

Graduation Ceremony Binder

Welcome and Processional

Matt Johnston

Good morning, graduates, parents, friends, faculty and staff! Welcome to the 8th Annual California Aeronautical University Commencement ceremony. Please stand and join me in welcoming our graduates as they file to their seats.

[Processional]

[Graduates proceed to their seats and remain standing.]

Presentation of Colors

Matt Johnston

Ladies and gentlemen, please remain standing for the Presentation of the Colors by members of the Civil Air Patrol's Bakersfield Composite Squadron 121.

[The Color Guard will retreat.]

National Anthem

Matt Johnston

Please remain standing for our National Anthem.

Thank you. Please be seated.

Matt's Welcome Address

MC: Matt Johnston

It's great to be with all of you here today. We appreciate all of your sacrifices, travels and scheduling to allow this celebration to occur.

My name is Matt Johnston and I have the honor of serving as the president of California Aeronautical University. It's hard to believe that just a few years ago each of you was starting your journey and here we are now celebrating your accomplishment. You worked the plan and the plan worked!

I speak for many when I say how lucky we all are to be part of something so special at CAU. I am thankful for our friends, family, aviation community supporters, airline representatives, state and federal politician

representatives, current students and everyone who has had a part in establishing California Aeronautical University, all established with one goal in mind.....TO CELEBRATE AVIATION PROFESSIONAL GRADUATES LIKE YOU!!

Speaking of establishing California Aeronautical University, this year we are celebrating our 10 year anniversary.

Change is one of the only things in life you can count on. A lot has sure changed in the past 10 years with CAU. The first ideas for what this would become were born in the summer of 2012, then in 2015 we established the main home of California Aeronautical University here in this facility and started our first students in January of 2016.

We started from the Santa Barbara/Ventura county area with a modest idea of how we

could serve the aviation community. We loaded up our ideas, obtained our appropriate clearances, taxied for takeoff, pushed the throttles forward and started what would become the best flying adventure anyone could ever dream of.

Empty hangars, empty café, empty rooms and an empty flight line. It took many hours and more importantly many people to get California Aeronautical University flying like it is today. There are too many to mention and if I try, I am sure to miss someone. Instead could the staff and faculty please stand. Everyone standing and those not represented here including the supporting vendors and contractors who believed in what we were doing and spent countless hours on their trades assisting us every step of the way are why CAU is what it is today. Its true what they say about it takes a village.

Now there is life all around campus and spaces are filled not only with furniture and material items, but also with memories of graduates and ideas for what is yet to come.

Now as one of the largest aviation training institutions in the western united states we have so many memories and things to celebrate we could spend all morning celebrating our 10 years by sharing stories. Graduates, you are now part of these stories. On behalf of all of us at California Aeronautical University, we just want to say THANK YOU to everyone for your belief and trust in us over the past 10 years. We could not accomplish what CAU has become and is still yet to do without all of your support, especially graduates like these, representing themselves and CAU in industry as true aviation professionals.

I want to discuss something a little different. As most of you know our university doesn't have any traditional college sports teams. However, we do have the next best thing for an aviation focused institution, we have a competitive flight team. Our team has worked hard to establish itself in the last several years, led by students and supported by their fundraising along with some University resources. This year's team and the several teams proceeding are made up of students who represent all of us when they compete and indeed their representation of CAU runs deep. Industry attends these competitions and their performance establishes a reputation with relationships that all students benefit from at airline interviews and with partnerships the university is able to build on. Can those students that are graduating today or who are in the audience who have served on the flight team please stand.

These week long competitions are like a track meet with many different events accumulating points. Flying events like power off and power on landings, message drop, and navigation. Ground events like IFR simulation, CRM/LOFT, simulated aircraft navigation, computer accuracy, CFI, and aircraft recognition all take practice and dedication for placing at high levels in competition.

I am proud to announce that this year's team competing with all the other collegiate aviation programs in the country, around 60 registered to compete, carried California Aeronautical University to 10th place overall in the nation.

This is not bad for a 10 year old University competing amongst many other legacy aviation programs. It takes the whole team

to support a win in the different competing events to accumulate enough points to place high. Just to call out a few highlights this year. The flight team received:

- Regional and National top Safety Award
- Regional 1st place sportsmanship Award
- Regional 1st place Navigation
- National 1st place - CFI event
- National Top 10 in CRM, Message Drop, Power off landing
- National Top 20 in preflight inspection, IFR Simulation, Power off landing, Power on landing, and Navigation.

Congratulations to the flight team and thank you for your dedication and hard work to represent yourselves and all of us at California Aeronautical University, you make us proud and represent us well.

Graduates, I want to remind you about the importance of never forgetting where you

came from and remembering those who were part of how you got here. Listen to everyone and everything around you, the world speaks to you at times when you least expect it. The world spoke to me and my journey in aviation started with a simple stop into a small airport in Santa Paula, not far from here. Judy Phelps handed me a king schools study kit and here we are today. Last month Judy Phelps, a friend, mentor and inspiration for me left us to soar high in the sky with the many others who inspire all of us. Thank you Judy for all of us you inspired and the impact on the many of us who are serving in aviation today. You will be missed and I have not forgotten where I came from.

