasurable value of family and community, the power of perseverance, and most importantly, the profound impact of having people in your corner who believe in you without reservation.

This achievement is ours to share. We did it!

Thank you for being the foundation upon which I could build this dream.

With deepest gratitude and love,

Jacobē Bell, Ed.D. '25
Department of Curriculum & Teaching

Dearest Family,

First and foremost, I must thank my mother. Queen, I am utterly indebted to you. I achieved this because you first told me I could. You love, spoil, nurture, empower, and protect me. You endlessly pray for me and over me.

Thank you to my father for being the smartest man I will ever know.

Psalm Nzingha, my baby, you are my heart and reason for everything.

Thank you to my family for your truth, lessons, love, bluntness, and encouragement.

Love,

Stephanie Jenn Boggs, Ed.D. '25
Department of Arts & Humanities

In the partial famous words of the great Aubrey Graham:

Started from Kingsborough now I'm here. Started from Kingsborough Community College now my whole team is freaking here.

I done kept it real from the jump. Living at work and school was getting tougher every month.

I was tryna get it on my own. But I needed my family with me, couldn't do it all alone.

My daughter is calling me like mom where you at? I said I'm getting our degree baby and I'll make it right back.

I just think it's funny how it goes, now I'm a TC grad, standing in my blue robe. And I started from Kingsborough now I'm here.

It's not enough to just say "thank you" to my family, because they have been my foundation, my North Star, and the reason I push myself to strive for more, for better, for excellence. Not only during my grad school journey, but throughout every aspect of my life. Everyday I walked through these halls at TC, I felt them with me, holding me up, saying "You got this, you can do it!"

I stand here today for all of the women in my family who came before me, who didn't have this opportunity or RIGHT to attend college, particularly this University. As a Black woman, I proudly share my degree in honor of those women, and especially, in honor of my family here with me today. Thank you!

Melody Brumfield, M.A. '25

Department of Organization & Leadership

Statistically, I'm not supposed to be here. Most research suggests that kids like me—inner-city kids—are more likely to drop out of school or end up caught in the school-to-prison pipeline. Environmentally, I'm not supposed to be here. Growing up, my living conditions were unstable. I moved constantly, transferring schools over and over because I spent a significant part of my teenage years homeless.

My parents were low-income, and both had only middle school educations—because that's what life allowed. But my mother taught me something more potent than any school ever could: grit, resilience, and self-belief. She wasn't the best with words, but her actions were powerful. When life got hard, she showed me how to push back with grace, stand tall with confidence, and find joy even in chaos. She taught me that there's always beauty in the mess, and that family is always there to lift one another up. She instilled in me pride—pride in myself, in my culture, and in what we can overcome. Even with her limited resources, she found creative ways to provide for and support us. She always showed up, doing her best, and that was more than enough. Though she rests in peace, I will always honor her memory. I am endlessly grateful that she never gave up on me.

I never imagined attending, let alone applying to, an Ivy League school. No one in my family had ever achieved or discussed it. But as fate would have it, I ended up working at Columbia University and was blessed with the opportunity for tuition exemption. Otherwise, a goal like this would have remained out of reach. But here I am: a first-generation graduate, the first of thirteen children. It became my mission to lead the way—to be an example for others like me. It was equally important to convey my message that you belong and are worthy. Today, we celebrate this significant achievement earned through sweat, blood, and tears. Congratulations to us!

I also want to express my deepest gratitude to my husband, my rock and strength throughout this journey. You've been my life partner, and I truly could not have done this without you. As a working mom juggling countless roles, your support has enabled me to flourish as a woman, mother, and wife. I'm endlessly grateful for our partnership and our friendship.

To my in-laws, thank you for embracing me as a daughter. Your love, support, guidance, and encouragement have meant the world to me. To my sister-in law Liz and my sister Gigi, thank you for always being there for me when I needed you most. And to my beautiful babies, Isabella and George—thank you for showing me what unconditional love feels like. You've truly been my miracle babies, teaching me what I am capable of. Even when the days are exhausting, your smiles melt the stress away and fill my heart with joy. Thank you for choosing me to be your mom. I feel like the luckiest person in the world.

I love you, and we did it!

Janeica Davis, M.A. '25

Department of Counseling & Clinical Psychology

Greetings Family,

When I began this journey at Columbia University, I was 28 — a first-generation college graduate who first stepped into higher education at the historic Lincoln University, the first degree-granting HBCU. I came to Columbia not just to earn a degree, but to expand my impact, deepen my calling, and walk boldly into rooms my ancestors could only dream of. I arrived with purpose, vision, and a guiding scripture that sustained me through every challenge:

“Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not put us to shame...”

— Romans 5:3–5 (NIV)

This moment is not just about crossing a stage — it's about carrying a legacy. I carry the name of my grandfather, Mr. James, who instilled in me the value of education, discipline, and faith. I carry the dreams of my family — the good, the bad, and the indifferent — because all of it shaped me. And I carry the power of every ancestor who survived, sacrificed, and sowed seeds so I could soar.

Along the way, I've outgrown people, roles, and expectations. But I've also gained something far greater: self-awareness, spiritual clarity, alignment, and a chosen family who showed up exactly when I needed them. Columbia sharpened my leadership, but more than anything, it strengthened my spirit. I leave here not just with credentials, but with confirmation — that I am called to lead, to serve, and to leave a legacy of transformation.

To my chosen family — thank you for showing up with love, wisdom, and unwavering belief. Your presence reminded me that when you're walking in purpose, the right people find you.

This degree is for every first-gen scholar, every young Black girl who dares to dream big, every immigrant child navigating identity, and every student I've taught who needs to know: your beginning does not determine your brilliance.

As I stand on the precipice of graduation, a new scripture rises in my heart — a reminder that this moment was already written:

“‘For I know the plans I have for you,’ declares the Lord, ‘plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.’”

— Jeremiah 29:11 (NIV)

Thank you, SPA, Thank you, Teachers College.

With purpose, ambition, and so much gratitude,

Shereka Ellington, M.Ed. '25

Department of Organization & Leadership

Mom and Dad,

Where do I even begin? All of your hard work has led me to this moment, and I am forever grateful for all of the sacrifices you made that allowed me to flourish throughout my life. I always knew I wanted to do big things—and it was your unwavering belief in me that made this possible. The first in our family to get a Bachelor's and now here we are with my Master's degree awarded next. I have worked hard to make you proud, but I've also worked hard to make myself proud, as you always pushed me to be my best and to chase my dreams. Even when a global pandemic dampened my spirit and led me to doubt myself and my dreams, you believed in me and never stopped believing in my potential. It is because of you that I now stand here, a graduate of two Ivy League institutions. Even when I couldn't see my worth, you were there to remind me that I can do anything I want and more as long as I dedicate myself to my passions. Your work ethic and your love for our family have been an inspiration for me in everything I do. Mom, thank you for choosing to love me as the "hijita de tu corazón". I am so blessed to be able to call you my mom and I am truly inspired by you every day. Dad, thank you for always making our family your top priority and working hard for us—I have learned so much from the example you set. Thank you both for all of your support and encouragement over the years. I know I never could have made it this far without you, and I thank God every day for bringing our family together. Despite all of life's obstacles, you have remained steadfast. And I stand here today because of you. I can't wait to see what the future holds and I am so blessed to have you both with me even when uncertainty hits. Thank you, thank you, thank you. I can never say it enough. I love you both so much.

