UC SANTA BARBARA

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Passing the Hat

Tucked in a corner of Bruce Tiffney's snug little office in UC Santa Barbara's College of Creative Studies (CCS) sits an object that has become synonymous with the CCS dean. It's a wizard's hat, one he wears as occasions warrant — serious and important matters to discuss, long-term visions to communicate, often regarding the futures of the students in his charge.

When Tiffney wears this hat, people pay attention.

Coupled with Tiffney's beard, his deadpan demeanor and, around this time of year, the formal commencement robes, the tall, silver-trimmed conical hat festooned with stars makes the paleobotanist resemble a visiting faculty member from Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Or — even better — the headmaster of what some might describe as the Gaucho parallel universe version of Hogwarts.

"The hat was initially not my idea," Tiffney said of the chapeau that made its debut in 2007 when he presided over his second commencement ceremony as CCS dean. At that time, the Harry Potter films were wildly popular, and Tiffney had crafted his address with references to the magical school and its excellent students. "A recent graduate of the college — Jay Freeman — was wearing it one day and he said, 'Why don't you wear this at graduation?'" Tiffney recalled. "I said, "Sure, why not?'"

The hat was a hit with the graduates and their families, as were the pop culture Easter eggs incorporated into his speech. And so was born a pair of CCS commencement traditions, new practices incorporated into an already unique take

on the typically more solemn commemoration of this important milestone.

“It puts the students at the center, as it were,” Tiffney said of the CCS Commencement exercises, which took place Sunday, June 5. The guest speaker was alumna Carol Greider (BS ’83), a molecular biologist at Johns Hopkins University and 2009 Nobel Laureate in Physiology or Medicine.

Rather than taking the stage in academic regalia and overseeing the parade of robe-clad students who take seats opposite them, the faculty’s place is in the audience in civilian clothes, and the graduates sit on stage, wearing whatever they choose. Fairies and warlocks are just as likely as students in robes and mortarboards to receive their degrees. Additionally, addresses and musical performances by the college’s students are part of the ceremony.

And that represents just one of the school’s breaks with to convention. Billed as “a graduate school for undergraduates,” CCS offers academic structure that may seem free form as compared to UCSB’s other colleges but is actually driven by the students’ own energy and laserlike focus.

“What distinguishes CCS is that it is a place where the students have a very strong passion and focus on one of the eight disciplines that we offer,” Tiffney said. “They’ve already made a decision as to what it is they want to do with their lives.”

The high academic expectations of the college provide undergraduates the opportunity to align their curriculum with their individual talents and passions while ensuring a rigorous background that will prepare them for graduate programs and/or their professions. Students of the small college work closely with faculty advisors — professors and lecturers in their respective academic departments — to complete original research and often produce tangible results, such as published scientific papers, or works of art or music exhibited or performed.

“Had I been on this coast 40 years ago I would have been attracted to CCS because I knew exactly what I wanted to do from probably when I was 10 years old,” said Tiffney, who received his Ph.D. in botany from Harvard University in 1977 and taught at Yale University for nine years before joining the UCSB faculty in 1986.

Most college students entering as freshmen typically still need to find their passion and direction, which they identify after sampling life and the diversity of pursuits on campus, he added. CCS students arrive already chomping at the bit to accomplish

things in one of the eight majors the college offers.

“CCS students are often the ones sitting in the front row of the class and asking really pointed questions, not the ones that are sitting there like baby birds waiting for the worms of wisdom to be dropped in,” Tiffney said. “They are actually out hunting and pecking and chasing, and not necessarily instantly believing what the lecturers say. If we’ve done our job that’s who they are.”

Some of these undergraduate hunters and chasers have gone on to distinguish themselves in their fields, including 1991 alumna Angela Belcher, now a materials scientist at MIT and a 2004 MacArthur Fellow, and, of course, Greider.

However, not everything can be all about taking one’s work and one’s self seriously, especially for a group of high-achieving undergrads with intense interests and a higher-than-average drive to succeed. And so the CCS dean, already instantly recognizable by his bowtie and field hat, turns up as a wizard at Commencement, or at the twice-yearly All-College meeting. He’ll take in one of the college’s many art exhibits with avid interest. He spends his day tackling various jobs, from guiding the college with long-term vision to counseling an individual student with short-term strategies.

But even that wizardry must come to an end. After 11 years at the helm of CCS, Tiffney is ready to pass the hat, as it were, stepping down from his post to get back to his research and teaching. Following his final commencement as dean, he’ll take a sabbatical to reacquaint himself with his paleobotany research, clearing the figurative cobwebs and sorting the stacks — literally — of journals and papers to catch up on.

“I’d like to get back into teaching botanical illustration,” he said. He’s also contemplating teaching a course on global climate change in the fossil record.

Regarding his successor, who has yet to be named, Tiffney said he would appreciate a new dean with their own ideas and vision, and he has a wish list of qualities for the next leader of the distinctive college. “What I would want of them is a very strong commitment to undergraduate education and particularly to nurturing square pegs in a world of round and triangular holes, of dealing with unusual students who have that extraordinary focus and passion for their subject material, and someone who is very interdisciplinary and interested — someone who’s got a broad perspective.

“I will pass the hat on to whoever the next dean is; whether they have the intestinal fortitude to wear it on the stage is their choice,” he quipped.

About UC Santa Barbara

The University of California, Santa Barbara is a leading research institution that also provides a comprehensive liberal arts learning experience. Our academic community of faculty, students, and staff is characterized by a culture of interdisciplinary collaboration that is responsive to the needs of our multicultural and global society. All of this takes place within a living and learning environment like no other, as we draw inspiration from the beauty and resources of our extraordinary location at the edge of the Pacific Ocean.