Graduates, you have made an impact on CAU and the world is ready for you to make more impacts as you continue your life journey. You deserve everything you have earned to this point and you have

demonstrated your ability to see things through to the end. Never forget where you came from, appreciate the here and now, show up to every opportunity with your best self for everything and I promise you, your tomorrow's will be as bright as today.

Congratulations Graduates, its now time to push back from the gate.

Partner Videos

Matt Johnston

California Aeronautical University has enjoyed great support from the aviation industry as I have previously mentioned. We are pleased to share some words of congratulations from the aviation community.

[Play supporting videos from SkyWest, PSA, United Aviate, Piedmont, Scaled Composites, and Vicky Benzing]

Local Dignitary Recognition

Matt Johnston

Thank you to our partners for those messages of support and congratulations.

At this time, we would also like to recognize the support of our local community. We are honored to acknowledge certificates of recognition provided by State Senator Shannon Grove's office in recognition of the accomplishments of the California Aeronautical University Class of 2026.

[clap and continue]

Commencement Speaker Introduction

Matt Johnston

It is now my honor to introduce our commencement speaker, Ms. Teresa Arredondo, President and CEO of Art Craft Paint.

Ms. Arredondo leads Art Craft Paint, a Santa Maria–based aircraft painting and restoration company known for its craftsmanship, innovation, and attention to detail in transforming aircraft across the aviation industry.

Through her leadership, she has built a respected and successful company grounded in hard work, perseverance, and a commitment to excellence.

Her journey reflects what can be achieved through determination and vision.

Please join me in welcoming Ms. Teresa Arredondo to the podium.

[Teresa comes to the podium.]

Commencement Speech

Teresa Arredondo

From extreme poverty to giving a speech at CAU Class 2026

I stand before you today as an immigrant from Michoacán, Mexico—a woman who endured a painful and difficult childhood, but rose to become a successful businesswoman. My purpose here is simple: to share my story. A story of resilience, determination, and of the unbreakable human spirit.

My journey began in hardship. My mother was forced to leave her ten children behind in Mexico to immigrate to the United States, searching for a better future for all of us. I

was only five years old when my father was killed. That day, I became an orphan.

By the time I was seven, I was working on the streets of Mexico, selling candies to help support my family. I didn't realize it at the time, but I had been forced into a form of child slavery—long days, hard labor, no rest, no childhood. Academic education wasn't even a dream I was allowed to have. I was lucky—*blessed*—to finish sixth grade.

Ten years of abuse. Ten years of survival.

And then—my mother came back for us.

She returned to Mexico, determined to reunite with her children and bring us with her to the United States. My mother, and Us, crossed the border in Tijuana Mexico with nothing but a green card, a fierce will, and a dream for her children's future. That moment changed everything. My life in Mexico was

like a black and white movie. Once we passed the check point my life movie turned into full colors, and now is a high definition, colors are bright, because the future looks bright.

When we arrived in Santa Maria, California—my journey toward the American Dream officially began. But let me be clear: it wasn't easy.

School still wasn't an option. At just 15 years old, I began working in the fields—harvesting strawberries, broccoli, cauliflower, lettuce—everything that grows in the valley. I worked long days under the sun, through dust, wind, and even rain. But I was grateful. And I was proud of who I was.

Growing Up Too Soon

While still working in the fields, I fell in love—and got married shortly after my 18th birthday.

You might be thinking, “*That’s so young.*” But remember—by the time I was seven, I was already doing the work of a grown adult.

I missed my childhood, my teenage years, and my young adult life. They were taken from me before I ever got to live them.

By 19, I leased a two-acre parcel and became a strawberry grower. Just after I turned 22, I purchased my first home. During that time, I went through three pregnancies—all while working in the fields.

On the outside, it looked like I was living the dream. But something inside me said, *This isn’t the life you were meant to live.* And there was one big challenge: I didn’t speak English.

So I made a decision.

I left the fields and enrolled at CET—Center for Employment Training—for a 9-month vocational program. I completed it in six months. I had to. My husband wasn't okay with me not working or helping support the household.

I flipped a switch in my mind:
I started watching TV only in English.
I listened to music only in English.
And I forced myself to speak to every English speaker I met.

I studied electronics, math, and English. I shared my struggles with my math teacher—and she helped me find a job in Goleta, California. But the commute? It nearly broke me. I spent three hours of my life every day on Highway 101, all while pregnant and battling morning sickness.

I knew I needed something closer. One day, I spent 25 cents on a local newspaper. In the classifieds, I found a job opening at an aircraft restoration company in Santa Maria. I applied.

And I was denied—*because I was a woman.*

So I filled out a second application under my husband's name. He got the job. Then he brought me on as his “helper.”

