

Victoria McDonald

“Why I Chose to Bleed Blue, Part III”

*Specialist in Education*, Educational Administration

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Good afternoon and thank you to all family and friends that have traveled from near and far to partake in today's graduation celebrations. In addition, let me take this opportunity to acknowledge all of the EIU staff on another successful semester. Most importantly, let me congratulate my fellow graduates whose dedication and efforts have earned them not only a degree, but opened the door to endless opportunities.

As I stand here today, I am honored to have been selected as a commencement speaker. I have been a dedicated believer in EIU my entire life; I chose to "bleed blue" three times because of my extraordinary experiences on campus, and those opportunities that have been afforded because of my EIU degrees. The obvious question is, why did this woman before you, chose EIU three times? Well luckily, I have been given the opportunity to explain my devout EIU preference.

Let's begin at the beginning of my EIU adventure, the fall of 2003. During my undergraduate studies, despite the large numbers of students on campus in the mid 2000's, my professors were phenomenal, dynamic, and demonstrated a passion for their profession. From Dr. McGaughey that made sure we had as much applicable science teaching knowledge as possible, to Dr. Switzer that used P.O.D. (person of the day) as a daily honorary title- this honor which only existed in chalk for a class period solicited unexpected, overwhelming, class participation; in a college level zoology class, POD was sought after just as a preschool student would battle for a coveted sticker. In fact, I successfully used the POD strategy in my own high school classes, which was always a crowd favorite. Also in my experiences at EIU, I encountered Dr. Miller the anatomy professor; he proved multiple choice tests could have infinite choices per question not just the standard 4 or 5, AND always included an option of "all of the above," "none of the above," or "write in the correct answer." This made sure you scrutinized over every exam question to the point of ulceration; Dr. Miller's exams and labs taught me to always be prepared for the expected, but not to be shocked if life tossed a curveball or four. But it wasn't just the professors that I encountered in my science classes that had an impact. For a woman

from a small rural community, Dr. Dagni Bredesen in the English department, was the first professional woman I encountered as an undergrad that made me own, "I am woman, hear me roar." A short four years later, I graduated in 2007 and had my science degree from EIU that led me to seven successful years as a high school science teacher.

Shortly into my second year of teaching, at the age of 23, I realized I wanted to make more of a difference and knew that if I took the leap into school administration, I would have the opportunity to positively influence more lives. I chose EIU and to bleed blue for the second time.

At this point in my life's journey, I was married, and through the next three years and two pregnancies (with nausea), while continuing to teach and coach, I was able to successfully complete my educational administration degree through an EIU Decatur Cohort. Even though the graduate classes were held at a community college in Decatur, the EIU professors delivered the same high quality education, I had known and appreciated on campus during my undergraduate studies. My EIU professors understood my life's challenges and were always willing to assist me in whatever way possible. From unavoidable missed classes due to medical need or a coaching conflict, to extended breaks during class due to lactation necessity, the professors saw me through to my graduation in the spring of 2011.

In addition to the invaluable relationships and compassion I gained from my professors, I also had the privilege of networking with other educational peers from various backgrounds from all over the state. Many of those relationships that developed from EIU cohort classes a decade ago, continue to flourish because of the irreplaceable perspective and experiences shared from my peers and new found friends. My cohort classmates were from urban schools, rural schools, large schools, small schools, school districts with different organizational structures, affluent districts, and districts in the midst of cyclic poverty; what my new found cohort peer network provided was vast and diverse perspectives that often times varied dramatically from my own. To this day, it is not uncommon for

me to make a call or send an email to a fellow EIU classmate to ask for their opinion on a situation I am currently facing as a public, high school administrator.

My EIU journey did not stop there; I took a leap of faith into my first administration position 3.5 hours away from my “home territory” as an assistant principal in a pre-K-12 county school in 2014. The educational knowledge and the eclectic personal experiences bestowed upon me by my EIU professors and peers allowed me to flourish in the midst of an unknown environment that I will fully admit, greatly expanded my definition of “normal.” Within my first year as an administrator, I dealt with a lock down due to a parental threat, hand-counting all medicines in the nurse’s office because of an anonymous complaint (this took 3 hours with the help of law enforcement and superintendent-no discrepancies were found), numerous DCFS phone calls, an online gun threat that brought 20 state troopers to a sectional basketball game hosted by the school, and the loss of a staff member at the school a mere 30 minutes before graduation, just to list a few out of the ordinary situations I encountered. Being able to survive and find success in the face of adversity in my first year in administration, allowed me the opportunity to move closer to home as an assistant principal in a 7-12 Jr/Sr high school building. Being within an hour and 15 minutes from extended family was important because my family now included a 6 year old Lillian and a 3 year old Benjamin. Within a few months of starting this new assistant principal position, I also began seeking my superintendency certificate; in January of 2016, I chose EIU for the third time.

Within a few months of beginning my next EIU educational endeavor, at the age of 30, I accepted the position as high school principal in Robinson, IL. Becoming a principal, as a young female, was made possible because of how well EIU prepared me for my administrative positions. One new professor at EIU, Dr. Carole Collins-Ayanlaja immediately recognized the struggles of young female administrators. Though her urban experiences varied dramatically from those of her students, she was relatable and contemporary with her approach to education; this led to highly productive dialogue and

mutual learning. Dr. Collins-Ayanlaja even went as far to express gratitude to myself and other female classmates for being young and “fighting the good fight” for up-and-coming female leaders. Her kind words and empathy were very much appreciated because she too was a public school administrator; for many do not know how many battles I fight for merely being a young, female principal. Attacks range from verbal harassment, to sexual harassment, to slander, and assault. She understood the struggle, and it rejuvenated my spirit. Dr. Collins-Ayanlaja was a professional woman that reminded me where my worth really lies.

Another professor who excelled at educating students on the reality of public education was Dr. Bartz. For me, Dr. Bartz was the most influential, inciteful professor through both my principalship and superintendency programs. What made Dr. Bartz dynamic was his decades of experience in various educational positions. His unique pedagogical approach and his flexibility to tailor his curriculum to meet his students needs, created an environment of engagement for superior learning. Additionally, Dr. Bartz showed compassion for his students and never shied away from overwhelmed tears or stress-filled emails. Fortunately for me, and maybe unfortunately for him, he helped me survive through both degrees and continues to be a professional mentor to this day.

I now stand before you a 3-time EIU graduate that is eternally grateful for the professors and my classmates that demanded more and demonstrated that education is a compassion filled profession. In closing, I know every graduate here today had to overcome struggles and make sacrifices in order to earn the degree they are receiving today. Our stories vary, our degrees are different, but today we stand united as proud EIU alum. Congratulations to the class of 2018!