# American Graduation

## A Faculty View

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Graduation ceremonies at high schools, colleges and universities in the United States are often referred to as "commencement." The word itself is weighty with tradition, having roots in the solemnities of legal proceedings as well as the British system of exceedingly solemn higher education. To commence means to begin, so commencement is really just a way to indicate the formality of an occasion. A trial commences, and so does a graduation. But ask most Americans what commencement means and they will tell you it means graduating from school.

Like people everywhere, Americans view commencement as a happy occasion, even though everyone admits that the ceremonies themselves are more than a little boring. Was I bored at my own graduation as an honors student at a Japanese university? If I was, I don't remember it. Maybe being Japanese, and incorrigibly duty-bound, I felt obliged not to be bored by the outcome of so much hard work. I have not forgotten that. Some detail of it comes back to me every time I catch sight of the Webster's Collegiate Dictionary on my bookshelf. It was given to me that day in recognition of work well done. That was so many years ago I am now forced to think of myself as "over the hill." But that is all right, too. I have those fond old memories of my own commencement. Better yet, I add fond commencement memories to my store every year. Every year some of my students graduate and begin—or say commence—careers I hope will be as satisfying as mine as been.

Quickly, let me add that most of my recent commencement memories come by way of students reporting back to me on ceremonies I do not often attend. Let me explain.

I think colleges and universities in Japan still require full-time faculty to attend commencement ceremonies. Here at my school, the University of Pittsburgh, only certain faculty bigwigs (like department heads) are required to attend. For the rest of us—as for students—commencement is an option.

No disrespect to the event itself is intended. It is all about numbers and logistics in a school as large and complex as the University of Pittsburgh. More than 30,000 students are enrolled, taught by a full-time faculty of nearly 3,000. Add to those numbers any number of family and friends of the various graduates and what do you have but more bodies than will comfortably fit in any indoor facility in this large city. I say indoor, because April showers are a fact of life in this part of the USA, so imagine that many people, thousands of them in caps and gowns, in a football stadium in a soaking downpour!

An equally serious problem arises out of the fact that commencement comes just when every faculty member is busiest; at the end of academic year. Suddenly there they are—the stacks of term papers and final exams all needing to be read and graded. There is just no way out of this bottleneck of overwork. My

own life as commencement time approaches takes on a hurried, harried note as I work on papers from early till late. I sleep less, eat more quick snacks than sit-down meals, and defer all life's pleasures but one: the daily run that keeps me going— mentally as well as physically.

Lucky for me and others like me, there is a safety valve. The university Office of Events sends out its invitations to commencement three months in advance. All we have to do is accept the invitation— or decline it. We have that vital option, thanks to the problem of space and to the problem of end-of-term work.

As you well imagine, the option to decline is a popular one. Like most, I have declined far more often than I have accepted. In fact, it has been some years since I attended commencement. My excuse has always been the best one, namely, that I am working too hard to help students graduate to have time to see them graduate....

This year, however, I decided it was time to pay my respects to the results of so much work on the part of students and faculty. And so I attended the 211th commencement of my university since its founder, Hugh Henry Brackenridge, established a school he envisioned as "a candle lit in the forested wilderness."

As it turned out, I was asked to serve as a faculty marshal for the graduating class of my College of Arts and Sciences. A faculty marshal leads graduates to the podium where the Dean of the College hands them their diploma.

The diploma handed out is not, in fact, the one its proud recipient will frame and hang on the wall. It is a fake, a facsimile, a temporary substitute! Again, logistics rule. Allow me to explain.

First let us remind ourselves that a university, by definition, is like a school of fish: one large gathering of more or less independent fish. The difference would be that fish in a school are all pretty much alike, but schools in a university tend to be as different as a School of Engineering is from a School of Veterinary Medicine.

A university as large and various as mine is made up of schools large and small, too many to mention. My own school is the largest "fish." It is called The College of Arts and Sciences (CAS) and has by far the largest student body. Each year the CAS confers degrees on some three thousand of its undergraduates. Some earn a Bachelor of Sciences degree, some, a Bachelor of Arts. Needless to say, I felt honored and proud to be chosen as faculty marshal for the "main event" of undergraduate life in my school.

Unlike universities in Japan, American universities have a flexible system of graduating students. Students here can graduate by fulfilling degree requirements at the end of any given term, which is to say three times a year: in April, August, or December.

