Greetings and welcome to graduates, parents, significant others, and honorary guests. It surely is a great honor to be today’s speaker. Even though I am proud to be this year’s distinguished teacher award recipient, I am equally humbled at the same time, especially, when one considers the talented educators who have shared the grace of such an award.

I thank my wife and daughter for their support and strength, they are the source of my inspiration, and they provide relevance to my accomplishments. I also thank the committee for their efforts in this process, I am sure that this was not an easy decision.

The gravity of such an award goes beyond the validation of peers. It also highlights the commitment of every educator within the academic community of Ferris State University. It is a commitment to provide you with an educational experience that is second to none - an educational experience with one purpose, to guarantee the success of our graduates in their chosen professions. Today we celebrate your accomplishment toward this goal.

Graduation is personal to each one of us. For some it marks the culmination of a period of exams and assignments, for others it marks the start of an autonomous career, and perhaps for most, it marks the beginning of paying off your huge student loans. However I would like to appeal to a deeper sense of appreciation for accomplishment today. It is said often (not verbatim): Many of the things that can be counted seldom count, while those that cannot be counted, usually count the most.

So, I will begin my brief talk by asking: What have you gained through this process that cannot be quantified? I pondered these questions myself as I prepared this speech and couldn't help but reflect to the day of my graduation...I remember the thrill and excitement, but little did I realize the impact that this achievement will have on my life as an academic and eye care professional.

I can trace the basis of this impact to 3 factors that formed the driving force within me. These factors are: The need to be empowered, the need to create, recognize and cease opportunities, and lastly, the pursuit of excellence. I will hopefully make the case that these 3 factors will play an important role in your life, and perhaps in the process attempt to address the question what it is that you have gained that cannot be counted.
Let me begin with empowerment. I firmly believe that if you want to create an industrious and autonomous nation, you must empower its people.

Each of you will graduate with a core of knowledge and skill set that is privileged to only to those who have met the high standards and demands of your program. However, what has this imparted to you?

- A type of knowledge and skill set that will make a positive impact on the quality of life of people and communities you serve.
- You have a core of knowledge that will be called upon to seek new and novel solutions to existing and emerging challenges.
- Throughout this process, you have been infused with a consciousness that will determine the future leadership of your professions.

In short, you are EMPOWERED...EMPOWERED with an intellectualism that will continue to grow and evolve well beyond the memories of today. However, the magnitude and quality of its impact will depend on how responsibly you use it.

**What about OPPORTUNITY?** Progress is impossible without the creation of opportunity and ceasing it when it presents itself. In fact, empowerment is weakened, and arguably ineffective, without opportunity.

My life would have been very different were it not for an opportunity that was provided to enter university, and an opportunity to engage in graduate studies. In both cases I was fortunate that somebody acknowledged an inherent potential and fostered this potential by providing me with these opportunities.

In your case, today would have not been possible were it not for an opportunity. An opportunity that was perhaps provided by your parents/ a significant other or a scholarship/ funding by an agency. However, even more important than the source of the opportunity, it was an opportunity that YOU recognized and ceased. Today you celebrate the fruits of pursuing this opportunity.

I would like to appeal to a greater sense of your responsibility. I come from a country which has popularized the term UBUNTU, which roughly translates to “Humanity is a quality we owe to each other”...”or “I am because you are”...essentially it means that the success of each of us, depends on the success and prosperity of those around. Therefore, as you recognize and create opportunities for yourself, I ask of you to create and provide opportunities to those around you. In this way you no only become a benefactor of empowerment through opportunity, but you also become a formidable empowering source to those around you.
This brings me to the last factor that is excellence. Regardless of how many opportunities present or how many empowering experiences there are, it will amount to very little if we do not commit ourselves to the pursuit of excellence. I understand the pursuit of excellence as a state of mind in which we are unwilling to accept mediocrity as an outcome for any endeavor we undertake.

You were not trained to be mediocre, the skills you have are not mediocre, and we hope that we have instilled within you a desire to never accept a mediocre outcome.

Therefore, as you venture forth in your chosen careers, strive to improve and constantly push the envelope. However, I am under no illusion, because the pursuit of excellence will come with it fair share of failure. Yet, the irony is that while success is extremely gratifying, it is failure that teaches us the most important lessons. So never let the threat of failure constrain your ability to explore and experiment with new ideas; “after all if you dare to succeed, then never accept the defeat of failure”!

I hope I made the case that we all share the common threads of empowerment, opportunity and the pursuit of excellence. This is what I think you have gained, more than anything you can imagine, more than anything you can count.

I congratulate you on a job well done, and wish you all the success you desire!

THANK YOU