

Reaching the seemingly unreachable

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Economics and mathematics

Hello everybody. My name is Wonjin Song. To the class of 2018, we made it. It took five years for me to finish my degree. I never expected I would be in college this long. I am delighted to be standing here as the valedictorian of the class of 2018. First and foremost, I would like to thank all of the parents and family members who were always there and who ensured that we would make it all the way to today. I'd also like to thank all of the faculty and staff because EIU would not be the same without them. Finally, the person I am the most thankful for is my father. You have been there with me through thick and thin. My heart is broken every time I see your knee that got injured in the military service getting worse. You ran wherever you needed to be for raising three crazy boys, including myself, with your worn-out knees. Thank you, father.

Instead of giving you the stereotypical graduation speech, I would like to tell you my personal story that I experienced here at EIU and which changed my life. I am eternally grateful for being able to share this piece of myself in my most authentic voice with you this afternoon. Many of you see me standing up here and assume that my life must be pretty great and my parents must be very proud. Nevertheless, I think it is important to note that those are half true. My reality has been quite different.

I came to EIU three and a half years ago from Korea. I was an exchange student just for a semester. Before I left home, I was very excited to experience new things. I imagined shaking hands with Obama or the terminator, Arnold Schwarzenegger. I thought everything was going to be awesome and cool. But, as soon as I got to the Chicago airport, I realized that everything was

not going to work out as I expected. Somebody took my money at the airport on my first day in the USA. I couldn't speak and understand English well. I didn't have any family or friends here. Everything that teachers said in class sounded like an alien language. There was a lot of homework that I could not even handle. What is MLA and APA writing style? I was afraid, nervous, and uneasy. I missed my home and wanted to go back. It was not a fun experience at the beginning.

Nonetheless, I am standing here as the valedictorian of the class of 2018. You know how I made it all the way here? Because you, my fellow students, staff members, and teachers, helped and motivated me not to give up.

Dear friends, you came up to me and said hello when I didn't have friends. You were willing to listen to my broken English. You let me join your study group. You served me food in the dining hall without yelling at me even though I went to get beef briskets more than five times within 30 minutes. You invited me to your birthday party and introduced me to new friends.

Dear crazy gym buddies, you made me realize my work out is not even close to your warming up, which motivated me to work out harder.

Dear staff members, you didn't scold me even though I asked the same questions more than a couple of times. You hired me at the Thomas hall desk even though I could not understand phone calls in English. And you gave me another chance at the Stevenson Hall RA position.

Dear teachers, you kindly explained the answers several times until I understood. Your passion for teaching in class and outside of class motivated me to study hard. You always welcomed me whenever I went to your office, even when I stayed in your office to ask some questions for more than one hour, like "Since this exam was hard, can you please curve it?"

As the time passed, I started loving EIU. I transferred here as a full-time student. And now we are about to graduate. Without all of you, it would have been impossible for me to finish my degree with great memories and fantastic results. Remember, you can be the motivation in someone's life. Together, we can inspire and motivate each other to move forward and reach the seemingly unreachable, in which we have never thought about.