

## **‘Outdated and Anachronistic, but That’s Part of the Fun’: Faculty Attitudes and Beliefs Regarding Academic Dress at a Second Land-Grant University**

**By Stephen L. Wolgast and Michael W. Everett**

### **Abstract**

Land-Grant academic institutions play a prominent role in the US university educational system. Each of the fifty states and six US territories is the home to one, where many of the faculty and graduates present themselves at commencement events in their academic regalia.<sup>1</sup> This research sought to understand attitudes and behaviours of faculty at one Land-Grant institution. Additionally, this research used a previous research study to validate the instrumentation developed while comparing and contrasting results between two Land-Grant institutions. Results of this study indicated consistent trends when comparing both Land-Grant institutions about faculty attitude and behaviour. At Kansas State University nearly half of faculty respondents indicated that they would likely purchase their hood indicating that faculty believe it is an important component part of their academic regalia. Reasons which faculty identified purchasing their academic regalia were very different between institutions, as was the proportion of faculty who borrowed it for a ceremony. Due to the varied results between Kansas State and Michigan State University in this study, the authors suggest further replication of the survey instrument at other Land-Grant institutions as a way to better understand attitudes and behaviours of individuals in the use of academic regalia. This study builds on previous research suggesting that compelling evidence exists indicating that there are many individuals interested in the continued use of academic regalia at Land-Grant institutions.

### **Introduction**

Land-Grant universities are known for opening education across the US to Americans of modest means while emphasizing practical fields of instruction. When they were first created in the 1860s, Land-Grant universities were to teach agriculture, the mechanical arts, and military tactics, but, according to the federal law that was their foundation, were ‘not to exclude’ the classics. While their goal was graduating students who could return home to improve their communities, Land-Grants aimed for a broader education. The third president of what was then known as the Kansas State College of Agriculture and Applied

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Thanks to Dr Alec Tefertiller of Kansas State University for his assistance with Qualtrics in administering the questionnaire.

<sup>1</sup> Because we are writing in an American context we will use ‘regalia’, the term Americans have adopted for their cap and gown. In addition, faculty refers to the teaching staff.



K-State Photo Services

**Fig. 1. Two professors hood a recipient of the PhD at Kansas State University in 2015.**

Science, George T. Fairchild (served 1879–97), believed the goal of the College was ‘not so much to make men farmers as to make farmers men.’<sup>2</sup>

Like this study, Fairchild came to Kansas State University (K-State) from Michigan State University (MSU). He was an ordained minister who arrived in Manhattan, Kansas, in 1879 from his post as a professor of English literature and a vice-president in East Lansing, Michigan. Both universities were founded among the first land-grant institutions, and both universities are the subject of our research. In 2017–18 Everett conducted a survey of attitudes and behaviours of faculty towards the use of academic regalia at Michigan State. The results were published in the *Transactions* last year.<sup>3</sup> Wolgast became familiar with Everett’s article during the editing process and asked him if he would consent to a study at K-State using his methodological approach. Everett agreed right away, and the partnership began. The K-State survey took place in March 2019.

While the American universities in the northeast have been the subjects of several historical articles in the *Transactions*, less attention has been paid to public universities in the US, among which are the Land-Grant institutions. They are of particular interest to researchers of traditional academic regalia because they are no older than 160 years and did not originally focus on liberal arts or religious instruction as their US forebears did. Instead, founded to teach students the virtues of scientific and applied scholarship, Land-Grant universities were to be defined as the people’s universities, in Everett’s phrase from 2018.<sup>4</sup> What are the attitudes at nineteenth-century universities towards the medieval tradition of cap and gown?

The two surveys followed the same pattern, with variations only to recognize differences at the two universities in the naming conventions of teaching ranks and the frequen-

<sup>2</sup> Willard (1940), p. 60.

<sup>3</sup> Everett (2018).

