Triumph over Challenges
Michigan College of Optometry and College of Education and Human Services
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David L. Eisler, president

For every student who crosses our stage today there is a story, a story that includes parents, family and friends who supported them, teachers on all levels who educated, challenged, and prepared them. And, of course, there are the students themselves and their personal commitment, effort and sacrifice, which brought them here today.

In the successes, triumphs, and achievements of these graduates we see our hopes and dreams for the future, a future that is bright and promising and filled with opportunities that are yet to be discovered.

Over the past few weeks I have taken time to visit with our graduates, learning about their experiences and hearing their stories. As I listened, I gained an even deeper appreciation of the students we have at Ferris State University and the power of the educational experience we provide.

For many of our graduates, there have been significant challenges along the way. Life often makes us reconsider our dreams, determine where our passions lead, and push on against adversity. I’m hopeful you can relate to the experiences of our graduates here today who truly have triumphed in this way.

Today we have a father and son graduating together. The father remembers when he began his electrical apprenticeship and the instructor for this telling him that his job was one of the best anyone could imagine. The father began his career as a journeyman electrician and eventually began teaching as an adjunct instructor at Grand Rapids Community College. One day he saw an advertisement for the same job his former instructor held at the Career Technical Center. He took the practical testing for this job, was the only one who qualified, and was hired for the position. But then he needed to earn a bachelor’s degree, an effort he began in 2004 at GRCC, then at Ferris Grand Rapids and finally here in Big Rapids starting in 2009.

Today he graduates as one of 12 in the Pro-Mo-TED program, an innovative approach designed to offer working students the opportunity to earn a Bachelor of Education degree in Technical Education. This is a modularized approach to teacher education that includes intensive direct instruction, on-line education and project-based learning. It is my understanding that we are recognizing twelve students from this cohort today. It is also my understanding that this special graduate plans to continue his education toward a master’s degree.

From middle school on, his son has wanted to become an engineer, and Ferris State University was number one on his list of schools that could help make that dream a reality. Here at Ferris he has majored in Welding Engineering Technology and graduates today with his associate degree. He will be continuing his work toward his bachelor degree here at Ferris.

I am proud to present to you a father and son both graduating today, Tom Medendorp and his son, Jacob. I would ask that they stand and be recognized. I would ask that their family also stand and be recognized.
Our next graduate is the youngest of four children and grew up in Julian, California, near San Diego. At age 3 ½ he lost his hearing through a genetic condition. Both his mother and sister took sign language and provided a foundation of support for him.

Initially he struggled with school because there was no interpreter to assist him. During the 3rd and 4th grade his parents drove him a half-hour to catch a school bus for an additional hour ride to a school where there was an interpreter. This was a turning point for him as he became a good student and continued this success with an interpreter throughout school. In addition to his own improved studies, he began volunteering in his father’s third grade classroom teaching sign language.

When he was a junior in high school, his mother, who had been his main advocate, passed away. Fortunately his father took over this role for him. After graduating from high school he was uncertain about what he wanted to do and attended three different community colleges in this search. A turning point for him came when he joined the group “Up With People,” travelling with them for six months through Europe and Asia. “Up With People” had a relationship with Carroll College in Montana, where he majored in elementary education. At a Christian conference he met students from Ferris State University and decided the recreation management program here sounded more like what he wanted to do. The program was more hands-on and this graduate learns best by doing.

So he moved to Ferris on his own and began his studies here, graduating today with his bachelor degree. He spends his summers working with disabled children, building homes for those in need, and serving the community. He has two dreams. One is to create high-adventure opportunities for those who are deaf or hard of hearing. He also hopes to start a farm for at-risk people so they can learn through real-world experiences by taking care of the animals there.

When this young man arrived for our interview, I wondered how we could communicate, as he did not have an interpreter with him. He read my lips throughout, and we communicated beautifully. This truly is a young man who has triumphed over the challenges life has placed in front of him and who is committed to continually learning. As he himself put it, “Just because you’re graduating does not mean that it’s time to stop learning – the best part is to know how to learn in our new careers.”

Today he thanks his family, father Richard, stepmother Amanda, grandparents and brother John. He also thanks his interpreter, Renita Causey. I am pleased to present to you a remarkable man, Jeffrey Burns, and would ask that he stand. I would also ask his family to also stand and be recognized.

Graduates, on behalf of our University, I wish you great success, meaning and fulfillment. As each of you sets out on the next phase of 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 the examples of Tom Medendorp, Jacob Medendorp, and Jeffrey Burns and their indefatigable determination to succeed.

Congratulations and best wishes, Class of 2012.