

April 15, 2024

Dear USC Community,

At this time of year, all talk about commencement should focus on the tremendous accomplishments of our 19,000-plus graduates, their friends, their families, and the staff and faculty who have been such a critical part of their journeys. As I walk around our campuses, there's a palpable sense of excitement as soon-to-be-grads happily pose for pictures with friends in all their favorite sites. At the same time, we all recognize the strife, turbulence, and pain being experienced within our own community, and on so many other campuses and places around the world.

The main stage commencement at USC draws 65,000 people to the University Park Campus. As at all universities, this is the most exciting week and most important academic event of the year. We seek to produce a ceremony that unites our community and celebrates the hard work and achievements of graduates from all our schools and programs. Because of USC's size and scale, commencement week is also the most challenging time of the year for our Department of Public Safety (DPS) personnel, who work tirelessly and effectively to keep our campuses the safe places that they are.

The Office of the Provost is involved in commencement in many ways, including the selection of our undergraduate valedictorian. Unfortunately, over the past several days, discussion relating to the selection of our valedictorian has taken on an alarming tenor. The intensity of feelings, fueled by both social media and the ongoing conflict in the Middle East, has grown to include many voices outside of USC and has escalated to the point of creating substantial risks relating to security and disruption at commencement. We cannot ignore the fact that similar risks have led to harassment and even violence at other campuses.

As always, and particularly when tensions are running so high across the world, we must prioritize the safety of our community. And as we do every year, we have been monitoring our commencement security needs based on all the information we have and the facts on the ground. Our DPS and expert campus safety team are uniquely prepared to evaluate potential threats, and we have consulted with them about the current situation, taking into account everything we know about our reality, as well as the unprecedented risks we are seeing at other campuses and across the world. We are resolute in our commitment to maintain and prioritize the existing safety and well-being of our USC community during the coming weeks, and allowing those attending commencement to focus on the celebration our graduates deserve.

After careful consideration, we have decided that our student valedictorian will not deliver a speech at commencement. While this is disappointing, tradition must give way to safety. This decision is not only necessary to maintain the safety of our campus and students, but is consistent with the fundamental legal obligation – including the expectations of federal regulators – that universities act to protect students and keep our campus community safe. It applies the same values and criteria that we have used in the past to guide our actions. In no way does it diminish the remarkable academic achievements of any student considered or selected for valedictorian. To be clear: this decision has nothing to do with freedom of speech. There is no free-speech entitlement to speak at a commencement. The issue here is how best to maintain campus security and safety, period.

Many have asked about the process for selecting the valedictorian. As has been true throughout USC's history, the provost's office managed the process. The first step was the appointment of faculty members to the Valedictorian and Salutatorian Selection Committee. This year the committee evaluated nearly 100 applications submitted from among the more than 200 graduating seniors who qualified for consideration based on their GPAs. The committee assessed each application based on various criteria – which did not include social media presence – and made a recommendation to me. Based on these faculty recommendations, I made the final decision.

This summer, I will work with the faculty to reconsider how best to recognize and celebrate the incredible achievements of our most outstanding undergraduate students. Many large universities like USC, for example, have moved away from selecting a single valedictorian from the many who are qualified, in favor of more inclusive processes and traditions.

At a time when there is so much discord in the world around us, it has never been more important for us to come together as a community, embrace our [Unifying Values](#), and celebrate our individual and collective achievements. Commencement will be an opportunity for us to do just that, and President Folt and I very much look forward to seeing and celebrating with you there.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'AG', with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Andrew T. Guzman
Provost and Senior Vice President for Academic Affairs