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Introduction of Clifton R. Wharton, Jr., delivered at Commencement on April 27, 1996

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When I think of Clifton Wharton, the words distinguished, successful, sensitive, articulate, tactful, intelligent, energetic, interested, gracious flash across my mind. I first became acquainted with him soon after he was appointed President of Michigan State University. To assume that Presidency in the volatile 1970’s of war protests and alternative life styles, following the legendary John Hannah whose long tenure made him Mr. MSU, he needed the qualities that those words imply. They served him and the University, and I was hoping he would make Michigan his permanent home, but that was not to be.

When the State University of New York, with its many campuses throughout the state and thousands of students set its sites on him, he went to Albany and presided over the country’s largest university, giving it vision and management skills, something only a person of unusual talent could provide for such an educational behemoth. I thought he would remain there, leading the continued improvement of a complex and huge higher education enterprise. I was wrong, and I have a personal reason for being happy that I was.

He became the Chief Executive Officer of TIAA-CREF, the Teachers Insurance Annuity Association and College Retirement Equities Fund, the pension
fund for all college and university professors and administrators. It is the largest pension fund in the world. A billion is a small number to TIAA-CREF. He moved in on those dollars and made them grow. Lack-luster performance was transformed into superior performance, making retirement a happier time for thousands of us in academia.

Where are the proving grounds for a person of such talent? He was the son of a diplomat, the first black to become a career ambassador. Life in foreign service, therefore, was natural for him. He spent 22 years working in foreign economic development in Latin America and southeast Asia. He formed himself into a diplomat and an economist, good preparation for a university President and Chancellor. During his career he has been called upon by six Presidents of the United States to serve the nation - recently as Deputy Secretary of State.

People beyond his circle of friends and family had a clue about his brightness when he was admitted to Harvard at age 16. His education continued in International Affairs at Johns Hopkins and in economics at the University of Chicago where he earned his Ph.D. Now he serves on so many Boards, both non-profit and profit, he may hold a national record and he is gaining on Father Hesburg, former Notre Dame President, as a leader in honorary degrees with 56, about to be 57.
I mention only one Board, the Ford Motor Company. He has served on it for over twenty years, seeing that company transform itself from near disaster to a leader in product development, quality, and technology. He is now working on his autobiography, a book when published that will be exciting because his life has been and is remarkable.
Frederick Douglas, once a slave and an eloquent leader of the 19th century abolition movement, wrote in his autobiography, “Gratitude to benefactors is a well-recognized virtue, and to express it in some form or other, however imperfectly, is a duty to ourselves as well as to those who have helped us.” As I welcome all of you to these exercises, graduates, families, friends, faculty and staff, I see this as a day of gratitude. Many have given much in treasure and effort to bring you, the graduating, to this ceremony. What better day to express gratitude to benefactors than Commencement Day; for love, for money, for encouragement. And for those, your benefactors, to express their gratitude to you for keeping the faith, for reaching the goal that they for some time have wanted for you.