

Hello, my name is Anna and I am from Greece. When I left my home, many years ago, my only purpose was... to return as soon as possible... to return with a luggage filled of experiences, memories, wisdom, and skills. More than a decade later and I'm still working on it. As the Greek poet, Cavafy, once wrote, "When you set sail for Ithaca, wish for the road to be long, full of adventures, full of knowledge". In this poem, the island of Ithaca represents our dreams and aspirations, our goals. Throughout my life and career I have set many goals, however, today, I will only focus on one of my biggest goals: to wear this large blue hood.

Was this road long? Yes, it was! 1594 days to be exact. Some of these days seemed endless, tiring, full of obstacles and often came with many disappointments. Not to mention, the numerous days that were filled with deadlines! Oh boy, these deadlines could tear families apart... And of course, I will never forget the days that I was missing my home and family and a phone call was not enough. But.....no matter how challenging a day was, I never gave up! My perseverance and stubbornness led to days full of successes and achievements, happy days, like today, the day of our graduation! Throughout my journey, I have met amazing people from all around the world, people who I can call friends and family.

Was this road full of adventures? Well... would you call an adventure, being "chased" by ABAC police while my team and I were in the field collecting samples in the middle of the night? Or the other time that we had to resort to dumpster diving, yes, to dumpster diving, to save samples that were thrown away by mistake? Not to mention that those samples were never used and thrown back in the dumpster again... If yes, then every single day was an adventure. Stories, as such, made my trip unique and priceless!

Was this road full of knowledge? Definitely! Education was the greatest gift I have ever received and studying abroad was one of the best decisions I have ever made! This experience not only helped me to broaden my knowledge in my area of interest, but additionally, it helped me to learn about cooperation, respect, kindness, love, and culture. I learned that life is not controlled by physical laws, it can be complicated and hard yet flexible and rewarding. I learned to take risks, pave my own path and recognize my mistakes. Living in Tifton made me appreciate the little things, taught me about southern mannerisms, such as saying "good morning sir", "how u doing ma'am", and enriched my vocabulary with expressions like "over yonder" and the all-time classic "y'all"! Being a student at UGA-Tifton taught me about responsibilities and how to take initiatives.

I learned how to lead but also how to be a member of a team. I learned the importance of offering help and appreciating the help that was offered to me. And of course, I learned how to surpass difficulties, like what to do when a truck gets stuck in the mud, and how to have fun during a long and tiring day. Good music and funny conversations saved many of those days!

I am leaving Tifton and UGA with an overweighted luggage. A luggage filled with good memories, and for those memories, I would like to thank the people that worked with me and never said no to a long day in the field or the lab. Of course, my supervisor, Dr. Porter, who provided me with invaluable guidance throughout my research as well as Dr. Vellidis, who hired me as a technician back in 2015. Thank you both for believing in me. I wouldn't be here today without your help. I would also like to thank the administration, faculty and staff of UGA Tifton campus. Thank you for making this campus a better place, and I hope next time I visit, our request for sidewalks and bike lanes will have been materialized. Thank you for educating us and preparing us for our future. For inspiring us! To our families and friends, thank you for your love, caring, support, and sacrifices.

My fellow graduates, I am sure that each one of us has a different story to tell about today's milestone, but I believe we can all agree with the philosopher Aristotle, who said ... "The root of education is bitter, but the fruit is sweet". With that I would like to congratulate each one of us! The degree we are getting today might be our ticket to a dream job, a great life, but I truly hope we will also use it as a tool for making the world a better place for everybody, regardless of gender, race, religion and sexual orientation. Let's have as a goal to do big things, inspiring things and to not be afraid to take risks. Let's make this our own journey and to not follow the road that is laid out in front of us... and if... if we ever feel our luggage doesn't fit more memories, adventures and knowledge, let's buy one more, a bigger one! I am sure we will never regret it! Congratulations to us all!

Thank you!