Thank you President Anderson. I would also like to extend a warm welcome to all of you for being here today. I am honored to be able to share a little bit about my time at St. Olaf, and the path I took to become interested in my majors in Asian Studies and Chemistry, and how I also became interested in becoming a physician in my time after St. Olaf.

I’ll start with a story from my interim abroad last year in China. We were in Beijing, and I had convinced a friend on the trip to come with me to a traditional Chinese medicine physician to see how they would treat her back pain. After a valiant effort of trying to communicate with the desk workers, we managed to find a kind man who was willing to do a little on-the-spot translating for us. We waited a very short time before we were brought in to see a physician, and soon after we entered the room we were bombarded with:

请你离开房间？我现在必须检查病人的舌头。

Don’t worry: the words flew right over my head too. Our on-the-spot “translator” informed us that the doctor had just said to me “Could you please exit the room? I must now examine the patient’s tongue”. I nodded and walked out into the crowded hallway outside of the Chinese physician’s office and sat down on the old wooden bench outside, wondering what examining the tongue had to do with back pain. I vividly remember thinking on that bench: how did I get here?
I thought back to my first exposure to Asia, which came early in my 6th grade history class, by way of a visiting teacher from China who attempted to teach us Chinese characters. I vividly remember sitting in class as my usual teacher, Mr. Alcott, told us our assignment for tomorrow was to go home and research the other four communist countries in the world besides China, to which our visiting Chinese teacher told us “No, actually China is socialist.” I will never forget the look on Mr. Alcott’s face as he stood behind her, sighing and attempting to signal to us that yes, indeed, China was a communist country. They went back and forth on the matter for a little bit before Mr. Alcott ceded that she was not going to change her mind. He still managed to get the final word on the matter by mouthing to us silently from behind her, “Yes, China is communist!”

Being as young as I was, I found it all a bit odd, and I found my Chinese teacher a little strict and expecting quite a bit from us. After just two days of exposing us to Chinese characters, she gave us a test that required us to write 35 of them from memory – which I can barely do now mind you – and we all promptly failed. For many, this was the first “F” they had ever seen. There were tears. The impression of how different her teaching style and personality was from the teachers I usually had was not lost on me – and this was to be my last real exposure to Asia for many years.

Jump now to the fall of 2012 – I was about to start my first year at St. Olaf and at first, I was thinking I was going to be a history major. I enrolled in the Great Conversation program, a history class covering the High Middle Ages, and a calculus class to fill a GE. However, I could not decide what class I should take for my fourth slot.
I remember seeing a class titled “Asian Cultures” and thought, “Well, if there’s one place I know almost nothing about, it’s Asia. And that’s a lot of places and peoples that I know very, very little about.” It also fulfilled a GE requirement, so that may have also factored in a little. I promptly registered for the class, excited about the diverse schedule I was able to get for my first semester at St. Olaf.

It was here that I had my first exposure to Chinese medicine. For one of our units in class we read Ted Kaptchuk’s *The Web That Has No Weaver*, a well-known book that describes the basic principles of Chinese medicine and its differences with biomedicine. I loved the book, and I was entranced by the complete difference in philosophical outlook that the Chinese mind had on the world. I remember reading the passages about Daoism, *yin* and *yang*, and was struck not necessarily by the ideas themselves but the fact that they were *so different* from anything I had learned about before. I remember thinking: how is it possible to conceive of a web that has no weaver? But the philosophical framework of Chinese medicine did exactly this.

This sealed it: I was going to take Chinese and continue to explore Chinese culture. I wanted to chase this feeling of challenging everything I knew, everything that I took for granted. It became the perfect challenge for me, as it was something I had no exposure to (outside of the 6th grade Chinese debacle) and also provided a window into a completely other world. I also hoped that studying an Asian language and culture would also help me to evaluate my own culture, language, and worldview, and ultimately make me a better global citizen in the future.
Now, if my embracing of Chinese wasn’t already enough of a surprise to my parents, it was also about this time that I suddenly found myself also falling into the arms of the sciences. Since I was determined to explore as many disciplines as possible, I had decided to give the sciences another try, which, by the way, isn’t really something you can usually say after some time in college – unless you are at a liberal arts school! I signed up for an introductory biology class over the summer following my first year at St. Olaf and absolutely loved it. This ultimately led me down the path of more and more science, culminating in my embracing of Chemistry, a once hated and feared nemesis in high school.

