Thank you so very much for the opportunity to be with you this evening. It is always wonderful to recognize such an extraordinary group of students. 4.0!! We are honored that you chose Ferris State University for your education and I want to offer my personal congratulations to you on your success.

We need to begin by taking a moment to honor your parents. I am so delighted they can be with you this evening and want them to stand so we can express our thanks them for the meaningful difference they have made in your lives.

Parents would you please stand? As a parent I understand how incredibly proud you are of your student and how much his or her success means to you.

Students, tonight I would like to share with you some thoughts on success. As you consider your many successes as a student at Ferris State University I would like you to consider what success really means to you. I intend to ask you about your thoughts regarding success. Knowing the type of enterprising, hard working students you are, that anticipate rather than react to assignments, you can start preparing your answers now.

Dare to Dream

When one thinks of your success there is little failure to be seen. I look at what you have accomplished and at the same time want you to go beyond what you may consider possible, to dream and do great things. You are among the very best students at our University. My guess is that your parents never received a teacher report like one of these -

“...as a seven year school boy this young man is hopeless. His brain is addled and it is useless for him to attend school.”

“...although he has had only four months of school, he is very good with studies, but is a daydreamer and asks foolish questions.”

“...[he] is a unique member of the class. He is ten years old and is only just beginning to read and write. He shows signs of improving, but you must not set your sights too high on him.”

“...[he] is a very poor student. He is mentally slow, unsociable, and is always daydreaming. He is spoiling it for the rest of the class. It would be best if he were removed from the school at once.”
Who was that hopeless 7-year-old boy with the addled brain? – Thomas Edison, inventor of the phonograph, the light bulb, motion pictures, and the holder of 1,093 patents.

Who was doing well with studies after 4 months of school, but daydreamed and asked foolish questions? - Abraham Lincoln, 16th President of the United States, the man many historians consider to be our greatest leader.

Who was 10 years old and only just beginning to show signs of improvement? - The 28th President of the United States, Woodrow Wilson, who also was President of Princeton University.

And who should have been removed from class because he was mentally slow, unsociable, and a very poor student? – Albert Einstein, the father of modern physics and winner of the 1921 Nobel Prize.

If each of these individuals went on to such great success after admitted inauspicious beginnings, what is possible for you?

Make a Difference

I always find inspiration in the words of Martin Luther King who said, “Life’s most persistent and urgent question is, ‘What are you doing for others?’”

As I look around this room I can reflect on the extraordinary way that many of you make a difference from your efforts to help others. I want to encourage you to do even more, to make a profound difference.

Let me give you an example. Recently I was fortunate to attend a meeting of the Grand Rapids Rotary Club where the program was dedicated to organ donation. Seated at my table was a senior from the University of Michigan and his younger brother, a freshman at Western. The older brother had donated bone marrow to his younger brother, not once but twice, saving his life.

Next, two men stood up who were being kept alive by mechanical heart assists that had been implanted in them to help keep them alive and strong until a donor heart could be found for them. I had thought this was the stuff of science fiction and here they were in front of us.

Then they had a woman stand up who worked at Metro Hospital. She had given up one of her kidneys not to a friend or a family member, but to anyone who needed it who lived in the Grand Rapids area. How profound is this, to give up your kidney, perhaps risking your own life, but in that process saving the life of an anonymous stranger.

Don’t give up

Over my career I have worked with many students, but I remember particularly the story of one young man who struggled to find his first position after college. Although his resume stretched
several pages in length, it spoke of potential rather than experience. During his job search he met with disappointment and discouragement. Fifty-six carefully written letters of application were rejected by potential employers. Finally his persistence did pay off. His 57th 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. The dean agreed, interviewed the student, and hired him on the spot.

I know that story well because 31 years ago, almost to this day, 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 me and became a part of my life in ways I could never have imagined. Just as your mentors honor your achievements today, he and his wife, Mary Lynn, attended my inauguration as president at Ferris State University. Their presence was one of the highlights of that day.

Now back to our assignment. I am hoping you have been thinking about how you define success. It is my experience that this can be considered from what you consider important. For me I would suggest five things –

**Family is most important** – Whether it be my parents or our family, they are what’s most important. As a first generation college student, I am so grateful my parents had the dream that I would attend college. They were to sacrifice so this dream became a reality. And if you are fortunate to find a spouse or partner that cares for you more than his or herself, you grow to understand that love is far deeper and powerful than mere physical attraction.

**Love what you do** – When your life’s work is something that you truly love, it will never be work. You shouldn’t dread Mondays or look forward to Fridays. Find a career that you love and pursue it with passion.

**Love to learn** - If you grow to love learning you will discover that life is an adventure. Through this you will develop an insatiable inquisitiveness and curiosity to learn from those around you.

**People are important, things are not** – While it is easy to want bigger, better, and more costly things, they will not bring you happiness. Happiness in life frequently comes from others. Learn to value and celebrate the friends and family you have around you.

**Take care of yourself** – Hopefully you will learn the importance of balance in life and to take care of your body and person. Health is a precious thing, something you may only discover after you have lost it.

So what do you think? What constitutes success for you? I’d like to hear from you. Your assignment is to take a few moments to capture your thoughts on paper and to email your ideas on success to me.

Remember how fortunate we are to live in a country where we are free to choose and where most of us will have the means to not only choose, but to accomplish our choices.
In our lives we will have many choices. I’m reminded of the third Indiana Jones movie, where Indy comes to a room full of chalices and the knight templar encourages him to “choose wisely.”

Choose wisely.

Congratulations and best wishes for your future success.