

Freshmen Inauguration Ceremony

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A Guide to Our University: On Survival, Inquiry and Sophistication

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Student Leaders,
Colleagues and friends.

To our 104th Freshmen Class, welcome to NUS!

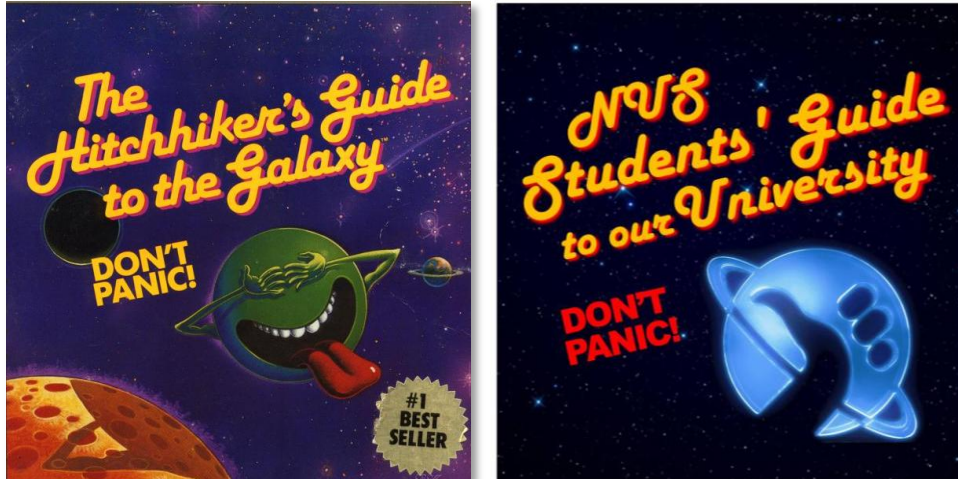
My colleagues and I share your great excitement at starting your NUS experience, and we look forward with anticipation to the new energy and creativity which you will bring to our community.

By now, you would have read our comprehensive admissions materials, and spoken to many friends and faculty. I will therefore not dwell on the distinctive aspects of NUS' education, such as our rigorous and rich undergraduate experience; our vibrant arts, sports and cultural life; and the myriad of global and research opportunities available to you.

Instead, I thought I would focus on a few broader but vital issues, the sort of things that should go into a "users" guide to our university.

A users' guide to our university

When I was your age, quite a long time ago, one of the books I enjoyed reading was the Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy. The book was very popular because it offers all kinds of advice for galactic travellers, the most useful one being "DON'T PANIC!"



The book observes that: *“The History of every major Galactic Civilization tends to pass through three distinct and recognizable phases, those of Survival, Inquiry and Sophistication.”*

Taking a cue from this, for our “NUS Students’ Guide to Our University”. I will like to share my thoughts under the same three headings: Survival, Inquiry and Sophistication

Survival

For some of you, “survival” might be your most immediate pre-occupation. Adapting to the rigour of the courses; establishing a new network of friends and peers; coping with an unfamiliar environment.

This is quite natural. In university, you will get to set your own course – which is at once a liberating experience and a potential source of anxiety. There will be many “ups” and likely a few “downs” as well. By taking these in your stride, by “surviving well”, you will hone your character and grow as an individual.

I would also urge you to move quickly beyond the “survival” mindset, to one that fully seizes the many opportunities in NUS, to develop as a well-rounded person, and to blossom as a future leader.

To do so, you must challenge yourself to try different things, some of which would test the limits of your ability. These could range from academic programmes which stretch you intellectually, to co-curricular activities that take you out of your comfort zone.

So, to move on from the conceptual to the actual - I offer you the example of Christel Quek who demonstrates that success in the working world isn't just about classroom learning. Christel is a Geography major who will be graduating next year and is a good example of how you too can design your individual paths to satisfy your interests and develop your talents.



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In addition to her school work, Christel actively pursued her interests in photography, design, writing and managing publicity events for a number of student groups.

