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## Confetti and Cheers

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Friday May 7, 2021

By Eric F. Spina

*(A near-perfect graduation rate is worth rejoicing. A promise fulfilled is worth celebrating — with confetti. Here are my remarks to the first Flyer Promise Scholars on the cusp of their graduation.)*

Good evening! I am very happy to be here. No, strike that. I am THRILLED to be here to celebrate our Flyer Promise students. This is for me personally, as well as for the University, literally a dream come true. We committed to each other just over four years ago. We made a **promise** to each other then: that we would support you through good times and bad, easy times and hard and that you would add your gifts and talents to UD while you worked hard to earn your degree. And now we are here together, you about to become University of Dayton alumni and us a better University because of your presence and your legacy.

I want to begin with a little bit of bragging on you!

The federally defined graduation rate for colleges and universities is the percentage of students who graduate within six years. At the University of Dayton, the six-year graduation rate is about 82%, while the graduation rate after 4 years is roughly 65%. Nationally, those numbers are more than respectable; they are excellent, certainly among the top 50 national universities. Well, the four-year graduation rate for Flyer Promise Cohort 1 is 95%. 95%!

Now, I understand that there is a lot of INDIVIDUAL achievement in that extraordinary statistic. Indeed, each of you deserves to take a bow and receive a round of applause individually. But I also want to highlight the **collective nature** of this accomplishment. Very simply, it is important to recognize that Flyer Promise cohort #1 did this collectively. You encouraged each other when you had doubt. Lifted each other up when you were down. Provided hugs and consolation when you experienced loss. Doubled or tripled the joy when milestones were achieved and celebrations were deserved. Within this wonderful UD community, you built a Flyer Promise community, and that community served you very well. Please continue to be community builders as you leave UD and venture forth. This is a gift that has served you well and a skill that the country and our society need. You are well prepared to contribute your gifts to the world in a way that can make a difference. And I know that you will.

In addition to congratulating each of our soon-to-be graduates, as president it is vitally important for me to recognize the UD leaders who conceived the Flyer Promise program, developed the details, initiated it, found these extraordinary students, and supported/mentored/coached/cared/loved them across the finish line.

Our provost, Paul Benson, and our vice president for strategic enrollment management, Jason Reinoehl, did not hesitate when asked to find ways to enhance our accessibility and socio-economic diversity as a University. As they designed the outlines of the Flyer Promise program, they also found its chief architect and inspiration, our now dean of admissions, Donnell Wiggins. Cody McMillen, Kathleen Henderson, and Beverly Jenkins soon joined the program staff. Donnell, Cody, Kathleen, and Bev have given the program — and, most importantly, the students — their hearts and souls. During the working day. And at night. Throughout the work week. And on weekends. They cared for the Flyer Promise cohort as students. And as people. They collaborated with administrators, faculty, and staff across the University to ensure that we fulfilled our part of The Promise and created the space and the opportunity for our students to succeed.

Jason, Donnell, Cody, Kathleen, and Bev: thank you. Thank you for caring for these extraordinary students and thanks for making this dream come true. You have every right to be enormously — **enormously** — proud.

So, now let me focus on the most important thing that I will say tonight. Actually, let me be honest: it is one of the most meaningful things that I will say in my life, and surely one of the things that makes me proudest.

Earned, not given. Earned, not given.

Those three words define the arc of your time at the University of Dayton. When you received your offers to join the first Flyer Promise cohort, you were excited and polite and gracious, and you profusely thanked anyone and everyone you could find at UD for **giving** you this opportunity. We spoke with one voice and pushed back: we said that we are not **giving** you this opportunity, you have **earned** it with your hard work, your excellence, and your promise.

We also told you — and I believe I charged you the first time that I addressed you as a group — to MAKE THIS YOUR UNIVERSITY. And oh, how you have! You have participated in numerous activities, assumed leadership roles in a wide diversity of organizations, and started new entities on campus. You have been admissions ambassadors and President's emissaries, served as co-op students at world-renowned companies and interns at start-ups. You have excelled in the classroom, earning a place on Dean's lists and winning academic awards. You have challenged us to be a better institution, truer to our identity as a Catholic and Marianist university, and have held us accountable to the values that we espouse, especially on issues of social justice. So, I thank you for listening to my charge. I thank you for making this YOUR UNIVERSITY, and for making us a better, richer, smarter, more creative, and more just university.

Now, in just a few days, I will have the great honor of officially **granting** you your Bachelor's degree from the University of Dayton. But when you hear those magic words — and they will sound something like this: "By the authority of the Board of Trustees and the State of Ohio, I confer upon the qualified candidates the appropriate degree..." — I want you to actually hear and to actively affirm and to forever hold onto four little words: "I earned this degree." I EARNED THIS DEGREE! Because you surely did.

I love you all. And I am so, so, so very proud of you.

GO FLYERS! GO FLYER PROMISE!

*(Photo by Julie Walling Noeth)*