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 33, referring to McDowell (2003).

cy of commencement ceremonies. A difference in the questionnaires' distribution resulted in response rate differences. At MSU, Everett was permitted to promote his survey through university emails to each faculty member, leading to a response rate of 21.47 per cent. At K-State, Wolgast was not given access to faculty emails and had to rely instead on the University's daily emailed memo and advertisements in the campus newspaper, resulting in a response rate of 8.29 per cent. So while the MSU survey was evaluated using an exploratory factor analysis and a descriptive statistical analysis, the K-State survey is evaluated using only a descriptive analysis.

## Purpose

The purpose of this study is to describe faculty attitudes and beliefs towards the use of academic regalia during commencement exercises at one Land-Grant university, Kansas State, and compare them to another, Michigan State. The following research questions guided both studies:

1. How do faculty at a Land-Grant university use academic regalia in the context of commencement exercises?
2. What are the differences among attitudes, subjective norms, behaviours, intentions, and opinions about the use of academic regalia during commencement exercises and other university-related activities at a Land-Grant institution?
3. How do attitudes and behaviours about academic regalia compare and contrast between KSU and MSU?

## Methods

As with the study on which it is based, this study used a mixed-methods research approach to determine attitudes, beliefs, use, and opinions about academic regalia among Kansas State University faculty, who are defined as either tenure-track faculty or non-tenure-track.<sup>5</sup>

## Population, sample and data collection

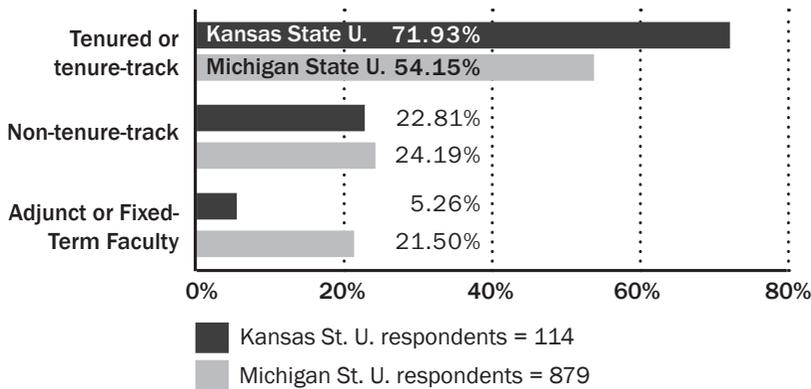
The population frame was found by reaching the faculty and staff of K-State in two ways. The first was through a daily email digest sent from the University's communications division to its faculty, staff, and retirees who chose to subscribe to it. The second was in advertisements placed in the campus newspaper.

The daily digest was received by 1,821 University subscribers and contained submissions from faculty and staff. The number of entries in the digest ranged from ten to more than twenty. An entry in the daily digest appeared three times to promote the survey, which was accessed online. Another survey advertisement system included the printed edition of the *Kansas State Collegian*. As a student publication, this information source has an average readership of about 4,000, although most of those were students; readers also included visitors who happened to pick one up from the distribution racks in the city. An advertisement was placed in the *Collegian* on two different days referring those interested in the topic to find the link in their email; it was not shared publicly. The survey was administered using Qualtrics software. All respondents who participated in the study provided consent prior to beginning the survey.

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<sup>5</sup> Faculty at MSU are defined as tenure-system faculty, academic specialists, or fixed-term faculty.

**Table 1. My current appointment is as:**



Data were collected in March 2019 using an online questionnaire. It was open for a fortnight, from 7 to 21 March 2019, coinciding with a week of spring recess when the faculty would, we hoped, have more free time to take a survey. The first email notice was sent on 7 March, the second on the 11th, and the last on the 20th; the newspaper ads appeared on 18 and 20 March. A total of 151 respondents completed the questionnaire, for a response rate of 8.29 per cent. An additional 13 respondents began the questionnaire but did not complete it.

