



## Office of the Secretary of Higher Education

### Considerations for all Postsecondary Commencement Ceremonies

May 27, 2020

To celebrate commencement during the on-going COVID-19 pandemic, institutions of higher education should plan for multiple scenarios in order to select the ceremony type that best fits institutional needs and context, and comports with the required level of social distancing restrictions in place at the time of the event. The decision regarding commencement is ultimately up to the institutions, which must certify that their plans comply with requirements for gatherings and social distancing to the Office of the Secretary of Higher Education (OSHE) as stated below. Institutions should also keep local officials, including emergency management, law enforcement, and health officials informed of ceremony plans.

This guidance document outlines several options for safe commencement ceremonies allowing for flexibility by the institution, including: virtual ceremonies and drive-in/drive-through or modified in-person ceremonies held at a later date (no earlier than July 6, 2020 pending state guidance at that time). While many institutions of higher education have already held spring commencement ceremonies, this guidance can inform institutions that may be also planning an in-person celebration for later in the year or those planning for summer commencement ceremonies. Institutions should stay current on state and local rules and guidance, as the social distancing requirements in this document are subject to change.

The State of New Jersey and OSHE recommend that institutions of higher education carefully strategize commencement ceremonies that prioritize the health and safety of all attendees, while still acknowledging the important accomplishments of students obtaining their degree or credential during this challenging time.

#### Requirements that *must* be in place for *all* ceremonies:

- Drive-in/drive-through or modified in-person ceremonies **may only occur after July 6, 2020. Institutions must limit the number of attendees to the number permitted under state gatherings rules effective on the date of the ceremony.**
- Institutions should continue to **monitor local and state health information** in case of any changes or fluctuations in the State’s “The Road Back: Restoring Economic Health through Public Health” stages.
- All institutions that plan to hold a drive-in/drive-through or modified in-person ceremony must certify to the Office of Higher Education, via an online submission form that will be made available starting June 5, 2020 on <https://covid19.nj.gov/>, that the planned ceremony will comply with applicable requirements for gatherings, including those

addressing social distancing. The form must be submitted no later than seven days prior to the scheduled date of the ceremony.

- Institutions must **prioritize the health and safety** of students, staff, faculty, and other community members, including abiding by the most current Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) guidance.
  - This includes notifying and keeping local emergency management, law enforcement, first responders, local elected officials, and local health agencies informed of the institution's planned ceremonies.
- Drive-in/drive-through or modified in-person ceremonies **must be held in outdoor venues** due to concerns with social distancing and ventilation of indoor spaces.
- With the exception of protective gear (such as gloves, non-medical face masks), materials such as graduation brochures, diplomas, caps, and gowns should be distributed prior to the ceremony wherever possible.
  - Institutions may want to consider mailing materials in advance, sending materials electronically, or arranging for a contactless collection.
  - Caps, gowns, and other materials can be mailed to individual student homes or otherwise distributed in a manner that complies with social distancing guidelines.
  - Chairs and other equipment should not be shared and must be sanitized before and after use.
- Institutions must **be proactive and clear in communicating** guidelines and directions for those in attendance (for example, if/when people are allowed to leave their cars during a drive-in/drive-through ceremony). Information could be displayed on digital screens or distributed via e-mail in advance of the ceremony, for example.
- Graduating classes that exceed the number of individuals permitted to be at an in-person gathering at the time of the ceremony must be divided into smaller ceremonies held throughout the day or over the span of several days to limit crowds, allow for cleaning in between ceremonies, and to allow the attendees to leave the venue before the next group arrives. For example, conducting separate ceremonies for different majors, etc.
  - Modified in-person ceremonies, when permitted, will require monitoring of the number of people in attendance. Organizers should consider distributing tickets to students and families in advance of the ceremony.
- Institutions should review the minimum number of staff and faculty required to be present at commencement and require the attendance only of necessary staff/faculty.
- Attendees may want to take commencement photos around campus. Institutions may allow this provided that students and family members abide by social distancing requirements and all photography takes place outdoors.
- Consider surveying your graduating students to get feedback on and gauge interest in anticipated graduation modifications.
- As always, any event must **be inclusive and accessible for all** students and families.

