A Tribute to
Dean Joe Thomas

Praise, thanks, and laughter mark Johnson’s Advisory Council dinner and roast in Thomas’ honor

At a celebration and dinner that alternated between heartfelt appreciation and lighthearted ribbing, Johnson Advisory Council members, alumni, faculty, students, and staff gathered to pay tribute to Dean L. Joseph “Joe” Thomas, who will soon step down after five years as dean of Johnson to rejoin the faculty. Held on a beautiful, balmy spring evening (just ahead of April’s surprise snow storm) at the Ithaca Country Club, speakers included University Provost W. Kent Fuchs, Professor Bob Swieringa, who served as Johnson’s dean 1997-2007, Associate Dean Doug Stayman, and Professor Maureen O’Hara.

As master of ceremonies, Advisory Council Chair Rich Marin ’75, MBA ’76, set the tone for the tribute and roast by affixing an enormous handlebar mustache to his upper lip (à la Joe Thomas circa 1970s) — and to the delight of the audience, every speaker, in turn, did the same. He further set the stage by showing a video produced by then-student Adam Beane, MBA ’10, “If I Weren’t Dean,” in which Dean Thomas gamely participates in numerous make-believe scenarios of where life might have taken him if he had never come to Cornell — to hilarious effect.

In his address, Provost Fuchs cited Dean Thomas’ reputation as a highly respected and widely published scholar, his acknowledged expertise in operations and supply-chain management, his more than 40 years of experience as a Cornell University faculty member, and more. After thanking Dean Thomas for his “wonderful job of moving Johnson forward with the strategic plan, positioning it well for the future,” Fuchs proceeded to read a laudatory letter from President David Skorton (who was unable to attend). Skorton wrote: “As Johnson dean, among many other achievements, you launched Johnson’s Emerging Markets Institute and its Entrepreneurship and Innovation Institute; led the development of the school’s long-term strategic plan; updated the Johnson ‘brand’; created a ‘chief marketing officer’ position for the school; established the Leadership Fellows program and clinical professorships; and oversaw the tremendous growth of the Executive MBA programs, including the expansion of the Cornell-Queens program — with the addition of Bogota, Colombia and Monterrey, Mexico this summer — to 23 sites, including eight outside the U.S.”

Skorton also thanked Thomas for his “ambitious travel schedule to connect with alumni around the world,” and stated his confidence that “Johnson is poised to become an even more widely recognized leader in global graduate business education” thanks to Thomas’ “vision, leadership and hard ... hard work. ... Finally,” ... Skorton wrote, “I am delighted that the Cornell University Board of Trustees, upon the recommendation of the provost, has awarded you the title of Anne and Elmer Lindseth Dean Emeritus, effective July 1, 2012.” Upon hearing this, the room burst into applause culminating in a prolonged, standing ovation.

In his tribute, Swieringa assured Thomas that “there is life after being dean,” humorously referred to such deanly duties as “repeating the same state-of-the-school speech” several times a week, and thanked him for being the “perfect cup of morning Joe.”

Noting that “Joe always wanted to do what’s needed for Johnson,” Stayman acknowledged that Thomas’ wife, Marney, stepped up to the plate, also: “How many events did Joe and Marney host in their home over the last five years?” he asked. “She has been a tremendous asset for the school.” The audience clearly indicated their agreement in their hearty applause, and another standing ovation, this time in Marney’s honor.