

# How do you do commencement when you can't gather?

By Jo Ann Deasy

ATS recently conducted a survey of chief academic and chief executive officers at member schools to learn about the immediate and long-term challenges they were facing in light of the emerging COVID-19 pandemic. The immediate challenge most often cited? Changes to commencement. In anticipation of these challenges, ATS hosted a webinar on virtual commencements featuring three panelists from ATS schools on April 9. To follow are some key insights gained from the webinar on virtual commencements and experiments in online programming.



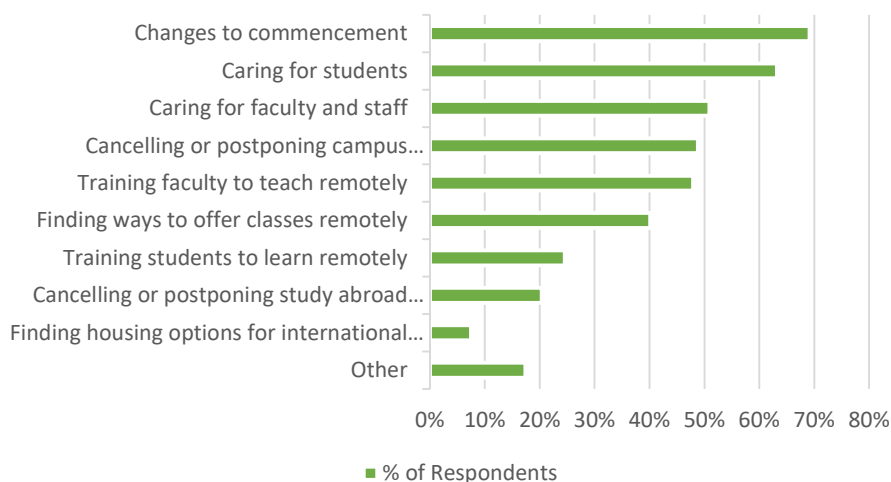
## What are your plans?

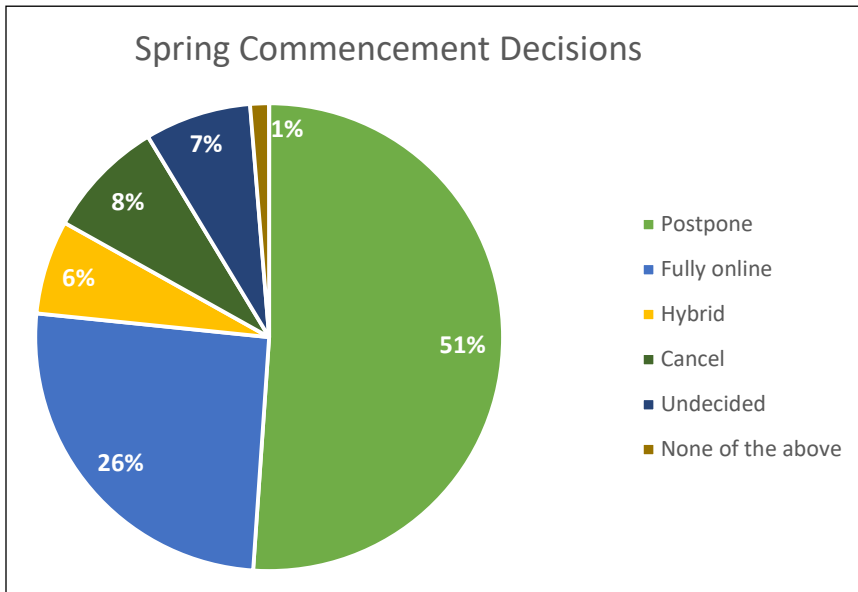
More than three-quarters of ATS schools have commencements in the month of May. These commencements have been directly impacted by the restrictions in travel and group gatherings enacted in response to COVID-19. More than half of the member schools are planning to postpone their spring 2020 commencements while another one-third are planning on fully online or hybrid commencement events. Almost all schools are finding some way to mark the spring 2020 graduation in a virtual or distributed way.

## Planning a virtual commencement

More than 140 people attended the ATS webinar on virtual commencement. The webinar was designed as a peer-learning event featuring three

Immediate Challenges in Response to COVID-19





panelists from ATS schools: Michelle Wobbe (registrar and director of assessment) from Eden Theological Seminary, Madelyn Snodgrass (registrar and director of assessment) from Seminary of the Southwest, and Vanessa Lovelace (vice president of academic affairs and dean) from Lancaster Theological Seminary. Each shared for about ten minutes about how their schools are shifting their commencements to virtual formats. Several key themes emerged.

