ABAC President David Bridges spoke at the groundbreaking for the $8.5 million laboratory sciences building on June 25. The Parrott, Ga., native began his 10th year as the ABAC president on July 1.

ABAC President Begins 10th Year

TIFTON—For Dr. David Bridges, there’s no greater pleasure than diving inside the numbers and finding answers to questions which come his way in his position as president of Abraham Baldwin Agricultural College. For the past two years, the numbers tell quite a story.
ABAC is the only college or university south of Macon in the University System of Georgia (USG) to experience an enrollment increase for the past two years.

“There are lots of reasons,” Bridges, who began his 10th year as president on July 1, said. “The primary reason is that we have an identifiable mission. We know who we are.

“Our enrollment went up because we had an increase in the number of students choosing the bachelor’s degrees in agriculture and natural resources. Our bachelor’s degrees in biology and business are doing pretty well also.”

Much has changed since Bridges stood on the front porch of Tift Hall on May 11, 2006 when he was selected by the Board of Regents of the USG to serve as the 10th president in the history of ABAC. On May 17, 2006, he returned to that same front porch to announce that ABAC had been granted state college status and would begin offering bachelor’s degrees.

That changed everything.

“The addition of bachelor’s degrees to the ABAC curriculum is the single biggest change during my tenure as president,” Bridges said. “Nothing else comes close.

“I think we hit it about right. We didn’t add a lot of bachelor’s degrees overnight. We raised our admissions standards. Now I think more of our students have a start-to-finish mentality. We have more students committed to getting a bachelor’s degree, and we certainly have more graduates. Our graduation rate is 200 per cent of the state college average.”

A record-breaking 409 ABAC students completed the requirements for graduation at the end of the spring term. A total of 117 graduates received bachelor’s degrees, shattering the previous high of 67.
“Scholarships have really helped the enrollment as well,” Bridges said. “We had about $300,000 worth of scholarships when I started and now we have just shy of $1,000,000 worth of private financial assistance.”

With nine years of his presidency behind him, Bridges reflected on how necessity has altered his presidential style a bit.

“We have been through some austere budget years,” Bridges said. “I would have liked to have spent more time on leadership and less time on management but we have a much smaller number of non-academic personnel that we did at one time. The number of bureaucratic demands has increased exponentially.

“We don’t have the autonomy we once had. Now everybody from the federal government to the state government to accrediting agencies to the Board of Regents to the Supreme Court tells us what we need to be doing. I’ve had to become more of an operational president because of that. In tough times, you just manage through it. I don’t necessarily like that but right now we’re operating in that type of environment.”

As Bridges looks to the start of the 2015 fall semester on Aug. 12, he hopes to focus on the implementation of a new strategic plan for the college. The cornerstone of the plan involves making sure ABAC graduates are prepared for the real world.

“Our value is cast in preparing students for life,” Bridges, the only ABAC president who was also an ABAC graduate (Class of ’78), said. “We have to keep mentoring, coaching, and placing students in internships. Unless we keep doing things of that nature that distinguish us, we’re just like everyone else. We have to remain student-focused.”
The list of ABAC accomplishments during Bridges’ tenure is a long one. In 2006, ABAC opened the Health Sciences building. In 2007, ABAC added the ABAC Lakeside housing facility and the soccer field. ABAC celebrated its 100th birthday in 2008 with a year-long centennial celebration.

In 2009, the ABAC academic curriculum was divided into six schools of study, and deans were selected to head each school. In 2010, ABAC took over the operation of the Georgia Museum of Agriculture and Historic Village. In 2012, a USG report said that ABAC had an economic impact of $281,563,172 on Tift and surrounding counties.

In 2013, the college completed the Historic Front of Campus renovation, which changed the physical look of the three original buildings on campus, the front lawn, and the area behind Tift, Lewis, and Herring halls. In recent news, ABAC broke ground on a new $8.5 million laboratory sciences building on June 25.

Not many presidents enjoy double digit tenures at their respective institutions. Bridges, 57, feels fortunate to be in that group. But it’s obvious he is still hungry to climb another hill or two to see what’s on the other side before his time at ABAC ends.

“My hope is that I realize it’s time for me to go before others let me know it’s time for me to go,” Bridges said with a chuckle. “I’m not looking for another executive academic position. I am beginning to consider what my post-ABAC life will be like. I will not be here forever but I do have a few more things I want to accomplish.”

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