MINUTES

Commencement Committee Meeting
Wednesday, September 2, 2026
Noon – 1 p.m.
Zoom

Present – Janice Austin (presiding), Erin Cox, Donna Fortune, J.P. Gannon, Anthony Watson, John Torget, Mason Ramboyong, Karl Rice, Beth Thompson, John Clements, Pascha Gerni, and Keith Thompson

Absent with Notice: Justin Lemkul, Michelle Seref, and Kim O'Rourke

Absent: Amy Rasor, Jenn Thomas, Lance Jones, Manuka Bhataini, Lisha Henshaw, and Jeanette Biczel

Guests: Jessie Richards, Jennifer Skaggs, Andrew Foiles, Becky Jones, Brittany Schulz, Cara Walters, Cathy Baker, Christeana Williams, Clayton Oliver, Conor Ross, Crystal Jefferson, Dana McGuire, Ginny Wagg, Heather Ducote, Holly Wessel, Jazmyne Barron, Joy Manning, Marlena Lester, Matthew Shelor, Michel Pleimling, Milford Palmer, Rebecca Bailey, Sarah Turner, and Stephen Milleson

Janice Austin called the meeting to order at 12:02 pm. A quorum was present.

1. **Other Business**

   Introduction of New Committee Members and New Approach to Committee Participation. Janice Austin, Committee Chair, presented updates to committee participation and membership structure to reflect the evolving nature of commencement planning and the increased collaboration required across colleges and university partners. She noted the significant growth and complexity of commencement operations in recent years, including the expansion of college-based ceremonies and increased coordination among academic and administrative units. Janice shared that the committee will continue to include designated voting members as outlined in its membership structure, while college commencement coordinators and other key partners will be invited to participate in discussions to support communication and collaboration across commencement activities. Formal actions and votes will be limited to designated voting members. The importance of gathering feedback and input from all participants was emphasized to support informed decision-making and continuous improvement of commencement programs and services. Following the discussion, attendees introduced themselves and identified their voting or non-voting status within the committee.

   Work Plan for Academic Year. Janice Austin, Committee Chair, presented the Commencement Committee's proposed work plan for the 2026-27 academic year and noted that University Governance requests committees to establish and communicate annual goals to promote transparency and accountability. The proposed goals include: (1) preparing for and managing the Fall 2026 and Spring 2027 commencement ceremonies; (2) evaluating and recommending, as appropriate, the purchase of a university-wide license for a comprehensive digital commencement and graduation management software platform; (3) evaluating and recommending revisions to Commencement Committee membership, as appropriate; and (4) collaborating with the Commission on Faculty Affairs and other governance and administrative bodies to achieve these goals.

During discussion of Goal 3, members noted that several committee positions have remained vacant for an extended period and suggested evaluating whether the current committee structure and voting membership continue to align with the operational needs of commencement planning.

Janice Austin then led a discussion regarding Goal 2 and the potential evaluation of a university-wide license for Tassel, a digital commencement and graduation management platform currently utilized by the College of Engineering as a pilot program. Discussion highlighted the various processes currently used across colleges to manage graduate communications, registration, attendance tracking, name cards, and ceremony logistics. Members noted that a centralized platform could provide a more consistent and equitable experience for graduates and their families across all commencement ceremonies.

Janice shared feedback received through commencement planning discussions indicating interest in creating a more streamlined and uniform graduation experience across the university. Marlena Lester provided an overview of the College of Engineering's experience with Tassel, noting benefits including centralized registration and ceremony management, improved graduate communications, name pronunciation support, and increased consistency in the graduate and guest experience. She also shared that the platform provides graduates with opportunities to verify and refine the pronunciation of their names prior to commencement and helps colleges maintain more accurate participation records.

Committee members discussed implementation considerations, including onboarding requirements, student participation, graduate student inclusion, hardware and software needs, operational logistics, and integration with existing commencement processes. It was reported that Jessie Richards and Jennifer Skaggs have begun exploratory discussions with Tassel representatives, including a planned in-person meeting to further evaluate system capabilities, implementation requirements, and potential funding considerations.

Members discussed information that would be valuable before any future committee action, including implementation requirements, operational responsibilities, support structures, impacts on colleges and students, and associated costs. Committee leadership invited feedback from members regarding additional information needed to evaluate the feasibility and value of a university-wide solution. Members expressed general interest in exploring tools that may enhance the commencement experience for graduates and their families.

Fall Commencement Details. Janice Austin provided an overview of Fall Commencement plans. The Fall 2026 Commencement ceremonies will be held on Friday, December 18, 2026, with the Undergraduate Ceremony scheduled for 10:30 a.m. and the Graduate Ceremony scheduled for 2:30 p.m. The committee was informed of the current ceremony schedule and planning timeline.

Janice Austin reported that the President's Office is following its established process for identifying and selecting a commencement speaker for Fall 2026. The President's Office is currently working to identify a potential speaker and will provide additional updates as they become available.

Ceremony Scheduling and Religious Observances. Janice Austin led a discussion regarding the potential impact of religious observances on commencement participation for some students. The committee discussed the importance of maintaining an inclusive and welcoming commencement experience while considering appropriate accommodation options and university processes. Members acknowledged the need for continued conversation on this topic and were encouraged to share experiences and practices from their respective colleges that may help support students with scheduling conflicts related to religious observances.

2. Announcement

- Janice Austin announced that a call for commencement volunteers will be distributed to colleges in October. The communication will include a shared document to collect volunteer information, and volunteer submissions will be due by December 1, 2026.

  Committee members were invited to suggest additional topics for inclusion on future meeting agendas.

  Rebecca Bailey inquired about access to commencement photographs, specifically centrally managed team photos. The committee discussed the possibility that some photographs may be available through the university's third-party commencement photography vendor. Jessie Richards agreed to investigate what photographs are available through the existing vendor contract and whether access can be provided to colleges.

- The next Committee meeting will be held Wednesday, October 7, 2026.

3. Adjournment

There being no further business, a motion was made to adjourn the meeting at 12:55 p.m.