One year later, the owner asked me if I wanted to buy the interior department. I said yes. A year after that, he offered me a partnership on the painting side of the business. Three years after walking in the door, after being told I wasn't good enough because I was a woman—I owned the entire company with my husband.

But that wasn't the end of the story. I ended 16 years of domestic violence. I became a single mother of three. I ran a business with 20 employees in a male-dominated industry, speaking broken English, with only a sixth-grade education.

I asked myself: *What have you done?*
And the answer came: *You figured it out.*

Sometimes I worked 36-hour shifts with no sleep. I had no backup plan. No safety net. I had to make it work.

Doors were slammed in my face. I doubted myself more times than I can count. But I never quit.

I sacrificed my time with my children. But today, my children are strong, independent, and resilient. Just like me. Our national and

International reputation has allowed us to win numerous awards.

Now, I employ veterans who need a fresh start, and I give second chances to formerly incarcerated individuals. I am a business owner. A mother. A grandma. A community servant. A motivational speaker.

And today, I speak to **you**—the graduates of CAU the Class of 2026

Let me leave you with this:

When a door closes in your face, find a way to crawl through the window.

Follow your dream.

Say yes to every opportunity.

Tear down every obstacle that tries to block your path. Be the most RESILIENT person you know.

And above all—**don't you ever think about quitting.**

I am proof that education is very important.

Today, you hold a degree in your hands to work on the most beautiful Industry that all of you and I land on. That's not just paper—it's proof that you have the tools to build the life you want with the company of your choice.

Fight for your dream.

Protect it.

And never let anyone steal it from you.

“Es mejor morir de pie que vivir toda tu vida de rodillas. It is better to die standing than live your whole life on your Knees”

"Emiliano Zapata (caudillo de la revolución mexicana)"

Thank you.

[Matt comes to the podium following Teresa's speech.]

Matt Johnston

Thank you, Teresa, for that inspiring address. Your experiences and accomplishments are a powerful reminder of what can be achieved through determination, and they encourage us to continue pushing beyond what we think is possible in pursuit of excellence.

[Present plaque and gift bag as a thank you for being our commencement speaker.]

It is now my privilege to invite our Provost, Dr. Michael Berry, to present the Outstanding Graduate Award.

[Dr. Berry comes to the podium]

Dr. Berry - Outstanding Graduate Award

Dr. Michael Berry

Please join me in recognizing our Outstanding Graduate. We are proud of the manner in which this student excelled in the classroom and in the flight labs, and participated in other areas of the CAU community. She has been an example for many students throughout her journey. It is therefore, with great honor and pleasure, with the input of key faculty and staff members, that we announce and recognize the Outstanding Graduate for this 2026 graduating class as:

Paloma Ford

[Present Outstanding Graduate Plaque after recognizing the Outstanding Graduate]

We thank Paloma for all of her hard work and dedication during her time at CAU. We are also excited to hear more from her later in the ceremony, as one of our distinguished student speakers.

Now, it is my pleasure to introduce someone who plays a vital role in guiding the academic success of our students. As the Academic Dean, she brings dedication, insight, and an unwavering commitment to excellence in education. Please join me in welcoming Megan Dutto, who will now present the Distinguished Academic Recognitions.

Distinguished Academic Recognition

Megan Dutto

High Honors

I now have the pleasure of recognizing our graduates who have demonstrated the highest levels of academic excellence. While we are proud of all our graduates and their accomplishments, we want to especially recognize the students who have demonstrated impressive dedication and achievement while attending school and managing life.

The graduates receiving High Honors today have graduated with a cumulative GPA of 4.0 and are adorned with a gold stole. As I call

out your names, please stand & remain standing to be recognized.

Zachary C. Cuneo [“KYOO-nee-oh”]

Robert E. Diaz-Moreira

Paloma Keala Ford

Denis N. Khavrenko

Sewook Kwon [“Say-wook kwahn”]

James C. Lopez

Nicholas E. Meyer

Hiram R. Taforkem

Isaiah Tejada

Trevor Tierney

and

Austin Watkins

CONGRATULATIONS! and PLEASE BE SEATED.

Dean's List

The graduates on the Dean's List have maintained a GPA of 3.5 - 3.99 throughout their programs. The graduates who have earned this honor can be recognized by the silver cords they are wearing. As I call out your name, please stand and remain standing to be recognized.

Ameer Saeed Ali ["Ah-MEER Sah-EED Ah-lee"]

Matthew A. Anderson

Shaquille ["Sha-keel"] Benson

Miguel-Aris Bernaldez Barlisan

["mee-GEHL air-IS ber-NAHL-DEHZ bar-LEE-sun"]

Ivan Cureno

Owen Dullum

Matthew Gilfilen

Frederick C. Gerges

Sofiane Harchaoui ["So-fee-yawn Har-chow-ee"]

Decklan Hanson

Hayden R. Herstad

Bryce J. James

Anthony L. James

Nizhoni Lara-Hill ["NY-JOH-nee LAH-ruh-HIL"]

Braden Lindberg

Isaiah Mejia

Giovanni Melendez

Jacob L. Murray

Preston Ray

Sinclair E. Richard

William Blake Roeber

Daniel Roman

Christian Tamayo ["TA - MAI - YO"]

Kade Uyesaka

and

Lara G. Zhao

CONGRATULATIONS! and PLEASE BE SEATED.

