

Distance doesn't dim graduates' joy of achievement

This past weekend should have been our commencement ceremonies. During the weekend I took the opportunity to pause and reflect – to silently express my gratitude for the students who choose to make FHSU their alma mater and for the faculty who ensured our graduates were absolutely prepared for their next adventure.

I also thought about the letter I sent to our graduates earlier this year, which read in part: “Dear Students – I consider the commencement ceremonies we host each year to be among the most important and cherished traditions of this university. Commencement is the celebration of a life-changing and singular achievement – one that has been years and even decades in the making. Every student will tell a different story about the journey to their degree, and every student will remember their graduation day.”

The letter went on to explain our celebratory plans. Each student will receive a regalia kit containing a gown, a hood (for graduate students), mortarboard, tassel, commencement program and diploma in an official Fort Hays State University diploma case. Our hope is that our graduates will use this kit to celebrate their achievements with the family and friends who have helped them throughout their academic careers. The university will also build social media events to supplement the kit and honor our students. Though not ideal – heartfelt.

I am so proud of our students. And yet that lack of celebration not only creates a void for them but for me as well. So, I did what I love to do: checked-in with some of our students.

Deja Brewer, Lenexa, is a student employee in the Geosciences Department and the president of the Black Student Union. Deja majored in general studies with a concentration in elementary education. She loves photography and baking. Next fall she plans on attending culinary school to become a chef. Deja and I have become very close over the years – ever since she came to visit me to complain about my decision not to cancel classes one wintry day. I truly miss seeing her on campus. Regarding commencement plans, Deja said: “Due to the postponed graduation for seniors, my family will be putting on a ceremony at home in my grandpa's backyard for me. My family is my biggest supporter, and I am the first to graduate from college, so this is a big accomplishment for my family and me.”

Nia Vasquez-Ward, Colorado Springs, Colo., is the youngest of three children and the only girl. She is also the first to go to college in her family. She earned a degree in criminal justice with a minor in psychology. Her dream is to become a probation officer. Nia has an amazing smile, and I bet her friendliness and graciousness will be welcomed by those with whom she will work. According to Nia, “Once my commencement kit comes in, my family has already planned a photoshoot with me in my cap and gown. This is exciting because I was going to have to do photos on my own in Hays, but now I can have my family in the photos, which will allow me to keep hold of special memories. I am still going to decorate my cap and save it for the new commencement date. Once this all passes, we will celebrate with a party.”

Becky Windholz, WaKeeney, put college on hold to pursue other opportunities after graduating high school, then began her FHSU studies in the summer of 2013. On Sept. 13 of that year, her son lost his father in a tragic vehicle accident. As much as she did not want to put college on hold again, she

knew her son, who was only 9 years old at that time, needed his mother, so she stepped out for another four years. This spring, Becky completes an elementary education degree with a minor in special education. She is looking forward to a very impactful career at Trego County USD 208 as a middle school special education teacher. Becky's thoughts on commencement: "With the unprecedented times in our lives, I do not know when I will be walking across the stage to get my diploma. However, I do plan to take my cap and gown from my commencement kit and have a fun photoshoot with my family to celebrate this life-long goal of mine. It wouldn't have been possible without their support, so we will celebrate this accomplishment together, as a family. Thank you, Fort Hays. You will always have a spot in my heart!"

Hearing the resiliency and pride through the voices of our students reaffirms for me the power of a Fort Hays State University education. For it is indeed a special privilege, one to be cherished. I truly hope that the commencement weekend left students feeling not the sadness of a missed ceremony, but the pride and the love we, the faculty and staff, feel for them. We look forward to their future successes and strong connections to the Fort.

Congratulations graduates!