

Proposal for a Fall Commencement Offering

Carnegie Mellon University

To: CMU Commencement Office; Gina Casalegno, Dean of Students;
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Executive Summary

The absence of a fall commencement ceremony at Carnegie Mellon University (CMU) coupled with accessibility issues with the spring commencement ceremony disproportionately disadvantages certain groups of students and diminishes the celebration of their accomplishments. In particular, the current policy makes it challenging for international and low-income students graduating in the fall to return for the spring commencement because it often requires visa renewal and travel expenses. The perception of discrimination among students can also negatively impact the diversity of enrolled student backgrounds necessary for quality education. Moreover, it contradicts CMU's principles of inclusive excellence by celebrating only some of our students' achievements when all students contribute to CMU's community. As a solution, CMU should host a smaller, proportionally-sized fall commencement ceremony to acknowledge the invaluable contributions of fall graduates while circumventing accessibility issues with the spring ceremony.

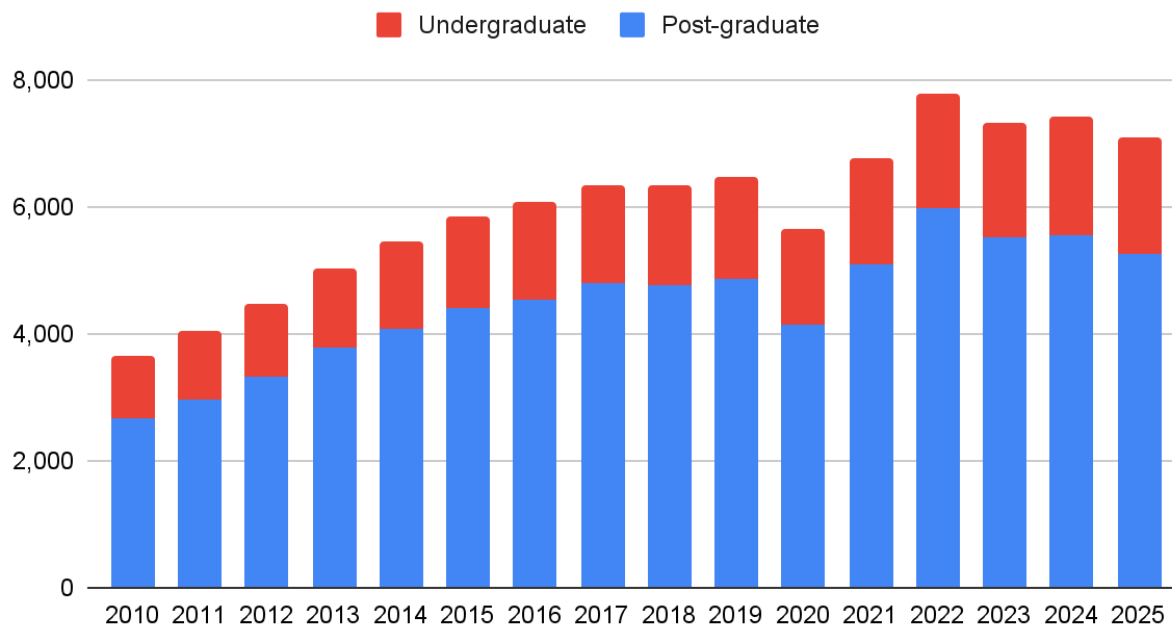
Problem: The Lack of a Fall Commencement Ceremony Poses DEIB Issues

Many CMU students, particularly those pursuing master's or doctoral degrees, finish their degree requirements in the fall. However, because CMU does not host a fall commencement, these students must attend the spring commencement if they want their efforts to be celebrated. Unfortunately, many fall graduates cannot attend the spring commencement due to accessibility issues. Additionally, not having a fall commencement creates four key issues relating to inclusion and equity that are discussed in further detail below.

ISSUE 1: Diversity of backgrounds is essential for educational quality. However, perceived discrimination in the form of accessibility barriers to the spring commencement can discourage international and low-income students from attending the ceremony or CMU.

Diversity in the learning environment promotes critical thinking, creativity, and collaboration by introducing new perspectives, problem-solving approaches, and cultural experiences. In fact, the bulk (~70%) of international students are graduate-level students ("OIE Statistics"), who are far more likely to finish their requirements in the fall than undergraduates. Many international students are on an F-1 visa, but these visas expire 60 days after the completion of their program, so they often cannot stay for commencement or even return unless their visa is renewed ("Student Visa"). The visa renewal process demands a great deal of time, paperwork, and money. For low-income students, the financial burden is heavy, especially if it requires navigating travel expenses and bringing guests to commencement. When faced with these challenges, many students may opt to forgo commencement rather than navigate the financial and/or legal challenges.