Alpha Beta Kappa

We will now recognize some of our graduates who have been honored to become a member of the Alpha Beta Kappa National Honor Society.

As a member of Alpha Beta Kappa, each graduate must have achieved a cumulative GPA of 3.5 or higher. Each graduate has been presented with a certificate and a gold key pin, which should be worn with pride as it signifies “Integrity and Excellence.”

Graduates who will be receiving this honor are adorned with red and blue cords.

At this time, I would like to ask the following students to PLEASE STAND while we give them a round of applause.

Ameer Saeed Ali [“Ah-MEER Sah-EED Ah-lee”]

Matthew A. Anderson

Shaquille Benson [“Sha-keel”]

Miguel-Aris Bernaldez Barlisan

["mee-GEHL air-IS ber-NAHL-DEHZ bar-LEE-sun"]

Ivan Cureno

Sofiane Harchaoui ["So-fee-yawn Har-chow-ee"]

Anthony James

Denis N. Khavrenko

Nizhoni Lara-Hill [“NY-JOH-nee LAH-ruh-HIL”]

Jacob L. Murray

Preston Ray

William Blake Roeber

Hiram R. Taforkem

Christian Tamayo

Isaiah Tejada

and
Lara G. Zhao

CONGRATULATIONS! and PLEASE BE SEATED.

Alpha Eta Rho

Now we will recognize participation in Alpha Eta Rho. Alpha Eta Rho is a professional collegiate aviation fraternity founded in 1929 to bring together students who have a common interest in the field of Aviation.

Membership is open to all collegiate men and women who have a strong interest in any career within the aviation and aerospace industry. Alpha Eta Rho is the oldest aviation organization on college campuses today.

At this time, I would like to ask the following students to PLEASE STAND while we give them a round of applause.

Matthew A. Anderson

Savannah L. Coffia

Blake E. Demoff

Derrick M. Dunlap

Decklan Hanson

Sofiane Harchaoui ["So-fee-yawn Har-chow-ee"]

Roberto Hurtado Quezada

Jackson Kaspar

James C. Lopez

and

William Blake Roeber

CONGRATULATIONS! and PLEASE BE SEATED.

Veteran Recognition

Next, we would like to honor those who have served our country in all branches of the military. These individuals can be recognized by the blue stoles they are wearing.

At this time, I would like to ask the following students, as well as faculty, staff and any of our guests who have served in the military, to please stand while we give them a round of applause and thank them for their service to our country.

Ameer Saeed Ali [“Ah-MEER Sah-EED Ah-lee”]

Shaquille Benson [“Sha-keel”]

Zachary C. Cuneo [“KYOO-nee-oh”]

James Cruz

Casey Gacke [Kay-see Gay-key]

Matthew Gilfilen

Sofiane Harchaoui ["So-fee-yawn Har-chow-ee"]

Vaughn K Igna-Espinosa ["Von K. IG-nah Es-pi-no-sa"]

James Jensen

Anthony L. James

Bryce J. James

Nicholas E. Meyer

Jacob L. Murray

McArthur U Ogbonna

Miguel Ossorio Sanabria

Preston Ray

Blake Ruz

Charise Swartz

Hiram R Taforkem

Trevor Tierney

Christopher Williams

and

Lara G Zhao

Thank you! Please be seated.

Next, I would like to call Dr. Michael Berry to the podium to introduce our student speakers.

Student Speaker Introduction

Dr. Michael Berry

Thank you, Megan. Now, we would like to welcome to the stage our first student speaker. This student truly exemplifies the meaning of perseverance and has inspired many of the other students, faculty, and staff with her tenacity, proving that you can achieve anything you set your mind to, even in the face of the most difficult challenges. I am proud to welcome back to the stage, Paloma Ford!

Student Speaker #1: **Paloma Ford**

Good morning class of 2026! How are we all feeling today?

My name is Paloma Ford, and I am deeply honored to stand in front of you all today on behalf of the graduating class of 2026. First, I would like to say that the support I can feel in this room is astounding. I know I can speak for the rest of my class when I say that many of us would not be here today if it were not for the same support we feel right now. Thank you to all the moms and the dads who made it here today. Thank you to the brothers and sisters, aunts and uncles, cousins, and close friends for coming. Thank you to the staff and to our CFIs who came here today to celebrate our journey. Thank you to all the loved ones who are watching from home, and those who are here in spirit. Thank you to my

Grandpa, who flew all the way from Hawaii to show his support today, and my grandma, who is watching from up above.