That is the real difference between graduation and commencement, which takes place just once a year. Graduation takes place on paper. It is a matter of record, of requirements fulfilled, of degree certified. Commencement is the public celebration of that process. Graduation, you might say, is a matter of individuals, commencement, a matter of community. Commencement brings everyone together to celebrate the purpose and achievement of individuals and of the university community itself.

So it is that the graduating "class" of 2001 is really a commencement class. It includes candidates who completed their degree requirements in August and December of 2000, as well as those just finishing up in April of 2001. Technically, here at my institution, those who are graduating this spring are still degree

candidates because grade rosters are due three days after Commencement. If, as sometimes happens, a student fails a required course, they will not have graduated after all. The facsimile degree they received at Commencement will not become the real thing till they repeat that course with a passing mark.

So why doesn't the university delay Commencement till after grades are in? Again, it is a matter of logistics. America takes pride in being the land of the free and the American definition of freedom is based on notions of individual liberty. That understanding of freedom translates into a constant pressure for more flexibility, not less, in life.

And so it is that Commencement is held at the busiest time of year for all concerned. And to be fair, students who have finished their exams are naturally anxious to get on with the business of life. Many have summer jobs waiting for them. Many rent housing in a city whose leases expire at the end of April.

Commencement for the graduating class of 2001 took place on April 28, the last Sunday of the month. The day was sunny and unseasonably warm, 80 degrees Fahrenheit by noon. The place was the Mellon Arena in downtown Pittsburgh. Formerly known as the Civic Arena, it is home to the Pittsburgh Penguins, every Pittsburgher's favorite professional ice-hockey team, and rightly so, since the Penguins have won the Stanley Cup a number of times.

Just the day before Commencement, the Penguins had defeated the Buffalo Sabres in the third game of the playoffs. I had not been there in the stands, howling for blood with the rest of the fans. I had been home, losing sleep to correcting exams and reading term papers. Still, I was feeling downright energized when I arrived at the arena an hour earlier. I was also glad I had my husband drop me off instead of trying to drive myself. Policemen on every corner were doing their best to deal with a complex congestion of cars and pedestrians. The flow of people into the arena itself was complicated by smaller crowds of graduates posing for pictures with friends and family. I had to smile at the sight of students I had seen all year long in sweatshirts, jeans and sneakers decked out now in the billowing black gowns and stiff square "mortarboard" caps of graduation attire.

I waved hello to a number of familiar faces as I hurried on to find the entrance reserved for marshals. At the reception desk, I was given a baton to carry in my right hand. I was also given my official hat, a blue "beefeater." Most people know this peculiar piece of headgear from picture postcards of the guards at the Tower of London, or on the label of the brand of gin that bears their name. The beefeater I had in my hand was a soft floppy hat somewhat like a beret. As far as I know, it is worn in America only at Commencements at universities like mine which cherish (or in some instances invent) their connections with merry old England.

Some years ago a minor scandal arose when the city of Pittsburgh bought some buses made in Japan. The molded plastic seats were found to be too demurely Japanese to accommodate the more expansive behinds of Americans. I thought of that East/West difference now, finding my head several sizes too small for all the beefeaters I was given to try on.

Well, I thought, America is the land of flexibility so I had better be flexible too and let my head wander around inside this monster hat. I had my gown and doctoral hood in a bag so the next stop was the ladies room where I went to put them on. It was jam-packed, of course, so I took my place in line, thinking ahead to the long long long long time it would be before—well, you understand.

Next stop was the mirror crowded with faces

old and young trying to look their feminine best in these medieval outfits academics wear when they strut their higher education stuff. I checked my ensemble and found it all right, everything black, even the dinky handbag ladies are allowed, so long as they give it its commencement name of "pochette." Even my hair still passes for black, streaked as it is with stray strands of gray. Too bad there was not more of it, and on a larger head. Then maybe I could make that beefeater fit. It threatened to fall down over my eyes at any moment—and what then?

At least my doctoral hood was on straight in back, its green and yellow bands adding a note of brightness to an otherwise drab outfit.

It was already half past one before the crowd got settled in their seats. Seated next to me was a young pre-med student from Maine. She too was a marshal, the student who would lead the graduating class of 2001 to the podium.

