

**PRESIDENT STEVEN P. O'DAY  
AUSTIN COLLEGE**

**Commencement Address**

**May 21, 2022**

**Class of 2022, today is a milestone.** Certainly, it is a milestone for you, graduates, but it is also a milestone for the people around you—your family and friends, the classmates who will still be here next year, your professors, coaches, and the staff you've worked with. No one does this alone. I hope you remember to thank them today and in the years to come.

This morning, we are standing on revered ground. This particular place is revered because so many of our students have walked across this platform and marked their graduation from Austin College. Sometimes they have walked in the Sid Richardson gym. In the early years students walked in Huntsville or the Sherman Opera House. They celebrated their accomplishments and “commenced” with the rest of their lives. Their families and friends, together with the faculty and community of the college, gathered around to officially mark the moment. Today, all of us join together with the people of those other times and places to mark this most special occasion.

All of the classes before you had their own stories, but YOU, Class of 2022, have seen it all. Your story has been like no other. You are the first class I helped recruit, and you began your first year as the largest incoming class in Austin College history. It was for you that the seniors applauded as you filed into the Wynne Chapel for opening convocation.

Throughout your time here you have discovered planets; conducted research; written papers, poems, and scholarly articles; performed Vivaldi and Queen and Sondheim. You have pivoted, locked down, gone remote, and Zoomed. You've had your noses poked and prodded. You've isolated and quarantined. You've discovered what an N95 mask is and what a PCR test is. You've socially distanced, hand sanitized, entered by one door and left through another. You've literally added new words to the world's vocabulary.

Amidst all that, you have started eSports, Roo Band, and Public Health Ambassadors. You have advocated in Mock Trial and Model UN. You have spent HOURS, days, weeks, in the lab, in the field, and in the studio. You have lent a helping hand, whether that was packing meals for First We Serve, on Alternative Spring Break in Corpus Christi or Louisiana, or through GreenServe right here in Sherman. You've presented research at conferences and to your peers here. You've competed. You've set records and won championships—on the court and in the water.

*President Steven P. O'Day*  
*Commencement Address*  
*May 21, 2022*  
*Page 2*

You have seen major renovations of spaces on campus, which often meant a lot of dust, a lot of caution tape, and the relocation of your usual classroom. You have experienced a call for social justice and have moved to support it. You have also seen the Mall lined with portable toilets in sub-zero temperatures and the swimming pool drained to keep the heat on in dorms during Snowmageddon in 2021.

You have triumphed with the completion of that honors thesis and in passing the last round of final exams. You have shared tragedy and tears and seen your share of stressed-out anxious nights. Me too! ... Been right there with you.

But through it all, you were slowed but never stopped; you were cold but never frozen; you were inconvenienced but never halted. Progress was not lost, and dreams were not delayed. You came out the other side. You have made it here—here, to the Clyde Hall Graduation Court—this revered place.

Now, as you look ahead to whatever the future may bring, be confident that you have been empowered by knowledge and steeled by adversity. You are smart, resilient, and good to each other. You know how to think and how to solve. You know how to create, communicate, and learn! Equipped with all that, know that you are facing a new moment in history as you go out into the world.

In 1966, Robert Kennedy spoke of such a moment at the University of Cape Town, South Africa, halfway around the world. He said,

This world demands the qualities of youth: not a time of life but a state of mind, a temper of the will, a quality of the imagination, a predominance of courage over timidity, of the appetite for adventure over the love of ease.

Kennedy's words 56 years ago are no less true today. What will your adventure be? What place out there in the world beyond Austin College are you going to make for yourself? Whatever that might be, I remind you that it will not always be easy. I hope no one thought life was always going to be comfortable and stress free.

*President Steven P. O'Day*  
*Commencement Address*  
*May 21, 2022*  
*Page 3*

In her Ted Talk and in her book *Emotional Agility*, Harvard Medical School psychologist and leadership expert Susan David asserts that dealing with tough emotions is part of our contract with life. “Discomfort,” she says, “is the price of admission to a meaningful life.”

Want to be a teacher? A boss? A parent? There will be discomfort to deal with.

Want to cure cancer? Transform the world? Give people hope? Make a difference? It isn't always going to be easy.

But you are the future we have been waiting for, a generation we are depending on. Let the discomfort you're going to feel be the price of admission for making a difference in the world.

Remember, though: You CAN do it! You have been prepared, here, by these people around you, through the belief that education can make our lives, our country, and our world better.

And remember this, too: You faced down a pandemic. You can deal with the just-plain-hard things that come your way. You can do whatever it is you have set your mind to. You are ready. Press on with confidence. Think, create, solve. Lead, serve, love.

As A. A. Milne wrote in the voice of a wise old soul you all know, “You are braver than you believe, stronger than you seem, and smarter than you think. And always remember that even if we aren't together, we'll always be with you.”

Now that I have tried to impart a little wisdom on your graduation day, quoted Robert F. Kennedy, and, yes, even Winnie the Pooh, it is time for me to close.

All of us, gathered around you today, in body or in spirit, are ready to send you out to make the world a better place. Make us proud by what you do and may you keep Austin College forever in your heart!

Thank you. Congratulations!