

UC Davis Commencement Review

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Background Information

Historically, UC Davis has offered a decentralized commencement model for its spring undergraduate commencements. Each of the colleges has taken responsibility for its ceremonies and all were held in the University Credit Union Center. The college-based undergraduate ceremonies were supported by event staff from Student Affairs and Ceremonies and Events personnel who were responsible for the commencement program.

As the campus has grown over the past few decades, additional ceremonies have been added to accommodate greater numbers of graduates and their families. The increase in ceremonies has impacted those involved with planning and execution from both a facilities and staffing perspective. In addition to the logistical challenges, there has been a desire to create a more celebratory event for commencement activities. The focus would include increased professional optics, greater emphasis on the students' entire experience at UC Davis, acknowledgement by key campus leadership at all events and prestigious speakers who elevate the events' importance. A different approach might also allow students to graduate with their friends, regardless of major.

The concept of changing to a more unified model for undergraduate commencements was broached as recently as 2015 when former campus leadership requested proposals to create a new commencement experience. That plan, which was to be implemented in June 2016, acknowledged the obstacles of space on the Davis campus and program time limitations while seeking a different venue to hold commencements. Leadership changes caused this plan to be placed on hold.

Again in 2019 the decision was made by campus leadership to move from college-based ceremonies to three non-college specific undergraduate ceremonies beginning in June 2020. Input was solicited by campus stakeholders and several groups began to plan for the new ceremonies. Discussions included venue location, logistical issues, potential speakers, and the feasibility of graduating a larger number of students in each ceremony. There was also a strong desire to retain some of the elements of the individual ceremonies, such as having the students sit within their college so their parents would have an idea of when to expect them to cross the stage.

When the pandemic disrupted campus operations in 2020, all activities, including this commencement change, were put on hold. Even as planning began again in Fall 2021, it was under the backdrop of new health requirements, a surge of a new COVID-19 variant in January 2022, and information that suggested an outdoor ceremony was the best option for a large gathering.

Brief Sketch of What Transpired Commencement Weekend

On Thursday, June 9th, a walkthrough was conducted with a number of staff who would be attending the commencement ceremonies. The purpose was to review the calling of names in real time. Full Measure (a contracted media vendor) representatives, along with Ceremonies and Events staff and some volunteers, coordinated walking up to the stage, presenting the QR codes which contained student names and majors, and then proceeding across the stage. Other walkthroughs were also done that week, but separately, for teams that would be working during commencement weekend. For example, the dining team that was responsible for a portion of the water service went to the stadium on Wednesday, June 8th to review concessions plans and the placement of water stations.

On Friday, June 10th, staff and volunteers began to gather as early as 4 a.m. An Emergency Operations Command (EOC) was designated in one of the press box rooms in the stadium. Fire and Police personnel were located in the room next door to allow for close proximity during the ceremonies. Friends and family members were welcomed into the stadium beginning at 6 a.m. The goal was to have all of the attendees seated by 8 am. This was accomplished.

At the same time the crowd was arriving, it was noted that the hot weather that was predicted for the day was materializing. Although those seated on the east side of the stadium had some natural shade as the sun rose, those seated on the west side were immediately in the path of the sun as soon as they sat down.

The student processional was scheduled to begin leaving Biggs Field at 7:20, and start entering the stadium at 7:40 so that the program could begin at 8 am. But there was a significant delay. Then, although the plan was for three lines of students to enter the stadium together, only one line walked in, greatly increasing the amount of time that it took for all of the students to be seated. It was learned that due to the construction fence near the new Edwards Family Athletics Center, there was only a four-foot-wide opening for the students to pass through. This made it impossible to begin with three lines of students moving towards the stadium at the same time. It was also learned that the volunteer team with responsibility for lining up the students did not meet in advance with the volunteer team that was seating the students; nor did the seating team believe they had the authority to redirect the processional into three lines once the marching began incorrectly.

The ceremony began at approximately 9:20 am. Although the Chancellor's remarks were abbreviated the remainder of the program continued as planned with speeches, the conferring of degrees, and the start of students crossing the stage.

The seating plan called for students in the four colleges to enter and sit together within their colleges. The plan also called for the students to be released (or to walk forward to cross the stage) from the back rows to the front. This was a departure from prior

ceremonies where the students were released from front to back. As the temperature grew hotter, the students in the front rows became reasonably uncomfortable and anxious and began to walk up to cross the stage without specific direction. It was not possible for the small number of volunteers to keep this from happening.