Fast forward now to my junior year. I had a year and a half of Chinese language under my belt, and I signed up to go abroad to China through a St. Olaf interim program. It was on this trip that I had that encounter with the Chinese medicine physician I mentioned earlier – and it was on this trip that I realized Asia was going to be a part of my life forever. The question then became: how was I to combine my interests in science with my interests in China?

It was also at this same time that I began to become drawn towards medicine as a possible future career. My father is a radiologist, and naturally, being the rebellious teenager I was, I had always vowed to avoid following that path. However, I had become a chemist, which was also my father’s major and my grandfather’s major when they both attended college. It therefore wasn’t that far out of the question that I could also become a physician as he had done. A career in medicine became more and more appealing for similar reasons as to why I was drawn to Chinese – not only for the personal and intellectual challenges associated with medical education and practice or learning the Chinese language, but also because of the exciting ways you can use what you learn to help somebody heal or, in the case of Chinese, to communicate across cultural boundaries.
After that encounter with the traditional Chinese physician in Beijing, something clicked in my mind as I sat on that bench: Chinese medicine. There it was! The perfect unification of my two loves: the beauty of science and medicine combined with the fascinating world of Chinese language and culture, and the spark that had originally led me down the path to Asian Studies. But how was I to pursue it? I didn’t see myself becoming a practitioner of Chinese medicine, but I knew I wanted to continue to learn more about it. Perhaps there was some way to conduct research on it during my senior year?

After returning from China, I remember seeing the call for the St. Olaf Magnus the Good research proposals, which called for projects that emphasized collaboration between a Professor and a student or students, and one that was relevant to both of their interests. I thought of my Chinese professor, Ka Wong, and the work he had done documenting Asian-American experiences in Minnesota through filmed interviews over the past few years. I approached Professor Wong, ready to give my pitch for studying Chinese medicine in Minnesota. Here it was, combining his research interests of Asians and Asian culture in America, with my interests in medicine and all things China. We could even film interviews and create an informative website modeled after his previous projects. It was exactly what the Magnus the Good grant called for. To my surprise, he enthusiastically agreed to work on a proposal with me for the project. We sent it off a few days later, not expecting anything, but excited to see what came of the proposal.
Long story short, just days after I had completed the MCAT (and experienced the sheer euphoria that came with finishing such a monumental task) we received an email telling us we had been one of two proposals selected to receive funding through the St. Olaf Magnus the Good research award. That brings us to today, one full year later. As graduation creeps up upon us, I am preparing to send off applications to medical school, all set with a job as a medical scribe and MCAT prep class instructor for next year, and planning for a summer trip to China through a program that involves not only intensive language learning but also extensive exposure to the healthcare system in China – as well as a focus on our old friend, Chinese medicine. Though I have learned more about Asian cultures than I could ever express in 10 minutes, the most important thing I’ve learned has been this: despite the seemingly insurmountable differences between us – be it philosophy, medicine, language, or even how you teach 6th graders – there is something that connects us all at a higher level, a fundamentally human level, that makes us able to laugh, cry, and relate to each other about the same things. Chinese medicine emphasizes the need to treat the person not the disease – a valuable perspective that can sometimes be lost in biomedicine. My experience with Chinese medicine hasn’t been that I’ve found some sort of miracle cure-all for diseases, but more that it is opened my eyes to the importance of treating patients with the perspective of their humanity in mind – treating the patient and not just the disease. I hope that my future career as a medical professional and my love for all things China continue to integrate and that I find a way to keep bringing these two interests closer together.
I think that my story is telling of the value of a St. Olaf education. I was free to explore so many different disciplines, challenge myself in so many ways, and ultimately to find a way to draw connections across disciplines in ways that just wouldn’t have been possible in other academic environments. I also haven’t even mentioned how incredible and supportive the community is – but I think you all know this already. I’ve talked a lot about my Asian Studies experience in particular because I think it is one that uniquely embodies what students can do at St. Olaf. Despite my plans on pursuing a career in medicine, I was able to learn Chinese and travel to China, read great philosophical and literary works through Great Con and my other general education requirements, all the while still getting the thorough education in the sciences needed to become a physician. For someone looking to challenge and deepen their perceptions of our complex modern world, be it through philosophy, language, or even medicine, I could hardly think of a better place to do it than St. Olaf College.

I’d like to take this moment to thank you all for the contributions you’ve made to help make St. Olaf such a wonderful place. I know I speak for all the students and everyone else here at St. Olaf when I say that stories like mine wouldn't be possible without everything that you all do. Thank you.