

# Class of 2021 Celebrates Hybrid Commencement

*May 20, 2021* / By [Lou Cortina](#)

The [University of Maryland, Baltimore](#) (UMB) celebrated Commencement in a fitting way this year, as its seven schools mixed virtual events and small, in-person gatherings to honor a Class of 2021 that has persevered to graduate amid the COVID-19 pandemic. On the Universitywide level, the theme was clear: Many of us have been apart for much of the past 14 months, but UMB always comes together to improve the human condition and serve the public good.

Rather than leading the annual Universitywide ceremony at Royal Farms Arena, canceled for the second year in a row because of COVID-19 safety protocols, UMB President **Bruce E. Jarrell, MD, FACS**, donned his graduation regalia and spoke from Leadership Hall in the Medical School Teaching Facility as the centerpiece of a 17½-minute video celebrating the Class of 2021.



[\(Watch video above.\)](#)



*Francis King Carey School of Law Dean Donald B. Tobin, JD, shares a moment of fun with a Class of 2021 graduate.*

“It is certainly unfortunate that you’re not walking across that stage today,” Jarrell said in addressing the graduates. “I feel your pain, to not be here in person to receive your diploma. But it’s not the act of walking across that stage that defines you or your career. That is just one more step in your career, the end of one more chapter. I’m sure and confident that your studies have prepared you to go forth and write that next chapter.

“Our Maryland community and the world could not be more ready for you to get started. The challenges that we face are daunting, but I’m confident that you will face them head-on with confidence in your abilities, and with an eye toward the future. The entire UMB family, your families, and the state of Maryland are very proud of you and your accomplishments.”

Before Jarrell spoke, members of a Lutherville, Md., family — Swiatoslaw Kuznik, Aneta Otreba, and their son, Mark Kuznik — performed “Pomp and Circumstance: March No. 1” with cello and violins inside Health Sciences Research Facility III. After Jarrell spoke, members of the Hippocratic Notes, an a cappella group from the [School of Medicine](#),

sang the national anthem while physically distanced and standing in front of historic Davidge Hall.

### **Greetings from Governor and Chancellor**

Next up was Gov. Larry Hogan, who extended congratulations on behalf of the state of Maryland as “you begin the next exciting chapter of your lives.”

“When history looks back on this year’s graduates, you will often be remembered for your earning your degree in the shadow of a global pandemic,” he said. “Normal life came to a screeching halt over the past year and forced all of us to pause and reflect on the things that truly matter. Staying apart from friends and family reminded us how much we depend on and need each other to get through the hard times.

“Fortunately, now we are so close to that light at the end of the tunnel when we can put this pandemic behind us. And while we know that we can never reclaim the time we’ve lost, I hope that as you graduate today, you remember that each of us can make the days ahead count that much more.”

Jarrell introduced a video presentation from Jay A. Perman, MD, the chancellor of the University System of Maryland, who noted it was “so nice to be home again,” alluding to his nearly 10-year tenure as UMB president before Jarrell assumed the office in 2020.

“I know that nothing you’ve endured throughout this COVID year has been easy,” Perman told the graduates. “Given the incredible challenges and uncertainty you faced, I’m awed by your persistence and flexibility, your grit and determination. What you’ve accomplished this year, of all years, is amazing, and I know that the same qualities that got you through these months of turbulence will propel you through a lifetime of work that truly makes a difference.

“A crisis like this is a crucible that tests you but also gives you your greatest reward. And that reward is the knowledge that you are who we need — leaders with your talent, your skill, your character, your compassion.”

### **Resilience and Inspiration**

**Nivedita Hegdekar**, president of the University Student Government Association, a student in the [Graduate School](#), and a Class of 2021 graduate of the [Francis King Carey School of Law](#), congratulated graduates and praised them for their resilience in the face of COVID-19.

“You navigated the hurdles of online learning, multiple Zoom meetings, online finals, personal hardships, and so much more,” she said. “These were challenges that none of you signed up for, yet you persevered and succeeded. You not only showed personal resilience, compassion, and strength of character, but you also supported one another and the UMB community.

