

Grads Are ‘Pride and Joy’ of the Graduate School

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“Graduates, today is your day. All of us join you, your family, friends, and loved ones in celebrating this remarkable achievement,” said University of Maryland Graduate School Dean **Roger J. Ward, EdD, PhD, MSL, MPA**, told graduating PhD students, family members and faculty at the Graduate School Hooding Ceremony May 19. Ward, who is also University of Maryland, Baltimore (UMB) provost and executive vice president added, “Our faculty are the heart and soul of our academy, and you, graduates, are their pride and joy.”

Ward’s words were far from hyperbole, explained UMB President **Bruce E. Jarrell, MD, FACS**. “You have a one-on-one relationship with your mentor. Nowhere else do you see that in the other schools” he reminded them. “You love them, yeah, hate them, they drive you one way you want to go the other I know it works that way. And yet, here you are here today, having completed that journey, with their great support, typically with them sitting beside you as your buddy today. I have no doubt that you will remember this person for the rest of your lives that you will consult with this individual for advice for counsel for good days and bad days.”



Graduate Ava Zapf, PhD '22, is hooded by mentor Paul Welling, MD.

Each of the 89 graduates who received their PhD degree from the multi-disciplinary Graduate School is prepared for a career in research in the health and social sciences, addressing many of the most pressing issues of our time. At the Hooding Ceremony, mentors, who hail from five of UMB's six professional schools - the schools of Dentistry, Medicine, Nursing, Pharmacy, and Social Work – were

given the opportunity to explain and share pride in their mentees' work. Many remarked how well students confronted all the usual challenges, like finding a cohesive thesis narrative, changes to the direction of research, and unending stress, as well as a unique

challenge all of this year's graduates faced: two years of the COVID-19 pandemic and the restrictions it imposed.

Speaking of her mentee, **Yoon Duk Hong, PhD '22**, mentor **Julia Slejko, PhD**, assistant professor in the Department of Pharmaceutical Health Services Research in the University of Maryland School of Pharmacy, marveled at her perseverance. "She did a lot of her dissertation work during the pandemic. So, all the way from proposing the topic, that was pretty much done in the whole virtual setting. Her proposal was online in 2020, and then she did most of the research independently. We weren't really meeting face to face during that whole time." Beaming, Slejko added, "She did the whole thing beautifully."

Hong agreed that her focus and her research – studying the issues surrounding the costs of treatment and cancer - owed much to the mentor-mentee relationship. "Dr. Slejko was always so supportive and always so helpful. So, I never felt like we were challenging each other in any way. I really enjoyed it."

"Yoon and I had this kind of weekly partnership or you know, we'd meet a couple times a week and it was really something I looked forward to because we could connect on you know, how things were going for us personally, of course, our research as well, what things were on our mind how things were kind of going up and down with the pandemic and how we related to that. So, fit was actually a really a big source of support for me as well," Slejko agreed.

Over the course of the Hooding Ceremony, each graduate received their ceremonial hood from their mentor, each hemmed in a bright or dark blue color signifying the PhD degree. The lining, in this case black and gold, indicates the institution conferring the degree. Before each hood was placed, mentors introduced graduates and their research with a few words.

"It's a pleasure to introduce Ava Zapf on this auspicious occasion," wrote mentor **Paul Welling, MD**, adjunct professor of physiology in the University of Maryland School of Medicine. "Born in Romania, but raised in Baltimore County and a graduate of Towson University, Ava is a diehard Ravens fan. Her thesis project focused on how the kidney maintains potassium, the most abundant mineral in the body, he added. "I will miss her bright smile, keen intellect, and unbridled determination."

Like most of the graduates, **Ava Zapf, PhD '22**, was happy to explain more about her research after the ceremony. "Basically, there's a lipid hormone that goes around and does different things. But I discovered a very precise mechanism that happens in the kidney and is able to precisely control potassium excretion. And hopefully that'll lead to clinical manifestations down the line," she said.

The hardest part of her doctoral studies? "Staying focused, I guess. Like, you go through so many meandering things, like ups and downs. Sometimes you just want to give up and other times you don't, but it's just the journey of a graduate student," she offered.

Mentor Welling agreed. “The hardest part of the process is keeping everybody happy. And making sure that the project goes smoothly. It never does. There's always twists and turns and you really never know. And it's really having terrific students like Ava who have the perseverance to go through the downs and find a way out.”

“I'm sure you've learned your science well,” Jarrell told the graduates, “But I also hope that you've learned your importance to society, your importance to setting the example for being the role model for making sure that truth compels us to make good decisions, whether it's COVID, or whether it's anything.” The work of a researcher, he reminded them, extends far beyond the lab, he concluded. “You have a role as a citizen to help guide this wonderful country forward and we need you more now than we ever needed you.”

