Commencement Presidential Address
1:30 p.m. Commencement Ceremony - December 13, 2003

"One Last Lesson: Challenged to Learn"
David L. Eisler, President

As graduates you represent the collective hopes and dreams of our institution. Each of us at Ferris State University, faculty, staff, administration, and yes, fellow students, look to you as the result of our collective efforts. In some ways this occasion feels similar to the emotion one sometimes experiences as a parent at graduations, weddings, and when someone is leaving home to set out on their own. These are major crossroads that help define life. As a parent, friend, colleague, and yes, as teacher, you look at someone that you've tried to help guide, grow, and evolve and wonder if you've done enough, if there is some last piece of information or advice that you might give that might make a difference. Is there something that you've forgotten to say or do that will help.

In those situations one looks into the eyes of that student and discovers that they've changed. A relationship that has been defined as teacher and student has become one of friend and colleague. However I hope you'll forgive me if in the spirit of the academy and as an expression of our University's hopes for you, if I try to deliver one piece of advice, something I've entitled "One Last Lesson: Challenged to Learn." And if you wondered, in the best academic tradition, yes there is a colon in that title.

An educated life is about learning and learning doesn't just happen in books or in classrooms. It happens in our interactions with others and in places we might never imagine. One never knows when there will be a teachable moment, but if we are observant, listen carefully, and are thoughtful, these occasions abound. I had such a moment yesterday.

Each of you has overcome significant challenges as you have worked toward this day of achievement. Over the next few moments I'd like you to think about those challenges as I share with you the college experience of one of your fellow graduates who I met yesterday. As an older student this person started back to school seven years ago. Beginning classes she discovered that she read poorly, barely at the junior high level. This reading difficulty resulted from a learning disability where she could not recall words or their meanings. She had an excellent job, didn't need college to have a financially secure future, and could easily have stepped away from her studies. No one would have blamed her had she decided college was too hard and demanding.

Instead she sought help from developmental teachers and the disabilities office, and did more than persevere, she triumphed. Today she graduates not just with a Bachelor of Science Social Work degree, she also graduates with 3.7 grade point average. After retiring from a thirty-year career as a custodian at Ferris State University, she now joins the ranks of our alumni and graduates. It is my honor to present to you LaVina Albright, class of 2003.
LaVina next plans to write a book on her experiences, to help others that might face challenges similar to hers. She is my hero, a person who exemplifies the triumph of the human spirit against insurmountable odds.

On behalf of our University I wish you great success, meaning and fulfillment. I would suggest that you consider this simple lesson taught to me this past week. As each of you sets out on the next step in your life and career you will face times of challenge, heartbreak, and disappointment. In those times when you might consider giving up, I'd encourage you to remember LaVina Albright and her determination to succeed as a student here at Ferris.

Congratulations and best wishes to the Class of 2003.