Diversity & First Generation
5th Annual Celebration
Letters
THANK YOU FOR EVERYTHING. Your driven work ethic, relentless passion, and unwavering commitment to altruism has transpired in me and has been the sole reason why I do everything in my life. Mom, you immigrated from the small village of San Marcos, Guatemala, and Dad, you immigrated from the bustling city of Istanbul, Turkey and worked as a cleaning lady and gas-station attendant, respectively. You both immigrated here to the U.S on your own without money and the ability to speak English in the search for a better life for future generations. We, as a family worked tirelessly together to navigate the “American” life to better learn how to amalgamate our cultures, languages, and values. You both came here with nothing and gave us everything. However, before all else, you taught me how to be human first and that our concern for the welfare of others will serve as our driving force in life. You taught me that in a world that is so quick to neglect the tribulations stories of others, we need understanding and compassion now more than ever. You taught me the importance of caring for one another as if they were our own. You taught me the crucialness of interconnectedness and the ability to empathize with one another because we are ALL in this together. You taught me that in darkness there is always light and how to be that lighthouse for those lost.

David, you were born with Down syndrome and have been my biggest mentor. You have taught me tenfold more than a lifetime of schooling ever will. You are the reason why I am in speech language pathology and the reason I aspire to make a change in our communities. You have been my lighthouse since the day you were born and guided me throughout my darkest days. You are the light of my life and a force to be reckoned with. You bring love to everything you face and I aspire to be even a fraction of the young gentleman you are today. You are perfect the way you are and I have an indescribable love for you like no other.

Dad, not only did you get to see me attend TC, but now you get to see me graduate. You left the world a better place and that was all I can ask for in a father. Your charisma, humor, and love was immediately instilled in all those who met you, and now it is in me. Your Young Turk will forever continue your legacy. I miss and love you with every fiber in my body and look forward to seeing the strides that I will accomplish in your honor.

You all taught me everything; without all of you, I am nothing. And with all of you, I am everything. We are now not only the first to graduate from a 4-year university, but now the first to graduate from an ivy league university at the graduate level. The insight you have all given me will make me stand out, whether it is as school or at work, on the road to making our world a better place. Thank you all for your mentorship, patience, care, humor, believing in me, and most importantly, love.

Congratulations!! WE accomplished this degree. I love you all more than words can ever capture. From the deepest depths of my heart - THANK YOU!!!!!!

DANIEL CAMPOLLO
DIVERSITY & FIRST GENERATION

INTRODUCTION PREFACE:

As a low-income, first-generation student, I felt compelled to study the social and political structures that shaped my education and that of millions of others. This led me to Teachers College, Columbia University where I am graduating with a Master’s in Education Policy with a specialization in law. I would like to express immense gratitude to Teachers College’s faculty members who have taught and mentored me. This educational privilege is not taken lightly for I am committed to passing on this privilege to other students. I would like to thank my sister, my partner, and my friends who have unconditionally accompanied me on this journey. Last and dearest to my heart, I am also grateful for my mother whose love and sacrifices keep me going. Below is a letter dedicated to her.

DEAR MOM / MÁ OI,

How do salmon swim upstream? Such treacherous journeys would require unfettered energy and strong leaping skills to counter the water flow. Only some would make it to the end of the journey. Like these fish, despite the dangers, countless individuals have migrated to North America for better opportunities for them and their children. Similarly, you have navigated upstream to provide for my sister and me—your transatlantic seeds. As I walked through the halls of this Ivy League institution, I often reflected on my education and the (invisible) sacrifices that you’ve made for me to be here.

My hunger for education is umbilically linked to yours. You were born in Vietnam during the Vietnam War. The illiteracy rate was as high as 90 percent, as the villagers suffered from generations of colonialism and military conflicts. Due to intermittent periods of war, including the Anti-French War, the Japanese invasion during World War II, and the subsequent Vietnam War, education was often disrupted. Many students were recruited for guerrilla warfare while others quit school to stay home and support their families. Out of seven children, you were the only one who graduated from high school. Yet, you were barred from attending college due to her family’s “bad history” or a term for those politically affiliated with South Vietnam during the Vietnam War. Post-war, he was sent to “re-education” camps or prison camps where he was forced to work as a gravedigger for nine years. A stamp of discrimination was forever sealed for prisoners and their children. Thus, you were forbidden to attend college.

