

Tulane Commencement celebrates the resilience and ambition of the Class of 2024

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To close out the 2024 Unified Commencement Ceremony, a fireworks display lights up the sky above Yulman Stadium. (Photo by Cheryl Gerber)

Tulane University's graduates celebrated Commencement in style Saturday, May 18, with all the pomp and circumstance many missed out on as high school seniors four years ago during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Speaking at Yulman Stadium on Tulane's uptown campus, President Michael A. Fitts said no group is more deserving of the storied tradition of a Tulane Commencement than the Class of 2024. On top of starting college during the pandemic, many who earned graduate degrees Saturday were also displaced for several weeks by Hurricane Ida, which struck soon after the fall 2021 semester began.

Fitts expressed his gratitude to the graduates for their spirit, enthusiasm and character, prompting cheers and "Roll Waves" throughout his address.

"You made it clear: There is no other class as tough or as talented as the Class of 2024. Tonight is in honor of you," Fitts said.

This year's class of more than 2,800 graduates across nine schools contributed more than 103,000 service hours to the community and represented 50 countries.

While the challenges of the last few years may have graduates wondering, "Why me? Why can't this just be easy?" Fitts encouraged them to stay resilient as they embark on their next great adventure.

"I hope you are up to the challenge of seeing your life, and the world, as a dynamic opportunity. It's a chance to be more than you ever dreamed possible," said Fitts, who is marking his 10th anniversary as Tulane's president.

He also reminded graduates to reflect often on their achievements as they plan for the future.

"You have already navigated your share of interesting times," he said. You have already set a standard for courage, clarity and purpose, and I can't wait to see what you will do next."

In his keynote address, [Pulitzer Prize-winning author and presidential historian Jon Meacham](#) told graduates to think for themselves and approach the world with curiosity, grace and hope.

“Tulane has prepared you for lives of entrepreneurial citizenship — a devotion to justice and to the pursuit of happiness,” Meacham said. “Such citizenship has led to great change, and great change in America tends to come when engaged and creative people — people like you — decide that the way things are isn’t the way they should be.”

Meacham, a contributor to major national media outlets and a frequent guest on popular news programs, has penned numerous national bestsellers and profiles on figures such as Thomas Jefferson, Winston Churchill and John Lewis, a civil rights icon, longtime U.S. congressman and Tulane University honorary degree recipient.

Meacham’s advice to graduates ran the gamut, including challenges to take naps outside on summer afternoons, subscribe to newspapers and magazines, vote in every election and “try to look up from your phones. You’d be amazed at what you can see if you look around.

“Above all, remember, in hours of joy and darkness, that Tulane has taught you that the test of the ages is not whether you lead *the* good life, but *a* good life, through all the length of days.”

The [Class of 2024 student speaker](#), Tamunoboma Dominion Fenny, who was earning a degree from Tulane Law School, challenged fellow graduates to apply the knowledge and experiences they gained during their time at Tulane to positively influence the world, regardless of where their paths may lead them. She said it’s natural to have doubts throughout life, but that graduating with a Tulane education already puts them ahead of the game.

“Tulane has taught us not only that it’s okay to be exactly who we are, but that it’s okay to aspire to be better not just for ourselves, but for the community that we’ve built here,” said Fenny, a native of Nigeria who grew up in Birmingham, Alabama.

“Now we’re expanding our Tulane community to the four corners of the world. A bigger challenge, yes, but a welcome one. One that we are well equipped with all the tools we need to handle whatever comes our way.”

When Fenny began law school, she overcame her own doubts by immersing herself in the Tulane community. During her three years at Tulane, she served as president of the Graduate and Professional Student Association, secretary of the Black Law Students Association and a legal intern for the Louisiana Fourth Circuit Court of

Appeal. As a member of the Air Force ROTC, she holds the office of Second Lieutenant and will embark on her Air Force career after taking the bar exam.

“This world is ours for the taking,” Fenny said. “It’s ours for the changing. And as we embark on this journey, we get to choose...We choose what’s next and our time is now, because we can do anything.”

Commencement 2024 began as the sun set over Yulman Stadium amid the sounds of “Commencement Fanfare,” a musical gift from Tulane alumnus and Assistant Director of Bands Dylan Parrilla-Koester. Performed by Parrilla-Koester and Director of Bands Barry Spanier, the composition featured threads of the Tulane Alma Mater and “Do You Know What It Means to Miss New Orleans.” Graduates made their way to their seats as Dr. Michael White and his Original Liberty Jazz Band provided the processional music.

Tulane also [bestowed honorary degrees](#) on Meacham and other distinguished guests. Meacham received an honorary Doctor of Humane Letters degree, as did Leona Tate, who began her life’s work as a civil rights activist and leader in 1960 at age six, when she integrated New Orleans public schools. Dr. Victor Dzau, a globally recognized physician-scientist, administrator and healthcare leader who’s devoted his career to advancing scientific innovation, global health and equity, received an honorary Doctor of Science degree.

[Teaching awards that recognize faculty dedication](#) in the classroom were also bestowed. The 2024 President’s Awards for Excellence in Professional and Graduate Teaching went to Ricardo Cortez, the Pendergraft William Larkin Duren Professor in the Department of Mathematics in the School of Science and Engineering, and Adeline Masquelier, professor in the Department of Anthropology in the School of Liberal Arts.

The Oliver Fund Award for Excellence in Faculty Mentoring, which is given on a biannual basis, was awarded to Katherine Theall, holder of the Cecile Usdin Professorship in Women’s Health in the School of Public Health and Tropical Medicine, director of the Mary Amelia Center for Women’s Health Equity Research and senior director of the Violence Prevention Institute.

Carrie Wyland, senior professor of practice in the Department of Psychology in the School of Science and Engineering, received the Suzanne and Stephen Weiss Presidential Fellowship for Undergraduate Education.

In true New Orleans style, the send-off included second-lining, fireworks, live jazz and Mardi Gras beads. Many graduates waved sparkly green and blue umbrellas emblazoned with their own designs.

The Unified Commencement was the culmination of three days of celebration that included individual school ceremonies, as well as hooding and awards ceremonies. Next year, Commencement will return to the Caesar's Superdome, which has been under renovation in preparation for Super Bowl LIX.

Relive more moments from the ceremony through this [photo recap](#).