Thank you. And thank you to the Department of Languages, Literature, and Cultures for inviting me here today.

Congratulations to not just all of you. Your presence here today indicates that you have succeeded in not just in learning a foreign language, but doing so with distinction. You have persevered despite years of confusion, or at the very least, year of only half-understanding. I would maintain that you have persevered in learning your chosen language despite the discomfort of confusion, despite the possibility you will misspeak, and you have persevered despite the very real possibility that you will sound foolish.

That, to me, was always the tough part. The possibility that you’ll look foolish. You work and you study and you triple check but in the end there is still some small error that in its stupidity is really not a small error anymore. For instance, accidently referring to Marcel Proust in the feminine was not a small error to my lit professor in France. So learning a language can be dangerous because errors can mean more than our intentions. It doesn’t take much to appear foolish—and that can be nerve-wracking.
That’s how I feel right now. I’m nervous to be up here. I’m certainly not used to being up here. But I think I have something to say, something I hope is helpful. But I’m not sure if I can communicate it, or if it will make sense once it all comes out. So, there’s something at risk. And this risk is the very same one that you encounter each time you speak a foreign language. You have something to say. You want to say it, but it is really possible that your listener is not going to get it. You’ll make some error that impedes this communication. But you try anyway. You try to speak the language despite the risk involved. And by you, here, I mean the ambitious student of which we have many examples sitting in this room. I speak to you today because we are not so far apart in age or experience and I know the efforts it has taken to get you to your seat today.

No one in this room will tell you that knowledge of a foreign language is easily won. It takes years of fastidious commitment, hours of review, and days fighting the urge to drop the course just so you don’t have to write the next paper. Learning a language, or at least learning for proficiency, is memorizing, perfecting, adopting. You memorize the words. You perfect the construction. You adopt the meaning. All of these tasks take relentless drive—relentless in its expectation of perfection, in the expectation of success.

But you already are this way. You are already ambitious, already expecting success. You push hard at any task and don’t cut yourself any slack. This is an oversimplification, but an embodiment of a trait that you have naturally. If you did
not expect success of yourself, you would not have persevered. And perseverance is a necessity as to learn a language; you must absorb so much content to be able to communicate the most basic idea. If you were not striving, you could not have mounted the first step of proficiency.

However, it is not commitment that I’ve learned from my foreign language education. Rather, it is the ability to push forward against the opposing force of self-consciousness. As achievers, you and I fall prey more easily to the self-consciousness of language learning. As achievers, you are used to success, not easy success by any means, but you are used to being successful with unquestioning hard work. You are accustomed to working hard to maintain control—whether that be simple control over your grades or a greater control over your education.

Of course, you can have some level of control your language learning- you can study one more hour, read the material more times, or seek outside help. However, language mastery is beyond control because it is a task that cannot be undertaken as a singular learner. At one point or another, you have to actually speak to someone. And you have to actually speak to someone who knows more than you do.

This, necessarily, comes with anxiety that the errors you commit will reflect poorly on your entire person. Your identity as the successful student is somehow compromised. Confusing the plural subject with the singular subject is no longer an
error of verb agreement, but in the ambitious student, a reflection that you are not in control. You have made the error and cannot take it back.

Some of these errors are of course graver than others. So, in my experience the amount of embarrassment can vary greatly. Wishing your professor a good night instead of a good afternoon is mildly embarrassing. Asking a fishmonger for poison—poison—instead of fish—poisson— is moderately embarrassing. Watching your French waiter act out the hopping of a bunny when you don’t recognize the word “lapin” for rabbit on the menu verges on humiliation. In my experience, studying abroad in an immersion program is consenting to appear stupid for 6 months. You have to consent to not knowing what you are doing, surrounded by people who not only know what they’re doing, but who also know that you are totally faking it.

But, there is no way to take back your cluelessness. Explaining to the fishmonger that you don’t really want to poison anyone isn’t going to make him (or you) forget your error. Instead, you must smile apologetically and accept the explanations of others. This is not only embarrassing, but also costs you the control that you’ve tried to grasp by mastering a language. But, in order to regain control you have to keep pushing forward and study the very language that embarrassed you in the first place. So, there is a conflict of goals. We all want to be successful. To be successful, we are ambitious and striving. And as we are ambitious, we fear the embarrassment into which we are diving, head-first.
It seems like a Catch-22, that to succeed you need to have a personality that fears failure and yet that failure somehow is an intrinsic part of successful learning. But, mitigating the fear and the necessary failure is the most valuable skill I've learned from my foreign language education and the skill that has served me the best in my launch into the professional world.

In my experience, particularly my time abroad in France, there was a limit to the usefulness of my hours spent memorizing. Of course, I had memorized and recited my list of nouns, verbs, and constructions with which I could make conversation. But, words are not objects—you cannot list them to use them. You can’t regurgitate structures learned for a quiz three-quarters of the way through a wine tasting. You will try. And they will not understand you.