You expressed your indignation towards this injustice through writing, comparing the principles laid out by Karl Max with the destructive and contradicting policies enforced by the new communist government. After sharing your essays with your teacher, you were reported and put in jail for treason. You were released two weeks later because my grandfather pleaded that you were mentally ill and had an arranged marriage. Refusing to get married, you escaped to the city where she would soon meet an intellectual man with a similar fate: my father. He also could not attend college because of his family’s involvement with the South Vietnamese government. Had you not advocated for your right to education, you would not have met my father, and I would not be here today.
You did not attend any of our honors nights, parent-teacher conferences, or school events. In the rare times that we saw you, there were no discussions about school, preparing for college, or what we aspired to study. You did not speak English and thus could not assist us with our schooling even if she had the time and energy to do so. Yet, I do not blame you, má.

Like many newcomers, you navigate first-world poverty in Atlanta, Georgia, with foreign accents and unspeakable struggles. Upon arriving in the U.S., I saw how you’ve changed drastically. After reuniting with my father, who had left Vietnam through the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees’ Orderly Departure Program, your American Dream fell apart as Ba filed for a divorce. I saw you became severely depressed and began working at the age of thirteen to help pay the bills so that you would not be sad.

During our first 12 years in America, you worked as a food packer at Thermo Pac factory. From night to weekend shifts, you worked ceaselessly to put food on the table. We were rarely in synergy with you. By the time we returned from school, my mother would dash out the door with her unpacked lunch box hoping to beat the 5 p.m. Atlanta traffic. Early in the morning, as we got up for school, she returned home in her white factory uniform, exhausted from working overtime. Too tired to even talk, we acknowledged each other’s shadows. Our bodies moved in the dim basement in silence, cautiously evading the rats and roaches that scurried along the corners of our room. While you were folding boxes at the factory, my sister and I were left on our own. Living in a dilapidated basement shared by other Vietnamese immigrants, predominantly men, we locked bodies in our room while letting our minds roam freely through reading books. For many years to come, books were our invisible guardians. Education was our haven.

There is a Vietnamese proverb that you’ve taught me while growing up: không gì bằng cắm với cá, không gì bằng má với con, which means, “there is nothing compared to rice and fish, there is nothing compared to mother and child.” In place of your direct involvement in our American education was an unbreakable trust that we would maximize the education that you never had. Your absence was infinitesimal compared to the obstacles you overcame for us. Má, you gave us the education of a lifetime. Privileged to receive an education that you sought but could not obtain, I inherited the responsibility of excelling while challenging the status quo. In education policy, critical race theorists refer to this as aspiration and resistance capital—or the knowledge and skills built through generations of resilience that marginalized students possess.

Fulfilling your deferred dreams, we graduated with honors and attended prestigious colleges, Stanford and Columbia University. We were graduates of “failing” schools where many of our peers have fallen behind through gang involvement and teen pregnancy. Our stories were counter-narratives to the bleak narratives of poverty and failing urban education. As students of color and immigrants continue to challenge this deficit portrayal, education should unravel the hidden individual and familial factors that are quintessential to our success. From a war-torn village to a segregated immigrant enclave, you’ve taught me how to be a feminist, a dreamer, and a dutiful daughter. As I graduate from Teachers College and head towards law school, I hope to embody your fighting spirit. I refuse to be a carrier of silenced testimonies. Oxygenated with your resilience, I will continue to navigate upstream, a journey you once relentlessly endured and eventually overcame. Thank you, mom. Cảm ơn má nhiều. 

YOURS SINCERELY,
YOUR BELOVED DAUGHTER
THUY HANG TRAN
TO MY LITTLE SHINING STAR:

You are perfect. The first night I took you home, you slept through the night!

You slept through the night while I sat in that dusty, dirty bed in a dark halfway house. We got to PATH too late that night, so now we are here. In a place you don’t deserve to be. We could’ve gone back home to Daddy in New Rochelle. But I was “too selfish” to take you home to a father whose mother didn’t want you to have their last name...

...because she feared you’d be too dark to look like them.

