

Dear High School Principals and Superintendents,

Below is a document prepared by the Montana University System for their campuses to provide ideas for alternatives to traditional commencement ceremonies and ways to recognize their graduates. There are many great ideas in here that could be applied to high school graduation. The OPI is working with our colleagues across the country to compile a list of ideas for alternative high school graduation ceremonies and will update this document as we gather more ideas. Feel free to send your ideas to dylan.klapmeier@mt.gov.



SPRING 2020 COMMENCEMENT TOOLKIT

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Commencement has always been my favorite day of the year on campuses. The sense of excitement among the students, the sense of pride among their families, and the sense of joy among faculty and staff build a special atmosphere unique to that day. As we approach spring commencement season, our world looks very different than usual right now, and we're feeling the impacts of the COVID-19 crisis and response in nearly every aspect of our personal and professional lives. Many campuses across the US have responded to this by designing an alternative to their usual commencement ceremonies, whether that's moving to an online/virtual event, postponing the event to the fall, or combining with next year's commencement events.

Here in Montana, I know that every one of our campuses will design a Commencement works best for their students. The purpose of this memo is to provide some guidance, suggestions, and resources as you decide how to proceed. I've included examples of campuses taking each approach as reference points. This memo is in no way an exhaustive list of the options available, but I do hope it is helpful to you and your team as you decide how to move forward.

Please do not hesitate to contact me for clarification on anything mentioned in the memo or to brainstorm ideas: rpower@montana.edu. In addition, I will hold an *optional* Zoom meeting/brainstorming session on Monday, April 6th from 11 a.m.-noon for anyone who is interested: <https://zoom.us/j/3859886619>; Meeting ID: 385 988 6619.

Importance of Student Input

As you all know, Commencement is a momentous day for our students and their families, friends, and support systems. For this year's senior class, their final semester has been hugely disrupted by circumstances beyond their control, and they're doing their best to adapt. I think that getting their input on which direction to take for their Commencement is essential, both because it's their day and because they've had so little control over everything else. Campuses such as [UC Berkeley](#), [LSU](#), and [ASU](#) are seeking input from their students on how to handle Commencement. My suggestion is to review the options presented in this memo, decide which are feasible for your campus, and then work with your student government groups, advisors, and faculty to circulate the options to your graduating students. Giving students options and being transparent about the decision-making process is vital during this time of overall uncertainty.

Option: Postpone Commencement to the Fall

Institutions such as [Carroll](#), [UT Austin](#), [Boston University](#), and the [University of Utah](#) have decided to postpone their in-person Commencement ceremonies to the fall. They will still issue degrees in the

support another large event around that time, and the availability of your keynote speaker and other dignitaries.

Option: Combine Spring 2020 Commencement with Existing Events in 2020 and 2021

Institutions such as [Nebraska](#), [SUNY Plattsburgh](#), and [Vanderbilt](#) have decided to cancel their spring 2020 event outright and instead invite their graduates to the Commencement ceremonies already scheduled for December 2020 and May 2021. Similar to the first option, they will still issue degrees in the spring and mail diplomas over the summer. Only some of our campuses currently hold a Commencement ceremony in December, so this would mean postponing a full year for many. Some big considerations with this option are, again, the possible exclusion of students who have jobs, graduate school, etc. lined up out of state and would not be able to return for the event, and the availability of the keynote speaker and other dignitaries. Some other key considerations are the space available for many more graduates at the events (campuses may have to hold multiple ceremonies on the same day to accommodate the increased number of graduates if they do not have a single space large enough to host the students and their guests), the budgetary and staffing needs/impacts of up-sizing the existing events, and planning the event so that the class of 2020 feels they are properly recognized, and not just lumped in with everyone else.

Option: Online/Virtual Commencement

Institutions such as [Rocky Mountain College](#), [Harvard](#), and [UCLA](#) have decided to keep their spring ceremony, but hold it online instead of in-person. This is uncharted territory for much of higher ed, and many campuses have yet to announce their actual plans for this approach. Guidance in this section is based primarily on my past experience planning Commencement ceremonies and is by no means the only way to approach this option.

