

## **Welcome Speech for incoming students of the Class of 2021**

by Bryan Penprase, Dean of Faculty, Soka University of America, August 10, 2018

Dear incoming Class of 2021 - Welcome!

I would like to both thank you and congratulate you on this exciting day. You are arriving here to Soka University for what is sure to be a transformative and life-changing new chapter in your life. Let me assure you that I share both your excitement and anxiety - because this is also my first year at Soka! So I too am arriving and all of us together are beginning a journey today.

As an incoming Dean, I have been spending the last few months studying the Soka University curriculum, faculty and campus. You as incoming college students have been spending the last year - maybe more - scouring college web sites, going on long road trips to visit campuses, taking stressful examinations, writing inspiring prose to convince admissions officers of your worthiness, and answering too many questions from relatives, friends, friends of relatives and relatives of friends like "where are you going to College?" "What are you going to major in?" And perhaps "Liberal arts? What does that mean?" All of that process has concluded and you now are ready to begin. To turn the page. To start fresh, and to redefine yourself, your life, to discover new passions, new friends, and in so doing you will create something new - a new identity for you as part of a vibrant, multicultural learning community known as Soka University of America.

In case those relatives, friends, etc have been asking for answers - I can tell you from a position of extensive experience in higher education that Soka University occupies a truly unique place in liberal arts education that will give you one of the best possible educations available in the world. My experience in higher education includes working as a professor, researcher or fellow at universities and colleges across the earth - Caltech, Harvard, Yale, Pomona College, Yale-NUS College in Singapore, and now Soka University. In my years as a professor, and as a parent of two daughters who both went to liberal arts colleges I have learned a lot about both the theory, and the actual reality of a liberal arts education. The reality - which you are now starting - is that a liberal arts education is the most exciting, and most effective way to reach your full potential as an individual. It blends an intense community life - within the residence halls, in the dining halls, in clubs and after hours - with a personal, interactive and open-ended academic life - with small classes tutorials and unmatched research opportunities. You have chosen well - and your life in a small liberal arts setting will allow you access to the entire campus - which is here for you and your development as its primary mission.

At Soka - starting now, and continuing for four years - you will deeply engage on complex interdisciplinary problems without any barriers and to take courses that intentionally interconnect cultures from East and West - China, India, Japan, Ancient Greece and Rome, and European thought, as well as the cultures across Africa and South America. You will become a truly global citizen and draw from the wisdom and cultures of the entire world. This process will enrich your life deeply, in ways that will unfold with each class, with each conversation, with each essay, and with each of the readings you will do. New worlds will open up to you as you open up to the world. You - in this room - are a unique and wonderful sample of the best students from across the world. You and your friends here will together create an intercultural environment that

is richer and more diverse than any of our peer liberal arts colleges - including Pomona, where I taught for 20 years. Within the Soka University classes of 2021 and 2020 are students from 26 countries - a larger cross section of the world than is found in many liberal arts colleges and even many universities several times larger than Soka University!

I also want to tell you that Soka's curriculum - which you will hear more about soon from a panel of professors - is one of the most thoughtful, interdisciplinary, expansive and rigorous as any in the world. In my work at Yale University I helped Yale begin its own liberal arts college in Singapore known as Yale-NUS College. The project of building Yale-NUS College engaged two of the leading universities in the world (Yale and National University of Singapore) in a multi-year discussion of what an ideal education of the 21st century might look like. After many years of meetings and discussions, the Yale-NUS College opened in 2013, and has just celebrated its first graduation ceremony last May. We were inspired by the question "What must a young person learn in order to live a responsible life in this century?" The answers we developed at Yale are very similar to the answers found here at Soka University . Both Yale-NUS and Soka have understood the need for a core and GE curriculum that provides a common experience for the students across disciplines to help them find answers to the deepest and most urgent questions facing humanity. At Soka University, this curriculum takes the form of truly innovative and exciting courses, which you will begin soon with Core I - "The Enduring Questions of Humanity." Your exploration will continue with full-semester courses such as the Pacific Basin, Creative Arts Forum, Modes of Inquiry, the American Experience, and Core 2 - "The Enduring Questions in Contemporary Contexts." The thoughtful multi-year curriculum of Soka University is an outgrowth of the intense dedication and commitment of the Soka faculty - who as a small community of scholars will be get to know you well. They will challenge you, encourage you, torment you, amaze you, and help you develop in countless ways.

The Learning Cluster, one of Soka University's signature academic programs, embodies this small and intense form of education. In the learning clusters (as in other courses too) you will co-create the experience with your fellow classmates. Students and faculty together co-create the course designs, and while exploring these deep questions together, they create a unique and interdependent learning environment. This is the difference between classes you have experienced before. Often a class in a traditional high school is based on "knowledge transfer" - where the professor knows things that you will soon know. Something like a mental printing press. At Soka there are times when in a discussion you will be the expert and will know things that nobody else knows. You will ask questions that may not have answers, and together your fellow students and professors will explore these questions. And finally - at Soka there will be new questions that will be asked that begin to explore topics that you and your professor may not know. This is the realm of the "unknown unknowns" and the journey into this area through class dialog and through research is how Soka University and academics can find truth.

This leads me to the part - where like many grownups- I am going to give you just a bit of advice. As a parent I know this is the part where the student typically raises the defenses as they are about to receive "wisdom" - or be told to do a laundry list of chores, tasks and other small items to keep track of. My advice is going to be different than that. I am going to advise you to take time to NOT be too busy, and to NOT just perform tasks and to get grades. I want you to go beyond this paradigm which has fueled your younger life and resulted in your admission here. I want you to

take ownership of your life, your mind, your education, and to become responsible for your learning. This is a key difference from the education here at Soka from your time in high school. You are going to be asked to go further - to ask questions - to do readings - to design your own research topics - to explore with fellow students and faculty in open-ended dialog. This open-ended dialog can be disorienting at first. I will tell you that a sense of disorientation, vertigo, euphoria, and occasional valley of despair is all part of this process of learning. You are taking a journey to a new place - and along the road will be some hardships, and some amazing vistas. Take the journey with patience, with humility, with joy, and most of all with an eye towards the hidden story, the complexity that is deeper than your first guess or even your second or third guess. This is how we find truth - but only after traveling through a valley of confusion! One tool toward managing this process is to make use of this community - your friends, your professors and the staff here at Soka are all here for you. Ask for help - visit a professor at office hours, talk with your fellow students, and go to the writing center. This campus is here for you and all of us here want you to succeed and will help you to succeed. And to take ownership of your own thought - take the time to think, to write a journal, to call home and to think about your thinking - this will give you “meta-cognition” and help you gain deeper learning.

One of the best skills here at Soka is learning how to work in teams with their classmates to solve problems. Your communication skills - in writing, in dialog and discussion - in visual arts, photography, and other media - are what truly set you as Soka University students apart from other students, and will assure success throughout your careers and lives - wherever you go. Communication skills also involve listening as much as expressing yourself. Take the time to listen and you will be amazed and surprised. In college what seems to be true on the surface is actually nearly always more complex and more interesting. This applies to people, to cultures, to assignments - and by being open to complexity through listening and reading and reflection you will learn more and deepen as a person.

In case your relatives ask you about the “liberal arts” - My experience in Asia has shown me how intense the demand for liberal arts graduates are needed, precisely for these skills of being able to listen, to navigate through complexity with compassion for others, and for providing creative solutions. You are needed - and not just by employers. The world needs those skills - and your education here at Soka will allow you to become a person will be equipped to profoundly change the world for the better.