

2019 University of Oxford's MSc in Higher Education Personal Statement: Ryan Liu

The first day of college is a vivid memory for many students: the sights – of college dorms for the first time. The sounds – of students saying goodbye to proud and anxious parents. The sense of a new beginning...

Even as a senior at Yale, I still think about my first day of college. However, my first day didn't begin at Yale. It began 2,859 miles away at a community college. My experiences of attending community college with low-income and non-traditional students showed me firsthand how many individuals struggle to attain a higher education. My work in politics taught me how political action and policy reforms bring about progress. And my understanding of how higher education can transform lives by providing socioeconomic mobility motivates me to pursue graduate study in higher education, so that I can study different approaches to making higher education accessible. With this knowledge, I plan to enter the political system to craft public policy that makes higher education accessible for all.

My interest in higher education accessibility was lit in community college. Understanding how my mother fled the Cambodian genocide and how my father emigrated from Argentina to provide a better life, I was committed to becoming a first-generation college student. However, as a low-income student, I had limited options. Community college provided a path: I could work three jobs while starting my degree.

Community college showed me the daily struggles students face. My classmates were diverse: a veteran, who served two tours, with posttraumatic stress disorder. A single mother who took her children to school, worked, and attended classes. An undocumented student who struggled to find transportation to school and suffered from food insecurity. These were real classmates. My conversations with them taught me that increasing access to higher education

requires more than just letting students attend classes. It necessitates policy reforms and political action that address the factors that prevent many students from completing their studies, such as through funding campus veterans' services offices, providing more morning and night classes for students with family and work commitments, subsidizing public transportation for low-income students, and working with food banks to provide food supplies for needy students.

I realized that I needed to become politically involved to make a difference. I joined my community college's student government to advocate for my classmates with administrators. I organized debates and town halls for elected officials to hear the issues facing students. I helped create scholarships for low-income students and lobbied legislators in Washington, D.C. to fund community college grants. I ended up working on Capitol Hill under Congressman Ami Bera, the California Public Higher Education Caucus co-chair, to analyze proposed higher education legislation. Understanding how politics affect policy, I joined Hillary Clinton's 2016 presidential campaign. As a member of its Millennial Victory Council and national chair of a grassroots coalition that supported the campaign, Asian American & Pacific Islander Millennials for Hillary, I organized young voters to support Clinton and her college affordability plan.

My research at Yale has focused on higher education by examining one reason for its inaccessibility: cost. My senior thesis focuses on evaluating the rise of tuition-free community college "Promise" programs. My research as an undergraduate fellow at Yale's Institution for Social and Policy Studies and my policy fellowship with the College Promise Campaign, the national organization working to expand Promise programs, are informing my thesis. To further increase higher education access, I'm working on creating a nonprofit to help community college students transfer to institutions like Yale.

For reforms to be effective, they need to address the factors that affect higher education accessibility and completion. However, I still don't understand all these factors. To build on my understanding and my ability to craft solutions that tackle these challenges, I'm interested in graduate study in higher education. Oxford's MSc in Higher Education provides the perfect opportunity to study the factors associated with higher education access and completion and to analyze public policies that address them. Oxford's program is unique through the option of focusing heavily on policy. Its emphasis on teaching the foundations of educational research would equip me with knowledge of the complex theories and practices in higher education and an understanding of how other countries are addressing higher education accessibility.

Unlike many classroom-focused U.S. education programs, Oxford's Department of Education offers a research-intensive environment, demonstrated through its research groups and centers focused on three research "themes." The "Policy, Economy, and Society" theme – with its groups focused on issues like higher education, comparative education, and skills knowledge – provides the opportunity to study higher education from a policy perspective. The higher education group, with its international research partners, would allow me to study the implications of higher education policies on access in a global context to understand comparative practices – an opportunity that doesn't exist with U.S. education programs' primary focus on the U.S. system. Past group projects relating to my interests include studies on English further education colleges and European vocational education reform.

I'd benefit from learning from leading specialists, such as Dr. Hubert Ertl, the MSc in Higher Education program director. His research on comparative and international education, such as his study of equity in higher education access in China, parallels my interest in studying competing practices of improving higher education accessibility. With Oxford's resources, the

Department of Education's research-intensive focus, and the mentorship of professors like Dr. Ertl, I'd study the factors that affect higher education accessibility and the policy reforms that different countries have taken to address them through my dissertation.

The first day of college is a vivid memory. But so is graduation. Through Oxford's MSc in Higher Education program, I'll study different policies that affect higher education accessibility and completion and gain a framework to evaluate reforms. Ultimately, I'll be ready to return to the U.S. political system to craft public policy that allows all individuals – including my community college classmates – to not only experience the first day of college, but to also experience graduation.