Freshmen Inauguration Ceremony 2011
Pursuing the “Useless”

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Student Leaders, Freshmen
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To our 103rd Freshmen Class, welcome to NUS!

Each of you has many talents – some are known to you but others are yet to be uncovered and nurtured. My colleagues and I look forward to working with you, to help you become the best that you can be.

The University you have joined is more than a hundred years old. The values that define us date back to our founding in 1905 – a fierce commitment to excellence; boldness and imagination to break new ground; and a strong sense of service to society.
Because of our long history, we have many traditions and practices that connect us to the rich tapestry of our past. Yet, NUS is also a university at the cutting-edge, a leader in global education, research and enterprise.

As the newest members of our community, I urge you to enjoy and benefit from the distinctive features of the NUS experience, and the NUS spirit. Your seniors have worked hard to make sure that your first taste of campus life will be exciting. The many orientation programmes will help you make new friends, and introduce our campuses to you. In the process, some of you may even discover new passions and talents.

In particular, I hope you will all take part in the NUSSU Rag and Flag, a unique NUS event which dates back to 1957. Each year, we are astounded by our students’ awesome floats and by the great energy of the performances. But this year’s Rag promises to be even more spectacular as it will be held at the Promontory@Marina Bay as part of the National Day Parade.

**Exploring Your New Campus**

Beyond the orientation activities, I invite you to walk around and discover the many charming aspects of our Kent Ridge and Bukit Timah campuses. You will encounter many interesting people - fellow students and Professors – with many fascinating ideas and pursuits.
We had the pleasure of walking together across the highway to our new NUS University Town. Let me show you around on a virtual tour:

To get to University Town from the Kent Ridge Campus, take the shuttle bus across this connecting bridge. You can also walk, cycle or drive across. Getting off the bus, you will walk along the covered main approach flanked by the buildings of the National Research Foundation’s research complex and NUS’ teaching facilities.
You will come to the Town Green which is a large open green space. The entire University Town complex earned top green marks for environmental sustainability. The building in the background – the Education Resource Centre - is constructed using recycled wood. It features state-of-the-art e-learning resources, teleconference facilities, customisable teaching spaces – and perhaps most importantly for some – the largest Starbucks in Singapore.

Walking to the right, you come to the graduate residence which can house 1,700 graduate students. Moving along, you will reach the first 2 residential colleges, each of which can house 600 undergraduates. Students have single rooms but many of these are in clusters of 6 rooms with common facilities. About 6 - 7 faculty residents will live and teach in each College, which also has rooms for Visiting Professors from overseas. Apart from the formal courses in the College, there will be many informal talks by local and overseas speakers in a wide range of fields. Each College also has a dining hall which invites students to linger and mix, as well as seminar rooms and multipurpose halls for sports and cultural activities.

But that’s not all at University Town – 2 more residential colleges, the EduSports Complex, and other facilities will be completed next year. EduSports will have seminar rooms, a swimming pool, rock-climbing wall, dance theatre, and fitness facilities. At the heart of the building is a grand open plaza which will be a central gathering point for students and visitors.
Many, if not all of you will have classes scheduled in our new University Town. I hope you will like the new facilities and encourage you to make the most of this unique opportunity.

**Making the Useless, Useful**

After the orientation period, your mind will naturally turn to your academic work. NUS is noted for the rigour of its education. Over the years, as I speak with our students, I am impressed by their determination to do well academically. This is a good thing, which I am happy to note has remained a constant with successive Freshmen classes.

At the same time, I am sometimes struck by my conversations with some of our students who seem too ready to classify things into “useful” and “useless”. By “useless”, they often mean courses which are interesting to them but which may be hard to score high grades in; or activities which do not provide a direct benefit.

I am reminded by what Steve Jobs, CEO and co-founder of Apple, shared about his own experience. He said that the most important class he took in university was perhaps the one on Calligraphy. He probably thought it was “useless” at that time, but it didn’t stop him from taking it out of interest. Ten years after, Steve Jobs recalled that what he had learnt about serif and sans serif, and letter spacing, turned out to be very
useful as he was designing the Mac, the first computer with beautiful fonts and typography.

For our new Freshmen, I hope you too would take a broader view. University education is not about memorising facts, but about learning how to question, to analyse and to think. It is not about narrow intellectual training, but about the broadening of the mind. It is not just about the training of the mind, but about the development of the whole person.

As you consider the choice of courses to take, the global education options to pursue and co-curricular activities to be involved with, think carefully, and seek the advice of your teachers and mentors. Let me also offer three suggestions which may be helpful to you:

First, stretch yourself academically. You should consider taking some courses which are of interest to you but which are tougher; or go outside areas you are strong in. It is only by stretching yourself that you can really grow intellectually and realize your full academic potential.

Second, breadth is crucial. The nature of work is changing. It is far more common for graduates to have several jobs during the course of their careers, often in very different sectors. In fact, some of the most exciting jobs of the future may not even exist today. To be able to re-tool for completely different types of work, you need a broader intellectual base and the ability to see connections across a wide range of subjects.

Third, your future success depends not just on your grades but on your qualities as a person. Qualities such as leadership, resourcefulness and interpersonal skills can only be developed and honed experientially.

So, I would encourage you to consider a term abroad at our partner universities to gain cross-cultural perspectives. Choose a co-curricular activity that will challenge you personally and as a leader. Or involve yourself in community work, to serve others
while building your interpersonal skills. The sum of your formal and informal experiences will give you an edge when interacting and working with the diverse peoples you will encounter in the future.

**Conclusion**

Finally, see NUS as your testing ground to pursue your interests and satisfy your academic curiosity. You can create for yourself new experiences, and take the risk to stretch yourself and pursue excellence. At NUS, there is no lack of opportunities to try new things, to learn, unlearn and re-learn. I believe you will find the experience enriching and useful, and it would also make your university life much more memorable. And if you encounter obstacles and disappointments, overcoming these will make you a stronger person.

Lastly, don’t forget to connect with the people around you. A fellow academic shared with me this rather cynical quote: “Friends come and go, but enemies only accumulate”. I don’t agree with the part about friends. The deep friendships you make in University
will be among the most precious legacies of your time here. So make many friends and make time for them.

I wish you all the very best for the future! Have an amazing journey at NUS, pursue many useful things, consider doing some that may appear “useless” and above all, enjoy yourself.

Thank you!

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