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## 'You have made this a better place': More than 1,400 graduate from Shenandoah University

Star staff report

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More than 1,400 graduates were celebrated at Shenandoah University's commencement on Saturday in the James R. Wilkins Jr. Athletics and Events Center.

Photo by

Shenandoah University celebrated the achievements of more than 1,400 graduates at its 2026 commencement held Saturday inside the James R. Wilkins Jr. Athletics and Events Center.

This year's ceremony honored 269 August 2025 graduates, 322 December 2025 graduates and 822 candidates for May degree conferrals, according to an SU media release. The total number of May 2026 graduates will not be official until 30 days after commencement.

"You are the best of Shenandoah, and we are so proud of you and so excited for you," Shenandoah President Tracy Fitzsimmons told students. "You graduate from a place that deeply values compassion, responsibility, advocacy and justice. We want you to stand up for yourself, advocate for others, and make the world a better place. You have done that along the way. You have made this a better place.

Fitzsimmons continued: "I simply ask you students, as you graduate and go into the world, to make the right decisions. Sometimes that's hard. Sometimes we don't know what the right decisions are. When you don't know what the right decisions are, I hope you dig deep into your Shenandoah education and make decisions that feel most honorable to you and to those that you serve."

The ceremony also featured remarks from James R. "Richie" Wilkins III, chair of Shenandoah University's Board of Trustees; Nicole Davis '03, '06, president of the university's Alumni Association; and Carter Sand '27, president of the Student Government Association.

"If there's one lesson I hope you will carry with you, it is this: please be open. Please be faithful. Please be solid with the people who showed up for you and saw something in you, because sometimes your path will be shaped not just by your plans, but by the people who believe in you," Davis said. "Never forget where you came from. Never forget those who paved the way, those who supported you, who poured into you so that you could be here today. And as you cross this stage and begin the next chapter, hold tightly to the lessons and the experiences you have gained here because they will guide you when things feel uncertain and they will ground you when life begins to move quickly."

Wilkins and Sand each talked about Shenandoah University's 150-year history — the 2026 commencement ceremony capped the university's sesquicentennial celebration — including the transformative leadership of Fitzsimmons and past presidents such as Forrest Racey and James A. "Jim" Davis, and the "bold move" to relocate Shenandoah from Dayton, Virginia, to Winchester, Virginia, in 1960.

"Have you ever noticed that bold moves don't feel bold when you make them? They feel scary. They feel uncertain. But if you aren't nervous, what you're doing isn't exciting and new," Sand said. "As you step into whatever comes next, there may be moments that feel overwhelming, challenges that make you question whether you chose the right path. When that happens, I want you to remember this: the university that you're graduating from has never been afraid to move forward. They've been making bold bets for 150 years, and one of those bets was on you being here today. You are now a thread woven into 150 years of history here at Shenandoah University."

In addition to presenting diplomas to the graduates who walked across the stage at commencement, Shenandoah conferred honorary Doctor of Arts degrees to Broadway stars and real-life husband-and-wife duo Austin Colby and Caroline Bowman.

Bowman and Colby have captivated audiences all over the world, notably starring together as Elsa and Hans in the North American tour of Disney's "Frozen." Bowman has starred as the iconic Elphaba in "Wicked" and as a member of the original cast of the Tony Award-winning "Kinky Boots," and has held lead roles as Eva Perón in the national tour of "Evita," the Lady of the Lake in "Spamalot," and in "Smash." Colby starred as Tom Buchanan in the original Broadway cast of "The Great Gatsby," as well as in an off-Broadway production of "Jersey Boys," the national tour of "The Sound of Music," and a regional production of "West Side Story."

Shenandoah University bestowed the honorary degrees upon each of them "in recognition of their exceptional contributions to musical theatre and their inspiring journey as partners in both life and art," the release states.

"Shenandoah has always been known as a community that nurtures and empowers well-rounded artists. I've had the pleasure of knowing and working with a few of them ... so it's my privilege to be associated with this legacy," Colby said. "To be honest, Caroline and I were both surprised to receive this recognition. We feel as though we've only just begun to contribute to this industry we love and respect so much. We humbly accept this honorary doctorate with every intention to continue our journey of learning, growing and earning this title."

Bowman was unable to attend the commencement ceremony as she was filming a movie in Thailand, though she recorded a short video that was played during the ceremony.

A recording of Shenandoah University's 2026 Commencement is available on the university's YouTube page.

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