If you decide to hold an online/virtual commencement ceremony this spring, I strongly suggest you try to keep the same date originally planned for the in-person event as students and their support system may have made celebration and travel plans around this date. I would also encourage you to work with other MUS campuses who have their event scheduled that day to see if you all can stagger the timing so the events do not overlap (in case there are students from the same family graduating from different institutions).

It will be essential to involve your IT team in the planning process from the start. Given the timeline and limited resources for purchasing any new software, the best approach is likely to simply stream the event. If you decide to do a series of smaller events (see later paragraph about conferral of degrees), you could use Zoom, WebEx, or Skype, so the students can see each other during the event. You could also work with your IT team to see if there's a blended approach to take – a general streaming link to post online for the general public, along with a Zoom invitation only sent to students so they can feel more part of the event. It would also be nice to record the event and then make it available to students, either through a download or a DVD.

It will be incredibly important to work with your campus leadership team, academic deans, and Commencement planning committee/staff when transition to the online/virtual format. An online/virtual ceremony of any kind will need to be shorter than the traditional in-person event as it's difficult to hold the attention of an online crowd for longer than an hour. When thinking about how to streamline the event and what elements to keep, think about the components that are unique to your

institution's event (e.g. Honor Song from a Native American elder, singing the school song, holding the event in/at a location that is meaningful to your campus community), and what elements could be shortened or postponed/combined with another event the following academic year. I suggest streaming the event from a location that is unique/distinctive to your campus (ex: in front of the Griz or Cat statues, in or in front of an historic building, etc.), to further personalize it.

Some components to consider keeping:

- Opening remarks from Campus CEO
- Campus-specific component(s) (e.g. student speaker, Native American blessing/honor song, singing campus/state song, Alumni speaker, a visit from your mascot, etc.)
- Keynote Speaker (have them in the same location as the CEO and CAO if local or have them join remotely to deliver remarks or have them pre-record remarks and play during your stream)
- Conferral of Degrees by CAO and CEO

Some components to consider postponing and/or combining with existing events the following academic year include:

- Hooding/recognition of graduate students (could be held as a separate in-person event in the fall, either as a large group, or broken down by school/college/department)
- Recognition of Honorary Doctorate recipients (could be included in Homecoming Weekend, Charter Day, or postponed to December 2020/May 2021 Commencement ceremonies)

The conferral of degrees is likely to be the trickiest ceremonial component to move to an online format. I believe there is a range of approaches to take here, spanning from calling the name of each student, to announcing the name of each program with graduates, to a very brief conferral of the degree by the President without recognition of specific individuals, programs, or degrees. Timing is the key factor here, and the biggest decider will be the number of graduates. For our smaller campuses, there is a good chance there will be enough time within the hour to call the name of every graduate. For our larger campuses, calling the name of every graduate may be more challenging. A key decision point here will be to decide what level to hold the ceremony at – either have one institution-wide event, or hold several smaller events, broken down by school/college. This is at the discretion of the campuses and the decision should reflect the overall campus community and culture.

Participants in the online/virtual event should be limited to 10 or fewer to adhere to the CDC guidelines. Depending on your campus traditions, and how you decide to structure the event, I suggest including the CEO, CAO, Chair/President of your Faculty Senate, keynote speaker, a student representative, a few Academic Deans, and whoever you've asked to deliver an Honor Song or Benediction.

It could be fun to add a little video at the end of the event (1-2) minutes that's a montage of students moving their tassel and saying "congratulations" or "Go Lights/Cats/Griz/Bulldogs!" or something similar. You could ask students to submit the clip to your IT or communications team to create the montage. It would be a nice way to involve the students a little more in the event.

Option: Hybrid Approach

Institutions such as [Notre Dame](#), [West Virginia](#), and [Virginia Tech](#) are taking a hybrid approach, and are planning to hold an online/virtual event in May and in-person celebrations at a later date. This follow-up event could range from a series of small receptions hosted by the schools/colleges, to regional events

hosted in collaboration with local Alumni chapters, to a full-scale Commencement ceremony. The biggest considerations here are budget, availability of space, bandwidth to add another event to the calendar, and distribution of your students (are they likely to stay in the area or move out-of-state).

Academic Regalia

If you decide to hold an online/virtual event, I recommend that the participants (CEO, CAO, etc.) still wear academic regalia. It helps to maintain the gravitas of the occasion, even in the different delivery format.