These evolved into designing social media campaigns for companies like DBS Bank, KLM Airlines, Intel and Toshiba Digital. Today, Christel is recognised as one of Singapore's leading Social Media experts, and is currently the Global Manager of Social Marketing at Havas Media, the fifth largest communications group worldwide.

As Christel shows, qualities such as leadership, resourcefulness and interpersonal skills can only be developed and honed experientially, and not out of text-books. This requires a mindset that goes beyond "academic survival" and an undue focus on grades, to one that seeks and embraces broader challenges, and is driven by more multi-dimensional personal and academic interests.

Inquiry

When I was a medical student, I spent a lot of time using the Index Medicus. I think many of you may not have heard of the Index Medicus. This was a huge set of tomes that you had to plough through manually to search for specific medical publications. Of course, no one has to do this anymore. As we all know, finding information is easy today – in fact, our problem is being deluged with too much information.

For you, this has a crucial consequence. In our information age, one of the most important skills you can have is to be able to ask the right questions.

This starts from a habit of mind which critically evaluates information, which examines the underlying assumptions and which considers issues from different perspectives. It is based on strong foundational knowledge but also the ability to work things out from first principles, particularly for complex issues. It comes from testing and sharpening our thinking and ideas, through rigorous debate and open discussion with others.

It is not easy to learn how to do these well but I urge you to use your time at NUS to nurture and hone this vital quality – an inquiring mind, with the ability to ask good questions.

Sophistication

At NUS, you will be immersed in a very diverse and dynamic community, one which is at once Singaporean and global. The diversity of our community – with all disciplines represented, and with students and faculty from 100 countries – is one of our greatest assets.

As students, you will have unique opportunities to learn across disciplines, to understand different perspectives, and to be effective in different cross-cultural settings. One good example of this is a series of initiatives managed and led by Muhd Ilnur Rashad, Veerappan Swaminathan and Tan Huei Ming who are graduates from the Faculty of Engineering. The trio works closely with USP students Ian Gan, Eddie Choo and David Tan whose home Faculties are Engineering, Arts and Science respectively.

Their projects are conceived cross disciplines and settings in order to cultivate environmental awareness, innovation and global responsibility.

The Ground-Up Initiative was started in 2008. Here, volunteers create awareness for sustainable living in a *Kampung* or village setting at Yishun. Visitors learn about eco-technology and environmentally friendly practices while experiencing *Kampung* style living. This initiative was extended by the Sustainable Living Lab project which invites engineering companies and innovators to prototype techniques that can be used by such communities.



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There are many other examples of how our campus diversity creates a rich learning and social environment. Indeed, a hallmark of a *sophisticated* community such as ours is the value we place on diversity, our openness to new ideas, and our willingness to engage constructively with others from different backgrounds.

As students, you play a key role in growing these aspects of our community, even as you gain from them. Our diverse campus community will enable you to gain valuable

cross-disciplinary and cross-cultural perspectives, if you actively participate in vigorous debate and discussion, and work with people from other cultures and backgrounds both in and outside the classroom.

In the course of these, we should always keep in mind that respect and mutual understanding are critical. In particular, vigorous discourse and debate are essential but in a sophisticated community, we should be able to put our ideas across without being offensive, and to be able to disagree without being disagreeable.

My colleagues and I are proud of our diverse and sophisticated community, and we look forward to working with you to further enrich it.

Conclusion: Don't Panic

In closing, I hope you will have an amazing journey at NUS. To return to the Hitchhiker's Guide, you can make a good start by remembering its opening advice, which is: DON'T PANIC!

You will soon be comfortably settled in our NUS community and do more than just survive. You should move beyond the "survival" mindset, to one that seizes the many opportunities in NUS, to be a well-rounded person and to develop and grow as a leader. To develop an inquiring mind with the ability to ask the right questions, to be part of, and to contribute to, the increasing sophistication of our community, which values diversity and the openness to new ideas

With that, to our freshmen of 2012, welcome once again to our NUS community!