Distribution of International Students Across Programs of Study



Source: <https://tableau.andrew.cmu.edu/#/site/IRA/views/StudentEnrollment/EnrollmentTrendsOverTime?iid=3>

Figure 1. TartanDataSource reports that the majority of international students are postgraduates, pursuing master's or doctoral degrees.

Commencements are highly significant events in an individual's career that everyone deserves the right to attend. Dr. Andreea Ritivoi, the Head of the English Department, could not attend her doctoral ceremony at the University of Minnesota. She regrets missing such an important milestone due to the cost-intensive process of reapplying for a visa and traveling back to the US from Romania. This accessibility barrier deprived her of an event that “launches careers, builds a sense of pride in accomplishments, bolsters self-confidence, and uniquely bonds students to their peers” (Ritivoi), all factors that are crucial to the process of successful acculturation, belonging, and well-being for international students.

Acculturation is an already difficult process for international students and perceived discrimination places a larger burden on them. Wadsworth et al. (80) collected survey data from 218 international students and analyzed the correlations between acculturation levels, perceived discrimination, identity struggles, and overall student satisfaction. In particular, it noted that “perceptions of discrimination from members of the host culture can create stress and hinder acculturation processes as well as decrease educational satisfaction” (80). The key here is that the “perception” of discrimination, whether intended or not, alone can cause distress. Therefore, an active effort to address identity gaps and ease acculturation via eliminating unintentional discrimination can reduce the load on international students.

Overlooking accessibility barriers poses one way of unintentionally discriminating against international students and this can make CMU less attractive to foreign students. Over time, this can reduce diversity in CMU's culture and thereby its standard of education. Considering that nearly 40% of CMU's student body is international ("OIE Statistics"), CMU should aim to support its international students wherever possible. This benefits CMU at-large because "diverse perspectives and student backgrounds in their classrooms can foster active thinking, intellectual engagement, and democratic participation" (Gurin et al. 362). All students at CMU grow from the diversity of thought and backgrounds present; therefore, promoting a welcoming environment is in everyone's best interest.

ISSUE 2: Commencement aims to acknowledge the contributions of all CMU students, but the lack of a fall ceremony overlooks the invaluable labor of graduate students. In an interview with the Commencement Office, Executive Director of University Events and Engagement, Jennifer Boyer noted that one of the primary goals of commencement is "to celebrate our students' achievements, hard work and the accomplishment of earning a degree from CMU." However, the majority of international students are graduate-level students ("OIE Statistics"), and the majority of fall graduates are graduate-level students: "around 150-200 bachelor's students and 1,500-1,800 master's/doctoral students complete their degree in December" (Boyer). Additionally, students, especially at the graduate level, have made invaluable contributions to CMU's research, teaching, innovation, and culture. Many graduate students also serve as teaching staff, enriching the campus community, and contribute to innovations on CMU's behalf through research, furthering the university and its prestige. Given the incredible amount of time and energy that these students have invested, they deserve to be treated with respect for the dedication that they have shown towards CMU. This means making a dedicated effort towards standardizing the current commencement policy so that spring and fall graduates are recognized equally and honorably.

ISSUE 3: Inconsistent departmental celebrations contradict the Inclusive Excellence initiative. Because there is no fall commencement, the responsibility falls onto individual departments and colleges to celebrate students internally. However, not all departments celebrate fall graduates, and departments in general receive different amounts of funding and resources (Ritivoi). As a result, because of differences in funding across departments, some department commencements will necessarily be nicer and more accommodating than others. As Christopher Newfield notes in his article about underfunding of the humanities, "For every thousand dollars the [federal government spends] on research, the humanities receive a dollar and 30 cents" (6). Similar disparities in external funding between departments can lead to some departments—especially those in the humanities—lacking the additional funding to hold events such as commencement ceremonies. Moreover, since international students are not distributed evenly across departments and celebrations are not standardized, this means the current system is not equitable and neglects some groups' achievements and efforts. This can further add to an

existing sense of discrimination created by the absence of a fall commencement.

ISSUE 4: *The current political climate creates a need for additional support for international students.* Recent years have observed a trend in increased visa restrictions, xenophobic rhetoric, and targeted violence towards international and immigrant communities (Johnson). This fosters fear and uncertainty on American campuses, heightening challenges for students from marginalized backgrounds. These conditions undermine students' sense of belonging and discourage participation in university events, including commencement.

A fall commencement counters a possible source of discrimination and failure of equity, promoting a safe and welcoming environment for students during an otherwise uninviting time. In particular, graduate and international students need more support because of their limited opportunities to connect with their communities. It is therefore important to include them wherever possible to recognize their contributions. By reaffirming its commitment to Inclusive Excellence, CMU conveys the integral value of all members of its community and the importance of cultural diversity.

Solution: Hosting a Fall Commencement Resolves the Aforementioned Issues

CMU should host a small (proportionally-sized) fall commencement ceremony for fall graduates to ensure that their accomplishments are celebrated and accessibility barriers with the spring commencement are circumvented.