Standing here today is something I never would have imagined when I was younger. I was the kid every parent seemed to complain about, the one who was always goofing off, constantly distracted, and overflowing with more energy than I knew what to do with. I earned mediocre grades and was told I was always on “paloma time,” or that I had my head in the clouds. If you had told eight-year-old me that one day I'd be standing here as a college graduate, holding a 4.0 GPA, pursuing the career of an airline pilot, making space for myself in a male-dominated industry, and speaking on behalf of an entire graduating class, I think she would have stared at me in complete disbelief. More than anything, though, I think she would be proud.

Looking back now, I realize that this moment isn't just a reflection of academic success; it's a reflection of growth, perseverance, and determination. And I know I'm not the only person in this room whose journey has exceeded their own expectations.

I am so honored for the opportunity to speak on behalf of all of our experiences. We are sitting here, after hours upon hours of hard work. All of the countless hours of studying, the staying up late, the stage checks, the knowledge tests, the classes, the homework, the checkrides, the, what-seems-like, never-ending knowledge. But we made it. What once felt like an impossible journey is now behind us. And, now that it's over, every memory, every experience, every moment has become that much more valuable.

If we look back to the very beginning, we all can remember some of our first joys in this journey. We can remember that thrilling first takeoff, pulling the yolk back, feeling the wheels lifting off the ground, and thinking “wow, I'm really doing this.” Or the first time we nailed a landing after many, many not-so-graceful attempts. We can remember electrifying moments, like exceeding the score you were hoping for on a knowledge test, passing a check ride, or finally understanding the art of the lazy eight, only after going through the seven stages of grief.

Looking back, we also remember some of our first fears. The first time talking on the radio, the first time hitting turbulence. Our first XC solo, or the first time getting an email confirmation that our checkride had been scheduled. It's funny to look back and realize that some of the obstacles that once felt like

the end of the world are now things we barely think twice about.

And now we are all here. We made it. We defined the odds. So, what's the trick? What is the secret hack to crossing the finish line? Some of us may be thinking the trick is 8 hours of sleep every single night, some may think it's to study all the time, non-stop, whenever you can. Some may even argue it's relaxing in our spare time. Although I don't doubt many of these tricks are tributes to the success of the class sitting before me, none of them are what I would like to talk about today. So, what is it? What's the trick? Well, the trick starts with failure.

At first, this might sound counterintuitive. How can failure lead to success? Well, failure is only the first step in reaching success. However, it's the step that stings. It's the point that makes us feel like we're not

good enough, that maybe we don't belong here. The moment that makes us think that maybe we won't make it, maybe we aren't cut out for this. That, “maybe everyone deserves to be here except me.” Relearning information we somehow forgot, reaching a burnout, botching a stage check, failing a checkride. We have all experienced at least one of these moments throughout our time here that have caused us to question our worth. Question our belonging. Moments in which we felt like we failed. But we forget that failing is important. It's necessary. It is a fundamental, undeniable, inevitable factor of the start of our career. What we will do, and what we have ever achieved in aviation, has been made possible because of failure. Because failing is how we learn.

Learning. A change in behavior as a result of experience. That's the second step. The step that would not be possible if it weren't for failure. What a mighty word. A word that embodies growth. A word that embellishes change. A word we have demonstrated since our first steps, our first words, our first day of school, and a word we demonstrate by sitting here today. Learning: a phenomenon that has existed since the dawn of time.

When ancient civilizations faced obstacles that seemed impossible, they adapted and found new ways to move forward, eventually building wonders like the pyramids. Thomas Edison created the first practical light bulb, but only after thousands of failed attempts. Nearly a century later, the Apollo 13 mission crew had survived a catastrophic oxygen tank explosion because NASA engineers refused to give up, using the Moon's gravity to guide the crew safely

home. Just two months ago, Artemis II followed a similar path around the Moon, showing that even today, the greatest human feats still depend on learning, adapting, and persevering.

So, what do historic moments like these teach us? That progress has never come without failure. It teaches us that failure is valuable. Failure teaches us, learning changes us, but determination moves us forward.

Determination. That's the final step. The toughest step. The point where people begin to question if their efforts will ever pay off. It's the event that tests your character, your grit. The time in your journey that challenges how bad you truly want it. The step where most people stop, where it's easier to just cut their losses.

But determination can be tough to find. It is not something we learn overnight. For many, it's something we witness first. We see it in the people around us, in the sacrifices they make, in the risks they take, and in the way they keep moving forward, even when they may feel they have reached their limit. Sometimes, it takes looking inward, recognizing the determination of the people close to you, in order to inspire yourself to never give up. To understand how determination can power your own passions. For me, those people are my mom, my dad, and my sister.

My mom (hi mom) was born and raised in Austria, and moved to America in her early 20's. Younger than many of us in the room today. She had no friends here, no family, no long-term job opportunity lined up, no home. She spoke no English. I remember her first telling me this, feeling horrified by the

thought. Thinking about how terrifying it would be to leave my friends, my siblings, my mom, and my dad, my home, to go to a country I have never even been to before. But my mom is here. She learned the language, the culture, found a job, and is now the proud founder and owner of multiple businesses, and the loving mother of 4 children.