But what I am proposing isn't, excuse the pun, totally foreign. That memorization and fastidious study can only take you so far. Our striving, ambitious selves are unsettled by this—or at least mine is. That hard work and determination can’t take you the whole way. I think this is especially at play in foreign language.

Memorization and regurgitation hinder mastery because they turn words into objects. They force you to arrange a series of meanings, often opposing or at least vaguely conflicting with each other. You end up using words as building blocks without considering what the structure is that you are building. The case in point
with my earlier example, the hopping waiter. After a particularly long day of classes, I was reading the menu at dinner and zeroed in on the one word on the menu that I couldn’t recall from the recesses of Unit 4: Farm Animals. Of course, I think of it now and I’ve known the word for years. For so long that its identification takes milliseconds. But in that moment, it wouldn’t come to me, so that one foreign word was all I saw. And my brain freeze was somehow a failure on my part and the fear of foolishness limited my capabilities even further. Had I read the surrounding dish description, I could’ve faked it. I like mashed potatoes and I love Shepherd’s Pie, so even if I didn’t know which meat was inside I probably would’ve liked it anyway. But, my ambition anxiety made me so concerned about that one word. So then the waiter, reading me, also became concerned about the one, singular word- the one singular unit of meaning. He wasn’t explaining the dish. He was engaging my word obsession. And that is how you end up with a hopping waiter.

And so, to avoid the embarrassment of restaurant charades, I propose what I so failed at while I was abroad: I suggest adding an ounce of Negative Capability to your daily diet. I wish I had done so in France, I wish I had done so in the weeks leading up to graduation and I still wish it was something I was any good at.

For those of you who have not yet completed your L requirement, Negative Capability is a term used in poetry and philosophy but was first used by English poet John Keats in a letter to his brother. To quote Keats directly, “Negative Capability is when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any
irritable reaching after fact and reason”. For my purposes, it is a state where you do not have the answer and yet do not strive to reach it immediately. This was my error with the hopping waiter—I was unable to dwell in uncertainty. I could not just order my dinner without a definitive answer to the contents of the Shepherd’s Pie.

I venture to say that this is the short-coming of achievers. To be an achiever, you are so goal oriented (often with laser focus on that goal) that to dwell in uncertainty seems like a waste of time, or even worse a mark of failure, a mark of deviating from the path of your goal.

This is certainly my shortcoming, now and when I was abroad. To learn the language, certainly you need drills and memorization. However, to speak it, and to speak it with any sense beyond “Je m’appelle Emily” requires letting go. It requires finding your meaning before finding the words. And if you can forget being wrong, or seeming stupid, for just a few moments, you find that you know what you’re doing and you know what you want to say. Focusing on individual words, or individual units of meaning makes you unable to construct any global meaning.

More than anything, I want to say that focus on your own need to be perfect, your need to be right impedes your ability to succeed outside of the achievement model. In my launch into the professional world, I clung to the achievement model. In the achievement model, you have a clear short-term goal to apply rigorous energy to. I could succeed with assessment within the achievement model. Because in
assessment, there is an answer. You can try really, really hard for a little while. And then it is out of your hands. Some higher power can tell you what you did right or wrong and your letter grade will tell you just how well you succeeded. Everyone here is great at the achievement model. You are periodically tested and often succeed.

However, this model does not survive outside your education, and from what I understand, does not even really exist outside your undergraduate education. In the working world, no one will tell you that you did an A plus job on that email to your supervisor’s boss. Rather, you need to be comfortable not knowing. You don’t know whether the subject line of that email was right. Or whether that letter really said what you wanted it to say. Instead, you have to accept that you don’t understand all the rules of the game you’re playing. You don’t know if what you implied was actually communicated. You’re operating under an entirely separate set of premises that no one has taught you.

And I am one of the lucky ones. My bosses know me. They knew me as a student and they know me now. They will tell me when something was right; they’ll tell me when I’ve slipped up.

But still, everyday, I want to be the best. I want to be the best in the position, or at least to defy and surpass expectations. This is my plight as the ambitious former student. But this is not a possibility in my working life, because I still don’t speak the
professional language fluently. I can force units of meaning together, I can force letters and emails together piecemeal. I can try to construct sensitive requests without knowing exactly what concerns I am trying to be sensitive to. But that is not mastery. And there is no mastery until I can accept I don't know, use Negative Capability, and fake it until I have absorbed enough language to speak the language fluently.

This method of adapting is the one I have learned here, within my French courses and within French restaurants, grocery stores and administrative offices. I have learned what it takes. It takes striving devotion matched with easy-going acceptance. And that is the best advice I can offer you. You will succeed. You will be great. You may not be the best. But don't let your ambition to be the best allow you to forget you are still learning. And, with any luck, we will all always be learning.

Thank you for having me here today and my sincerest congratulations to all inductees today on your remarkable achievement.