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## UVI's St. Croix Class of 2026 Told to Be Original, Waste Nothing and Shape the Virgin Islands' Future

UVI's St. Croix commencement celebrated graduates at Island Center, where speakers emphasized local impact, originality, community support, hidden growth, political change and the responsibility to use time and talent with purpose.

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UVI 2026 graduates on St. Croix. By. DEAR PRODUCTIONS.

The University of the Virgin Islands celebrated its 2026 commencement on St. Croix Friday with a ceremony that mixed pride, humor, personal reflection and serious calls for graduates to define their own paths while remaining rooted in community, service and the future of the Virgin Islands.

Island Center was filled with parents, well-wishers and graduates as the St. Croix class marked the end of what was described as a four-year academic marathon and the beginning of their professional lives.

UVI President Dr. Safiya George emphasized, as she did during Thursday's St. Thomas commencement, the university's deeply local impact. She noted that 84 percent of UVI graduates still live in the territory, and that more than 1,100 graduates are part of the Virgin Islands workforce, with an "impressive number" serving in local government and agencies.

One of those UVI graduates is Governor Albert Bryan Jr., who said the 2026 ceremony held personal meaning because his daughter, Sumayah, was joining the UVI alumni family.

Speaking last on the program, Governor Bryan told graduates that overcoming the hurdle of graduation is itself an achievement. "I did not go to school on scholarship. I was not a good student," he disclosed. "Reprobate would describe me."

He contrasted his college performance with the career that followed. "It don't matter where you are now, it doesn't matter about your yesterday," he declared. "What matters is how hard you put your heart into what you do."

Acknowledging what he described as the intense passion of the current generation, the governor encouraged graduates to define success on their own terms. "Figure out what it is you want to do, dance to your own music, be different, excel," he said.

That message was echoed by Adam O'Neal, known professionally as Adam O, who may now adopt the name "Dr. O" after receiving an honorary Doctor of Letters for his contributions to Virgin Islands culture.

He told the graduating class that "in the world we have a shortage of originality, people afraid to be themselves, people afraid to be funny." He urged graduates to bring their own creative spark into the world. "Be original, be funny, be silly," he said.

Though he avoided island rivalry during Thursday's remarks on St. Thomas, Adam O leaned into it on St. Croix, declaring guava tart the superior flavor and teasing St. Thomians for their "Gucci link" Johnny cakes. After the friendly jabs, however, he reminded the audience that Virgin Islanders remain part of a tightly knit community with a shared identity, regardless of which island they call home.

Lieutenant Governor Tregenza Roach challenged graduates to think even more broadly about community and the territory's future. He said the relationship between the U.S. Virgin Islands and the mainland is not fixed. "In your lifetime, this status will change," he predicted.

Pointing to what he described as renewed aggression in the federal executive branch's foreign policy internationally and closer to home in the Caribbean region, Mr. Roach said the Virgin Islands "will have to choose what this place will become."

He suggested that it may be time to consider a closer relationship with the British Virgin Islands, separated "by only 10 miles" from the east end of St. John. He noted that one option already being discussed at the United Nations is "whether we together could decide that we have the resources to combine and become a country of ourselves."

St. Croix student representative SaVaughna John-Baptiste, who spoke before the lieutenant governor, also reflected on the unsettled world graduates are entering.

“We are graduating in a time where pressure is real, where systems are still uneven, where truth is questioned, where justice is delayed, where decisions are made between fear and hope every single day, where even the right to exist boldly, unapologetically and intellectually as black people are questioned.”

Still, Ms. John-Baptiste urged her classmates to trust their individual journeys of growth, even when those journeys appear different from those of their peers.

“As someone shaped by horticulture, I learned something from the land itself. Growth is not always visible. A seed underground can look like nothing. A field can look empty before it becomes abundant. So, to anyone who ever felt like their progress was too slow, do not confuse hidden growth with no growth. Some roots deepen before anything blooms, and today we bloomed to those earning associates, bachelors, masters, doctorates, and advanced credentials,” Ms. John-Baptiste said.

Congresswoman Stacey Plaskett also urged graduates to reflect on the unique paths ahead now that they have earned a tertiary education.

She told them that the degree they received Friday “is not a destination...it’s a departure point. What you do next is what defines you.”

Ms. Plaskett also underscored the role of family and community support in helping graduates reach the milestone.

“The parents, the grandparents, aunties and uncles, nannies, pepes, godparents...who saw something in the graduates before they even saw it in themselves...this day belongs to you as well,” Delegate Plaskett declared.

Senate President Milton Potter offered one of the ceremony’s most direct reminders about time and purpose. “You’re going to die,” he declared, noting that the average human lifespan lasts somewhere around 4,000 weeks.

“Many of those weeks are already gone,” Senator Potter continued. “You spend some of them learning to walk, some of them sitting in classrooms at UVI, some of them figuring out who you are, some of them – if we’re being honest – playing Call of Duty with friends until two in the morning,” he noted.

The important question, he told graduates, is how best to use the time that remains.

“My charge to you, ladies and gentlemen, is simple: waste nothing, not your talent, not your time, not your connection to this place and these people,” he concluded.

The ceremony also included recognition of Rena Brodhurst, longtime publisher and editor of The St. Croix Avis, who received an honorary degree for her distinguished career and lasting impact on journalism and the Virgin Islands community. Brodhurst was recognized for helping shape public discourse in the territory and championing the importance of a free and independent press.

The St. Croix ceremony closed a commencement week that celebrated UVI's Class of 2026 across both districts, with Friday's speakers urging graduates to carry forward the university's local legacy while preparing to shape a future that may look very different from the past.

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