

Rutgers University Senate
Academic Standards, Regulations, and Admissions Committee
Response to Charge A-0906B
January 2012

Charge A-0906B - Academic Calendar, Commencement Dates, Part 2 - Permanent Change of Commencement Dates: Consider and decide on whether to make permanent for future years the [changes in University Commencement dates approved by the Senate for 2010 and 2011, and for 2012](#).

Background

As explained in more detail in the [first of ASRAC's partial responses](#) to the original version of this charge, the request to move all-University Commencement to the Sunday immediately following the end of the final exam period, starting in spring 2010, had its origin in the recommendations of an ad hoc committee of faculty, students, and staff, chaired by Vice President for Undergraduate Education Barry Qualls, and charged with reviewing and revising the commencement schedule for 2010 and beyond in light of the reorganization of undergraduate education in New Brunswick and the formation of the School of Arts and Sciences-New Brunswick.

The ad hoc commencement committee recommended that, beginning in spring 2011, University Commencement be held in Rutgers Stadium on the Sunday immediately after the spring final-exam period, and that the SAS-NB graduation ceremony be held in the stadium later the same day. For 2010, on the other hand, the ad hoc committee originally recommended that University Commencement be held for the last time on Voorhees Mall on Wednesday, May 19, but it was later proposed to move it to Sunday, May 16, because of conflict with the Jewish holiday of Shavuot.

The Senate was officially informed of the ad hoc commencement committee's recommendations and asked to approve the proposed changes of commencement dates by means of Secretary of the University Fehrenbach's letter of July 27, 2009. The Senate Executive Committee considered this request on an emergency basis at its meeting of September 4, 2009, and, acting on behalf of the Senate, approved the changes in the commencement schedule for spring 2010, and charged ASRAC with considering the requested changes for 2011 and beyond.

ASRAC considered this charge over the course of the fall 2009 semester. On one hand, members expressed serious concerns about holding University Commencement only two working days after the last final exams are given, and about holding University Commencement and the SAS-NB convocation back-to-back in Rutgers Stadium. On the other hand, members were cognizant of the need to make a decision quickly with respect to Commencement 2011 in order to give the University sufficient time to plan the 2011 graduation ceremonies. In its January 2010 [partial response](#) to the charge, ASRAC recommended that the Senate approve, on a trial basis, the proposed changes in the commencement schedule for 2011, but defer making a recommendation concerning Commencement 2012 and beyond until the 2010 commencement exercises had occurred and been evaluated, and until planning for the 2011 commencement had progressed to the point that ASRAC's questions and concerns could be addressed satisfactorily. The Senate approved those recommendations.

ASRAC then discussed the proposed move of University Commencement in spring 2012 and beyond over the course of the 2010-2011 academic year in light of our assessment of the 2010 University Commencement and of the ongoing planning for Commencement 2011. We had concerns arising from (1) serious problems with Commencement 2010, in which recognition of more than 1,000 liberal arts graduates who chose to graduate with SAS (rather than one of the former liberal arts colleges) was appended to the traditional all-university graduation ceremony, and (2) the seemingly somewhat chaotic planning for Commencement 2011. In its [second partial response](#) to the charge, therefore, ASRAC concluded that it could not make a fully informed decision concerning permanently moving University Commencement to the Sunday immediately after final exams until it could evaluate Commencement 2011. Realizing, however, that a decision with regard to the date for Commencement 2012 would need to be made before such an evaluation could be completed, ASRAC recommended that the Senate approve moving the 2012 University Commencement to Sunday, May 13, 2012, but defer making a decision concerning the dates for subsequent commencements until ASRAC would have the opportunity to perform a thorough evaluation of Commencement 2011. The Senate approved this recommendation in April 2011.

Evaluation of Commencement 2011

A number of ASRAC members attended the 2011 University Commencement and/or one of the school convocations held on the same day. ASRAC Co-chair Cotter served as a marshal at University Commencement, at the Graduate School - New Brunswick convocation, and at the SAS Mathematical and Physical Sciences convocation. She also participated, in place of Senate Chair Panayotatos, in the University's official commencement debriefing held on June 9, 2011, and has been kept informed of planning for Commencement 2012 by Secretary of the University Leslie Fehrenbach.

