

## PROMISING STRATEGIES FOR VIRTUAL COMMENCEMENTS FAQ

COVID-19 has disrupted many postsecondary institution operations, including the much-anticipated commencement celebrations that serve to honor the accomplishments of students and their families. In response, many institutions are rapidly deciding if a virtual commencement ceremony is right for their students, and if so, how best to execute one. Content experts from Western Governors University and the University of Hawaii Manoa's College of Education shared their tips and tricks, offered advice, and outlined challenges to be expected when organizing and conducting virtual commencement ceremonies during a webinar. The following is a collection of questions and answers that may serve to support any institution interested in planning and executing their own virtual commencement ceremonies.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS		
	Western Governors University	University of Hawaii at Manoa
<b>CHALLENGES IN PLANNING &amp; EXECUTING</b>		
<p><b>WHAT ARE SOME CHALLENGES AN INSTITUTION CAN FACE WHEN PLANNING A VIRTUAL COMMENCEMENT CEREMONY?</b></p>	<p>Western Governors University (WGU) is using Stage Clip. As part of this service, they are asking students to film short videos of themselves that will mirror in-person commencement ceremonies. Each student will have their name displayed in a lower third on screen along with their degree; their name will then be announced. No audio will be included with the short videos.</p> <p>WGU’s policy allows for students to participate in an in-person commencement ceremony in the future, even if they graduated 10 years ago. Students have the opportunity to walk once per degree. WGU communicates that virtual is just one option available.</p>	<p>The University of Hawaii at Manoa (UHM) enables the chat functionality in their YouTube channel, which they use to stream the ceremonies. Enabling this capability allows family members, graduates, faculty, and staff to celebrate their student’s accomplishments.</p> <p>UHM includes e-invitations that students may modify with virtual watch party information. The invitation includes ideas on how students can set up a watch party using Skype or FaceTime or other streaming technologies so families can engage remotely in the virtual commencement ceremony.</p>

LOGISTICS		
<p><b>HOW MANY GRADUATES ARE YOU EXPECTING TO PARTICIPATE IN YOUR VIRTUAL COMMENCEMENT?</b></p>	<p>WGU executes 7 to 8 commencements a year that typically average 1,000 graduates and are usually split between those receiving a bachelors or master's degree. We are planning to host 1,000 graduates for our virtual commencement ceremony but think we may get half of that number participating.</p>	<p>The UHM expects about 200 graduates, however the registration deadline is coming up soon. The College of Education's virtual commencement ceremony is much smaller with about 30 graduates.</p>
<p><b>WHAT IS THE COST OF IMPLEMENTING A VIRTUAL COMMENCEMENT CEREMONY?</b></p>	<p>With WGU using Stage Clip, as a platform, the pricing model is currently determined by the number of graduates participating in the virtual commencement. Pricing is also determined on the type of platform chosen for the virtual event.</p>	<p>UHM is using tools that we already have (e.g. Zoom &amp; OpenSim) the only "cost" of implementing our virtual graduation would be the time we spent to research, test and plan these events. We have had to get a paid subscription to <a href="https://restream.io">restream.io</a> to stream live to multiple social platforms simultaneously... sorry this is probably not helpful but I hope that others would be inspired to try implementing virtual graduations using tools they have access to.</p>
TECHNOLOGY & STREAMING		
<p><b>BANDWIDTH TENDS TO BE A CHALLENGE IN HOSTING VIRTUAL COMMENCEMENT CEREMONIES. WHAT ARE SOME WORKAROUNDS OR ADVICE ON HOW TO WORK WITHIN THIS CONSTRAINT?</b></p>	<p>WGU is relying primarily on prerecorded segments to avoid potential technical difficulties associated with running a live virtual ceremony or distractions. Graduates are sending in prerecorded clips that will be edited into ten second segments with name and</p>	<p>UHM will be hosting most of their virtual commencement ceremonies live, however, many of the commencement speakers are prerecorded, in preparation of any technical issues that may arise. UHM also asks that commencement speakers send their speeches beforehand in case they need</p>

