

Mr. Chair

Mr. President

Distinguished Guests

Members of the Platform Party

Graduates

Ladies and Gentlemen

And everyone watching the Live Video Stream who couldn't be here today

I promise to be short. We've all waited anxiously for this moment, but now I know we're all anxiously waiting to move on.

I truly appreciate the opportunity to speak to you all today. In my non-student life, I work at a university, and every year I volunteer as a marshal at our convocation. I'm used to being on the other side of the program, pinning hoods on students and hoping they stay in alphabetical order. I've always enjoyed convocation for the joy and excitement that fills the room when so many graduating students get together, and I admit I've been curious how it would feel to gather a bunch of distance education students for the same purpose. Would the same energy be there when most of the students have never met each other before? Now, I can't speak for everyone graduating today, but speaking for myself, I have to say that it feels pretty awesome.

Today is the culmination of years of work for us. It's a time for celebration, but I'm sure I haven't been the only one thinking, what next? I thought that the absence of course work would leave a huge void in my life, that there would be time needing to be filled with something else.

Surprisingly, it hasn't been that way, and I can't help but wonder why. When school has seemed such a huge part of my life over the last few years, why don't I have too much time on my hands? This turned my thoughts to what else we as distance students have been going through.

In the last years, while engaged in our studies, we've cared for our families. Many of us have spouses, children, or other dependents. All of us are sons or daughters. With family comes great reward but also responsibility, and there have been times when family has had to take priority.

We've worked. Full-time, part-time, casually, frantically, we've worked to pay the mortgage, to buy kids' shoes, and maybe in those rare moments between courses to go to a movie. For most of us, working has been a necessity, not a choice.

We've been part of the world. We've helped a neighbor, volunteered on a committee, done a favour, all of those little parts of living that can add up to a significant amount of time.

And we've experienced life-changing events. We've married, divorced, moved homes, changed jobs. We've welcomed new family members and mourned the loss of others. We've wrestled with illness, lived in a depressed economy, and seen the end of Lost.

Already this seems like a lot to juggle, but we've managed these commitments while managing our studies, and what I've discovered is that there isn't a huge hole in my life because taking my degree by distance let me fit school in around everything else I had going on. Distance education let me maintain my own priorities and commitments.

Sure, there were times when an assignment was due and school took a higher priority, but even then, studying by distance gave me the flexibility to always prioritize my family. My autistic son in meltdown can't wait, but my instructors here always understood that a paper could. As a distance education institution, Athabasca understands that we have chosen to study by distance for a reason, to be with family, to maintain a job, or to stay in a community where we can afford to live, so Athabasca has allowed us all to live first and study second.

This might seem like an odd way to run a university, but in allowing us freedom and control over our academic progress, Athabasca has helped us develop a skill that, I think, is even more important than the content we learned in class. How many of you have had a friend, family member, co-worker, or random stranger on the bus say something like, "You're getting your degree by distance? I could never do that. I just don't have the self-discipline." Willpower, determination, focus, self-direction, whatever word you want to use, by getting to this day, where we gather to share in the successful completion of our studies, we've mastered a skill far more valuable than we may realize. Yes, we're all eager for the ceremony to end and to go eat free

food--after all, we are students, right?--but take a moment before you go home to look around this place and to think about what got you here. The support of family, friends, instructors, and others was invaluable along the way, but none if it would have made a difference if you hadn't acted on their encouragement. You got yourself here, and that same skill will take you anywhere you want to go next.

From the other side of the ceremony as a marshal, I always thought the excitement was about being done. Now I know that being done is certainly part of it, but excitement over what comes next is part of it too, and in today's constantly changing world, I honestly believe we have an advantage over our peers who are convocating from traditional face-to-face institutions. So many of them said they couldn't do what we have done. I say, if we can do this when so many others couldn't, think of what else we can accomplish.

On behalf of everyone graduating today, those here and those watching from home, I'd like to thank all who contributed to today's ceremony. What a wonderful way to experience student life on campus. Thank you to our professors, tutors, support staff, and fellow students who helped us and challenged us along the way. Nowhere else could we have gained so much. To my fellow graduates, congratulations on your achievements, and I would encourage you to maintain your ties to Athabasca. Visit a social café in Moodle or wander the new Athabasca Landing social network. As AU's newest alumni, we have a lot of experience to share with those still working towards their convocation day. Finally, to our family and friends who have made sure we didn't feel alone while studying in isolation, thank you isn't nearly strong enough to show our gratitude. I hope we make you proud.

Thank you.