The heat also resulted in students seeking water. The placement of the water stations in the back of the rows of chairs, under tents, caused the students to congregate and remain standing. This picture of the field as the ceremony progressed was ultimately very chaotic. At the same time, attendees in the stands were likewise seeking water and shade. They appeared to be unaware of the cooling stations that were available, but located outside of the venue. The no re-entry policy kept many from seeking that as a solution for their discomfort.

As the commencement progressed, several individuals began to experience heat exhaustion and emergency services were notified. The Acting Fire Marshal asked for temperature readings in various places, including on the turf. The results were alarming and indicated that a decision to end the ceremony was necessary as the situation was deteriorating rapidly, in the midst of a very active event. Students' names were being called, the Chancellor and the Provost were shaking hands, a few of the stage party were experiencing lightheadedness, and sirens could be heard as first responders were being called to the stadium.

Understandably, the cancellation announcement was met with much anger and disappointment. It is important to note that the Chancellor and several of his leadership team remained on the field for approximately 90 minutes shaking hands and conversing with students and family members. They accepted and acknowledged the negative crowd reaction in real time.

Two lengthy debriefs of the event occurred Friday afternoon, along with consultation with senior leadership. Modification of the next day's ceremony was the primary topic. Initially, decisions were made to continue with the keynote speaker and the student speaker; to eliminate the student procession; and to eliminate the calling of student names in order to shorten the ceremony and to avoid the heat issues of the previous day. However, as that information was conveyed over the evening (it takes several hours to relay emails to a large number of addresses), the social media response was very negative and included subtle plans for disruption of Saturday's event. The primary point of angst was the elimination of the calling of students' names.

As a result, a quick pivot was conveyed early Saturday morning, June 11th, to forego the speeches and only call student names. Unfortunately, the only means to communicate this information was again by email to students or directly to students as they arrived at the stadium. It was later learned that the vendor Full Measure had texting capability that could have been used, but this was not widely known or used. The scramble to get names on to cards to be read was described as very chaotic.

Also, as a part of the debrief discussions and following consultation with Associated Students of UC Davis (ASUCD) leadership, a refund on regalia was offered to those students who were unable to walk across the stage on Friday. Although this was a good faith gesture, it was not meant to make up for a poor experience.

Saturday's ceremony began at 7:30 am with students being directed to go to their seats as soon as they arrived. Although the weather was basically the same, the overall attendance was less and students were asked to leave after they walked across the stage. The ceremony concluded by 10:30 am.

On Sunday, June 12th the ceremony began 30 minutes earlier at 7 am to allow for the speeches to be re-inserted to the program. Once again, the students were instructed to go directly to their seats upon arrival. There was also a marked decrease in temperature for the final ceremony which made for a much more comfortable experience for all. The ceremony ended at approximately 9:30 am.

On Monday, June 13th, students who did not have the opportunity to walk across the stage on Friday or Saturday were notified that they would be contacted at a later date to get their input on a future opportunity to celebrate their achievements. A survey went out in late June and two makeup ceremonies happened in August with a third to occur in December.

Stakeholder Feedback

Nearly 50 stakeholders were interviewed for this review. They represent different segments of the campus community, were integral to the planning of the commencements, and/or attended the ceremonies. Their thoughts have been synthesized for the purpose of providing a combined perspective for this review. Several individuals also provided follow-up documents that were pertinent to their planning and helpful for understanding the full scope of what transpired. In addition, emails to the Chancellor's office and a summary of social media posts were considered, along with responses to the survey that was sent to all students who registered for commencement and a survey that was given to all volunteers.

Significant planning by university personnel over the course of many months was done for these ceremonies. It was clear and resonated strongly that all involved were undertaking something new and of critical importance for the campus. The planning also required coordination from a variety of units across the campus in order to ensure success. Regular operational meetings were held beginning in January 2022. As new issues arose, additional staff members and departments were added to the meetings. Separate communications meetings were also started in early spring, primarily to create a new registration system for student signups. It is important to note that many individuals stepped up and got involved in the planning before they were officially asked to participate. Although there were patterns in place from previously combined fall commencements and from other large events at the stadium such as football

games, the specific timing of the program (8 to 10 am) and the crowd estimates (12,500) required new ways of thinking.

The traffic mitigation strategies appear to have been the most successful in execution. Families were in place and ready for the ceremony to begin just before 8 am on Friday. Similarly, fire, police and emergency personnel increased staffing resources from other UC campuses, neighboring locations, and the California Highway Patrol and were prepared for the day's events as they unfolded.

