Thank you so very much for the opportunity to be with you today. It is very special to be able to share this moment with you, when we celebrate your success and achievement. As graduates you represent the collective hopes and dreams of this institution. Each of the faculty, staff, administration, and yes, fellow students, look to you as the result of their collective efforts.

In some ways for me 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?

My experience in those situations is that one looks into the eyes of that student and discovers that they’ve changed and that a relationship that has been defined as teacher and student has become one of friend or colleague.

Over my career I have worked with many students, but I remember particularly the story of one student determined to find that first position after college. Although his resume stretched several pages in length, in reality this spoke of potential rather than experience. This student received rejection letter after rejection letter, and in the job search process met with disappointment and discouragement. Fifty-five letters of application were rejected, sometimes the treatment was brutal. I want to share with you some thoughts learned from that experience, thoughts that may be useful for your future. Four ideas this person found as core values when faced with bitter disappointment.

**Develop A Passion for Excellence**

Whatever your future may be, I urge you to develop a passion for excellence. I truly want you to be the best, not in terms of competing against others, but rather from measurement against yourself and your potential. I select the word excellence rather than perfection, because life is rarely, if ever, perfect and part of success is getting things done. You have been given a wonderful brain and
as educators we have done our best to help you use it. Become an effective thinker. Practice something I call “breakthrough thinking,” that’s where you combine intellect, creativity, and analysis to develop a new approaches to persistent problems.

In your life you will seek success, but must learn to embrace failure. It will be one of life’s lessons that you can learn much from failure. Along your path there will be opportunities for shortcuts. While this may seem to work for others, I believe there are few silver bullets in life, magical cures for challenges. A passion for excellence will help you develop the character to sustain your life’s loftiest ambitions, and attributes like hard work, commitment, deliberation and self sacrifice are all a part of striving to be the best.

Learn to Work with Others

Whatever future you choose, much of your success will depend upon your ability to work with others. Unless you choose to live your life as a hermit or never grow beyond self absorption, life is ultimately about others. How do you empower those around you? One of the measures I look for in working with teams is the transition from you, to we, to I. Allow me to explain... In ineffective groups, I frequently hear one person saying to the team, “You should...” In essence we look for someone else to do the work. With proper guidance and encouragement, these statements can move to, “We should...” Through growth we have begun to look at how our combined efforts can work toward a shared goal. The most effective groups I hear occasions where someone will move one step further, stating, “I can...” Here individuals assume responsibility for the group’s success, contributing time and talents where they are best used.

I suggest you begin not just by treating everyone as equal, but believing that they are. Adopt the Golden Rule, to treat others as you would have them treat you. Instead of telling people what to do, consider asking more often, “How may I help you?” Learn to encourage and trust others. In trusting, think of the gardener who plants a seed, trusting that it will grow. What would be their success if they dug it up every few days to see how it was growing?

Keep Learning

Have a passion for learning. Be intrigued my new ideas, new approaches, and new possibilities. Without question the key to learning is to learn to listen. There is so much you can learn from others, if you will just give them this opportunity.
There is a Hindu legend that at one time men and women knew everything. However they misused this knowledge and used it against others. To punish them the gods took knowledge away from people. A discussion then ensued about where the knowledge should be hidden. One suggested that knowledge be buried deep under the earth, but someday man would dig down and find it. Another suggested deep in the ocean, but someday man would swim down and find it. A third suggested it be placed on the highest mountaintop. Here too, man would reach up and find it. Ultimately it was decided to place knowledge inside people, because that would be the last place they would likely to find it.

There is so much to learn from listening and observing. Mentors and role models are everywhere; learn from their experience. When one speaks, two words are most important, “Thank you.” Give credit to others for help, assistance, and success. Take the “I’s” out of your sentences. After those first two words, the second three are, “It’s my fault.” One of my mentors taught me an important lesson. His words, “If you take responsibility when things go wrong, some day you will be.”

Know Who You Are

Can you answer the question, “Who are You?” Take a moment and consider this. In the final analysis, who we are communicates far more eloquently than anything we do or say. Ultimately a life spent making a difference is much more than your career and professional success. A measure of your personal effectiveness will be found in the relationships you create and sustain. Achieving a balance among your career, your family, and your friends is one of the keys to happiness. Helping others is a shallow existence if it is only an approach for the workplace and does not extend to those you love and cherish.

As you consider and create your future I hope you’ll retain an insatiable curiosity for the present and an unshakeable hope for the future. In this vision for the future, don’t be afraid to dream about the limitless possibilities you can create through the lives that you touch through this journey. See this as a shared rather than solitary experience, seeking to include rather than exclude those that truly matter to you. You yourself have already been a beneficiary of the support of so many – family, friends, teachers, and others, who provided assistance, not asking what they would receive in return. This life’s lesson is that satisfaction comes not from what we receive, but rather from what we give. I urge you to give generously of yourself.
Closing Thoughts

As each of you sets out on the next step on your life and career you will face time of challenge, heartbreak, and disappointment. I would encourage you to keep these thoughts in mind -

- Develop a passion for excellence
- Learn to work with others
- Keep learning
- Know who you are

Let me return to the story of that young student I mentioned earlier. You may recall that 55 letters of application met with rejection. Finally his persistence did pay off. His 56th application was for a teaching position at a small state university in Alabama. Seeking to get his foot in the door, he called the dean there, said he would be nearby and wanted to interview for the job. While this might never happen today, the dean agreed and hired the student on the spot, who finally found success after 55 failures.

I know that story well because 30 years ago I was that student. The dean was a legendary Alabama educator, John M. Long. I had the opportunity to work for him for 15 years and he influenced my life in ways I could never have imagined. And for me the ultimate honor was that he and his wife, Mary Lynn, drove to Big Rapids and attended my inauguration at Ferris State University.

Pause for just this brief second, consider this achievement and gather all the emotions of this moment. In those times when you face failure and might consider giving up, remember today’s spirit of achievement and to draw upon that passion for excellence.

I wish you great success, meaning and fulfillment – a life that truly does make a difference. Congratulations and best wishes.