	degree in a lower third.	to read, if the speaker cannot connect remotely.
<b>WHAT SERVICES ARE YOUR INSTITUTIONS USING FOR STREAMING OF THE VIRTUAL COMMENCEMENT CEREMONY? ARE YOU USING YOUTUBE, FACEBOOK LIVE?</b>	<p>WGU will live stream the first portion of the commencement ceremony with the provost and president. Chancellors will be prerecorded, national anthem singer, graduate speaker, and keynote speaker. Wi-Fi connectivity can put a strain on streaming and prerecording segments can alleviate some of those issues. The entire ceremony will then be edited together and posted on WGU's media outlets such as YouTube channel, and Facebook.</p>	<p>UHM will be streaming using OpenSim and on the department's Facebook page, YouTube channel, Twitch.TV, and Stream.IO. The ceremony will be streamed live.</p>
<b>HOW ARE YOUR INSTITUTIONS CONTROLLING FOR VIDEO QUALITY?</b>	<p>Graduates will be receiving a quick tip sheet on how to properly light themselves for filming, camera placement, tripod use, and how far they should be from the camera when recording their segment.</p> <p>Speakers have been sent rented camera equipment from WGU's production company. Speakers receive directions on how to set up camera equipment and are provided similar directions on lighting, camera placement, etc.</p> <p>Graduate video clips do not include audio and are limited to 10 seconds that will then be edited down to typically 3-4 seconds.</p>	<p>Graduates are receiving guidelines, including information on appropriate backgrounds. Graduates are welcome to decorate the space that will be captured by video.</p> <p>Graduates are asked to send a statement of no more than 30 words that will be read aloud during the ceremony.</p> <p>UHM will be using OBS Studio as an external capture that can help set up scenes. It does involve editing and coordination of the live segments.</p>

<p><b>WHEN YOU HAVE GRADUATES ON ZOOM, HOW ARE YOU MONITORING THEIR MICROPHONES? ARE YOU MUTING AT CERTAIN POINTS?</b></p>	<p>WGU is not permitting audio with graduate clips. This is the same for in-person commencements. WGU does not use Zoom as a platform and has opted to use Stage Clip instead.</p>	<p>UHM conducts virtual rehearsals with students and they are informed on expectations. We haven't had any issues to date. Offering a commencement ceremony virtually, allows UHM to shut down quickly if the need were to arise.</p>
<p><b>WILL SPEECHES BY THE UNIVERSITY PRESIDENT/CHANCELLOR BE PRERECORDED OR PROVIDED LIVE?</b></p>	<p>Commencement speakers such as the president and provost will welcome graduates and those streaming the ceremony. WGU does plan in providing some live elements such as keynote speaker, however, it will still be prerecorded in case it is needed.</p>	<p>UHM's virtual commencement ceremony will be conducted live, however, speakers will be prerecorded in case it is needed.</p>
<p><b>WHAT DO YOU DO IF A STUDENT DOES NOT SEND A VIDEO CLIP OR PICTURE BUT DESIRE TO PARTICIPATE?</b></p>	<p>WGU is still discussing ideas amongst the team to develop an alternative solution. One idea is to display a picture of the mascot in place of the video with the name of the graduate and degree earned.</p>	<p>UHM sends out invitations to students who are set to graduate. Students are required to RSVP; however, we try to accommodate last minute participants.</p>
<p><b>HOW LONG IN ADVANCE DO YOU START ACCEPTING VIDEOS FROM STUDENTS FROM THE PRERECORDED SEGMENTS?</b></p>	<p>WGU plans on providing a two-week turn around for graduates to return their video segment.</p>	<p>UHM is conducting these live and will not use prerecorded segments from graduates.</p>
<p><b>HOW LONG ARE YOUR VIRTUAL COMMENCEMENT CEREMONIES? ARE THERE TIME LIMITS BEING APPLIED TO THE VIRTUAL COMMENCEMENT CEREMONY LENGTH?</b></p>	<p>WGU typically attempts to keep commencement ceremonies to two hours. The virtual commencement ceremony will be about 1.5 hours. We understand that prerecording segments will reduce timing and we will have more control over the length of clips.</p>	<p>A virtual environment means that the ceremonies go much faster because you eliminate physical movement, which takes a lot of time. UHM envisions 1.5 hours for the ceremony.</p>
<p><b>WHAT ABOUT STAGECLIP APPEALED TO YOU AND YOUR</b></p>	<p>Stage Clip has been responsive to WGU's ideas for</p>	<p>N/A</p>