With love and gratitude,

Isis Encinas, M.A. '25

Department of Counseling & Clinical Psychology

To my parents, Mr. David Cook and Dr. Kathy R. Farley-Cook, thank you for a lifetime of unwavering love and support. My success at Teachers College, Columbia University throughout my matriculation as a Master's and doctoral student is a direct result of your hard work and sacrifice. I love you both! To my sister, Ms. Jada S. Farley-Cook, thank you for being the best sister that I could have ever asked for and a source of inspiration along this journey! I love you!

Ivorie Farley-Cook, Ed.D. '25

Department of Health Studies & Applied Educational Psychology

Dear Family, Friends, and Fellow Dreamers,

Tonight is not just a celebration of degrees—tonight is a celebration of becoming.

My journey began when I was just 16, full of dreams but faced with a choice. I pressed pause on my own ambitions to raise three beautiful children as a single mother. I traded in textbooks for lunchboxes, lectures for late-night lullabies, and each year I whispered the same promise to myself: "One day."

Decades passed. Life unfolded in all its complexity—joy and struggle, sacrifice and small victories. Then one day finally arrived. With gray in my hair, courage in my heart, and yes, an AARP card in my wallet, I walked across the stage as the first in my family to earn a doctorate—from the world's leading school of education.

People ask if it was worth it—this late start, this uphill climb. And my answer is simple: Absolutely. Because learning didn't just give me a credential—it gave me back a part of myself. It reignited my purpose, expanded my voice, and proved that curiosity has no expiration date.

To my children—Arvin, Andrei, and Tinay—you are the reason I paused, and the reason I found the strength to begin again. Every step I took was for you, and because of you.

To my family: Leni, Nick (+), nieces and nephews—you are the roots I held on to. Your love carried me when I was weary, and you gave me a reason to dream bigger. Every milestone I chased was a gift I offered to you.

And to you, Andrew—thank you for being my calm through the storm. For enduring my stressed-out rants, listening to my long-winded stories, and reading paper after paper filled with academic theories I'm sure you never signed up for. You never had to understand it all; you just had to believe in me. And you did.

To my dear friends—Leslie M., Philip T., Susan S., Mel, Kaori, and Nel—thank you for being my chorus of encouragement. When I faltered, you lifted me. When I doubted, you reminded me: I could do this. And I did.

This degree is not an ending—it's a beginning. I carry it forward as a mentor, an advocate, and soon, the founder of an entrepreneurship education program in rural communities back home. Because no dream should be out of reach for lack of opportunity.

Let this moment stand as a love letter to resilience. A testament to late bloomers, second chances, and the power of daring again. Age, accent, and circumstance are not barriers unless we accept them as such.

With enduring hope, fresh initials, and a blueprint for change,

Vivian Faustino-Pulliam, Ed.D. '25

First-Generation Graduate

Department of Organization & Leadership

Mãe e Tia Má,

Nós nunca imaginaríamos que estaríamos aqui em Nova York juntas, e que, entre tantos bons motivos, seria para a minha graduação de mestrado em uma das universidades mais prestigiadas do país. Esse feito eu não teria alcançado sem vocês, que desde sempre me incentivaram e me apoiaram — mesmo quando tomei a decisão de ir morar em outro continente. Mudar para os Estados Unidos sozinha, e durante a pandemia, foi desafiador, mas a resiliência que desenvolvi veio de vocês.

Esses últimos cinco anos não foram fáceis para a nossa família. Tivemos perdas significativas, e em muitas delas eu não pude estar ao lado de vocês — o que me doeu muito. Em vários momentos durante o meu mestrado, lembrei muito da vó e do tio Cuca, e de como eles também estariam orgulhosos e felizes por mim.

Muitas memórias surgiram na minha cabeça: cada momento que me trouxe até aqui, cada pessoa que conheci, cada lugar que visitei — e eu sempre chego até vocês, minhas raízes.

Agradeço a vocês, aos nossos ancestrais, aos nossos familiares que não puderam estar aqui fisicamente, por terem sido um suporte não só durante esses dois anos de mestrado, mas durante toda a minha vida.

Eu amo vocês.

Este poema que escrevi reflete a influência e a importância de vocês na minha vida — e de onde eu venho.

Sou fruto de um sol brilhante,
de uma casa cheia de cachorros e do oceano.
Sou fruto de latidos e da voz da minha mãe me chamando pra casa.
Sou fruto do abraços da minha mãe.
Sou fruto do pão fresco com manteiga derretida pela manhã.
Sou fruto das tardes de verão com tempestades.
Sou fruto da força do oceano e do céu azul sem fim.
Sou fruto da gentileza, da independência e da selvageria,
das mulheres que me ensinaram que tudo é possível.

Mom and Aunt Má,

We never could've imagined that we'd be here together in New York — and that, among so many beautiful reasons, it would be to celebrate my graduation from a master's program at one of the most prestigious universities in the country. I wouldn't have achieved this without you. From the very beginning, you've supported and encouraged me, even when I made the bold decision to move to another continent.

Moving to the U.S. alone, during a pandemic, was not easy. But the resilience I needed to face it came from you.

These past five years haven't been easy for our family. We've experienced significant losses, and in many of those moments, I wasn't able to be there with you — something that hurt me deeply. During my master's, I often thought of Grandma and Uncle Cuca and how proud and joyful they would be to see me reach this milestone.

So many memories came rushing back, of every step that brought me here, the people I met, and the places I visited; and somehow, they always led me back to you, my roots.

I thank you, our ancestors, and all of our loved ones who couldn't be here physically, for being my foundation, not just throughout these two years of graduate school, but throughout my whole life.

I love you both deeply.

This poem I wrote is a reflection of your influence and the role you've played in my life, and of where I come from.

I was raised by the bright sun, a house filled with dogs, and the ocean
I was raised by barks and my mom calling me to get back inside
I was raised by my mom's hugs
I was raised by fresh bread and melting butter in the morning
I was raised by thundery summer afternoons,
The strength of the ocean and the endless blue of the sky
I was raised by kindness, independence, and wildness
By women who taught me that everything is possible

Katie Garcia, M.A. '25

Department of Counseling & Clinical Psychology

Dear Mom and Dad,

Thank you so much for always supporting me in everything I do. I would absolutely not be where I am today without your endless love and devotion. From working overtime to be able to pay for violin and violin lessons when I wanted to take up music, to supporting me with moving across the country to pursue a college degree and career in music education. You do so much everyday to be able to support my success, and I appreciate everything you have done to help me reach my dreams. I am so proud to be able to share this day with you.

Love,

Viviana Garcia, M.Ed. '25

Department of Arts & Humanities

Kristy, I am so grateful that God blessed me with you as my wife. You are my love, my best friend, my spiritual partner—the one who walks beside me in every step of this journey. Words will always fall short of expressing what you mean to me and how deeply I value the strength, encouragement, and unwavering support you pour into me. There's no one I would rather share this journey with than you, my love. Whatever I accomplish, including this moment, is not mine alone—it is ours. This degree, this milestone, this victory... we did this, together.

Mom, you have been the light, the rock, the guiding example that God knew I needed as my mother. You have always stood by me, even when you didn't fully understand some of the choices I made in my youth. Through every stage of my journey, you pushed me to think for myself, take responsibility for my mistakes, and reach beyond the limits others tried to place on me. I am forever grateful for the countless sacrifices you made—for the ways you poured yourself out so that I could have more, dream bigger, and walk boldly into my calling. You have been, and continue to be, a powerful example of what it means to faithfully walk the path God uniquely set before you. Thank you, Mom, for everything.