My dad, (hi dad), who also moved far away from home. Born and raised in Hawaii, he left his friends, family, and home to move to California for college. My dad is the smartest person I know. He always believes that you can try harder, study longer. He believes you could've always shot for a better score, a higher record. He never stopped pushing for education and success. He graduated from Pepperdine University with a Bachelor's degree in Chemistry and a Master's degree in Business before meeting my mother, two brothers and sister, and

taking on the role of a father and a husband before having me.

My sister, (hi sis), who has battled relentlessly for years against one of America's deadliest and most devastating diseases, and won. She is here today after choosing every single day to fight a little harder, and is now the healthiest she has ever been. She has spent the last five years reclaiming her life, one day at a time. I am so endlessly proud of her. She sits here not only as my sister, but as a loving mother to my baby nephew, whom I cannot describe as anything less than a miracle.

I am so beyond grateful for my family. They are all the reasons that I am standing here today. I share their stories, not just because they are important to me, but because they can serve as a valuable lesson to everybody in this room today. Challenges

and failures aren't just something we experience in aviation; it's experienced everywhere. It's how we learn. Every bad landing, every missed question, every burnout, every failed checkride forces us to understand something we didn't understand before. That's what learning is: change that comes from experience. But learning alone is not enough. Knowing what went wrong doesn't get you back in the air. Determination does.

My dearest class of 2026, hold your heads up high. Sitting here today in these interesting-looking hats and drowning robes has been a colossal combination of our wins, losses, heartbreaking failures, tremendous accomplishments, and an undeniable fire of determination.

As you step out of this hanger today, you step into the beginning of your journey as a college graduate. Wherever you may be in your journey - starting at the airlines, working as a mechanic, pursuing aviation management, inspiring students as a CFI, or even just continuing as a student, carry determination with you. Remember that the only thing that can stop you from achieving your goals, your hours, your dream job is the decision to never give up. Stay focused. Study hard. Stay determined, even when the journey seems impossible, and success will follow.

Congratulations class of 2026

[Dr. Berry comes to the podium]

Student Speaker #2 Introduction

Dr. Michael Berry

Thank you for that inspiring speech, Paloma. I see that there are some Aim High students here now—two years ago, Paloma was an Aim High student herself. Our second student speaker is someone who has always been the type to set a positive example for others. He has consistently gone above and beyond in taking initiative to engage in academic and career-driven activities, both on- and off- campus. A good student and role model, we are proud to welcome to the stage, James Lopez!

Student Speaker #2: James Lopez

It all started with a vision:

to dream an impossible dream. A fantasy so far-fetched, the idea of living that dream seemed unimaginable.

For some, that impossible dream is to become an astronaut or a professional athlete. For others, it's to build a successful business or finish a marathon. And for most, their impossible dream is yet to be realized.

For the longest time, I couldn't figure out what my impossible dream was going to be. My parents overcame many hardships and made many sacrifices that had shaped the way I perceived my future. My mom immigrated from Guatemala as a little girl, and my dad is a first generation Mexican

American. For them, work was not just work; it was survival, sacrifice, and love. Growing up, they gave everything they could to support my sister and I. So, in fear of not letting them down, I felt like my purpose was simple: get accepted into a prestigious college, excel, and make them proud.

And there I was, the summer of 2022. I had just graduated high school and was preparing to attend a well-known university in San Diego. Everything was going according to plan. My parents were happy. My friends were happy. But was I happy? This burning feeling that I had chosen the wrong path was sickening me. And the longer I waited, the more I felt like I was doing irreversible damage financially and emotionally to those

closest to me. So, I took a step back, made one of the hardest decisions of my life, and dropped out with no backup plan.

My whole life I've been a runner. I ran track and cross country in elementary, middle, and high school. And when I made the decision to drop out, my running days were long behind me. I was out of shape and hadn't raced for months. But if I was going to figure out what my impossible dream was, I had to start thinking out of the ordinary, beyond whatever predetermined future I had already molded in my head. So naturally, I signed up for my first ultramarathon.

For those unaware, an ultramarathon is defined as any race longer than a typical

26.2mi marathon. And the race I had impulsively signed up for was a 46mi night race on the desert trails of Phoenix, Arizona. For context, the longest race I had ever done up until this point was a 6mi road race. How in the world was I supposed to finish this thing? To run for that many hours? Do people walk? Do they even sleep? When do they eat? It all just seemed *impossible*.

And there I was, only 15mi into the race, lying on the side of the trail in the Arizona desert at night. I was limp, malnourished, exhausted in ways words can't describe; I just simply couldn't move. Runners had passed me by, but I was hidden in the bushes amongst the rattlesnakes and scorpions, so they couldn't even see nor hear me. As the headlamps of each runner disappeared into

the dark abyss that became of the desert, I started to lose hope. I still had 31 miles to run, meaning I wasn't even halfway. I was alone. With no reception. No water. No food. Just a body illuminated by the star-lit sky. I began to feel a sense of comfort, as if this was it. This impossible goal was turning out to be *impossible*.

