ABAC President David Bridges presented the first ever ABAC Alumni Association Award for bachelor's degree graduates to Andrea Smith, a biology major from Fitzgerald, at the fall commencement ceremony. ABAC expects a record number of bachelor's degree graduates to receive their diplomas at the spring commencement ceremony on May 7.

ABAC President Always Keep Eye on the Future
TIFTON—Planning for the future is always on the front burner when it comes to the priorities of Abraham Baldwin Agricultural College President David Bridges. Even so, it’s hard not to delight in the present day.

“It’s really remarkable when you consider the enrollment situation across the University System,” Bridges said. “We have an identity. We have a legacy. People know who we are.”

Spring semester 2015 numbers show that the enrollment at ABAC has increased for the fourth consecutive term. During the 2014 fall semester, ABAC became the only college or university south of Macon in the University System of Georgia to grow its enrollment two fall terms in a row.

A total of 3,138 students are enrolled for the 2015 spring term, a slight increase over the 3,132 students enrolled during the 2014 spring semester when ABAC was one of only three state colleges in the System to increase its enrollment.

“It comes down to focus and mission,” Bridges said. “That’s the reality of the situation. What has sustained us is the almost double digit growth in some of our upper division classes in agriculture, natural resources, and biology.”

Bridges stood on the front porch of Tift Hall on May 17, 2006 for the announcement that ABAC had been granted state college status by the Board of Regents of the University System. That news came on the heels of Bridges’ selection as the 10th president in the history of ABAC on May 11, 2006.

Both those events helped to set in motion the success that ABAC enjoys in 2015.
With state college status, ABAC now offers bachelor’s degrees in diversified agriculture, biology, business and economic development, natural resource management, golf course and turfgrass management, and rural studies. Over 1,100 students major in the bachelor’s degree programs.

The natural resource management degree offers four-year options in forestry and wildlife. The rural studies degree offers four-year options in social and community development, politics and modern cultures, and writing and communication.

“We started with 40 students in those programs in January of 2008, and now the number keeps going up every semester,” Bridges said. “I believe our next jump in enrollment will probably be in the Stafford School of Business where we have a new bachelor’s degree in business and economic development. That degree will be particularly popular among students who have an interest in family-owned businesses.”

Bridges’ selection as president came at a crucial time in the history of ABAC. As a member of the Class of 1978, he is the only ABAC president ever to have been a student at the college. He guided the institution through a very successful 100th birthday celebration in 2008 and worked in conjunction with state legislators to make sure the Historic Front Campus Renovation was completed on March 1, 2013.

In the $15 million renovation, all three original buildings on the campus, Tift Hall, Lewis Hall, and Herring Hall, received complete rehabilitation and are now shining examples of ABAC’s proud past and promising future.

“It was quite a project, and a lot of people stepped up to make it a success,” Bridges said. “Future generations of ABAC students will reap the benefits.”
Students from 150 Georgia counties, 18 states, and 28 countries are about to complete the spring semester at ABAC. Many of those students were a part of the 1,659 freshmen that ABAC enrolled in the fall term of 2014. Bridges and the ABAC administrative team would like to see those soon-to-be sophomores stay at the college for three more years to complete their bachelor’s degrees.

“Our new strategic plan is titled ‘Destination ABAC’ for a lot of different reasons but the number one reason is that we want ABAC to become a destination college,” Bridges said. “With a shrinking number of high school graduates in Georgia, the top students will have more and more choices. We want them to make ABAC their first choice.”

Bridges said the strategic plan actually places more emphasis on graduating students from ABAC than it does on enrolling students as freshmen.

“We have had four consecutive semesters where the number of graduates increased over the previous year,” Bridges said. “That’s the kind of numbers that are good for ABAC, for the community and for the state of Georgia.

“Think about it. When students stay at ABAC for four years to get one of our bachelor’s degrees, they are much more likely to stay in this area, find employment, and raise families.”

Bridges said the ABAC graduation rate is twice the average graduation rate of the 13 state colleges in the University System, and he expects a record number of bachelor’s degree graduates to walk across the Gressette Gymnasium stage at the spring commencement ceremony on May 7.
In the 2012 fiscal year, ABAC’s economic impact on Tifton and the surrounding area was $261,313,451. With all 1,300 beds filled at ABAC Lakeside and ABAC Place on campus, that economic impact will be magnified this year and in years to come when an increasing number of students are expected to choose four-year degrees.

###