Thank you, Provost Fleischman, for your kind & generous words. 
Wow! It’s truly an honor and privilege to be invited to give this address. Truth be told, it’s the fulfilment of a lifetime aspiration… Let me take this moment to also thank the Board of Trustees, President Eisler, the DTA Committee, administrators, staff, faculty, friends, and family. I’m also thrilled to extend a warm, bighearted, holiday welcome to the many guests of our graduates. And now…

Good [morning-afternoon] graduating classes of Ferris State University from May 2020 all the way through December 2021! Wow! This is the first time we’ve been able to get together in a couple years. It feels so good to be with you in person.

But wait a minute… Isn’t there something else going on today? I can’t remember… Oh yeah! Our Ferris Bulldog football team is in the D2 National Championship game! So, this event is being live-streamed and recorded. I think we need to start this off by sending the players and coaches a big shoutout of support, don’t you? Alrighty! I’m going to ask you a question that you all know the answer to. I want to hear you loud and proud, all the way down to Texas. Ready? “Who let the dogs out?!”

Alrighty… so, 2020-21?! Whew! Living through the last couple of years reminds me of the well-known joke about the faithfully optimistic little girl who asks for a pony for Christmas. It goes something like this. When she wakes up on Christmas morning, she runs downstairs and goes straight to the tree and finds… a huge pile of manure. But, undeterred, she grabs the little dust shovel from the fireplace and begins enthusiastically shoveling manure. Her parents rush in and say, “What in the world are you doing?” She excitedly replies, “There’s gotta be a pony in here somewhere!”

Now… yes, it’s totally weird that her parents, or Santa, or someone put a huge pile of “duty” under the Christmas tree, right?! But, you gotta love the little girl’s response. Thinking of 2020-21, maybe we can have this same attitude about what we’ve been through, “There’s gotta be a pony in here somewhere!”
One of the things I love about this story is it hints at something really helpful, but even more so, **something really hopeful**. And isn’t that what we need more of nowadays?

*Let me share* with you something that makes me smile and gives me hope. By a show of hands, how many of you have pets? Okay, 1-2-3… I’m guessing around 23. Those little *furrbabies* give us hope, don’t they? Unlike me, they don’t spend time worrying about the future or festering about something silly they did a couple days ago. I’ve got an awesome little *poocharoo* named Cooper, or Coop-sauce, or Coopster, or Gary Cooper, if you’re a pet owner, you know how it goes. Anyway, the other day this actually happened:

My little Cooper *doesn’t like stairs*. We’re the second owners and he was never taught stairs as a lil’ pupster, but he’s totally my shadow, following me everywhere. The other day, I go upstairs and he starts to follow. About five steps from the top, *there’s SHE is*, his frenemy. The beautiful, long-haired, black cat, Miss Binkie Barnes. She’s sprawled all the way across the step, you know, like she owns the place, which she does. He’s climbing up, *gets one step away from her* and has no idea how to proceed. He’s dumbfounded. He goes all the way back down, turns around, looks up, and tries again, stopping one step short of where she’s lounging. He’s so confused, he turns around and goes down again. Third time. He makes his way up. Stops one step short of her. He’s looking around, trying to figure things out, so I give him a little encouragement. “*Come on buddy! You can do it Coop!*” He does this *panicky, darting move past her backside*, but his back leg slips and he steps on the cat’s tail. Binkie screeches and skedaddles down the steps. Cooper meanwhile, *totally freaks out and goes full spread eagle* on the fourth step from the top of the stairs. He’s lying there for second wondering what the heck happened, then gathers himself, and scrambles up the last few steps to safety. He gives me this look, like, “*Whew! That was a close one, Dad!*”

Then he does something *wonderfully mundane* that most of the time goes unnoticed. He does a full-out body shake to get rid of the stress, and then scoots off to go find his ball. Within seconds, he’s forgotten and moved on to better things…, like eating Binkie’s food. These little antics give me hope. What if we could be more like Cooper? I think we can in our own way. I think it starts with a new way of being in this world. Maybe seeing things a little differently.

Sometimes I read poetry to help me see things differently. One of my favorite poets is Mary Oliver. I love her words of hope and inspiration:
“What is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life? Are you willing to be dazzled? To cast aside the weight of facts and maybe even to float a little above this difficult world? To believe?! To know you are looking into the white fire of a great mystery. To believe the imperfections are nothing; that the light is everything; that it is more than the sum of each flawed blossom rising and fading.”

What is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life? Man, I love that. When I ponder that question, here’s what bubbles up in my heart to leave you with as you venture out and carve your own path:

If no one has ever told you before… it’s you! You are the creative spark that can change the world as we know it in a thousand small ways through the very life you live. You are creativity incarnate in this moment as your very self. Your “Yes!” to follow great love’s call is all-and-everything it takes. It’s fundamental. It is your essence. Your being. Your place and space that you cannot lose because it is who you are beyond, under, over, and through it all. A shining spark of perfect inspiration forged in the white fire of love’s desire to know itself, bursting forth as you. The only you there will ever be! Never, ever before seen. Never, ever again repeated. Never, ever found, but in this one place and one time where only you can fulfill its calling.

And so, graduating bulldogs, let me ask you this question from Mary Oliver again: What is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?