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Thiel College celebrates two graduations unlike any in its history

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By EARL CORP



Despite the weather, the Thiel College class of 2021 was able to complete the Brother Martin's Walk prior to graduating on Sunday. Earl Corp/R-A

Neither rain, sleet, snow, nor pandemic could keep Thiel College from holding its 147th commencement exercises at Passavant Center on Sunday.

"The Class of 2021, you not only survived a pandemic, you thrived," Board of Trustees Chair John Hudson told them. "I urge you to use your gifts and better your communities and the world you live in."

Sunday marked the first time in the college's history it awarded master's degrees in business administration and speech-language pathology. "You are making history in your own lives as well as the college," said President Susan Traverso.

Thiel conferred 133 degrees to the class of 2021 which included 26 bachelor's degrees going to residents of Greenville, Hadley, Sandy Lake, Mercer, Jamestown, Hartstown and Adamsville.

There were 21 master's degrees awarded for the first time by the college, which included residents of Jackson Center, Greenville and Atlantic.



Thiel senior class president Kiersten Peabody, of Greenville, gives the class gift to Thiel President Susan Traverso during commencement on Sunday. Earl Corp/R-A

Rose & Black Funeral Homes funeral director Casey Rose was one of those receiving a master's degree in business administration.

Rose graduated from Thiel in 2014 then attended mortuary school. He said returning for the master's program, which he completed in a year, was challenging.

COVID-19 didn't play a role during his master's program, according to Rose.

"Not so much for us; we were such a small class," Rose said.

In the afternoon, Thiel College held a second commencement for the class of 2020 and awarded 133 degrees. The graduation had to be canceled last May due to the pandemic.

Greenville High School graduate Dave Blaney actually had graduated in December 2019 with a marketing degree, but was supposed to walk in the May ceremony.

"I thought I got out of the ceremony altogether," Blaney said with a laugh.

But he returned to his Alma Mater one more time.

"It's a rite of passage, a chapter closing and I can move on," Blaney said.

Matt Crawford, 2016 GHS graduate, was excited to return to Thiel for commencement.

"It's awesome, we've been waiting," Crawford said.

The secondary social studies major was the class salutatorian.



Graduating Thiel College students head to Passavant Center for commencement on Sunday. Earl Corp/R-A

Amelia Mutinelli graduated high school with Crawford, and was graduating college with him on Sunday. The speech pathology major will be attending graduate school at Clarion in the fall.

“It’s exciting they were able to do this for us,” Mutinelli said.

Aside from awarding degrees, Thiel honored the husband and wife team of Bretton and Stacey Walberg, of Walberg Family Pharmacies, with the William A. Passavant Award.

The Walbergs purchased the Jamestown Pharmacy from Bretton’s parents in 1999 and have expanded the business to 11 pharmacies in Pennsylvania and Ohio.

The Passavant award is one of the highest awards the college can bestow on an individual, according to Traverso.

The Walbergs teamed with Thiel College to set up COVID-19 vaccination clinics in Passavant Center.



(Above) Thiel College faculty lead the way out of the auditorium following commencement exercises on Sunday. (Left) Greenville’s Emily Groves received her bachelor’s of science degree in information systems at Thiel College’s 147th commencement on Sunday. (Below) Bretton Walberg leaves the Thiel commencement ceremony after he and his wife Stacey were honored with the William A. Passavant Award on Sunday. Earl Corp/R-A

"We are truly humbled by this award," Bretton said.

The Walbergs were able to administer approximately 37,000 doses of the vaccine. Bretton said they were accepting the award on behalf of everyone who made the vaccine clinic possible, including local legislators, churches, volunteers and Thiel College.

"We are so blessed in our volunteer partnerships," Bretton said.

Thiel College reached out to the Walbergs when they first started holding the clinics and offered to provide a space and volunteer manpower to hold the clinics.

"What an amazing gesture to reach out and help the community," Bretton said.

He then directed his remarks to the graduates.

"Be the example Thiel College has shown you," Bretton said. "Thanks for the award, we will share it with those who truly deserve it."

In her role as senior class president, Greenville's Kiersten Peabody presented the class of 2021's gift to Traverso. The Class of 2021 is donating an outdoor seating area to the college.



Thiel had planned for Sunday's ceremonies to be outdoor, at its football stadium, but rain, sleet and cold moved them indoors.