Eric Garvanne, M.A. '25

Department of Counseling & Clinical Psychology

Dear Mamá,

As I stand at the threshold of completing my graduate studies at Teachers College, Columbia University, I find myself reflecting on the extraordinary journey that brought me here—a journey that began with you.

When you arrived in this country as a teenager, you carried with you not just hopes and dreams, but the courage to build a life in a place where even the language was foreign to you. Without guidance, without support systems, you persevered. And when I came into this world, you shouldered the immense responsibility of raising me alone, working tirelessly in jobs that demanded everything and offered little in return.

Do you remember those days when we moved from apartment to apartment, those nights when you returned exhausted from work, but still found energy to embrace me? I do. I remember watching you struggle with English, with finding stable work, with navigating systems that weren't built to welcome you. In those moments, you taught me my first and most important lesson: resilience.

By fourteen, I was working alongside you, determined to ease your burden even in small ways. Those early jobs weren't just about earning money; they were my first steps toward understanding responsibility and purpose. When other children were playing, I was learning how systems work, how to navigate challenges, and most importantly, how to persevere despite circumstances that might have defeated others.

The military became my path forward—a decision that required sacrifices you understood all too well. Those years of service gave me discipline and structure, but they were built on the foundation of strength you had already instilled in me. Every challenge I overcame in uniform, I overcame because of the resilience I learned from you.

Today, as I complete my graduate studies, I want you to know that this achievement is not mine alone—it is ours. As a Dominican boy raised in poverty by a single immigrant mother, statistics suggested I wouldn't be standing here. But statistics don't account for a mother's determination or a child's resolve to honor her sacrifices.

The academic knowledge I've gained at TC is valuable, but it pales in comparison to what you've taught me: grit in the face of adversity, dignity despite hardship, and compassion born from struggle. These qualities—not my degrees or credentials—are what truly define my success.

My education has never been just for me. It has always been about creating ripples that extend beyond us—to help other immigrant families, other single mothers, other children growing up too quickly. I want to build support systems for students like me and mothers like you, to create the educational equity that would have made your journey less arduous.

Mamá, when they call my name at graduation, I want you to know that they are calling your name too. This achievement belongs to both of us—to your courage in coming to this country, to your persistence in the face of poverty, to your unwavering belief that education could transform my life.

Te quiero con todo mi corazón. This milestone isn't an end but a beginning—of the work I'll do to honor your sacrifices by creating change for others walking paths similar to ours.

With eternal gratitude and love, Your son

Anthony Guzman, M.A. '25
Department of Arts & Humanities

Thank you to my family and friends for the continued support throughout my time at TC for my graduate studies. I could not have finished this journey without all your emotional and practical support along the way!!

Chaeri Han, M.Ed. '25
Department of Counseling & Clinical Psychology

As a first-generation student, graduating with my master's degree in Social-Organizational Psychology is one of the most meaningful accomplishments of my life—and I'm proud to be walking in the May 2025 Commencement ceremony.

This moment is the result of years of hard work, resilience, and an unwavering commitment to building a better future for myself and my family. I've poured my energy into this journey, balancing many responsibilities along the way, and knowing that my loved ones will be there to witness this achievement makes it even more special.

Their support has meant everything to me. Being able to celebrate this milestone with them is not just a personal victory—it's a shared one. I hope this day serves as a reminder that with determination and love, anything is possible.

Thank you for being part of this unforgettable moment.

Jennifer Hurtado, M.A. '25
Department of Organization & Leadership

亲爱的爸爸妈妈、爷爷奶奶：

当我站在硕士研究生毕业的终点，回望这一路的旅程，感谢你们一直以来对我的支持。

从我十五岁那年一个人出国读书，你们就给了我莫大的信任和勇气。虽然你们不熟悉国外的教育体系，也没有相关的资源和人脉，但你们选择相信我可以独立面对一切。正是这种信任，让我拥有了探索世界的机会，也塑造了我的性格。

我很清楚，和很多人相比，我是幸运的。我从来不用担心吃穿和温饱，也不需要为了基本生活而焦虑。在生活上，你们始终是我坚实的后盾。你们不曾告诉我该怎么走这条学术的路，但你们用行动教会了我责任、勤劳、和踏实。

这份来自家庭的支持，是我能够一路走到今天的根本。我将带着这份爱和力量，继续走下去，走进博士阶段，学习更多我热爱的心理咨询，尽我所能去帮助别人，也走向更宽广的人生。

谢谢你们，我爱你们。

你们的孩子
季诗旖

最后，我想对我亲爱的弟弟 Daniel 说几句话：

姐姐知道你也不容易，从小在全英文的国际学校学习，要自己花很多力气去理解课程、适应环境。爸爸妈妈在这方面帮不上太多，因为他们也不太懂英文。

你正在经历的，可能在课业难度上比很多公立学校的学生轻松一些，但在学业和社交上，你比自己身边的同龄人更辛苦。

你现在付出的努力，将来都会成为你宝贵的人生财富。

慢慢去理解学校的规则、社会的规则，学习如何成为一个有责任感、有判断力的人。即使有时会感到孤单，也不要轻易放弃。一个人的出身、种族、长相或智力都不是决定命运的关键，真正重要的是有没有一颗愿意努力、愿意思考的心。希望你能常常反思自己做了什么，哪里做得好，哪里还可以改进，勇敢地思考、尝试、成长。

你一直是姐姐的骄傲，我也会永远支持你。

Suzy Ji, M.A. '25
Department of Counseling & Clinical Psychology

I just want to say thank you to my parents for their hard work and sacrifice to enable me to pursue my dreams. To escape the Khmer Rouge and arrive in the United States with an elementary education and \$100 in your pocket, you both are the symbol of what America is all about. Without your love and support, I would not be where I am today. I love you.

And to the love of my life, Brent- thank you for always supporting me when I needed it the most. I love you!

Love,
(Doctor) **Nancy Kuy, Ed.D. '25**
Department of Health Studies & Applied Educational Psychology

I am very proud to be the third member of my family to graduate from TC! My father, Dr. James H. Lockhart, III received his Doctoral degree in Educational Management here and my sister, Angela Lockhart Fisher, received her TC Masters degree in Independent School Arts in the spring of 2023. Their unwavering support, along with that of my amazing mother, the late Esther Lockhart (also an educator) and my loving and steadfast husband, Dirk Gavin McCoy have encouraged me to relentlessly pursue my dreams and passions and have inspired me to share my love of music with my audiences and students. Thank you also to all of my brilliant TC professors; especially Dr. Goffi-Fynn, Dr. Coles, Dr. Allsup, Dr. Baxter, Dr. Thompson and Professors Apodaca and Lomelli. You have all been instrumental in the expansion of my knowledge and ways of thinking, as well as my motivation to continue on with my lifelong learning.

Lisa Lockhart-McCoy, M.A. '25
Department of Arts & Humanities

Dear Daddy, Ma, Sis, and Buddy:

As I close this chapter, I feel overwhelmed with gratitude - for the sacrifices, the strength, and the love that carried me here. This moment is not mine alone. It belongs to all of us.

You made the brave choice to leave behind everything you knew—your culture, your people, and your home—in pursuit of a better life. As I was spared the thorns of a foreign land, you faced them bare. You found your way through a world that wasn't always kind, all while carrying the weight of my hopes and dreams. You took the difficult path so I could move forward without fear. Every step I take is possible because of the ones you took first.

This moment is more than a personal achievement—it's a tribute to our family's journey: a 2,700-mile journey from the humble roots of a small rural village in Guyana to the bright lights of New York City.

