

Derek Peterson's Submitted 2026 Commencement Remarks

Good morning, graduates, family, and friends. My name is Derek Peterson, and I have served this past year as the Chair of the Faculty Senate. It is a great honor to be here today, as a faculty member in the College of Literature, Science, and the Arts' Departments of History and African Studies, to join in celebrating this year's graduates.

In 1858 a young woman named Sarah Burger applied for admission to the University of Michigan. In those days there were 450 students on campus. All of them were men.

Michigan's president, Henry Tappan, was opposed to the admission of women. "When we attempt to disturb God's order," he wrote, "we produce monstrosities."

So it must have taken courage for young Ms. Burger to make her application. She was by no means naïve. She was a suffragette, who at the age of 14, had attended a national conference on women's rights in Cleveland.

Her application for admission to Michigan was received skeptically by the Regents. Allowing women into the University would "obliterate their refined and retiring delicacy," advised the president of Rutgers. The Board of Regents voted unanimously against admitting Ms. Burger.

She was not deterred. She applied again in June 1859. The Regents again refused her application. Michigan did not admit women until 1870.

Today, as I speak, over 53 percent of the graduating class of 2026 is made up of women.

The point I want to make is that this and other freedoms were hard won. They were not handed out by a generous administration. This is the greatest public university in the world because people like Ms. Burger refused to accept the orthodoxies of their time. They saw in Michigan a promise: that this great university should actively place itself in the service of all the people of this great state.

The next time you sing Hail to the Victors, sing for Sarah Burger. Sing for the thousands of students who have devoted themselves to the pursuit of social justice.

Sing for Moritz Levi, professor of French, the first Jewish faculty member at the University of Michigan. Sing for the Black Action Movement, whose members demanded a curriculum that honored the experience of Black Americans. Sing for the student activists, who have over these past few years sacrificed much to open our hearts to the injustices happening in Gaza.

The greatness of this institution does not rest only on the shoulders of our student athletes. It rests on the courage and conviction of student activists who have pushed this university down the path toward justice.

Congratulations to all of you, and Go Blue.