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## UVI's St. Thomas Class of 2026 Told to Carry Virgin Islands Legacy Forward; St. Croix Ceremony Follows Today

UVI's St. Thomas commencement celebrated the "Ambitious Class," nearly 300 graduates territory-wide, five new school psychology specialists, and speeches urging alumni to embrace creativity, service, community duty and tuition-free UVI's future.

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Janeka Simon **May 15, 2026**

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Lt. Gov. Tregenza Roach congratulates a graduate during UVI's St. Thomas commencement, where he said the territory's tuition-free UVI program is "in peril" but promised that it will live. By. GOV'T HOUSE.

The University of the Virgin Islands marked the commencement of its Class of 2026 on St. Croix with a ceremony that celebrated nearly 300 graduates, highlighted the return of Educational Specialist degrees in School Psychology for the first time in approximately a decade, and called on the newest UVI alumni to use their education in service of the territory and beyond.

Each year, UVI celebrates the excellence and achievements of its graduating seniors in a public ceremony. On Thursday, it was the turn of the Class of 2026 on St. Thomas to mark the beginning of their professional lives.

The cohort, dressed in black gowns and caps with stoles of official Virgin Islands madras, added their number to more than 11,000 graduates of UVI and the College of the Virgin Islands since the institution's founding in 1962.

This year also marked the first time in approximately a decade that graduates qualified as Educational Specialists in School Psychology, a degree situated between the master's and Ph.D. levels. Five such degrees were awarded this year, including four to students on St. Croix and one on St. Thomas.

"This is particularly important because the U.S. Virgin Islands faces a severe shortage of school psychologists," said UVI President Dr. Safiya George. "This shortage impedes early identification of learning and behavioral needs, delays services and negatively affects student outcomes," she noted. The five newly-minted educational specialists in school psychology "are critical to rebuilding capacity and strengthening school based support systems."

George described the graduates as the "Ambitious Class," saying the Class of 2026 had fully embraced the journey toward becoming university graduates.

"You showed up thoughtfully and ignited others to dream," she remarked, saying the students "impressed me immensely."

Keynote speaker Adam O'Neal, known locally and internationally by his performing name Adam O, delivered a message tailored to the different paths represented within the graduating class.

To those entering traditional fields such as medicine, law, engineering and related professions, he advised them to "show up as your best self every day" if they wanted to reach the top of their field.

He then addressed a second group — dancers, actors and other creatives — whom he called "the ones with the pretty hats," referring to the decorated mortar boards visible throughout the crowd.

"Y'all are me. I am you," he told them.

His advice to them was to remain authentic. "We have to go against the grain. We have to show up and be silly...because the world lacks originality."

Mr. O'Neal, said the territory needs both groups equally. "Creativity and industry needs to come together more in the Virgin Islands, so we could show the world how colorful we really are."

He ended his address with a serenade to a third group — the women graduates who are often the target audience for much of his creative expression. "Loving your mental, we need you more than you know, in every nation, guardian angel, your beauty gives us hope," he sang.

Student speaker Zeidan Bass reflected on the challenges faced by the graduating class over the past several years, speaking to the familiar struggle of balancing study, sleep and social life. “These were moments that tested our patience and reminded us that persistence was both necessary inside and outside,” he said.

Mr. Bass, a computer science major from St. Kitts, also acknowledged UVI’s status as the only HBCU in the Caribbean. He said the graduates “represent excellence emerging from small islands with global impact.” UVI, he added, is “a university that continues to produce leaders, innovators, and changemakers” with global impact, while still reflecting “the spirit of the Caribbean itself; diverse, resilient, vibrant and deeply rooted in community.”

Senate President Milton Potter reminded graduates that they stand in a long line of people whose work, struggle and sacrifice made their achievement possible.

“The sacrifices behind you are not small. They are enormous, and they demand something in return...that you show up fully for your community, for your calling, for your gift,” he said. “The Virgin Islands did not produce you so you could disappear into mediocrity,” he admonished.

Congresswoman Stacey Plaskett also spoke about the legacy the graduates are expected to join, pointing to Orville Kean, whose name graces UVI’s St. Thomas campus. Mr. Kean, she said, “understood that education was not a luxury for the Virgin Islands.”

Noting his accomplishments over his lifetime, Ms. Plaskett told the graduates, “The Virgin Islands has always produced people who outperform expectations. That’s our tradition. That is now your tradition.”

Symbolically passing the baton to the new graduates, she urged them to root themselves in community and continue the work of advancing the territory.

“The Virgin Islands gave you roots. Now go show the world your reach and give back and plant what you have grown.”

Lieutenant Governor Tregenza Roach, speaking on behalf of Governor Albert Bryan Jr., closed the sequence of speakers by recalling his role in the creation of tuition-free UVI for resident students.

Mr. Roach said the idea began after a promising student told him he could not afford to return the following semester. As a UVI professor, Mr. Roach said he pledged that if elected to the Senate, the first bill he introduced would be one to eliminate tuition for Virgin Islanders enrolled at UVI.

The proposal, he noted, was supported by his then-colleagues in the 32nd Legislature and resulted in free tuition for resident UVI students.

“Unfortunately this idea [is in peril](#), but I promise you that it will live,” he assured. “You cannot tell young people...that you care about them, without making significant commitments to their future.”

A commencement ceremony for St. Croix graduates will take place today.