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A View from Melrose

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The meaning of commencement



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few weeks ago, as I walked from the President's house to my office, I was greeted by one of our facilities staff who was erecting the commencement stage in the Oak Grove. "This is what it's all about!" he exclaimed.

His comment reminded me of the power of symbols and ceremonies; commencement, after all, is a human event that lasts about two hours. We don't really discuss or do anything; we could mail diplomas to students rather than have them attend in cap and gown. The ceremony itself is unnecessary; regardless of whether they attend, our students get their degrees, receive their

diplomas, and have their academic credentials duly recorded for posterity in the registrar's office. So why is it such a big deal?

There are certain achievements that transcend human description and find their best expression in ceremony and symbol. This is vigorously demonstrated at commencement. After all, it represents a host of achievements and facts that are difficult to express in any other way: the passage of time; new maturity and understanding; hard work and self-discipline; intellectual achievement. It's a doorway into the next stage of life. Relationships will change or even disappear. Nothing will ever be quite the same. It can be sad, especially if you've enjoyed being a student, but it's also an important passage, and thus we celebrate it.

If you've been reading my column the last couple of years, you've encountered a lot of words about the Linfield community. That community, that sense of family, is experienced at commencement where we recognize deep friendships, remember extracurricular adventures, and honor academic achievements. We celebrate the transformation that has occurred in our students' lives. It's even a kind of family reunion: our most senior alumni march alongside our graduates. And we recognize emeritus faculty – professors who are now retiring from the college after devoting their careers to our students.

On commencement day, many of our graduates are already aware of the impact of their professors. But after they leave Linfield, when they go to graduate school or enter careers, they more fully recognize the quality of their education, which is often superior to that of their peers, and they learn how unusual our professors are. Linfield boasts remarkable faculty: teacher-scholars who are dedicated to the transformation of our students. Again and again alumni have told me of individual professors who inspired and mentored them. It makes me very proud to be Linfield's president. And it reminds me that we must recruit and support faculty to replace those who retire on commencement day. This is a precious part of Linfield's culture and legacy.

The power of the commencement ceremony cannot be fully explained because it holds a symbolic, even poetic power. That's why so many want to participate. But fundamentally it's an academic ceremony and celebrates academic accomplishment – which begins, and ends, with professors and their students, learning together, seeking truth, and improving the world. 🌱

–Thomas L. Hellie, President