

## UNIVERSITY OF MONTANA COMMENCEMENT

### Keynote Address

**William A. Franke**

**Chairman of the Board, Frontier Airlines**

I am honored to be here with you to commemorate the end of the mind-bending journey taken by the classes of 2020 and 2021. Each of you has followed a totally unprecedented path leading to this day. The fact that you're here in caps, gowns and masks, about to cross this stage to accept your diplomas, is hard to grasp.

Just 15 months or so ago, you were cruising into the home stretch, ready to take the victory lap of your senior year. Then a deadly virus began spreading, one droplet at a time, until the COVID-19 global pandemic effectively shut the world down. In short order, your academic experience was disrupted. You were sent home. In-person learning was replaced by Zoom sessions from your apartment – or worse, from your parents' basement. Many of you lost the part-time jobs that were helping to keep you in school. You entered a year of quarantines, social distancing, infinite disinfectants, toilet paper-hoarding and self-administered haircuts.

Study abroad plans were scuttled. Academic competitions were cancelled. There was no Foresters Ball. No law students kidnapping Bertha the stuffed moose head. No Spring break. No group hikes to the "M" or group floats down the Clark Fork. No Griz beat-downs of those slower, weaker and obviously much less attractive Montana State Bobcats.

Probably most importantly, you missed out on time spent with your friends and fellow students, complaining about projects, solving problems and sharing ideas and experiences. You missed out on much of the gusto and glory that a senior year is supposed to be about.

But despite all the roadblocks and detours, you remained dialed-in and persistent in pursuit of your academic goals. Studies and statistics show beyond a doubt that when students choose to withdraw even temporarily from college, they're significantly less likely to earn their degrees. But, despite these historically difficult circumstances, you did whatever it took to complete your education. Congratulations!

Every one of us had challenges to deal with during the pandemic, and combined with the long-term isolation, it was easy to become completely consumed by our individual problems. But you rose above your own challenges to show empathy and support for each other as well as your faculty. Your willingness to help others while facing your own challenges demonstrated the kind of strength of character that can't just be learned in a classroom.

Achieving your academic goals also required you to learn how to adapt and overcome an unanticipated series of inescapable setbacks. And that's a lesson many people spend their lives learning. So I'd say you're already way ahead of the real-world's rather substantial learning curve.

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Now that we can see the light at the other end of our quarantine tunnel, we're looking for answers to some important questions. Not the least of which is: What is a post-COVID world going to look like for someone who's ready to start their career?

Perhaps the most obvious impact of COVID-19 on the labor force has been the dramatic increase in employees working remotely. Companies have learned that, in many cases, it's less expensive and more efficient to move people out of their cubicles and into their living rooms. It's been estimated that as much as 25 percent of the workforces in advanced economies now could perform the majority of their work from home or other remote locations -- that's four to five times more remote work than before the pandemic.

The shift to remote work, and an accompanying increase in automation, could have a domino effect across the economy. For example, labor demand may decline over the long term in some industries. Large amounts of work could migrate out of large cities and into suburbs and smaller cities. Fewer workers in urban areas could decrease demand for restaurants, retail and public transportation. Commercial properties will likely sit vacant as companies downsize space.

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So even as we begin to figure out just what the new normal is going to be, the impact of COVID-19 will continue to be felt throughout our economy. And as the global pandemic has reminded us, we don't live behind a fence. What happens in one corner of the world affects every other corner of the world.

About 80 percent of you come from right here in Montana. And some of you have never lived or worked outside of this amazing state. Here at UM, you've been exposed to the idea that you're part of a global community. And it's now more important than ever to understand how the world impacts you – and how you can impact the world.

Thanks to ever-increasing reliance on production and markets across borders, the world has never been smaller. Internationalization has produced a hyper-connected global economy.

Internationalization creates emerging markets as well as career opportunities. Virtually any career you choose to pursue will be impacted by internationalization. It's hard to think of a sector that doesn't face a globalized perspective. Even if you never leave Montana you will likely find that your value to the job market is enhanced by an ability to engage with people from different countries, cultures and perspectives.

The University of Montana excels at preparing students to address issues that transcend borders. Here, you've acquired tools and learned skills that make you competitive not just in this region but around the world.

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And, more than ever, it's a world in need of global solutions as we move to a greener economy. You're entering the workforce just as we've reached a tipping point in human history.

Your generation is about to inherit a world in which every living system is in some state of change. It's a world that needs new, sustainable ideas and solutions. And it needs them now. Climate change, deforestation, drought, hunger, homelessness and countless more crises are bearing down on us at an alarming rate.

Addressing the world's greatest challenges will require a transition to an economy that's more sustainable on a global scale. New markets, new businesses and new jobs will emerge as we move toward a greener economy. Sustainable practices and companies have already added tens of millions of new jobs and this number will keep growing as we continue to invest in renewable energy and a low-carbon economy. But skills shortages are currently holding back the development of green sectors, green occupations and green enterprises across the economy.

The University of Montana was committed to sustainability for at least a century before sustainability was even a thing. The experience and perspective that you've acquired here will be invaluable as companies race to compete in the green marketplace.

It would be difficult not to agree that the world is changing. Don't fear that change. Be part of it. Capitalize on it. Cause it.

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The classes of 2020 and 2021 are about to take on challenges the likes of which have been unseen since the Great Depression and the post-World War II period. I'm sure you are ready. We need you to be ready.

As you sit here today in the Last Best Place, you have what you need to succeed. And then some. More so than any recent class of graduates, your learning experience has been enriched by your life experience. The ability to overcome the challenges you've encountered through perseverance, grit and resilience are assets that will serve you well in the professional world as well as in life. And, the perspectives you've gained here in Missoula will help keep you balanced when the world shifts under our feet again, as it inevitably will.

University of Montana graduates, you have reached the end of one extraordinary path and the beginning of another. I wish you happiness and success on the incredible journey that lies ahead.

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