

Office of Graduate Affairs

A Last Hurrah: Graduate Students Reflect Before Commencement

May 11, 2026

Abigail Arnold | Office of Graduate Affairs

On May 17, 2026, 517 Brandeis graduate students will receive their degrees at [Commencement](#), where they will march in their regalia, be honored by their advisors and peers, and hear a keynote speech from acclaimed narrative nonfiction writer [Isabel Wilkerson](#) and a student speech from Computer Science PhD Jin Zhao. These PhD and master's students have worked hard over the past years, studying, conducting research, and building connections along the way. Now heading out into the world beyond Brandeis, they shared some reflections on their time here.

Antares Brown is graduating with their master's in [Philosophy](#); during their time at Brandeis, they have served as the [Graduate Student Association](#) (GSA) senator for the School of Arts, Humanities and Culture and as a Graduate Affairs [student ambassador](#). "I've really loved being involved on campus through my student worker positions. It's been so meaningful to me to connect with other students on similar journeys to my own and to give and receive support to one another. Through these positions, I've made friends with some people who are very special to me, and I really hope those relationships evolve to be lifelong! I've also found great mentors here, especially Becky Prigge and Jessica Basile in their roles in student support," they said.

Jiahua Chen is graduating with her PhD in [Biochemistry and Biophysics](#). As an undergraduate alum as well, she has been at Brandeis for ten years. "Being a graduate student at Brandeis gives me a strong sense of privilege – the close-knit community makes it easy to connect with professors and seek help whenever needed, the abundance of academic resources continuously supports my research, and the approachable alumni network offers valuable academic and career advice," she said. "In particular, I would like to thank my PI, Professor Maria-Eirini Pandelia, who has mentored me since I was a sophomore undergraduate student and has continued to guide me throughout my doctoral training. She has not only trained me to become a scientific researcher but also has taught me how to be a responsible mentor to others. I have also received a lot of support from the Career and Professional Development team – especially Marika McCann – who guided me through resume development, the job search process, and networking strategies." Of Commencement, Chen said, "This moment means so much to me because I was part of the Class of 2020 – the year of COVID – when our traditional Commencement was canceled and moved online. For me, this feels like a second chance to walk across the stage as a Brandeis student—this time in person, with my loved ones both by my side on the stage and cheering for me from the audience. I arrived here at eighteen as an undergraduate student, and now, at twenty-eight, I leave as a doctoral graduate, carrying with me the knowledge, experiences, and skills to pursue my dream career."

Joshua Perlmutter is graduating with his PhD in [Mathematics](#). He was the 2025 [Three Minute Thesis](#) competition winner for Brandeis. "Something that really drew me to Brandeis initially and has stayed consistent throughout my PhD was the relatively small size of the math department, which allowed me to get individualized attention from my advisor and professors, but also allowed me to become close friends with all the other math graduate students, even if our specific areas of research were quite

far apart,” he said. He looks forward to celebrating in community at Commencement. “I really like the tradition for PhD students that their advisor is part of the hooding ceremony during graduation,” he said. “I am glad that the person who has been mentoring me throughout my entire PhD journey gets to be a part of the celebration.” After graduation, Perlmutter will join Ballantine Partners, LLC as a portfolio analyst. “Throughout my PhD, I met with Marika McCann many times to discuss cover letters and resume, and I attended many professional development sessions, all of which I feel contributed to getting this job,” he said.

Bipasha Roy is graduating with her master’s in [Sustainable International Development](#); this year, she served as the Board of Trustees Representative for the GSA. “Being a graduate student at Brandeis has been one of the most transformative experiences of my life. Coming from Jharkhand, India, and entering a completely new academic and cultural environment, I think what I appreciated most was the space to grow intellectually while also being encouraged to bring my own lived experiences into the classroom and broader community,” she said. Roy appreciated all the people she got to know during her time here. “I’ve been incredibly lucky to learn alongside classmates from different parts of the world whose perspectives challenged and shaped my thinking in meaningful ways,” she said. “I would particularly like to thank Dr. Richard Lockwood, Mary Poor, the SID faculty and cohort, and many friends and colleagues who supported me through both academic and personal transitions during graduate school.” After graduation, she hopes to work in education and community-centered spaces. “My experiences at Brandeis strengthened my commitment to building systems that are more equitable and humane. Brandeis gave me opportunities to connect research with lived realities, and I’ll carry that with me moving forward,” she said.