However, there was agreement among most interviewees that the overall program planning was often disjointed and lacked a centralized voice of authority on decision making. Meetings were lengthy and described by some as ineffective because they were focused on how to orchestrate logistical issues rather than reporting out on key issues and obtaining direction on major decisions.

The primary feedback from students and families was to express anger because they believed there was a lack of planning on the part of UC Davis. They commented that it was well known that days in June in the Sacramento valley and the city of Davis in particular are often unbearably hot. The choice of an outdoor venue was highly criticized.

Responses to the volunteer survey revealed that their experiences were both very challenging and very rewarding. Few in number, they were asked to perform a myriad of unfamiliar tasks, including providing crowd control as the situation on Friday unfolded and the cancellation announcement was made. Although training was provided, many felt unprepared to deal with angry and sometimes aggressive people who were both hot and disappointed. In general, they felt that volunteer leadership did a good job of providing information in advance; however, the early start (5 am) and heat issues negatively impacted their experience. However, many also commented that they look forward to participating again as lessons learned are applied to future ceremonies.

Conclusions/Recommendations:

It cannot be understated that the failure to execute a successful commencement weekend reflected poorly on the university. Even though there were improvements as the weekend progressed, much of the damage had already been done on Friday. Graduation is the culmination of years of hard work; the end of one chapter and the start of the next. For some students, it has been described as the best day of their life and a dream come true. The commencement ceremony is often viewed as a landmark event as one moves on to a new adventure. It is a celebration for the individual, family and friends. If the student is the first in their family to graduate, attendance becomes even more important and the ceremony becomes a major celebratory event.

In light of this and all of the information gathered for this review, the following conclusions are drawn and these recommendations offered for consideration when planning future commencement ceremonies:

- **Identify a Commencement Leader.** Although individual campus leaders provided direction for their respective units, there was a void and lack of coordination across the campus. Handoffs were simply made without understanding the impact of failure at any one point. A leader, with either specific experience in orchestrating large graduation ceremonies or one with the willingness to be informed by best practices across the country, needs to be identified. It is critical that this person is designated by campus leadership and accepted as having the authority for final decision-making across all units and colleges for commencement activities.
- **Document Specific Goals for Commencement.** There was a lack of written expectations and specific guidance for the ceremonies. A charge letter with goals would have pushed stakeholders to think more broadly about the commencements and their individual unit or college responsibilities. This ceremony is specifically for the UC Davis students. Everyone who participates is doing so because of their commitment to student success and their desire to join in celebrating this culmination of the graduates' college experience. Whether responding to emails that may seem mundane or repetitive, volunteering to help students line up, or ensuring water is readily available, every assignment becomes important and should be viewed as such.
- **Recruit a Robust and Trained Volunteer Team.** In the past, volunteers came primarily from college personnel via listservs and/or dean's office solicitation. However, with the expansion of the size of the ceremonies, more support was needed from others on campus. Unfortunately, there was not a centralized effort to organize volunteers until May, when it became apparent that there were insufficient people to manage the various tasks needed. With a two-hour time frame for the commencement program, it was critical that students were moved through the registration, lineup, and seating processes. The lack of an effective plan in this area is seen as the primary impetus for the failure of Friday's ceremony. In fact, it is not clear that the plan included a careful analysis of what support was needed to distribute more than 2000 registration cards, to line up and move the students from Biggs Field to the stadium floor and into their seats.

To remedy this, early in the planning process a significant number of trained volunteers need to be engaged to support all of the operational aspects of the event. Ideally, these individuals should be professional campus staff who are already familiar with commencement activities. It is * important that a method of compensation or time off is determined and announced in advance. Expanding volunteer opportunities to include student organizations, management, and retirees may also be worth considering.

- **Retain Added Ceremonial Effects.** Positive feedback was consistently given by interviewees on the feel and atmosphere of the ceremony prior to the unfortunate heat issues. The stadium was described as spectacular and beautiful. If a new venue is selected, it is recommended that planners work to maintain the newer look and feel elements that were added to the June 2022 ceremonies at UC Davis Health Stadium.
- **Assess the Need for a Processional.** When graduating more than 2000 students at one event, every minute counts in order to avoid a very lengthy ceremony. Although in theory it was determined that it was possible to have students seated within 15 minutes, it may not have been realistic that young people, in celebration mode, would focus on making “their moment” go as fast as possible. Saturday’s and Sunday’s ceremonies proceeded without a student processional. It appeared that this allowed students to get into place much more quickly. However, there may have been a downside to this change that will need to be determined.
- **Eliminate Registration Cards.** Students who wanted to walk in the commencement ceremonies were required to register in advance. From this registration, a card was created with a QR code that would display their name and major as they crossed the stage. The passing out of the cards was very time consuming and added to the difficulty of lining students up to begin the processional on time. Only one table and one line were set up for three of the colleges, and only two lines for the fourth college which was also the largest. The cards were set loosely (not in boxes) on the tables in alphabetical order and then were separated by the volunteers. As the morning progressed, the cards quickly became mixed up and it became more difficult for volunteers to skim through the various stacks to find a particular student’s card.

