

The Sky is Not the Limit — Think Bigger

USF Summer Class of 2023 Commencement Address by President Rhea Law

Saturday, August 5, 2023

Welcome everyone, and congratulations to the Summer Class of 2023!

Today is a momentous occasion for our graduates, and before we get started, I'd like to take a moment to recognize the friends and families who are here in the audience. Will you please join me in giving a big round of applause to those who have helped you get to where you are today?

I am honored to be with you today, and on behalf of the entire University of South Florida community, we are so excited to celebrate your tremendous accomplishments. This is *your* moment!

As a proud USF alumna, I know from personal experience how much of an impact this university has on the lives of our students. When I was sitting where you are now, I never imagined that I would one day have the privilege of leading this great university and cheering each of you on as you cross the finish line.

Like many of our students, I was a first-generation student — the first in my family to attend college. And while I came to the university to earn my bachelor's degree, I've had the pleasure of giving back to my alma mater from several vantage points over the years — as a student, an employee, a volunteer, a donor, a board member... and now as president.

Through each of these roles, I've had a front row seat to our university's transformation from a small commuter school to a world-renowned research institution. It's undeniable that USF has seen remarkable growth and change over the years — a feat that is truly uncommon for a university of our size to achieve in a relatively short period of time.

And earlier this summer, we reached another historic milestone — our university was invited to join the Association of American Universities, a prestigious group of the research universities in the United States and Canada.

As the first public university in Florida to join the AAU in nearly 40 years, USF now stands alongside widely respected peer institutions including Harvard, Princeton, Stanford, Johns Hopkins, the University of Florida, and the University of Michigan.

This is a distinction earned by just 3% of all four-year universities in the U.S. Joining the AAU will strengthen our university, because it allows us to further invest in USF's powerful research enterprise, help us attract even more bright minds to our institution, and empowers us to make an even greater impact on our society.

As USF graduates, you can take great pride in knowing that the degree you have earned holds tremendous value and respect, because it was earned at a world-class institution that is now included among the ranks of America's leading research universities.

When we were given the go-ahead to share this terrific news, I was eager to tell my colleagues, and I had a little fun while doing so. I started these conversations by asking a question: “If I had something REALLY great to tell you, what would you guess it is?”

And when we made the big announcement, there was a common sentiment shared across the board — many people knew USF would reach this point one day, but they didn’t realize it would happen so soon.

We set our sights on this goal because we knew our university community can achieve great things. It’s a testament to the hard work of our students, faculty, and staff, and a powerful reminder of the journey we’ve traveled to reach this point — and how far we’ve come, together.

Our Bulls community has a proven track record of thinking bigger and bolder. It’s a core part of our university’s DNA – established in 1956, we were the first major state university opened in the 20th century, and the catalyst for our founding was to provide access and opportunities to people who wanted to learn, live, and grow right here in Tampa Bay.

Over time, our university has redefined what it means to be a Bull by setting ambitious goals and continually defying expectations. And in doing so, we’ve often flown under the radar and proven that we can outperform even our oldest peer institutions. As someone who was often underestimated throughout their career, I can tell you – taking others by surprise *never* gets old.

I encourage you to reflect on the remarkable history of your alma mater because it's a reflection of you, our extraordinary students.

USF is a place for trailblazers who aim to push the boundaries of their potential. For those committed to pursuing excellence in everything they do. For those who are unafraid to ask questions, explore new ideas — and think bigger.

It's often said that the sky is the limit — but why limit yourself to the sky? Graduates of our great university have gone on to achieve incredible feats — such as performing on Broadway, competing in the Olympics, and leading missions to space taken in NASA's most powerful rocket. We even have a graduate-turned-faculty member who recently broke the world record for consecutive number of days spent living underwater!

Always remember — think bigger. Keep asking yourself, "What's possible, and how can we make it happen?" The answers you uncover might surprise you in a *very* good way.

What I love about the University of South Florida is that across our three campuses, you'll find pockets of knowledge where you can learn more about anything that sparks your curiosity — if you're willing to put the work in to make it happen.

The time you've spent at this university has provided you with the knowledge and skills needed to think critically, develop new ideas, and solve problems of the future. I can't wait to see all that you, our newest class of graduates, will accomplish in the years to come.

Allow me to share with you a few more reasons why you should be very proud of the university where you have earned your degree.

This year, USF achieved its highest position ever in U.S. News & World Report's annual ranking of the best colleges in America. This marks the fourth consecutive year that our university has ranked in the nation's top 50 public universities and the first time we've broken into the top 100 among *all* public and private universities. USF is on the rise, and we are not slowing down!

Our university is a resource that fuels the talent pipeline and advances the economic development of our region and our state. USF is proud to be among the state's top-performing institutions and to lead the way in preparing students for careers in high-demand fields, filling the talent pipeline for employers in our region, and driving our state's economy.

And we are incredibly proud of our student body, which includes a diverse representation of students from all walks of life. In fact, our study abroad programs and international student enrollment have earned USF national recognition as one of the best institutions for global engagement among its students.

As you move into this next chapter of your lives, I encourage you to draw from the courage and curiosity you have developed during your time at USF. The world you are entering will continue to undergo enormous shifts — and what once seemed pre-determined by others is now flexible and open to change.

As USF graduates, YOU are our future, and it is you who will define what tomorrow looks like. Remember, there are no limits to what you can accomplish if you continue to believe in yourselves.

And wherever your journey in life takes you, I want you to always carry a sense of pride in the diploma you have worked so diligently to earn through your academic excellence in the classroom, the laboratories, the recital halls, and the library — where many of you have, no doubt, spent countless hours burning the midnight oil.

Each of you will go down different paths — whether it's starting your career, attending graduate school, serving in the military, or pursuing other life goals — but you are united through your alma mater. You are *all* USF Bulls.

This weekend, our university will award more than 2,400 degrees across three ceremonies to a graduating class representing 36 states and 71 nations.

In closing, I'd like to take a moment to share some points of pride that make YOU, our summer class of 2023 so special...

Your cohort features 19 undergraduate students who have been named King O'Neal Scholars; a title reserved for those who graduate with a perfect 4.0 GPA.

And we are proud to support 85 student veterans who are earning their degrees this weekend. Collectively, these graduates possess a combined grade point average of 3.39! We also have 12 graduates who, through USF's

ROTC program, will be commissioned into the U.S. armed forces as officers.

Our youngest graduate, who is earning a bachelor's degree in psychology, is just 18 years old, and our *most experienced* graduate, who is earning a master's degree in economics, is 67 years *young*!

Your graduating class is a shining example of our incredible Bulls community. Each of you is ambitious, resilient, and determined to build a better world. And by graduating from the University of South Florida, you've proven that you can accomplish anything you set your mind to.

While your time as a student might be over — at least for now — the world is at your fingertips. It is my greatest honor to welcome you to the USF alumni family and to wish you all the best in your very bright futures.

On behalf of the University of South Florida's faculty, staff, trustees, and hundreds of thousands of alumni from around the world, I applaud each of you on reaching this tremendous milestone.

Congratulations and as always — Go Bulls!