

Kai-fu Lee's letter to his daughter: how to spend your college career

Dear Daughter:

As we drove off from Columbia, I wanted to write a letter to you to tell you all that is on my mind.

First, I want to tell you how proud we are. Getting into Columbia is a real testament of what a great well-rounded student you are. Your academic, artistic, and social skills have truly blossomed in the last few years. Whether it is getting the highest grade in Calculus, completing your elegant fashion design, successfully selling your painted running shoes, or becoming one of the top orators in Model United Nations, you have become a talented and accomplished young woman. You should be as proud of yourself as we are.

I will always remember the first moment I held you in my arms. I felt a tingling sensation that directly touched my heart. It was an intoxicating feeling I will always have. It must be that "father-daughter connection" which will bind us for life. I will always remember singing you lullaby while I rocked you to sleep. When I put you down, it was always with both relief (she finally fell asleep!) and regret (wishing I could hold you longer). And I will always remember taking you to the playground, and watching you having so much fun. You were so cute and adorable, and that is why everybody loved you so.

You have been a great kid ever since you were born, always quiet, empathetic, attentive, and well-mannered. You were three when we built our house. I remember you quietly followed us every weekend for more than ten hours a day to get building supplies. You put up with that boring period without a fuss, happily ate hamburgers every meal in the car, sang with Barney until you fell asleep. When you went to Sunday Chinese school, you studied hard even though it was no fun for you. I cannot believe how lucky we are as parents to have a daughter like you.

You have been an excellent elder sister. Even though you two had your share of fights, the last few years you have become best friends. Your sister loves you so much, and she loves to make you laugh. She looks up to you, and sees you as her role model. As you saw when we departed, she misses you so much. And I know

that you miss her just as much. There is nothing like family, and other than your parents, your sister is the one person who you can trust and confide in. She will be the one to take care of you, and the one you must take care of. There is nothing we wish more than that your sisterhood will continue to bond as you grow older, and that you will take care of each other throughout your lives. For the next four years, do have a short video chat with her every few days, and do email her when you have a chance.

College will be the most important years in your life. It is in college that you will truly discover what learning is about. You often question “what good is this course”. I encourage you to be inquisitive, but I also want to tell you: “Education is what you have left after all that is taught is forgotten.” What I mean by that is the materials taught isn’t as important as you gaining the ability to learn a new subject, and the ability to analyze a new problem. That is really what learning in college is about – this will be the period where you go from teacher-taught to master-inspired, after which you must become self-learner. So do take each subject seriously, and even if what you learn isn’t critical for your life, the skills of learning will be something you cherish forever.

Do not fall into the trap of dogma. There is no single simple answer to any question. Remember during your high school debate class, I always asked you to take on the side that you don’t believe in? I did that for a reason — things rarely “black and white”, and there are always many ways to look at a problem. You will become a better problem solver if you recognized that. This is called “critical thinking”, and it is the most important thinking skill you need for your life. This also means you need to become tolerant and supportive of others. I will always remember when I went to my Ph.D. advisor and proposed a new thesis topic. He said “I don’t agree with you, but I’ll support you.” After the years, I have learned this isn’t just flexibility, it is encouragement of critical thinking, and an empowering style of leadership, and it has become a part of me. I hope it will become a part of you too.

Follow your passion in college. Take courses you think you will enjoy. Don’t be trapped in what others think or say. Steve Jobs says when you are in college, your passion will create many dots, and later in your life you will connect them. In his great speech given at Stanford commencement, he gave the great example where he took calligraphy, and a decade later, it became the basis of the beautiful Macintosh fonts, which later ignited desktop publishing, and brought wonderful tools like Microsoft Word to our lives. His expedition into calligraphy was a dot, and the Macintosh became the connecting line. So don’t worry too much about what job you will have, and don’t be too utilitarian, and if you like Japanese or Korean, go for it, even if your dad thinks “it’s not useful” :) Enjoy picking your dots, and be assured one day you will find your calling, and connect a beautiful curve through the dots.