### **Considerations for Different Ceremony Types**

#### **Virtual Ceremonies**

- Virtual ceremonies pose the safest alternative at this time.
- Consider bandwidth and accessibility to technology for those who may be participating/viewing the virtual graduation.

### **Drive-in/drive-through Commencement Ceremonies**

- All drive-in/drive-through graduations must adhere to the requirements in effect on the date of the ceremony. Current restrictions set forth in Executive Order Nos. 142 and 148 are subject to change based on evolving circumstances.
- Attendees participating in the gathering must arrive in a vehicle and they must remain in that same vehicle during the entire gathering, except for the limited number of individuals organizing or maintaining the ceremony. If there are individuals organizing or maintaining the gathering, and who are not in closed vehicles, such individuals must follow all applicable Executive Orders and Administrative Orders and must wear cloth face coverings or more protective face coverings in any settings where other social distancing measures are difficult to maintain, except where doing so would inhibit that individual's health.
  - Institutions should be mindful that not all students will have access to transportation and should provide alternatives for these students.
- Each attendee's vehicle must remain entirely closed at all times, meaning that the windows, doors, sunroofs, and tops of the vehicle must be closed at all times, unless the vehicle is more than six feet from any other vehicle or individual.
- Multiple ceremonies may be needed depending on class size.

### **Modified In-Person Outdoor Commencements**

*Critical factors to consider - outdoor space size, number of attendees, and weather. Ceremonies must abide by the limits on gatherings in effect at the time.*

Ideas for outdoor ceremonies that comply with current executive orders and guidelines include the following:

- Identify the largest outdoor venue in the area to allow for maximum spacing among participants.
  - Attendees should be able to maintain a 6-foot distance from each other at all times, including entering/exiting the event, excluding immediate family members, caretakers, household members, or romantic partners.
- Seat graduates with enough distance (no less than 6 feet) from one another with a restrictive number of guests or no guests at all (graduating student only).
- Make available a livestream or televised broadcast of the ceremony to limit participant attendance and provide the commencement experience for guests unable to attend.
- Celebrations should be limited in length to reduce the time that attendees are exposed to each other.
- Individuals who are sick should be encouraged not to attend – see [CDC guidelines](#) for what individuals should do if they are sick and to see a list of possible COVID-19 symptoms. Consider posting signage discouraging anyone from attending if they or anyone in their household are experiencing symptoms of respiratory illness or have been in close contact with anyone diagnosed with COVID-19 in the past 14 days.
  - Institutions should also consider conducting temperature screenings with non-contact thermometers of everyone entering the venue. Where such screenings are conducted, any person with a temperature of 100.4 °F or greater should be excluded from the event.

- Prospective attendees should be advised to consider current guidelines from the DOH and CDC regarding high-risk categories and necessary precautions.
- Strongly encourage all guests, graduates, and participants to wear face masks or coverings, except where doing so would inhibit the individual's health or where the individual is under two years of age.
- For schools conducting multiple ceremonies to accommodate the number of graduates, schedule ceremonies with sufficient time in between to ensure appropriate time for cleaning and sanitizing.
- Predesignate/assign parking so that arrivals and departures are carefully coordinated and socially distanced.
- Stagger the entry and release of students and guests and when possible, use multiple entrances and exits to limit congregating after the ceremony and allow for social distancing.
- If allowing access to restrooms, take appropriate measures to prevent congregation such as marking standing locations and assigning staff to monitor these areas, and consult with health officials on disinfection protocols;
- Mark 6 feet sections to help individuals understand what 6 feet looks like. You can use small flags, tape, balloons, etc. to indicate that people should stand on or by the markers and remain 6 feet from each other.
- Diplomas, awards, medals, programs, etc., where possible, should not be handed from person to person.
  - Sharing or exchanging materials of any kind poses an increased risk of transmission/spread of COVID-19 and should be avoided. (Throwing graduation caps, "Sign-in" practices, gifts, flowers, etc.)
  - If chairs and other equipment are provided, they should not be shared and should be sanitized before and after use.
- Limit the number of speakers and the number of people on stage. Speakers must also abide by the 6 feet social distancing rules and should not share microphones.
- Limit or eliminate performances, particularly group performances, to help limit exposure.
  - At a minimum, performers should not share microphones.