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The Foundational Pillars of the EIU Experience

I'm Edwyn Mitchell, and I am proud to say: Spring Class of 2019, we made it. To say that today is the day that we have all dreamed of is, to say the least, an understatement. Because we did far more than just dream; we executed. We set goals, created dynamic plans to achieve them, worked diligently, and pushed ourselves to our limits. Today is the day when we collectively share the experience of a lifetime. In this speech, I will share aspects of my personal story, but I want each and every one of you to reflect on your personal experience as well, because I believe all of our journeys have been founded on three pillars which are foundational to the Eastern Illinois University experience: accessibility, opportunity, and connection. Although we each took unique paths to get to this point, our stories share something special.

So, let's explore our first pillar of the EIU experience: **accessibility**. The day I toured this campus as a teenager was the day I made one of the best decisions of my life: to come to EIU. There is something very unique about this university: everything you need is within reach. This campus was designed to provide each of us with access to all of the university's most powerful assets. As I speak about EIU's accessibility, I immediately think about the student-to-teacher ratios in our classrooms. Last fall, I took my final required course for my Political Science major, with my Department Chair, Dr. Melinda Mueller. The name of the course was the Political Science Capstone, and for the latter half of the course, my fellow classmates and I formed our desks into a circle. For each class, two of us were responsible for leading that day's political discussion. Our class had 15 students with completely different backgrounds and beliefs. We engaged in discussions about some very controversial topics, but we shared our perspectives in

such a respectful manner. Dr. Mueller, and all other EIU educators, thank you for always creating such life-changing academic experiences for your students. We have all taken rigorous yet engaging courses that have broadened our perspectives and truly enhanced our education's sense of closeness and accessibility - an experience that is uniquely Eastern.

Along with EIU being a community of accessibility, every student has a chance to succeed here, which brings us to our second pillar: **opportunity**. While many of us were indeed excited when we first arrived on EIU's campus, our excitement was also coupled with high levels of uncertainty, doubt, and fear. We weren't 100% sure if we would fit in, transition well, or make it all the way to the finish line. However, each and every one of us sitting here today validates Eastern's unique promise to give students the opportunity to succeed. At EIU, we have had the opportunities of a lifetime. Personally, I was inducted into The National Society of Collegiate Scholars and the Political Science Honor Society. I have also served as the Business Affairs Committee Chair for our Student Government Association and the President of the EIU Competitive Speech Team. Furthermore, I have worked for our University President, Dr. David Glassman, for two years as a receptionist, I was selected as the student speaker for EIU's Open Houses and Admitted Student Days, and for three years in a row I have earned the 1st Place National Title in Persuasive Speaking, at the National Speech Championship. Our opportunities have ignited an eternal fire of perseverance and determination within us. This university has granted each of us transformative opportunities that have truly given us the agency to thrive.

Although our opportunities have been nothing shy of life-changing and beautiful, we would not stand where we are today if it wasn't for the bonds we share with members of our EIU community, which brings us to our third and final pillar: **connection**. The relationships we cherish with our loved ones and the faculty, staff, alumni, and students of EIU have played

essential roles in each of our journeys and triumphs. A shining example of this pillar is my speech coach, Sara Gronstal. Since I first arrived here in fall of 2015, she's been a great friend, instructor, confidant, mentor, but most of all, she's been an amazing coach. Regardless of how nervous I was about competitions, how overwhelmed I got trying to balance my responsibilities, or how stubborn I was at times, Sara has been there every single step of my journey to remind me that *I can do anything*. Sara, thank you so much. Connections like this make the entire experience worth it. Whether it's been through the speech team, athletics, classes, student organizations, ROTC, student jobs, residence halls, or study abroad, our connections keep this community strong. Right now, I want each student sitting before me to take the time to think of the individuals who taught you, mentored you, inspired you, motivated you, and pushed you. And for the faculty, staff, and alumni I want you all to think of the students you have impacted. Lastly, for the friends and family in the audience, take a moment to reflect on the love and support you gave us. EIU has given us graduates a platform to sustain and create lifelong bonds and the tools to connect with others on a global scale – not just to cause a ripple but to create a wave. Collectively, each and every member of our EIU community has augmented the pillar of connection which not only reinforces our confidence, passion, and integrity, but provides us with a sense of belonging and home... *Connection* is the reason we are all here right now.

As we prepare to walk across this stage in honor of our success, I challenge each of you to cherish the three foundational pillars of the EIU experience. Accessibility. Opportunity. Connection. Eastern Illinois University, we thank you for sculpting us. We thank you for the obstacles we had to overcome, and most of all: we thank you for helping us grow into the amazing people we are. To the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences' Spring Class of 2019: congratulations – because we transformed what was once a dream... into reality.