

The Bridge to a Brighter Future

USF Spring 2023 Commencement Address by President Rhea Law

May 5-7, 2023

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

Before we get started, I'd like to take a moment to recognize the friends and families who are here with you 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. I credit much of my own personal and professional success to the opportunities provided to me right here on campus.

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.

Before you cross this stage today, I encourage you to take a moment to reflect on your why. Why did you enroll at the University of South Florida, and why did you want to earn your degree?

For many of you, you're the first in your family to do so. In fact, approximately 1 in 4 of our university's students are first-generation — the first person in their immediate family to attend college. I was also one of those students. I was the first in my family to go to university and I had big dreams for the future.

Now, it took some time and *a lot* of effort. I spent 10 years working toward my bachelor's degree while supporting myself as an employee in USF's Office of Sponsored Research. But I kept at it because I wanted that degree. I knew my education would be something I could hold on to for the rest of my life — it would open doors, and it would allow me to build the bridge to a brighter future.

If you're not the first to go to college, you may be first in other ways — the first to select your chosen major ... the first to study abroad ... or maybe even the first to navigate how to politely tell your professor they're "on mute" in the middle of a passionately delivered online lecture?

No matter what you're first in, remember that you worked so hard to reach this point *for a reason*. Your graduating class has not only worked diligently to reach your academic goals, but you have also shown amazing fortitude in the face of unprecedented challenges and change.

Over the past few years, and in the wake of the global pandemic, our society has been forced to confront many of its previous norms. We have adopted new ways of working, living, communicating, and relating to one

another. The adoption of these fresh approaches has required creative problem-solving and new ways of thinking about the world around us.

Your time at the University of South Florida has provided you with the knowledge and skills needed to think critically, develop new ideas, and solve problems of the future.

As USF graduates, you are prepared to build the bridge to a brighter future. I urge you to keep pursuing your goals and to never underestimate yourselves.

Remember that you can accomplish anything you set your mind to. Continue to ask yourself, “What’s possible, and how can we make it happen?” The answers you uncover might surprise you — in a 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.

Our university’s history of unleashing innovation is what’s fueled our upward trajectory — and it’s resulted in the creation of hundreds of inventions, academic programs, student organizations, and so many other valuable contributions to our society.

As you all have experienced throughout your time as students, USF has seen transformative 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.

Allow me a few moments to share with you just some of the 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* universities. USF is on the rise, and we're 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 top-performing universities in our state for the number of graduates employed and the highest average salaries achieved within one year of graduating.

And the diverse representation of international students studying at our university is a point of pride for our community. USF is proud to be nationally recognized as a leading institution for international student enrollment and education abroad. More than 10 percent of USF's student body is comprised of international students, who collectively represent more than 145 countries.

As you all move into this next stage 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.

And as USF graduates, YOU are our future, and it is you who will define what tomorrow looks like.

Ahead of you lies a bright future full of boundless possibilities. I encourage you to *always remember your why* and to hold onto your passion for pursuing new knowledge. Be a lifelong learner and push the boundaries of your potential.

Wherever this next chapter takes you, I also 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 be 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.

With more than 7,100 degrees conferred this weekend, our spring Commencement ceremonies span over three days and nine total ceremonies.

In closing, I'd like to share with you some points of pride that make YOU, our spring class of 2023 so special...

Your cohort includes graduates representing 46 states and 98 countries!

We are also proud to support 211 student veterans who are earning their degrees this weekend. Collectively, these graduates possess a combined grade point average of 3.58!

Our youngest graduate, who is earning a bachelor's degree in criminology, is just 17 years old, and our oldest graduate, who is earning a bachelor's degree in interdisciplinary social sciences, is 74 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 congratulate each of you on reaching this tremendous milestone.

Share your pride, stay connected, and as always — Go Bulls!