Commencement speaker Jin Zhao is graduating with her PhD in [Computer Science](#). She won the People’s Choice Award in the 2025 Three Minute Thesis competition. “What I have enjoyed most about being a graduate student at Brandeis is the people in the CS department. I have been lucky to work with peers who are not only incredibly smart but also kind, funny, generous, and supportive. A PhD can be stressful and isolating at times, but my friends and colleagues made the journey feel much less lonely,” she said. “I would especially like to give a shout-out to Jack Garbus, Jonne Saleva, Derrick Kim, James Petullo and Zepeng Hu for organizing Phood, a biweekly event where CS PhD students get together to eat, present ideas, and have casual conversations about research and life.” After graduation, Zhao will join Saint Louis University as an assistant professor. “Reaching this point has been possible because of the guidance, encouragement, and generosity of many people at Brandeis,” she said, offering thanks to her advisor Professor Nianwen Xue and to Professors Constantine Lignos, Lotus Goldberg, and James Pustejovsky, as well as Marika McCann of Graduate Affairs Professional Development. “Looking back, I realize that pursuing academia was never something I did alone. It took encouragement, advice, honest conversations, and support from many people here at Brandeis,” she said. Zhao looks forward to delivering the Graduate Commencement speech, which will involve her research into the framing of news stories, using AI. “I feel both excited and humbled to have the chance to speak on behalf of my fellow graduate students and to celebrate this milestone with them,” she said. “I want to acknowledge the excitement of this moment, but also remind us that as graduates, researchers, educators, and citizens, we have a responsibility to ask not only what AI can do, but what kind of world it is helping us create.”

And for those students who remain at Brandeis, the graduates shared some advice...

- There is so much about graduate coursework that is so demanding, but I really think most students would benefit from letting go of perfectionism a bit more and letting themselves do work that is merely good as opposed to outstanding. Good work is usually more than enough, and there is so much more to grad school than just studying constantly! Grad school is also a great opportunity to expand your horizons and develop lasting friendships with people you might not have ever met otherwise. Studying is very important, of course – that’s what we’re all here to do first and foremost – but looking back over the last two years, I strongly believe that what I will look back on most fondly as I move forward with the next stage of my life will be the friends I made and the memories we now get to share – *Antares Brown*

- I think it is okay and normal to feel stress about classes, qualification exams, progress meetings, thesis writing, or searching for your dream job. From my experience, the faculty at Brandeis are not here to exclude us, but to guide, challenge, and inspire us, helping us identify our strengths and grow into the people we aspire to become. If you are going through a stressful moment right now, I want to acknowledge that these feelings are real and valid. But in some ways, stress also reflects how much we care, and that itself is a good thing. These challenges are not here to make us fail but rather to give us opportunities to demonstrate our capabilities. When things feel overwhelming, maybe we do not have to multitask or solve everything at once. Instead, maybe we can take a step-by-step approach, facing one (or two) challenges at a time. And remember, you are never alone – we are all here for you: Faculty, Family, and Friends – *Jiahua Chen*
- I think the classic phrase "stop and smell the roses" is extremely apt. My years in the PhD program have flown by and I cannot believe it is already at an end. I would definitely advise other graduate students to appreciate all of the wonderful life experiences and opportunities that are only accessible in graduate school because you will be graduating before you know it – *Joshua Perlmutter*
- My advice to other graduate students would be to allow yourself to build community, ask for help when you need it, and not underestimate the value of your own experiences and perspective. Graduate school can feel overwhelming at times, but some of the most meaningful learning happens outside of assignments and classrooms — through conversations, relationships, and moments of uncertainty that help you grow – *Bipasha Roy*
- My advice for other graduate students is: do not wait until you feel completely ready to try something meaningful. Apply for the opportunity, submit the paper, give the talk, ask the question, reach out for help. Graduate school often makes us focus on what we do not know yet, but I have learned that not knowing everything does not mean we are not ready to begin.

Teaching COSI 230 this semester helped me understand this in a new way. I thought I was there to teach my students, but in many ways, they taught me just as much, maybe even more. Being on the other side of the classroom for the first time, I got to see students learning, struggling, asking questions, taking risks, and sometimes making mistakes. In these moments, I saw my students as thoughtful, brave, and curious. I appreciated the fact that they were trying, thinking seriously, and growing through the process even when they didn't have all the answers yet.

That experience made me realize that it can be much harder to see ourselves with the same generosity when we are the ones learning. As students, we often judge ourselves for being uncertain or imperfect. But as a teacher, I saw very clearly that growth comes from engaging before everything feels polished.

So I would tell other graduate students to be kinder to themselves. It is okay to feel uncertain. It is okay to make mistakes. It is okay to ask for help. The important thing is to keep showing up, keep learning, and keep taking the next step. We do not become ready first and then begin; we become ready by beginning – *Jin Zhao*