

CLASS DAY 2021

JUNE 11

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Growing up five miles from the US-Mexico border in one of the poorest towns in Texas, I learned the importance of building bridges at a very early age. As a first-generation, low-income student, I didn't have a direct bridge to places like UChicago. In fact, upon coming to UChicago, I learned that I was the only student from my entire region in the Class of 2021. But as I walked through Cobb Gate during orientation week, I immediately found myself in an inclusive community committed to building bridges between people, ideas, and possibilities. Even in this time of physical and social distancing, we haven't lost sight of what connects us to UChicago and to each other.

African American writer Ralph Ellison once said, "Education is all a matter of building bridges." Our education has equipped us with the necessary tools to build bridges not just in theory, but in practice. Critical thinking, open inquiry, and human empathy are all essential for fostering greater communication between peoples from diverse backgrounds and crossing between disciplines to forge new ways of seeing and saying. Whether it's linking ideas across the Core to better understand the human condition or interviewing frontline workers to document their experiences for future generations, our class has built lasting bridges in the rigorous pursuit of knowledge.

Time and time again, our class has paved the way for others to become connected, recognizing that a community is only as strong as the connections within it. In that spirit, fellow classmates created a mutual aid network to connect to others in the community and to give and receive support in the form of food, financial assistance, and personal protective equipment. More recently, students and alumni from around the world came together virtually for our beloved annual scavenger hunt, determined that Scav must go on! From working with the broader South Side through student-led initiatives to connecting to diverse cultures through study abroad, the Class of 2021 has shown its willingness to engage a diverse and interconnected world. My border community is often described as *dos países una comunidad* (two countries one community). In that same spirit, our class can be aptly called *varias países una comunidad* (countless countries one community).

In the face of growing divides, the task of building bridges across lines of difference and disagreement has never been more important. Confronting the tremendous divides before us requires sharing ideas, finding common ground, and using what is right with the world to remedy what is wrong with it. Only then can we bridge the gaps of inequality and injustice and span the institutional chasms laid bare by a global pandemic.

Like many of you, I'm a better scholar and person for all the lasting connections I've made in the classroom, on the Quad, and at the Reg. Whether you ultimately stake your claim in the private sector, academia, public service or any number of professions, push yourself to build bridges. Bridge to connect common understanding to new knowledge, bridges to foster tolerance, and bridges to

new frontiers. The world needs bridge builders, and the best bridges are built by those who look to the future and dedicate themselves to others.