

St. Thomas Aquinas College Honors Convocation Address
Tuesday, April 8, 2025
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Colleges & Universities (NAICU)

President Daly, Dr. Fitzpatrick, esteemed Trustees, dedicated faculty, distinguished guests, proud families and friends—and most importantly, the radiant, resilient, award recipients and honor society inductees—what a privilege it is to be here with you for this celebration of excellence.

Now, I know that convocation speeches often fall into two categories: the “inspirational, motivational - you can change the world” speech and the “reflective - here’s what I’ve learned” speech.

I’ll be honest: this one’s going to lean a little into both. Because I *do* want you to go change the world—but I also want to share a few stories, and perhaps a bit of advice, that I wish someone had told me when I was sitting where you are now.

But don’t worry—I’ve been told I have five minutes and no musical number to deliver because I couldn’t compete with your own Anna Vota! Therefore, I should have just enough time to share some things I’ve learned - stories about orchestras, love, martinis, and detours.

Let’s start with orchestras.

In my current role as President of the National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities, I am fortunate to visit colleges and universities nationwide, meet students, and see first-hand the impact campuses like St. Thomas Aquinas College have on their communities.

With our member presidents, I also share an important responsibility as an advocate for private, nonprofit higher education. It is a heavy responsibility but one that fills me with immense pride as I bring the campus stories and lessons I hear to our elected leaders in the nation’s capital.

I often feel like a conductor standing before an orchestra of college and university presidents from across the country.

Each one plays their own part—with different instruments, tempos, and styles—but when they come together, they can create something beautiful for our nation’s colleges and universities and the students we serve.

And like any orchestra, the music doesn’t come from just one soloist. It comes from listening to each other. From working in harmony. From letting others shine.

The same is true as we celebrate excellence in so many forms and areas of study. You didn’t arrive here alone. Behind every accomplishment is an orchestra of people—professors, advisors, classmates, colleagues, family members—who help us excel.

Yes, it is a personal accomplishment. But it's also a collective one. And the greatest things you'll do in life will rarely be done alone.

In Washington, DC this is particularly true.

Speaking of Congress, one of the unsung heroes behind moments like this was Rhode Island Senator Claiborne Pell, who believed deeply in access to – and the power of – education. His name lives on through the Pell Grant, which has helped over 80 million students pursue higher education, including many of you. He had a famous saying: *“Let the other fellow have my way.”*

That phrase always struck me. It reminds us that we can achieve so much more when we work together, when we lead not by claiming credit, but by clearing the path for others.

Each of us is a beneficiary of that legacy. Throughout your life you will have opportunities to pay it forward—to use your knowledge and compassion not just for personal success, but for collective good.

Two weeks ago today, my mother passed into eternal life. She was 97 years old and married to my father, who went before her 7 years ago, for 71 years. In her final days, all she wanted was to be reunited with him—and maybe with the pitchers of martinis he used to make and keep in the freezer until guests arrived on Saturday nights. Their life was filled with laughter, hospitality, and love.

In the spirit of your patron, St. Thomas Aquinas, who said, *“No man truly has joy unless he lives in love,”* I hope that each of you finds that same kind of joy. Yes, attending college has helped you reach a dream you held for yourself. But the real magic will happen in the dreams you hold for others—in the relationships you build, in the love you share, and in the lives you change.

Let me also leave you with this final thought, as you consider how to ignite your passion: don't be afraid to pivot. Life rarely follows a straight line, and sometimes the best chapters begin with an unexpected turn.

Years ago, I was teaching entrepreneurship at Carnegie Mellon University when I was asked to lead the Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh. I loved teaching but felt a pull to the mission of the library system, thinking about how my daughters had grown up in the branch library in our neighborhood.

I didn't train as a librarian, and don't have a degree in Library Science. My studies were focused on business. The search consultant and academic colleagues told me, “Don't take the job—you'll never be welcomed back in higher education.”

But I did take it. And not only was I able to sustain the great legacy Andrew Carnegie started, but I also eventually became a college president, and now lead an organization that represents hundreds of colleges and universities nationwide.

Those detours? They weren't distractions. They became the glue that held my career—and my purpose—together.

Your liberal arts foundation teaches you to think critically, to embrace complexity, and to lead with empathy. Trust in that. Be greedy about experiences. Say yes to things that scare you. Especially those that don't fit neatly into the plan you have for yourself.

So, as you seek to excel at all you do, consider carrying these four thoughts with you:

- Build your orchestra. Surround yourself with people who lift you up and make beautiful music together.
- Lead like Senator Pell. Focus on the goal, not the spotlight.
- Love with your whole heart. Because joy isn't found in titles or achievements—it's found in people and experiences.
- And when life says, “turn here,” don't be afraid. The unexpected roads might just be the most important ones.

Today is a celebration of excellence and everything you've accomplished—and everything that's still to come.

I believe in you. We believe in you. We are cheering for you. And we can't wait to see the symphony you'll create.

Congratulations to each of you and the St Thomas Aquinas College Community.