

Ouachita Baptist University

Scholarly Commons @ Ouachita

Press Releases

Office of Communication

5-12-2021

Progress is more about direction than speed: 2021 Commencement address

Ben R. Sells Dr.
Ouachita Baptist University

Ouachita News Bureau
Ouachita Baptist University

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarlycommons.obu.edu/press_releases



Part of the [Higher Education Commons](#), [Organizational Communication Commons](#), and the [Public Relations and Advertising Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Sells, Ben R. Dr. and Ouachita News Bureau, "Progress is more about direction than speed: 2021 Commencement address" (2021). *Press Releases*. 1251.
https://scholarlycommons.obu.edu/press_releases/1251

This News Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Office of Communication at Scholarly Commons @ Ouachita. It has been accepted for inclusion in Press Releases by an authorized administrator of Scholarly Commons @ Ouachita. For more information, please contact mortensona@obu.edu.



Progress is more about direction than speed: 2021 Commencement address

By Ben R. Sells

May 12, 2021

For more information, contact OBU's news bureau at newsbureau@obu.edu or (870) 245-5208.

ARKADELPHIA, Ark. – I feel a special relationship with this graduating class. Many of you began in the fall of 2017, but we first met during your senior year in high school – my first year as president. We've been on this journey for five years.

You and your class mark a turnaround for Ouachita, a rising tide in our enrollment that's running counter to trends. While total university enrollment in the state and country has declined for several years, Ouachita's has grown – this year recording our highest enrollment in 20 years. It began with you. You were one of our largest freshman classes, and one of our most academically talented.

Our kinship runs especially deep because of our shared struggles and shared responsibilities. The persistence of COVID-19 marked your entire senior year. We asked you to help us manage that threat, and you rose to the occasion.

You allowed Ouachita to continue offering a fully in-person, year-long experience, one of very few across the country. So, it's appropriate that we celebrate this year together, in person, for your commencement.

We give thanks to the Lord for His provision; to a state that trusted us; and to parents, alumni, friends and churches who supported us. Your faculty and staff worked hard to create and sustain the best possible conditions to pursue our vision of fostering a love of God and a love of learning.

" THE PERSISTENCE OF COVID-19 MARKED YOUR ENTIRE SENIOR YEAR. WE ASKED YOU TO HELP US MANAGE THAT THREAT, AND YOU ROSE TO THE OCCASION. YOU ALLOWED OUACHITA TO CONTINUE OFFERING A FULLY IN-PERSON, YEAR-LONG EXPERIENCE, ONE OF VERY FEW ACROSS THE COUNTRY. "

-Dr. Ben R. Sells Ouachita president

But, the human secret to this year – this long, challenging, tiring, yet ultimately successful year – has been our students. They were led by you, the seniors. You led by example to live and learn with new protocols. You found new ways to have a meaningful campus life. You persevered when it would have been easy to panic. You encouraged peers when spirits lagged. And, you gave us helpful advice.

So, before going any further, I want to say one more time to you: thank you! I want to declare to your family and to a watching world: see what these graduates have done! You give us hope and confidence for the future. And, your successes should give you hope and confidence for your own future.

History records that global events – wars, depressions and pandemics – accelerate change. As you commence to graduate school, the workplace, new communities and churches, you'll face new challenges, uncertainties and opportunities.

I've pondered and prayed for weeks about what I might share with you – on your final time to gather as students. I kept returning to seven words of wisdom. These words aren't original to me. They were shared with me before you were born by a respected friend who undoubtedly heard them from someone else.

This saying has served me especially well when starting something new. Here it is: *Progress is more about direction than speed.*

I'll not take the time to fully explain it. But, let's briefly explore three components: The desire for – and hard work – of progress. The caution of speed. And, the importance of direction.

The desire for and hard work of progress.

Deep in the DNA of the American experience is the desire for progress – something that lives beyond ourselves – not only as a personal ethic but a hope that each generation could build on the gains of the last. Someone in your family was the first person to attend college in search for a better life. In some families, that person is you. As such, the hopes of previous generations were invested in you.

