What an honor it is to be standing here in front of you, because…

I am one of you.

My grandparents did not go to college. Neither did my parents. My father didn’t even finish high school. But he and my mother gave my sisters and me two precious gifts.

One was unconditional love. This is a love that we often don’t understand until we become parents ourselves.

The second was a thirst for education. Raising a family in a Bronx tenement was hard, but they knew education would change our lives.

In fact, education was at the heart of my parents’ biggest dream, just as it surely is with your parents: To see you rise.

You are the American Dream. Let your joy dissolve your fear, because we know you have what it takes to succeed in college.

Former first lady Michelle Obama said that, for her, attending college as a first-generation student was like learning “a whole new language … an out-of-body kind of experience.”

She was talking about Princeton. My experience was a little different, but no less scary.

Some kids know what they want to be when they grow up right from the start. I wasn’t one of them. I knew I was good at math, though. My mother would take me to the grocery store, and I could tell her to within five cents what the bill would be.
Still, though, I never thought about college when I was little. But Mr. Cohen, my seventh grade math teacher, changed that.

One day he gave us a difficult math problem to solve in class, and I dutifully worked on it. When I was done, I looked up and saw my classmates either were struggling, or had given up. The next day, Mr. Cohen says to me, loud enough for the class to hear, “Wanda, you’re good at this. Don’t ever let anyone tell you that you’re not.”

I bet many of you had a similar experience with a teacher who saw your ability, and recognized you for it. It’s the greatest feeling, isn’t it?

After that, I could see myself in college. Maybe I could make a living by teaching math.

My math ability got me into the prestigious Bronx High School of Science. I remember they had beautiful labs, biology labs, chemistry labs. I’d never seen anything like that in a school before. I thrived there.

In my senior year, I was accepted to Franklin and Marshall College in Pennsylvania. It is known for its math department, but more importantly, they offered me financial aid. And, unlike Princeton, it is a very small college, which helped.

But I was away from home for the first time, and there were maybe 20 black students my freshman year, and only five of them women.

It’s easy to get lost on your way to a degree.

And once again, a math teacher stepped up. Professor Rosenstein was his name, and sometimes he would invite us to have cookies with him and his family on Sunday afternoon.

At first, I wasn’t a straight-A student. I struggled. But I grew in confidence, perhaps too much so.

One day, I decided to sleep in, and skipped my 8 a.m. calculus class with Professor Rosenstein. I was in the campus coffee shop with friends and never saw him coming. He tapped me on the shoulder and said, “Wanda, you weren’t in class today. Don’t ever let that happen again.”

I didn’t. I can never thank him enough.
I share these memories to help ease the worry that comes with being a first-gen student.

We already know you have what it takes to succeed in college. We want to help you. We want to inspire you. And we want to see you soar.

Take the story of Krystal Gallegos, a USC sophomore majoring in International Relations. She grew up in a part of Santa Ana where the median income hovered at the poverty line.

Life dealt Krystal an early blow when she lost her father to cancer at age nine. Her mother became her rock. Inspired by her mother’s “never quit” mantra, Krystal put everything into her schoolwork. It led to a scholarship to Sage Hill in Newport Beach, one of the finest college prep programs in California.

Her mom didn’t drive, but the school had a shuttle.

“I had to wake up at 6 a.m. every morning,” Krystal says. “And there was code-switching. I had to adapt.”

What that meant was this: Krystal, who grew up speaking English and Spanish at home, downplayed her Mexican-American heritage with her classmates. It helped ease the stress of a new school.

Things went well at first, but then her world fell apart again. Her mother became sick and was hospitalized. Doctors said she had diabetes and a blood infection.

Krystal didn’t think twice. She became her mother’s caregiver, which includes giving insulin injections, even though Krystal’s hands shook the first few times.

In applying to USC, she wrote this: “The challenges I’ve faced… have made me a driven individual, who cares for the well-being of others and wants to make a positive impact.”

Today she is a Fisher Fellow, and she is here with us, paying it forward by being a mentor to other first-gen students. And there is no more code-switching.

In a few weeks, she will lead a USC delegation to Princeton for a conference that focuses on first-gen, lower-income students. She deserves a round of applause.
Of course, Krystal is not alone. USC has nearly 3,600 first-gen undergraduate students, and more than 7,300 at the graduate level. We are so proud of all of them, and all of you.

I know many of you are here from other universities. I know what you’re going through.

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Before I close, let me give you some things to remember.

Be proud to be a first-gen. You worked hard to get here.

Be engaged in your campus community. It reaps rewards.

Be inspired by your passion. Make that passion your purpose.

Don’t ever give up.

People often have excuses for why they can’t do, or didn’t do, or why they gave up.

I’ll tell you, when I was that little girl from the Bronx, if someone said, “Wanda, you’re going to be a CEO of a national corporation, and President of USC….”

Are you kidding me? No one would have believed it. Most of all me.

All of us—students, staff, and faculty—want to help you realize your own American Dream. All of us want to watch you rise.

At USC, we always say two words…

And I want to say them to you, because we believe in you.

Fight On!