This honor is not mine alone – it belongs to all of us. It stands on your shoulders, built from the ground up through your sacrifices, love, and belief in something bigger. Thank you for believing in me, for creating opportunities you never had, and for showing me what it truly means to be a Mahabir ~ “mighty warrior”.

With all my heart,
Celine Devani Mahabir, M.A. '25
Department of Mathematics, Science & Technology

¡LO LOGRAMOS!

Lo logramos por nosotros, por quienes vinieron antes que nosotros y por quienes vendrán después.

Hoy, al alcanzar una meta que antes parecía tan lejana, siento una inmensa alegría. Me llena de orgullo, pero sobre todo, de profunda gratitud, amor y humildad. Este momento y este doctorado son un logro colectivo. Está construido con los sacrificios, los sueños y el amor incondicional que ustedes dos han derramado en mí.

Mamá, desde el principio, tú has sido mi mayor maestra. Me enseñaste lo que significa caminar por este mundo con fortaleza y ternura, con esperanza incluso cuando el camino fue difícil. Tu amor ha sido el latido constante bajo cada paso que he dado. Cuando dudaba de mí misma, tú creías. Cuando me sentía cansada, tú me recordabas quién soy y de dónde vengo. Este logro es tanto tuyo como es mío — es el reflejo de tu amor feroz, tu aliento incansable y los sueños que nuestros antepasados alguna vez imaginaron.

Ivan, cuando apenas susurré la idea de aplicar a un doctorado, tú nunca dudaste si yo podría lograrlo — solo

preguntaste: “¿Cómo puedo apoyarte?” Y así lo hiciste — en todas las formas posibles. En las noches sin dormir, en los borradores interminables, en medio del hermoso caos de convertirnos en padres, estuviste a mi lado, a menudo cargando más de lo que te tocaba para que yo pudiera seguir adelante. Tu fe en mí me dio el valor de seguir creyendo en mí misma. Tu amor hizo espacio para que este sueño pudiera crecer.

En este momento, no estoy sola. Estoy rodeada por las manos invisibles de quienes vinieron antes de mí, por el apoyo incondicional de quienes me aman, y por el futuro brillante y lleno de esperanza que estamos construyendo todos juntos.

Este doctorado no es una meta final — es una promesa. Una promesa de honrar todo lo que ustedes me han dado, y todo lo que nuestros ancestros soñaron. Una promesa de ser el reflejo de todo el amor, la esperanza y la resiliencia que me trajeron hasta aquí.

Gracias por ser mi corazón, mi fuerza y mi hogar. Los amo más de lo que las palabras pueden expresar.

Con todo mi amor,

Karina Malik, Ed.D. '25
Department of Curriculum & Teaching

To my family,

Today, as I celebrate this milestone, I carry with me the love, sacrifices and strength of the generations before me. I am especially thinking of the family photo taken the day my sister was born — a moment full of hope that continues to guide me.

To my mom: your resilience after Dad’s passing, when I was young, has and continues to teach me what it means to push forward when the road is anything but easy. Your strength, quiet sacrifices and endless encouragement have been the foundation of this very achievement.

To my family: our roots in Central America and the Caribbean are a source of endless pride for me. I am honored to be a first-generation scholar, a first-generation Master’s student, and a first-generation Ivy League graduate because of the paths you paved. I know the world we live in today often presents challenges for families that look like ours. But in those tough moments, I am reminded of how strong we are. From humble beginnings, you persevered — and every small step forward made it possible for me to move our story ahead, tenfold.

Finally, I pause today to recognize the part of me that stayed curious, that pushed through the emotional, physical and societal barriers, and for continuing to choose learning, even when it felt impossible. It is easy to celebrate the outcome, but today, I celebrate the journey. Every moment of doubt, resilience and growth that brought me here.

With profound love, your daughter, sister, niece, granddaughter, great-granddaughter, god-daughter, graduate,

Eileen Méndez, M.A. '25
Department of Mathematics, Science & Technology

Dear Mom,

As I ascend from this wonderful part of my life's journey, my heart is full of gratitude, and I know I could not have arrived at this moment without you.

From the very beginning, you have been my foundation. You gave me the courage to dream boldly, the strength to persevere, and the faith to rise when life tested me. You raised me to believe in the power of education, not just as a means to an end, but as a responsibility—a tool to use for the betterment of myself and for others.

Being a first-generation graduate student hasn't been easy. There were moments I felt overwhelmed, moments I wanted to quit, and moments I doubted whether I was truly meant to be here. But your voice, your prayers, your resilience, and your love stayed with me every step of the way. I thought of you often—your sacrifices, your long days and sleepless nights as a young single mom, your unwavering belief in me—and I kept going.

You taught me how to lead with heart, how to show up with humility and strength, and how to carry the weight of being “the first” with dignity and grace. I share this achievement with you. Every moment you kept the kids, every class, every paper, every late night and early morning—it was never just for me. It was for the little girl you raised to believe she could, and for my children Aja, Avani, and Ayari, and every other child who needs to see what's possible.

Thank you for being my reason. Thank you for giving me wings and for being the wind beneath my wings.

With all my love and deepest gratitude,

Shanifa Morris, M.Ed. '25

Department of Organization & Leadership

Hi Mumma and Baba,

I wish you could be here in person for my graduation. I'll miss you terribly as I walk across the stage, but I'll be carrying you with me every step of the way. Thank you for all your support from across the oceans and for always believing in me. I can't wait to celebrate with you soon <3

Love,

Iman Nandy, M.A. '25

Department of Counseling & Clinical Psychology

Dear Mom, Dad, Jennifer, and Moa,

Today, as I have graduated with my Master's from Teachers College, Columbia University, I want to express how deeply grateful I am to all of you. Being a first-generation student, moving across the world to attend TC, and to proudly represent Sweden and Japan feels incredible, but I know I didn't get here alone. Mom, Dad, Jennifer, and Moa, this achievement belongs to all of us. Your love and sacrifice have been my foundation, guiding me at every step when I had no example to follow. From the bottom of my heart, thank you for believing in me.

I still remember when I first joined the swim team and was one of the slowest swimmers in the pool. I was so discouraged, but Dad, you saw how much I cared and wanted to become the best. Every single day that summer, you woke up early to drive us to the pool, and you swam laps by my side, gently pushing me to improve each practice. Mom, after each exhausting practice, you lifted my spirits in your own special way by having my favorite homemade Japanese meals waiting for us at home. Your delicious gyoza (dumplings) and tonkatsu were more than just food; they were comfort and encouragement that refueled me for the next day. Thanks to that summer of hard work and your unwavering support, I improved my times and discovered what dedication and love can achieve. By the end of that summer, I wasn't the slowest anymore, and I had found a new confidence in myself. The two of you never missed a single meet or even a regular practice. I could always spot you both in the stands ready to record each race with the camera, Dad cheering "Ja, Niklas!" (Go Niklas in Swedish) and Mom shouting "頑張れ、ニッケ!" (ganbare Nicke! – do your best Nickel). Every lap I swam, I swam with the strength of both of you beside me.

Another vivid memory that shaped me is attending Japanese school on Saturdays. While other kids enjoyed their cartoons or playtime, I spent those weekends in a classroom, struggling to learn kanji and Japanese literature. It was so hard that many times I ended up in tears over the homework. I remember crying at the kitchen table, frustrated and exhausted, feeling like I would never get it right. But Mom, you were always right there by my side late into the night, patiently helping me finish every assignment. Even when I wanted to quit, you never gave up on me, you would always be there and we would get through it together. Going to Japanese school and Swedish school at the same time while practicing several times per week turned out to be some of the toughest moments of my childhood, but they also transformed my despair into resilience. Over time, with your support, I realized that I could overcome challenges that seemed impossible at first. And knowing that my little sisters, Jennifer and Moa, were watching their big brother work through difficulties made me even more determined to keep going. I wanted to be a good example for both of you, to show you that if I can push through, you can too. In the end, that experience of struggling and persevering became a strength I carried with me into high school, college, and now into my Master's, consistently reminding me to never give up when things get hard.

