Thinking like an immigrant
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It is an honor to be here, congratulating the graduating MS and Ph.D. UNL students, their families and friends, and the great UNL system that made it possible.

You are the cream of the intellectual crop that we produce. And that means that you belong to a select group that can think deeper than most, have the endurance to pursue your thoughts longer than most, and can communicate some of those thoughts more eloquently than most.

And because you can think deeper and longer than most, I am going to guess that many of you are not just enthusiastic about your future, but you feel a bit fearful as well. Expectations are high and there are many unknowns.

Let me tell you my secret to dealing with such fear and uncertainty: think like an immigrant.

For full disclosure and as you may have guessed, I am one of the 13% of the US population that was not born here. Like many, I am an immigrant. I also consider myself fortunate to be a citizen of the United States, a country founded by immigrants.

While I know enough immigrants to realize that I cannot generalize to the experience of all immigrants, let me take a stab at this and argue that all immigrants have at least one thing in common: every immigrant wants an opportunity. An opportunity to pursue happiness, to live in peace, to succeed in some endeavor, to grow. Just like I did. Just like you are about to do. And in pursuing that opportunity immigrants tend to do some things worth observing and even mimicking.

Today I want to focus on just five of those traits, traits that were important to my development as a young man leaving the comfort of my family, my friends, and the Argentinian society, when I felt unsatisfied with the prospects for learning and building something new there. I am not sure the exact moment when that happened, but I recall seeing a faulty inspirational sticker at that time saying “the sky is the limit”, and I may have taken that as a sign.

These traits emerged as I tried, with some fear and much uncertainty, to define a new path in a country I admired but did not really know. Traits that I believe were and are critical to the development of this country of immigrants, and that could be useful to you as you transition to this new phase of your life.
The first trait is courage to take on big-opportunities. Immigrants have the courage to leave dear people and places behind to pursue an opportunity. Immigrants are able to recognize and value that opportunity and really go all in. The cynic in us may want to say that for some folks migrating is not much of a sacrifice as the situations they face are really desperate. However, I have yet to meet an immigrant that does not reminisce about where they came from, or about something they left behind. And there are many more that stayed behind in that context, that did not recognize the opportunity, that did not take the risk.

So just like an immigrant, keep your eyes open and be ready to bet big when that opportunity comes.

Second, immigrants generally do not go back “home” except for visits and they even send money to their parents’ home. I can hear parents and relatives saying YES, that is a good one! But the concept of home is a fluid and complex one for an immigrant. Is it where you are born? Where you live? The country on your passport? Where your kids grow up? Your property? The reality is that as immigrants we build many homes along the way as we forge our path. And over time we learn which homes to keep visiting, which ones can serve as points of reference, and which ones we would rather foreclose. We are also extremely sensitive to the fact that no matter how good a home appears to be, there is a possibility that we misjudged it.

So just like the immigrant, keep pursuing Your own path, building and assessing homes along the way, and being willing to accept that your home may not be perfect.

Third, immigrants have different perspectives. It is not just the look, the accent, the dress code, the skin color, … Not having the same economic, social, intellectual opportunities as those around us gives the immigrant a unique perspective. We all have tunnel vision, we know what we know and what we can imagine from what we know. The immigrant has navigated at least one different tunnel, one with a distinct view, and that has incredible value when integrated in the rich context of this country. Just in my field of computing, that perspective contributed to the creation of companies like Google, Intel, and Tesla, companies driven by innovation leaders that brought their perspectives from Russia, Hungary, and South Africa.

So, just like an immigrant, try to look at everything from a different perspective and get some new perspective from others to broaden your own personal tunnel.
Fourth, immigrants have a sense of almost belonging but never quite. There are the benign but nonetheless missed cultural references or jokes in casual conversations that make you feel not quite there. There is an uneasiness when re-entering the US, even after becoming a citizen, conditioned perhaps by previous entering experiences. There are those scary feelings when there are talks about building a wall. There are people just like I was, or I am, or you are, behind that proverbial wall. That sense of belonging but not quite completely is often a powerful driver, a motor that runs because it is never satisfied.

So just like the immigrant, embrace that feeling of not being quite there yet, use it to remain hungry, and tap into it to propel you forward.

Last, immigrants often have friends in many places. That helps to deal with life’s ups and downs, as those will inevitably be there, and there is nothing like the safety net of loved ones for when support is needed. I hope that you feel that we at UNL are one of those places for you. And so, just like an immigrant, visit us and count on us, your academic home. And no, you do not need to remember to send money home to UNL. We are very good at sending reminders.

Now I understand that many of you may not have this “immigrant” advantage, but you can adopt an immigrant mindset. Also note that I do not advocate for you to migrate, this country needs you more than ever, but I do want you to think more like an immigrant, to be ready to pursue those high-risk opportunities, to build a worthy path full of homes, to look at things differently and appreciate different perspectives, to remain hungry, and to consider us one of your homes. After all, you are the cream of our academic crop.

Congratulations and best of luck to all of you.