

I have been teaching an agriculture class with N.C. State University College of Agriculture and Life Sciences Dean Richard Linton for several years now and it is something I enjoy and look forward to. I like sharing some of my experiences with the class and sharing with them the work of the department. I am continually impressed by the students and I am grateful to see future leaders in agriculture

Graduating seniors, whether from high school or college, did not experience a traditional graduation. I dedicate this column to them.

You all are living in an extraordinary moment of history that is challenging us individually, as a state, as a nation and globally.

We **WILL** emerge from this pandemic, having made big and small sacrifices, having adjusted to new normals and having learned many valuable lessons.

We are fighting something we cannot see, with a playbook that does not exist.

In the end, I hope we can all look back and collectively say we have done the very best we can.

I know you are disappointed not to go to a formal graduation ceremony, but I want to share a secret with you.

I never went to one – not because of a pandemic, but because I had crops to plant and needed to be home to work.

I know it disappointed my parents because they invested so much in my education, but in the long run I don't think it had any bearing on my success or failures.

Do the very best you can. That attitude will serve you well for other challenges that you will encounter in life.

Work hard and be nimble and willing to adjust based on the obstacles in your path.

What you have learned in school provides a foundation for where you can go. What you learn in life and through events like this one, will help determine your future success.

One of the things I have seen time and time again from this pandemic is the resiliency of our farmers and those in the food supply chain.

I have seen farmers with crops ripening in the field, adjust their operations to meet social distancing measures and CDC guidance. Farmers markets offering drive-thru service or boxes of produce; pick-your-own farms alternating rows to ensure people stay safe distances apart.

I have seen food processors who have lost their restaurant customers, adjust to offer bulk sales directly to individual customers.

And restaurants shift to providing curbside pick-up or delivery to remain open and provide for their customers.

My point is, this pandemic has forced us all to be adaptive and innovative. Sometimes doing what you have always done is just not possible. So, look at ways to do things better, more efficiently or with new tools.

Technology will only continue to advance, offering new possibilities that will no doubt force us to be more innovative and adaptive.

As you prepare to take the next steps in life, I challenge you not to focus on what you have lost in this moment, but instead look at what you have been given.

This time is helping prepare you for whatever comes your way. This pandemic is one of the biggest challenges I have ever experienced in my lifetime. And, YOU will be able to learn from it now. This class is already a step ahead.

I want to challenge you to do whatever you choose in life with passion and purpose.

I knew when I went to college that I wanted to be a farmer. I learned everything I could at school and set off making my dream a reality.

If you have a real passion for what you do, your work will never seem like just a job. Success comes from the work you are willing to put in, the determination you have and the drive to achieve.

You have been tested by unimaginable circumstances, but you have stuck with it and are stepping forward. Now it is time to make a difference.

Remember the time, effort and energy that others have invested in you and work to make them proud. If you do that, you will never go wrong. Congratulations again to you all.