

## WSU Commencement Address 2020

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### "Lessons from a Global Pandemic"

Thank you Chairman Madaus, President Maloney, my fellow Trustees, and you, the graduates of the class of 2020. I am overwhelmed by your generosity and this extraordinary honor. I owe so much to Worcester State University and all of those who brought me to this moment. I especially want to thank the most important people of all, my parents. I wish they were alive today to share this with me. So as your commencement speaker, let me first say how important it is to thank your parents, friends, and relatives for their love and support. They will always share in the joy of your successes. As will your professors and advisors. Be sure to stay connected. They are your touchstones and the foundation of your professional network.

I know things have been difficult since COVID-19 so abruptly changed your lives. I understand that having a virtual graduation is disappointing and likely a bit painful. Yet, you have all persevered.

For the record, my messages would have been the same today regardless of the pandemic, but my experience during this time has given me a way to make them relevant. I want to share with you my "Lessons from a Global Pandemic."

As Chairman Madaus mentioned, I am the executive vice chancellor at Commonwealth Medicine, the consulting and operations division of UMass Medical School. We work closely with the state, serving those who rely on public assistance for their health and well-being. Late one Sunday night at the end of March, the Massachusetts deputy secretary for Health and Human Services called to tell me about a severe outbreak of COVID-19 at the Soldiers' Home in Holyoke; he needed help immediately and asked if I knew anyone who could do it. I really couldn't think of someone in that moment; he told me to sleep on it, and he would call in the morning. He called at 8 a.m. and said, "The Secretary and I think *you* are the best person for this job. How soon can you get to Holyoke?"

*I knew I had the experience to help.* Yet, in that split second, I was paralyzed with fear. I knew the seriousness of what I had to do and the threat it could pose to my health and to others. But without hesitation, I said, yes, I can help. **Lesson number one: never let fear stand in the way of doing what you know you are capable of.**

There was one hitch. I have an autoimmune condition, so going into a COVID hotspot was probably ill-advised. But it was a calculated risk. As a nurse, I knew how to protect myself and prevent the spread of infection. **Lesson number two: Take calculated risks. Number three: Rely on your education, training, and experience to guide you.**

I remember driving home on the second day of my assignment, my head filled with the awful images, and suddenly I realized I was crying. Just then, the phone rang; it was my 90-year-old father, a Korean War veteran, calling from the rehabilitation facility where he was living temporarily. He couldn't believe what was happening at the Soldiers' Home. I told him I was working hard to help the veterans. "I'm a veteran," he said. "Yes, dad, I know, but you don't have COVID-19. You are safe."

I spent nearly six weeks in Holyoke experiencing firsthand what COVID-19 did to the veterans, their families, the staff, and the Holyoke community. The conditions were so severe that we needed the help of the National Guard. Brigadier General Driscoll was their commander and my partner in coordinating the military and civilian efforts. The General never left my side. When I left Holyoke, I thanked him for being such a good partner, and he told me, "never leave your wingman." **Lesson #four.**

When my assignment was ending, I was tested for COVID-19 and thankfully tested negative. I was relieved and happy, until later that day when I got the call from the rehab facility telling me my dad had tested positive. It seemed like a cruel irony.

He was declining quickly and wanted to die at home. Thankfully, we were able to take him home on hospice. Ten days later, he died peacefully in the company of my brothers and me. I was so grateful to be with him. A privilege that so many families were robbed of during this pandemic.

My father always said he wanted military honors at his funeral, so when the funeral director told me, military honors had been suspended, my heart sank. But I've learned, **never say never**. Remember General Driscoll, who told me never to leave your wingman? He was true to his word and said he could help.

A few days later when my family members and I pulled into the cemetery behind my father's hearse, there were four guardsmen in their dress blues standing at attention...one trumpet player, two for the flag service and General Driscoll who handed me that flag and thanked me for my father's service. I realized how lucky we were.

Had I never gone to Holyoke and developed a relationship with the General, those military honors would not have been possible.

I have just given you **Lessons 5, 6, and 7**: Never say never, relationships are everything, and everything happens for a reason.

There you have it—a few pearls of wisdom from a fellow Lancer.  
Things that I have come to appreciate and live by.

WSU Class of 2020, this is your time. You are ready to start your new journey. Go forward and live it intentionally. *You* are the future of this country.

Take these and all the lessons you have learned and use them to make this world a better place.

Thank you so much for the privilege of being with you today. Congratulations!