However, this desire for something more, something better, isn't just American. In the Bible, in Ecclesiastes, we find this truth: "God set eternity in the heart of people." [1]

It's not just genetics and personality, but God's design for us to be aware of, to long for something more, to restore what is broken, to pray that earth become more like heaven, to find a purpose and meaning greater than ourselves.

You came to Ouachita to pursue progress – academically, spiritually and personally – which we celebrate today. Your journey here has been filled with achievements and obstacles, and you’ve learned and grown from both. Because of what happened here, you’re dreaming a larger dream for your life.

May I encourage you to pay attention to and steward well what God has deeply planted in your heart and further cultivated in you through Ouachita.

Progress is more about direction than speed, but that doesn’t mean speed is unimportant.

Indeed, there are times when speed is very important. As a five-foot-five basketball player in high school, speed was my only advantage. Among you today are our first students earning a post-graduate internship in dietetics because Ouachita moved quickly to start this program, addressing a critical shortage in our country. In our race against the pandemic, speed has often been the difference between life and death.

However, over the span of one’s life, experience and wisdom reveal that direction is more important than speed. Over 2,000 years ago, Aesop told the fable of the tortoise and the hare. Remember the rabbit, so confident in its speed, stops during the race and falls asleep while the turtle moves slowly without stopping. The turtle wins the race. The moral of this fable endures not just because it’s a good story, but because it’s true.

One of the cautions about speed that got my attention this year is found in the song with the title “Does Anybody Hear Her” by the group Casting Crowns. It includes lyrics about a person, and I quote: “running a hundred miles an hour in the wrong direction.” [2]

Speed matters, but most of the time direction matters more.

And direction really matters. At Ouachita, we believe in God’s larger redemptive purposes. We believe that history is moving in a direction; that God invites us personally to join Him in this journey; that through His work, our response and the help of the church, we’re formed into the person God intends for us to become; to serve Him and our neighbor in all of our roles and places; and that eventually all that is wrong will be made right. All for eternity.

That’s progress with a purpose, progress that requires direction, progress that takes time.

During this year, I read again a book drawn from the Psalms of the Bible. Written 20 years ago by the late Eugene Peterson, the title of the book is “A Long Obedience in the Same Direction: Discipleship in an Instant Society.” Peterson writes it this way, and I quote: “Christian discipleship is a decision to walk in his ways, steadily and firmly, and then finding that the way integrates all our interests, passions and gifts, our human needs and eternal aspirations. It is the way we were created for.” [3]

“WHEN YOU FEEL UNCERTAIN OR ALONE, AN EXPERIENCE WE’VE ALL HAD THIS PAST YEAR, REMEMBER THAT GOD IS WITH US, DESIRING TO WORK FOR YOUR GOOD AND HIS PURPOSES, DAY BY DAY.”

-Dr. Ben R. Sells Ouachita president

Deep in our hearts, don't we long to live "the way we were created for?" When you live for that direction, you'll make progress through successes, which will be many for you, but also through setbacks. Setbacks are inevitable, some by our own choices and others for reasons we can't explain – like a pandemic.

When you feel uncertain or alone, an experience we've all had this past year, remember that God is with us, desiring to work for your good and his purposes, day by day. Remember what you did this year, what we did together, a company of the committed, known as Ouachitonians, who didn't shrink away or just aim to survive but succeeded in ways we couldn't have imagined.

As you leave Ouachita and start a new chapter in your story, may I suggest that you consider: *Progress is more about direction than speed.*

As you go, we'll continue to encourage and pray for you. We hope to hear from you about the milestones in your life. And, we'll so look forward to welcoming you back to campus – as alumni and as friends.

We're always proud of our graduates, but the Class of 2021 will be forever known for what you did and how you led. Congratulations!

[1] *New American Standard Bible, Ecclesiastes 3:11.*

[2] *"Does Anybody Hear Her." Casting Crowns, album "Lifesong," 2005.*

[3] *"A Long Obedience in the Same Direction: Discipleship in an Instant Society" by Eugene H. Peterson, 1980. Page 128.*

Lead photo by Abby Blankenship