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Dr. J. David Johnson, Dean
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Dear David,

I apologize for being so slow in sending this letter. As you may know, I left for a week in the United Arab Emirates shortly after my visit to Lexington. With the final two weeks of classes, visits by two candidates, final exams and papers, and then the holidays, I just have not had time until now to put together my thoughts for what I feel is a very important letter.

First, I want to tell you how much I appreciate the hospitality you and your staff provided for me and Ann while we were in Lexington for the Awards and Recognition Dinner. I particularly want to single out Janice Birdwhistell. She was simply amazing. Ann and I had a wonderful weekend, in large part because of the suggestions and arrangements made by Janice.

Second, I want to offer to you and members of the selection committee my sincere thanks for naming me the 2007 recipient of the Outstanding Alumni Award. This award means so very much to me for a whole multitude of reasons. Please bear with me while I tell of two of them. And please share these comments with those involved in the selection process.

Having one's work recognized by one's peers is really special. When those peers are at one's alma mater, the feeling is even more intense. And when those peers are part of an institution that has achieved what the College of Communications and Information Studies at the University of Kentucky has achieved in the last 20 years, the feeling is almost overwhelming.

The second reason getting the Award means so much to me is that it has given me an opportunity to reflect on what the University of Kentucky and the College have done for me over the years and this opportunity to share that story with you.

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I grew up in a large, Northern Kentucky family. I was about two-thirds of the way through my generation, but I was the very first to go to college.

My father was a very big University of Kentucky sports fan. I am sure that somewhere today he is smiling knowing that Kentucky has returned to its winning ways in football. He always spoke fondly of the Bear Bryant era at Kentucky.

My father's fondness for Kentucky sports, however, had nothing to do with my decision to enroll at the University of Kentucky. It simply was the only university I could afford to attend.

I came to the University as a pre-pharmacy major. I'll spare you the story of how I came to that major. During my freshman year, however, I decided I didn't like college chemistry, though I had been very fond of the subject in high school. And at the end of my freshman year, I was considering dropping out of school while I figured out what I wanted to study.

I had the good fortune that semester of rooming with a considerably older student who happened to be a journalism major. I think he had a more realistic--or better--understanding of what going to Vietnam would mean than I did. It was 1966, and Vietnam was the alternative to university study. So this roommate said to me: "You like writing. You worked for your high school newspaper. Why not consider journalism?"

Next he arranged for me to visit with his adviser, Dr. Bob Thorp, who also seemed to have a better sense of what Vietnam represented than I did. Bob took a keen interest in me and became my academic adviser, my instructor, and my career mentor. He got me started at the Kernel and found me an internship at The Wichita Eagle. And he, along with a large number of other Department of Journalism faculty, gave me wonderful and important advice during my undergraduate years at Kentucky, including during my senior year--1968-1969--when I was Kernel editor. Among the caring faculty were J.A. McCauley, Lew Donahew, and, in my senior year, Bruce Westley. Bruce had just come from Wisconsin to become director of the Journalism Department in January of 1969.

I left UK in the spring of 1969 and started working for The Cincinnati Enquirer. In early August of the following year, I was sitting at my desk at the Enquirer when I got a phone call from Bruce Westley. Bruce said he had heard from a friend of a friend of mine that I was considering leaving the Enquirer and going to graduate school. I told him that was true. He asked if I had applied at UK. I told him I had not. He said that didn't matter. It was Friday. Classes started two weeks from the coming Monday. If I told him on Monday that I wanted to start my master's degree, he would get me admitted. And he would give me an assistantship.

I thought about the opportunity that weekend and gave my notice to the Enquirer and answer to Bruce that Monday.

I must admit I had only a very limited idea of what graduate school was all about when I returned to UK that autumn. What I did know came from an undergraduate class I took with Lew Donohew on mass communication theory in my senior year. I discovered when I started my graduate studies that I really liked what I was doing.

I remember very well walking back across campus from a visit to the student center one Friday afternoon with Leonard Tipton, a new professor in the College from Wisconsin. I told Leonard I really liked being back at the university, and I said I wanted to know how one stayed there. He told me to get a Ph.D. I asked him how to go about doing that, and he told me he would help.

I applied at a number of doctoral programs, including Iowa, where Lew had earned his doctorate, Wisconsin, and Michigan State. But I also had stayed in touch with Bob Thorp, who by that time had left UK and was working at The Louisville Times. Bob told me he could get me on at the Times after I graduated if I wanted.

I had decided it was either Wisconsin or the Times. And I remember well a telephone call that Bruce Westley, Lew Donohew, and Leonard Tipton made on my behalf that spring to Jack McLeod at Wisconsin. They gathered around the front desk, where the secretary in the Journalism Department sat. I guess it was the equivalent of a conference call. They asked me to be available as well. Bruce told Jack: "We have a good, young student here. You should take him. But he needs an assistantship or he won't come." About a week later, Jack offered me the assistantship. I accepted immediately.

At that time, UK did not have a doctoral program. One was in the works, but students were going from Kentucky to graduate programs around the country. Phil Palmgreen that year went to Washington. Roy Moore and Rick Stephens joined me at Wisconsin. The year latter, Jane Brown started there as well.

Those of us from Kentucky--and particularly Jane and I, who went directly from our master's programs--had a wonderful advantage over other new doctoral students coming into the program. We knew nearly everything that Jack McLeod and Steve Chaffee had written, having read their publications and convention papers in our classes at UK. I had a fantastic experience at Wisconsin, where I was mentored by both Jack and Steve. That doctoral program--built on my experiences at UK--launched my career.

If that career has reflected positively on the University of Kentucky, as you have suggested by selecting me for this Outstanding Alumni Award, it is only a small payback for everything the College of Communication and Information Studies and the University of Kentucky have done for me. I am so glad to be able to make the small payback.

I thank you very much for selecting me. I am delighted to join the distinguished list of recipients. I wish the College all the best for the future.

Sincerely,

Lee B. Becker
Professor and Center Director
2007 Recipient of the 2007 Outstanding Alumni Award