### Narrative of results

An overview of the respondents in both surveys shows that a greater proportion of faculty are in the tenure-track career pathway who responded at K-State, 71.9 per cent, compared to 54.2 at MSU, because at MSU the proportion of temporary instructors was higher, at 21.5 per cent compared to 5.3 per cent (see Table 1).<sup>6</sup> The primary appointments of all respondents were most likely to be in the humanities and agriculture, with engineering close behind. At K-State, the College of Arts & Sciences includes hard sciences, life sciences and social sciences, while at MSU the College of Arts and Letters excludes the sciences. For comparison purposes, at MSU the Colleges of Social Science, Natural Science, and Arts and Letters respondent responses were combined. Adding the three MSU colleges gives us a sum of 282 respondents (35.6 per cent of the total), creating the largest group at MSU by overtaking Agriculture, which would come in second with its 145 respondents (18.3 per cent). The result is a proportion not far from K-State's, whose 31.6 per cent of respondents were in Arts & Sciences and 17.5 per cent were in Agriculture & Natural Resources (see Table 2).

The way in which the faculty of both universities acquired their academic regalia is similar. Forty-five per cent at K-State, and 49.8 per cent at MSU purchased their entire outfits (gown, hood, cap). The next largest group hired theirs, with 21.2 per cent at K-State choosing this option and 24.2 per cent at MSU doing so. The largest discrepancy between the universities comes in the next highest response, which was borrowing academic regalia.

<sup>6</sup> At MSU the temporary faculty are hired for one year at a time and are called fixed-term faculty while at KSU temporary faculty are hired for one academic session at a time and are called adjunct faculty.

Table 2. Which is your primary appointment at:

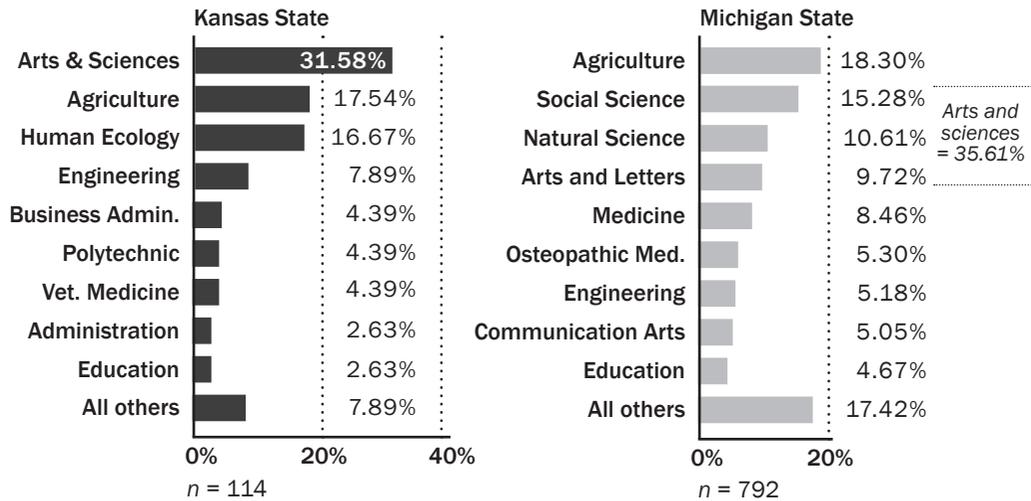


Table 3. Which of the following best describes how you acquired your academic regalia?

