Ms. Shelby Jackett! Thank you Shelby!

President Vaughn, Board of Trustees, faculty, staff of the University, family, friends, and most importantly the graduating class of 2022,

Congratulations Graduates!!! Look around,,,,,, we are alllll here,,, for you.

Graduates, as you move forward in life there are 10 things I want you to remember.

Okay, I’m just kidding, no assignments (or 10 things) today. If you think you’re relieved you should see these faces. (point to faculty)

When this award was presented the very first thing many of my wonderful colleagues pointed out is, “now you get to write a commencement speech!” Doing some homework, it seems that people usually speak of what they do in their field, and relate that to what got them to this place, as advice to you.

I’m an athletic trainer. I evaluate injuries and musculoskeletal conditions and tell people what’s wrong with them and then try to fix it and teach others to do the same. I was told my Dean said I should get someone up here on the stage with me to do an evaluation and tell them what’s wrong with them. Maybe I should get my Dean up here and tell him what’s wrong with…..never mind. Well, speaking of blown out knee, ankles, concussions, or long-standing chronic conditions and relating that to you just didn’t work me. Next, I thought, well what are the drivers that led me to what I do. That might work.

So, my first big driver is an inexhaustible curiosity. I’m just inquisitive about everything. I want to understand how everything works and how it all works together. I like to see the big picture. In grad school I was a bit afraid of, and thought I absolutely frustrated my cadaver anatomy professor with continuous questions. She wrote a reference letter for me including the line, “Kim is very energetic and might occasionally “wear out” those around her by her unquenchable thirst for information.” I knew what she really meant.

The next big driver is empathy. I hate to see anything, or anyone suffer. One of my fellow faculty pointed out that I’ll notice how someone is moving down the hall and I’ll stop them to ask what is bothering them. In fact, I’ve been known to do this to people I don’t even know, but it’s worked out for me. Turns out people like it when someone cares.

My other big driver, possibly due to that empathy driver, is I like to find solutions to the problems. This works very well with the first driver, because if you investigate to understand the big picture you have a better possibility of finding a solution.

Okay,,,,, so those are the drivers that likely got me to this place. But what I really thought this speech should focus on today is you. When this award occurred in April, we hoped we were coming out of a pandemic but not quite sure what the next variant might bring; there was talk of a World War; and due to Covid lockdowns in other countries that are only now starting to subside we had pretty bad supply chain problems, causing fear we would have a depression. Beyond these we are dealing with extreme weather events; gun violence and total lack of compassion for our fellow human, hateful and partisan politics we previously couldn’t have imagined; and social media that can completely wear you out. Groups can now produce deep fakes that can make anyone look like they are saying absolutely anything. I checked Politifact recently for something I had heard, and couldn’t believe the number of “Pants on Fire falsehoods” people had posted on social media. And we know how much the negative grabs attention as compared to the positive. How do you sort it all out?

With all of this you have faced I couldn’t help but think of those who have been named the “greatest generation”. They had to deal with a pandemic, and then a depression, followed by World War II. We ask, why did they become known as the greatest generation? The reason is they prevailed through it all, they were resilient.

Yet, studies have been done in the past few years, and I know you have heard these, finding that generation Z and millennials lacked resilience, they hypothesized due to helicopter parents. At a conference this summer those thoughts were repeated. But, halfway through this Fall I began asking my fellow faculty if they agreed with this research and every time got a resounding NO, absolutely not, these students are great. A Newsweek article this September said that 10 percent of young adults were opting out of going to, or going back to college. You, sitting here, persisted. How do you become resilient? You have to face adversity and push through it. Well, you have demonstrated resilience. Those researchers are going to have to come up with a new group for you.

Other recent research by the Pew Research Center finds that Gen Z and Millennials are the most well-educated generation yet, and much more accepting, and open minded than previous generations. You know, there was this great teacher that lived around 2000 years ago who told us numerous times that we shouldn’t judge others and we should love our fellow human as much as we love ourselves. Many of the major institutions of the world were built on these teachings, but these primary principles of this great teacher’s teachings seem to have gotten lost in our world today. Maybe you’ll bring us back to this.

Graduates, you have been well prepared at UT. You have been taught how to do your own research to sort out the truths. And,,,,, don’t forget us. Possibly one reason you came back to college was the great personalized education you get at The University of Tampa. When you get stumped in the future give us a call or email. Bounce ideas off someone who won’t judge your questions and will listen and help you find your way. There’s a lot of really good gray matter out here, who are at UT because they really love to teach, you. You have had the unique opportunity to have direct access to your professors. Hopefully UT will find a way to continue this opportunity far into the future.

Finally, my encouragement to you is, be inexhaustibly curious. Try to understand the big picture from all sides. As the old saying goes, you need to walk a mile in the other persons shoes. Then, don’t judge but have empathy. America is great in the world because we followed that great teacher’s words and had empathy and showed compassion for those around us. Finally, with the knowledge of the big picture and with empathy, work on the fixes. Don’t just be a problem finder but be a problem solver.

I truly believe, you have persevered to be here, and you will be named our next great generation. Make us proud. And again, Congratulations! Graduates.