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TOP STORY

WKU celebrates 185th Commencement, recognizes more than 2,600 graduates

By AARON MUDD amudd@bgdailynews.com May 10, 2019



Dressed in caps and gowns, Western Kentucky University graduates paraded down the Hill on Friday amid international flags and waving red towels as the university celebrated its 185th commencement.

Called the Topper Walk, it's the continuance of a tradition that began last year as a way to shake up the university's regular graduation celebrations.

For Ruchini Mendis, a master's student from Sri Lanka studying mathematics, it was a chance to represent her country by carrying its flag. She did so in the aftermath of terrorist bombings that killed hundreds; she remembers having to defend her master's thesis as the attacks unfolded.

"It doesn't matter whether we're Buddhist or Christian. We're all like Sri Lankans," Mendis said, pointing out symbols in her flag for Buddhists, Muslims, Christians and Hindus.

Looking back on her experience at WKU, Mendis is profoundly grateful. Her next step is to pursue a doctorate at the University of Louisville and then possibly become a mathematics professor. Her parents came all the way from Sri Lanka to see her graduate.

"Thank you very much WKU," she said. "You gave me the strength to stand up and wings to fly."

This year, the university conferred degrees and certificates to 2,677 spring graduates during a ceremony at Houchens-Smith Stadium.

In his commencement address, WKU President Timothy Caboni offered students many pieces of advice. Perhaps most importantly: to avoid living passive lives and to carry the WKU spirit with them.

“Speak up, engage, make a difference,” Caboni said. “This is what Hilltoppers do.”

Among those honored was famed bluegrass musician Sam Bush. The fiddle and mandolin player from Bowling Green was presented with an honorary doctorate of fine arts.

In accepting the award, the three-time Grammy Award winner congratulated graduates and recalled his days as a drummer in Warren Central High School’s marching band participating in state competition.

“It was right over there, where I mistimed my turn by 10 steps,” he said, getting laughs from the crowd. “When you turn around and you’re 20 yards away from the rest of the band, well you catch up.”

The ceremony also featured the commissioning of 10 ROTC cadets.

Among them was U.S. Army 2nd Lt. Alexander Stamatiou of New Jersey. Stamatiou said he underestimated the friends he’d make as a graduate student in the university’s ROTC program.

“I made some lifelong friends here in this ROTC program and I’m just so happy that I got to meet them,” he said. “Just keep an open mind. ... Don’t go into any situation with a closed mind.”

Also during the ceremony, Kyla Scanlon of Louisville was recognized as the Ogden Foundation Scholar, which is WKU’s top undergraduate award. Rachel Kaiser of Covington received the John D. Minton Award, awarded to the top graduate student at WKU.

Among the degrees conferred, 1,842 were bachelor's degrees, 77 associate degrees, 494 master's and specialist degrees and 59 doctorate degrees. The university awarded 142 undergraduate certificates and 63 graduate certificates.

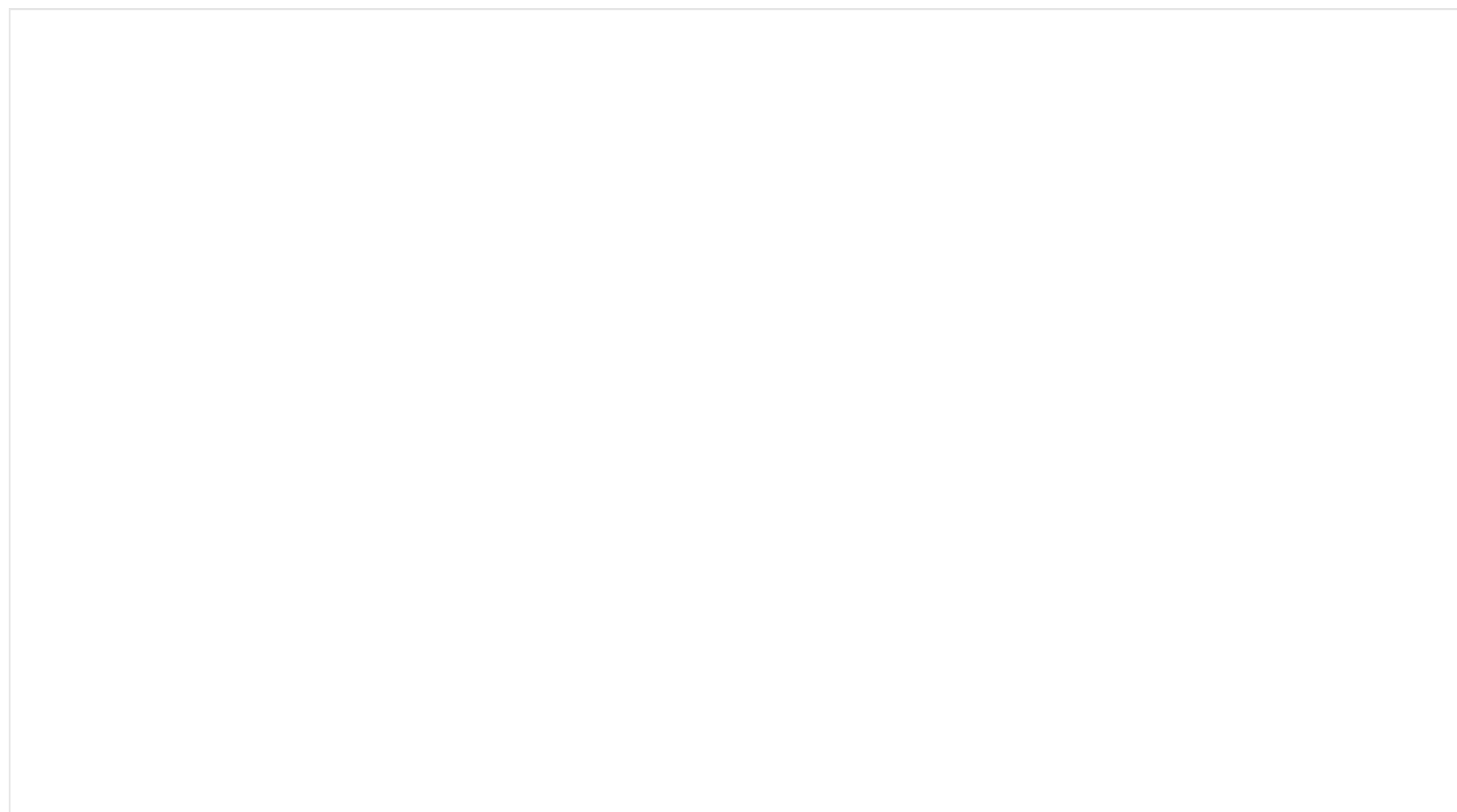
Separate ceremonies for each of WKU's five academic colleges will take place Saturday at Diddle Arena. Those ceremonies will celebrate the accomplishments of graduates who will walk the line and shake Caboni's hand.

A schedule for the Saturday commencement ceremonies is as follows: Gordon Ford College of Business at 8 a.m.; Potter College of Arts & Letters at 10:30 a.m.; Ogden College of Science and Engineering at 1 p.m.; College of Education and Behavioral Sciences at 3:30 p.m.; and College of Health and Human Services at 6 p.m.

Commencement ceremonies will also be broadcast live by WKU PBS and webcast live on WKU YouTube Channel at www.youtube.com/wkunews and on the WKU Facebook page at www.facebook.com/wkunews.

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VIDEO: 185th WKU Commencement kicks-off with Topper Walk

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Education reporter. Covers education and related issues, focusing primarily on the Bowling Green and Warren County public school districts and Western Kentucky University.

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