



**President Peter Hans Graduation Address  
East Carolina University  
May 7, 2021**

Thank you, Chancellor. I'm delighted that you're now steering this Pirate ship!

It is an honor to be aboard, to bring admiration and good wishes on this hopeful day, to share a moment of joy and optimism with all of you.

But even simpler than that — it is amazing to stand up here and see so many *people* — real human beings! — gathered together.

My goodness, how I've missed moments like this! I know everyone's experience of the past year has been different, but for me it's been almost fourteen months of sitting behind a Zoom screen and working with a handful of masked colleagues. The fact that we're not all in tiny, pixelated boxes seems miraculous to me.

I can only imagine what a long haul it's been for many of you because I've been to this stadium before. I've attended ECU football games and some Greenville tailgates. I know from experience that Pirate Nation does not naturally excel at social distancing.

There is nothing COVID-safe about a proper football weekend in Greenville, and I cannot wait until this stadium is once again packed to the brim with a screaming, cheering sea of purple and gold. Here's hoping many of you will return for those weekends, to make up for some lost time.

Now let's begin by acknowledging the obvious: your last year here at ECU was not the college experience any of you wanted, and not the college experience any of us wanted for you.

But the faculty and staff on this campus have done heroic work so that all of you could keep learning, keep making progress toward graduation, and we owe them our deepest thanks. They treated higher education like the essential work that it is, and that's why all of us are here today.

This has been a year of sacrifices, some small and some big enough to stay with us for a lifetime. People have lost loved ones, lost jobs, lost time with family and friends, missed holidays and birthdays and even Saturday nights on 5th Street. For every single one of us, things have looked different than we hoped and planned, and that's been hard.

But as we gather here today, with vaccines rolling out and the summer stretching before us, I don't think there's ever been a better moment to celebrate new beginnings. I don't think that

any graduating class, certainly not in my lifetime, has had a more profound reason to celebrate, to feel gratitude for those who helped you get here, to look hopefully toward the future.

You made it, and you have arrived at this moment with the hard-earned knowledge that nothing in the world is quite as certain as you'd imagined it to be. We've all seen that there's immense room for things to change — both good and bad — far faster than we'd imagined. That's unsettling, to be sure. But it's also energizing.

I can't predict the future, other than to suggest life is often random and occasionally chaotic. I can't tell you how many conferences or discussion panels I've sat through lately with lots of very smart people who are basically trying to peer into a crystal ball and offer confident prophecies.

I am not going to do that. The future — for the world, for North Carolina, and for you, especially — is gloriously unknowable. It's up for grabs. And no amount of earnest thinking or big-data voodoo will let any of us know for sure what's coming down the bend.

People have been wishing and trying since the dawn of time to get some certainty about the future, and you just can't. But the key thing about the future is that it doesn't just happen to you; you get to shape it. And because of what you've just been through I would argue you are better prepared to shape it. Strength comes from resilience.

ECU was built because North Carolina needed a place like this, a school where talented and ambitious people would come and figure out how they could make the world a little better than they found it. It was built because scrappy, smart people fought for it.

The doctors, nurses, researchers and public health officials who have done such extraordinary work to give us our lives back over the past year — many of them trained right here in Greenville. They didn't know what would be asked of them, had no idea what the future held, but they made themselves ready. And when the world seemed to be spinning out of control, they showed us all that we're not powerless in the face of great forces.

We can do something about it.

The whole point of a public university is that all of you, whatever your chosen path, have important work to do. You all carry the expectations of your state, your fellow citizens, the millions of people who chipped in to build this place because they had faith in your ability to shape our shared fate for the better.



When ECU opened its doors near the start of the last century, no one could imagine what North Carolina was going to look like 113 years later. But they knew we'd be better off if bright and motivated young people had the chance to prepare, so here you are.

When your parents and loved ones sent you off to college just a few years ago and encouraged you along the way, they didn't know what the future held, either. I imagine some of them are still pretty nervous about it. But they had faith in you, so here you are.

There are hundreds of first-generation college graduates among us today, myself included. When you decided to come here, to try something that no one in your immediate family had done before, you didn't know what the future held. You took a leap of faith for the chance to shape a better future, and so here you are.

I put a lot of stock in the serenity prayer, perhaps you've heard it before: God, give me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change; the courage to change the things I can; and the wisdom to know the difference. Serenity is not the same thing as passivity or indifference; it's the discipline of focusing your energy on things that matter.

We've all been through shared, worldwide events that none of us could control. But from here on, you get to make some pretty big decisions about which things in your life you can change, and how you want to spend your time making it happen.

We live in a noisy age. Some of the smartest and richest people in the world create ways to keep you distracted, to keep you keyed up about crazy things happening far away, to make you feel like life is happening someplace else. You're the first generation growing up fully immersed in the technology of mass distraction, and I don't envy you. The 'serenity' part of the serenity prayer is a lot harder in the age of smartphones and social media.

Shaping the world takes curiosity and focus. Curiosity so you can make real decisions about where your attention belongs and focus so you can follow through. Attention and time is your greatest resource, and you only get a limited amount of it. Tomorrow is promised to no one. *Choose* how to spend it, or other people are going to choose for you.

For example, if you're ignoring this speech right now to talk to the person next to you, to feel some joy at the sight of this crowd or daydream about the party tonight — well, good for you! Those are all fine reasons to tune me out, and I salute you.

But if you're looking at your phone, then know this — someone else is deciding how you're spending this moment. Someone else is shaping your world and doing it for their own reasons.



Moments of great upheaval can make you feel powerless — or they can give you the courage to live well, to focus on the things you can change. You are, now and forever, the pandemic class of 2021, the generation that will remember masks and lockdowns and the weird mix of exhausted euphoria that followed.

What that means to you, what you do with it from here, really is up to you. That's up to you...

Go get 'em Pirates! Raise the skull and crossbones and give no quarter to life's challenges!  
Thank you, and congratulations!