BEST PRACTICES:
Virtual Commencement

April 2020

In the following report, Hanover Research presents an analysis of trends in virtual commencement before and after the COVID-19 pandemic with a focus on best practices for online ceremonies.

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RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on an analysis of best practices in virtual commencement, Hanover recommends:

Extend an invitation to 2020 graduates to attend and be recognized at an in-person commencement ceremony in the future.

Institutions should extend an invitation for 2020 graduates to participate in a special commencement ceremony or the next regularly scheduled graduation. During those events, recognize students as 2020 graduates. The administration should acknowledge plans for an in-person ceremony in virtual commencement marketing messages.

Host the virtual commencement on Facebook or YouTube.

Institutions should use a platform like Facebook or YouTube, a technology familiar to the administration and audience, to host virtual commencement. Using a platform that is familiar to all participants will likely increase engagement and enhance the user experience.

Develop an online form to collect student pictures and name pronunciations to include during the virtual ceremony.

Institutions should collect pictures of students to show on screen as the names of the graduates are announced. The administration should develop an online survey to obtain images and the correct pronunciation of student names. The name, photo, and degree awarded should be visible for all students during the ceremony.

Market the ceremony and engage the institutional community through social media campaigns dedicated to supporting the 2020 graduates.

Students and the broader institutional community should be able to engage in the ceremony through social media. Institutions should develop a hashtag to collect well wishes for the class of 2020. These can be displayed on the institution's social media accounts or during the ceremony itself.

KEY FINDINGS

Pre-pandemic, virtual graduations were rare for higher education institutions.

Before the COVID-19 outbreak, institutions encouraged online students to attend in-person graduation ceremonies. Fully online graduation ceremonies were rare, but the practice of live-streaming in-person commencements is becoming standard for institutions of all types.

Many institutions offering virtual commencement are inviting 2020 graduates to a future in-person ceremony.

Most institutions that are offering an online celebration for spring 2020 graduates have also suggested alternatives for in-person celebrations. Some institutions are holding special commencements in the fall or inviting graduates to participate in a future graduation ceremony. Other administrations are waiting to share logistics about another ceremony until there is greater clarity from public health officials.

Student engagement is vital to virtual commencement ceremonies.

Pre-COVID, institutions opted for in-person ceremonies as a means to foster a sense of connection among the student body. This engagement can still happen through social media and other engagement. Marketing messages and promotional materials that emphasize the student and institutional community will likely result in greater engagement.

Institutions collect information from students via social media and online forms.

Many institutions are using online forms or surveys to collect data from students, including photos and pronunciations of names. Students are also often encouraged to participate in commencement festivities through social media campaigns. Institutions use these posts to promote the ceremony. In some cases, the administration will choose to include the messages of support in the ceremony itself.

VIRTUAL COMMENCENT TRENDS PRE-COVID

Before the COVID-19 outbreak, virtual commencement ceremonies were rare.

Before the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic, online students generally attended in-person ceremonies arranged by their institutions. These functions would typically take place at the main campus with the rest of the on-campus student population. Alternatively, online-only schools, like the University of Phoenix, would hold several commencement ceremonies nationwide. In the case students were not able to attend the ceremony, some institutions read the names of online-only graduates during in-person celebrations.

Institutions opted for in-person ceremonies as a means to foster a sense of connection among the student body.

For some online students, commencement was the only opportunity for students to meet faculty and peers. Many institutions with large online-only cohorts hosted receptions ahead of the ceremony for graduates to meet and make in-person connections. In many cases, this process fostered a sense of community within the group. These connections also helped students enjoy the rest of the commencement activities and feel a greater sense of connection to the student body. For example, the reception for the University of Arizona online students before commencement helps students navigate open seating at the ceremony.

Pre-pandemic, live-streaming of commencement ceremonies was becoming standard.

Institutions, regardless of the size of their online student population, have started regularly live-streaming commencement ceremonies. Some institutions with larger online cohorts included videos and speeches uploaded specifically for this audience. While live streaming as a practice is feasible for most institutions, it does not include many elements that help foster feelings of community.

- Streams of live ceremonies are becoming standard for all institutions.
- This year, Purdue Global planned to stream the ceremony in virtual reality for all online students.

