

DBU finds innovative way to celebrate graduates

May 5, 2020

DALLAS (BP)—Zachary Funderburk was disappointed to have his graduation plans interrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic. But for Funderburk and other spring graduates of Dallas Baptist University, the experience could turn out to be more memorable than expected.

Instead of a typical graduation, Dallas Baptist has scheduled a drive-through commencement ceremony to honor its spring 2020 graduates.

With staff and faculty lining the streets of the campus, graduating seniors along with friends and family have been invited to drive through the parade May 15.

Their names will be read aloud as they pass through. They'll be showered with cheers and confetti cannons. And at the end of the line, they'll receive their physical diplomas.

DBU President Adam Wright said he hopes the ceremony is an encouragement to graduates whose final semester was altered by the pandemic, with the campus shuttered and classes shifted abruptly online.

"It broke my heart to think about not being able to celebrate with our graduates this May, so we decided to hold this parade on campus," Wright said. "Our prayer is that the students will not only feel loved and celebrated, but also challenged to go out into the world and serve and love others."

Cheer on the graduates—from a safe distance

Blake Killingsworth, DBU's vice president for communications, said he expects about half of the 600 graduates to participate. The parade would allow families to celebrate together while maintaining appropriate social distance, he added.

Jay Harley, DBU's vice president for student affairs, said the feedback from students regarding the alternate ceremony has been strong and positive.

"We cannot wait to see our campus lined with our faculty and staff, cheering on the parade of graduates and their families as they drive through the campus," Harley said.

Funderburk, a Christian leadership major, said he believes the graduation experience will be even more memorable than a typical ceremony.

"I think that every graduating class will wish they got a celebration like we did," Funderburk said. "DBU is taking advantage of this unfortunate situation and creating a moment that the class of 2020 will never forget. I am excited to drive by all my professors, who have helped me get to this moment."

Other schools adopt alternative plans

Other Baptist colleges and universities have a variety of plans for spring 2020 graduation ceremonies, including postponement or cancellation. Some have rescheduled for the summer, while others have given graduates the option to participate in regularly scheduled commencement exercises in December 2020 or May 2021.

Others have held or will hold virtual commencement ceremonies, while attempting to include as many elements of the originally planned event as possible.

The Baptist College of Florida plans a virtual ceremony May 15, to be streamed live on the school's Facebook page. The broadcast will be from the first-person vantage point of a graduate, with a videographer walking down an aisle, passing by faculty members, shaking hands with the president and receiving the diploma, in an attempt to provide graduates the feeling of being at the ceremony.

Thomas Kinchen, president of the Baptist College of Florida, said students also have the opportunity to have formal portraits taken on campus in cap and gown and for the photos to be shown during the ceremony when their name is called. The graduates also will be allowed to walk around campus in their cap and gown to take pictures with family and friends.

In addition to the virtual ceremony, the spring graduates are invited to walk in the December 2020 graduation. Kinchen said that although the challenges are great, he believes the graduates are prepared, focused and surrendered to all that God wants them to do in the world.

"I want to give them one day that will be very special that they'll never forget," he said.