“The Class of 2021 proved that through hard times, you can still complete your education and follow your dreams. You inspire all of us.”

The presentation ended with a five-minute video recapping UMB's response and recovery efforts as the University adjusted to a "new normal" starting in March 2020 when the pandemic unfolded: the switch to telework, volunteers sewing face masks to support hospital personnel, the Food for Our Front Lines campaign that provided free meals to front-line workers, the Community Engagement Center giving food and support to West Baltimore families, and, of course, the massive efforts to test for the virus, conduct vaccine trials, and distribute vaccines.

The video ended with inspirational words about UMB and its response to the pandemic:

"We adapted. We overcame. And what changed as a result of COVID-19 has only made UMB stronger and more efficient. There is no going back to the way things were. We're beyond that. We will keep moving forward, assured that what we've achieved has only made us more focused and more dedicated than ever to our mission. Together, we will continue to persevere. Together, we will always adapt. Together, we will never give up.

"UMB ... together."

Elsewhere around the University:

### **School of Nursing**

In a virtual ceremony, **Jane M. Kirschling, PhD, RN, FAAN**, the Bill and Joanne Conway Dean of the University of Maryland School of Nursing (UMSON), recognized the extraordinary dedication of the school's graduates whose time at UMSON was capped by the pandemic, with some choosing an early exit option or to volunteer in other capacities to immediately help the front-line needs brought on by COVID-19. Kirschling said the graduates "have my deepest respect" for their efforts in balancing school, work, families, and the pandemic.

"The events of the past 14 months, our national and global struggles to combat COVID-19 give additional meaning to this dedication," Kirschling said during a virtual ceremony that combined live and prerecorded remarks. "It is a reminder that nursing does not have the opportunity to pick and choose its moments of service, but rather it must always be on the ready to respond."

Student speaker and Doctor of Nurse Practice graduate **Henry Eromosele Inegbenosun, BSN, RN, DNP**, echoed the dean's remarks about graduating during a pandemic.

"Every crisis has its heroes. Firefighters race into burning buildings. Soldiers and police officers place themselves in the line of fire. During times of fear and uncertainty, the world called, and nursing answered," he said.

Eromosele Inegbenosun also told his fellow graduates to remember the journey during these tumultuous times both before and during the pandemic, with some leaving families, others leaving jobs behind, and many experiencing hardships to make their education possible, including himself.

“Not many little boys from Lagos, Nigeria, have the opportunity to reach what I have accomplished today: a Doctor of Nurse Practice degree as a family nurse practitioner,” he said. “Throughout my program, I had to consider various life decisions: contemplating if I should pay for rent, put food on the table, or pay for school. But with the passion for knowledge and the love of wisdom, my nursing education won every time. I overcame the social determinants most only considered in theory.”

## Graduate School

In a prerecorded ceremony for its doctoral degrees, the University of Maryland Graduate School dedicated more than an hourlong video to personal messages from graduates’ mentors, giving viewers a chance to learn about their detailed research and accomplishments.

**Gerardo R. Vasta, PhD**, professor of microbiology and immunology at UMSOM, introduced the first graduate, **Kelsey Abernathy**, whose research focused on the opposite roles of zebrafish galectins in attachment and infection by the infectious hematopoietic necrosis virus. She graduated with a doctoral degree in marine, estuarine, and environmental science, and Vasta noted that she multitasked by supervising student interns the laboratory, serving as a teaching assistant, and co-founding a startup company, AlgenAir.

“Kelsey has been a dedicated and hardworking member of our research team and is known to everyone as a committed team player,” Vasta said. “These findings are highly relevant to how viruses have evolved to subvert the immune defenses of the host. It will open new evidence for interventions of viral disease not only in aquaculture but also in veterinary and human medicine.”

*Charles Schelle contributed to this article.*

*(Read more about [Commencement](#) and UMB’s [honorary degree recipients](#).)*