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Bridges Begins 11th Year as ABAC President

TIFTON—Dr. David Bridges doesn’t spend a lot of time pondering his golden years. His waking moments are consumed with planning the future of Abraham Baldwin Agricultural College. And he believes that his vision is within reach.

“I want ABAC to be the premier place for students to study agriculture and natural resources in the entire Southeastern part of the United States,” Bridges, who begins his 11th year
as the ABAC president on July 1, said. “We should be a destination school, everyone’s first place choice in agriculture and natural resources.”

Bridges even has the perfect log to toss on the fire to make that future burn even brighter.

“My number one goal for the coming year is to add agricultural education as a bachelor’s degree on our campus,” Bridges said. “The State of Georgia has had a deficit of vocational agriculture teachers for 30 years. We are in a unique position to provide a solution to that problem.”

After 75 years of graduating students with associate degrees, ABAC introduced bachelor’s degrees to its curriculum in 2008 when 42 students began taking junior level classes. The number of students in bachelor’s degree programs at ABAC now exceeds 1,400 out of a total enrollment which registered 3,393 students in 2015 from 153 Georgia counties, 25 states, and 22 countries.

“I thought we would grow our bachelor’s degree program faster than any of the other state colleges in the University System, and that has proven to be the case,” Bridges said. “I didn’t anticipate that we would grow those programs quite this fast.”

Diversified Agriculture is the most popular bachelor’s degree at ABAC with 502 students enrolled. A total of 255 students are majoring in the bachelor’s degree in business and economic development. Another 242 are in biology, and 237 are in forestry and wildlife.

Other four-year programs of study include politics and modern cultures, social and community development, writing and communication, and ag communications, all under the rural studies umbrella. ABAC also offers a bachelor’s degree program in environmental
horticulture, and a brand new bachelor’s degree in nursing started enrolling students this summer.

“All of the bachelor’s degree programs have done well but the increase is driven by the ag degrees,” Bridges said. “Agriculture is Georgia’s largest industry, and jobs are available.

“We are uniquely different from any other state college in the System. The other state colleges have a limited number of typical bachelor’s programs, such as education, business, or the liberal arts. We have those too but ABAC has national name recognition, unique programs in agriculture, natural resources, and rural studies, and a biology program that prepares students for professional school. ABAC has a beautiful rural campus, and modern housing which allows us to attract students from all over the world.”

Glancing out the window of his second floor office in Tift Hall at the summer shower outside, Bridges ticked off on his fingers other examples of the uniqueness of the ABAC campus including the 200-acre J.G. Woodroof Farm, the nine-hole Forest Lakes Golf Club, and the Georgia Museum of Agriculture and Historic Village.

“You strip away all those things, and we look just like any other state college,” Bridges said. “But each one of those adds to the unique nature of this institution.”

ABAC will open a new laboratory science building on July 27 to replace Gray Hall. The building contains eight labs focusing on general biology, microbiology, molecular biology, general chemistry, tissue culture, organic chemistry, and anatomy/physiology. Renovation continues on the King Hall academic building and the plan to turn Thrash Gym into a wellness center.
“We’re getting much closer to resolving some of our huge backlog of facility needs,” Bridges said. “We still have to do something with the J. Lamar Branch Student Center and the Carlton Center to have a more appropriate student learning center.

“We also need a 500 to a 1,000-acre teaching and demonstration forest for students in forestry and wildlife. I’d love to have a new academic home for fine arts, which should include rehearsal space for the music program.”

ABAC will unveil a new area in Tift Hall in October devoted to veterans. The centerpiece of the exhibit will be the Medal of Honor presented to Grace Durham Jolley on Oct. 30, 1969 in recognition of the bravery displayed by her son, Harold Bascom “Pinky” Durham, Jr., who gave his life for his country on Oct. 17, 1967 in Vietnam. Durham is an ABAC alumnus and the only Tifton resident to receive the Medal of Honor.

“We wanted to create a space where our students can be exposed to the heroics of those who have served in the Armed Forces,” Bridges said. “It’s an important milestone in our veterans’ initiative.”

That initiative also includes the opening of the Veteran Success Center on campus, the establishment of a student veterans’ organization, a Purple Heart College designation, a Military Friendly College designation, free tutoring for veterans beyond the normal tutoring hours, and advanced registration for veterans.

Bridges and his wife, Kim, also donated the first $20,000 toward a $100,000 Veterans Enrichment Fund, which reached its goal in less than a year. Bridges has now proposed a $1,000,000 campaign for a veterans’ endowment fund.
“We’re doing this because I want future generations of ABAC students to know that we respect the honor, the integrity, and the valor of our veterans,” Bridges said.

When the fall semester begins on Aug. 10, Bridges believes enrollment will hold about the same as last year. He hopes the new bachelor’s degree in nursing provides an enrollment bump in the future. The ABAC Foundation recently approved scholarships devoted specifically to students in that program.

“The nursing program has made quite an impact on ABAC over the last 50 years, and it will continue to do so with the bachelor’s degree program,” Bridges said. “These scholarships represent one more incentive for all our nursing graduates with associate degrees to come back and get their bachelor’s degree.”

A new strategic plan will guide faculty and staff of ABAC into the upcoming fall semester with five primary tenets focusing on quality programs, graduating students on time with minimum debt, engaging students in internships and study abroad opportunities, increased use of technology, and diversifying the revenue stream with a focus on philanthropy and fund raising.

“I’d really like to carry out a capital fundraising campaign but I don’t think we’re quite ready for that right now,” Bridges said.

With his 11th year at the helm of ABAC about to begin, what motivates the 58-year-old native of Parrott when he walks into the president’s office every day?

“It’s certainly not the process of getting things done,” Bridges said with a chuckle. “My reward comes in seeing the nursing program get that bachelor’s degree, watching our students cross the stage at graduation, and seeing the front of campus get renovated. That’s what motivates me.
“I had no timetable as to how long I would stay here when I started ten years ago. It was not something I thought about. One day I will be doing something a lot more restful and a lot more peaceful. But I can honestly say I don’t think about that stage of my life very much.”

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