



Commencement: Behind the Scenes

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While every attempt is made to organize and coordinate a flawless ceremony for each commencement, things do happen. One marshal had his section seating in reverse order. A mad scramble took place to reseal about seventy graduates prior to asking them to move on stage to receive their individual diplomas. During a ceremony in 2000, the marshal in charge of the faculty section began seating the robed participants in the wrong rows, which were right in front of the stage. Since each row had a different number of seats at EJ Thomas Hall and with graduates taking their position immediately behind the faculty section, people would be left

standing in the aisle. Fortunately, the university marshal observed the error from the podium and halted the proceedings until the faculty were properly seated.

Traditions come and go, but one found at each commencement ceremony has endured. The square mortar board hat worn as part of academic regalia has become a message board. Many undergraduate students uniquely decorate the top of the hat with short statements such as, “Thanks Mom & Dad,” “Need Job,” and “Deep in Debt.” The College of Engineering graduates, after receiving their diplomas, would in mass replace their mortar boards with stripped ball caps, i.e., train engineer caps, to signify pride in their achievement. On one occasion, unknown to the assistant marshal, two young women donned tutus under their black robes. Upon receiving their degrees, the two, who were next to each other in line, opened their robes and pirouetted across the stage to the applause and delight of the audience. Once in a while, some enterprising graduates might be seen having small blinking lights on their hats. The objective was to make sure their loved ones recognized them in the sea of black robes. Such displays were a distraction from the decorum expected by some but added to the joy of the occasion, Graduating!

The Edgar Award! This award was named after an infamous assistant marshal who always seemed to make errors—both small and large—at commencement ceremonies. It was awarded to a member of the planning team whom the group determined “screwed up” during the ceremony. Mostly

given in jest, and not given each year, the “plaque” was a toilet seat cut in half, signifying a “half-assed” effort. The practice was discontinued after 2000 as the new University Marshal deemed the award “too gross.”