

Hampton University

Hampton, VA 23668

Committee on
Ceremonial Occasions
(757) 727-5402

Dear Senior Class:

Thank you for the outpouring of calls and emails from you and your loved ones encouraging Hampton University to host an in-person Commencement Ceremony. The University truly understands the importance of graduation and the excitement surrounding the culmination of your academic studies. Commencement is one of the University's most treasured traditions, and we are saddened that we are unable to host an in-person ceremony as a result of the associated risks involved due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Please know that the Infectious Disease and Prevention Working Group and the Committee on Ceremonial Occasions have thoroughly reviewed numerous possibilities for hosting an in-person event that would be safe for everyone and fall within the current guidelines pertaining to graduations issued by Governor Northam. Our first step was simply doing the math. Armstrong Stadium's capacity is 12,000 individuals. Thirty-percent of this number is 3,600. Therefore, if we were to hold an in-person commencement, we would be limited to having 3,600 individuals present. Currently, we have over 900 Hamptonians in each of our graduating classes. Graduates and the staff required to manage an in-person ceremony would total approximately 2,000. Even if we allowed one guest per graduate, our event count would exceed the 3,600 allowed.

We have considered hosting multi-day events, limiting the number of participants and attendees, requiring proof of vaccinations, postponing the ceremony to a later date, and other possibilities. Despite all of our efforts to find a way to host a safe in-person ceremony, neither of the strategies we developed would offer a safe ceremony and meet the detailed guidelines established by Governor Northam. These guidelines extend far beyond the number of attendees and include entry/exit, seating, traffic, staging, personnel, and social distancing stipulations, to name a few. When all options were considered individually and collectively, it was determined that hosting an in-person ceremony would not be safe nor in the best interest of the Hampton University community in this current environment. The university has maintained a low testing positivity rate because of the protocols and mitigation strategies executed. We must continue to keep the campus safe and secure. The pandemic is not over. We do not want to risk the lives of students, faculty, staff and visitors by hosting an event.

Whereas vaccinations have increased and there was recently a decline in the number of daily reported cases, this trend has now shifted. Cases of COVID-19 are on the rise again, and scientists are now identifying new variants, some of which are more contagious. When large groups have gathered, around holidays and during the recent Spring Break season, cases have increased. This trend is expected to continue during the graduation season when large crowds gather to celebrate.

As has been the case from the very beginning, the virus is unpredictable and fluid. This makes it very difficult to plan for the near future as well as far in advance. Therefore, the University must make decisions based on the information currently available. We are hopeful that within the coming months, our nation will reach a point where we can return to some semblance of normalcy. **Later in the year**

when this occurs, the University will explore hosting an opportunity for graduates to return to campus to commemorate graduation and their Hampton experience in a manner that is safe for everyone involved.

Again, please know that we are truly sympathetic to our graduates and their experiences over the past year. Our faculty, staff and administrators have been working diligently in your absence to support you in whatever ways possible. We plan to make our virtual celebration as exciting and interactive as possible, and look forward to, hopefully, welcoming you back to your “Home by the Sea” later this year.

Sincerely,

/s/ Karen Turner Ward, Chair
Committee on Ceremonial Occasions

/s/ Barbara L. Inman
Vice- President of Administrative Services
Infectious Disease and Prevention Working Group, Chair