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Pomp, Circumstance, and the People Who Make It All Happen



Laura Segall for The Chronicle

Melissa Werner manages commencement ceremonies at Arizona State U., which graduated 17,000 students last year. "It's like a wedding for 10,000 people," she says. "Everyone's important that day"—but only briefly.

By Don Troop

Barnard College scored the prize commencement catch this year, landing President Barack Obama to speak at its ceremony on May 14.

With the president, of course, comes drama: a kerfuffle over his bumping the originally scheduled speaker, the first female editor of *The New York Times*, and the bruised egos over at Mr. Obama's alma mater (to say nothing about bringing the Secret Service to a women's college after that business in Colombia).

Melissa Werner knows what sort of pressure Barnard's commencement planners are under. As director of university ceremonies at Arizona State University, she was in their position three years ago when Mr. Obama delivered his first commencement address as president. She's spent the past academic year carefully mapping out this week's four days of commencement activities on Arizona State's four campuses, culminating with an address by Tom Brokaw at the undergraduate ceremony.

Not as big a catch as the president, perhaps, but with his broad appeal and newsman's gravitas, Mr. Brokaw can expect loud cheers. The same cannot be said of Ms. Werner, who, no matter how well things go, is more likely to hear about the less-than-ideal experience of some graduate or grandparent.



[Enlarge Image](#)

Joshua Lott, Getty Images

President Obama delivered the commencement address at Arizona State in May 2009. The event, at Sun Devil Stadium, drew 63,000 guests and resulted in only minor dramas, to organizers' considerable relief.

"If you do your job well, don't expect a lot of praise," she says. "And that's OK."

Look behind the scenes of any college commencement, and you'll find a Melissa Werner or someone a lot like her. At the University of Richmond, her name is Anita Yearwood, a young events planner—one-woman events office who credits her success to tactful communication and student helpers. At the University of Texas at Austin, his name is Douglas W. Bolin, a laid-back former opera singer who organizes some of the biggest academic ceremonies in America. At Concordia University, in Montreal, she is Susan Durkee, an office-technology analyst who custom-designed a multimedia system to manage and coordinate the ceremonies that Canadians know as "convocation."

Depending on how their particular job evolved, they might answer to the dean of students, the registrar, the head of the development office, the director of alumni relations, the provost, or someone else.

"Sometimes it's just somebody in the president's office who agreed to take it on 40 years ago and still does it," says Ms. Werner, who emphasizes that commencement officers do much more than simply manage the spring and fall graduation ceremonies twice a year.

In her own case, Ms. Werner also serves as the university's protocol officer, coordinating visits by diplomats and other VIP's. She started doing commencements more than a dozen years ago when she joined Arizona State's summer-sessions office, where administrators assumed people had time to plan the ceremonies. During the job interview, her new boss, Carol Switzer, floated the idea of starting an association of commencement professionals who would meet to exchange knowledge. A year later, Ms. Switzer announced it was time to get the group going.

The North American Association of Commencement Officers convened its first meeting in 2000, attracting about 75 people. Ms. Werner was selected as its founding president, and Ms. Switzer its first treasurer. The two women set out to change commencement from a thankless job into "a symbolic ritual" that honors the institution. Ms. Switzer died last year, but the organization she dreamed up has continued to grow.

Happy Grads, Generous Alums

In early February, 300 commencement professionals and vendors gathered at the University of Texas at Austin for the 12th annual meeting of Naaco (say NAKE-oh), as the group is usually called.

In a session on commencement participation, Brian Anderson, a sales manager for the graduation-products vendor Jostens Inc., said graduates who most often skip their commencements say they do so because the ceremonies are too long or and their families aren't attending. He asked his listeners to describe what their campuses had done to make their ceremonies more attractive. Among the solutions: low-cost overnight campus housing for family members, events like lobster bakes and riverboat cruises, and graduation scholarships for distance-ed students to offset their travel costs.

Christopher R. Retzko, manager of special events and programs at Rutgers University at New Brunswick, said his institution had revamped its universitywide ceremony "to give everyone the permission to have fun." Rutgers, he said, has what may be the world's loudest commencement.

The faculty and students of each separate school are equipped with noisemakers that symbolize their group: Last year graduates of the School of Environmental and Biological Sciences rattled green cowbells. The School of Communication carried megaphones. This year the School of Pharmacy will blow pill-shaped whistles. At the end of the ceremony, each school takes turns rising en masse and cutting loose with its noisemakers.

Mr. Retzko described the cacophony. "It was very loud," he said, "but you're in a stadium, so it was just jubilant." Some of the commencement officers wrinkled their noses, suggesting that what works at one college might be a poor fit at another.