Do your best in classes, but don't let pressure get to you. Your mother and I have no expectations for your grades. If you graduate and learn something in your four years, we would feel happy. Your Columbia degree will take you far, even if you don't graduate with honors. So please don't give yourself pressure. During your last few months in high school, you were so happy because there was little pressure and college applications are finished. But in the past few weeks, we saw you are beginning to worry (did you know you bite your nails when you are nervous?). Please don't be worried. The only thing that matters is that you learned. The only metric you should use is that you tried. Grades are just silly letters that give the vain people something to brag, and the lazy people something to fear. You are too good to be either.

Most importantly, make friends and be happy. College friends are often the best in life, because during college you are closer to them physically than to your family. Also, going through independence and adulthood is a natural bonding experience. Pick a few friends and become really close to them – pick the ones who are genuine and sincere to you. Don't worry about their hobbies, grades, looks, or even personalities. You have developed some real friendships in high school in your last two years, so trust your instinct, and make new friends. You are a genuine and sincere person – anyone would enjoy being your friend, so be confident, outgoing, and pro-active. If you think you like someone, tell her. You have very little to lose. Give people the benefit of the doubt; don't stereotype and be forgiving. People are not perfect, so as long as they are genuine and sincere, trust them and be good to them. They will give back. This is my secret of success – that I am genuine with people and trust them (unless they do something to lose my trust). Some people tell me that occasionally I would be taken advantage of. They are right, but I can tell you that that loss is nothing compared to what I gained. In my last 18 years leading people, I have realized that only one thing matters – to gain the trust and respect of others, and to do so, you need to trust and respect others first. Whether it is for management, work, or friendship, this is something you should ponder.

Do keep your high school friends, and stay connected to them, but do not use them as substitutes for college friendship, and do not spend too much time with them, because that would eat into your time to make new friends.

Start planning for your summers early – what would you like to do? Where would you like to live? What would you like to learn? What have you learned in college that might change your mind? I think your plan of studying fashion is good, and you should decide where you want to be, and get into the right courses. We of course hope you come back to Beijing, but you should go where you think is best for you.

Whether it is summer-planning, or coursework planning, or picking a major, or managing your time, you should take control of your life. In the past, I have helped you quite a bit, whether it is in college application, designing your

extracurricular activities, or picking the initial coursework. I will always be there for you, but the time has come for you to be in the driver's seat – this is your life, and you need to be in control. I will always remember the exhilarating feeling in my life – that I got to decide to skip kindergarten, that I got to decide to change to computer science major, that I got to decide to leave academia for Apple, that I got to decide to go to China, that I got to decide to go to Google, and most recently, that I got to decide to start my own business. Being able to decide means you get to live the life that you want to. Life is too short to live the life others do or others want you. Being in control feels great. Try it, and you'll love it!

I told your mom I'm writing this letter, and asked what she wanted me to say. She thought and said: "just ask her to take care of herself." Simple but deeply caring – that is how your mother is, and that is why you love her so much. In this simple sentence is her hope that you will become independent in the way you take care of yourself – that you will remember to take your medicine, that you will get enough sleep, that you will have a balanced diet, that you will get some exercise, and that you will go see a doctor whenever you don't feel good. An ancient Chinese proverb says that the most important thing to be nice to your parents is to take care of yourself. This is because your parents love you so much, and that if you are well, they will have comfort. You will understand this one day when you become a mother. But in the meantime, please listen to your mother and take care of yourself.

College is the four years where you have:

- the greatest amount of free time
- the first chance to be independent
- the most flexibility to change
- the lowest risk for making mistakes

So please treasure your college years – make the best of your free time, become an independent thinker in control of your destiny, evolve yourself into a bi-cultural talent, be bold to experiment, learn and grow through your successes and challenges.

When I faced the greatest challenge and opportunity in my life in 2005, you gave me a big hug and said "bonne chance", which means "good luck" and "good courage". Now I do the same for you. Bonne chance, my angel and princess. May Columbia become the happiest four years in your life, and may you blossom into just what you dream to be.

Love,

Dad (& Mom)