

Goals for UW-Stevens Point grads

Bernie Patterson, For USA TODAY NETWORK-Wisconsin

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I had the privilege of conferring degrees on 1,400 graduates at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point last week. This pinnacle of their college careers is also the highlight of my year. From the comments and cheers I heard from parents, this is an immensely exciting, proud moment for family members, too.

Because of the number of graduates, two ceremonies are held each spring. An element in each ceremony drew a standing ovation from the audience of students and families:

- In our morning ceremony, Darlene Esqueda, who will turn 80 in July, received her associate's degree. She was the oldest graduate to cross the stage Saturday. She plans to continue her course of study – history – and complete her bachelor's degree.

What a testament to life-long learning. We champion this at UW-Stevens Point. We know the value of a broad education and the benefits of continuing to learn and grow. An educated populace recognizes the common good, that a rising tide lifts all boats. Higher education prepares students for successful careers, meeting business needs for workforce talent and the community's need for leaders and volunteers who support the fabric of the place they call home.

No matter the degree program our graduates pursued, they learned the importance of critical thinking, analytic thinking, creative thinking, independent thinking. Our graduates understand historic perspective and engage in effective communication.

A strong democracy demands citizenry of informed, independent thinkers, who ask the right questions and develop their own understanding of issues.

Our youngest graduate to receive a bachelor's degree was Nicholas Plaski, 20, Junction City. Thanks to thoughtful planning and hard work, he took several college courses while in high school and tested out of other courses. With winterim and summer courses, he completed his economics-social science degree in only two years on campus. When students graduate in shorter-than-average time, they have less student debt. Nicholas is doing an actuary internship at Delta Dental this summer.

Sixty years separated our oldest and young graduates. From ages 19 to 79, my hope is all will continue to learn, grow, question and embrace the challenges that lie ahead.

- In our afternoon ceremony, I had the distinct privilege of conferring honorary doctorates of humane letters on John and Patty Noel. Their tireless support of humanitarian causes in central



Wisconsin and around the world has transformed and, in many cases, saved thousands of lives. They live their values every day.

UW-Stevens Point means the world to the Noels, Patty said, because university faculty, staff and students have supported and offered expertise on every idea the couple suggested. They founded the Noel Compass Scholars Program for UW-Stevens Point students and, along with other community members, the Boys and Girls Club of Portage County.

John Noel encouraged graduates to be leaders worth following and to serve others.

Commencement is a time of new responsibilities. It is a time to make a difference, to become a servant leader, to start paying it forward.

We congratulate our graduates and all who made it possible for them to achieve this milestone. Very few graduates reached this point alone. They received support from parents and other family members who likely sacrificed to help them realize their dream. With dedication and resolve, faculty and staff members have taught, advised and mentored, broadening students' intellectual horizons and transforming their lives. Friends, community organizations and businesses that employed or served students also helped them succeed.

So join me in celebrating their achievement and proudly continuing the goal of public higher education: to ensure all people, regardless of socio-economic background, have the opportunity to reach their fullest potential.

Bernie Patterson is the chancellor of the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point.

<http://www.stevenspointjournal.com/story/news/local/2016/05/27/patterson-goals-uw-stevens-point-grads/84979844/>