

Commencement Address
University of the South
Sewanee, Tennessee
Patricia Ramirez Miranda, C'24
All Saints' Chapel
May 12, 2024

Good morning, Chancellor Owensby, Vice-Chancellor Pearigen, Provost Wilson, deans, faculty, staff, family, and friends. **Thank you** for celebrating the graduation of the **century**, whether in person or remotely. We have waited **many years** for a proper recognition of our academic careers and achievements, so it's a blessing to gather here **together** with purpose. I am honored to share this moment with you all.

Coming to Sewanee in the fall of 2020 was the craziest and most impulsive decision I ever made. Back then, I couldn't have told you two things about this place because I didn't know anything about it. I applied randomly, got in, the school gave me financial support, and now I stand here hoping to share some reflections with you all. Whether you have ties to the university dating back to generations ago, or like me, you are one of the firsts to attend college, **you belong here.**

I will take a brief moment to thank my family. Mami y papi, gracias por siempre creer en mí y darme la confianza para continuar mis estudios tan lejos de casa, en un lugar desconocido para todos nosotros. Sé que no ha sido fácil la distancia ni los costos financieros pero he honrado todos sus sacrificios y les dedico este reconocimiento.

René, sé que la vida de adulto no ha sido lo que esperabas pero no te desanimes. Tu tienes mucho que ofrecer. Familia, estoy muy orgullosa de ustedes y los amo.

For many of us, we were once the class of 2020. Today, we officially become the class of 2024. **CONGRATULATIONS.** Graduating from high school and entering college during a global pandemic was a terrifying moment for all of us. I left my family back in Puerto Rico and moved to Tennessee. **The first time** I stepped foot in this state was the day before I moved into Benedict Hall. Throughout my four years here, I put my trust in our different communities. All of

us have put our trust in this institution and its promise to deliver an excellent liberal arts education at Sewanee. **When the world had gone quiet**, and we kept moving in no particular direction, we leaned on our professors, staff, community members, and administrators to make our time here worth the challenge and risk.

When I think back about our first year here, it feels surreal. I refuse to believe that we had to get tested for Covid **every week** at Fowler Center. **But yes**, we did and we prevailed **together**. I recently found a series of emails sent from **Public Health Sewanee** that still haunt me.

The weekly reminder went something along the lines of: **“Dear Student - You are scheduled for a COVID test tomorrow, Oct. 8, 2020, based on the first letter of your last name. COVID testing is required. If you miss a test, you will be asked to go home for 14 days.”** I hope none of you forgot to get tested like I did.

—And, while I treasure plenty of lovely moments during this time that brought us together as a class, **I don’t want to wallow in nostalgia**. As a class, many have labeled us with attributes of praise, such as resilience and courage, and others of pity for facing challenges when coming to this institution. Whether you place yourself on either end of the spectrum, **I THINK IT’S TIME WE REDEFINE WHO WE ARE**. — Let this celebration be the turning moment to reconcile with this experience.

Today, we become **alumni of The University of the South**, a role that comes with honor and vital responsibility. This institution has a strong network of alumni who pride themselves in being involved in the decision-making process for the future of Sewanee. **So, what is our role in the future of this community?** Primarily, we must keep our institution accountable to continue equipping citizens and stay true to the liberal arts education it offers to incoming and current students.

The education thousands of students across the US are receiving is under threat by political agendas and changes in the structure and policies in higher education. As unforeseen shifts rapidly occur, we must prepare to face these changes **as alumni** and support our alma mater (mah-ter). Due to financial losses and administrative challenges, among other factors, **at least 55** public or nonprofit colleges have closed, merged, or announced closures or mergers since March 2020. **55**. These

statistics are heartbreaking because I cannot imagine my life without ever attending Sewanee or having a place to come back to in the future.

Although we are a small university and are limited to some capacity with the courses and programs our departments offer, **we have the privilege of creating our own academic portfolios** by declaring our majors, minors, and certificates. If you are not aware, colleges and universities currently find themselves in the position to cut or merge programs that are very popular and integral to our campus. Some of these programs include gender studies, political science, American history, foreign languages, art, education, religious studies, and **even economics, one of the largest cohorts at Sewanee.**

This list is not exhaustive, but it can give you a clear picture of how pressing this issue is. In light of this, Sewanee **must preserve its academic traditions** so that its future students can have the **same profound and unique experience in academia we did.** I know many of us dreaded taking gen-eds, but those were the deciding factors in the academic programs we chose along the way. For me, I found out I wasn't good at math, music, **or** philosophy, among other subjects. a

By joining these ranks as alumni today, we have a fundamental role to play. We must join **committees**— and give our **input** as recent graduates who have **experienced firsthand** the issues our institution faces. Not only that, but we have contacts with the student body and should give them a voice in ongoing conversions. As a class, we have addressed institutional changes and uncertainty, so we are **almost** overqualified for the job. Donate money to programs you cherish... host internship opportunities for students... be the person who comes back to campus four times a year to network or socialize. Whatever you do, **remember to give back to this community.**

In closing, thank you to Facilities Management, our Technology Access and Support Team, the Sewanee Angels, and everyone who made this event possible. And today, **on Mother's day**, I want to give a big shout-out to our beautiful mothers. We wouldn't be here without you. This expensive degree, **and what we make of it**, is our gift to you all.

YSR!