But mommy had a plan. Mommy wanted an M.A. from Teachers College, Columbia University. And maybe Mommy is selfish because I just missed your third birthday. I guess I am selfish because I am here in New York City, while you are away so I can afford to raise you and pursue my studies simultaneously. But listen, as of today, Mommy is the first in our family to complete a masters degree in the United States.

“It’s very strange to have feelings of guilt attached to achieving your dreams. But remember that progress is a constant (and fortunate) condition of our world. I hope that when you are my age that the stigma attached to single-motherhood would subside; that it’s perceived as a choice, as opposed to a measure of your character. I hope that when you pursue your masters at TC, that no one will ever call you selfish for wanting a masters ‘because women should stay at home once they have a baby’. Your Russian grandma told me I was too selfish of a woman to deserve a family. Too selfish to deserve a man. Too selfish to deserve a perfect little baby like you. But if selfish means making sacrifices to build your future independent of a man, then no doubt I am the Queen of Selfishness.

But I promise you, this was for us. The “us” that loves us, that accepts our dark skin – the “us” that cheers us on. So long as I live, I promise to only surround you with love. And I promise you that this degree means we will never be homeless in New York City again.

Your Lola Jojo is in heaven now, but I also want you to know how much she sacrificed for me, for you. Lola Jojo, my mommy, was one of the two women who finished the civil engineering program in West Visayas State University in Central Philippines in 1980. But she gave up her promising engineering career in the Philippines to make my life — and all your titas and lolas watching you in the Philippines right now — a better life. Have you noticed you are the only kid in the barrio with a pool? That everyone dotes on you? That our house is covered in marble, towering over all the smaller houses in Barrio Cinco? That’s because of Lola Jojo.

It’s mommy’s turn to help the family now, just like your Lola Jojo did. Because in our family, we take care of each other. In our culture, we share our blessings. At three years old, you aren’t really good at letting people share your new puppy, but I am sure you’ll understand our values soon enough. You will understand that as Filipinos we value kindness, generosity, and community. You will understand that our community cultural wealth stems from these very values we pride ourselves on.
A global pandemic is keeping us apart at the moment, but when the Philippines reopens, I promise to come home. You will be back here soon, and mommy will have figured out which doctoral program she will pursue. And soon enough, Mommy will be able to afford to raise you here, and help everyone back home at the same time. When you return to NYC, Mommy will make sure no one in your school, or in your social life, will ever make you feel less than what you deserve to feel just because you are brown –or because you are a woman. Mommy is building you a cultural capital here, Stella. Mommy is trying to set you up the best she can.

I hope when the time comes and I’m gone, that you will never resist a cry for help. Our current state of affairs has shown us that having an individualistic approach in your existence creates a set of values predicated on greed. Greed has collapsed our financial markets and successfully pitted biotech companies against each other in a search for the cure. Everyone around the world is fighting this virus, and I can tell you the most successful countries have approached the problem from a collectivist lens. Stella, I need you to use your agency and privileges to make sure you are contributing to a just world. I will only accept selfishness when it comes to pursuing your wildest dreams. And I hope when you read this, that you understand the very few things that will make Mommy proud.

Go be the kind, loving, and most ‘selfish’ woman I need you to be.

LOVE,

MOMMY
DEAR TITA BEC, TITO MON, AND MARIANNE,

I still remember the first day Mama and Papa went home after bringing me to NYC, I was crying my eyes out because it was the very first time in my life that I would actually be separated from my family. I was in a boarding house back in UP, but it was different because back then I could just ride the jeepney and the MRT and I’ll be home in a little over an hour whenever I feel homesick. This time, I would not be able to ride a subway home whenever I feel lonely or homesick. Nothing in all my experiences with travels or chaperoning prepared me for this feeling of being alone in a strange place like NYC.

But then you were there and welcomed me to your home and your family and I can never put to words how grateful I am that you did. I wrote in my dissertation acknowledgement page that I would never have made it sane this past four years without your support, love, and care. And Marianne as usual laughed at me and said you did not do anything, you were just there. But by being just there, I survived the past four years. I may not be able to ride the subway home to my family back in Manila, but I was able to ride the subway and bus home to my family in New Jersey every weekend. Being able to come home every weekend to family and being able to eat home cooked meals helped me get through the difficult times of loneliness and homesickness. You made it a second home for me and I will always remember fondly the past four years, the numerous adventure trips, and all the memories. It helps that Tito Mon’s Facebook posts reminds me of the memories every now and then!