This method of distribution was a return to a process that had already been proven to be problematic in the past. An alternative is suggested of placing the information on students’ cell phones. Admittedly, this method brings its own set of challenges since the phones would have to be passed back and forth and it would mean relying on each student to be prepared as they approach the stage. But for the future, even with the stated drawbacks, it is recommended that the cards be virtual and distributed in advance to substantially expedite this part of the ceremony.

- **Consider Centralizing Communication Messages.** The communication processes appeared to be fragmented throughout the planning. Different entities were responsible for messaging to students, families and staff at various times. Although the Full Measure vendor was contracted to send email communications to students, college personnel coordinated the effort with support from campus units. However, this decision limited external campus messaging to families and staff during the three commencement days when only

social media was available. Many students, family members and volunteers commented that they did not have many important details nor did they receive information in a timely manner as changes were made. Volunteers in particular found themselves unable to answer questions and unable to get real-time information regarding what was going on as changes were made.

In addition, staff in the EOC were not routinely updated about what was occurring. Unlike the messaging that takes place during events like Picnic Day, there were gaps in information. Although some staff had radios, others relied on text messaging, which inevitably meant that information was not being conveyed consistently and was done without the benefit of review for accuracy, tone and potential audience reaction. This would have been particularly beneficial when the cancellation announcement was made.

- ***Reconsider the Venue and the Timing of Ceremonies.*** Based on student and staff feedback, the UC Davis Health Stadium is viewed as problematic for this type of event. The bowl-type structure, with no shade, becomes extremely vulnerable to heat. Although weather experts were consulted and an early-morning ceremony appeared to be the best option given these concerns, graduates did not arrive for registration in a timely fashion on Friday. In fact, it is estimated that only one-third of the graduates had arrived by 7 am. This, along with the processional and registration issues already discussed and the surprisingly rapid escalation of heat at an early hour, quickly magnified the day's problems. Exploring an evening ceremony at the stadium, locating an indoor venue, or making a significant investment in shade structures for the stadium are some possible alternatives.
- ***Incorporate a Rehearsal and Final "Run of Show."*** Many individuals commented on the lack of a full rehearsal, given this was the first time commencements were being held in the stadium. Similarly, comments were made regarding the lack of a final "run of show" document, which is a tool that is used for almost every event and provides written details of what is planned to happen and when. An advance look at this may have given the planners more discussion points and opportunities to challenge some of the timing assumptions, especially for graduates to walk across the stage. Likewise, a full rehearsal could have brought to light the gaps between what was planned and what could actually be executed.
- ***Develop Contingency Plans.*** Even if all future commencements are carefully organized and all of these recommendations are considered, it is still possible that there will be things that do not go exactly as planned. UC Davis has established an Event and Crisis Management Team (ECMT) for the specific purpose of having an executive-level oversight and strategic decision-making body for the campus during potential or actual crisis situations. There was a severe weather warning prior to commencement weekend, and Friday turned

into a crisis situation. This team could have been activated and provided various scenarios at least a week prior to the first ceremony on June 10th.

It also does not appear that written contingency plans were fully developed by the various work groups. Some questions to answer might have been:

- 1) What if a majority of the students arrive at the same time and there is a bottleneck at the registration tables?
- 2) What if a speaker is unable to attend at the last minute?
- 3) Who is responsible for ensuring that the processional starts on time?
- 4) What if key staff become ill and are unable to attend the ceremonies, given the prevalence of COVID this year?
- 5) What will the message be if the ceremony is interrupted for any reason?

At a minimum, these issues could be discussed in advance; but ideally, written plans should be developed and executive leaders should be fully engaged as needed.

In conclusion, collecting insight for this review highlighted the many talented and dedicated individuals who work at UC Davis. Although it is always easy to say what should have been done after the fact, early planning appeared to miss the opportunity to fully engage all of those individuals who have institutional knowledge of past commencement ceremonies and the hosting of large events held in the various venues on campus. Future commencements can be successful with specific leadership and unified planning.