

Rethinking University Commencement

Background

Spring Commencement is a highly choreographed ceremony planned each year by a dedicated group of faculty, staff and students who serve as members of the Commencement Committee. By Administrative Regulation (AR 4:4) the Committee membership, appointed by and reporting to the President, shall be comprised of faculty, students and staff. The Committee's responsibilities are prescribed in AR 4.4 as the following:

The Committee's responsibilities shall include participation in the planning and execution of the commencement ceremony and periodic review of the ceremony and related events.

Despite the Commencement Committee's statement on its website <<http://www.uky.edu/Commencement>> that "approximately 8,000 persons attend this event," the Spring (aka May) Commencement has been characterized as poorly attended. Indeed, against the background of what one could concede -- 8,000 persons constitutes a sizeable crowd -- the percentage of eligible graduates who participate in Spring Commencement (11%) is hardly inspiring. Attracting little more than 1 in 10 eligible graduates to May Commencement does not reflect well on the University. Fortified by his previous experience at Indianan University, where the University Commencement was extremely well attended, Provost Subbaswamy charged a group of deans last fall to review benchmark data on commencement activities and recommend improvements to the current ceremonial arrangements at the University of Kentucky. Dr. Tom Lester, Dean of the College of Engineering, chaired the ad hoc workgroup.

One fact galvanized the workgroup's resolve to recommend a break from the University tradition of a single May commencement: For the past five years, an estimated 41% of UK's graduates completed degrees in December and August. Compounding the vexing problem of a Spring Commencement in which almost 90% of the eligible graduates do not attend the ceremony is the equally harsh reality that 40% of *all* eligible graduates over the course of an academic year complete their degree study at times of the year other than May, rendering the timing of a single commencement ceremony in May extremely unattractive, if not fundamentally insensitive.

We owe our students and their families more. Indeed, the workgroup concluded that the University needs to find ways to rejuvenate the Spring Commencement ceremony *and* address the glaring problem that a considerably minority of our graduates are ill served by the timing of a May commencement. The major findings of the workgroup underscore these two points. The workgroup reported that:

- The majority of UK's benchmarks hold winter commencement exercises (see attached spreadsheet for data on commencement ceremonies at our benchmark institutions)
- Among Kentucky institutions, only UK and Kentucky State do not hold winter ceremonies (note: Kentucky State awarded 193 bachelor and 47 master's degrees in 2008).
- An estimated 41% of UK's graduates complete degrees in December and August while 59% complete in May. The proportional spread across these three months has not changed over the past five years.
- Main commencement is extremely poorly attended. In 2008, an estimated 11% of eligible graduates walked in the May commencement ceremony. This poor attendance does not portray the university in a positive light, nor does it reflect a Top 20 institution.
- Poor attendance at main commencement does not result from disinterest on the part of students in participating in a graduation ceremony as individual college ceremonies are extremely well attended.
- Currently all degree-producing colleges hold individual ceremonies in May and three hold a winter ceremony (Engineering, Nursing and Social Work). Some colleges hold individual ceremonies to meet special needs (e.g.: Nursing pinning ceremonies), but several Deans indicated that dissatisfaction with the main ceremony led them to establish their own. This increases overall costs: the main commencement budget is \$100,000 but does not include costs for individual college ceremonies.
- Several Deans expressed concern about the quality of the main ceremony and indicated that they would not hold an individual ceremony if that ceremony were improved through individualized attention to students; less focus on awards and more on student achievement; no speech; and other improvements.
- Feedback from Student Government is that the main ceremony is not positively viewed by most students. In fact, SGA has difficulty finding students willing to serve on the commencement planning ceremony.

A Modest Proposal

Provost Subbaswamy requests that the University Senate consider an amendment to the academic calendar to accommodate a three-year pilot initiative of a Winter (December) Commencement. The major elements of the Winter Commencement proposal include:

- Stage the ceremony in Memorial Coliseum to contain costs
- Recognize individually not only Ph.D. degree candidates but also Bachelor's & Master's degree candidates
- Have President Todd serve as the Master of Ceremonies
- Forego speakers and awards to maximize the allotment of time for the individual recognition of all degree candidates in attendance
- Conduct a separate Winter hooding ceremony for professional degree and professional doctorate candidates
- Ask deans and faculties to promote the Winter 2010 Commencement among their students to create an expectation that all winter graduates (and their families) would attend the ceremony
- Ask the University Senate to consider a revision to its policy on the conferral of honorary degrees to permit the award of honorary degrees at the Winter Commencement¹

Furthermore, Provost Subbaswamy suggests the following timeline for implementing a three-year pilot initiative of a Winter Commencement:

- Discuss the Winter Commencement proposal at the April 19 & 26 meetings of the Senate Council and have the Senate Council forward its recommendation on the Winter Commencement proposal to the University Senate for its consideration and vote on approval at its May 3 meeting
- (Assuming the University Senate approves the inclusion in the academic calendar of a three-year pilot initiative for a Winter Commencement, beginning in December 2010), ask the Senate Council and the Provost's Office to work collaboratively over the summer to develop a framework that would guide Fall 2010 discussions on the substance of the Winter 2010 Commencement and improvements to the Spring Commencement
- Initiate discussions in the Senate Council in the early fall of 2010 on the conferral of honorary degrees, beginning Winter 2011 Commencement, and

¹ Recognizing that this proposal is being conveyed to the Senate Council on the cusp of the off-assignment period for nine-month faculty, Provost Subbaswamy recommends that the conferral of honorary degrees at Winter Commencement be deferred until the Winter 2011 Commencement. Such a delay would help ensure that the faculty governance bodies had sufficient time in the upcoming fall to consider the merits of conferring honorary degrees in conjunction with a Winter Commencement and, if so, on what terms.

conduct a vote on approval in time to initiate the honorary degree vetting processes (as enumerated in AR 11:4), were the University Senate to approve the implementation of a three-year Winter Commencement initiative