From the three of you, I learned a lot and I do hope it made me into a better person than who I was four years ago. I learned how not to take everything seriously and have a sense of humor. I finally learned how to accept changes and started to adapt the philosophy that when things don’t go according to plan, that’s when adventure happens. From Tito Mon, I learned to love photography again and take pictures of memories. From Tita Bec, I learned how to embrace my artistic and adventurous side again. I am still in awe of how Tita is able to juggle and manage everything she does. From Marianne, I learned how to go out of my comfort zone and try new things. Yes, even having a random conversation with people I don’t even know and putting a smile on other people’s face, which I would have never done four years ago.

As I close this chapter of my life and received my doctorate degree, I thank God every day that I am blessed and loved. In the past four years, I have not only gained three degrees, or grew intellectually with the experience, I have also gained a family, a very big extended family. For that I will always be grateful. I am who I am now because you were all part of my life. Words cannot give justice to how grateful I will always be, so for now, all I could say is “Thank you” and “I love you all.”

LOVE ALWAYS,

BEA
I still remember the day I had decided to apply for a doctorate degree at TC. It was the day I finally decided to take a leap of faith and work towards the little girl’s dream of studying in my dream school and becoming a doctor. At first, I debated on telling you or anyone of my plans, because I was afraid I would fail and would simply disappoint you. But I realized I would never get through the hurdles of applying without you by my side so I decided to tell you. You have always been with me every step of the way even if at times it felt as if I’m going nowhere at all.

Ever since I could remember Mama was the tough one, the perfectionist, the one who expects me to be the best in everything. There were times I didn’t want to talk about my problems, knowing you would always have something to say. I had always wondered why you did this and felt like nothing I did was good enough. But as I grew up I finally realized why you pushed me so hard. Because you always wanted something better for me and you knew I could do better. Yet, ever since I could remember, you would always have my back. When push comes to shove, you would always say, “Huwag ka mag-alala, ako bahala sa iyo.” And true to your words you would always take care of it. From you, Mama, I inherited the will to be better, and to aim for excellence. I also got the courage to stand up for the people I love and the people who needed my help. From you, I learned how to be compassionate. I know I am strong because my mother is strong and you raised me to be the woman I am now.

Ever since I could remember Papa was always the sweet and loving one. The one who would always have little gifts for me and do things for me so that life would be easier for me, whether it was cooking or doing a project. I always said you were my Superman, someone who always swoops in to rescue me when I needed it. People often tell me they are surprised that you let your little princess out into the concrete jungle of NYC. However, they did not know you like I do. You may have called me your principessa and you raised me like one too. But you also raised me to slay my own dragons. And when push comes to shove, I know you wouldn’t fly in and carry me to safety, or wrap me in a bubble wrap, instead I know you’ll be at my corner psyching me for the upcoming battle and telling me to have more faith in myself. From you, Papa, I inherited your sense of perception and resiliency, of having the courage to stand up after falling down and taking responsibility for my actions. From you, I got the fortitude to face the challenge in front of me. I have the fortitude to have faith because I know my father has faith in me and my abilities.

As I finish my four years adventure in TC and prepare to come home to you, I want you both to know that I am thankful to God everyday for giving me to you to love and to be raised. I am where I am because of you.

Mama, Papa, Enzo, Ellie, Isak and Kano, even from a thousand miles away, you had walked every step of this adventure with me. This doctorate degree is yours as much as it is mine. I love you.

**DEAR MAMA AND PAPA,**

**LOVE ALWAYS,**

**BEA**
“Adiós, adiós, mi México lindo, mañana, mañana, me iré.” Y me fui a Nueva York, lejos de mi tierra colorada.


“Toquen mariachis canten, alegren mi Corazón, no quiero que nadie me vea triste.”

Y como podré estar triste? Si estoy viva. Tengo a mi familia. Rodeada de ustedes ya sea en el trabajo construyendo nuestra casa o alrededor de una fogata comiendo botanas y cantando como Chente o Chelo.

“Toquen mariachis canten que el mundo escuche tu voz , porque mientras cante el mundo entero, no habrá mas guerras sino canciones.”

