

Commencement Joy

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Last weekend I served in the platform parties of the all-campus commencement and the six undergraduate college ceremonies. All told, I introduced 9 deans, handed out 500 yellow roses, and shook 1500 hands. I even carried the ornate University Mace while pacing behind the bagpipe players leading the Muir College processional.

Between ceremonies, I shared eclectic meals and swapped stories with faculty, staff, alumni, and impending graduates in the RIMAC Green Room.

Despite the common setting and pattern of their festivities, the colleges nonetheless achieve a sense of personal connection and distinctiveness through their choices of processional music, graduate gifts, award descriptions, alumni invocations, student addresses – and the inimitable styles of their provosts' remarks.

What impressed me most deeply were the four hours I spent shaking hands with individual graduates on the lower platform of the great stage:

Each graduate walks up the ramp toward me, hands a card to the announcer, then halts till their name is read aloud. The tension, the anxiety of waiting one's turn for a momentous transition is clearly visible in visage and stance. Then, an incandescent flash of joy as a graduate hears their name. Walking toward commencement, some stare fixedly at my outstretched hand; others scan the audience for the sight of family; a few cavort gleefully with upraised arms.

As I speak my congratulations, our eyes meet and we exchange warm, genuine smiles. In that moment, we are united – university and student – our handshake frozen by the photographer's flash.

Then they're away down the perpendicular central ramp and the next name sounds.

Three or six hundred such joyful vignettes in quick succession bring a sense of exhilaration. I feel buoyed by the essential hopefulness of the academic enterprise, by the belief that we, the nation's great public universities, can help people set their lives on an upward course. Reminded, suddenly, of how many individuals rose to receive applause when transfer and first-generation students were honored, I can feel how we are changing the face of our society.

The lines wane, the ceremony draws to a close. No matter; the next begins an hour hence.

Faculty colleagues, if you are tired at year's end, I urge you to attend Commencement. Honor the students by marching in the processional of the all-campus ceremony wearing the arcane regalia of our academic guild. Or join your college's platform party and greet the happy

graduates as they return from the platform to their seats. You'll resume your usual pursuits refreshed by knowing you have enlivened these students' special day and made their commencement even more memorable.