Live Streams of In-Person Ceremonies

- Videos generally consist of administrators reading names of graduates. Viewers can access the video at their convenience.
- American College of Healthcare Sciences used YouTube in 2015.

Videos of in-person ceremonies

- Students at Newcastle University used webinar software to graduate early in April 2020 to help with the fight against COVID-19.
- Colorado State University utilized a webinar in 2016.

Live Webinars

- The University of Edinburgh School of Education used Second Life avatars for its 2013 graduation ceremony.

Avatar-based ceremonies

- Southern New Hampshire University has historically used a traveling bus to award degrees to students at their homes or places of employment.

Live home visits

- Strayer University built a virtual commencement webpage that featured a pre-recorded President's Address, commencement awards, and graduate profiles.

Commencement Webpages

OPTIONS FOR INSTITUTIONS

Institutions are taking three general approaches to 2020 commencement: 1) delaying the ceremony indefinitely, 2) canceling the in-person ceremony in favor of an online celebration without contingency, or 3) holding an online ceremony while arranging an in-person commencement in the future.

Due to nationwide stay-at-homes measures and bans against large gatherings, nearly every institution has rethought its plans for spring commencement ceremonies. Some institutions sought feedback from students to help in their decision calculus, while other administrations opted to take swift, unilateral action.

Despite the varied response, nearly every institution highlighted the impact of the pandemic on graduates and emphasized the desire to honor graduating students again in the future.

Delay In-Person Ceremony	Some institutions are delaying in-person commencement ceremonies until the fall or an indefinite date in the future. • For example, Edinboro University delayed commencement until August based on responses from a student survey.
Virtual Commencement + No In-Person Ceremony Plans	Other institutions are canceling their in-person ceremonies in favor of online options, but have not scheduled another in-person ceremony. • Many of these institutions have not committed to offering an in-person celebration in favor of waiting for guidance from public health officials.
Virtual Commencement + Delayed In-Person Ceremony	Several institutions are attempting to provide both an online ceremony in the immediate future while providing logistics about future in-person ceremonies. • Most institutions are inviting graduates to attend the May 2021 commencement or another future ceremony.

PUBLIC FEEDBACK

Providing information about future in-person commencements is vital to the positive reception of virtual commencements.

In general, graduates believe that a virtual ceremony is incomparable to graduating in-person. A survey done by Edinboro University found that 76 percent of respondents voted to have an in-person ceremony despite the inability to predict the timing.

Elsewhere, an announcement that the administration was considering a virtual commencement became public prompted a senior at West Virginia University to start a petition against the action. The appeal garnered enough public support to reach over 3,500 signatures. Ultimately, WVU went ahead with an online ceremony but also agreed to host another commencement for 2020 graduates in the fall. Other institutions, including Northwestern University, are experiencing a similar backlash. In many cases, students seem to respond to offering a virtual ceremony in the spring and offering an opportunity to celebrate in-person at a future date positively.

THIRD PARTY CEREMONIES

Human Rights Council

The Human Rights Council and GLSEN, an education organization aimed at ending discrimination, harassment, and bullying based on sexual orientation and gender identity, are hosting a virtual commencement on May 8, 2020. The focus for the organizations is to provide support to students that might be suddenly returning to unhealthy or unwelcoming environments.

Natural Light Beer

Natural Light Beer is live-streaming a commencement ceremony on its Facebook page on May 14, 2020. The company promises "unforgettable speeches & sage advice on how to survive in the real world" from special celebrity guests.

Minecraft Virtual Commencement

College students have created Minecraft versions of their institutions in response to COVID-19 stay-at-home measures. On May 22, 2020, users will host an in-game graduation ceremony. Within the first week, 706 graduates from 278 institutions have signed up to participate.

BEST PRACTICES IN VIRTUAL COMMENCEMENT

PLATFORMS

There are four main platforms for institutions to host virtual commencement ceremonies:

Institutional Websites

Many institutions are hosting their virtual ceremonies directly on their institutional landing page. Although the actual hosting platform is not publicly available, this method provides a singular access point. This can prevent confusion and increase traffic to the institutional website.

Facebook and Other Social Media

Some institutions are hosting their online ceremonies on social media. Michigan State University, for example, is streaming its May 16th ceremony from the institution's Facebook page. This platform will likely make it easy for graduates and supporters to share the video and increase the size of the audience. Because the platform was designed to stream to large groups, there are likely few technical requirements from the institution. Additionally, with the audience's pre-existing knowledge of the platform, there could be higher chances of engagement with a decreased risk of technical challenges.

