

Teresa Abi-Nader Dahlberg, Ph.D.
Inauguration Address
University of Tampa
March 31, 2025

It is an honor to stand before you today as the 11th president of the University of Tampa. Thank you for being here.

I acknowledge a few people, knowing I can't possibly mention everyone who has played a role in this journey.

To the Board of Trustees. Thank you for your commitment and partnership.

To President Ron Vaughn, you did a remarkable job as my predecessor and handed over a University that is strong and ready for continued success.

To the university presidents and delegates who traveled here to enrich our celebration...I know how hard it is to leave your campus during the semester.

To all who gave such special welcoming remarks and performances. Your words and performances are meaningful to me.

To my family who traveled to share this special day – sisters, Susan and Patty, sisters-in-law, Kim and Stacy, a bunch of brothers-in-law, cousins John and Karen, and Aunt Susan. Thank you.

To my children, Nathan and Kristen. You've become amazing people and have taught me more than you know. I am proud of your journeys and excited to see where they lead.

To my parents, Sheb and Josette, watching from Virginia – Hi Mom and Dad! I would not be here without your unwavering love and encouragement.

And to Brian, my partner of 40 years, who retired a decade ago to support my leadership journey. Thank you, for walking every step, by my side.

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I stand here today, because **EDUCATION has long been my passion** – as a catalyst for thriving lives and thriving communities.

You see, my family lived the American Dream, and education powered that dream. Grandparents, Marianna, Ferris, Azzizy, and Boutrous immigrated from Lebanon in the early 20th century seeking a better future, and they believed education was key. They started businesses and ensured their children finished high school – laying the groundwork for future generations.

My parents took that foundation and raised six daughters, each of whom pursued higher education and advanced degrees. My mother, with her love of mathematics, instilled in me an early appreciation for logic by turning math problems into family competitions. My father, an insurance sales manager, began

coaching me in door-to-door sales when I six years old – fostering skills that would serve me well throughout my life.

As first-generation college students, my husband and I pursued professional degrees. We met in ECE 305 – Electric Power Systems. We bonded over our intense dislike of that class! Little did we know, *that class* would become essential to Brian's career. Thank you, Dr. Goetze!

Today, our children have pursued degrees in the liberal arts, social sciences, and professional fields – continuing the mindset that learning and discovery forges a better future.

So, you see, I view my life journey as part of an upward continuum of excellence empowered by education, reaching higher with support from those who came before me and enabling those who came after to do the same.

I view my journey as the University of Tampa's 11th president as following this same upward path, building upon the prior 10 presidents and providing a platform for the 12th – All in pursuit of educating students to forge their better futures.

Since starting in June, it has been interesting to learn **the University of Tampa story**.

We were born during the Great Depression, and our story is one of strong **Community Partnerships, Tenacity**, and unwavering pursuit of **Excellence**.

- In the 1920s, Dr. Frederic Spaulding, principal of Hillsborough High School, saw the need for a local college where students could pursue higher education while staying in Tampa.
- The Tampa Chamber of Commerce and business leaders responded to this need by founding Tampa Junior College in 1931, ensuring that Tampa's talent stayed in Tampa.
- Dr. **Spaulding** became the first president.
- When the University moved into the city-owned Tampa Bay Hotel, which is now the iconic Plant Hall, it was rundown and vandalized, but it was a home for the new school. President Spaulding personally boarded up windows, repaired roofs, and built library stacks.
- In the sixties, President Delo, envisioned expansion from a local commuter school for Tampa residents, to an institution that would serve students globally. He started building student dorms and recruiting nationally.
- First-lady Delo, and prominent community leader, Mrs. Ferman, founded The Chiselers, and worked alongside others to literally chisel and scrape debris off the building.
- In the 1970's, President Owen secured the Florida Fairgrounds, now the heart of our campus.
- With support from many who are here today and my predecessor these spaces have been transformed into a **destination campus** that is historic, modern, and artistic.
- Today, UTampa is a global **Talent Importer**, with 40,000 applications vying for 3,000 seats annually. Over 70% of our students come from outside Florida and more than 60% of our graduates settle in Florida.
- So, I guess we are partly to blame for traffic situation.

- Today, the university's partnerships have exponentially multiplied. Over 400 leaders in the Tampa Bay metro serve on one of our many boards, supporting students, our fiscal health, and the beauty of our physical space.
- In return, we are an anchor institution in Tampa – with an economic impact of \$1.5 billion annually, clocking 350,000 community volunteer hours last year, and offering countless cultural and academic contributions to the community.

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We now begin a new chapter.

With the help of the 12 great leaders on the president's cabinet, we've been on a giant **listening tour** since June – engaging thousands in all manner of gatherings: retreats, meetings, events, president office hours, the cafeteria, classes, and alumni events across the country.

There has been a lot of food involved, and it has been a delicious experience!

We aren't passively listening, we are benchmarking, assessing, examining: long term financial health, our people infrastructure, the student experience both inside and outside the classroom. We're comparing to aspirant schools to determine stretch goals for our future.

Throughout these experiences, I've been inspired by how deeply you love this university—and by the hopes and dreams you've shared for our future.

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My overarching conclusion is this ...

Our greatest partner, the city of Tampa, has evolved from swampland ... to leading Cigar manufacturer ... to thriving metroplex that leads in technology, healthcare, the arts and education. Today, the Tampa Bay metroplex is on the precipice of becoming a globally recognized metro area.

