

College Dean Commencement Addresses

College of Arts and Letters/David Gudelunas

Congratulations to everyone from the College of Arts and Letters receiving a degree today. I am incredibly proud of your accomplishments and I am equally proud of your perseverance. I am speaking to you today from the Charlene and Mardy Gordon Performance Gallery in the new Ferman Center for the Arts. I am so happy we were able to open this amazing new building in time for your last semester at UT, even if we didn't have all the doorknobs until, well, we may still be waiting. The music students know what I'm talking about. Never mind, the beauty of this space is more than architectural, it is intellectual and even at times spiritual. It is a place that brings together philosophers and artists, dancers and musicians, filmmakers and communicators, actors and writers. It is a place where creativity is currency and a place where I hope you will continue to come back to long after you graduate.

You don't need me to tell you that this is an unusual time, and this is an unusual way to mark a significant milestone like commencement. It really does make me alternately sad and angry that so much of your senior year experience was impacted by a global pandemic that was especially hard for those of you that like to sing and act and just generally be in close communion with one another. But you know what, you did it. Every production, every class, every recital, every dance happening, and everything you did was, in fact, that more special because of the obstacles you overcame. That's the stuff. You made it to graduation and we can see the end of the pandemic in sight.

I wish I could tell you exactly what's coming next, but I can't. What I do know is that what you've done the past four years has made you uniquely prepared for this uncertain future. It may seem in this unprecedented moment like creating music, poetry, meaning, movements, art, ideas or advertising campaigns is a type of luxury. Of course, creativity, critical thinking and effective communication are not things we can live without. Art is something we need.

When I talk about art, I'm not just speaking about paintings or an experimental film. At its best, art communicates. Art tells a story and helps convey meaning and allows us to express something that matters. Of course, this is what you did no matter what you studied here in the College of Arts and Letters – you told stories and conveyed meaning through dance, music, film, emerging technologies, speeches, languages, poetry and prose. What I think is so important and so incredibly valuable about the work that you've done toward your degree is tell stories that matter.

I think that sometimes students who studied in the College of Arts and Letters think of themselves as a bit outside the mainstream. We often times think about writers or artists or intellectuals as the quintessential outsider, that person on the margins of culture looking in. My mentor in graduate school used to say "art is what real people do in their spare time and spare people do in their real time." Artists are people on the cultural reservation who stand apart from a culture in order to critique it.

And for the past few years you have been a part of really special reservation that is UT. My challenge for you now is to leave the reservation and take your art and your ability to communicate and express meaning and take this from the margins to the center of our culture. We need your voices and your clarity and your eloquence. We need your carefully chosen words, your ability to capture and hold our collective attention and your artistry. We need those people who tell stories not just about the center of our culture but from the margins to claim their space. We need those people who are spare to become those people who are real and we need those people who are real to pay attention to those of us on the fringe. We need you to guide our engagements with technology and to create beauty. This is your call.

There is, of course, another real value in honing your creativity. Creativity, innovation and the ability to communicate will take you far, even into an uncertain future.

In my area of scholarship, I think a lot about the impacts of technology on our lives. What does it mean that we spent a lot of the last year in Zoom classes or that commencement is being held not in a large room but over the tiniest of fiber optic cables? And what do these technological shifts mean for your future? Rapid changes in technology have made more and more cultural observers and employers alike realize that creativity is a key factor in determining success and happiness. As automation and artificial intelligence shake up the traditional employment landscape, it will be those people who can think and express creativity and who can communicate effectively who will succeed. SnapChat, AirBnB, YouTube and Overstock.com were all founded by or headed by someone not with a computer science degree or a business degree, but rather someone trained in a creative field. This makes sense. To think about what hasn't existed already, you need to be able to dream. You need to be able to communicate those dreams, and you need to be an artist in the broadest most magical sense of the word.

During a period of our collective history where history itself seems to move so fast and be so fleeting, where we can't remember what a politician said yesterday or what a celebrity tweeted today, the fact that you took the time to pause, to think, to create something with permanence and, perhaps most importantly to bring some meaning to a culture that often times feels awash in meaninglessness is truly an accomplishment. You will forget a meme tomorrow but a great poem, a powerful film, an essay you're particularly proud of or a painting that you love is something that you can never forget. This is the stuff that matters.

On behalf of the faculty and staff in the College of Arts and Letters, congratulations. Go out there and make meaning, make noise, make a difference, and make someone feel. Be kind to one another and thank your parents, your families, your friends. These are the people who have cheered for you and supported you.

Of course, be sure to thank your professors as well. Graduates, you are our most cherished partners in teaching and learning, and your achievements give meaning to our vocation. The faculty and staff at throughout the College have been partners in your education, and when you achieve excellence, we share in your accomplishment.

Now go out there and do good. More than ever, we need your creativity, your passion, your commitment.