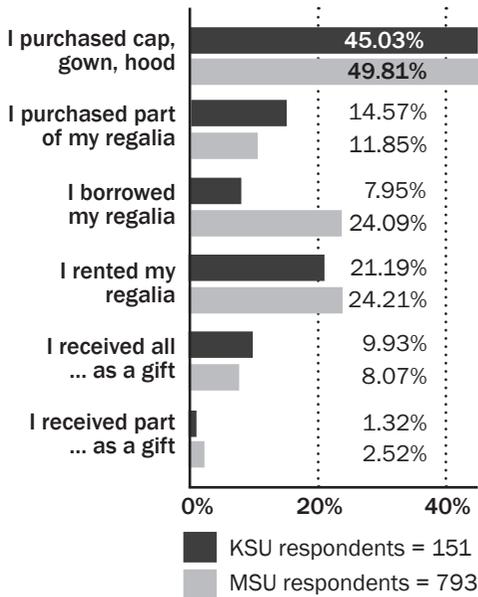
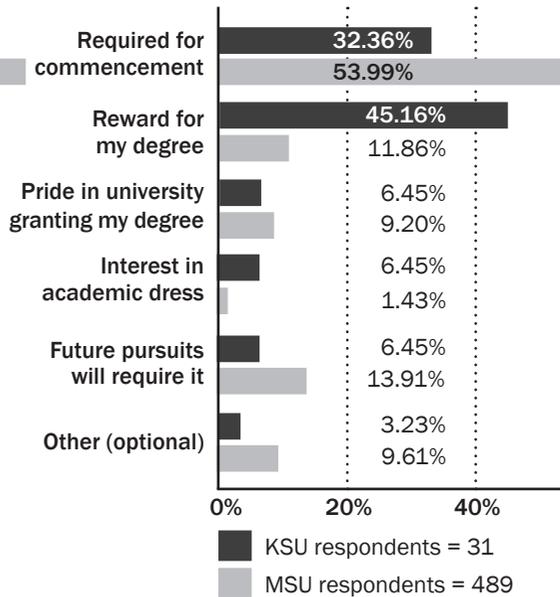


Table 4. Asked of those who purchased some/all of their academic dress: What is the single most important reason you chose to make this investment?



lia. Only 8 per cent of K-State faculty borrowed cap, gown, or hood (or a combination of them), while at MSU 24.1 per cent wore someone else's gear. Among this group, another difference appears when we asked if they owned any part of their regalia. At K-State, 46.7 per cent had purchased their hoods, and 36.7 per cent had purchased both hood and cap (requiring them to hire or borrow a gown). At MSU the figures are nearly flipped: 33 per cent had bought their hoods, but 46.8 per cent had bought both their hoods and caps.

Another large difference is in the single most important reason identified for purchasing some or all of their academic regalia. At K-State, 45.2 per cent said they bought their regalia as a 'reward for my degree', but only 11.9 per cent of MSU faculty chose the same answer. By contrast, 32.3 per cent of K-State faculty said they made the purchase because academic regalia is required to participate in commencement, while 54 per cent of MSU faculty had the same response (see Table 4).

At K-State, 83.5 per cent of respondents participated in a commencement ceremony, compared to 80.1 per cent at MSU, and 73.3 per cent of K-State faculty were likely to attend a commencement ceremony in the year ahead, compared to 63 per cent at MSU. Among the reasons K-State faculty attend commencement is the approval of those whose opinions the respondents valued, according to 76.7 per cent, and to 76 per cent at MSU. At K-State, 74.1 per cent find the ceremony itself at least a little satisfying (see Table 5), and nearly a quarter—23.3 per cent—find the ceremony at least a little boring (Table 6); those responses compare to 62.2 per cent and 18.7 per cent, respectively, at MSU. As one respondent put it, 'Attending graduation is definitely boring, but not more boring than any departmental meeting. It's important to be there to support my graduate students.'<sup>7</sup> This person made another point about candidates for master's and doctoral degrees who, in the US, are usually the only graduands who wear hoods. '[I]f I'm hooding, it's even more important' to attend. Another respondent indicated that 'It's a sign and confirmation of institutional commitment to university traditions and a celebration of those wearing the regalia.'