YouTube

Much like with Facebook, using a widely available platform like YouTube could increase traffic and minimize potential disruptions. YouTube's platform allows for encoder streaming. This feature enables an institution to use more advanced technology to capture content, including their desktop, camera, microphone, and send it to YouTube Live to be streamed to participants.

Webinar Platforms

For a smaller ceremony, a webinar platform could significantly increase the sense of connection to the graduates. This format would allow for the traditional elements of a graduation ceremony via live speeches and the reading of names. The webinar platform could also enable sharing student pictures and information to highlight graduates in addition to name reading.

STRATEGIES AND TIPS FOR ONLINE CEREMONIES

Announcements	Announcements about virtual commencement ceremonies are generally posted on institutional websites and then sent directly to students.
	Statements should also be available on institutional social media channels.
Speeches	Institutions should use the opportunity to invite high-profile speakers that might have previously been unable to attend an in-person ceremony.
	Speakers should acknowledge the current situation and its impact on the graduates.
Reading Names	Institutions should ask students for information on pronunciation of their names.
	Student information can be collected via online survey platform.
Integration of student pictures and messages	A slideshow of students and their awarded degree can take place of walking across the stage
	Institutions can collect this information via online survey platform.
Acknowledgement of traditions	Institutions should still integrate important traditions into their virtual ceremonies.
	At Purdue University, the institution will play prerecorded performances by Purdue Bands and offer virtual campus backgrounds for photos.
Diploma, honor cord and mortar board delivery	Institutions should get materials to students well ahead of the virtual ceremony.
	Institutions can include other items in mailings including class themed gifts, alumni pins, etc.

INSTITUTIONAL PROFILES

INSTITUTIONAL PROFILES

DAVIDSON COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Fast Facts

Date	May 8, 2020 at 6:30 p.m.
Platform(s)	Institutional website
Plans to reschedule	The institution invited 2020 graduates to attend the 2021 May commencement ceremony where they will be recognized as 2020 graduates.
Components	Virtual commencement featuring student photos submitted to the graduation committee.

Davidson Community College has reached out to students to get involved in the commencement ceremony. Graduates have the option to submit a photo to the graduation committee via Google Doc to be featured during the ceremony. Davidson also has made clear its commitment to "provide each graduate with a meaningful, memorable graduation event" by inviting students to participate in a future in-person ceremony.

Davidson Community College 2020 Commencement landing page

2020 Virtual Commencement Ceremony

DUE TO THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC, DCCC WILL HOST A VIRTUAL COMMENCEMENT TO CELEBRATE THE CLASS OF 2020!

A virtual ceremony will take place on the originally planned 2020 Commencement date, **Friday, May 8, starting at 6:30 p.m.** — students, families, and friends will be able to watch this ceremony from their computer, phone, or any device with an internet connection. On day of the event, the virtual commencement ceremony website, will showcase each graduate (name, optional photo, and credentials) as well as other celebratory features.

Date: Friday, May 8, 2020
Time: 6:30 p.m.
Location: Davidsonccc.edu/grad

SUNY GENESEE COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Fast Facts

Date	June 6, 2020 at 1:00 p.m.
Platform(s)	Streaming instructions sent directly to participants
Plans to reschedule	No current plans to reschedule
Components	Virtual commencement featuring student photos submitted via Google Forms

SUNY Genesee Community College is using a system of student RSVPs to organize its virtual commencement. The online form collects a student's name, pronunciation, and a picture to show on a slideshow with their degree awarded as names are read. If students RSVP, they are also eligible to receive a graduation favor package in the mail. The kit includes a student's graduation cap, 2020 tassel, and luggage tag. All student responses are due by April 27 to give the institution time to organize the ceremony.

Genesee Community College virtual Commencement RSVP introduction

Virtual Commencement RSVP

Please join us for a virtual commencement on Saturday, June 6, 2020 at 1:00 p.m.

