By John Rogers

He’s been a race-car driver, a Santa’s elf, a TV anchorman and now that he leaves the University of Southern California with an honorary doctorate in hand, Will Ferrell told fellow graduates Friday that he’s ready to deliver a baby on an airliner.

“Hopefully it will be on United Airlines, from which I will be immediately subdued and dragged off the aircraft,” Ferrell added to roars of laughter as he delivered the commencement address to USC’s 134th graduating class.

The Emmy- and Golden Globe-nominated actor-writer-producer arrived at the podium on the university’s campus near downtown in full graduation regalia, including a black, white-striped gown.

For the most part, he shyly ignored a huge ovation as he walked in with other distinguished guests, including actress Helen Mirren, instead waving quickly to family and friends that included his mother, his wife and their three children.

At the podium he took a moment to apologize “to all the parents who are sitting there saying, ‘Will Ferrell? Why Will Ferrell? I hate Will Ferrell.’”

“Although,” he added he also overheard, “‘He’s much better looking in person. Has he lost weight?’”

Friday’s speech, he said, was not his first commencement address, adding he’s spoken at a truck-driving school, a deejay academy and Trump University, among others. “I’m still waiting to get paid from Trump University,” he said.

Then he took the Class of 2017 through a laugh-filled, self-deprecating 30-minute ride through his career since the day in 1990 he received a degree in sports information journalism from USC. “A program so difficult, so arduous, that they discontinued the major eight years after I left,” Ferrell said.

No matter, by his senior year Ferrell was beginning to realize his true calling.

Several times, he recalled, he’d interrupt friends’ classes by playing pranks on their professors.

One of the professors, the late, heralded Ronald Gottesman, editor of “The Norton Anthology of American Literature,” was delivering a lecture when Ferrell showed up dressed as a janitor, insisting he’d been sent to clean up someone’s vomit.

When he learned whose class he had disrupted, he was certain he’d be ordered to never do it again. Instead, Gottesman invited him back, earning Ferrell a classroom ovation when he arrived with a noisy power drill.

“Moments like these made me believe that maybe I was funny to whole groups of people,” he said.

He would go on to star in such films as “Get Hard,” “Elf,” “Old School,” “Blades of Glory” and “Anchorman: The Legend of Ron Burgundy.”

He was nominated for Golden Globes for his roles in “The Producers” and “Stranger Than Fiction” and Emmys for his work as a producer on television’s “Drunk History.” He received the prestigious Mark Twain Prize for American Humor in 2011.

But none of it came quickly or easily, Ferrell told the graduates, reminding them that critics called him the most annoying new cast member when he joined “Saturday Night Live” in 1995.

In a rare moment of seriousness he exhorted his audience not to be afraid to pursue their dreams, adding everybody at some point is certain they’ll fail.

But in his case he said, “My fear of failure never approached my fear of what if. What if I’d never tried.”
Will Ferrell ended his commencement address at the University of Southern California with a rendition of Whitney Houston’s “I Will Always Love You,” and we should all be grateful.

By contrast, half the graduates turned their backs when Education Secretary Betsy DeVos spoke at Bethune-Cookman University this week. And not everyone will like hearing from President Trump, who spoke Saturday at Liberty University’s graduation ceremony.

Then there’s Ferrell, whose speech was alternately hilarious, poignant and wise. And earned him a standing ovation.

The “Saturday Night Live” legend graduated from USC in 1990 with a degree in sports information. “A program so difficult, so arduous,” he said, “that they discontinued the major eight years after I left.”

On Friday, Ferrell received an honorary USC doctorate, as did a humanitarian, an innovative spinal surgeon, a leading AIDS researcher and Dame Helen Mirren. “And then there’s me,” he said. “Will Ferrell, whose achievements include running naked through the city of Montrose in ‘Old School.’ ”

“I think my fellow doctorates would agree, based on our achievements, we are all on equal footing,” he added. From now on, Ferrell said, he is requiring that his wife and children address him as “Dr. Ferrell.”

There were times, Ferrell said, when he sat in his apartment “eating spaghetti topped with mustard” and had only $20 in his checking account. “Yes, I was afraid. You’re never not afraid. I’m still afraid,” he said. But, he added, “My fear of failure never approached in magnitude my fear of ‘What if? What if I never tried at all?’”

Ferrell said that, for all his accolades and outward success, “To me, my definition of success is my 16½-year marriage to my beautiful and talented wife, Viveca. Success are my three amazing sons, Magnus, 13, Mattias, 10, and Axel, age 7.”

“No matter how cliche it may sound,” he told the class of 2017, “You will never truly be successful until you learn to get beyond yourself. Empathy and kindness are the true signs of emotional intelligence.”

He advised graduates who don’t feel sure of their next steps to “enjoy the process of your search without succumbing to the pressure of the result. Trust your gut. Keep throwing darts at the dart board. Don’t listen to the critics, and you will figure it out.”

And, he told them, if they get really lonely and down, they should think of the support of their Trojan family.

“Imagine me,” he added, before breaking into “I Will Always Love you.” “Literally picture my face, singing this song gently into your ear.”

Thank you, Dr. Ferrell. We will.