At a university the size of Kansas State, with more than five thousand students receiving degrees in an academic year, hooding the doctoral graduates, of whom there were 279 in 2018–19, can take a fair amount of time, a noticeable point coming as it does at the end of the week of final exams. Too much time, in fact, for one respondent, who referred to commencement as a 'barrier' because it takes away time that could be used grading.<sup>8</sup>

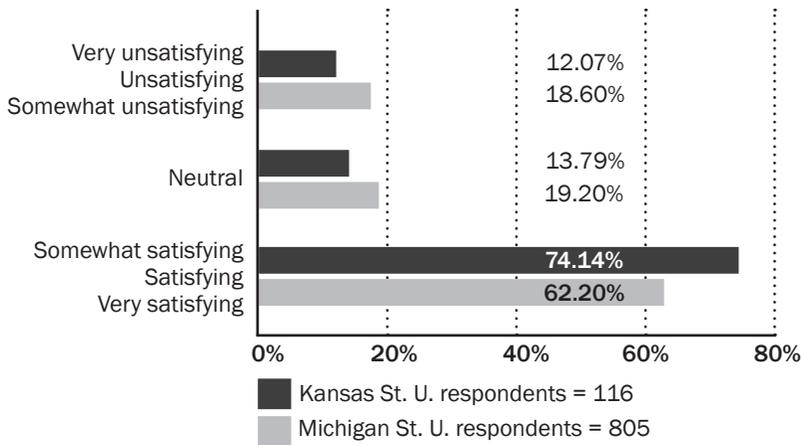
Even still, the great majority of faculty at both universities favours retaining cap and gown at commencement: 95.2 per cent at K-State, and 88.4 per cent at MSU. The enthusiasm dropped considerably, however, when they were asked if regalia should be worn to more activities. At K-State, opposition to the suggestion rose to 73.3 per cent, and MSU came in at a nearly identical 73.8 per cent (see Table 7).

The nearly one in four who said they would like to see it used more often were given the chance to offer suggestions. The K-Staters' largest single volunteered suggestion (12 responses) was to use it at the installation of the university president, a proposal that is unlikely to have come up before 2017, when the current president was inaugurated. Al-

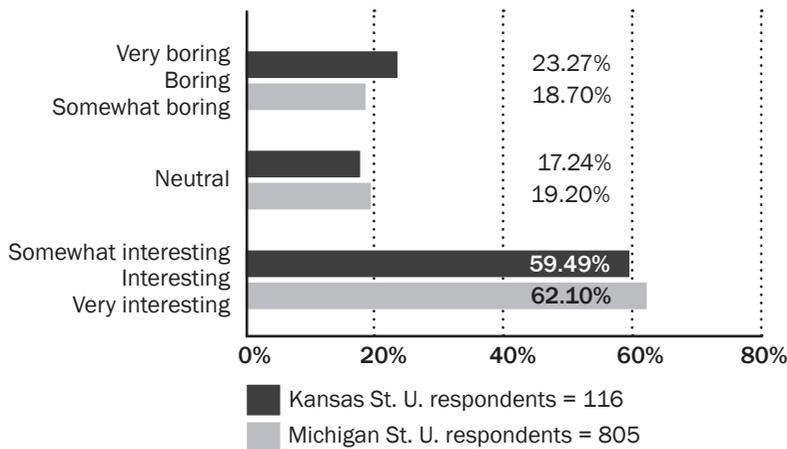
<sup>7</sup> All the comments quoted here are reproduced as written, with changes only to spelling.

<sup>8</sup> In that year 176 PhD and EdD degrees were awarded in the ceremony of the Graduate School and 103 DVM degrees were awarded by the College of Veterinary Medicine in a separate ceremony. Email from Beth Bohn at K-State News and Communications Services, 23 March 2020. The number of graduates hooded is smaller because some graduates do not attend commencement.