<p><b>ADMINISTRATION THE MOST?</b></p>	<p>a virtual commencement ceremony and have helped guide the institution as to what is possible. The experience has made a difficult process a bit easier for the institution.</p>	
<p><b>WHAT KIND OF QUESTIONS HAVE YOU FOUND WOULD BEST CAPTURE A STUDENT'S VIRTUAL COMMENCEMENT EXPERIENCE AND GIVE US INFORMATION FOR IMPROVEMENT, SHOULD WE CHOOSE TO USE THIS METHOD AGAIN [STAGE CLIP] IN THE FUTURE?</b></p>	<p>WGU sends a commencement survey immediately following each in-person ceremony. WGU will follow the same process for the virtual commencement and will use that feedback to improve future virtual commencements.</p>	<p>N/A</p>
<p><b>HOW DO YOU HANDLE SECURITY? IS THERE A WAY TO KEEP INAPPROPRIATE OR OFFENSIVE MATERIAL OFF?</b></p>	<p>WGU is taking precautions to prevent any "Zoom bombers." WGU will be using a 3-5 second delay on any of their streaming services, such as YouTube, that will be monitored; should anything happen we have someone available to remove anything inappropriate.</p>	<p>UHM conducts rehearsals for all participants of the virtual commencement ceremony. Graduates are walked through the process and given guidelines.</p> <p>Only graduates will have access to the Zoom session, viewers will be using streaming services and can use the chat feature to interact in those platforms (e.g., Facebook Live, YouTube Live). Faculty and staff moderate the chat features in our streaming services.</p> <p>Offering a commencement ceremony virtually, allows UHM to shut down quickly if the need were to arise.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>ACCESSIBILITY</b></p>		
<p><b>WHAT IS BEING DONE TO</b></p>	<p>WGU has been working with</p>	<p>The platforms used by UHM</p>

<p><b>ACCOMMODATE THOSE THAT ARE DEAF OR NEED ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE SUPPORT? HOW IS CLOSED CAPTIONING BEING HANDLED?</b></p>	<p>the institution’s accessibility team to address issues of accessibility. All the recordings will include close captioning. We are currently exploring additional options with the accessibility team such as a script of images and other items.</p>	<p>have included a lot of the accessibility components used with UHM’s core office helping with close captioning. We know some institutions are using Google Beat because it has live closed captioning features.</p>
<p><b>STAGE CLIP NOTIFIED US THAT THEY CANNOT CAPTION THE GRADUATE VIDEOS THEY UPLOAD. DO YOU HAVE ANY ACCESSIBILITY CONCERNS REGARDING STAGE CLIP FOR THE CAPTIONING PIECE AND/OR WITH THEIR INTERFACE?</b></p>	<p>For the conferral of degrees segment of WGU’s virtual commencement, graduates do not have a speaking role. Only participants who have speaking roles, such as our graduate speakers, will have captioning for their segments. Fort his, WGU is using a local production company to facilitate closed captioning for pre-recorded videos. Stage Clip will add a lower-third for every graduate, including their name and degree earned. Graduate names will be read aloud. We are following the guidance of WGU’ accessibility team.</p>	<p>N/A</p>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>THE STUDENT EXPERIENCE &amp; PARTICIPATION</b></p>		
<p><b>ARE YOU CALLING THIS A “GRADUATION” OR RECOGNITION OR CELEBRATION?</b></p>	<p>Our graduates graduate every day from WGU; therefore, we call our 7-8 ceremonies across the country “commencements”. In this instance we are referring to this ceremony as a virtual commencement.</p>	<p>UHM calls the large institution ceremony convocation.</p>
<p><b>WHAT REGALIA, IF ANY, ARE YOU REQUIRING GRADUATES TO WEAR? HOW ARE YOU DELIVERING THESE ITEMS?</b></p>	<p>WGU is not making regalia mandatory for graduates to wear if they do not already have it. We ask that graduates</p>	<p>UHM is sending regalia items ahead of time for graduates to wear such as their cap and candy lays (flower lays would</p>

