

## **President's Address at the 2024 Saitama University Entrance Ceremony**

Once again, spring has come to the Okubo area, home to Saitama University. There is no greater joy for us than welcoming new friends to our campus, where the trees are budding and the cherry blossoms are in bloom.

Today, I would like to congratulate the 1,679 undergraduate students, 629 Master's students, and 38 Doctoral students who have been admitted to Saitama University. On behalf of all our faculty and staff members, I welcome you with an open heart. I would also like to extend my sincere congratulations to their families and other involved parties, who have raised and supported our new students with deep love and care.

It is my heartfelt wish that as you step into this new world, your days at Saitama University will bear plentiful fruit. Now, at the beginning, in order for your time here to be substantially rewarding, the most important thing is for you to think deeply about the essence of your student years.

First of all, I would like you to take the question of what "learning at a university" means as a starting point. The foundation of university study is the acquisition of advanced and specialized knowledge. In that process, it is essential to constantly maintain a spontaneous learning attitude, a critical spirit that does not take existing knowledge for granted, and the flexibility to listen to different opinions. Graduate students are required to treat the fundamentals of their program as a matter of course, and look further beyond them. In addition to academic learning, participation in various activities, both on and off campus, is also a rich and essential aspect of the student years. If you set these as your starting points, I would like you to simultaneously consider what destination you should be aiming for. The topic I would most like to talk about today has to deal with that "destination you should be aiming for."

I would like to talk about developing your own values. Although thinking about values is one of the most important essential aspects of your school years, there are some people who think that "developing your own values" is an abstract goal to be attained. However, all professional knowledge and objective scientific judgments, when implementing them in society, ultimately come down to that person's sense of values.

Let me talk about one example.

The COVID-19 pandemic which swept the entire world caused great social turmoil in Japan, as well. For those of you whose schools were all forced to close in March 2020, it must have been a serious experience that felt truly real. Over the next three years, the Subcommittee on Novel

Coronavirus Disease Control repeatedly analyzed and discussed the situation as a group of experts that brought together the comprehensive wisdom of law, economics, and medical sociology, as well as virology, infectious diseases, and other medical fields, to recommend guidelines to the government for dealing with ever-changing circumstances. Mr. Shigeru Omi, who was the chairman of the Subcommittee, wrote a detailed account of those tense days in his book "1,100 Days of Inner Struggle," published last year. In his book, there is a section in which Omi, an expert on infectious diseases, refers not only to scientific evidence and objective figures, but also to values.

That was when the Subcommittee reached the point of discussions about "choosing lives." "Choosing lives" meant that if the government were to select one measure for a foreseeable serious situation, at the same time, it would have to allow for a certain amount of deaths that would accompany that decision. Such a state of affairs forced them to make hard choices about whose lives to prioritize, and how many deaths would be acceptable. Various opinions and specific indicators were proposed and discussed by the Subcommittee members. There were times when they shouted at each other. Nevertheless, as Dr. Omi recalls, "No matter how many discussions we had, we were unable to reach a conclusion. I came to realize that this issue was a matter of values, and went beyond the realm of medicine and public health." He continues, "Every life carries the same weight. People have such diverse values, even in a crisis, that there is no single absolute right answer." Each member's opinions and judgments were based on a combination of his or her expertise and personal values. Each person had their own philosophy, one might say.

It is not the case that we will be able to respond appropriately to every situation so long as we possess the expertise that we learned during our undergraduate and graduate studies. When you are faced with a problem which has no right answer, the values you hold, along with logic, are the basis for how you think about dealing with it. Dr. Omi's thoughts deeply imply this idea. I would like to ask you young people to think about what "values" are in the first place, as well. However, if I were to demonstrate one way to look at the question: when you are faced with a problem, what do you value? You will understand that the familiar little quarrels you have on a daily basis with friends and family are, to put it bluntly, clashes of values.

Everyone, please continue to ask yourselves: "What is important to me?" That is what it means to develop your values. From this day forward, throughout your student life, please read many books, think, have discussions with your friends, engage in physical activity, and gain plentiful experience. In addition, please seek out encounters that will enhance your sensitivity, such as

exposure to the arts and travel. As young and flexible people, you have the power to renew your own values and develop them in-depth as you encounter many things that you did not know, and which differ from your own ideas. Recognize that just like you, other people have their own values to cherish. Please show respect for each other, and thoroughly discuss any conflicts that arise. These will serve as touchstones for all of you in developing your values. Cultivate an attitude of continuing to face problems that do not have answers, such as the one that Mr. Omi faced, and continuing to think about them. Facing problems for which there are no answers is the essence of human nature. This is something that all of you should tackle head-on during your student days. Your university studies and your sense of self-worth will support that.

Finally, I hope that all of you who will spend your university life here at Saitama University will experience and enjoy the Saitama area while you are in school. Because each region of Saitama Prefecture has a diverse climate, there are many places famous for their seasonal flowers. Festivals that carry on traditional Japanese culture are also held in various locations. Notably, Kumagaya, Kawagoe, and Chichibu have their own Hikiyama festivals in summer, fall, and winter, so please visit them at least once while you are a student. Going off-campus with your new friends to experience Saitama's rich nature, culture, industry, and meeting people will surely be an invaluable part of your time as a student.

On this auspicious day - the bright start of your journey - I would like to conclude my address by wishing you all the best in your future endeavors, and that you will keep in mind both the ground beneath your feet and the peak of hope to which you should aspire.

Congratulations on your admission today.

April 3, 2024  
Takafumi Sakai  
President, Saitama University