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To the Class of 2020,

Congratulations! You made it. You made it to your graduation scattered around the globe, taking classes remotely in your pajamas, and missing your friends and instructors. You made it under unprecedented conditions, and yours is the first commencement in the history of the university that we are celebrating virtually. And you made it.

I'm Anne Curzan, Dean of LSA. I wish we could all be together in the Big House, in our fancy regalia. It is traditional for the LSA Dean to give a commencement address there, and I am honored today to congratulate you on behalf of my LSA faculty colleagues. We have taught you and learned from you and been honored to spend time with you during your years in LSA. You have inspired us with your drive and your ideas. This is a very special moment in your lives—and it is special for everyone who loves and cares about you. You are now a college graduate, and you get to own that accomplishment and that distinction for the rest of your life.

Now being the responsible dean that I am, I started drafting a commencement address for you in late February, before the COVID-19 pandemic. And being the experienced teacher of writing that I am, I regretfully threw that draft away—just as I tell students they must be willing to do—because it wasn't right for you. I want to talk to you, Class of 2020, as you graduate at this pivotal moment in this country's and our world's history.

As some of you know, I'm trained as a linguist, and one of the things I do every year is vote on the word of the year for the American Dialect Society. There are already many contenders, including COVID-19 and coronavirus (sometimes known as "the rona"), social distancing, PPE, self-quarantine, zoom-bombing, and more creative blends that probably won't win such as covidiot (for the person hoarding needed supplies) and quarantini (for the drink you make from whatever you have available at home in quarantine).

Now these words surely do capture much about 2020 so far, but they don't capture you. When I think about the class of 2020, the words on my mind are resilience, care for each other and this remarkable place we call LSA, and commitment to your education. You all have grit, and you can know that as you hit the challenges ahead. What I have also seen is the generosity with which you have approached your instructors and your peers as we figured out how to move into this weird remote world of teaching and learning and work. When the going got tough, you were tough, and you were also patient and compassionate.

You are graduating at a time of great uncertainty, and I'm not going to pretend that this situation isn't hard. But I also believe that as an LSA graduate, your liberal arts and sciences education has prepared you perfectly for the work ahead.

COVID-19 is the kind of complex problem that demands the very mindset and skills you have been cultivating these past few years. You have learned to ask the hard questions that no one else at the table seems to be asking, to empathize with people whose perspectives and experiences are very different from your own, to test ideas with science and rigor, and to trust that more minds working together will be more creative. As a result, you know how to find unexpected solutions that stick. The work ahead starts with being able to imagine a world based on some different premises, where we commit to the deep, patient work of better understanding the world and one another. You have been trained to do this.

We will need solutions to many problems, both global and local. I have every confidence in you as the people who are going to help us solve those. In the optiMize program, which is housed in LSA and was created by two LSA graduates who decided to help their peers create positive social change, the mantra is "Why not me?" I hope that as you find the problems that call to you for solutions, that give you a sense of purpose, you will ask, "Why not me?" We need it to be you.

So I hope you will trust yourself and your education to ask the hard questions that you don't hear being asked enough and advance creative solutions about how we can collectively take better care of each other and the planet. COVID-19 has been disruptive, and I hope that our response to it can be healing, compassionate, and connective.

To the Class of 2020: I am so deeply proud of what you have accomplished, and I couldn't be more excited to see all that you will achieve. My colleagues and I welcome all that you bring. We need you. Congratulations. And forever Go Blue!