ASRAC's evaluation of Commencement 2011 agrees with the general consensus of other participating members of the University community. On one hand, Commencement was clearly successful in a number of respects:

- It was very well attended despite the unpleasant weather, which reflected well on Rutgers.
- It was the intended grand, joyous, impressive event, full of pageantry and Rutgers spirit.
- Feedback from graduates and their families has been generally very positive.

On the other hand, there were very serious logistical problems outside the stadium: traffic in the area came to a standstill; many graduates and their families spent hours stuck in traffic and were unable to reach the stadium at all or arrived quite late; and others who attended the ceremony in the stadium had great difficulty getting to the school convocations held afterward on other campuses. In short, planning for traffic control and parking proved highly inadequate.

Discussion and Recommendations

The major concern ASRAC had with the proposed change in commencement dates was holding University Commencement only two working days after the last day of final exams. As a result, a number of faculty members may have insufficient time to submit their grades before commencement, and some participants in the commencement ceremonies may not know whether or not they will actually receive a May degree. More seriously, we feared that the pressure on

faculty members to submit grades in a timely manner would dissipate, and some students would be left for an extended period not knowing whether or not they had graduated and could move on to the next phase of their lives.

To determine if our fears were justified, ASRAC members spoke with members of the SAS academic staff involved in certifying students for graduation. We were assured that very few, if any, students in either 2010 or 2011 had to wait for an extended period to find out if they would receive a May degree. While SAS-NB clearly cannot certify all students for graduation by the Sunday after final exams, nor, for that matter, by the following Wednesday, they do vigorously pursue faculty and departments to make sure that every intended graduate who fails a spring course needed for graduation is so informed in time for the student to register to take the course in summer school. Since SAS-NB clearly has the most daunting task in certifying students for graduation, we believe that moving Commencement back to the Sunday immediately following final exams will also not cause serious problems for students in other schools and colleges.

In addition, ASRAC had two main concerns about the University Commencement ceremony itself and the scheduling of the school convocations:

- that attendance at University Commencement would be poor and that a small crowd in the stadium would reflect badly on the University.
- that having University Commencement and nearly all the New Brunswick school convocations on the same day would produce a logistical disaster.

The first concern definitely did not materialize. The sight of faculty and graduates filling the field and their families filling much of the stands reflected very well on Rutgers, and looked very good in the media. Our second concern was, unfortunately, realized to a large extent. However, we are convinced that revised plans for traffic control, parking, and signage, together with changes in the scheduling of events on commencement day, will avoid a repeat of at least the worst of last year's problems.

Based on the above considerations, the majority of ASRAC members agreed to recommend that the Senate approve permanently moving University Commencement to the Sunday immediately following the end of the final exam period. Initially, some members of the committee wanted, instead, to recommend moving Commencement to the following Sunday in order to give schools and colleges more time to certify their students for graduation and to preserve the tradition of senior week in New Brunswick. In the end, however, the majority agreed that this would probably substantially decrease attendance at Commencement and would not be worth the expense to both graduating seniors and to Rutgers.

Another concern arose at the last moment when ASRAC learned that a number of staff members were quite upset that Commencement 2012 will coincide with Mothers' Day, and they will be required to work and will therefore be unable to celebrate Mothers' Day with their families. Since the Senate had already approved the date for Commencement 2012, and the next time that Commencement Sunday will coincide with Mothers' Day is not until 2016, ASRAC voted to approve the requested permanent move of Commencement, despite staff concerns. It should be noted, however, that a future ASRAC may wish to revisit this issue the next time that Commencement would fall on Mothers' Day or a major religious holiday.

We therefore offer the following resolution for the Senate's consideration.

Resolution:

Whereas, the Academic Standards, Regulations, and Admissions Committee (ASRAC) has carefully evaluated the pros and cons of approving the request to make permanent the move of University Commencement to the Sunday immediately following the end of the spring final exam period and recommends approval of this request; and

Whereas, the Senate has considered ASRAC's arguments and recommendation and finds them to be sound and in the best interest of Rutgers University;

Therefore be it resolved that the University Senate approves moving University Commencement to the Sunday immediately following the end of the spring final exam period for spring 2013 and beyond.

Academic Standards, Regulations and Admissions Committee

Cotter, Martha, GS-NB (F), Co-chair – *Executive Committee Liaison*

Schantz, Daniel, Newark Staff, Co-chair

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