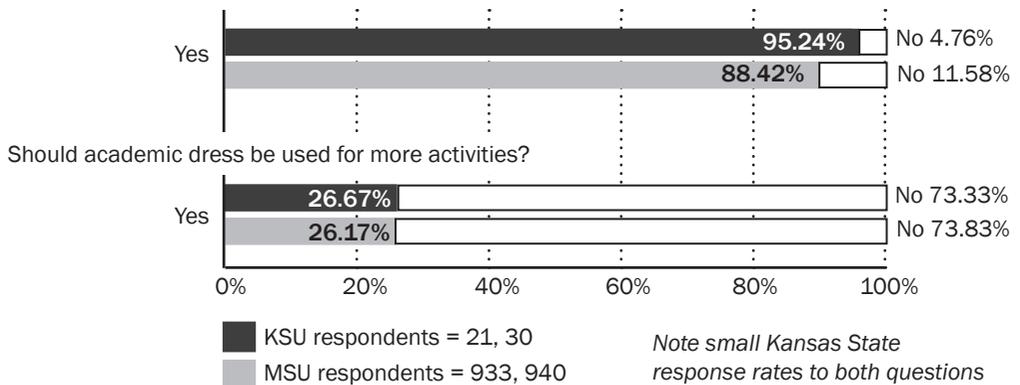
**Table 5** For me, to attend commencement is ...



**Table 6** For me, to attend commencement is ...



**Table 7** Should academic dress use continue at commencement?



though he wore the president's gown, which is the Code's standard model in purple with black trim ([c4] in the Boven system<sup>9</sup>) but with a fourth stripe on each sleeve, and although the platform party wore academic regalia as did the representatives of other universities, the K-State faculty was asked to wear no academic regalia. Requiring street clothes of the faculty was a change from the previous installation, in 2009, and from the modern installations preceding it.<sup>10</sup>

Fifteen answers at K-State suggest it be worn for various but unspecified special events that are academic or 'formal' gatherings. Another 9 responses suggested adding it to the University's convocation, which is held for freshman before the first week of autumn classes, and was begun only in 2013. Gowns were worn by the platform party in 2016, but not by the rest of the faculty in attendance.<sup>11</sup>

The rest of the responses numbered 15 and included lectures, ceremonies honouring faculty or bestowing awards on them, and for inducting students into honorary societies. There was even a suggestion for cosplay, alas.

At MSU, the volunteered responses also suggest wearing it at awards ceremonies, and added dissertation defences to the list along with the suggestion that academic regalia be an alternative to 'business' dress. One enthusiast went so far as to propose wearing it to departmental meetings.

### Voluntary responses

Survey-takers were given the chance to share their thoughts in open-ended response questions, and while nearly two-thirds of comments, 24 out of 38, at K-State viewed academic regalia positively, a few people expressed their dissatisfaction with it. One person described it as 'outdated,' and another wrote, 'It no longer serves a purpose and is one more financial burden we place on students and many faculty.' Three additional comments made cost their primary complaint. Some academic departments at the University offer to cover the expense of hiring academic regalia for commencement, but even that assistance was not universally admired: 'If the department covers it, that is not a very good use of scarce resources.' Another commenter suggested a clothing closet, into which retiring professors could deposit their gear for incoming faculty. It's an idea that could be explored easily and would answer the suggestion of another commenter, that departments 'should find a way to help younger faculty members with the purchase of their academic regalia.'

The preponderance of voluntary comments supported the use of academic regalia at commencement ceremonies, which may suggest that those taking the survey disproportionately represent those who appreciate academic regalia. That appreciation is clear in their comments, such as this one, which brings together the graduate's contribution to scholarship with credit for the new doctor's supervising professor, and acknowledging that the dress represents something greater than colourful formality.

Hooding of PhD graduands by the major professor is something that K-State does right; it recognizes the academic achievement of both the PhD student and the major professor in novel contributions to the body of knowledge. The academic regalia is an important contribution to institutional belonging and recognition of generational academic enterprise.

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9 Boven (2012).

10 For details on the 2017 inauguration, see Wolgast (2016).

11 Origination: Staab (2013). Gowns in 2016: Parton (2016).

Another commenter shows how the statement made by gowns may be stronger than in times past: 'With so much becoming casual the regalia helps to highlight the accomplishments of all involved.' For one respondent, attending commencement recalls his or her past, which becomes a guide for current students.

