

Chancellor Michael F. Collins
Graduate School of Biomedical Sciences 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 lab coats that you would soon wear; the cutting-edge science that you would undertake; the lab teams you would be join; and the late nights you would spend along your own pathways to your PhDs.

Perhaps even some of you dared to look years ahead, to that joyous time when you would triumphantly process onto the campus green together with your fellow classmates and march 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; 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 deans, 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, virtual lab meetings and even virtual thesis defenses 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: that science and discovery are the catalyst for new knowledge, progress, innovation and advancement.

If the first chapter of this pandemic was the health care community's finest hour, the current chapter surely will relate the scientific community's intellect and ingenuity.

Rather than shrinking from the daunting challenges brought forth by this pandemic, researchers around the world are responding with collective intellectual force and mobilizing on a massive scale to understand, harness and eventually eliminate the threat of COVID-19. Guided by courage, conviction, collaboration and compassion, this awe-inspiring global effort comprised of a constellation of scientists and research labs is bolstering hope when we need it most.

Indeed, scientific ingenuity is slowly breaking apart the storm clouds above.

We are feeling these rays of hope on our campus and, especially, within the Graduate School of Biomedical Sciences.

Since the early days of the pandemic, 19 of our most productive labs have been fully operational, accelerating promising COVID-19 research programs, conducting lifesaving clinical trials and leveraging complementary expertise wherever and whenever needed.

The spirit of collaboration and generosity of spirit that are the hallmark of the GSBS learning environment now also characterize the global race to find vaccines and therapeutics that will save lives and livelihoods.

This is science's moment, and much like the days written about by Camus, you are the young scientists of the day. You are of keen intellect and well prepared, having been expertly stewarded in your education by our world-class faculty.

I know you will not be daunted by nor shrink from your responsibility to apply the tremendous education you have received to the world's most vexing problems, beginning with the urgency of the SARS-CoV-2 virus.

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

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!