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Graduating Seniors Contemplate an Online Commencement

Nicole Alejandra Hong, Staff Reporter

For the past year, the COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted and changed the course of student's lives. The large amounts of time spent online have exhausted many, but the widespread distribution of vaccines that began earlier this year seemed to provide a light at the end of the tunnel, and graduating seniors hoped this meant they would get to experience an in-person graduation ceremony. However, decisions and planning around graduation needed to be made well in advance of the event, and CDC guidelines still do not currently allow for large gatherings.



As a result of these complications, Seattle University announced that the 2021 and 2020 commencements will be held virtually.

Joyce Allen, the co-chair of the commencement committee, discussed the difficult decision of having commencement online this year.

"Putting on an in-person event requires an extreme amount of organization and processing. We tried this with the class of 2020, but COVID-19 restrictions didn't lift. We looked really hard at how we could make this a celebratory event. Inclusion was another huge part of this. We wanted to make students who are not local feel as included as possible," Allen said.

This year's commencement will be like no other. President Stephen V. Sundborg, S.J. will be graduating with the class of 2021 after 24 years as the president of Seattle U. Commencement will be held June 13 at 1 p.m. and will feature ceremonies for both the 2021 and 2020 graduating classes.

Due to extenuating circumstances last year, the in-person ceremony was canceled. There were plans to reschedule the event for October, but as the date approached those were canceled as well due to the ongoing severity of the pandemic.

The ceremony this year will begin with a benediction, speeches from both the undergraduate and graduate student speakers and a speech from Fr. Greg Boyle, who will also be receiving an honorary doctorate. Graduates will then be directed to separate ceremonies via different links that correspond to each college. These smaller ceremonies will give graduates the opportunity to be individually recognized through slideshow presentations of individual students in each college. A speaker from each college will call out students' names, their degree(s) and if they have graduated with honors. Commencement for the class of 2020 will follow a similar agenda.

Following these ceremonies, there will be virtual celebrations for international students and BIPOC students. The mass of the Holy Spirit, which is typically held at the St. Ignatius Chapel will not be possible this year, but commencement planners hope to organize an online vigil.

All the commencement ceremonies will be pre-recorded on campus and available on the Seattle U website on the day of commencement. This gives students who are receiving degrees from multiple colleges the opportunity to go back later and watch the ceremonies that they missed.

Although commencement will be 100% online, many graduates and their friends and families have come to visit campus and take pictures.

Many seniors remain undecided about how they will celebrate graduation, or if they will even attend commencement at all.

Cecilia Hansen, a fourth-year humanities for teaching and Spanish double-major, voiced her opinion about the plan for a virtual commencement.

"I wasn't originally planning to attend commencement, but all my family will be watching so it would be weird if I wasn't there. I think I'll tune in for at least a little bit," Hansen said.

Although there were some attempts to gain student input on commencement at the beginning of the academic year, seniors have largely remained in the dark about specific plans. Kelly Curtis, a fourth-year political science major, expressed her disappointment about how the planning for graduation was handled.

"Graduating this year feels very underwhelming. I wish they would have involved us students more in the planning process. I know it's not typical to have students so involved, but we've lost so much this past year that it would have been nice to have a little bit more input on our commencement," Curtis said.

Sundborg also expressed his disappointment in not being able to attend an in-person ceremony. Four years ago, at the freshman convocation, President Sundborg told the class that he would graduate with them and signed the class of 2021 banner.

"My vision was that I would walk out of the commencement ceremony along with the students, because I'll be graduating too. It's really too bad that we can't have that, but I will be there with the students virtually," Sundborg said.

For seniors, graduating and attempting to enter the workforce in the middle of a pandemic has taken a severe toll on some, causing commencement to be the least of their worries. The state of the economy has made it increasingly difficult to find work due to the limited job opportunities available.

Valencia Cardona-Belgarde, a fourth-year criminal justice major, expressed being overwhelmed throughout the past year.

"I know that a lot of my original plans aren't going to happen, so I think I'm going to take a year to reassess my situation and just everything that is going on in my life, because there is so much pressure right now, and it's a lot to deal with," Cardona-Belgarde said.

Curtis expressed her resentment at not starting the job-searching process sooner.

"I know I'll find something eventually, but I just wish that someone would have sat me down sooner and told me that I should have been job-searching this whole time," Curtis said.

Ginny Woodworth, a fourth-year humanities for teaching major, shared her relief at finding work amidst the pandemic.

"I started job searching at the very beginning of senior year, because I suspected that it was going to be even more difficult, and I'm glad I did. I'm grateful that I found a teaching job up in Alaska and will be moving up there right after graduation," Woodworth said.

Seniors also reflected on the last year and a half spent learning virtually and the impact that has had on their college experience.

"I feel like I was robbed of my college experience. We lost so much of it to COVID-19, and virtual learning has just left me feeling utterly exhausted to the point where graduating just doesn't feel exciting anymore," Curtis said.

Woodworth discussed how her college experience ended up being much less exciting than she had originally anticipated.

“When I first got to college, I was just studying all the time and I was super invested in my academics. I thought that when senior year came around, I would have less classes and that would be my time to go out and have fun and look forward to my life after college, but it ended up being the complete opposite. I feel like my whole college experience has just been school, school and more school,” Woodworth said.

Despite the struggles the pandemic has brought, seniors also reflected on the positive things they will take away from their time spent at Seattle U.

Hansen imagined how different her education would have been if she had gone to another school besides Seattle U.

“I’m so glad that I chose Seattle U, because I don’t think any other school would have had the social justice focus that Seattle U does. It is something that has influenced my academics so much, and it will impact how I educate and the way I view my career for the rest of my life,” Hansen said.

Cardona-Belgarde reflected on how her experiences at Seattle U have allowed her to explore herself and her interests.

“Even though I’m a criminal justice major, I’m so appreciative that I was able to have conversations with my professors outside of class about things unrelated to criminal justice, because those conversations have opened my eyes to a lot of other things that I am interested in as well,” Cardona-Belgarde said.

Sundborg also looked back upon his time at Seattle U over the past 24 years as president.

“The most important thing I will take away is the wonderful interactions I’ve had with students, staff and administrators and the relationships I’ve built here,” Sundborg said.

There’s no doubt that this past year has been a difficult one and that the transition to the workforce will be difficult for recent graduates. Sundborg shared his message for graduating seniors during this time.

“My hope is that in the midst of their disappointment of not being able to have the graduation that they thought they were going to have when they first came to Seattle U, they realize we are all in this together, that they have gratitude for what this experience has been and how it’ll show later in the rest of their lives. I wish them well in their transition,” Sundborg said.

Although this year’s commencement is online, there are plans to begin holding in-person events and classes again next year. Provided that COVID-19 restrictions have lifted by then, the university looks forward to hosting commencement at the newly renovated Climate Pledge Arena, formerly Key Arena, next year to celebrate the class of 2022.