

From the Crag to the Commencement Stage: OPDD's Graduation Cord Tradition Honors Grads with Upcycled Climbing Rope

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Custom graduation cords made of upcycled climbing rope and designed by faculty member, Dave Gibson

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For students graduating from Utah State University's Outdoor Product Design and Development program, the cord draped around their neck at commencement carries a different kind of weight. It didn't come from a catalog or a bulk supplier. It came from a climbing rope — one that had already lived a life on the wall — washed, measured, cut, and finished right here in Logan by the hands of their professor.

Dave Gibson, faculty member in USU's OPDD program, has made this handmade gift an annual tradition, designing custom graduation cords for each cohort of graduates using upcycled climbing rope sourced from the outdoor industry. This year, the rope came from [Black Diamond Equipment](#) — one of the most storied names in

technical outdoor gear — which donated retired rope that would otherwise have been discarded. It's no wonder this unique gift to graduates [took off on Instagram in 2025](#) and [again this year](#).

Rope with a History

Climbing ropes have a finite service life. After enough falls, UV exposure, and time, even a rope in good cosmetic condition is retired from safety-critical use. For most, that's the end of the story. Gibson saw an opportunity to give that material a second life with genuine meaning.

This year, Black Diamond Equipment — headquartered in Salt Lake City and a longtime presence in the climbing and outdoor industry — provided the rope for the project. Once the rope arrived at USU, Gibson and collaborators washed it, cut it to length, and assembled each cord by hand, transforming what was once safety equipment into a tangible emblem of a graduate's journey through the program.

The result is a cord that feels different from anything available in a university bookstore — thicker, more textured, unmistakably outdoor. For students who have spent years studying the design, performance, and lifecycle of products like this, wearing one at graduation is not just ceremonial. It's fitting.

A 3D-Printed Finishing Touch

Paired with each cord is a custom cap medallion Gibson designs and 3D prints in-house. Each year's medallion is unique — bearing the name of the OPDD program and the graduation year — so that no two graduating classes wear the same piece. The medallion serves as both a functional anchor for the cord and a keepsake designed to last, reflecting the same attention to detail that the program instills in its students.

The use of 3D printing is intentional. Additive manufacturing is a core tool in OPDD's curriculum, and seeing that technology applied to something personally meaningful — a graduation gift made by their own professor — reinforces the program's ethos that design skills are not just professional tools but a means of creative expression and care.

A Tradition Built on Values

The graduation cord project is, at its core, an expression of what the OPDD program believes design can and should do: solve problems thoughtfully, use materials responsibly,

and connect people to something larger than themselves. In this case, that means the outdoor industry — its culture, its craftsmanship, and its ongoing conversation about sustainability.

For the graduates receiving them, the cords are a reminder that their education has been grounded in the real world of outdoor product design — not just theory, but materials, processes, industry partnerships, and purpose. That a piece of Black Diamond rope now marks their transition from student to professional feels less like a coincidence and more like the point.

Gibson plans to continue the tradition with each incoming graduating class, sourcing rope from outdoor industry partners and refining the cap design year over year — building, one cohort at a time, a small archive of objects that tell the story of a program and the people who came through it.

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About USU's Outdoor Product Design and Development Program

Utah State University's Outdoor Product Design and Development (OPDD) program is one of the nation's premier programs dedicated to designing gear, apparel, and equipment for the outdoor industry. Located in Logan, Utah — a hub for outdoor recreation — the program combines industrial design, human factors, materials science, and business principles to prepare graduates for careers across the outdoor industry. For more information, visit opdd.usu.edu.