

SCOTT LEONARD 2025 University of Tampa College of Arts and Letters and College of Social Sciences, Mathematics and Education Commencement Address

Class of 2025, I'm so honored to share in your celebration.

It's the end of an academic journey, and the beginning of the rest of your lives.

It's the result of years of hard work, and dreams that started small and are now ready to fly. The road ahead probably won't always be smooth, but the road will be yours. Each step yours, each choice yours, each challenge yours.

Now when they asked if I'd give this commencement address, I hesitated. I wasn't really sure that what I've accomplished qualifies. I mean when your greatest hit is "Oh the best part of waking' up is Folgers in your cup", you don't really expect commencement addresses to follow. But when I thought about having followed that up with "hoo-wop hootenboobay hoo-wop hootenboobay Where in the World is Carmen San Diego?" I realized the weight of my art was undeniable. Now, I tried to remember what I was thinking when I sat where you're sitting back in 1987. Not a clue. I should've been thinking about how to buy up all the real estate surrounding the exploding UTampa campus.

But let's reflect on what you've achieved. Think about how many late nights, early mornings, and moments of doubt you've pushed through to get here. You've met challenges, and probably discovered strength you didn't know you had. It hasn't always been easy, but you've persevered time and time again. And now - a new chapter of new challenges. New curricula with no syllabi.

I figured now that I'm addressing graduates, I needed to up my vocabulary game. You'll face new trials, experiences, paths. Some clear, some not - with detours and setbacks, but remember: FAILURE IS NOT THE OPPOSITE OF SUCCESS; IT IS PART OF THE JOURNEY TO SUCCESS. I'd like to credit ChatGPT for that quote.

Each time you mess up and feel like giving up, remember the lessons you've learned here at this gem of place UT. I gotta remember to say UTampa. When I came here, we called it Camp Tampa - beautiful, but not the amazing sprawling campus it is today. The gold paint was peeling off the minarets from the 50th anniversary celebration. Beautiful idea, but - Florida sun, gold paint - no chance.

I don't know about you but when I came here from my Indiana high school for my campus visit, I did not stand a chance. I mean this place is one-of-a-kind. That building. The setting. The weather. The pool. Freshman year, I definitely majored in pool. But I did find time to learn from remarkable professors that became friends like David Isele and Terry Mohn, and classmates and alumni that remain in my life. And with the careful way UTampa's been developed, it will only continue to be a source of pride for all of us. When I came here there were 1600 students. Now there are almost 12,000. But I still consider it my little secret.

Now you may have a clear vision for the future. I didn't. I think the 4 years here of problem solving implanted the confidence to know that each next step would reveal itself. And if it didn't, I could just go to the pool.

And remember, you now have a community of people who believe in you, cheering you on from the sidelines. The alumni association is a great resource, and makes it easy to stay connected to this place we love. In the nearly 40 years since I graduated, it has been a marvel to watch this place grow. I can only imagine what it'll look like 40 years from now.

You guys will define the future. Please. Do something. Something's happened. But however you move forward, lead with your heart. Be bold, curious, passionate. Take risks. Take chances. Embrace the discomfort that comes with growth. Pursue what excites you, and don't be afraid to change direction. Take the confidence you've developed here at UTampa to know there are successful steps in every direction. And whatever direction you choose, know that the best is yet to come.

Remember - you got a diploma from the University of Tampa, and you got nothin' to lose.

Go for it.

Thank you, and best of luck to the class of 2025!