Y esas canciones las he llevado conmigo a donde fuera. Fue ese amor abundante que tanto me sobraba que lo traté de compartir. Conoció a tanta gente. Les daba la entrada para que pasaran a mi cocinita a desayunar frijoles y café. Otros vinieron a disfrutar su primer encuentro con el menudo. Otros probaron esos tacos verdaderamente auténticos.

Y saben? Que ustedes nunca me cuentan de su sacrificio. Serán mis ojos gringos que lo llaman sacrificio, pero ustedes se pasaron. El amor que ustedes nos dieron, yo nunca podré dar. Nunca se quejaron. Ni una sola vez. Los trabajos que ustedes aguantaron, la violencia verbal que mis “compatriotas estadounidenses” les echaban, la traición de tantos seres “queridos,” y al final, el aguante para poder ser libres.

Y lo fueron. Y se defendieron. Y me enseñaron mi valor. Mamá, tu no eres como las demás. Me enseñaste a ser fuerte. Prácticamente me subiste al avión para cumplir logros que no te dejaron. Y papá, que papá le enseña a su hija a andar en el mundo por si sola? Fue difícil llegar hasta acá, pero aquí, en esta ceremonia me lo reconocen. Y a ustedes? Cuando se ganaron esa medalla de oro por haber aprendido inglés rodeados de tanta indiferencia? Cuando se ganaron la medalla de oro por trabajar sin descansar todos los días de la semana? Cuando se ganaron esos premios por haber construido, no solo un hogar, sino varios? Dios se los pagará.


“Que el mundo escuche mi voz, porque mientras cante el mundo entero, no habrá más guerras sino canciones.”
TO MY MOTHER AND GRANDMOTHER, JANETH ALVAREZ AND LANDY KING,

Thank you for being the rocks in my life and for constantly being supportive and empowering. I see in you the sacrifices you have made in your life that made you move your roots from Ecuador to the United States in search of better opportunities.

Being a first-generation college student and the first in the family to attend a prestigious Ivy League university such as the Teachers College at Columbia University, I dedicate this to both of you. There are many things that I hope to achieve in my life that can give back to our communities and honor the work you have put and for this, I thank you.

Thank you for your love and support.

MARIA MUNOZ
DEAR FAMILY,

I am truly grateful for the support that you have given me over the years. I wouldn’t have reached this milestone in my education without your encouragement. Mom, at an early age, you instilled in me the importance of education. You held me to high expectations and never allowed me to slack off with my grades. You continue to push me to work hard and pray for my well-being. Dad, in my moments of doubt, you reminded me of my strengths and academic capabilities. There was never a moment when you believed I couldn’t succeed. I’ve watched you overcome many challenges throughout your own life. Because of you, I have a strong work-ethic.

Shabba, you are the IDEAL sister: caring, optimistic, and supportive. Although the last few years have been more difficult, you have continued to push through and have become a stronger person as a result. I admire your drive and your ability to remain humble in spite of it all.

Yvette, you were my first role model of success. My mom would often say she sent me to Atlanta as a boy and I can back as a man. You taught me how to navigate the world as a black professional and made me aware of how society might sometimes mistreat me despite my educational background. I’m appreciative of your sound advice and your warm presence throughout my life.

Kenneth, I consider you my stepdad although you and my mom aren’t officially married. I’m thankful that my mom has you in her life. Just like you care for her, you have also been there for me, whether it’s been a flat tire or simply to offer advice and support.

Because of all of you, I stay motivated and have made it this far in my educational journey. Who would have thought that a little boy from the St. Thomas Housing Projects of New Orleans would end up with a master’s degree from an Ivy League institution? This thought keeps me humbled.

I hope that I continue to make all of you proud.

LOVE,

AL

ALBION SUMRELL
Being apart of a family of eleven children has been the most precious gift of all for my educational aspirations and my personal growth. First I want to start by giving thanks to Mami y Papi, porque sin su amor y suporte, no se como mis sueños se pudieran hacer realidad (Mami y Papi because without your love and support, I do not know how my dreams would have been a reality). Mami tu me enseñaste que al poder ayudar a otros es un privilegio y ese es mi modelo para ayudar a la comunidad (Mami you taught me that to be able to help others is a privilege and that is the model that have taken when it comes to serving my community). Y tu Papi, tu me enseñastes como hacer fuerte y como soñar fuera de lo normal como poder hacer la primera Latina presidenta de los Estados Unidos algun dia (Papi, you taught me how to be strong and how to dream beyond the norms, like becoming the first Latina president of the United States one day). Los amo (I love you both).

