



ECKERD COLLEGE

Commencement Address

Melissa Seixas '92

May 18, 2025

[Video recording](#)

Good morning, Eckerd College graduates, families, friends, faculty, staff and Board of Trustees.

What a beautiful day to celebrate the extraordinary Class of 2025!

A heartfelt thanks to President Annarelli for the invitation to join you today, and for including my husband, Greg, and youngest son, Jack.

It's an especially meaningful weekend for me, as my mentor and adviser, Professor Carolyn Johnston, is being honored for her extraordinary contributions to this college, to the field of history and to the countless lives

she's touched along the way. She truly is a gift.

As an alumna of Eckerd College, being your Commencement speaker today feels completely surreal. Never did I imagine someone would say, "Would you like to give the Commencement address at Eckerd College?"

Nor did I expect—back in February of 2021—to hear these words: "Melissa, you will be the next president of Duke Energy Florida."

People often ask how I "planned" to become a utility president—especially when they find out I'm not an engineer, accountant or lawyer. I'm a proud historian. And I can tell you this with absolute certainty: There was no plan. No vision board. No 10-step strategy.

But what I did have was Eckerd College. My experience here shaped me—how I lead, how I serve customers and communities, and how I think about building a cleaner energy future. It taught me how to listen, collaborate, problem-solve and lead with curiosity. I carry that with me every single day.

Nothing about my upbringing would have led someone to say, "She's going to run a utility someday."

My mother was born deep in the Amazon interior of Brazil, in the state of Pará. One of nine children, she arrived in the U.S. at 19 to work as a maid. She didn't speak English—but she had grit, determination and an unshakable will to build a better life.

My father, in contrast, was a U.S. Army colonel and an attorney. As white, Anglo-Saxon and Protestant as they come. To say they came from different worlds would be an understatement.

So I grew up knowing that not everyone shared the same story. While my friends spent their Saturdays playing outside, I was at long, lively lunches with a big group of Brazilians—most not related by blood but bound by culture, food and community.

My mom gave me a love for cooking, music and people. From my dad, I inherited a passion for history. By third grade, I was watching the nightly news with him. At the time, I wasn't sure what was better—to be a boy or a girl. Boys went to war; girls had babies. That was the reality I understood, growing up in the shadow of Vietnam.

Living in a home with two vastly different parents, I quickly learned that no two backgrounds are the same. While I didn't yet recognize it as diversity, deep down, it sparked a curiosity about the past and its influence on the future. That early awareness became the foundation for my profound love and

appreciation of history.

In 1977, we moved from Baltimore to St. Petersburg. The city was a much different place than it is now. I don't recall ever going downtown except for high school graduation at Bayfront Center, which is now the Mahaffey Theatre at the Duke Energy Center for the Arts.

Two years later, my father passed away. My mother didn't drive and didn't know how to manage the finances. I was writing checks for her to sign before I could vote.

Let me share a story that illustrates how life events—no matter how far apart—can weave together in unexpected and meaningful ways.

At one point, our power was disconnected due to nonpayment, and I found myself calling Florida Power Corp.—the very same company I now lead—to speak with a customer service representative. I explained that English wasn't my mother's first language, and she was uncomfortable talking to the power company, and that the army pension and social security checks hadn't arrived yet—but I assured them we would pay the bill.

The representative's kindness left a lasting impression on me. It was more than just a moment of empathy—it was a lesson in the power of service, the

impact of simple human decency. That experience shaped my approach throughout my career, reinforcing my unwavering belief that every customer deserves to be treated with respect and dignity.

In high school, I developed a strong interest in drafting and technical drawing, but my commitment to staying close to home for my mom meant shifting away from engineering school.

At 19, while attending St. Pete Junior College, I started working in the drafting department at Florida Power Corp. in St. Pete. When I transferred to Eckerd College to major in American history, I worked part time and continued mapping the poles and wires that form our electric distribution system.

It was the perfect combination: hands-on technical experience paired with the critical thinking and broader worldview I was building through a liberal arts education.