Until it wasn't. A kind runner had found me on the trail and helped me to my feet. All the pain, the exhaustion, the fatigue, had vanished. My body was done, but my heart wasn't. Each step was fueled by my passion for running and the belief that not finishing wasn't an option. And from where I was laying on the trail, I went from 40th place to 4th place and became the youngest runner to ever finish.

As I packed up my dorm and prepared to move back home, still limping from the race, I looked out the balcony and saw a little white Cessna plane soaring through the sky with the letters CAU painted on it. Up until this point, the world of aviation seemed so foreign. So inaccessible for people like me. When talking about careers in school, the aviation industry was never even discussed as an option. Becoming a pilot was so alien-like; it seemed *impossible*. So, there I was standing in my dorm, having just dropped out, with a new vision. The impossible dream to become a pilot.

[next page]

After some trial and error, I found myself at CAU, the same school that had sparked that dream from the sky. I'll never forget my first flight. I struggled immensely, so much so, I cried myself to sleep. I had just taken a leap of faith. I left all my hard work, my parents sacrifices, and my friends support and there was no going back. How was I going to do this? I was going to have to fly by myself pretty soon and eventually teach others how to fly. It all just seemed *impossible*.

But like running, I grew a passion for flying. I became obsessed with the journey. And told myself that I was going to go all in on this impossible dream. Do whatever it takes to manifest it into reality. Failure after failure, setback after setback, giving up was never an option. And trust me, there were failures. On

one flight, I landed so hard, I jokingly earned the call sign “crater” in reference to the supposed broken pavement I left on the runway.

I knew this wasn't going to be easy, but I kept showing up. I chair flew. I studied. I learned from every mistake. I even joined our school's flight team where, for the first time in CAU history, we became regional champions in the navigation event and ranked nationally against the best aviation colleges in the country.

And now, after years of hard work, self-belief, discipline, and sacrifice, I am beyond fortunate to say that I have proved my impossible dream *possible*.

But my story showcases just one perspective out of many amongst this room. Every single one of us have dreamt of our own impossible dream. Each with our own stories, hardships, and obstacles we've had to overcome. Those early mornings and long nights studying for classes. The all-nighters before stage checks and EOCs. Those 12hr days where finding time to eat and sleep seems impractical. And those moments when your mind starts giving you the easy way out.

We each hold unique experiences, with unique triumphs, and unique journeys. Some of us have families that depend on us; others work long shifts to make ends meet, and others go through their own intrapersonal battles without anyone else knowing. This individuality is what makes it all so beautiful.

Despite all that we have on our plate, we keep showing up. We are fueled by our passion for the world that is aviation. For what a beautiful industry to be a part of. One where loved ones are reunited and where lifelong memories can be made from across of the globe.

To everyone who came to celebrate with us today, you are not just witnessing a ceremony. You are witnessing what years of discipline, grit, resilience, and passion will get you. On behalf of everyone wearing a cap and gown, we'd like to say thank you. Thank you to our moms and dads, our brothers and sisters, our friends and family, our mentors and mentees, our instructors and teachers, and our peers and teammates. Thank you for believing in us when this dream felt so far

away. Thank you for joining us on this journey of sacrifice and the desire to do something great. Thank you for allowing us to have an impact as aviation professionals, both as pilots and mechanics. For we are only here today because of your support.

Before we all go our own separate ways and decide to take the next leap of faith in our own paths, I would like to leave you with a vision. A vision to dream your own impossible dream. Pursue the fantasy that scares you. Follow the path that calls you. And never forget that what feels impossible today may one day become the very thing you stand proudly on a stage to celebrate.

You know, every now and then I think back to when I was lying in the desert that night, and

how I thought getting back up
was *impossible*. I think back to when I
dropped out of my first college and thought
starting over was *impossible*. When I failed
stage check after stage check and thought
becoming a pilot was *impossible*. But
standing here today, watching us all gather in
our caps and gowns, with all the
support we've had
through everything we've accomplished, is
proof to me that nothing was
ever *impossible*.

Thank you.

[Dr. Berry comes to the podium following the Student Speaker speech.]

Faculty & Staff Video Compilation

Dr. Michael Berry

Thank you, James, for that moving speech. Before we move on to the conferral of diplomas, we'd like to take a brief pause to share something meaningful.

Our faculty and staff have walked alongside you throughout this journey, and today, they want to share just how proud they are of everything you've accomplished.

Please enjoy this special video message from the people who have supported, taught, and cheered you on every step of the way.

[Play compilation video of faculty and staff]

Conferred Degrees

Dr. Michael Berry

Master of Aviation Science: Hooding Ceremony

At this time, I would like to invite Dr. Carol Sommers to join me on stage to assist with the hooding of our Master of Aviation Science graduates.

