



## Want something from the President? Send a student to ask him.

The photographer had just concluded a photo session on the south oval with David and Molly Shi Boren for the cover of the Fall 2004 *Sooner Magazine*. A small group of students, who had been watching the proceedings from across the chrysanthemum beds, rushed up to the President eager to talk. Not an unusual occurrence in itself, but these students had a specific reason for seeking him out. They wanted to thank him for changing his mind.

Several days earlier, Boren had cancelled plans by a few of OU's colleges to hold convocations for their December graduates. An ardent defender of tradition and proponent of institutional inclusiveness, Boren did not want to detract from the official spring Commencement, where degrees are conferred on all the year's graduates from the Norman campus, OU-Tulsa and the Health Sciences Center colleges—except medicine and dentistry, whose later coursework completion dates have led to separate ceremonies in Oklahoma City.

The student protest that ensued centered on the lateness of the decision, arrangements already made by families to attend from distant locations and the inability of many December graduates to return for the spring celebration. Boren granted a one-time reprieve, then initiated a re-evaluation of mid-year recognition and the graduation process in general.

Commencement is academia's most meaningful ritual—or should be. "Pomp and Circumstance" is more than its musical accompaniment; it is its theme, the pulling out of all the ceremonial stops, with pageantry appropriate to the solemnity of the occasion. But Commencement also has been batted about over the years.

By the 1950s, the number of graduates, their families and friends had outstripped the capacity of the campus' large

auditorium, and Commencement became an evening event in the stadium, subject to Oklahoma's capricious spring weather and occasional streakers and protesters. A new Lloyd Noble Center offered shelter by the mid-'70s but likewise was outgrown. In 1992 the ceremony was moved back to the stadium, with LNC as a very crowded bad-weather backup.

Every degree candidate once marched individually across a single stage, sometimes for hours, a distinction eventually reserved for master's and Ph.D.s, while bachelor's recipients stood and had their degrees conferred en masse. Then someone thought to erect additional side platforms, allowing individual parading by several colleges simultaneously.



For many years, the spring festivities also have included auxiliary college convocations and/or receptions, in which personal recognition takes place in closer proximity to the family camcorder. Graduates are encouraged to participate in both their convocations and Commencement; most do, but some do not. Exact figures on participation by returning December and August graduates are not available, but it is safe to say that the numbers are not large. Commencement attendance as a whole has declined in spite of the undeniable grandeur of the event and a succession of A-list speakers.

Boren recently formed a Graduation Office, headed by long-time University

staff member Becky Heeney, to deal not only with Commencement and convocations but also to coordinate the graduation process, including efforts to increase the graduation rates. Spring 2005 will see some major changes as Commencement Day becomes a more leisurely Commencement Weekend.

Scheduled for Saturday morning during the Boren years, Commencement is being moved to Friday evening, in part with comfort in mind, since outdoor-friendly dry weather in May often comes with attendee-unfriendly heat, especially for cap-and-gowned graduates. The Borens will host a reception following the ceremony on the stadium's north lawn. Saturday will be reserved for the college convocations and receptions, which no longer need be scheduled so tightly after Commencement.

Will everyone be satisfied with the new arrangement? Of course not. It ties up parts of two days instead of one for participating faculty and staff, but then that is the business they are in. Some family members will have to take off work and stay over a night, and that could be a hardship. But Commencement is one of those once-in-a-lifetime occasions. A lot of sacrifice has gone into those degrees; perhaps the celebration merits just a little bit more.

And what about those December graduates and their desire to be recognized before they head off to pursue their life goals? Boren has approved mid-year college convocations or other appropriate events—while still hoping the newly minted alumni will elect to return for spring Commencement as well.

Molly Boren often refers to a joke making the rounds among staff, faculty and especially deans—that if you want something from the President, send a student in to ask him.

Guess what? That's no joke. —CJB