

**COMMENCEMENT WELCOME**  
**May 18, 2021**  
**10 a.m. ceremony**

Thank you, Benson, and good morning everyone!

Welcome to our outdoor, in-person Commencement for the College of Arts and Sciences!

I'm truly overjoyed to see everyone here today – our first major event on campus since the pandemic forced us all into seclusion back in March 2020.

Let me hear you – are you out there, Class of 2021?

And what about you – parents, friends and family members – this is your day too. Let's hear you!

We're all gathered today to celebrate our student's achievements – and indeed, our shared accomplishments – at the end of a year that none of us will ever forget.

And I have to say that I'm proud of our community, because despite all of the challenges, and the stress and the struggles, we never flinched from our commitment to student success.

We remained a socially and intellectually vibrant community while upholding the health and safety of all our members.

Together, we were...Southern Strong!

Of course, none of us expected to find ourselves in the uncertain, surreal, world in which we have been living.

But there is hope. A brighter future lies just ahead – and today's commencement ceremony symbolizes that.

We are so glad that we were able to have the opportunity to have friends and family members join our graduates today, along with the professors who taught you and the staff who helped you on campus.

All of these good people encouraged you, supported you, nurtured your creativity and kept you both focused and grounded.

They have shared in your journey – they also share in your success. Let's give them a

round of applause!

To the graduates - our Commencement team has worked long and hard to ensure that these ceremonies will be a special occasion...because you deserve to be honored.

To your great credit, despite the most stressful of circumstances, you persevered with your studies – and you succeeded!

You worked just as hard—maybe even harder—to complete your academic requirements, to cooperate with quickly evolving situations, and to uphold the health and safety of our community.

In fact, I would say that the Class of 2021 will truly go down in history for its resilience, sacrifice, and determination under the most difficult of circumstances.

In far too many ways, the last 18 months have shown us how fragile our world is.

So much vanished so quickly: research projects, internships, artistic performances, athletic competitions, even the simple pleasures of sharing meals, hugging friends or shaking hands.

Some of you have lost friends or relatives to the COVID-19 virus, or struggled with it yourselves.

Many of you saw jobs disappear or felt the economic devastation inflicted by the pandemic.

Clearly, you are graduating in much harder times than the classes that immediately preceded you.

And, for our undergraduates in particular, this experience comes at a particularly formative moment in your lives.

So how will you respond? Undoubtedly, the losses are real and painful.

What they took from you was beyond your control. What you take from them, however — that is at least partly up to you.

You have already shown your persistence and resilience in tough times, achieving something remarkable.

And now I believe, that you have the chance to be the start of something truly extraordinary:

to appreciate anew the value of ordinary human experience and to make your individual contribution to the common good.

Your talents, your insights, your courage and your compassion will never be more valuable than in the post COVID-19 world.

And you will be in good company.

During the course of the pandemic, thousands of Southern-trained nurses and healthcare workers have served on the front lines in Connecticut hospitals and health clinics.

Thousands of Southern-educated teachers, principals and school administrators have taught and nurtured young students and kept our education system operating remotely.

And thousands of Southern-trained accountants, financial consultants and business owners have worked to keep commerce afloat during a time of great stress for our economy.

You will soon be joining them and other Southern graduates as key contributors in our state's - and our nation's - revival.

Some of you may remember that at Freshman Convocation I always emphasize that, as the newest members of the campus community, you take on a larger responsibility - to each other.

Now, more than ever, is the time to be "intentionally kind."

Take care of yourself and those you love, absolutely. But remember that everyone has value, everyone counts.

Commitments to diversity, inclusivity and human rights are fundamental to our social justice mission at Southern.

So in that spirit of caring and compassion, I ask all of you to help build a better society...

...one that confronts racism wherever and whenever it is encountered

...one that strives relentlessly for equality and justice for all.

Because decades from now, I hope that you won't just view this as the time when the last part of your college career was disrupted...

...but instead, you'll recall it as the year when everything began to change and you started out on your journey to making sure that it did – for the better.

I'll leave you now, as I always do, with a short story – this one from Aesop, reinforcing the fact that no act of kindness is ever wasted:

“A Lion is fast asleep until a Mouse wakes him up.  
The Lion opens his big jaws to swallow him.  
But the Mouse begs the Lion to think again, as he may become useful in the future.  
The Lion laughs the idea off and lets him go.  
Sometime later, the Lion is caught in a trap by some Hunters.  
At that moment the same little Mouse walks by and notices the Lion trapped.  
He walks up and chews the rope to free the Lion.  
The Mouse smiles and says, was I not right?”

So, the next time you think your contributions, your acts of charity, your works of justice, your gifts of love, and your “intentional kindness” are nothing, think again!

They all add up, allowing great things to happen - you too, can make a difference.

Stay well, stay safe... take care of yourself and those whom you love.

Congratulations to all of you!

And remember...together, we are and always will be - Southern Strong!