

## **Welcome Speech for Parents of the Class of 2021**

by Bryan Penprase, Dean of Faculty, Soka University of America, August 10, 2018

Dear Parents of Soka University students,

I would like to both thank you and congratulate you on this exciting day. Your son or daughter is arriving here to Soka University for what is sure to be a transformative and life-changing new chapter in their lives. Let me assure you that I share both your excitement and anxiety - both as a new Dean and as a Parent who himself will be sending his youngest daughter off to College in just a few weeks! As we are all sharing this first semester here at Soka University - I would like to bring to you my perspective as an incoming Dean and also as a parent of two daughters who both are liberal arts college students.

As an incoming Dean, I have been studying the Soka University curriculum, faculty and campus for several months now. I can tell you from a position of extensive experience in higher education that Soka University occupies a truly unique place in liberal arts education that will give your child one of the best possible educations available in the world. My experience in higher education includes working as a professor, researcher or fellow at universities and colleges that include Caltech, Harvard, Yale, as well as Pomona College, Yale-NUS College in Singapore, and now Soka University. In my 20 years at Pomona College, I learned a lot about the power of liberal arts to focus on a student's potential and customize both the classroom experience and on-campus life to allow students to both find their interests and then have the resources and mentoring to fully develop those interests to enable students to develop new capabilities of deep inquiry, creativity, and self-reflection that empowers them to become leaders. Soka University shares Pomona's approach which is rooted in the multicultural environment of Southern California. Soka University however, goes further than Pomona College in several areas that make its education truly exciting. The Soka University education is designed around interdisciplinary concentrations and lacks the silo-ed environments of departments. This allows for Soka University students to deeply engage on complex interdisciplinary problems without any barriers and to take courses that intentionally interconnect cultures from East and West - China, India, Japan, Ancient Greece and Rome, and European thought, as well as the cultures across Africa and South America. Soka students become truly global citizens and to draw from the wisdom and cultures of the entire world. Soka University also has a uniquely international student body with over 40% of the students from outside the United States - and this allows for your student to live among a global community of fellow students to achieve a deeper level of intercultural understanding than any of the peer liberal arts college - including Pomona. Within the Soka University classes of 2021 and 2020 are students from 26 countries - a larger cross section of the world than is found in many liberal arts colleges and even many universities several times larger than Soka University!

In my work at Yale University I helped Yale begin its own liberal arts college in Singapore known as Yale-NUS College. The project of building Yale-NUS College engaged two of the leading universities in the world (Yale and National University of Singapore) in a multi-year discussion of what an ideal education of the 21st century might look like. After many years of meetings and discussions, the Yale-NUS College opened in 2013, and has just celebrated its first graduation ceremony last May. I was part of the inaugural curriculum committee that designed the Yale-NUS

College curriculum, which was inspired by the question “What must a young person learn in order to live a responsible life in this century?” This question could have been answered by Soka University - which was designed and built to “foster a steady stream of global citizens committed to living a contributive life.” Soka University now is at a much greater level of maturity than Yale-NUS - and is just a bit older than your incoming students - a “young adult”! The answers we developed at Yale are very similar to the answers found here at Soka University . Both Yale-NUS and Soka have understood the need for a core and GE curriculum that provides a common experience for the students across disciplines to help them find answers to the deepest and most urgent questions facing humanity. At Soka University, this curriculum takes the form of truly innovative and exciting courses, which your student will soon begin with Core I - “The Enduring Questions of Humanity.” Their exploration will continue with full-semester courses such as the Pacific Basin, Creative Arts Forum, Modes of Inquiry, the American Experience, and Core 2 - “The Enduring Questions in Contemporary Contexts.” Very few institutions in the world have as thoughtful, as expansive and as rigorous common and GE curriculum as Soka University - including institutions such as Chicago, Columbia and the entire set of US and international liberal arts colleges. The thoughtful multi-year curriculum of Soka University is an outgrowth of the intense dedication and commitment of the Soka faculty - who as a small community of scholars will be deeply challenging and engaging your sons and daughters in small seminar discussions and in collaborations in the laboratory, studio, and field settings.