	<p>wear business professional.</p> <p>Military graduates receive a cord to wear. When graduates register for commencement, they are asked to check a box if they are active military or veterans.</p> <p>WGU mails diploma covers to anyone who is registered to participate in the virtual commencement ceremony, similarly to those participating in person. Currently we are looking to provide alumni gifts that can be sent in addition to the diploma covers.</p>	<p>not survive shipping). Graduates are also invited to pick up their package a week prior to graduation.</p> <p>The cap is probably the most important piece the graduate can wear. Conducting a ceremony online means that we primarily see the graduates face.</p> <p>Diploma covers are mailed to graduates and some departments send additional gifts together with the cap.</p>
<p><b>CAN YOU SHARE WHAT INFORMATION YOU PUT ON YOUR E-INVITATION AND HOW THAT LOOKS? INCLUDING RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ENCOURAGING WATCH PARTIES?</b></p>	<p>The e-invitation looks like a small card and has the current WGU branding. It includes the time and date where students can include information if they are planning a watch party. It includes information on how to join the watch party.</p> <p>Include fun ideas on your virtual commencement page. WGU has included a list of options to chat and message with family members and friends while watching the virtual commencement. The options include Slack, Skype, FaceTime, Whats App, Facebook Messenger, and Zoom.</p>	<p>The e-invitation for UHM is similar to WGU's. It includes the time and date for the live virtual commencement ceremony, how to watch it through our live stream options, and it provides a space for graduates to include information on a watch party if they so choose.</p>
<p><b>DID YOU CONSIDER AN ASYNCHRONOUS VIRTUAL CEREMONY? IF SO, WHAT MADE YOU DECIDE TO</b></p>	<p>WGU considered it, however with bandwidth use and other technical difficulties that may arise, being able to work with</p>	<p>UHM never considered it but it may be something we consider for next time. The College of Education at UHM has done</p>

<p><b>PROVIDE THIS TYPE OF CEREMONY?</b></p>	<p>as many graduates as possible and no platform we liked to do it live, we opted for this format with Stage Clip. We wanted the virtual commencement ceremony to mirror an in-person ceremony as much as possible.</p>	<p>the live synchronous ceremony using Open Sim and it seems natural to continue with this environment. We have a high rate of adoption of Zoom in our college and would be comfortable to continue with this option.</p>
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**BUDGETS AND RESOURCES**

<p><b>IN THE CURRENT ATMOSPHERE OF EXTREME AND IMMEDIATE BUDGE RESTRICTIONS, WHAT RESOURCES ARE YOU USING FOR COMMENCEMENT RELATED COSTS?</b></p>	<p>WGU is still working with the production company that helps support many of the university’s commencements. The production company travels across the country to coordinate the seven to eight commencements and sets up stages and all the AV needs for each. WGU is spending less on the virtual commencement ceremony because we are not requiring as many of these services, however, we are planning on sending gifts to graduates in addition to their diploma covers. We plan to give back unused funds to students or graduates in other ways.</p>	<p>UHM will save some money because there is no chair and set up fees typically associated with an in-person commencement. We did have to purchase subscriptions for the platforms being used to stream the ceremony, however, we have a colleague that was able to research options and save us money on some of these platforms.</p>
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**WORDS OF WIDSOM & ADVICE**

<p><b>BEFORE WE CLOSE WHAT WORDS OF WISDOM OR ADVICE DO YOU HAVE FOR THOSE INTERESTED I N PLANNING OR EXECUTING A VIRTUAL COMMENCEMENT CEREMONY?</b></p>	<p>We started working on this last year in the spirit of testing in June. We had to expedite the timeline a little bit. I agree with everything [Peter - UHM] said and I would add to that, one of the things we always look at is that experience. Knowing your student and</p>	<p>I highly encourage everyone to try and do something for their graduates. I know it can be challenging. If students don’t have the resources or have not planned for it, but also different levels, we can all do something.</p>
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	<p>graduate population, what is it they would want? Plan with them and their families in mind.</p> <p>We have been doing research and have seen backlash with traditional brick-and-mortar and some online universities who have completely replaced in person commencement with virtual only. We are pushing that this is another option for our graduates with them in mind, so we don't want to take away the in-person option away.</p> <p>Test everything as much as you can, staying in communication with production partners and university or college partners. Testing does not guarantee an issue free event, but at least you can troubleshoot and maybe help you see something ahead of time that you can avoid.</p> <p>Start earlier than you think you need to with your planning. It is going to take some time no matter what you choose to do and make sure you are giving yourself enough time.</p>	<p>I believe this is, especially in this time, when we need things to celebrate. I encourage people to do so in whatever small manner you can, using the resources you have available.</p> <p>The first thing is to ask yourself, who is your audience? What are they capable of in terms of technology, access, and their comfort level with technology? What is the essence of our ceremony that we want to keep? Focus just on that aspect. I don't think we can replicate all that.</p>
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