



The Greening of Commencement Ceremonies

A growing number of education institutions are making a greater effort to integrate environmentally intelligent practices and products into their graduation events.

May 14, 2013

By Susan Durkee

Reduce, reuse, recycle. Those buzz words from the 1970s have gained widespread credence in the 21st century. Five decades after the first Earth Day, green has gone mainstream and, in many cases, colleges and universities are leading the way.

In addition to upgrading their facilities and operations for greater sustainability, a growing number of institutions of higher learning are turning over a new and green leaf at commencement and convocation ceremonies.

“We started off like a lot of other institutions by greening the regalia after we came across information about biodegradable graduation gowns a few years ago,” says Christina Huie Lesyk, director of university events at [Clarkson University](#) in upstate New York. “So it kind of snowballed from there as we thought ‘Okay, what else can we do?’”

The first year the university adopted the new gowns, which are made of wood-sourced acetate fibers, there was a lot of good-natured humor at commencement. “Our president joked with the graduating students that, due to a minor design flaw, the gowns were going to dissolve on them in an hour.”

Regalia from plastic bottles

“We use 100 percent recycled regalia made out of plastic bottles,” says Lisa Walker, marketing and events manager at the [University of Washington, Bothell](#). She explains the bottles are melted into beads which are then converted into thread fiber. Students are encouraged to return the gowns for reuse.

The manufacturer states these eco-friendly gowns remove about seven million plastic bottles annually from waste stream. More than 250 institutions ordered recycled plastic graduation regalia in 2011, up from 60 in 2010, according to *USA Today*.

Reducing the number of seemingly ubiquitous plastic water bottles—or at least making a concerted effort to recycle them—is a goal of many green graduation initiatives. [York University](#) in Toronto, Ontario, has made its convocation more sustainable by introducing collapsible, refillable water bottles, according to Sheelagh Atkinson, manager, ceremonials and institutional events at Canada's third-largest university. The logo-branded bottles, in York red, are complemented by strategically placed hydration stations situated across campus. On a larger scale, the university has pledged to phase out the sale of plastic water bottles campuswide by 2015.

York University, like many other institutions, has taken other steps to reduce the environmental impact of commencement ceremonies in the form of paper, printing and postage by transitioning to virtually all-electronic commencement communications.

"Most universities send out a printed commencement invitation package to graduating students," says Atkinson. "We provide that information, of course, but now everything is electronic."

"The commencement office mails out just one printed postcard to our graduating class about how we will be communicating electronically with them during their final semester," says Laura Rommelfanger, executive events coordinator for the University of Wisconsin, Oshkosh. The university, along with Clarkson University, has been recognized as among the most environmentally responsible educational institutions by *The Princeton Review*. "We have a comprehensive website and a mobile app dedicated to commencement. We send weekly updates via email, and also tweet and post several times a week on social media. I'm able to respond quickly to tweets from students or parents and keep up the pulse of commencement conversations."

The majority of commencement paper products ultimately are discarded, so many institutions not only are downsizing the quantity of paper used, but also are producing programs, diplomas and other commencement paper materials using recycled paper, low-VOC inks and copiers that produce no ozone and use less energy.

Sustainable cost efficiencies

Eco-friendly graduation ceremonies not only are environmentally intelligent and broadly accepted, but also cost-efficient.

"I'll put it this way: Sustainable practices don't necessarily make the ceremonies any more expensive," says Lesyk. "Our primary concern is to continue to produce a quality product. Through sustainable practices, we can take what most colleges and universities consider to be their most important annual event and add value to it without sacrificing quality."

The greening of graduation still is a relatively new trend, but a growing number of institutions of higher learning are making a greater effort to integrate environmentally-intelligent practices and products into their graduation events. As colleges and universities depend on their campus environments to be a major factor in attracting prospective students, it makes sense to nurture these valuable environmental assets, as well as promote the sustainability of the world around them.

Durkee is the office technology analyst in enrollment services at [Concordia University](#), Montreal, Quebec. She is president of the [North American Association of Commencement Officers](#)

[\(NAACO\)](#), a professional peer community for commencement officers and a catalyst for sharing solutions and advancing members' event-management expertise.