

Congratulations! I'm so grateful to stand before you and have the opportunity to be your commencement speaker. The view from here is amazing. This is a wonderful way to cap off an interesting, challenging, and rewarding year as president of the MTSU faculty senate. It's certainly a highlight of my career as a professor to be part of your graduation ceremony.

As faculty senate president over this past year I've seen first-hand how hard members of the university administration work to make sure you get the best education possible. I've seen how much Dr. McPhee cares about your success. I've seen the dedication of the provost, other vice presidents, deans, and all the MTSU staff members who work tirelessly to make sure your experience at MTSU is a great one.

And as a faculty member I certainly know how hard the faculty have worked for you. At various times professors at MTSU have pushed you, cheered you, encouraged you, worried about you, admonished you, occasionally been disappointed in you, and often been amazed by you.

I know you've all worked hard, and as a professor I've seen the many different things that our students push through to get to graduation. I doubt that any of you are sitting here thinking, "Well, that was easy." Some of you have gone to school while working multiple jobs and dealing with financial challenges and stresses. Some of you have wrestled with issues like anxiety and depression. Some of you have had to deal with injuries or illness. Some of you have had to work to improve your English language skills in order to succeed. You have helped take care of parents, siblings, grandparents, and/or

your own children. You've overcome learning disabilities. You've lost loved ones. You've succeeded in balancing an expanding social world with school work – *that's a polite way of saying that some of you had to stop partying and buckle down to graduate* – but you did it!

I have one message for you today that comes in the form of a request. As a graduate of a public university, you have each benefitted from public education. And I today ask that for the rest of your lives you be passionate advocates for and defenders of public education.

I'm here today because of public schools. Both of my parents are from immigrant families. My dad grew up in England and was a little kid during World War II. His earliest childhood memories are of bombings, blackouts, inadequate nutrition,

and most of all fear. Her grew up in public housing. But he got a free education, paid for by the government, from elementary school through a PhD. After graduate school he came to the US for what was meant to be a short visit but ended up being a long stay. He never became a US citizen, but became a research scientist and taught medical school in Virginia for several decades before moving to Canada where he lives now. Among the many lessons I've learned from my dad is that you do not have to be a US citizen to love America or to contribute to this country.

My mom was born into an immigrant family in New York. She was born shortly after my grandparents arrived here from Italy. My grandparents eventually learned some English but honestly not very much. My mom grew up bilingual. When Mom was a little kid they were desperately poor. They lived in

a tiny, crowded apartment that shared a toilet with several other families on the same floor. But like my dad, my mom got to go to school for free. She went to New York city public schools and then to the City College of New York. She never paid a dime – tuition at City College was free back then. Then she got a scholarship to get a PhD, this time at a private university. She became a scientist, a professor, finally an administrator at the National Institutes of Health and the US Department of Energy.

In contrast, and thanks to them, I grew up with a lot of privileges and opportunities. But my parents sent me to public schools as a kid. I attended public universities, and now I work at this wonderful public university. My parents never let me forget two things about public education:

First: the opportunities they had in life, and by extension the opportunities I've had in life, were due in large part to public schools and public universities, institutions supported by the taxpayers of this country.

Public universities like MTSU have two main sources of revenue. One is tuition and fees – that's what you and/or your families pay, and what scholarships and grants help you pay. The other source is state appropriations. In the case of MTSU, the state of Tennessee funds part of our budget.

This means that a significant portion of the cost of your education was paid by the taxpayers of Tennessee. Who are these taxpayers of Tennessee? The taxpayers of Tennessee are anyone that buys anything in this state. Tennessee, as

you probably know, doesn't have an income tax. Most of our state government is paid for by sales taxes.

Anyone who buys anything in Tennessee has paid taxes that helps pay for MTSU and your education. Whether they are rich or poor, young or old, black or white. Whether they live in Rutherford County or any of the 94 other counties of this state. Whether they are born in the US or immigrated here. Whether they are legal immigrants or whether they are here without documents. People who are homeless helped pay for your education, as did people with big, fancy houses.

You are here because a lot of people gave you a gift. Some of them are people you know and love, most importantly your family who may have helped pay for your education, and your loved ones who supported you through it. But many of the

people who helped bring us here today aren't here and aren't people we know. Please think about how you can use your education to make the lives of ALL people in this state better, no matter who they are. Because all of the residents of Tennessee have contributed financially to your education and helped enable your success.

My parents also taught me that one of the beauties and strengths of public education is the diversity of it. Look around you for minute. This is an incredibly diverse gathering. We have people here who have lived in the Middle Tennessee area for generations. We have people who moved here from other parts of the US sitting next to people who are here from all over the world. We are economically diverse. We are Christians, Muslims, Jews, Buddhists, Hindus, agnostics, atheists and more. We are heterosexual, gay, lesbian,



bisexual and transgender. Some MTSU students are still teenagers while others are collecting social security. We have many kinds of disabilities and many kinds of abilities. For many of us, this is one of the most diverse rooms full of people we have been in this year. This is America. Y'all are America at its most beautiful and most inspiring.

That's another gift that public education gives us all. And it's another reason to protect public education. Spaces this diverse are still too rare in the US.

Public education offers people from diverse backgrounds opportunities for success and a path to reach their full potential. An education at MTSU isn't cheap, but because it's a publicly-supported institution, it's an amazing bargain compared to private universities. MTSU drives economic

growth across the region and state, because a university education makes you better able to help solve social problems, contribute to technological advances, be innovators, thinkers, and leaders. Education makes you more informed when you vote, better able to understand your responsibilities as a citizen, and better able to hold our elected leaders accountable.

As a public institution, MTSU is here for you and your families for the long term. You're getting a degree today but MTSU will still be here for you if you chose to pursue graduate degrees, (or additional graduate degrees), need certifications for a promotion, need continuing education units for license renewals, and more. MTSU will also be here for your children's education.

I worry that people are forgetting how important public education is to our country and our lives. In some states due to budget shortfalls, they've had to cut back on public schools, so that kids only go to school 4 days a week. Public school teachers are underpaid in many districts across the country and leaving the profession. Nationwide, funding for higher education has dropped significantly over the past decade. States collectively cut spending to colleges and universities by 16 percent between 2008 and 2017. This forces institutions to raise tuition to pay their bills, making it harder and harder for students to afford it.

We can't take our system of public education for granted. So please: Be advocates throughout your lives for our great American system of public education, from kindergarten onwards. We can't have schools and a functional government

unless people are willing to pay for it. Please demand that our elected leaders support public colleges and universities, promise to fully fund public education, promise to keep the costs of public universities affordable, and keep the quality of public education high. If you can't vote, do your part to educate those around you that can about these issues.

Those are tasks for other days though. Today, spend time with those you love and those who've supported you. Enjoy this day that you will never forget. Pat yourself on the back for accomplishing something hard and sticking with it.

Congratulations, graduates.