Virtual commencement will function as follows:
The event will be streamed with access for you and your loved ones to watch from the comfort of your home. As your name is announced, your picture will be displayed on the screen. Alongside your picture will be your name and the degree/major you are graduating with.
As we reach closer to the commencement date, you will receive live-streaming instructions to your GCC email address

In order to ensure your name will be announced during the live stream, please RSVP below. The deadline to RSVP is Monday, April 27.

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MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY

Fast Facts

Date	May 16, 2020 10:00 am
Platform(s)	Institutional Facebook
Plans to reschedule	2020 graduates have been invited to attend a future in-person ceremony
Components	Virtual ceremony live stream

Michigan State University (MSU) virtual commencement will stream from the MSU Facebook account. After the event, a recording of the ceremony will be available on the commencement webpage. The announcement of the ceremony on the institution's social media has been met with a measured response from current and former students that are disappointed in the circumstances but appreciative of immediate recognition. In general, the acknowledgment of a future in-person celebration has produced the most positive reaction on the MSU Facebook page.

Responses to the announcement of a virtual commencement on the MSU Facebook page.

PURDUE UNIVERSITY

Fast Facts

Date	Before May 15
Platform(s)	Not publicly available
Plans to reschedule	Information for students about participating in a future ceremony are forthcoming.
Components	Graduates will receive a mailing and information on how to download their own ceremony.

Purdue University is pioneering an "on-demand" model of commencement. According to the institution's announcement, graduates will be mailed "a diploma cover, the commencement program, their honor cords (as earned), and information on how to download their own ceremony, which they can watch with their families at a time that works for them." Purdue included information about renting a cap and gown and announced they extended the deadline for students to secure their regalia.

Tweet announcing the decision to move 2020 commencement online via Purdue's Twitter profiles.

UNIVERSITY OF PITTSBURGH

Fast Facts		
	Date	April 26, 2020, at 11:30 a.m.
	Platform(s)	Facebook, YouTube, and social media
	Plans to reschedule	The institution plans to honor graduates with an in-person ceremony in the future, but the date it not yet determined
	Components	• Virtual ceremony with full program • Social media campaign

The University of Pittsburgh (Pitt) has emphasized marketing efforts to help graduates and the broader student body connect. Pittsburgh created dedicated webpages to help participants and audience members access the stream from a variety of platforms and devices. The institution is also inviting students to participate in a virtual version of "The Living Panther," a 1920 photograph of 5,000 students in the shape of the university logo. Pitt is engaging with students through social media by asking members of the intuitional community to submit their favorite photo of their time as a student. The mosaic made up of the images will be sent out to the Pitt community, but students' posts are also available for view on the commencement webpage.

Pitt includes a real-time view of the #PittGrad2020 hashtag on the commencement landing page.
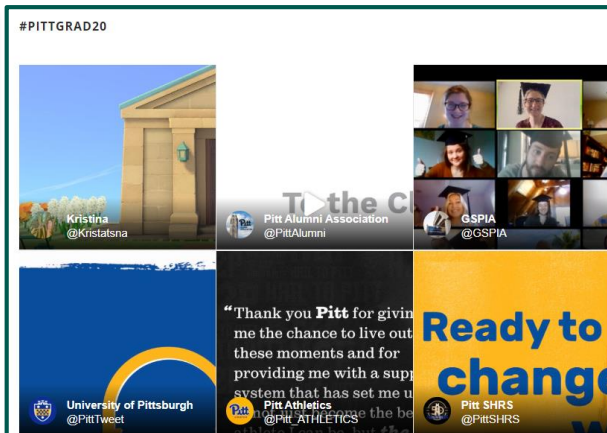
WEST VIRGINIA UNIVERSITY

Fast Facts		
	Date	May 16, 2020
	Platform(s)	To be determined
	Plans to reschedule	The institution plans hold a special commencement ceremony for all May graduates on Saturday, Dec. 19, 2020
	Components	• To be determined • Information being sent directly to graduates

West Virginia University recently shifted its plans to offer a celebration for future graduates after public backlash. Initial stages of planning indicated the administration was not planning to offer a future in-person ceremony. Students protested the perceived plan through a formal petition on Change.org. Since that time, the administration has announced plans to host a dedicated ceremony for spring 2020 graduates in December. Information about the virtual commencement celebration has not yet been publicly announced but will be sent directly to eligible graduates.

The link to the announcement of a virtual commencement ceremony was released on the institution's Twitter account.