I did not attend commencement for my PhD. Over the years though, [I] have highly encouraged students to walk graduation and I think it is gratifying for family and friends to see the pageantry after they have put in the hard work. Also, I think it helps give a perspective with all the different regalia of the diversity of training that is on campus.

Another commenter sees gowns as an emblem of the students' success. 'I think anyone who does not support wearing academic regalia at commencement does not understand the milestone of achievement it represents or the honor it gives graduates.' Another imagines commencement in ordinary clothes. '[I]f faculty didn't wear regalia it would be a very weird commencement. I would actually be less likely to attend commencement because the pageantry and tradition would be diminished.'

As if to underscore that position, one respondent, a potential member of the Burgon Society, makes the quintessential point. 'Regalia is an indispensable element of commencement and any proposal to deviate from this tradition would be inconceivably misguided.'<sup>12</sup> There's more to it than tradition, another commenter says, and it's in an outsider's perception. 'The use of academic regalia provides one of the most dignified presentations to the public. This helps enhance the reputation of the university and its faculty.' It's not only the university as a whole whose reputation may be elevated. A professor of music writes:

Wearing regalia at commencement gives me a sense of pride and accomplishment. Being part of a program (music) that rarely receives recognition for teaching, funding for projects [or] raises, at least my regalia reminds me of the pride I feel for completing the DMA and my students can see this pride when I stand for them at commencement.

One person asks straightforwardly, 'Why would we want to stop this tradition?' Another provides the answer in what could be the motto for Society's drinks-night. 'I enjoy it,' this faculty member writes. 'Sure, it's outdated and anachronistic, but that's part of the fun.'

## Conclusion

It is evident from this study that faculty respondents from K-State have differing views about the use of academic regalia at commencement and other campus events. However, this study did reveal that the trends were consistent when comparing the Land-Grant institutions. Differences in some attitudes at MSU and K-State are important. In particular, at K-State nearly half of faculty respondents indicated that they would likely purchase their hood, suggesting that these faculty believe it is an important component part of their academic regalia. Reasons which faculty identified for purchasing their academic regalia were very different, as was the proportion of faculty who borrowed it for a ceremony. The latter result leads us to believe that a 'gown closet' stocked with the regalia of retired professors be made available. If the gowns and caps were the standard black they would match any professor's degree; dark blue trim for the PhD would be appropriate for most of the faculty, leaving them only their hood to buy or hire. Additionally, respondents from both institutions valued the use of academic regalia at commencement, were likely to attend ceremonies in the future, and approval from peers mattered as a source of influence for at-

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<sup>12</sup> If only the questionnaire had not promised anonymity, we would have been able to send this professor a membership form.

tending commencement. This suggests that there is a deep-rooted belief about the value of commencement among faculty respondents in both Land-Grant studies and further indicates that entrenchment in beliefs and use equates to opportunity for education to further promote the use of academic regalia.

The authors recommend the continued study of attitudes and behaviours of institutional faculty to better understand how they perceive the use of academic regalia within educational settings. A similar study was made at Kumasi Technical University in Ghana in 2019 and found that 56.3 per cent of respondents, who included students, wanted to continue the use a regalia.<sup>13</sup>

Based on the results of the Kansas State study, the authors believe that the continued use of academic regalia based on respondent comments and descriptive results provided in this research study supports the form and function at commencement and other special institutional events (e.g., installation of a President or Chancellor). Replication of this methodological approach on a larger scale (e.g., US, UK, Canadian institutions) would also provide valuable insight that may indicate spatial trends in attitudes and behaviours of faculty or perhaps institutional trends based on current use of academic regalia. Larger-scale studies of attitudes and behaviours of faculty will support educational and historical efforts of organizations like the Burgon Society while also informing manufacturers of academic regalia about trends in use and potential for promotional opportunities.

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<sup>13</sup> Howard (2019), p. 33.