Bridges Begins Eighth Year as ABAC President

ABAC President David Bridges speaks at the Historic Front Campus Rededication on March 1.

TIFTON—With seven years as president of Abraham Baldwin Agricultural College under his belt, Dr. David Bridges is thinking about the future. But then again, the 10th president in the history of ABAC never stops thinking about days to come.

“We’ve got to be thinking about the next innovation that will continue to make ABAC a place where people choose to come,” Bridges, who began his eighth year as the ABAC president on July 1, said. “My goal for ABAC is for it to be as successful in the future as it has been in the past. For that to happen, we must do things differently.”
Bridges believes that the addition of bachelor’s degrees coupled with strong associate degree programs such as nursing will keep ABAC on a path toward an enrollment of 4,000 students in the future.

“Our goal is a slow, steady enrollment growth where we’ll approach 4,000 students over the next five years,” Bridges said. “The advantage we have is that our tuition is very low. ABAC is a great value for students with tuition rates for the coming year of about $1,400 per semester compared to about $2,400 and $4,000/semester for USG State Universities and USG Research Universities, respectively.”

“Agriculture, forestry, and wildlife programs are growing rapidly. ABAC graduates with these degrees are finding good-paying. These programs are our meat and potatoes. I can see 1,000 students just in that school (Agriculture and Natural Resources) alone this year.”

Bridges, the only ABAC president who is also an ABAC alumnus (Class of ’78), said the bachelor’s degree in biology is doing “phenomenally well.” Graduates use the degree as an entry point into medical school, dental school, pharmacy school, vet school and other health-related occupations. With the addition of a new science building later this year, these programs will grow even more.

He predicts the next big enrollment surge will come in the Stafford School of Business.

“Susan and Dill Driscoll brought creativity, innovation and energy in their first year as co-deans of that school,” Bridges said. “All colleges have business schools but not all colleges approach it like we do. Enhancement of programs in business in the Stafford School of Business will have a long-lasting positive impact on the college and the community.”
“It has been a difficult three or four or five years here during this time of economic downturn, particularly in rural communities,” Bridges said. “But the long term impact is really what we need to concentrate on and a forthcoming economic impact study is likely to show that ABAC’s impact is bigger than ever.”

“Because of the bachelor’s degrees, students are staying longer, spending more money, and assimilate into the community. They find jobs. They find spouses. Some of them never leave. I don’t know of any other institution in this town that brings in a more diverse group of people that leave a longer lasting impact on this community.

“In a 10 or 12 year period, we run thousands of people through the college. Many of them get degrees, stay in Tifton, raise a family, and contribute to the community.”

Bridges said the newly formed Board of Regents showed great insight when they changed the name of the college in 1933 from the Georgia State College for Men to Abraham Baldwin Agricultural College.

“We are just a really good fit for this area,” Bridges said. “Agriculture continues to be the state’s largest industry. Every day I see our graduates who have gotten their degrees and put down roots here.”

ABAC has made tremendous strides forward since Bridges assumed the presidency on July 1, 2006. To the outsider, the most noticeable change is the appearance of the front campus, including the reopening of the three original buildings.

Tift, Lewis, and Herring halls were the centerpiece of the campus when it opened as the Second District Agricultural and Mechanical School on Feb. 20, 1908. Time took its toll on the
three structures. As a result, Lewis and Herring closed for 20 years, and Tift closed for five years until it reopened on May 14, 2012. Lewis and Herring reopened on March 1, 2013.

“Our local legislative delegation was extremely supportive on that project,” Bridges said. “It took two chancellors and two governors but we got it done.”

The addition of bachelor’s degrees in January, 2008 will always be a milestone in Bridges’ presidency. Until that point, associate degrees had been the highest level of academic accomplishment at ABAC for 75 years. ABAC now offers bachelor’s degrees in biology, natural resources (forestry and wildlife), agriculture, and turfgrass and golf course management. As part of its Rural Studies Program ABAC offers bachelor’s degrees in business and economic development, writing and communications, social and community development, and politics and modern cultures. During the fall of 2012 20 percent of ABAC’s 3,200 students were enrolled in bachelor’s degree programs.

Other headline accomplishments during the past seven years include the opening of the Health Sciences Building, the creation of an intercollegiate soccer team, the opening of ABAC Lakeside student housing, the division of the curriculum into six schools study with a dean for each school, the celebration of the college’s 100th birthday, the addition of the Georgia Museum of Agriculture and Historic Village to the campus, and the raising of the admissions standards.

“We raised the bar on our admissions standards so that we could recruit and retain better students,” Bridges said. “It did have an effect on enrollment but it really improved the quality of academic programs and enhanced the student experience at ABAC.”

The Tifton/Tift County Chamber of Commerce recognized Bridges’ willingness to lead change when it awarded him the John Hunt Entrepreneur of the Year award in 2013. The 55-
year-old native of Parrott, Ga., who became a grandfather for the first time in May, said he never really thought of himself as an entrepreneur but he recognizes that forward movement requires change and with that comes some risk. “ABAC has accomplished a great deal. I expect ABAC to accomplish even more in the future,” Bridges said. “A great deal of change has occurred in higher education. It will change even more in the next 24 months. In fact, I predict it will change more in the next 24 months that it has changed in the last five years.”

Without using a crystal ball, where does Bridges see ABAC five years from now?

“ABAC will be a place that carries a reputation for preparing students for life,” Bridges said. “It will continue to be a desirable place for students to go to college. I want to see students lined up on the front steps of Herring Hall because they have made the choice to come to ABAC.”

Fall semester classes begin at ABAC on Aug. 14.

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