The University of Tampa has a similar history and stands on this same precipice—ready to reach new heights alongside the city whose name we proudly bear.

As we envision this next chapter, let us be bold ... tenacious ... engage our partners more deeply. Let us build upon our successes to reach the next level of excellence.

My focus centers on three overarching pillars that will shape our future: *Impact on People*, *Reputational Excellence*, and the *Endowment*. With that, I give examples of *where we are now* and *where we are going* in these three areas.

First and foremost, we will magnify UTampa's **impact on People and Communities**, starting with student success – *the heart* of our mission.

- For years, people have debated: *Is a college degree about preparing for a career or expanding one's mind?*
- To me, the answer is *both*.
- All day long, it's both, and a University of Tampa degree is designed to do both.

- Our programs are built on a strong liberal arts foundation. Exceptional faculty guide students to *think critically and creatively, communicate effectively, and lead with purpose.*
- Experiential learning outside the classroom complements academics, fulfilling the UTampa commitment of “*Learning by Thinking*” and “*Learning by Doing.*”
- People who hire our graduates laud their knowledge, skills and tenacity – and share that a UTampa graduate stands-apart from their peers.
- And yet, not enough of our students make it to graduation. Most often, due to insufficient academic preparedness and financial hardship. And, not enough of our graduates who seek employment, attain it in a timely manner.
- We are changing that.
- We are strengthening our student support services, such as with the recently launched UTampa Cares - a campus initiative that bolsters students’ *sense-of-belonging* and their *resilience*, from their first through their last year at UTampa.
- We are intently focused on growing our endowed student scholarships to close financial aid gaps.
- And, we’ve recently launched ***Internships for All*** – an initiative that builds upon longstanding efforts by faculty and staff. Our goal is to provide paid internships to students, so they are ready to enter the workforce, regardless of their chosen major.
- Many of these will be through traditional pathways, in companies aligned with each student’s field of study.
- We are also expanding opportunities, beyond companies, by establishing the **Tampa Bay Nonprofit Endowed Fund** to support students who intern with local nonprofits. Giving

students broader exposure to career options and enabling donors to make an awesome trifecta investment in a student, the university and the community.

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Next, we are accelerating our pursuit of ***reputational excellence***, our second pillar. We want to *be* better, and we want to be *known* for our distinctions.

- When I first explored the University of Tampa as a presidential candidate, I felt as though I had discovered the best-kept secret in higher ed. We are beloved in our feeder regions but relatively unknown beyond them. Let's change that.
- Let's build a reputation that opens doors for alumni—so that when a recruiter in Los Angeles or London sees “University of Tampa” on a resume, they immediately associate it with excellence and eagerly reach out to interview.
- We are charting a path from our current regional U.S. News classification to national classification. The key metrics that we need to improve upon are... take a guess... yes! Raising our graduation rates and growing our endowment—Our two top priorities.
- And since we're talking about national visibility, let's talk about branding and our new nickname: UTampa – as Chancellor Boschini mentioned.
- While UT was the university's original nickname, our alma mater, written in the 1940s, refers to Tampa U. The alma mater will play when I'm finished speaking. Listen for the Tampa U.

- In choosing a new nickname, we selected the student favorite: UTampa—it honors our foundational nickname, UT, while embracing our home, the city of Tampa
- Now I address **academic excellence**—the heart of our reputation
- Under the leadership of Dr. David Stern, our provost for 12 years, our curriculum has evolved to meet society’s future needs, with personalized learning environments, small classes, cutting-edge technologies, and meaningful community engagement.
- As a young university, we are nimble. Even so, Generative Artificial Intelligence is advancing at lightning speed.
- So we’re launching the ***AI Across the University*** initiative, to accelerate the great work that faculty have already begun. Our goal is to prepare UTampa graduates to ride the wave of change as AI becomes integrated into their future careers and future lives.
- And there will be more.
- Provost Stern retires at the end of this semester, and we are deeply grateful for his service. On June 1, Dr. Michael T. Stephenson becomes our new provost, and will lead the faculty in refining and advancing our academic priorities.

Our third pillar is our **endowment**—the financial foundation that supports UTampa’s long-term excellence.

- Our endowment has been growing steadily and yet is still well below our peer and aspirant schools. Furthermore, over 90% of UTampa students receive financial aid or scholarships.

- This is why we are intensifying our focus on growing endowed student scholarships and endowed faculty and staff positions. Here are just a few examples.
- **Centennial Circle** scholarships help us meet more student financial aid, as we approach our 100th anniversary in 2031.
- **Spartan Alliance** scholarships support gifted students from Tampa Bay high schools, continuing our original mission to provide opportunity locally.
- I've already mentioned the **Tampa Bay Nonprofit Scholarship**, supporting student internships in local nonprofits – remember? The trifecta investment?
- And lastly, **Endowed Faculty and Endowed Staff** positions are an investment in student success. These support the excellent people who lead in curricular and research innovations (such as our AI initiative) and extra-curricular support (such as our Internships initiative).

In closing ...

The University of Tampa was born during the Great Depression. We have weathered many storms. We are now a thriving anchor institution to the thriving Tampa Bay metroplex. We are poised to become a nationally relevant and recognized university.

We offer a unique educational experience that produces unique graduates - leaders who are making important contributions to society.

I invite you to join us on our journey to elevate our impact on students, achieve a national reputation, leap towards the future

in academic excellence, and cultivate an endowment to keep UTampa strong and sustainable for generations to come.

Thank you, and Go Spartans!