To my ten brothers and sisters, I just want you all to know that today is not about me. Today is about you for your enormous emotional support that you gave to me through my entire educational journey. These past seven years have not been easy being away from home, but I thank you for encouraging me, trusting me and believing in my dreams. For my older brothers and sisters, thank you for sacrificing your education so that I can have a meal to eat, a roof over my head and clothes on my back. You giving up your education so that I can further mine is beyond a proof of your love and support towards my dreams. To my younger siblings, I just want you all to remember to dream big, because dreaming doesn't cost a thing. It is not too late to go back to school or even to explore another degree. As the youngest, we truly owe to the oldest to become more beyond our current circumstances, so I challenge you all to find your educational motivation to go back to school and to finish what you started or to further get the master's degree in clinical psychology that you have always been talking about (this is for one my sisters who got there B.A.). Thank you all for being amazing brothers and sisters and parents to your children. In addition, thank you for listening to me and for most importantly believing in me. You are all truly the reason why I wake up in the morning with a purpose to better support my students and for that, I am will forever be grateful. We made it and one day you all will too.

I love you all with all my heart.

PATRICIA GONZALEZ
To my extraordinary mother, Evelyne Moore. I watched you get up before the sun came up to go to work. I saw you go to stores, but never buy anything for yourself. You constantly went without so that you could afford to finance any random wild dream that my brother or I had—I really did think I would be a singing ballet dancer who played the piano though—sorry. You did all this as a single mother in Harlem in the 1980s, a very different Harlem than the one we see today. But you did it all for us. You are the most selfless person I have ever met. And the reason I am where I am today is because I had the best role model on the planet. You told me I could accomplish anything and I believed you. Thank you, thank you, thank you.

To my loving and supportive husband, Maurice Allen Jr., I know being married to a stressed out doctoral student was not easy. Thank you for sticking with me, picking up the slack with the kids, and always offering reassurance that I could and would succeed.

To my beautiful, energetic, and brainy children—Lily & Preston—I thank you for reminding me on a daily basis what it means to appreciate the little things. When this doctoral journey got rough and it got very rough, I just needed to see your smiling faces and it put me in a better space. I cannot wait to see what greatness you choose to share with the world.

To my family and friends...you are my everything. I don’t think I can ever thank you enough for the love and support you have provided me over the years. I can’t put into words how much your continued encouragement pushed me to reach not only this goal, but all others I have set for myself. I’m the first to earn my doctorate, but I have seen you all achieve success in so many different areas. I could never have done this without your excellent examples of what it looks likes to want something, work hard for it, and achieve it. Aunt Dinnah, may she rest in peace, always said, “nothing comes to a sleeper, but a dream.” So I thank you all for reminding me to STAY WOKE.

To the Harlem community...whether I was sitting in a classroom in London or teaching in a classroom in Tennessee, I always showed and told people where I was from. I am so honored to be from such a rich and colorful community. And I always want people to know and remember, that Harlem creates scholars too. Thank you for giving me a hometown I can be proud of. I pray I always represent you well.

ANTIJA ALLEN
Being the daughter of a single immigrant mother who raised me in a foreign country away from her family and love one was the choice my mother had made, so that I can have a better future. With every decision and sacrifices my mother had made, it became clearer to me that I was going to college to get my Bachelor with the notion of furthering my education by getting a Master’s degree. And here I am, 4 years after graduating with my Bachelor I am ready to walk across the stage to receive my diploma at an Ivy School for my Masters’ degree.

I would not have made it this far without the support of my mother. It was her faith and belief in me that as allowed me to see that I have potential to apply at Teachers College. With her constant encouragement and provision, I am able to fulfill her dream of graduating from a prestigious University. Although the diploma is going to have my name on it, I do not shy away from the fact it is her accomplishment the diploma is going to hold. For me, being a first-generation graduate, and in fact first women in my extended family to graduate, is a really big deal because it means I have fulfilled my mother wish and her sacrifice had meanings.

So, at this moment I want to say - Thank You, Mom! For believing in me when no one else had and continuing to love and support me.

POOJA KAR