One of the most touching moments of the college's 164th Commencement exercises on Sunday, May 20, was the recessional. New graduates walked, diplomas in hand, through lines of faculty. Applause, handshakes, pats on the back, smiles, high fives and tearful hugs from faculty mentors, advisors and friends said “Well done, graduate,” “We're proud of you” and “Now go out and make us proud” in ways that left all of us feeling a part of something much bigger than ourselves.

How appropriate that Wofford College's faculty and students have this final experience together after four years of teaching, learning, researching, exploring, traveling, questioning, serving and debating questions both large and small. Commencement weekend is about celebrating our graduates and sending them forward, but it is also about rejoicing in the liberal arts and the importance of creating an environment committed to stretching the academic mind by bringing both depth and breadth to the educational experience.

While every employee of the college and everyone who donates their time, resources and expertise contribute to student success, there is no question that the faculty is at the core of Wofford's distinctive educational experience. Wofford faculty deliver disciplinary knowledge, absolutely, but they also help students discover what it means to understand history or appreciate fine art or music or theater. Wofford faculty teach the evaluation of numbers and symbols and letters in mathematics or chemistry, the nuances of Shakespeare or Eliot or Baldwin, and the interconnectivity of disciplines. They offer opportunities for students to learn how to prepare for a future of personal fulfillment and societal responsibility — how to think critically, write effectively and act ethically after considering the philosophical implications of issues ranging from affordable health care to cybersecurity. Our faculty define the curriculum and expose students both to the essential foundational or classical knowledge that sustains us as human beings and the knowledge that prepares us for the future.

Throughout its history Wofford has been fortunate to have an abundance of exceptional faculty. In the Fall 2016 Wofford Today, Dr. Phillip Stone ’94, the college's archivist, boldly published “The archivist’s list of the top 10 faculty members in Wofford’s history.” Stone’s list included faculty who, in the course of their time at Wofford, had a significant influence on some aspect of the college: “Some were leading scholars in their fields. Some brought something new to the college. Some had influence as the mentors for a generation of alumni.” On the list were Dr. Don Dobbs, professor of biology from 1955 to 1995, who helped build Wofford's reputation in the sciences; Dr. John Harrington, professor of geology from 1963 to 1981, who published, taught and mentored in ways that were always innovative; Dr. James Childes, professor of German from 1914 to 1947, who published a widely used German textbook and
founded the national German honor society from Wofford's campus; and Dr. Constance Antonsen, who taught art history and fencing at Wofford from 1962 to well into the 1990s. She was a legend with oft-told stories of her exploits saving priceless art and artifacts from the Nazis during World War II.

Of course, Dr. Lewis P. Jones ’38, professor of history from 1946 to 1987, an expert in South Carolina history and one of the college’s great teachers and mentors, made the list. He was famous for bringing history lectures alive in the classroom with his dry wit, pointed discussion questions and complete mastery of the subject, but he also was known for creating orbiting seminars in which he chartered buses to take students throughout South Carolina for an in-the-field history lesson that changed the course of more than one Wofford student's life.

While we often call Old Main the heart of Wofford College, I think all of us know that the faculty are truly at the heart of the institution because they embrace the residential liberal arts experience as a way of life. Colleges such as Wofford are communities in and of themselves. They’re places to live, play, explore and plan, but fundamentally they are places to learn. And if they are places to learn, then they must be filled with people who teach, mentor, advise and support both inside and outside the classroom. Wofford has always been committed to recruiting faculty who teach, grad lab reports and papers, keep office hours and advise students with excellence and devotion. These teachers and scholars also participate in evening panel discussions, fill the bleachers at Wofford athletics events, network and present at conferences, attend student art exhibitions and plays, engage side-by-side with students in the community, contribute to knowledge in their fields, participate in campus governance and leadership committees, and even walk their dogs or bring their children to campus.

Dr. Deno Trakas, the Laura J. and Winston Hoy Professor of English, is an example of the commitment to which I am referring. He helped start the Wofford women’s tennis team in the late 1980s and served as its coach during those formative years. He has shepherded student journalists for decades as chair of the college’s Publications Board and has chaired the Department of English. He has traveled with students during Interim, written books, spoken at conferences and mentored student writers, some of whom have gone on to publish their own books. A few years ago he ran with the bulls in Pamplona, Spain, setting yet another example for our students of what it means to experience new challenges and new adventures. His office door is always open, and more times than not, a student is sitting in his book-crammed space talking about a paper or research for a novel or whether to consider graduate school.