Regardless of which option you decide to take, I recommend working with your regalia vendor to still offer your students the option to purchase a cap, tassel, hood, stoles, and honor cords if they want. This may be challenging given the contract you already have with your vendor, but I know the students would appreciate the option and I think that most vendors are trying to be somewhat flexible given the situation.

Additional Recognition of Students

One of the biggest challenges to any of the options presented is how to ensure that our graduates still feel recognized and celebrated. Here are some ideas for additional recognition and personalization, regardless of which option you choose:

- A personalized video message sent via email to each graduating student either the last day of the semester or the day of the virtual event. The message could be from the campus CEO, CAO, or the Academic Dean of the school/college the student is graduating from. The message can be simple, and no longer than a minute, but would be a great way to make the student feel recognized and appreciated.
- A handwritten note from the campus CEO, CAO or Academic Dean, included with the student's diploma (likely mailed over the summer).
- A personalized email or letter or video from the Alumni Office, congratulating the student and welcoming them to the ranks of the Alumni.
- A social media campaign in the weeks leading up to the end of the semester that highlights individual members of the graduating class. This could range from asking students to submit videos and/or photos and captions talking about their favorite part of being a student and what they plan to do after graduation, to pitching stories to your local newspaper about specific graduates, to working with faculty and staff to identify graduating students to reach out to and interview (and then post online).
- Also, in the social media realm, you could develop frames, filters, and backgrounds for students to download and use when taking photos of themselves leading up to the event. You could start a “#WhereICelebrate” campaign (or something similar – I’m certainly not a hashtag expert!) where students post photos of themselves in their caps celebrating commencement, watching the livestream, etc.
- Again, in the social media realm, if you are able to arrange with your regalia vendor for students to purchase caps online before the event, you could hold a cap decorating contest, which is a fun way to highlight the creativity of your graduates.
- On many campuses, graduates receive a branded diploma cover when they cross the stage, and I know that many of the students treasure this keepsake. While it might be a little expensive, I encourage your campus to consider mailing the covers to students along with their diplomas (if

you don't already do this).

- Finally, most campuses produce a booklet for their Commencement ceremony that lists the names of all the graduates. Campuses could print them and mail them with the diplomas, create a digital booklet that folks can download, create an online system where students can order a certain number (perhaps you could offer the first 10 for free and then charge a nominal fee for more than that to offset the printing and postage costs, or some combination of all these options.

Additional Resources

Additional Institutions moving to an online/virtual Commencement this spring:

- Johns Hopkins: <https://hub.jhu.edu/2020/03/18/university-operations-update/>
- Penn State: <https://www.thedp.com/article/2020/03/penn-commencement-2020-virtual-ceremony-coronavirus>
- Upper Iowa: <https://cbs2iowa.com/news/local/upper-iowa-to-hold-virtual-only-commencement>
- Purdue: <https://www.purdue.edu/newsroom/releases/2020/Q1/purdue-to-pioneer-on-demand-commencement-for-class-of-2020.html>
- Northeastern: <https://www.northeastern.edu/commencement/>
- Georgia System: https://www.usg.edu/coronavirus/#usg_institutions_to_develop_creative_alternatives_to_com_mencement_ceremony

Institutions who have done an online/virtual Commencement in the past:

- Columbia College: <http://www.ccis.edu/virtualcommencement.aspx?year=2019>
- SJSU School of Information: <https://ischool.sjsu.edu/virtual-graduation-celebration>
- Simmons University: <https://www.simmons.edu/events/commencement/virtual>

Articles about Commencement:

- https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2020/03/31/tips-holding-your-institutions-commencement-ceremony-virtually-opinion?utm_source=Inside+Higher+Ed&utm_campaign=42108796fd-DNU_2019_COPY_02&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_1fcbc04421-42108796fd-236251837&mc_cid=42108796fd&mc_eid=0db1682a19
- <https://www.npr.org/2020/04/01/823866801/no-caps-no-gowns-for-many-in-the-class-of-2020-commencement-is-called-off>
- <https://er.educause.edu/articles/2010/12/a-virtual-graduation-ceremony-for-online-distance-students>
- <https://www.acenet.edu/Programs-Services/Pages/Academic-Ceremony-Guide.aspx>