



prologue.

Returning to complete that degree? Extraordinary. Going through Commencement? Priceless.

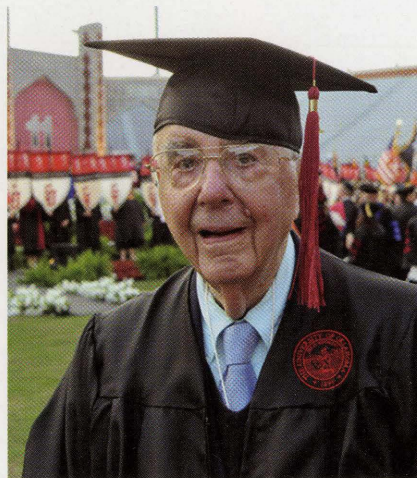
There have always been those who question in the press or on television or on the lecture circuit the value of a college degree—usually someone who already has one. For anyone in the degree business, this attitude could be troubling—but only if he or she has never been to Commencement, that annual rite of passage that somehow says to the world, “OK, world. I said I’d do it, and I’ve done it. Come celebrate with me.”

Today the University of Oklahoma provides its graduates with multiple opportunities for elaborate public recognition—as a group at the gala Friday night Commencement (see the inside back cover for photographic proof), individually at the colleges’ convocations, departmental and program receptions during that day or the following Saturday. However, the degree and the celebration do not always follow in orderly fashion. For one reason or another, some newly minted alumni skip the ceremonies—and not surprisingly many of them always regret having done so.

One such graduate was Irv Trachtenberg, who donned cap and gown and processed with the Class of 2011 on May 13, although he had completed his journalism degree in 1950. The 87-year-old Trachtenberg, the top advertising student in his class, traveled from Portland, Oregon, with his wife, Pearl, to be joined by family members from both coasts for the long-delayed event.

Trachtenberg had been eagerly anticipating Commencement 1950 when his father had a heart attack. He took his last final exam and drove non-stop to New York. Time, career and family intervened, but as he watched children and grandchildren graduate, he continually was reminded that he had missed his

moment in the spotlight. A niece who became aware of his early disappointment contacted the OU Graduation Office, and Trachtenberg finally completed his educational journey.



Irv Trachtenberg, Class of 1950 and 2011

Bill Weppner’s story is a little different. He was in uniform, not cap and gown, when he received a bachelor’s degree in electrical engineering from the University of Buffalo and an Air Force commission on the same day in 1959. Later the Air Force Institute of Technology sent him back to complete a 1964 master’s at the University of Oklahoma, then off to his next military assignment. His diploma came by mail.

He retired in 1980 and now teaches at Southwest Tennessee Community College in Memphis. The day after the 2002 STCC graduation ceremonies, “I got this wild idea,” he recalls. Maybe he could still walk the stage at OU; he got in touch for the first time since he had left Norman. On the 40th anniversary of his master’s, he went through Commencement and the College of Engineering Convocation—in full academic regalia.

For another category of Commencement celebrants, the festivities are more than a weekend’s return to the campus. Those who left OU with requirements unmet have a longer road, necessitating a strong commitment to finish what they started. It is easier now with online courses trumping the problem of proximity, but it takes time, a course or two at a whack.

Nowhere is this group of returnees more recognizable than in the Athletics Department. This spring 139 graduates from all sports were honored at the department’s well-attended reception—and for 23 of them more than six years had passed since they began their degree work. The quick answer is that they were initially more focused on playing at the next level—in football and men’s basketball that may be true. But that sort of success comes to very few. Slowly but surely another focus takes over—at least if academic adviser Teresa Turner has her way.

Turner is charged with the Athletics Department’s degree completion program. With colleagues C. B. Elder and Carla Winters, she relentlessly pursues any former athlete she can find who is reasonably close to a degree, and every week she gets responses. The Varsity O Association puts out information. Former teammates talk to each other, recalling promises made when they came to OU, many of them with a chance to be the first family member to graduate. Somehow they find a way.

Does everyone need a college degree? Of course not. But for those whose dream is to hold that diploma in hand, whose ambitions require it, whose hearts covet it, there is no substitute. And let us hope that they also seize the opportunity to cross the platform and hear their University say, “Well done.” —CJB