Perhaps one of the greatest powers of the Soka University education comes from this small and intense academic community - where faculty get to know your students well, and work individually with them in their classes, in research, and as part of a residential community. Across the space of four years at Soka University the faculty can help our students develop in ways that is impossible in a larger campus where students are often anonymous. Faculty will know your student well - will challenge them, and will also understand their needs and interests better than is possible on a larger campus - making the education more effective and relevant to your student. The Learning Cluster, one of Soka University’s signature academic programs, embodies this small and intense form of education. In the learning clusters (as in other courses too) students and faculty co-create the learning environment. Unlike any other campus I have studied, at Soka University, the courses in Learning Clusters are truly co-created by faculty and students through a process where students and faculty vet and refine ideas in dialog. The courses they design enables students and faculty to ask and answer questions about the world in an immersive exploration that often involves travel both internationally and within California. In this process, the students gain an awareness of the interdependence between themselves, each other, and the larger environment.

At Soka, our small classes enable the development of dialog that is powerful and open-ended. It creates new understanding beyond a static curriculum, explores ideas in ways that are impossible in larger groups, and enables your student to engage fully and deeply in crafting questions, and providing answers to questions that are sophisticated and that draw deeply on both experience and on scholarly research. Both Core I and Learning clusters take advantage of Soka’s unique academic calendar which blends the best of the “block system” - with deep and intense learning in 3.5 week long courses - and the semester system - with longer and more extended 15 week courses like most US liberal arts colleges. The mix of formats for Soka courses gives our students a diversity of experience and learning environments that are not matched at other institutions.

Students at Soka University also have the opportunity to develop their abilities to communicate fully - across cultures, across media, across languages, and across disciplines. They learn how to write effectively in two different writing courses, learn how to speak in another language to proficiency and then live and learn in that language abroad. Our students learn how to create sophisticated arguments in writing and in dialog in their classroom, and how to work in teams with their classmates to solve problems. These communication skills are what truly set our Soka University students apart from other students, and will assure success throughout their careers - wherever they may take them. Liberal arts colleges like Soka, Pomona and Yale-NUS excel at crafting skills of debate, discussion, dialog and to enable students to work collaboratively in intercultural and diverse teams. These are precisely the skills most needed by employers and by the world, and your student will join Soka at a time when liberal arts graduates are most in demand. My experience in Asia has shown me how intense the demand for the types of liberal arts graduates are needed - and new universities and programs in liberal arts are proliferating in India, Singapore, China and Japan to help develop the kinds of creative and articulate graduates that can profoundly change the world for the better. Liberal arts graduates are trained in intellectual depth as well as agility, are trained to ask difficult questions, and to work with others to answer those questions in ways that are compassionate and that fully recognize the complexities of culture and society. Soon your students will join the stream of Soka graduates who are making profound contributions toward building a more peaceful, and more sustainable world through their added knowledge and wisdom from the Soka University education.

It is also worth noting a final point from my standpoint as a fellow parent of an incoming first year student. I can tell you as a fellow parent that Soka University offers much more to its undergraduates than many of the larger universities - even Yale and Harvard. While these institutions are sought after by hundreds of thousands of parents around the world, the value added from Soka and from liberal arts colleges is much higher. This has been borne out by my experience as I am sending or have sent both of my two daughters to a small liberal arts college (Carleton College in Minnesota). My own personal experience has been one of delight as I have seen my daughter experience entirely new subjects - some she did not even know existed. It was exciting to watch her develop new intellectual passions from the open-ended inquiry of the liberal arts college classroom, and from exploring wide ranges of subjects in her liberal arts education. As a parent, I truly appreciate the intense and supportive community found in residential life that brought about deep friendships and understanding. At Soka University and liberal arts colleges, deep learning is enabled by the faculty who care deeply about undergraduates as their primary focus, unlike in some universities where undergraduates can be a second or even third priority of faculty after postdocs, and graduate students. Here at Soka the primary mission is to develop your student to their fullest capacities and to provide the most excellent possible undergraduate education possible. The opportunities for your student to grow and develop - within the classroom, through international study, through internships and research tutorials, will be truly exciting, and I am sure that you will enjoy watching your student develop new capacities and talents in the coming years at Soka University. Thank you for coming to Soka and again congratulations on becoming part of the larger Soka University of America community!