As a first-generation student, I often felt like I was venturing into unknown territory without a map. Neither of you had gone to college, let alone lived in the U.S. or navigated things like applications or student visas, so there was no family roadmap for me to follow. But whenever I felt lost or overwhelmed, your belief in me became my guide. I still remember when I decided to move across the ocean to the U.S. for college: it was a huge leap into the unknown for all of us, yet you both supported my decision wholeheartedly. You gave me the courage to leave home and chase my dream, even though it meant your eldest son would be an ocean away. This encouragement also became evident in Jennifer and Moa's decisions to move abroad.

For all these reasons and so many more, I am deeply grateful to you, Mom and Dad. You have sacrificed so much and given so much of yourselves so that I could stand here today. That little boy who once struggled in the pool and at the kitchen table is now receiving his Master's degree and about to begin new chapter in my journey for a Ph.D. in Clinical Psychology. I am proud of this achievement, but I am even prouder to be your son, because without your sacrifices and support, none of this would have been possible. Thank you for every late night, every early morning, every cheer, and every hug along the way.

As we celebrate this accomplishment, I know that our family's story is part of a bigger picture. Mom and Dad, your sacrifices have laid the foundation for everything I have achieved; you haven't just changed my life, but

everyone coming after. And someday, when your future grandchildren look at what is possible for them, they will know it was built on the love and work you poured into us. We turned challenges into triumphs together, and that legacy will inspire our family for generations to come. I love you all so much, now and always.

With love and big hugs, med kärlek och stora kramar, いつもありがとう,

Your dear son,

Niklas Kei Nyblom, M.A. '25
Department of Counseling & Clinical Psychology

Dear Family,

It's often said that it takes a village to raise a child, but I'd like to add that it also takes a village to make it through graduate school.

SPA was not made for the weak! I couldn't have completed this journey without each and every one of you. Knowing my child was safe and loved, feeling your prayers, receiving your kind thoughts, venting to you when things got hard, sharing my lofty ideas, and benefiting from your feedback and resources — this support is what carried me through.

Mommy, Daddy, and Nay Nay, thank you for caring for my tornado of a child for six weeks each summer. Thank you for loving him, for filling his days with joy, for making sure he called me every night, and for keeping him well-fed and well-loved.

Mommy, your daily inspirational text messages kept me going. Thank you for being a steady light.

Nay Nay, thank you for listening so lovingly and grounding me when I was on the verge of burnout. Your support, encouragement, and patience meant everything. Thank you for the extra help, emotional, logistical, and financial, when I needed it most.

To the smallest member of my village, my greatest support: Azarias. You remind me of Gideon, a mighty warrior from the smallest and weakest tribe. Together, we ventured into the uncharted territory of graduate school. You were right by my side every step of the way.

You fell asleep on my lap during long nights fueled by coffee and adrenaline. You offered hugs and kisses when I was grieving but still had work to do. You endured my grumpiness on sleep-deprived mornings and always managed to be the best part of my day. For all of this, I am eternally grateful.

This degree is not just mine. It's ours. Mommy, I already know you're going to make Daddy hang it up at your house "just to keep it safe." But honestly, since you helped me earn it, I guess it's only right it takes up permanent residence.

With love,

NaTazah O'Neil, M.Ed. '25
Department of Organization & Leadership

To my family:

Thank you for your support.

Akniyet Ozat, M.A. '25

Department of International & Transcultural Studies

This letter is first and foremost dedicated to my mother.

Because of your unconditional love, you've instilled so much in me — but most importantly, how to use my vulnerability as a superpower, showcasing that my voice not only matters — but deserves to be heard.

You are my rock, my best friend, my fiercest protector, & the one who taught me that tenderness is strength. Every word on these pages carries your legacy.

To my late grandparents, Eddie & Mattie Phelps — for being the epitome & true pillars of radical love in my life. Your wisdom walks with me. Your prayers hold me. This work is for you.

To my sister Deja — Thank you for your constant encouragement, your quiet strength, & the light you bring into every room. Your belief in me kept and still keeps me going.

To Taiyo Na — my brother & one of my greatest inspirations. Meeting you in the midst of this journey will forever remain one of the deepest blessings I've received. I cannot thank you enough for your unwavering support, presence, & belief in me — especially during the moments I almost gave up. Through your friendship and your brotherly love, I have found the strength to persevere, & the healing I never knew I needed.

To those who have been silenced — those whose voices were taken, dimmed, or buried beneath fear & forgetting — may this work be a testament to your truth. To know love that sees you fully, that asks nothing in return but your presence, is a rare & sacred thing.

The ones named above have given me that love — they have seen me in both my brokenness and my wholeness, in my grief, in my fire, in my becoming — & still, they choose to love me.

To God—thank you for gifting me with my voice and teaching me the power of the pen, a sacred tool for truth, healing, & liberation.

For that, I will never stop writing.

Darius Phelps, Ph.D. '25

Department of Arts & Humanities

Ma, I came to this university with only one mission: to be you. Though you only graduated from primary school, you worked hard so I can have my education degree. I, by your strength and determination you gave me, have determined to pass the ballot to educate children who can't go to school like you, to be able pursue education, so there will be more mothers, and even fathers, as strong and as determined as you.

Alphani Putri, M.A. '25

Department of International & Transcultural Studies

As I reflect on this experience of pursuing a M.A. in Sociology and Education, all I can hear is "It takes a village". My village has been a community of family, friends, professors, colleagues, and more that have poured into me along the way. As a South Bronx native, raised in a single-parent multi-generational home, I remind myself how blessed I am to be so loved, that this degree is not just for me, but for that village that stands behind me. This journey has been far from easy. Juggling full-time work, part-time school, and life's many trials and tribulations takes its toll, but nonetheless the experience has been rewarding. I graduate from Teachers College not just with a degree, but also lifelong friends to continue the journey with. Although this chapter is ending, my village continues to grow. I can't thank you all enough for the endless support, the consistent check-ins, the reminders that "You got this" when I felt like throwing in the towel. Words can't begin to express the level of gratitude I have for you all. I want to give a special thanks to my mother, Sandra Massey, for being a constant motivating force and reminding me to always let my light shine. Thank you, mom, for believing in me and nurturing my love for education. You've been an exemplary role model. Thank you to my grandmother, Janie Barber, who's no longer with us, but lives inside of me. I hope I made you proud. To my village, WE did it y'all!

Kiki Ramos, M.A. '25

Department of Education Policy & Social Analysis

To My Family,

As I reach this milestone, I want to take a moment to say thank you. Not just for your support, but for the ways you have helped carry me here.

Graduate school was never just about earning a degree. For me, it was about reclaiming space, challenging systems, and pushing toward a life that could hold both truth and transformation. That kind of journey is never easy, and it's certainly never solitary. You stood beside me through every late night, every difficult choice, every season when I felt stretched impossibly thin juggling all of my responsibilities.

Your love -- steady, patient, and present -- has created a foundation I will always return to. You remind me of who I am when I feel overwhelmed by who I am trying to become. You never ask me to be smaller, even if you feel hesitant about my plans or decisions. You hold space for the full version of me: mother, student, partner, dreamer, doer.

