
A Pile of Honorary Degrees for Zelensky

At least 15 institutions plan to honor the Ukrainian president in absentia, showing support for his war-ravaged country while inspiring the Class of 2022 with his example of dauntless leadership.

By [Susan H. Greenberg \(/users/susan-h-greenberg\)](/users/susan-h-greenberg) // April 1, 2022

Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky may not know it yet, but at least 15 U.S. colleges are planning to grant him honorary degrees this graduation season.

He will receive the awards in absentia, given that the war Russia launched against his country in February shows no sign of ending. But the strength and perseverance Zelensky has demonstrated in the face of Vladimir Putin's brutal invasion compelled a group of college presidents in upstate New York to come together and formulate a plan to honor him and Ukraine while upholding their mission of teaching students how to live meaningful lives.

"His very brave action very early on—to decide not to evacuate Kyiv, to keep his family in the country—that is a move that has potentially changed the course of history," said Joyce Jacobsen, president of Hobart and William Smith Colleges, one of the institutions giving Zelensky an honorary degree. "No matter what happens subsequently, he has already done something that stands as an example of how to be consequential for our students."

Alfred University president Mark Zupan came up with idea of conferring multiple honorary degrees. On March 19, he wrote to Oksana Markarova, the Ukrainian ambassador to the U.S., asking whether Zelensky might be able to "speak virtually" to the Class of 2022.

At the same time, he began reaching out to other college presidents in the greater Rochester, N.Y., area, which is home to more than 40,000 people of Ukrainian descent.

"The idea was, if we got a group of us together, would [Zelensky] communicate to our graduating class? Because we were all so impressed with the example he was providing," Zupan said. "An embassy official wrote back, saying he's just way too busy right now managing the war."

An Alfred alumna suggested they give the awards in absentia, Zupan said. Other institutions quickly signed on.

"When Mark reached out to me, I said yes immediately," said Jeff Docking, president of Adrian College in Michigan. "We have tried to generally stay away from political issues at large gatherings like [commencement] because of how divisive some of those have been. But the clarity of this situation, and the fact that it really

could be an inflection point in our history, said to us that we needed to bring this forward now and speak out against what Putin is doing to these people.”

The participating presidents recognize that honorary degrees are largely symbolic, but they see the gesture as a complement to the actions their constituents are already taking—and a way to help maintain public awareness about Ukraine.

“A lot of our colleges have been active in collecting supplies, including medical supplies, and working with our local volunteer organizations and getting huge amounts of goods shipped over, especially to Poland and countries that are adjacent to Ukraine that are receiving the refugees,” said David Munson, president of the Rochester Institute of Technology. “But somehow, it just doesn’t seem enough. And one more thing we can do is draw attention to the world of our support for the leader of Ukraine.”

U.S. colleges and universities have been among Ukraine’s staunchest supporters since the war started. Students have [organized protests \(https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2022/03/01/students-rally-support-ukraine\)](https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2022/03/01/students-rally-support-ukraine), raised funds and collected supplies for Ukrainians. Some institutions have [cut financial \(https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2022/03/09/colleges-cut-financial-ties-russia\)](https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2022/03/09/colleges-cut-financial-ties-russia) or [research \(https://www.texastribune.org/2022/03/09/texas-am-russia/\)](https://www.texastribune.org/2022/03/09/texas-am-russia/) ties to Russia. Others are offering to fund [full \(https://www.insidehighered.com/quicktakes/2022/03/16/u-chicago-pay-tuition-students-affected-russian-war\)](https://www.insidehighered.com/quicktakes/2022/03/16/u-chicago-pay-tuition-students-affected-russian-war) or [partial \(https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2022/03/22/online-learning-scholarships-1000-ukrainian-refugees\)](https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2022/03/22/online-learning-scholarships-1000-ukrainian-refugees) scholarships for students impacted by the war.

This week, the Texas A&M University system [announced \(https://www.texastribune.org/2022/03/29/texas-am-ukraine-students-free-tuition/\)](https://www.texastribune.org/2022/03/29/texas-am-ukraine-students-free-tuition/) that any Ukrainian students enrolled would receive free tuition, room and board beginning next semester. And Stetson University [said it would welcome \(https://www2.stetson.edu/today/2022/03/stetson-announces-plans-to-sponsor-displaced-ukraine-faculty-and-students/\)](https://www2.stetson.edu/today/2022/03/stetson-announces-plans-to-sponsor-displaced-ukraine-faculty-and-students/) to its central Florida campus Ukrainian students and faculty displaced by the war.

So far, 15 institutions have committed to giving Zelensky an honorary degree, including Bard College, Canisius College and Alvernia University. The group expects more will follow, pending the necessary approvals; the process for selecting honorary degree recipients varies dramatically among institutions.

“Many of our colleagues would have liked to join and are supportive, but they just can’t do it given their internal processes,” said Jacobsen. “Sometimes they have a limit on how many they can give; sometimes they cannot give it to political figures. Some of them just have a very time-consuming process and already have set it up for the spring. I think we are a group probably a little more nimble than some, and certainly private schools are a little more nimble.”

In granting Zelensky the award, each college will work from the same citation, which they can modify to suit their purposes.

"This ought to send a message to the world that the bravery of Zelensky is tangible," said Jonathan Peri, president of Manor College, which was founded by a Ukrainian religious group. "Zelensky's leadership is so laudable that maybe for the first time in American history, you're going to have multiples of colleges and universities giving these honorary degrees to one person."

Liberal Arts Icon

A well-known polymath, Zelensky holds a special place in academe.

"He's a person of the liberal arts—he's trained in economics and law and in music," said Linda LeMura, president of Le Moyne College, a Jesuit institution in Syracuse. "And beyond his intense bravery, his leadership skills are just remarkable. But he uses all of the talents across the spectrum to communicate and to inspire multiple generations around the globe."

Michael Brophy, president of the Hilbert College in Buffalo, also said Zelensky "spoke to our identity as a liberal arts college" with his "extraordinary cross-cultural competencies." He noted that when the Ukrainian president was making the virtual rounds asking NATO for support, "he clearly was going home every night and rewriting his speech to fit Germany, to fit the U.S., to fit Britain. And the faculty definitely noticed that. So they thought that was another thing to emphasize: as we've seen in so many world leaders of note, that ability to understand it was time to communicate. He knew how to communicate, and he really demonstrated his worldview."

LeMura, who said her institution was considering showing a video of Zelensky playing the piano and singing John Lennon's "Imagine" at graduation, noted that the Ukrainian president's inspirational leadership transcends religious and cultural differences.

"I'm part of the Jesuit tradition in the Catholic Church, and we have Hilbert representing the Franciscans. President Zelensky is Jewish, and we have great secular institutions here," she said. "It's special when you see that he can bring all of us together like this and in unison trying to find a way through our processes that are not known for moving at warp speed."

Most of all, the presidents hope awarding Zelensky honorary degrees will teach their graduates something.

"It doesn't happen to coincide a lot that there's somebody who has been so profoundly visible and effective at communicating something of value that we really hope that our students will espouse in their lives," said Amy Storey, president of Keuka College. "So for me, it's certainly about recognizing him and his bravery and his efforts and the efforts of the Ukrainian people and the suffering of the Ukrainian people. But it's also about reminding our graduates about the work that they hopefully have before them in their lives and their respective communities."

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