

President Fitts encourages students to 'defy gravity' at Oz-inspired Convocation

August 18, 2025 9:00 AM Kate Lorio
klorio1@tulane.edu

The Green Wave rolled through the Emerald City on Sunday afternoon at the President's Convocation for New Students, a grand finale to the Hullabaloo Hello orientation for first-year students. As the kickoff to the academic year, the event included addresses from President Michael A. Fitts, deans and senior administrators that were imbued with New Orleans charm and a touch of magic.

Tulane senior Luke Broussard, the master of ceremonies, welcomed everyone with an explanation of the symbolic opening procession. As strains of Tulane's Alma Mater filled Avron B. Fogelman Arena in the Devlin Fieldhouse, gonfalon flags adorned with colors representing Tulane's schools soared high, just as they do at the start of Unified Commencement. Tulane Trailblazer and alumnus Dr. Michael White led the Original Liberty Jazz Band, deans and administrators through the crowd as President Fitts rounded out the procession and took to the podium to welcome the Class of 2029.

"Right now, you may feel like you've been dropped into a totally unfamiliar environment. Like Dorothy in 'The Wizard of Oz,' you may be thinking, 'I'm not in Kansas anymore,'" Fitts said. "I may not have much in common with Glinda, the Good Witch of the North," he added. "But just as she set Dorothy on the right path, I'm here to help you find your own version of the yellow brick road."

With a wave of a magic wand, Fitts transported the audience "over the rainbow" to begin their journey to several iterations of the Emerald City. The first stop: the classic 1939 film "The Wizard of Oz."

"At home in Kansas, Dorothy dreams of a place 'where the dreams that we dare to dream really do come true,'" Fitts said. "During your time at Tulane, I dare you to dream big."

Fitts then led the class to the groundbreaking 1970s musical, “The Wiz.” Referencing the show’s hit song “Ease on Down the Road,” he encouraged students to persevere in the face of setbacks, reminding them of the support system they would find in Newcomb-Tulane College (NTC), the academic home of all full-time undergraduate students.

The final stop was “Wicked,” a 2003 Broadway smash hit whose film adaptation has become a cultural phenomenon. Noting the narrative transformation the story takes in centering “wicked witch” Elphaba as its protagonist, Fitts encouraged students to consider their own points of view.

“When we build bridges across differences, we can change the world for the better,” Fitts said. “This openness to new ideas and perspectives is how we create an environment where academic excellence can thrive.”

Marking the end of their journey through Oz, Fitts encouraged the audience to remember the lessons of the day: dream big, persevere under pressure and build bridges across differences, all within the nurturing environment they will find at the university. “There’s no place like home,” he said, “and there’s no place like Tulane.”

After thunderous applause and a rendition of “Defying Gravity” from the Tulane University Marching Band, Provost Robin Forman emphasized the value of higher education and introduced senior administrators and deans, including NTC Dean Mollye Demosthenidy, who presented another tradition: the class challenge. Calling upon Tulane’s motto “Not for oneself but for one’s own,” she charged students with the responsibility to reflect on ways in which they could improve not only themselves but also the world.

“I challenge you to measure your success by the relationships you foster, the communities you build and the lives that you impact,” she said.

Before the grand send-off, students raised plain white second-line umbrellas they had been given, blank canvases they will decorate with memories of their Tulane years and later showcase, fully adorned, during the joyful fanfare of Unified Commencement. With a final exclamation of “Roll Wave!” echoing over a sea of umbrellas, Dr. Michael White led his band and the crowd out of the arena, where a celebration awaited at the Hullabaloo Hello block party.





The Class of 2029 received the unadorned white umbrellas they will decorate throughout their Tulane journey and display at Unified Commencement. (Photo by Kenny Lass)

First-year students celebrated the start of the academic year at the Hullabaloo Hello block party, a fun-filled occasion featuring local food trucks. (Photo by Kenny Lass)