### ***Translating ritual to a virtual format***

Rituals are layered experiences designed to convey multiple meanings and serve multiple purposes in the life of a community. For most schools, commencements are rituals that serve to mark the end of the semester. They celebrate the accomplishments of graduates, confer awards including honorary doctorates, recognize retiring faculty and/or administrators, provide closure for graduates, and send them forth into their ministries. They often include symbolic moments: receiving a hood, processing a cross, faculty in regalia, worship in the campus chapel, or photos in front of a statue or building. Moving to a virtual environment forces schools to name the multiple purposes embedded in commencement and determine what can be effectively accomplished online.

In response, schools are videotaping speakers or musicians in their chapels, asking faculty to wear regalia at

home (if they can get to the office to pick it up!), sending caps and hoods to graduates, and mailing traditional annual gifts. Some schools are even mailing celebration packages to graduates that include cakes and party supplies. Everyone is trying to figure out how to honor each individual student in their ceremonies. Smaller schools are able to have all the graduates on their webinars or livestreams. Others are asking students to submit bios, photos, or videos and creating montages. Some are posting profiles on their Facebook pages or other virtual media. The larger the school, the more difficult it is to recognize individual graduates—both in a face-to-face ceremony and virtually.

One specific aspect of ritual raised was how to bring closure. Most of us have experienced the awkward video conference that either ends abruptly or with everyone waving and waiting for the host to end the meeting. How do you end a video conference well? Perhaps, more importantly for graduates, was how to provide those moments that usually take place after the ceremony is over—receptions where everyone hugs one another, pictures with those who accompanied them through their degrees, informal words of encouragement and thanks, etc. Some schools are adding a webinar just for graduates, faculty, and staff after the formal ceremony to provide opportunities to say goodbye.

### ***Adapting to new technologies***

Panelists and attendees of the webinar named multiple ways they are adapting to new technology. What was very clear was that most of us have a lot to learn about what is possible and potential pitfalls. Most schools who are planning on a virtual component to graduation are doing one or more of the following: creating videos to post online, livestreaming, or hosting a webinar with multiple people on video. What apps and programs are people using? In the *ATS Survey of School Response to COVID-19*, the most cited was Zoom (38)

followed by YouTube (9), and Facebook Live (8). Some were livestreaming or posting videos on their websites or through their learning management systems.

During the webinar, concerns were raised about providing quality music through Zoom or other webinar applications, about “Zoom-bombing” or the security of their livestreams, and about copyright issues. Suggestions included finding a third-party service before posting live, recording certain aspects of the ceremony, and checking to see if copyrights have been waived for online usage during this time of crisis. It became very clear that our IT personnel and educational technologists are crucial to planning and implementing an effective event.

Some schools have significant IT resources and experience with virtual programming. For those who are new to these technologies, it will be important to practice. You may want to experiment with a smaller event first. Hold a virtual chapel service or some other event that will allow you to practice the many technologies you might want to incorporate into your virtual commencement. Talk with your IT department or the IT department at another school to find out how to ensure stable video and audio connections.

### ***Caring for students through trauma and grief***

The third theme that emerged during the webinar was how to care for graduates through the trauma and grief related to COVID-19, including changes to their final semesters of seminary. Like everyone else, graduates are navigating health issues for themselves, their families, and their friends. For those in caring professions, they are also navigating the pastoral and psychological care needs of those they serve and, for many, also negotiating how to do their work online. Many are facing financial uncertainty or unemployment. Those who are seeking

placement face an unknown job market. The stresses related to COVID-19 are compounded by the stresses related to graduation and transitioning out of the seminary environment. Faculty and staff are also bearing these stresses both for themselves and for the students they serve.

Leaders who are communicating cancellations or changes to virtual formats often receive the pain and anger of graduates who are grieving. It is important to acknowledge the loss they are feeling, recognize that you will not be able to fix everything, and respond with a non-anxious presence that does not take things personally. Some schools are convening students online for conversations about this transition, gathering feedback from student leaders, including them in the planning process, or including some form of lament in their commencement programs.

For those schools that are still in the midst of planning for commencement, we would encourage you to reach out to other schools of similar size and styles of worship or celebration. Many who work at member schools are connecting through [Engage ATS](#), our online community, to continue this conversation. A [recording of the webinar](#) is available on the ATS website.

This was the first in a series of webinars designed to bring ATS schools together to share experiences and wisdom navigating the COVID-19 crisis. Other webinars include:

- A Conversation with Directors of Housing/Student Life: April 29
- Virtual Recruiting: 2 p.m. ET, April 30 ([Register here](#))
- A Conversation with the Career Services Network: May 5 or 6 (email [deasy@ats.edu](mailto:deasy@ats.edu) to learn more)



*Jo Ann Deasy is Director of Institutional Initiatives and Student Research at The Association of Theological Schools in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.*