

Fall Convocation, Sept. 29, 2004
Remarks by Undergraduate Student Kalen Ridenour

Good morning. My name is Kalen Ridenour. I recently participated in the Education Abroad Program with the intention of heightening my proficiency in the Spanish language. What I didn't fully realize is that this experience would give me so much more than simply language skills.

Two years ago, I first learned of a concept in a Spanish class here at UC Davis that I would like to share with you today. It was an idea that didn't fully make sense to me until I completed my EAP experience. The term is called "cosmovision," which, literally translated to English, means "world vision." It's a concept that I feel is largely foreign to most Americans. Indeed, it does not suffice simply to translate the name of this concept to all of you. I've come to understand it only gradually, and only through the course of my Education Abroad experience in Chile.

To give you a better idea, cosmovision can best be described as an extensive knowledge and appreciation for a wide variety of cultures, peoples and paradigms. Although it is difficult to fully describe this concept, the best way of coming to comprehend it is simply to experience your own radical paradigm shift. Certainly, I don't believe I would have been able to fully appreciate the importance of cosmovision until I ventured abroad for the first time.

You see, one of the many things I discovered through my Education Abroad experience is that we as humans establish limits, or borders, within ourselves. These borders are generally limited to our own everyday experiences that only take place in our individual, comfortable worlds. Personally, I didn't know of this boundary within myself until I forced myself to cross over it, into the unknown, and sometimes, the uncomfortable. Herein lies the importance of cosmovision: as our world grows more and more diverse, it is increasingly important that we test our own comfortable limits and see things from another's perspective.

Growing up, I never perceived myself as being sheltered. I always paid attention to whatever news was going on in the world at the time, and I moved around a fair amount, which put me in contact with new and interesting people. But if I were to travel to San Francisco, for example, I would still find myself trying not to stare at the homeless people in the streets. I guess you can imagine what an abrupt culture shock it was for me to suddenly be in a metropolis of over six million people in a third-world country. Instantly I had to develop an entirely new way of interacting with people on different levels than I was – be it economic, social or cultural. For the first time in my life, I experienced what it was like to be a member of a minority group. I was able, for the first time, to truly take a step back and view my country as an outsider looking in.

I feel that my Education Abroad experience has given me this irreplaceable sense of cosmovision. I believe that we as Americans tend to think that there exists more concrete, tangible borders separating us from the rest of the world, but in reality I believe the opposite to be true. These perceived borders are, in a large part, imaginary and subjective. It is often hard to force ourselves outside of our comfortable square that we've worked our entire lives establishing, but it's completely worth the effort.

Perhaps some of you today are starting here at Davis this fall, and are leaving your homes and your families for the first time. This is an important and valuable step in the process, but there are further lengths that you can push yourself to. Others in the audience today might have already lived abroad for a period of time or may even be native to other countries. But for everyone who is not, I strongly encourage you to truly consider living in and experiencing a foreign country. I guarantee that you'll discover an entirely new side to things. I know that I have.

Thank you.