

We Belong Together, We Are Stronger Together

In every culture of the world, ceremonies are important. They are important because they are a kind of glue. They form a bond between individuals and the cultures, communities, and countries they are part of. They form a bond between the past and the present. They form a bond between people and place.

In the weeks leading up to this Welcome Ceremony, we have begun to introduce our newest members to UWC-USA culture at its best.

- It started with pickup at the airport, where first years were warmly greeted and brought to Montezuma by bus to be embraced by the entire student body. These warm greetings expressed something simple: You belong. We belong together.
- Then it was time for orientation. First years were guided through a whirlwind of information. Second years led the way. The purpose, to begin to understand how the mission, values, structures and community standards we share make our communal life possible. These many days of learning about our academic, experiential, and residential expectations expressed something simple: You will be challenged to be and do your best. We will be challenged to be and do our best together.
- Wilderness excursions tested our newest members. They tested their willingness to stretch themselves to learn new things. They tested their endurance. They tested their ability to rely on themselves and on one another. These excursions expressed something simple: You are strong. We are stronger together.
- And last week, we held our matriculation ceremony. One by one, our first years called one another by name to sign the college register. They worked hard to pronounce the names of their classmates with care, forming sounds that in many cases were unfamiliar. And by calling their names, they called them into this community. A community that is a living expression of the possibility of building bridges between diverse people in a world seemingly more inclined to build walls. After signing the college register, our first years crossed over to join our second years and take their place among them. The matriculation ceremony expressed something simple: You matter. Our life together matters.

Now among the rituals that introduce our first years to the culture of UWC-USA, the Welcome Ceremony is by far the most spectacular. We are treated to the beauty of one another's national dress and the colorful national flags carried with pride by our second years. We can't help but smile at this impressive display of human, national, and cultural diversity.

What I want to reflect on with you tonight is the national diversity we see represented here in the flags that grace our dining hall and our tables. Among our 227 students, 94 countries are represented. Our faculty hails from many countries as well. The flags all around us express national pride. They express a bond between citizens and their countries, between the past and the present, between people and the places they come from.

But we also know that flags can represent something else. They can express boundaries that say “We belong here, but you do not.” That can say “We are interested in what is best for us, but not for you.” That can say “We are strong, and you are not part of that strength.” That can say “We matter, you don’t.” In short, flags can represent barriers between us: Borders we are not welcome to cross. Political freedoms we are not welcome to share. Human suffering that isn’t our concern.

And so this ceremony poses a question for us. How do we make sure that our flags don’t become barriers between us?

This is not an easy question. Our year together will be the answer we give. How we make room for one another to belong; how we support one another in our challenges to be and do our best; how we learn from and respect one another’s strengths; how we tell others they matter by our words and actions--these will be the ways that we represent what is best in the nations and cultures we come from. These will be the ways we form a community based on the UWC values that shape our culture and make our communal life together possible.

Our life together here is an experiment. It is an experiment not just for ourselves, but for the world. A world that is inextricably connected. Connected by the pressure on its lands and waters. Connected by the economies that bring workers along or leave them behind. Connected by the refugees and migrants who are on the move across the globe, asking us to reconsider the human toll of corrupt political regimes, war, human rights violations, and environments no longer suited to sustain life.

Our life together here is a microcosm of what the world might be. How we might learn from our differences rather than fear them. How we might solve problems together rather than blame one another for them. How we might begin to believe that our choices actually do matter for the future that is coming.

Our life together is an experiment in creating a world in which everyone belongs, everyone is challenged to be and do their best, everyone is allowed to contribute their strength, everyone matters. Let’s make good on this experiment in living, learning, and serving together. Welcome to all!