Wofford faculty members such as Deno Trakas are all part and parcel of the intellectual journey that students take, and we have always recruited and worked to retain faculty who add breadth, depth and diversity to a department’s teaching and research capabilities, which means expanded opportunities for students. Dr. Helen Dixon, assistant professor of religion, and Dr. Youness Mountaki, assistant professor of Arabic, are in their first years at Wofford. Dixon came to Wofford from Helsinki, Finland, where she was part of a five-person team that was awarded an eight-year, 8 million euro grant to start a new think tank on ancient Near Eastern empires. For our students this means a growing network of top scholars in the field and opportunities for archaeological experience. Mountaki, a native of Casablanca, came to the United States as a Fulbright scholar. He has expertise in teaching modern standard Arabic in a way that gets students excited about learning. He also is planning to lead Wofford students during Interim 2019 on a travel/study project to explore the nature, culture, art, politics and religion of his native Morocco. Both Dixon and Mountaki are the type of faculty Wofford seeks to attract because they understand that being a member of the faculty at Wofford College means engaging students both inside the classroom and in a greater global context through travel-study experiences, internships or collaborative research.

Wofford faculty also elevate the student experience by engaging through their disciplines in the larger academic commons. Research, conference attendance and presentations, study and writing fuel our faculty intellectually, which, in turn, enhances classroom experiences and creates further opportunities for our students. This spring, the college announced the naming of three endowed professorships. All three of these individuals are active in research and professional organizations outside of the college. Dr. Christine Dinkins, the William R. Kenan Jr. Professor of Philosophy, has co-authored two books and has published a number of chapters and scholarly articles. In 2017 she received a nursing education grant from Sigma Theta Tau International Honor Society of Nursing to conduct site research at a nationally ranked medical center for her project “Nurse Preceptor Use of Socratic Pedagogy to Improve Critical Thinking in New Graduate Nurses.” Dr. Natalie Grinnell, the Reeves Family Professor in Humanities, maintains an active and varied scholarly presence in her field of medieval literature, publishing in-depth, discipline-specific research and presenting at conferences, including in 2017 at the 52nd annual Congress on Medieval Studies. Dr. Tim Terrell, the T.B. Stackhouse Professor of Economics, serves on the editorial staff of the Quarterly Journal of Austrian Economics and is a member of the editorial board of Political Economy of the Carolinas. He is an associated scholar with the Ludwig von Mises Institute. His primary research areas relate to regulation, environmental policy and ethics.

At Wofford, these three are the rule, not the exception. For example, Dr. Dawn McQuiston, associate professor of psychology, will take three Wofford students with her to the American Psychological Association 126th annual convention in San Francisco, California, in August, and Dr. Chuck Smith, associate professor of biology, also holds an appointment as a research scientist with the Department of Ecology and Evolutionary Biology at the University of Connecticut, which has opened doors for Wofford students to conduct national research into pit vipers. Faculty in the Department of Art and Art History — Dr. Karen Goodchild, the Chapman Professor of Humanities and chair of the department; Dr. Peter Schmunk, the Mr. and Mrs. T.R. Garrison Professor of Humanities; and Dr. David Efurd, associate professor — all use their scholarship, experiences with international research and travel and professional training to inform their work with Wofford students both on campus and across the globe.
Dr. Matt Cathey, associate professor of mathematics, and Dr. Joseph Spivey, associate professor and chair of the Department of Mathematics, gave a presentation in 2016 — “Breaking Free From Traditional Calculus Textbooks with Mathematica.” They now have developed a free, online textbook that has been well received by students because of its ease of use, interactivity and cost. Again, these are just a small percentage of the faculty who are turning their scholarship into expanded opportunities for students.

Wofford faculty also foster in students an affinity for civic engagement, global citizenship and moral responsibility. No one lives a life independent of community. Whether as a college or as a society, we thrive or fail together. I firmly believe that the greatest value of the type of broad and deep education that Wofford College provides is in developing relationships with others, an appreciation of differences and the receptiveness to transformation. The new Community-Engaged Faculty Fellows program that launched in the fall of 2017 institutionalizes support to faculty who have shown an interest in including a civic engagement component in their classes. Fifteen members of the faculty across nine disciplines accepted the challenge, partnering with local elementary schools, the Spartanburg Housing Authority and the city of Spartanburg, among others. Dr. Kara Bopp, associate professor of psychology and chair of the department, was one of the Community-Engaged Faculty Fellows. Through a grant funded by the Council of Independent Colleges and the AARP Foundation, Bopp and a group of Wofford student fellows engaged with older, low-income adults throughout Spartanburg in ways that supported the social, cognitive and emotional needs of these older adults while providing an impactful civic engagement opportunity for students.

