

Tulane celebrates the Class of 2023 with rollicking ceremony

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bbronst@tulane.edu



At the Tulane University Unified Commencement Ceremony on May 20, the Class of 2023 gathered in Yulman Stadium to celebrate their academic achievements. The annual event includes live music, fireworks and thousands of new Tulane graduates. (Photo by Cheryl Gerber)

Donning a coach's cap and whistle, President Michael A. Fitts celebrated the Tulane Class of 2023 at Saturday's Unified Commencement, likening their grit, spirit and drive to the Green Wave football team's magical season and [Cotton Bowl victory](#).

"You represent how quickly things can change. When your classes first went virtual in a matter of days. When the deep wounds of racism and injustice were once again exacerbated on a global stage. When you went from sheltering from a storm to evacuating from a hurricane. When your team made one of the greatest turnarounds in college football history. No matter how quickly things changed, you adapted. You endured. You saw it through. And you overcame it together as a team. That's the stuff of champions."

Keeping with the football theme, Fitts assumed the role of "Coach Fitts," offering graduates a playbook with tips for winning the game of life and avoiding penalties — which he represented by throwing yellow flags from the podium. At one point, Fitts even received a shower of confetti, courtesy of Riptide.

"Things don't have to be perfectly arranged and aligned before you begin them," Fitts said. "It's okay to start and fail, then try again. You can change direction — you just can't quit. You've proven over and over again that you can adapt, and you can turn things around. But you cannot watch the clock wind down."

Following Fitts' speech, Tony and Grammy Award winner [Leslie Odom, Jr., the keynote speaker](#), stressed the importance of "doing the work" and lauded graduates for their diligence and perseverance. "You read the books, you wrote the papers, you took the tests, you passed the finals, you finished what you started. That alone sets you apart from so many. Give yourselves a hand for showing up for yourselves. You have the evidence of what you are capable of."

Odom's address also included a love letter to New Orleans.

"You are a jewel in this nation," said Odom, who has performed at the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival and spent two months in the city shooting the acclaimed film *One Night in Miami*. "The richness of your rhythms, your recipes, your southern speech, your customs and traditions — you're an original."

Odom is best known for his breakout role as the original Aaron Burr in the hit

musical *Hamilton*. In *One Night in Miami*, which earned him nominations for an Academy Award, BAFTA Award, Golden Globe Award and Screen Actors Guild Award, he starred and performed the songs of legendary singer Sam Cooke. He also wrote and performed the film's Oscar-nominated original song.

The Class of 2023 student speakers, [Da'Sean Spencer](#) and [Arianne D. Sacramento](#), challenged graduates to use what they learned at Tulane over the past four years to make their mark on the world, wherever the future may take them.

Spencer, a New Orleans native, graduated with a Bachelor of Arts (BA) in political science, while Sacramento is leaving Tulane with a Tulane 34 Award and three degrees — a Doctor of Medicine (MD), a Master of Business Administration (MBA) and a Master of Public Health (MPH).

"We are leaving today with a diploma," said Sacramento. "But we are also leaving today with lifelong connections and memories to look back on, with a sense of pride in knowing that we have what it takes to be successful (and no one can tell us otherwise), and with the strength and kindness to make positive impacts in our community, in our careers, and in all aspects of our lives."

"My fellow graduates," said Spencer, "as we enter this new chapter, I implore you to start your sentences with 'What if,' and, if need be, end your sentences with 'Why not?' Push the boundaries of what is possible in the world, and at every step of the way, embrace that part of you that wants to curl into a ball or run. Learn to understand it. Learn to wield it. For it is your greatest strength and the key to a life of leadership, purpose, and success in the possibilities of tomorrow."

Commencement 2023 began as the sun set over Yulman Stadium with an academic procession of nearly 2,000 graduates representing nine schools. Graduates paraded onto Benson Field as family and friends cheered from the stands, many waving to them and capturing the scene with cell phones and video cameras.

It was a true New Orleans-style send-off that included parasol-toting graduates second-lining, fireworks, live jazz, Mardi Gras beads and more.

[Tulane also bestowed honors on several special guests](#). Odom received the President's Medal and Dr. Rosalind Picard, an inventor, engineer, scientist and pioneer in artificial intelligence received an honorary Doctor of Science. Quint Davis,

producer of the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival, which has grown to become a national treasure over the past 50 years, received an honorary Doctorate of Humane Letters.

An approaching lightning and thunderstorm forced the university to shorten the program and defer the formal conferral of [teaching awards, which recognize faculty for extraordinary dedication in the classroom.](#)

Faculty who were scheduled to be honored with teaching awards at the ceremony included D. Jelegat Cheruiyot and Allison Emmerson, recipients of the Suzanne and Stephen Weiss Presidential Fellowships for Undergraduate Education, and Katherine Andrinopoulos and Kris Lane, recipients of the President's Awards for Excellence in Graduate and Professional Teaching.

The Unified Commencement was the culmination of four days of celebration that included individual school ceremonies, as well as hooding and awards ceremonies.





Graduates are all smiles as they head into Yulman Stadium. (Photo by Tyler Kaufman)

Members of the Class of 2023 pause on the field. (Photo by Tyler Kaufman)