Mr. Anderson asked his listeners to estimate what proportion of their graduates showed up for commencement. "We're less than 50 percent," said Michael W. Pasquarelli, director of special events at the private, nonprofit National University, a "lifelong nontraditional adult-learning" institution with campuses in California and Nevada. based in La Jolla, Calif. Representatives of some small, private colleges, however, reported participation rates as high as 95 percent.

Attendance is an important yardstick because it demonstrates graduates' affinity for their alma maters. Mr. Bolin, the artistic director and director of operations for university events at Texas, said satisfied graduates are more likely to donate when they become successful alums.

Last year Mr. Bolin, who is Naaco's president through July, surveyed members to learn whether their commencement budgets had been trimmed as a result of the poor economy. He was relieved to learn that most had not been. "When a person is graduating," he said, "that's the last chance you have to make a lasting impression on them" about your institution.

Three and a Half Seconds

Mr. Bolin declined to say how much his university spends to make that impression. "It's a legislative year," he said, then quickly pointed out that donors, not taxpayers, pay for the spectacle. Austin's universitywide spring commencement, which attracts about 35,000 guests and graduates for an event that takes place around the iconic Texas Tower, has several indoor viewing areas where video is pumped in "so Grandma can get out of the heat," says Mr. Bolin. The show concludes with a fireworks display and the famous, Paul Cret-designed tower lighted in burned orange.

Ceremonies for individual colleges give graduates the opportunity to walk across the stage and hear their names read aloud. Arizona State's College of Liberal Arts and Sciences graduates about 1,200 students in two ceremonies, giving each student about three and a half seconds to cross the stage.

"It's like a wedding for 10,000 people," Ms. Werner says. "Everyone's important that day"—but only briefly.

Among the countless volunteers who help out with Arizona State's commencements are the "catchers," people who stand on blocks just below the stage to keep nervous graduates from tumbling five feet onto the a concrete floor. "The lights are bright, they turn, and they start to go off the edge of the stage," she says. Most of the time the wayward grad can be gently shoved back onto the stage, but Ms. Werner says there have been cases where catchers have had to live up to their name.

Ms. Werner began working last August on the schedule for this week's commencement. Like most of her counterparts, she has no say in the selection of the speaker. Rather, she concerns herself with a whole range of logistical concerns: lighting, the script, parking, water stations, restrooms, and accessibility for the disabled. "You don't want that special day to be ruined because you forgot to put water out, or you didn't think about how Grandma was going to get to her seat," she says.

The best commencement officers, Ms. Werner says, are the ones who can pay attention to the details but also know when to pull back and look at the big picture. "I'm very mindful that we're telling our story well, and celebrating our students."

After each commencement Ms. Werner revises her script as needed. But one year, she forgot to revise someone else's.

In December 2010 she handed the commencement remarks to Arizona State's president, Michael M. Crow, before he stepped onto the stage to speak. President Crow, she says, does not always follow the script, but on this particular day, he read verbatim a particular line. "*And the date was wrong*," she remembers with a horrified whisper. She had forgotten to change "2009" to "2010." As he descended from the stage, Ms. Werner stood waiting at the bottom of the stairs. He looked her in the eye.

"That date was wrong twice in the script," he said.

"Yes, sir," she replied, "and it will never happen again." Ever since, she's made a note in her calendar to check.

In 2009, Ms. Werner learned just 80 days before commencement that President Obama had accepted her university's invitation to speak. "It was the best and worst moment of my whole life," she says. That was the semester that employees had been ordered to take unpaid furloughs. "That was never going to happen with the president of the United States coming," says Ms. Werner.

In the end, Mr. Obama's visit to Sun Devil Stadium, which drew 63,000 guests and 9,000 graduates, resulted in only minor dramas: The university chose not to give the president an honorary degree, saying that his "body of work is yet to come." A graduate who had been booked to sing the national anthem three months earlier heard a rumor that he was going to be bumped by the *American Idol* winner and Arizona native Jordin Sparks (he wasn't). And Secret Service agents denied a request by the shock-rocker Alice Cooper—a John McCain supporter—to meet Mr. Obama.

When the president walked backstage on his way to the lectern, Ms. Werner saw her opportunity to introduce herself. "I said, 'This is it. This is my chance.'" She extended her hand and he smiled and shook it. "Thank you very much for being here, Mr. President."

As his name was announced, he stepped onto the stage. Then came a wall of sound and explosion of flashbulbs like she'd never seen before.

"I was dumbstruck."

If Ms. Werner were to advise the event planners over at Barnard, she says she'd encourage them to take time to absorb the sheer impressiveness of a presidential visit.

"Stand back and listen to the crowd, watch people's faces, and enjoy the experience," she says.
"You'll never forget it."