

Column: Southside Strong

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Stupendous Success

By Quentin R. Johnson, Ph.D.

Southside Virginia Community College will honor its 2021 graduates in a virtual celebration to be released May 15, 2021, at 9:30 a.m. Students, their families, and others in the community can access the pre-recorded video through the college's website (southside.edu) or FaceBook page (facebook.com/SouthsideVirginiaCommunityCollege).

Tiara Mustafa, a 2017 SVCC alumna, will sing the National Anthem. Tiara says SVCC gave her time to find herself and make important friendships. Today, she is a full-time musician. "Music has always been what makes my spirit happy," she says. A word that describes Tiara is *inspiring*.

The graduates to be recognized embody many additional characteristics that have contributed to their successes. In preparing for this year's celebration, we asked faculty and staff to tell us what words best portray the Class of 2021. Here are just a few.

Brave. A recent survey of students revealed that 45% belonged to the first college-going generation in their families. These educational pioneers have taken steps beyond their parents' experiences to navigate new opportunities. Each of these individuals has demonstrated personal courage in reaching their goals. We salute them.

Diligent and *hard-working*. Earning a post-secondary degree or other credential, even during the smoothest of times, requires careful attention and the persistent application of effort. Our 2021 graduates have maintained their focus during a turbulent year rocked by social justice concerns and a pandemic. In addition, two out of three completed their studies while holding down a full-time or part-time job. We admire their determined dedication.

Adaptable. This year's graduates have taken a mix of courses made available through traditional and innovative formats, including online lectures, meeting-style Zoom classes, video broadcasts, and hybrids that combined assorted modalities. SVCC recognizes the importance of giving students opportunities to develop their roles and responsibilities as participants in a changing society. The ever-changing reality of societal transformation has never been more apparent than during the past year. We take our collective hats off to our adaptable students.

Ambitious. The Class of 2021 includes 751 individual academic students who will earn a combined total of 855 awards, including associate degrees and other certificates. Their post-graduation ambitions vary. Some will put their education immediately to use in the workforce; others will continue their academic journeys through transfers to senior institutions.

Positive and *driven*. 175 students who have completed workforce training programs throughout the year are celebrated with program-specific ceremonies. Combined, they have earned 352

industry-recognized credentials. These individuals worked hard to learn new skills and demonstrate the level of mastery required to enter and excel in their chosen professions.

Resourceful, resilient, and strong. All our graduates can tell personal stories about overcoming challenges. One student noted, “I work a full-time job and have small children.” Another explained, “At first, I did not know if I was going to like SVCC being that I was supposed to go to a four-year university and my plans fell through, but now I love it! I would not want to have it any other way.”

There are many other words that can be used to describe the remarkable people who will be honored at SVCC’s commencement ceremony. One I like is *Stupendous*. As they move into the future, these extraordinary graduates will make a wonderfully stupendous impact as they weave their personal success stories into the fabric of our communities.

Dr. Quentin R. Johnson is president of Southside Virginia Community College, an institution of higher learning that provides a wide variety of education opportunities to a diverse student population within a service area that spans ten counties and the City of Emporia. He can be reached via email at quentin.johnson@southside.edu.