

Physical Therapy Convocation

ADAPTING TO THE LIFE IN FRONT OF US



May 29, 2020. A day that 29 of our doctor of physical therapy students had etched in their calendars for at least 3 years. Included in the excitement leading up to this day was a culmination of clinical experiences, located across five different states, as they finally got to the end of their curriculum. In March 2020, the students were starting their last clinical when the COVID-19 Pandemic forced closure of physical therapy clinics, removal of students from clinical sites and stay-at-home orders in our state. At University of New Mexico Division of Physical Therapy, we quickly went into emergency mode.

As the crisis went into a steady state and the shock of the change wore off, we began shifting our focus on completion of Capstone projects, "exit" day, and board exams. When it was apparent that we were not going to be able to gather for a Convocation, we polled our graduates and asked them if they wanted a virtual Convocation. The consensus was "no". The class opted to hold out for a possible gathering in August. The faculty agreed to follow their wishes. That was in April.

By May we realized that students would not be back on campus for some time. As a leader, I struggled to make the decisions that would be the best for our students, faculty and staff, public health and the University. Reading the "tea leaves" I was fairly certain we would not be able to have a large gathering in August. I struggled to let go the idea of no convocation at all.

May 8th arrived, the class of 2020 had completed all graduation requirements. I had just completed watching 6 graduates' final Capstone presentations and I said goodbye and congratulations to those students via Zoom. It did not feel right. It bothered me and I felt a little disoriented. What students may not realize is that we faculty walk this professional path with our students. We see the change and professional growth. We celebrate this milestone, in a different way than our students, and I felt that loss; I felt the loss of the bookend; the stamp of completion; the recognition that this was a journey worth celebrating and remembering.

Ceremonies mark our lives. We celebrate births, anniversaries and yes graduations to signify a significant milestone. These milestones help bookend our life journey. Without the milestones of life we can feel lost in time. With all that has occurred in the spring of 2020, feeling lost in time has been a significant issue. Days meld into days, we forget if it's a weekend and time moves in a different rhythm. This milestone, completion of a doctorate in physical therapy is not one I wanted "lost".

With the help of zoom, technology and many hands we created a virtual convocation furnished with our speakers that the class had chosen, awards, the Physical Therapy Oath, a conferring of degrees and many videos of congratulations. The day before, we had a drive-by celebration with all faculty, staff, alumni and students dressed in masks, six feet apart, screaming and waving cow bells as the students received a "party in a bag" with their regalia, decorations, small gifts and food. It was a hot day, we all got a little sunburned but the smiles, tears and joy was worth it. The video of convocation streamed the next day "live". Students were encouraged to have watch parties and take pictures.

We received many thanks for the day, saw many pictures of students in regalia around campus and in the end, I believe we all felt that "bookend". Life is about milestones. Life is about the journey. In our little part of the world, in the midst of a Pandemic, it was important to remember that.



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