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TOP STORY

## WKU honors more than 3,200 graduates during 183rd commencement

By AARON MUDD amudd@bgdailynews.com May 11, 2018



International students carry the flags of their countries in the Topper Walk down Avenue of Champions on their way to the football stadium on Friday, May 11, 2018, at WKU's new commencement ceremony. (Austin Anthony/photo@bgdailynews.com)

Austin Anthony

Western Kentucky University conferred degrees and certificates to 3,283 graduates Friday during the first outdoor commencement the university has held since 2006.

The ceremony began with the new Topper Walk, a parade-style event that had graduates, garbed in caps and gowns, wave red towels as they walked from the Kentucky Museum to Houchens-Smith Stadium.

“I think it’s pretty cool because we’ve been so separated in our colleges,” said graduate Angela Perrone, who waited for the cue for graduates to line up for the procession down the Avenue of Champions. “I think it’s really cool that we all get to be together.”

Her friend, Samantha Weick, agreed.

“I think it’s interesting to see campus one last time before we leave,” she said.

The Topper Walk, a tradition borrowed from WKU’s football games, was also well-received by parents at the university’s 183rd Commencement.

“I like the idea,” said Kevin Gentry, who waited with his wife, Kim, for graduates to pass by Downing Student Union.

“We’re alumni so we like to come back to campus,” Kim Gentry said.

The two were there for their daughter, Courtney, who was graduating with an entrepreneurship degree. Both said the university has offered supportive faculty and vital instruction.

“They’ve been really helpful with her,” Kevin Gentry said.

Paulita Hayes and her husband, Joey, also appreciated the change of pace.

“This is so much more casual and loose and relaxed,” said Joey Hayes. “I just think it’s great.”

The two have watched their son, Micah, find a home in the campus rugby club. After a career in the military, he's graduating with dual degrees in social studies and education in hopes of becoming a high school teacher.

Commencement began shortly after graduates arrived in the football stadium and took their seats.

When WKU President Timothy Caboni addressed graduates, he urged them to keep their memories close after leaving the hill.

"Your WKU experience is special and it is unique to you," he said. "I hope it has prepared you for a good life."



The ceremony included the commissioning of 16 ROTC cadets and the recognition of Lillian Nellans as the Ogden Foundation Scholar and Nicole Musgrave as the recipient of the John D. Minton award. Both awards recognize the university's top undergraduate and graduate students, respectively.

WKU's student body president Andi Dahmer encouraged graduates to carry the Hilltopper spirit with them after they leave the hill.

"Today as you leave this stadium, you are not just a Hilltopper, not only a member of the WKU alumni, but a vessel of experience and a beacon of inspiration for all those who come next," she said.

Caboni added that he hoped students' time on the hill had given them vital workplace skills along with the ability to adapt to change and even new jobs that haven't been conceived of yet.

"Be bold, be courageous, be the solution," he said, encouraging students to embrace diversity. "Surround yourselves with others who see the world differently."

Following the ceremony, graduates and their families were invited to a new Big Red Bash event on the university's South Lawn. The celebration featured musical entertainment by Tyrone Dunn and Kin-Foke, food and fireworks. Graduates also had the opportunity to get their portrait made through the university's commencement photographer GradImages.

While all students received their degrees at the ceremony, WKU's six academic colleges will host special recognition ceremonies throughout the day Saturday.

The ceremonies will take place at Diddle Arena with the following schedule: College of Health and Human Services at 8 a.m.; University College at 10 a.m.; Ogden College of Science and Engineering at noon; College of Education and Behavioral Sciences at 2 p.m.; Potter College of Arts & Letters at 4 p.m.; and Gordon Ford College of Business at 6 p.m.

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