There are always days when the weight of this work feels too heavy to carry. But knowing you are behind me, cheering me on, is a kind of strength I can't fully put into words. This degree may have my name on it, but it holds the fingerprints of everyone who encourages me to keep going when it would be easier to stop.

Thank you for believing in the path I continue to choose. Thank you for believing in me. I hope I continue to make you as proud as I am to be part of this family.

With all my love and gratitude,

Charissa Ratliff-D'Addario, M.A. '25

Department of Education Policy & Social Analysis

For the past 20 years I've wanted to pursue a master's degree. My curiosity and dedication to learning has been an attribute that has carried me through life feeling like a guiding light to self-discovery and a world outside of my own habits of mind. Although the barriers of entry to higher education have seemed impossible to get through, somehow a path was made for me. For that path, I'm grateful for every word of encouragement, prayer, financial contribution, and sacrifice made by my family and friends to help get me to this point. I vow today to ensure that I use my knowledge to give back to my community and loved ones. This degree is dedicated to my Nana who was my biggest example of love and radical empathy. I promised you I would always do my best in school and even though you aren't physically with me, that promise is something I still uphold til this day. Thank you

Arielle Robinson, M.A. '25

Department of Organization & Leadership

To those that make life worth living,

Querida Familia Sánchez y Familia Madrigal: I want to first and foremost say thank you for never doubting my educational pursuits. Any degree I have ever wished to pursue, you've believed that I can achieve. I will always be appreciative that you instilled that education be at the forefront of your aspirations for my life. I know that I will have your support and unwavering belief in my ability to pursue greater knowledge. I don't have to worry about whether those in my life believe I can achieve my goals and that is a relief that I do not take for granted. Thank you for always showing me love and patience as I balanced my social life, home life, professional life, and academic life all at once and in my own way. Thanks for allowing my educational journey to be my own. To my Dad and Maria: thank you for never doubting my ability to grow and for reminding me to always try my best and that that was good enough. To my sister Izzy: thank you for letting me be your big sister and for letting me be a part of your world. Your sisterhood means so much to me. To my sister Jessica and the Lyman family: thank you for being a key part of my New York experience. Getting to bond over one of my favorite cities with you was such a highlight of my time here. To my Tio Wilson and Tia Margarita, thank you for not only being my godparents but also being another set of parents to me and for showing me what love looks like, both outwardly and behind the scenes. To my tias, tios, and cousins: thank you for being a part of my village and for always asking me about how my program was going and for the check-ins that show me that you care. They don't go unnoticed. To the next generation of the Sánchez and Madrigal clans: know that I love you unconditionally and I'm so thankful to see you share the same love of learning I have and I hope to encourage that for the rest of your lives. To my whole family: Whatever path life takes me next, I know you'll be along for the ride.

To my friends: Thank you for keeping my sanity intact. To my best friends: thank you for allowing me to be the best and not-so-best version of myself with you. I love y'all more than I can ever fully say but overall thank you for each showing me that I don't want to do life without you. I am so blessed to have you. To the New York peeps: thank you for making this city worth coming back to. I was deadset on leaving but you helped me build a life here that I'm not done with yet. Thank you for reminding me there's life outside of work and school. Finally, thank you to everyone in my life who remind me that platonic love exists every day and I have it all around me.

I dedicate this degree to my mom. She never got to see the late nights, research papers, collaborative projects, or new adventures I participated in as a part of this program. She won't get to see me walk across the stage or know that her daughter completed her master's degree. She won't see my next academic pursuit, whatever that may be. She never saw me take a class over zoom or hear about my weekly hour-long commute from Brooklyn. She never got to be a part of my TC experience yet she was and is the driving force behind everything I do. She comes out in every paper I write and every presentation I do. She was right there with me at every step, pushing me through. I hope that every accomplishment I ever complete that you know I do it for you, just like you lived your life for me. I hope to continue to show the world a fraction of the kindness and gentleness you lived your life with. Siempre voy a ser su niña.

Finally, thank you to my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Thank you for allowing me to live a rich and beautiful life and for giving everyone a purpose on earth. Thank you for granting me life to complete this degree and for continuing to show me that whatever I do and wherever I go, I can see your glory in the world around me.

With all the love in the world,

Jennifer Sánchez, M.A. '25

Department of Mathematics, Science & Technology

To Mama, Papa, Bisma, and Shahroz,

From the deepest part of my heart, thank you.

This journey, my time at Columbia, every lecture I sat through, every paper I wrote, every sleepless night, every tear, and every single moment that felt overwhelming or bigger than me, it was only possible because of you. You made my dreams come true, dreams that once felt so far away and almost too big to say out loud, but you stood by me and held me through them until they became real.

Bisma and Shahroz, I know you both had your own lives and your own struggles, your own worries and challenges, but even with everything you were carrying, you still showed up for me without hesitation.

Mama and Papa, I do not even know how to begin. You were so much braver than I have ever been. You let me go, you let me grow, and you never held me back even when it must have been so hard. You believed in me when I could not see past my own fear. You supported me in every way I needed, emotionally and financially and physically and spiritually, even when it meant putting your own comfort aside. You gave me the kind of love that makes impossible things possible, and I carry that love in everything I do and everything I will become.

I hope I made you proud, because you have made me proud every single day.
This is not just my degree. It belongs to all of us.

I love you more than words could ever say.
Thank you for everything.

With all my heart,

Taru

Bakhtawar Shahbaz, M.A. '25

Department of Counseling & Clinical Psychology

To my Home - Back in India and Here,

As I wear my cap today and look around, I see a mosaic. I see myself as pieces of you - my Mumma, Pappa, Manav, Maasi, Jiju, Mama, Mami, Avi, Ruch, and Ananya. This journey that the 21-year-old Tanishka decided to take, to cross countries, and change homes, to choose a new life and pack the old, I could not have done it without you.

Mumma and Pappa, how lucky I am to be your daughter. From our first 3 AM offer letter joy together to our first night away, life has changed, but you both haven't. Mumma, from our daily video calls to cries and periods of laughter, we have found so much more of each other. Thank you for becoming my best friend. Pappa, thank you for being my support in every way possible. You have been my strength on this journey, and while I miss your hand over my head, caressing me for a hot cup of masala chai, I am so thankful to you for giving me the wings to fly.

Manav, for the first time, I realized how hard it was to stay away from a sibling the first night I stayed here, and what it means to have one close by. Thank you for being my strength when I needed one. Thank you for strumming those chords, choosing those video filters, and continuing to crack our inner jokes on days when New York felt hard, because you made it easy. You will always be my first love.

Maasi, Jiju, Mama, Mami, and Avi, I always knew you were family. Thank you for showing me what family means, what love means, and what joy and togetherness mean on days I felt homesick. Thank you for holding me up and being my strength on more days than one. Avi, you are a joy. Thank you for all your game evenings! They made my day.

Ruch and Ananya, my best friends in this whole wide world. Two people I know I could call at 3 AM. Thank you for taking each of these calls. Thank you for being there through all the days and nights that felt like they couldn't end, and through the rainy days for the sun. Thank you for meaning what you said to me as I boarded my flight,—"We are always here for you."

To you all, and my extended family and friends who have been such a significant part of my journey, you are the pieces of my mosaic, and without each one of you, I am incomplete, and so would this journey be.

Thank you for being with me on this journey and for everything you've given me - warm hugs, cups of tea, home-cooked meals, soulful songs, endless video calls, shared laughter, a shoulder to cry on, strength, and, most of all, Love.

This cap adorns the heads of each of you, for you are and therefore I am.

