

COVID19 & Convocation



It seems clear that social distancing orders and public assembly bans will force all North American institutions to cancel, or at least *postpone*, spring and early summer graduation ceremonies this year.

At most institutions, the reluctance to cancel convocation was palpable. In many cases, the decision was reached *weeks* after bans on all other non-essential gatherings. Presidents wrote thoughtful letters or recorded video messages to break the “enormous disappointment” to graduating students and their families, expressing regret that “longstanding traditions” to make “one of life’s great milestones” had to be postponed.

All institutions have indicated that students will graduate on schedule, *in absentia*, and will receive their diplomas by mail. Most have also suggested that graduates will be welcome to participate belatedly in a convocation ceremony this fall, or once the ban has been lifted. Some have optimistically announced a new date for the postponed ceremony, in October or November, while others have identified dates in 2021. Many are implementing virtual approaches to celebrate their graduating class in the meantime.

This bulletin offers a sampling of intriguing approaches to mounting a virtual convocation for the class of 2020.

Social Media Celebrations

Even under *normal* circumstances, students share millions of graduation photos and video clips on **social media**, often with institution-specific hashtags. This year, some event organizers are holding awards celebrations *exclusively* on social media. Brock University’s Badger Athletics held their annual [awards gala on Instagram Live](#).



The media relations and social media manager at **Brigham Young University** [shares](#) that they will be curating user-generated content on social using the hashtag #BYUgrad, providing Zoom backgrounds of BYU convocations, sharing feature stories, encouraging grads to takeover social channels, creating a presidential address video, collecting scores of 14-second video clips from faculty, and encouraging grads to use a “then vs now” photo frame for Instagram stories.



Others are compiling **webpages** of graduate profiles, or to replace graduate art shows. Marketing departments are compiling clips from graduates into class recognition **videos**. A social media coordinator at the University of Utah's Quinney College of Law is heading out with a telephoto lens to **capture** "front porch graduation photos," or what the cool kids are starting to call "**porch-ritz**."

Videoconference



As the term wound down, institutions began using videoconferencing solutions for more and more celebratory purposes. Students collaboratively performed **plays**, choir recitals, awards shows and graduations using Zoom or other

platforms for a virtual ceremony. Many recorded video messages of congratulation from administrators and faculty.

Care Packages

Since institutions are mailing diplomas to their graduates anyway, some are creating "**care packages**" to make an even bigger impact. Some are including class rings or branded **alumni swag**, and hashtags to encourage "unboxing" videos on social media. Johns Hopkins is sending **lawn signs** and flowers to senior athletes. Buffalo State College is **reportedly** considering shipping **champagne flutes** to students for a virtual toast.



This June, **uLethbridge** will ship graduates their parchment, a cap and tassel, a commemorative program, alumni pin, Indigenous stole if requested, and honour cords for those graduating with distinction. Students are encouraged to post photos to social media with the hashtag #uleth2020 (and to attend a convocation ceremony sometime in the next 3 years).

Social Distance

Some institutions are considering ways to observe social distancing requirements during convocation. For instance, Maine's Kennebec Valley Community College is reportedly holding their graduation ceremony in a [drive-in movie theatre](#), with faculty and staff lining the streets in their cars.



Probably one of the least practical approaches, although nonetheless thought-provoking, comes from Tokyo's Business Breakthrough University. They recently used [telepresence robots](#) to allow four graduates to “walk” across the stage *remotely*, their faces displayed on tablets on robots wearing graduation gowns and mortarboards.



Virtual Reality

Usually, the ideas that will resonate most with students are the ones that they develop spontaneously on their own. It's an old adage that you put walkways across the quad where students have *already* worn paths, not where the administration *wants* them to walk. So while it may be a less reverent setting than many academics would wish, perhaps massive multiplayer online role-playing game worlds are worth considering.



Last month, University of Pennsylvania students created a virtual campus inside the gameworld of [Minecraft](#), so that graduates could still ceremonially walk down Locust Street to celebrate their graduation. Thousands of students from institutions across the US are recreating campuses in Minecraft, or have expressed an interest in graduating in a communal ceremony there, at a fictional “[Quarantine University](#).” The gameworld will allow students to invite their families, visit with classmates, and add spontaneous fireworks to celebrate.



Likewise, a small group of high school seniors has launched [Nexus](#), a cross-platform app to host virtual graduations and year-end celebrations in immersive 3D, incorporating customizable avatars and realistic campus simulations based on Google Maps. “Designed by students, for students,” the multiplayer immersive platform improves on the experience of web conferencing with Unity3D’s rendering engine, spatial realtime audio, and administrator security. All profits go to COVID19 research.