End-of-term surveys showed that 89 percent of students who took one of these classes said they were challenged to do their best work partly because they felt a responsibility to the community. Faculty fellows reported that the civic engagement component of the class improved student understanding of community. Faculty fellows engaged with older, low-income adults throughout Spartanburg in ways that supported the social, cognitive and emotional needs of these older adults while providing an impactful civic engagement opportunity for students.

Because faculty invest so much in Wofford students, it is important that the college invest in the faculty. The college’s Center for Innovation and Learning sprung from this commitment and continues to promote effective and innovative teaching practices that engage and cultivate student learning. The best teachers continue to reflect on their practices in order to create rich learning environments for students. Sometimes that means faculty attend master classes taught by their peers. For example, within the past year, Dr. Kimberly Hall, assistant professor of English, and Dr. Peter Brewitt, assistant professor of environmental studies, led a roundtable discussion of living-learning communities; Dr. Britt Newman, assistant professor of modern languages, literatures and cultures, shared his thoughts on “Interim as a Pedagogy Lab;” and Dr. Carol Wilson, professor of English and coordinator of academic advising, has led several workshops on “Advising as Teaching.” In the spring the college received a $250,000 grant from the Arthur Vining Davis Foundations designed to align faculty development and support with the learning needs of tomorrow’s college students. The grant provides for faculty mentoring as well as time and space for faculty to discern and plan the best ways to prepare students to navigate the future. This grant pairs ideally with the $500,000 Mellon Foundation grant that Wofford received in the fall that gives faculty the necessary resources to design and pilot new courses, enhance existing courses and experiment with creative teaching methods. Wofford faculty, in turn, reinvest the time spent developing professionally back into Wofford students.

The beauty of the liberal arts at Wofford is that it has evolved in response, not to fads, but to fundamental changes in society. A hundred years ago philosophy was the core of the curriculum, and it remains a relevant and important major at Wofford because of its emphasis on helping students learn to analyze, think and write. A proposed major in environmental studies, on the other hand, would not have been considered at a faculty meeting a hundred years ago. In today’s complex world, however, we need those with the ability to integrate scientific, social, ethical and economic knowledge to study human and environmental sustainability. Again, faculty are the cornerstones of curriculum planning, evaluation and change. They bring ideas from the larger academic realm to the Wofford community and share Wofford innovations through their professional networks.

As a college we must raise support for the faculty — for advancing faculty development opportunities, for endowed professorships and chairs, and for endowments to support faculty-student collaborative research to promote innovation and experimentation in the classroom. Your support affirms our commitment to excellence and the centrality of the faculty-student relationship that is the essence of the Wofford experience.

Phillip Stone finished his list of the archivist’s top 10 faculty with an opportunity for readers to fill in the 10th faculty member on the list with their favorites. “And who is the tenth?” he wrote. “It’s your favorite professor, the one who made you see the world in a different way, encouraged you to work harder or gave you direction into your chosen career.”

Ultimately, Wofford graduates carry with them into the world their experiences with Wofford faculty. And the world is a much better place for it.
Nayef Samhat, President of Wofford College

Nayef H. Samhat, the 11th president of Wofford College, is a native of Detroit, Michigan. He holds a B.A. in international affairs from George Washington University's School of International and Public Affairs, a master's degree in international affairs from Columbia University and a Ph.D. in political science from Northwestern University.

Samhat came to Wofford in July 2013, after having served as provost and professor of political science and international studies at Kenyon College in Gambier, Ohio. Prior to his time at Kenyon, he was the Frank B. and Virginia B. Hower Associate Professor of Government and International Studies and an associate dean of Centre College in Danville, Kentucky.

His academic interests include international relations theory, international political economy and the politics of the Middle East, especially international relations in the Middle East. He has contributed articles, papers, reviews and essays on these and other topics to a variety of journals.

He is also a staunch advocate of the liberal arts educational experience, and he and his wife, Prema, love living on Wofford's beautiful campus.