

USF Spring 2024 Commencement Address

Remarks Delivered by USF President Rhea Law

May 2-5, 2024

Welcome everyone, and congratulations to the Spring Class of 2024!

Today is a momentous occasion for our graduates, and before we get started, I'd like to recognize the friends and families who are here in the audience. Will you please join me in giving a big round of applause to those who have helped you get here?

I am honored to be here with you today. On behalf of the University of South Florida's faculty, staff, trustees, and hundreds of thousands of alumni from around the world, we are so excited to celebrate your tremendous accomplishments. This is your moment!

Today's ceremonies may be especially meaningful for many of you because this marks your first — and perhaps only — in-person Commencement since the onset of the global pandemic. You've overcome great obstacles and unprecedented challenges to reach this point, and I am delighted that you get to experience this milestone as a part of our USF Bulls community.

I know from personal experience how much of an impact the University of South Florida has on the lives of our students. When I was sitting where you are right now, I never imagined that I would one day have the privilege of leading my alma mater and cheering each of you on as you cross the finish line.

When I came to USF for the first time, I was just 18 years old, and like many of our students, I was the first person in my family to go to college. I wanted to earn my degree because I knew it would open doors to new opportunities and change my life for the better.

My years at USF did exactly that. Throughout my studies, I discovered pockets of knowledge everywhere I looked, and I was fortunate to have several mentors and champions who guided me and encouraged me to explore new interests, try new things, and chase after my goals.

As I was getting ready to leave USF to attend law school, a wise mentor of mine, Dr. Bill Taft, reassured me by saying, “You can always come back. There will always be a place for you here at USF.”

And all these years later, I want to share that message with you.

Over the years, I’ve had the pleasure of giving back to my alma mater from several vantage points — as an employee, a volunteer, a donor, a board member... and now as president.

Today you join a network of nearly 400,000 USF alumni who are making an impact worldwide. While your time as a student might be over — at least for now — I encourage you to cherish your connection to your alma mater and stay connected within our university community for the rest of your lives.

Each of you will go down different paths — whether it’s starting your career, attending graduate school, serving in the military, or pursuing other life goals — but you are united through your alma mater. You are all USF Bulls.

Allow me to share with you a few reasons why you should be so proud of the university where you have earned your degree.

One of the most significant milestones in USF’s history was our recent invitation to join the Association of American Universities, a prestigious group of 71 research universities in the United States and Canada.

This is a distinction held by only 3% of all four-year universities in the country. Joining the AAU empowers us to further invest in USF’s powerful research enterprise, attract even more bright minds to our region, and make an even greater impact on our society.

Also, this year, USF reached its highest position ever among all institutions, public and private, in U.S. News & World Report’s annual ranking of the best colleges in America. Our university is on the rise, and we are not slowing down!

Our Bulls community possesses a strong spirit of innovation, and our researchers are turning their bold ideas into both action *and* impact. With 88 new patents secured in 2023, USF is ranked 14th among American public research universities and 34th among all universities *worldwide* in generating new U.S. utility patents.

And as home to one of the largest populations of student veterans within the State University System of Florida, we are proud to support our veterans, military-connected students, and first responders. USF is among the first to be designated as a Florida Collegiate Purple Star Campus, a recognition reserved for institutions that are making a significant commitment to supporting military-connected students and their families.

In closing, I'd like to take a moment to share some points of pride that make YOU, our Spring Class of 2024, so special...

This weekend, our university will award more than 7,000 degrees across 10 ceremonies to a graduating class representing 46 states and 89 countries.

Our newest class of graduates includes 168 student veterans, who collectively possess a combined grade point average of 3.6! We also have 57 graduates who, through USF's ROTC program, will be commissioned into the U.S. armed forces as officers.

Our youngest graduate, who is earning a bachelor's degree in health sciences, is just 17 years old. And our most experienced graduate, who is earning a master's degree in history, is 69 years young!

Your graduating class is a shining example of our incredible Bulls community. Each of you is bold, ambitious, and determined to build a better world.

And by graduating from the University of South Florida, you've proven that you can accomplish anything you set your mind to. I wish you all the best in your very bright futures.

It is my greatest honor to be among the first to welcome you to the USF alumni family. Congratulations and as always — Go Bulls!