Reflecting on Graduation

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“By the power conferred on me as President of the University of . . . , I hereby confer on you the degree of” Do you remember those solemn words on that day when you walked across the stage or outdoor lawn as an undergraduate student?

As I prepare this editorial, the most exciting day of the academic year is underway: it's graduation throughout North America. On our campus, students young and old are sporting regalia of red and black, the colors of the University of Georgia. The University was chartered by the Georgia General Assembly on January 27, 1785; and as the nation's oldest public university, we excel in tradition and celebration, having practiced for over 225 years!

We have grown over time, and it is impossible to know even a small percentage of the students on an individual level. In FY11, we conferred over 6,800 undergraduate, 1,800 master's, and almost 900 professional and doctoral degrees, for a grand total of just over 9,600. Today's spring commencement will claim the bulk of degrees granted this year.

As the state's land-grant university, we offer a wide range of programs and degrees through 16 colleges and schools. The oldest and largest, the Franklin College of Arts and Sciences, dating from the year 1801, hosts 30 departments and claims the five most popular degrees: biology, psychology, English, art, and history. Franklin offers a total of 76 graduate degrees and certificates. The Terry College of Business, founded in 1912, ranks second in degrees granted, followed by the College of Education, founded in 1908, both at over 1,500. The smallest college in number of degrees is UGA's newest school, the School of Ecology, which was founded in 2007 and confers about 50 degrees annually. Yes, UGA claims the only independent School of Ecology in the U.S. (maybe the world), the Eugene Odum School of Ecology, named for the longtime, distinguished UGA faculty member and father of ecology.

The graduate commencement ceremony is held midmorning inside the basketball arena, Stegeman Coliseum. The much larger undergraduate ceremony with thousands of degree recipients and friends and family in tow is held at the UGA football shrine (oops, field), Sanford Stadium. The banners of the colleges (Veterinary Medicine, Environment and Design, Law, Pharmacy, Agriculture and Environmental Sciences, Family and Consumer

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Sciences, Forestry and Natural resources, Journalism and Mass Communication, Public and International Affairs, Social Work) line the platform just behind the deans, vice presidents, President, and other distinguished guests.

The processional is to live music by the UGA Wind Orchestra, comprised of dozens of students who give up a Friday evening for a rather long ceremony. We saw the presentation of the colors by the UGA Army and Air Force ROTC Cadets, joined in the National Anthem and the Alma Mater, and watched the closing of the ceremony with fireworks against the beautiful spring night sky. Yes, real fireworks like the fourth of July. It is a grand occasion. Sunrise to sunset and beyond, graduation is a myriad of colors, sounds, smells.

During the day, students mill about the north campus, lingering under the massive old oak trees that shade the historic buildings and the recently dedicated statue of Abraham Baldwin, the University's founder. They stop for that one last photo under the Arch, our campus landmark, or by the fountain merrily spouting water into the air. Some carry flowers, others carry children. I notice that the undergraduate women seem to favor stilettos for the grand occasion (some in red!), and the young men likely create a record for most shirts and ties on twenty-somethings in one place at one time. All in all, it is somewhat bittersweet and makes me feel nostalgic.

As I sat on the platform and looked across a sea of smiles, questions kept racing through my mind. What do they know, how are they prepared to use their knowledge, what do they fully understand?

With so many degrees emanating from such a broad range of fields, what, if anything, do they hold in common? Did we enlarge their world views? Did we teach tolerance and respect for diversity? Were they enriched by the cultural opportunities in the visual, performing, and literary arts that are plentiful on the UGA campus? Did we help them deepen their skills, enhance their attitudes, and create life-long learners with a heart for civic responsibility and service? Did we sufficiently model the habits of the heart, the mind, and the soul so they could get a glimpse into living productive, engaged, full lives without regrets?

Did we carry them to the brink of adulthood with all of the knowledge, skills, behaviors and attitudes that would characterize a fine college education? In the end, I asked myself the question, did I do enough? Did I do a good job? Perhaps you, too, have asked yourself these questions at graduation ceremonies. It is a time that provokes reflection.