I looked around, feeling like a potential small personal puddle in this sea of humanity. In spite of the option to forego the occasion, the arena was jam-packed. This was no howling ice hockey crowd. It was a smiling, chitchatting multitude of teachers and students and parents and friends gathered together to celebrate the end of years of learning and the beginning of a lifetime of more of the same. I felt quite moved and thought how moved so many parents must be too, in more ways than one. For one thing, for many of them graduation must mean the end of horrific yearly expense. Maybe now, I thought, some of those parents can think of saving for their own retirement.

At five minutes to two we were asked to be seated, a polite way of telling us to stop talking and pay attention. Settling in to be quiet and pay attention gave each of us a chance to register another fact of the day: that we were sitting on portable chairs set on—ice! Because of course this was a hockey arena. Thin layers of plywood were all that separated us from the frozen solid cold at our feet.

Just as I was wondering if maybe three or four hours of frozen feet would have the convenient side effect of freezing my fluid-awareness too, the University Chamber Orchestra struck up a familiar university theme: the Nimrod variation from Sir Edward Elgar's "Enigma Variations." That signaled the beginning of Commencement 2001. We stood as the procession entered the arena.

First in line was the Chief University Marshal, president of the Faculty Senate, a distinguished professor in the Graduate school of Public Health. I know him very well. We have competed in a number of races. I know what he would say if I asked him which he would rather wear, running shorts or commencement regalia. But here we were and he was looking marvelously medieval, solemn and dignified. I reached up and touch my beefeater nervously, convinced that it would swallow my head any moment now

Next to mount the stage were the doctoral candidates of the class of 2001, followed by university faculty and staff. Then came the council of deans followed by university trustees and various administrative officers. This last group included the featured guest speaker and the Chancellor of the university. As ritual demands, each group was led by its two marshals identified by blue beefeaters just like mine.

Once the dignitaries were seated onstage, the university marshal announced that the convocation had begun. Everyone stood for the national anthem, men removing their hats as is the custom. The anthem was sung as a solo by a woman with a beautiful voice. I assumed that she was a graduating music major. My view of her was cut off by the

forest of tall graduates standing between little me and the distant podium. Oddly enough, I could see her lovely face in close-up, thanks to a huge monitor suspended in the center of the arena. It was such a different sight from the usual close-up view of ferocious hockey players suited up for combat on the ice.

After a brief congratulatory speech to degree candidates, the Chancellor conferred an honorary doctorate on this year's guest of honor, Dr. David Satcher, Surgeon General of the United States. His first M. D. and Ph. D. came by way of his own hard work at the Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland, Ohio. Since those first degrees in 1970 he has been given honorary degrees by eighteen prestigious academic institutions in the United States.

What impresses me most about this distinguished African-American doctor/administrator is the degree of motivation and devotion that made him what he is today. Dr. Satcher was born in Anniston, Alabama in 1941. His birthplace was, as they say in the USA, in the middle of nowhere. He was one of many children in his family, the one who almost did not survive childhood. He would have died when he was quite small, but for the dedication of a family doctor, who sat by him day and night.

Dr. Satcher credits that doctor's example with inspiring him to take up medicine. For many decades now, his own sense of mission has been directed at making public health available to all. He has set himself a difficult task in a nation where thirty-six million citizens have no health coverage and shocking numbers of mothers and infants have no access to medical care.

The acceptance speech he gave was also impressive, outlining his vision for public health in the United States. He also graced that serious message with welcome touches of humor. Still, his message to the graduating class of 2001 was serious, simple, and direct: *Don't smoke! And if you do smoke, quit!*

He might as well have said: "Don't let your young life go up in smoke." I myself had not realized that lung cancer caused by smoking is the leading cause of death among Americans—higher even than cardiovascular disease.

Dr. Satcher's speech, good as it was, was rather long, so I was feeling somewhat relieved when it ended and the Chancellor began the long process of conferring degrees. Each school of the class of 2001 stood as he called their name. First up was the School of Engineering, followed by the School of Education. American students are famously apt to "act up" on all manners of occasions, so I was glad to see things going well in that respect. At least they did go well in that respect till the School of Pharmacy was called. Clearly, there was a conspiracy afoot, since a group of about thirty students suddenly stood up to celebrate Pharmacy's achievement by throwing balloons and streamers of white paper tape. It looked like the kind of mischief made by friends of the bridegroom at weddings. But what could thousands of us do but laugh? Commencements may be solemn occasions, but few such occasions are proof against the American love of boisterous behavior.