Yours,

Tanny

Tanishka Sidhwani, M.Ed. '25

Department of Counseling & Clinical Psychology

Above all, I honor and praise God, the giver of every blessing. It is by his wisdom and strength, granted to me from birth to this very day, that I stand. For without him, I am nothing! He was the potter and I was the clay. He molded me and made me day after day until completion. I can boldly declare, "GOD DID IT!"

To my husband, Jean Souffrant, whose unwavering love, patience, and support have been the cornerstone of this journey. Thanks for every hot meal; the breaks you enforced to keep me balanced were unwavering. For every tear you wiped away and shoulder to cry on, your belief in me was unmatched, even when my own faltered. You have been my greatest strength! A truly heartfelt mentioning of God's greatest miracle (Baby Girl Souffrant) actively and healthy growing inside of me, as I come to the end of my doctoral studies!

To my parents, Bernice and Aurbon Minors, thanks for being my first role models. You instilled in me faith to trust God, strength, endurance, and the fight to persist against all odds. Your sacrifice of love and finances got me thus far from kindergarten to this final degree. I am incredibly proud to be your first-generation child to alter the trajectory of earning a doctoral degree. My dearest sister, Charlene C. Coaxum, thanks for listening and being my unpaid therapist, my brother-in-love, nephews, nieces, my family at large, and friends' thanks for your continuous prayers during this journey.

As well as my Pastor, Bishop Dr. James N. Hassell, Co-Pastor, Alonda S. Hassell, my church family at the Kingdom Christian Cultural Center, co-workers, nursing organization, and my illustrious sorority, your words of encouragement, love, support, and continuous prayers brought me through to this day.

This dissertation is a testament to the support and inspiration of my entire village. Thank you all for being an integral part of this achievement. I did this for ALL of us!

Ilesha Souffrant, Ed.D., '25

Department of Health Studies & Applied Educational Psychology

亲爱的老妈：

感谢你从中国特意飞来参加我的毕业典礼！虽然我们的交流并不多，但是我知道，你很想念我，我也很想念你。

感谢这两年你在背后的默默支持。今天能顺利毕业，你的付出功不可没。如今也非常开心你能看到我毕业的时候。

这次你来美国，我制定了一些旅行攻略。希望你有一个轻松愉快的旅程。也希望我们能和睦相处。

目前我在紧张的找工作的阶段，希望我能顺利上岸，找到心仪的工作，不辜负老妈对我的支持和期待。

这两年，我感觉老妈变了。从以前不希望我出国到现在支持我出国，即便老妈舍不得我，但是也给了我自由和发展自己的机会。我也觉得跟老妈更亲近了。

等我稳定了，带老妈好好玩玩！爱老妈！

女儿

2025年5月

Zhaoyi Sun, M.A. '25

Department of Arts & Humanities

Dear Family and my community!

Thank you for all the love, energy, and light you've poured into me! You've supported me on this journey and I am eternally grateful. As a Haitian-American first-generation scholar, I would not have been able to reach these new heights without your consistent hyping me up, taking me out, helping me prioritize, and even doing my laundry (Ma & Angee). I was continuously amazed by the way y'all showed up for me.

Madame Armand for literally carrying me and my mother in your womb and always telling me how beautiful I am. My mother, who is my everything. My paternal grandfather, Joseph Lamarre and great-uncle Emmanuel, for immigrating to this country and leading the pride. My younger sibling, Rey, who always referred to me as a researcher since childhood. And the rest of my family for their love and support.

All the amazing peers I have met at TC specifically, Ayeisha G., Mel B., Lisa A., and Kiki R. My besties Mish, Gaylen, Angee, & Deb. My Twin, Ashley, in this master's journey. My PPC Davina, Diane, and Aisha. My gym buddies and BCDW ladies, the Association of Black Women in Higher Education, for being a home for Black Women in Higher Education to uplift, support, make space, and celebrate us.

LOVE,

Genevieve Thevenin, M.A. '25
Department of Organization & Leadership

**Hindi Letter

प्रिय परिवार और दोस्तों,

इस विशेष अवसर पर जब मैं अपनी ग्रेजुएट पढ़ाई के एक महत्वपूर्ण अध्याय को पूरा कर रही हूँ, मेरा मन सबसे पहले आप सबके प्रति कृतज्ञता से भर जाता है। आप सबका प्रेम, आशीर्वाद और अटूट समर्थन ही मेरी इस यात्रा की नींव रहा है।

भारत में पली-बढ़ी एक बेटी के लिए, अमेरिका आकर पढ़ाई करना सिर्फ एक व्यक्तिगत उपलब्धि नहीं है — यह पीढ़ियों की आकांक्षाओं और बलिदानों का फल है। मेरे पापा का सपना था कि वे अमेरिका में पढ़ाई करें, लेकिन जीवन की परिस्थितियों ने उन्हें यह अवसर नहीं दिया। आज जब मैं इस भूमि पर ज्ञान प्राप्त कर रही हूँ, तो ऐसा लगता है मानो उनके अधूरे स्वप्न को मैं अपने कर्मों से पूरा कर पा रही हूँ।

मेरी माँ मेरी सबसे बड़ी ताकत रही हैं — उनके धैर्य, प्रार्थनाएँ और निःशब्द समर्पण ने हर कठिन समय को पार करने में मेरी मदद की। मेरे भाई ने हमेशा एक सच्चे मतिर की तरह मेरा साथ दिया, कभी हँसाकर, कभी सुनकर, और हमेशा विश्वास दिलाकर कि मैं यह कर सकती हूँ।

मेरी बहनों, ऋचा और सोमी, ने भारत से दूरी के बावजूद हर मोड़ पर मुझे प्रेरित किया। उनके संदेश, वीडियो कॉल्स और छोटे-छोटे इशारे मेरे लिए एक गुप्त ऊर्जा की तरह काम करते रहे।

यह यात्रा केवल पढ़ाई तक सीमित नहीं थी। यहाँ, विभिन्न संस्कृतियों से आए छात्रों के साथ मैंने जो संबंध बनाए, वे अब मेरे जीवन की सबसे सच्ची और सुंदर मतिरताओं में बदल चुके हैं। एक साथ संघर्ष करना, जश्न मनाना और एक-दूसरे की संस्कृतियों को अपनाना — यह सब मेरे अनुभव को और भी गहरा बना गया।

मेरे लिए ग्रेजुएट स्कूल केवल शिक्षा का केंद्र नहीं रहा — यह आत्म-खोज, साधना और सेवा का माध्यम भी बना। भारतीय योग, ध्यान और आध्यात्मिक परंपराओं पर शोध करते हुए मैंने जाना कि सच्चे स्वास्थ्य की जड़ें मन, शरीर और आत्मा के संतुलन में हैं। इन्हें वैश्विक मंच पर साझा करना और लोगों को उनके भीतर की शांति से जोड़ना अब मेरा उद्देश्य बन गया है।

आप सभी — परिवार, मतिर और सहपाठी — मेरे जीवन की उस रोशनी की तरह हैं, जो हर अंधेरे में चमकती रही। इस उपलब्धि में आप सभी का अंश है। यह मेरी नहीं, *हमारी* वजिय है।

***कर्मण्येवाधिकारस्ते मा फलेषु कदाचन।
मा कर्मफलहेतुर्भूर्मा ते संगोऽस्त्वकर्मणि***
— *भगवद् गीता 2.47*

***कर्म करने का अधिकार तुम्हारा है, फल पर नहीं।
फल की इच्छा से कर्म मत करो, और न ही नष्टिक्रयिता से जुड़ो।***

सप्रेम और आभार सहित,
साक्षी

**English Letter

Dear Family and Friends,

As I reach this special milestone in my graduate journey, my heart is overflowing with gratitude for each one of you. Your love, blessings, and constant support have been the foundation of every step I've taken.