[Dr. Sommers comes to the stage and stands with Dr. Berry]

But first, let me provide a brief history of the “Hooding Ceremony.” The tradition of academic dress entered the United States through King's College, which is now known

as Columbia University. In the 1880's, different institutions established their own academic dress codes. The custom grew so rapidly that a commission was formed to draw up an intercollegiate code of academic dress. This code, with modifications made in 1959, remains in force today. The attire, colors, trimmings and patterns you see are all traditional, and reflect both the degree and field of learning.

The colorful hood is reserved for those individuals who have attained a professional degree, one that specializes in a particular field of study, such as a Master's in Aviation Science. It is a special part of the academic regalia that denotes scholarly and professional achievements.

Please notice that the hood is lined with the official colors of CAU, red and blue, with the red forming a chevron pattern over the blue. The hood is edged and bound with gold velvet representing the sciences.

Please join me in welcoming

Robert E. Diaz-Moreira [moh-RARE-rah]

Denis N. Khavrenko

Daniel Roman

Hiram R. Taforkem

and

Lara G. Zhao

to the stage to be hooded.

[Have students face the audience; place the hood over their head. Give students diploma.]

Stand for a moment with the students in order for pictures to be taken, then dismiss the students.]

[David Alvarez will step to the podium and read Degrees and Names. Megan Dutto will hold the basket of diplomas.]

David Alvarez

At this time, California Aeronautical University would now like to confer the following degrees.

Will the graduating class of 2026 please stand and come to the stage as we call your name.

Aviation Maintenance Technology:

Ivan Calderon

Giovanni Melendez

Associate of Science Aviation Studies:

McArthur U. Ogbonna

Blake Ruz

Bachelor of Science Aeronautics:

Ameer Saeed Ali ["Ah-MEER Sah-EED Ah-lee"]

Zakria Amilee ["Zecheriah Uhm-Mil-E"]

Matthew A. Anderson

Seamus Barthel

Shaquille Benson ["Sha-keel"]

Miguel-Aris Bernaldez Barlisan

["mee-GEHL air-IS ber-NAHL-DEHZ bar-LEE-sun"]

Kyle V. Bloemhof ["bloom-hoff"]

Savannah L. Coffia

James Cruz
Zachary C. Cuneo ["KYOO-nee-oh"]

Ivan Cureno

Blake E. Demoff

Knightly A. Dugger

Owen Dullum

Derrick M. Dunlap

**Paloma Keala oka hilihili oka awa puhi ihoni iana keke hau
Ford**

Casey Gacke [Kay-see Gay-key]

Alana R. Garcia

Frederick C. Gerges

Matthew Gilfilen

Decklan Hanson

Erik Hanson

Sofiane Harchaoui ["So-fee-yawn Har-chow-ee"]

Hayden R. Herstad

Roberto Hurtado Quezada

Vaughn K Igna-Espinosa [Von K. Ig-na-es-pi-no-sa]

Anthony L. James

Bryce J. James

James Jensen

Jackson Kaspar

Corey Barrett Ketchem
Abraham Korin
Sewook Kwon [“Say-wook kwahn”]
Nizhoni Lara-Hill ["NY-JOH-nee" "LAH-ruh-HIL"]
William Layton
Braden Lindberg
James C. Lopez
Ryan James Kealoha Makaiwi
[Ryan James "Kay Aloha" "Mah Kah ee VEE"]
Isabelle Mares
Isaiah Mejia
Nicholas E. Meyer
Jacob L. Murray
Kendrick Nguyen
Miguel Ossorio Sanabria
Stan Pryor
Preston Ray
Sinclair E. Richard
William Blake Roeber
Alexander Martin Sanchez
Jacob Sarlan

Connor Sierras
Dominic J. Silva
Austin Smith
Piper Stafne
Charise Swartz
Christian Tamayo ["TA - MAI - YO"]
Isaiah Tejada
Trevor Tierney
Luke Uganiza
Kade Uyesaka
Austin Watkins
Christopher Williams

[David Alvarez and Megan Dutto will step down from the podium.]

Class Confirmation

Dr. Michael Berry

We have heard from many wonderful people today who were kind enough to share their stories with us. These testimonials remind us that each of you possesses the characteristics it takes to be successful and of the importance of hard work, adaptability, and perseverance in order to accomplish one's goals.

...So without further delay, the moment we have all been waiting for.

Will the graduates of California Aeronautical University's Class of 2026 please stand?

[Graduates stand.]

With the authority given to me by the Accrediting Commission of Career Schools and Colleges, and the State of California, I would like you to now move your tassels from the right to the left. Your degrees have now been confirmed. Congratulations!

[Matt comes to the podium for final remarks.]

Exit

Matthew Johnston

We thank you for joining us in this day of celebration and the promise of a bright future. Please stand as the graduating students from California Aeronautical University, the Class of 2026, leaves the hangar.

[Matt and stage party exit leading the recession.]