By now, two hours had passed. Some fifty doctoral candidates filed onto the stage to receive their diploma and doctoral hood. A couple of my friends were in the procession, but my view was blocked. Again, I looked up at the monitor. There I caught a glimpse of one friend's smiling face. She is a librarian at the University's main library. She had taken one course a term, working full-time, for ten long years. Now at last she had her reward for so much hard work, a doctorate in information science. I have long been impressed by such steady determination from a woman

almost my age.

I was also surprised to see such a large number of foreign students—students from all over the world—receiving our highest degree. I was pleased to see this confirmation of my university's mission of global education.

By now, the crowd was getting restless. Young and old were getting tired, and youth is always restless. Yet some I saw sneaking toward the exit have a look of needing to visit a place I would very much like to be visiting myself.

Finally, it was time for me to lead the procession forward. I was sure I looked perfectly dignified, even in a hat too large for my head. The College of Art and Science students were the largest graduating student body. Though about 3,000 formed the class of 2001, two thirds of those attended. Many already graduated in August or December last year and simply did not return for the ritual of towns. Even among those graduating this term there was a noticeable absenteeism. Some chose not to spend the money: $60 for a polyester cap and gown. Others were too busy or already gone to their jobs.

Having performed my duty, I now switched to paying closer attention to events onstage. It was time for the short speech known as the Student Response. It was given by an undergraduate English major who served as editor of The Pitt News, the university student paper. He spoke on behalf of the Class of 2001, in essence thanking the university for "opening up the future" to students like him. He spoke of his own experience as a member of the Heinz Choir, the university's representative choral ensemble. The choir would be setting out on a world tour the day after graduation.

It is interesting to note that the name of the choir is taken from one of Pittsburgh's famous families, one whose huge fortune was made from products as humble as pickles and ketchup. Heinz products made the company "a household name" all across America. Heinz was synonymous with pickles and ketchup. This happened long before Madison Avenue made advertising into a multi-billion-dollar industry in America. Now companies pay millions to gain this advantage Heinz has had for over a century now.

Also interesting to note that the family's money has done the city of Pittsburgh a world of good. The university's small but elegant Heinz Chapel is a treasure built in the 1920s in a Gothic Cathedral style. And that is just one small example of this family's public spirit. A larger, more recent one, would be Heinz Hall, home of the world-famous Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra.

The student response was followed by a touch of fund-raising on behalf of the University Alumni Association. Like most such schools in America, the University of Pittsburgh needs its additional millions year after year as programs expand and costs increase at alarming rates. The speaker was the Alumni Association president, a CEO in a major brokerage firm. He made clever use of his own professional success, offering each graduate a free one-year membership in his firm. That would ease him or her more quickly into stock market participation and, presumably, speed up the kind of personal prosperity that leads to donations to the Alma Mater. I also could not help thinking that this was a shrewd business move on his part as well, since surely a number of those free memberships would lead to paid renewal....

I was not the only one getting restless now. When the vocalist returned to lead the assembly in singing the traditional "Hail Our Alma Mater," most in the audience mumbled along wearily. A few did belt it out.

The long ceremony was finally over. The

afternoon outside was bright and beautiful and all-flutter with happy graduates. Waving hello and goodbye to a number of friends and colleagues, I made my way through the milling crowd and traffic jams of automobiles to the nearest bus stop. Weary as I was and thirsty now, too.

Next morning's newspapers featured our graduation ceremony. The headline of one read: "PAYBACK TIME." The article underneath explained that "tears of joy from college graduate evaporate over the next month as they sweat out average debt loads that have risen 33.8 percent in the past five years." Nationwide, an estimated 60 percent of undergraduates take out loans to complete their four-year college education. In the state of Pennsylvania, the average debt the student accumulated has risen to $16,798. Even that amount is small potatoes compared to the debt incurred by the average graduate from medical school There the average debt runs to $100,000. The federal government's student loan guarantee program absorbs interest costs while a student is in school. But once the student graduates, the loan must be repaid within ten years —unless the student receives a deferment for graduate school or military service.

The costs involved add a note of urgency to the pleasure I feel in helping students all I can. I am pleased to report that all my advisees to date have found good jobs or gone on to graduate school. Writing so many reference letters—as many as fifteen per student—did take a lot of time last term, but I have no doubt it was time well spent. I did not need Commencement to teach me that. It is a lesson I learn, term after term, from the best of all teachers; the young men and women who ask me to help them shape their future life.

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