For a daughter raised in India, studying in the U.S. is more than a personal goal — it is the realization of generational dreams and sacrifices. It was my father's dream to study in America, a dream life did not allow him to fulfill. Today, as I pursue knowledge on this land, I feel that in some way, I have honored and carried forward his unfulfilled dream.

My mother has been my greatest strength — her quiet patience, prayers, and unwavering faith carried me through every challenge. My brother has been a true friend — always ready with a laugh, a listening ear, and constant encouragement, reminding me that I could do this.

My cousins Richa and Somi, despite the distance from India, have inspired me deeply throughout this journey. Their love, calls, and thoughtful gestures have been like invisible threads of strength holding me together.

This journey has also given me the gift of friendships that transcend borders. The connections I built with students from different cultures evolved into some of the most beautiful and enduring friendships of my life. Celebrating, struggling, and growing together has made my experience richer in every way.

Graduate school was not just a place of academic learning — it became a path of self-discovery, spiritual practice, and service. Through my research into Indian traditions of yoga, meditation, and spiritual wisdom, I came to understand that true wellness lies in the harmony of mind, body, and soul. Sharing this on a global platform and helping others find peace within themselves has become my calling.

All of you — my family, my friends, and my classmates — have been the light that guided me through every moment of darkness. This achievement belongs to you as much as it does to me. It is not just **my** success — it is **ours**.

"You have a right to perform your actions, but not to the fruits of those actions. Do not let the fruits of action be your motive, nor let your attachment be to inaction."
— **Bhagavad Gita 2.47**

With heartfelt love and gratitude,

****Sakshi****

Sakshi Upadhyay, M.A. '25

Department of Counseling & Clinical Psychology

Dear Mumma, Papa, Baba, and Lailu,

I don't quite have the words to begin - I truly wish you all were here with me to celebrate this moment.

We've always spoken about how our caste marginalization has been a hurdle, and I still see that truth every day. For so many who come from caste privilege, the journey looks very different. But during my time here at Columbia, I've also begun to find strength in this marginalization.

I don't think I'll ever be able to fully put this feeling into words, but I'll try.

You've given me a gift - the gift of holding my identity close and learning not to shy away from it. That has shaped me into someone who can hold space for so many other forms of marginalization around the world.

Back home in our village, living through challenges in isolation, things felt different. But when you gave me this opportunity, something shifted. Here, I found my people - people carrying struggles, shame, and resistance that felt deeply familiar, even though they came from Cameroon, Ecuador, Maui.

And that is the privilege. That is the transformation - the change in my brain chemistry - that I'm honored to carry with me.

Mumma, you have always believed in me - with your whole heart. Through everything. From my boy problems to the discrimination, I faced in school, and even when I doubted myself right before grad school - you were there, cheering me on without question. I love you.

Papa, you've been shaky at times. "What will this girl do", has been a lingering question for you I know - and I get that, I really do. But what matters most is that you've always been there. You've stayed open, willing to be challenged, and you keep learning how to show up for me in the ways I need. And that means everything. I love you.

To my baby Laila - You've taught me so much about being independent. About the boundaries I still need to learn to build. About how self-preservation and taking care of myself isn't selfish - it's an act of empowerment. I have held those learnings so close in my time in this city, patting my own back after successfully cooking something edible and hugging myself when I am too deprived of love. You've helped me choose the people I want in my life and reminded me that I have the power to envision and shape my world exactly how I want it to look.

To the people I choose in my life, my friends and lovers - the ones who have been my constant strength in everything I do. You are my spine. You hold me up, keep my world stable, and remind me who I am. Anu Masi, Don, Zoya, Tanvi, Simriti, Cathy, Shivam, Jyothsna, my professors, my boss Erica, my community, my home, and my partner and the love of my life Yuvraj - I love you all so, so much.

And Baba -

I am here because you fought for the rights of our people. You fought with everything you had - tirelessly, diligently - and you keep the fire alive in my heart, and in the hearts of millions of Ambedkarites across the world.

You are my hope. You are the force that keeps me going.

Columbia happened because of you. So many times, I've tried to picture it - how you got up for your classes here, how you dressed in such swag, the places you liked to wander through. Did you come to love jazz because you lived on these same Harlem streets - just like I do now? What was your friend circle like?

I carry those imagined memories of you with me - I keep them alive alongside my own dreams. You're my friend, the one I always picture beside me when I walk to school. When I start to lose faith. When it's freezing cold, and I still have to show up at Butler Library to finish my work. When I feel alone in this city - I think of how were you resiliently working while you carried so much and were alone with it. I think of you. Always.

And last, but not least - I want to thank me (channeling my inner Snoop Dogg here).

Yes, Prerna - I want to thank you. You've shown what it truly means to be brave. You carry so much power, and you've trusted your intuition every step of the way - even when you had to fake it just to keep going.

But look at you now.

You freakin' made it!

Prerna Vishwapremi, M.A. '25
Department of Organization & Leadership

Dear Family,

During this year and a half of study, although the physical distance between us has grown, the distance between our hearts has become even closer. Perhaps it is this period of long-distance that has given me more opportunities to reflect and to understand your support and dedication, and it has made me even more grateful for and cherish every connection we share.

I feel especially lucky to have been born into a family full of strength. Every member of our family has achieved something significant in their own field, which has been an endless source of encouragement for me and has made me aspire to become someone as influential as you. Especially Grandma and Grandpa, at times, I feel like they believe in me more than I believe in myself, and their unwavering support and strength have been a source of endless motivation.

Changing my major was one of the biggest breakthroughs in this year and a half. It was not only an academic challenge but also the first time I had to face and solve a major issue on my own. Without relying on my family, I proactively found solutions, overcame many obstacles, and ultimately became the first student at the school to successfully change majors. This experience taught me that when facing difficulties, I have the power to face them. I am not just someone who can create new paths for myself, but I have learned that when encountering difficulties, I don't have to follow traditional paths. The true strength is in discovering one's potential in adversity, not fearing challenges, and courageously taking roads others haven't walked before. This process has not only brought me academic achievements but also solidified my belief in myself and my determination to face challenges and try new things.

After moving through different environments, I've come to realize that not every family can provide such unconditional support to face the challenges of the world. I cherish the time spent with my family even more now, and I understand that the energy one draws from family is vast and immeasurable. Your love and support have not only allowed me to grow but also strengthened my sense of responsibility: I should be grateful for everything I have and use it to give back to the world, making my own contributions.

Looking back, it feels like not only I have grown, but that we've all grown together. I am grateful that my family has such an open-minded, accepting, and respectful attitude toward new ideas. I can see each of us making progress in every conversation. There was a time when I felt that many topics between us were difficult to

communicate and understand, but over this year and a half, those gaps have gradually disappeared, and many previously hard-to-express thoughts and feelings have become easier to convey. This has given me more confidence and hope to face the unknown world.

In the days to come, I will continue to carry the strength you have given me and face every challenge in life with courage. I know that no matter where I am, your support will always be my most solid foundation. I will cherish the time spent with you and continue to strive to live up to your expectations.

Thank you for your constant companionship and selfless love, and I will repay you with my efforts and achievements. I hope that wherever I go in the future, you will always be proud of me.

With all my love,

Eleanor

Yuhan Wei, M.A. '25

Department of Arts & Humanities

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

