

**Commencement Address  
Friday, May 17, 2019  
College of Optometry**

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It's a privilege to be here and represent a class I've grown to know and love; the 39 young women and men who are the Class of 2019.

We would be remiss if we did not mention that what is occurring on stage today would not be occurring if it wasn't for a very special group of individuals...you. For those of you in the audience today, I'm sure you are very proud of our honorees and you should be.

But let's not forget that the pride you feel is in large part a result of your influence. What is occurring on stage would not be occurring without the significant and positive impact you have had on the life of your loved one. Thank you.

So let's ask the question: what do Jackie Robinson, Billie Jean King and Walter Peyton have in common? Certainly they were all trailblazers; they were Hall of Famers in their respective sports; and they proceeded to make a difference in the lives of others.

And isn't that what life is all about...making a difference.

Well, when they define a hall of fame class in optometry, the UMSL Class of 2019 will most certainly have a prominent seat at the table. The reason is, they've made a difference. Let me explain.

Optometry today and tomorrow has challenges: how about online glasses; online eye examinations; illegal CL sales. It makes you think, when you see all of those ads from those "companies" certainly there must be some type of subliminal message, such as "please take our online eye exam because Glaucoma is over-rated. Buy our contact lenses illegally because you need to experience the pain of having an eye infection. Ignore your eye care practitioner because there just simply is not enough blindness in the world.

Well, you know what? The Class of 2019 is up to that challenge not only on a local and state level, but how about an unparalleled involvement in serving the profession on a national level with the American Optometric Association? Do you realize that the majority of the class traveled all the way to Washington DC to help us legislatively at Optometry's Meeting, and through primarily their efforts and leadership, UMSL was honored with the coveted Spirit award?

Or how about making the Golden Rule come to life? We are all equal regardless of race, gender or economic status. Well, what happens when you have mature leaders within a class? You establish a national organization. The "United Optometrists Association" was established with the mission of nothing less than to solve inequality within the profession, so that optometry remains an excellent profession for optometrists of every race, color, religion, national origin, sex, sexual orientation, age and status as a protected veteran; and you know, thanks to them, it's working.

And today, May 17, 2019, I can state most confidently that we have the best combination of students, faculty and staff in our nearly 40 year history. And, although we were in the process of both building our beautiful Patient Care Center, and hiring some exceptional, new faculty, we were not yet where we wanted to be when this class first entered our program.

So what about the fact that they worked with administration to create positive change within our program to benefit future students, ultimately achieving the excellence that is and will continue to be - the UMSL College of Optometry? And what about their performance on the national board examinations?

UMSL has had a long and positive history of success on the NBEO examinations. That changed recently, which as luck would have it, coincided with the first time we had to be transparent with national board scores on our website. Applicants this past year would ask during the interview, "Dr. Bennett, could you please explain UMSL's performance on the national board exams?" Therefore, it was absolutely essential that our Class of 2019 perform significantly better such that we can replace the previous scores.

So how about this performance, which was nothing short of remarkable: 11% higher than the national average on Part One; a 95% success on Part Two with an average score of no less than 547 when 300 represents passing.

And no class in UMSL's history has performed better than the Class of 2019 as it pertained to Part 3, as they achieved nothing less than a 100% pass rate. Now that's incredible!

But I can definitely tell you that nothing this class accomplishes surprises me anymore. In our contact lens courses, I provide a series of M-C questions at the conclusion of lecture, which helps reinforce that they have been attentive during the lectures. In recent years they have used their cell phones as an audience response system. If everyone in the class answers a question correctly, I will run around and literally high five every student. In the 9 – 10 years I've been doing this, the record number of high fives in a given lecture is two; in a lecture a year ago February this class established a new record: 12 high fives, remarkable! And I didn't have to go the gym that day.

We pride ourselves on being a family at UMSL and the best example that is the Class of 2019 occurred last year. And, as the Class of 2019 is the class of harmony, which means fellowship, unity, and friendship, it's not surprising how they reacted when a member of their extended family became ill.

Even though I interviewed most of the individuals sitting behind me, I purposely don't remember interviews. I do remember, however, the wife of one of the applicants because of her incredibly positive and engaging personality; and all I remember doing was laughing. Her husband was admitted, two years later they had a baby.

One year after that at the beginning of his third year, he approached Vinita Henry and I at the beginning of CL lab and said those three dreaded words: "I have cancer". My response was, take a year off and let's fight this thing. He said, "Dr. Bennett, I intend to stay in school."

Well, for that entire semester, he was gone every other week for chemo treatments, and the weeks he was there he was experiencing the nightmare that is the chemotherapy.

For the next three months his extended family, which included a cancer survivor, in combination with our faculty, did nothing less than make sure he had all of the notes and assignments, that he would take exams only when he was able to do so, and deliver dinner to his house every night.

With the help of the 38 other young doctors on this stage – including one other who has been a cancer survivor, Adam Wira – did nothing less than make grades that semester and then proceed to pass national boards, and he will become a doctor today. He made it due to the innate courage he possesses, the support of his family, and because of the people sitting here on this stage...and he is cancer-free.

Now I have two degrees in psychology, and the reason I don't have three is that when Indiana admitted me into the Master's program, it was with the understanding that I would never pursue a PhD. Obviously they had grave concerns about the possibility of me being let loose in the public to counsel anyone.

As many of you know, my optometry career faced similar obstacles. The first time I applied to optometry school I was rejected – actually on July 6 – which just happens to be my birth day. The next year same thing. A few weeks before school started in August, I received notice that a friend of the family had arranged an interview with the head of admissions.

He drilled me for two hours and when it was over told me someone had dropped out that day and he wanted me to fill that spot. Years later when I was on the faculty at IU, he told me he got in trouble with the dean for boosting me ahead of several alternates. As I had decided not to apply a third time, he did nothing less than give me my career.

Fast forward to the early 80s and I'm new faculty member at UMSL, and I have dream to write a book; the problem is that it was rejected by every publisher. One publisher even said, "We don't think it's a good topic, and who has ever heard of Ed Bennett." I still have that letter. I asked my mentor and optometry icon, Dr. Irvin Borish – who had the biggest selling book in optometry's history – to contribute a chapter. He agreed and I submitted it to his publisher. It was accepted and my life changed forever, so my message to you is: if my dreams can come true, so can yours.

When you think about the Class of 2019 you think about outstanding leadership; and they do. You think about their truly collaborative effort to complete a demanding and rigorous four-year curriculum: and they did. You think about how they have excelled within the program, becoming exceptional clinicians who are well prepared to provide exceptional patient care; and they are.

And you know why I know that? Because you received an outstanding education; they gave it to you, so you are more than prepared to meet the challenges that await you in the years ahead.

Who is the Class of 2019? In your own words, "You are individuals who are willing to put in the work to make whatever you endeavor to do better. You are individuals who want to speak for those who don't have a voice. You are individuals who have had a significant impact on our program, and you are individuals whose legacy will be felt by our current and future students." As you go out into the world, it wouldn't be surprising if we see your class as the future leaders of their communities and in our profession.

And let me tell you now, in summary, how significant and life-changing today is. Do you realize when you walk off this stage today, you won't be Dalton or Matt; you won't be Rachel or Kate; you won't be Maggie or Ben? When you walk off this stage, you will be today and forever more be referred to as "Doctor."

And my charge to you from this day forward is to exceed your goals; to endeavor to take your legacy at UMSL of proactive change, leadership, equality and diversity; and literally put the profession of optometry on your shoulders by going out and making a difference in the lives of other people.

You – of all people – can accomplish that, and we will all benefit from your efforts.