

Commencement 2020 Working Group Recommendations to Chancellor Wilcox

Background

On January 21, 2020, the first U.S. case of COVID-19 was diagnosed in Washington State. As of April 16, more than 660,000 cases have been diagnosed in the nation, with 29,000 deaths. In response, federal, state, and local governments have restricted movement and promoted physical isolation to reduce community spread of the coronavirus.

Beginning Monday, March 16, Riverside County Health Officer Dr. Cameron Kaiser closed all county schools, including Pre-K-12, colleges, and universities, both public and private initially through April 3; this date was later moved to April 30. Earlier that week, UCR had asked instructors to begin transition tenth week instruction online and announced that finals would be administered remotely. This closure would eventually be extended to June 19, 2020.

On Thursday, March 19, California Governor Gavin Newsom issued a statewide “stay-at-home” order that prohibited gatherings and discontinued non-essential functions indefinitely. UCR moved all spring quarter instruction and exams to remote learning and extended that platform into summer session.

As a result of these closures, the 2020 commencement ceremonies could no longer proceed as scheduled in May and June. Chancellor Wilcox asked the Commencement Working Group to assess the situation and make recommendations on how to proceed.

Discussion

The Working Group met on Wednesday, April 8 by video meeting. In advance of this meeting, an email communication was sent by Chancellor Wilcox on Friday, April 3 inviting UCR students, faculty, and staff to provide input and feedback. The compiled data as of April 7 was presented to the group. The following topics were discussed:

1. Given UCR’s large representation of first-generation college students and the intense personal obstacles many of them overcame to pursue their degrees, graduation rituals have amplified significance. Strong opposition was voiced to canceling commencement.
2. Postponed commencement exercises could occur as soon as late September 2020 or as late as June 2021, concurrent with or adjacent to commencement for the next class. Timing will depend on guidance from public health agencies.
3. School of Medicine is on a different calendar than the other six degree-granting units, as the students will have completed their studies in mid-May and must begin their residencies soon thereafter. Those commitments render a postponed ceremony virtually impossible to consider, so the Dean consulted with the SOM Class of 2020 and has elected to create a synchronous, online ceremony that will be delivered on approximately the same schedule as originally planned.
4. Postponement is complicated:
 - a. There is no way to know now when social distancing measures will be relaxed;

- b. If there is another outbreak, governmental stay-at-home orders may be reactivated in the future;
 - c. Several months of advance notice would be required of any postponed in-person activities, allowing graduates and their families time to plan, as well as offering lead time for venue, rentals, regalia rental/purchase, etc.; and
 - d. Some unknown number of students will have schedule conflicts with the new dates, may have moved out of the area, or may not feel moved to return to campus for the ceremony, so it's impossible to estimate scale of a postponed event.
5. There was support for finding creative ways to celebrate the June 2020 milestone that don't require mass gatherings.
- a. For remote activities, computer and broadband Internet access for some students may be a barrier to participation. This issue may be even more challenging for students' family members.
 - b. No consensus was established around whether remote activities would be coordinated at the college, departmental, or major level.
 - c. The cultural celebrations (Raza Grad, Black Grad, Undocumented Student Graduation, etc.) are in similar phases of trying to decide how to approach commencement in ways that balance safety and health with a need to celebrate and create community.

As of 7:00 pm on April 7, 2,718 UCR stakeholders had responded to the online survey. The results are included as an attachment to these recommendations, and participation is summarized below.

- 88.48% were undergraduate students, 6.59% were graduate students
- Among the students, 84.41% had planned to walk in their respective ceremonies this quarter, 88.57% of the undergrads and 78.36% of the grad students
- Among respondents, 1,206 undergraduates and 65 graduate students submitted free-form comments.

Breakout Groups

During the discussion, the Working Group proposed formation of three small committees to discuss options under #5 above:

1. Undergraduate Students
2. Graduate Students/Hooding
3. Cultural Celebrations

The student committees shared input from their peers on April 13 with the Working Group.

Recommendations

1. Postpone in-person Commencement 2020 events until it is safe to reschedule them.
2. Hold online June 2020 celebrations (synchronous/asynchronous).
3. Communicate approved recommendations to students and their families in a timely manner (approximately 3 months for the in-person ceremonies when rescheduled) so that they can plan accordingly.

Principles Guiding Postponed Commencement and June Celebration

At the April 13 meeting, the student leaders reported the feedback they received from their respective constituents. They offered several high-level guiding principles to advise the group and campus leadership in approaching the recommendations in this document:

1. The postponed in-person commencement ceremonies should be held as soon as it is determined safe, and in a form and setting that will support and protect the health of our community, including graduates, faculty and staff members, family, and friends.
 - a. The longer after June 2020 the postponed ceremonies occur, the more difficult it will be for students to return.
 - b. There is no appetite among terminal degree recipients for any virtualized version of hooding, even paired with in-person hooding later.
2. Access to remote activities may be more manageable if split by college, major, and/or department and asynchronous participation may make them available to a broader audience.
3. For June celebration there is a strong desire for personalization and individual recognition.
4. Both undergraduate and graduate students highly value multi-media opportunities to acknowledge their families and others who supported their journeys.
5. Graduate students highly value sharing of their dissertation title and other elements that underscore their scholarly accomplishment, in addition to acknowledging their supporters.
6. Access to regalia for those students who can afford it and desire it for photography, videography, etc. is important and can be negotiated through various vendors, but shipping costs and availability may put that option out of reach for some graduating students.
7. Likewise, access to computing technology and broadband internet will present barriers for some students who lack the resources for either or both.

The Event Management Office will research options that honor the wishes described above and submit cost and logistics information to the Chancellor and Provost.

The Working Group is grateful for an opportunity to consider and discuss this incredibly vital milestone in the life of a university campus. While adhering to public safety guidelines and restrictions, our goal is to appropriately engage in adapted and novel rituals and traditions that celebrate the exceptional achievements of UCR's Class of 2020.

Respectfully Submitted,

Vice Chancellor Brian L. Haynes, Co-Chair
Dean Kathryn Uhrich, Co-Chair

For The Working Group