



John Sanders Receives Honorary Degree

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Categories : [Uncategorized](#)

Date : May 14, 2019





John Sanders received a much-deserved honorary degree at Carolina's commencement in Kenan Stadium on Sunday, May 12. It recognized his extraordinary service to the University and to the State of North Carolina. The Secretary of the Faculty read a citation that included some of the highlights of John's service (a more complete description of his accomplishments is [here](#)), including his 24 years of service as Director of the Institute of Government.



John Receives Honorary Degree at Commencement

Chancellor Kevin Guskiewicz hosted a small dinner at Hyde Hall the night before commencement for the degree recipients and the commencement speaker, who was Jonathan Reckford, CEO of Habitat for Humanity. The dinner also included a small number of others, including trustees, the honorary degree selection committee, and the people who sponsored the degree recipients. I attended as John's sponsor, but he stayed home to conserve his energy for commencement on Sunday morning. He will be 92 years old next month. The chancellor read each honoree's citation at the dinner and then asked the person to make a few comments. Because John was unable to attend, I was asked to share a few thoughts about him with the group.



John and Ann Sanders at Ribbon Cutting Ceremony Adding his Name to the Building

Here is what I said, mostly, though I didn't follow my notes exactly.

You have heard Kevin describe many of John's accomplishments, and they have had a major impact on public life in North Carolina. I want to provide some context by talking about several of his strongly held beliefs. They have played a role in many of John's accomplishments.

I have never met anyone with greater integrity or a deeper commitment to democratic values. As Carolina's student-body president in 1950, John publicly advocated for ending a campus policy requiring segregation of the races at public meetings, arguing that black and white students should sit together in Memorial Hall. People lost their minds. He was verbally attacked by a member of the Board of Trustees, threatening letters were sent to his home, and he was warned that he would never get a job among "respectable people." After refusing to back down, John was summoned to appear before a meeting of the trustees. He and others assumed that he was about to be expelled. After hearing John's presentation, which must have been impressive and unfortunately



was not preserved, the trustees did not expel him. Instead, they decided to censure their own colleague who had attacked John. Integrity and a commitment to democratic values.

I have never met anyone who thinks, speaks, and writes with greater precision, and who believes so strongly that getting it right matters—a lot. Through John's example, he taught all of us on the faculty the importance of paying attention to the small things if you want to get the big things right. He did it by expecting accuracy from everyone. He once was testifying as a witness in court and the opposing lawyer kept referring to him as "Dr. Sanders." John politely corrected him by noting that he was not a doctor. The lawyer referred to him as "Dr. Sanders" two more times. After the third time, John raised his hand and corrected him by saying, "As I've said before, I'm not a doctor, but if you insist on conferring honorary titles, I've always preferred commodore." Getting it right matters.

I have never met anyone who cares more about encouraging students to commit themselves to public service. John has mentored scores of student leaders at Carolina. That might not be surprising, except that he has never taught an undergraduate course. Our work at the School primarily is with public officials. John reaches out to them, and over time many of them have learned from their peers to reach out to him. He invites them to lunch or dinner, gives them thought-provoking books to read, challenges them, and encourages them to continue their leadership and service. John remains in regular contact and supportive throughout their careers. The importance of encouraging public service.

John loves North Carolina and this University deeply, and if he were here he would express with precision his appreciation for this great honor.

John attended the commencement ceremony on Sunday and received his honorary degree. Many people were able to speak with him and offer their congratulations before and after the ceremony. The support for him was wonderful. John's daughters attended and they were proud and happy for him. I'm sure the honor for John also means a great deal to Ann, his wife, who has been his partner in so many ways. Unfortunately, she was not feeling well and could not attend. Ted Teague, one of those former students who John mentored, was incredibly helpful to the family (and to me) in managing the logistics of getting John to the ceremony.

John is one of the most remarkable people I've ever known, and it was a pleasure to have a small part in honoring him.

