

Chancellor Michael F. Collins
Graduate School of Nursing Commencement Address
May 31, 2020

To our graduates, please allow me a few moments to share some thoughts with you.

On your first day of graduate school, none of us could have imagined how unusual this graduation day would become.

Unless one had just finished Albert Camus' *The Plague*, or Bill Gates' 2015 Shattuck Lecture, thoughts of a pandemic were the furthest thing from your minds that day. Most of you envisioned the white coats that you would soon wear; the pins that you would be earning; the interprofessional teams you would be joining; and the late nights you would be putting in along your own educational and career pathways.

Perhaps even some of you dared to look further ahead, to that joyous time when you would triumphantly march onto the campus green with your fellow classmates and walk into a crowded commencement tent basking in the cheers of family and friends.

How we wish it could be that way!

You deserve such a celebration; and you have earned such a celebration.

At this moment, the cheers of your dreams, now fulfilled, are deafened by the continued solitude and seriousness that accompany this ongoing pandemic.

This moment is both real and surreal. As an academic community, we are gathered, if such a word could be used, in ones and twos, some with families near, others next to provosts, and yet others watching from afar, as the festivity of the moment is silenced into solemnity by an unrelenting virus.

This was not how it was meant to be.

In 1943, college graduates never saw their commencement stage, as they were hurried off to serve their nation in another global crisis that would test the mettle of individuals, nations and the world.

Never, did we think this could happen again.

The ruffles and flourishes of commencement dreams are absent. The green is largely empty and still. We are separated from those we love. But our spirit must not be dashed.

As members of the UMass Medical School academic community and citizens of the world, this period in human history implores us to focus on what is most important.

We have isolated ourselves to combat a virus whose vaccine has yet to be found.

We have moved to virtual relationships to deter a disease for which therapeutics are under investigation.

We have made sacrifices – and continue to make sacrifices – to slow the spread of a pathogen that preys on the fragile and vulnerable.

Despite the dark clouds that persist – or perhaps because of them – an awakening is taking hold, across this nation and around the globe. The world is finally understanding what we have long appreciated: the essential nature of caregivers who, in times of crisis, go towards their patients.

As Camus sets the scene in *The Plague*, Dr. Rieux, Oran's young caregiver, recognizes disease could overwhelm his village. Camus writes, "I have no idea what's awaiting me, or what will happen when all this ends. For the moment I know this: there are sick people and they need curing."

How poignant that a philosophical tale that recounts a plague of the mid-1800's could presage today's pandemic.

Know how proud we are that you are the young clinicians of this moment!

As nurses, you have pledged to put others above yourselves. You have committed to those most in need; at a time when they need you most. You have vowed to step forward when stepping aside is not an option.

Please remember that in the days ahead, you will draw upon all you have learned as a graduate of our nursing school. Never waver from a commitment to lifelong learning as there will be much to master in the days and years that follow.

With time, you will tell your children and grandchildren that while in graduate school and immediately following your graduation, you were called into service to care for patients with a contagious disease for which there was no cure.

You will go on to regale them with the discoveries that were made and how they are now safe because a vaccine and therapeutics were discovered.

Tell those tales with equal parts of pride and humility, for our noble healthcare professions benefit most when we are humble in our achievements and modest with our accomplishments.

Throughout your career, never let the mask, gown or gloves come between you and those for whom it will be your privilege to care. There will be moments when all therapeutic options for your patients have been exhausted; please remember that the greatest privilege of your career may be the time you will spend holding the hand of your patient. These will be moments that comfort those for whom you care; and sustain you in our profession.

My confidence in you, in your compassion and in your abilities, both reflects and confirms my confidence in our faculty, the stewards of your education.

The experiences you will encounter and the decisions that you will make in the days ahead shall be with you for a lifetime.

During the trying and triumphant moments of your career, please know of the enduring pride the University of Massachusetts Medical School shall have in calling you one of our own.

Congratulations and Godspeed along your professional journey!