As I unraveled the complexities of the electric grid, my classes in Reformation, Women's Studies, Russian/Soviet History, English Literature, African American History, and Latin American Politics reshaped my perspective. These courses didn't just inform me—they transformed how I see systems of power, resilience and changes. They sharpened my ability to recognize the intricate

forces shaping the world.

My time at Eckerd College emboldened me to express my thoughts. It honed my ability to see world events, local dynamics and personal experiences through a wider discerning lens. I learned to articulate my position with thoughtful precision—less reactionary and more reasoned.

But more than that, it helped me realize that this expanded perspective was just the beginning of a lifelong journey of learning.

That journey continues every day. I learn a dozen new things a day in the rapidly changing world of energy, and more often than not, I uncover something new about myself—constant refinements that make life meaningful and fun and reframe my focus on those around me. Of the many things I've learned, to truly grasp the gift of living a full life—through both the hard times and the good—you have to walk through the storm. You can't go around it. And on the other side, gratitude takes root. These lessons I credit to Eckerd College.

Once I completed my undergraduate degree, I entered into the M.A. program at the University of South Florida. As I neared completion of my program, I applied for a full-time role in our Consumer Affairs group, working with customers and the Florida Public Service Commission.

During the final interview, the department director was riffling through a filing cabinet, searching for a piece of paper. He didn't invite me to sit—he was too focused on whatever he was trying to find. Finally, he looked up and said, “Well, you have the job. But I have one question: Why did you major in history?”

That was the first time I gave the answer I've now repeated for over 30 years:

A liberal arts education gives you a unique perspective. It teaches you to analyze, to connect the dots, to think creatively. It helps you understand people, assemble a world-class team (like the one I'm honored to work with), know how to process complexities, and communicate ideas—essential skills when your job is powering the lives of millions. And the same is true for you as you head off to a new job, graduate school or to take time to evaluate your next step.

Your life will take unexpected turns. You'll switch paths, hit guardrails, pivot. But through it all, your Eckerd education will remain a part of you, grounding you in ways you may not even realize at first. Beyond the warm sunshine, the unmatched beauty of the waterfront and lifelong friendships you've made, you'll carry with you an openness to experiment, a sharpened ability to critically analyze, and a deep understanding of competing perspectives—qualities that will serve you no matter where life leads.

One lesson I took from Eckerd was the value of keeping a *Commonplace Book*—a notebook of quotes, thoughts, lists, anything meaningful that crosses your mind.

Today, I call my list “Speak Plainly.” It’s a reminder to myself that in a world of sound bites, jargon and acronyms, it’s important to choose words with intention. I jot down ideas from podcasts, novels, historical research, even Dove chocolate wrappers (my favorite: Be brave enough to be bad at something).

An example—I stink at technology. Last week following a dinner at a St. Pete restaurant, I couldn’t manage to pay the valet through the app. The young man was very kind and offered to do it for me. I am certain it was painful for him to watch, and I was making him crazy. When I gave him my Duke email address, he asked me what I did and how do you get a job there. I went into my “I am a history major” speech and mentioned I went to Eckerd College. As it turns out, he’s a junior at Eckerd—further proof the universe always returns me to Eckerd College in ways large and small.

So let me leave you with four things I’ve come to live by. Maybe they’ll mean something to you:

First, don’t chase perfection in every aspect of life—it stifles joy and spontaneity. In my industry, perfection can mean the difference between life and death, and that’s where it truly matters. But outside of that? Give yourself

room to explore, to stumble, to grow. Everyone's definition of perfection varies, and trying to be everything to everyone all the time is an impossible burden. There will always be someone smarter, faster, more polished—and that's perfectly okay. So let go of the pressure and allow yourself the freedom to be human.

Second, whatever job you have—do your best. Someone will notice. But more importantly, *you* will. Every experience adds to who you are and what you bring to the table. You have a lifetime ahead to try things, learn, fall short, fall in love with something completely unexpected.

Third, be kind to yourself. You are so worth it.

Finally, a quote taken straight from my *Commonplace Book*: Don't take criticism from someone you wouldn't take advice from.

Congratulations, Class of 2025. May your journeys be bold, your impact lasting and your joy undeniable.