

Name _____

Speech: Excerpt from Michelle Obama's Commencement Speech

Context: Former First Lady Michelle Obama gave the graduation commencement speech at City College of New York in 2016; it was her last commencement speech in her role as First Lady. Read each section of the speech and answer the questions for each section.

Just look around. Look at who you are. Look at where we're gathered today. As the President [of the college] eloquently said, at this school, you represent more than 150 nationalities. You speak more than 100 different languages -- whoa, just stop there. You represent just about every possible background -- every color and culture, every faith and walk of life. And you've taken so many different paths to this moment.

Maybe your family has been in this city for generations, or maybe, like my family, they came to this country centuries ago in chains. Maybe they just arrived here recently, determined to give you a better life.

1. From the first paragraph, what can we tell about the student population at City College of New York (CCNY)?

2. In the second paragraph, Obama says, "[M]aybe, like my family, [your family] came to this country centuries ago in chains." What is this an allusion to?

3. Provide one example of parallel structure from this section.

4. Anaphora is a rhetorical device that is repetition of a word or phrase at the beginnings of sentences in a row. One example is "Look at who you are. Look at where we are gathered today." What is another example of anaphora in this section?

But, graduates, no matter where your journey started, you have all made it here today through the same combination of unyielding determination, sacrifice, and a whole lot of hard work -- commuting hours each day to class, some of you. Yes, amen. Juggling multiple jobs to support your families and pay your tuition. Studying late into the night, early in the morning; on subways and buses, and in those few precious minutes during breaks at work.

And somehow, you still found time to give back to your communities -- tutoring young people, reading to kids, volunteering at hospitals. Somehow, you still managed to do prestigious internships and research fellowships, and join all kinds of clubs and activities. And here at this nationally-ranked university, with a rigorous curriculum and renowned faculty, you rose to the challenge, distinguishing yourselves in your classes, winning countless honors and awards, and getting into top graduate schools across this country.

5. Provide two examples of parallel structure from this section.

6. Obama has already mentioned that CCNY is culturally diverse. In what other ways is the student body diverse? (Hint: Are all of the students 18-22 year olds who live on campus as traditional students? What does she imply about the students at CCNY?)

So, graduates, with your glorious diversity, with your remarkable accomplishments and your deep commitment to your communities, you all embody the very purpose of this school's founding. And, more importantly, you embody the very hopes and dreams carved into the base of that iconic statue not so far from where we sit -- on that island where so many of your predecessors at this school first set foot on our shores.

And that is why I wanted to be here today at City College. I wanted to be here to celebrate all of you, this school, this city. (Applause.) Because I know that there is no better way to celebrate this great country than being here with you.

7. What statue is Obama alluding to in this section?

8. Why is that statue relevant or significant to mention to this particular student body?

9. Provide one example of parallel structure from this section.

See, all of you know, for centuries, this city has been the gateway to America for so many striving, hope-filled immigrants -- folks who left behind everything they knew to seek out this land of opportunity that they dreamed of. And so many of those folks, for them, this school was the gateway to actually realizing that opportunity in their lives, founded on the fundamental truth that talent and ambition know no distinctions of race, nationality, wealth, or fame, and dedicated to the ideals that our Founding Fathers put forth more than two centuries ago: That we are all created equal, all entitled to "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." City College became a haven for brilliant, motivated students of every background, a place where they didn't have to hide their last names or their accents, or put on any kind of airs because the students at this school were selected based not on pedigree, but on merit, and merit alone.

10. What does Obama mean when she says that this city (and for some, this school) was a "gateway"?

11. What document does Obama allude to in the middle of the paragraph? Why is that an appropriate allusion for this paragraph?

So really, it is no accident that this institution has produced 10 Nobel Prize winners -- (applause) -- along with countless captains of industry, cultural icons, leaders at the highest levels of government. Because talent and effort combined with our various backgrounds and life experiences has always been the lifeblood of our singular American genius.

Just take the example of the great American lyricist, Ira Gershwin, who attended City College a century ago. The son of a Russian-Jewish immigrant, his songs still light up Broadway today. Or consider the story of the former CEO of Intel, Andrew Grove, class of 1960. He was a Hungarian immigrant whose harrowing escape from Nazism and communism shaped both his talent for business and his commitment to philanthropy.

And just think about the students in this very graduating class -- students like the economics and pre-law major from Albania, who also completed the requirements for a philosophy major and dreams of being a public intellectual. The educational theater student from right here in Harlem who's already an award-winning playwright and recently spoke at the White House. The biomedical science major who was born in Afghanistan and plans to be a doctor, a policy maker and an educator. And your salutatorian, whose Yemeni roots inspired her to study Yemini women's writing and to advocate for girls in her community, urging them to find their own voices, to tell their own stories. I could go on.

12. In the first paragraph of this section, what does Obama say is the "lifeblood of our . . . American genius"?

13. Underline the examples Obama provides to illustrate the diversity of the student population at CCNY.

14. Provide an example of parallel structure from this section.

These are just four of the nearly 4,000 unique and amazing stories in this graduating class -- stories that have converged here at City College, this dynamic, inclusive place where you all have had the chance to really get to know each other, to listen to each other's languages, to enjoy each other's food -- lasagna, obviously -- music, and holidays. Debating each other's ideas, pushing each other to question old assumptions and consider new perspectives.

And those interactions have been such a critical part of your education at this school. Those moments when your classmates showed you that your stubborn opinion wasn't all that well-informed -- mmm hmm. Or when they opened your eyes to an injustice you never knew existed. Or when they helped you with a question that you couldn't have possibly answered on your own. . . .

That is the power of our differences to make us smarter and more creative. And that is how all those infusions of new cultures and ideas, generation after generation, created the matchless alchemy of our melting pot and helped us build the strongest, most vibrant, most prosperous nation on the planet, right here.

15. According to Obama this section, what do we stand to gain when we are surrounded by diverse people and cultures? List at least four things.

16. The term "melting pot" has been used for a couple of centuries to describe America. How is it an appropriate term to be used here?

