

Good afternoon students, alumni, and faculty:

My name is Olivia Mbugua. I came to Berea about 7 weeks ago as part of the Berea Bridge program. Along with 60 other first-year students, I stayed on campus for 4 weeks, took two classes, worked hard at my labor position, went to study hall each night, learned to meditate in my Koru class, and manage my time in afternoon workshops. I did all of this to prepare for the pace of Berea. I feel ready to begin.

But I'm not going to lie to you. I was nervous at first. I moved here from Arizona by myself. A TA whom I didn't know picked me up from the airport (she ended up being really cool) and I arrived on campus after everyone else had moved in and their parents had left. I walked into a room of my peers, with my suitcases dragging behind me, scared of what would happen next. Quickly, I was welcomed, even as I worried that I wouldn't be able to handle college life so far from home.

But Bridge showed me that I *can* handle it, and what's more, just like you, I can thrive here. During the program, I had a lot of fun and learned that at Berea, we have to find ways to appreciate all of the little moments of grace and laughter along the way. We had a barbeque; we sang karaoke; we did facials during a spa day; we played in great ping pong tournaments, and we even relaxed in hall-wide movie nights. But we also laughed as we ran to our first study hall in the rain and sang on our way back to campus after First Friday in Old Town. And discovered ice cream at the fudge shop on my birthday; which is amazing go try it if you haven't. All of these moments made the studying easier and the friendships deeper.

I remember most that the day before our finals, we took a class hike up to the East Pinnacle. It was a little difficult to do since I had recently sprained my ankle, but I made it up.

And when we reached the top, I felt a kind of accomplishment that I had forgotten about. I'm going to force myself to remember that feeling when I'm going through tough classes, early-morning labor shifts, and any extracurricular activities that are taking up my time. I invite you to the Pinnacles as well and to that feeling that you can accomplish anything you set your mind to. Together, we are working towards long term goals, but in that short term, we need to remember to exhale and keep hiking.

By now fellow first-years, most of you have had homesickness, felt the pressure of our classes, and maybe the intimidation from upperclassman. As a first-year, I am in the same boat as you; I don't have all the answers. I can only tell you one thing for sure. Each of us has the ability to succeed here. We all may have different backgrounds, and personal stories; but each of us were chosen, out of hundreds of applicants because Berea saw something in us. They saw who we are. They saw who we can become. I wanted a school that didn't see me as a dollar sign, but an individual looking to further her knowledge and defy statistics; to really make an impact in the world around me.

I can't wait to write the rest of my Berea story in the years to come.