Offering a fall commencement promotes diversity by considering accessibility barriers to international and low-income students. Because international students and low-income students may not be able to travel back to CMU for the spring commencement, they often miss out on this important experience. Holding a commencement ceremony in the fall, shortly after they fulfill their requirements would allow these students to attend, giving fall graduates the opportunity to celebrate an important milestone in their career, especially since they might never get such an opportunity again.

This change would also create a more welcoming environment at CMU, in line with the current Inclusive Excellence efforts. Considering accessibility thoughtfully when planning events to include people of all socioeconomic backgrounds presents CMU in a more attractive way to prospective students, domestic and international. This may lead to higher institutional rankings, better education quality due to diversity, and higher educational satisfaction.

A fall commencement would also strengthen the bond between graduating students and thus

increase the quantity and quality of CMU's alumni network. A dissertation from the West Virginia University's Division of Social Work collected 847 alumni responses from the California University of Pennsylvania (now PennWest California) found that "[a]n influential aspect of making a donation is the emotional or psychological component. A majority of the alumni responses to the reason they would donate [...] involved feeling connect[ed]" (Drew-Branch 43). Hence, positive experiences make it more likely for these alumni to then donate. Moreover, with the current political environment, it becomes imperative that CMU remains a safe space for students and strives to provide belonging to all demographics.

Offering a fall commencement would support CMU's Inclusive Excellence initiative by valuing students' contributions and making them feel that they belong and deserve to be celebrated as much as everyone else. A fall commencement standardizes the university-wide graduation practices, thus promoting equity, and acknowledges the contributions of graduates to CMU and honors them as alumni. Additionally, holding a fall commencement ensures that graduates receive their diplomas in due time and eliminates the lengthy delay that results from postponing the celebration until spring. This avoids burdening individual departments with adequately recognizing graduates, as each department receives different amounts of support, resources, and funding.

Preliminary Evidence Suggests a Fall Ceremony is Feasible

Several limitations and considerations must be taken into account to successfully offer a commencement at the end of each fall semester. Among these are operational and logistical practicalities, time, space, financial constraints, attendance, and the need for long-term re-evaluation. While the Office of Commencement had not conducted a full feasibility study at the time of this proposal, the details gathered from this office suggest that the proposed addition of a regular fall commencement at CMU is feasible.

Budget and operational feasibility:

Boyer explains the difficulty of accurately estimating the cost of commencement as "it depends on what is considered a cost for the commencement itself, rather than a regular operating expense of the institution. That said, numerous units are called upon to contribute staff time and resources, including event services, student affairs, [and] public safety." At this time, the Office of Commencement has not conducted a full feasibility study of a fall commencement.

While hosting a fall commencement poses added expenses, part of these expenses could potentially be covered by (A) the proportionate decrease in spring commencement costs, and (B) increased and/or targeted donations from alumni. Regarding the former, since fall graduates will only attend one of the two yearly commencement events, the effective cost per attendee should not vary significantly, though further study would be needed. Some of the funds allocated for the spring ceremony could be diverted to the fall ceremony in proportion to the fall attendees. In

addition, this would reduce the burden of preparation required within a short timeline for the spring ceremony, as there would be fewer attendees. Furthermore, positive experiences and high educational satisfaction among alumni are correlated with increased participation and donations (Gaier 284), so fall graduates who feel included and celebrated may help cover the costs of an additional commencement in the long run. If necessary, some of the funding given to departments to organize internal celebrations can also be rerouted to offset a fall ceremony's expenses. Although extra time and resources are required to host an additional event, several options exist to cover the additional expenses, and the operational knowledge needed for a fall commencement ceremony would be similar to the spring commencement's procedures.

Time and space constraints: In a typical year, “between 1,500 – 2,000 students graduate in December and between 3,800 – 4,400 students graduate in May and August” (Boyer). Many auditoriums and venues on campus would easily host a fall commencement ceremony, especially as there are far fewer attendees than in the spring. The spring commencement ceremony is held in Gesling Stadium, a venue that could be reused for the fall commencement ceremony with a similar layout on a smaller scale. Furthermore, this would reduce the demand for space in the spring by up to 1,500 - 2,000 students as they would plan to attend the fall ceremony instead. In terms of timing, the fall semester concludes before winter break, meaning venue availability and staff schedules are more flexible during the last week. This would reduce typical constraints on event planning and setup.

Notable attendees: Notable attendees include university executives, honorary faculty, and invited speakers, who play an important role in commencement by presenting degrees and representing the university's values and accomplishments. As a fall ceremony would be smaller than the spring commencement, it would require fewer such attendees, making scheduling and coordination easier. At a minimum, a fall commencement requires the presence of degree-conferring executives, a keynote speaker, and select faculty, but securing their attendance is manageable with early notification.

Benchmarking:

Several peer institutions demonstrate the feasibility of a fall or winter commencement in addition to the spring ceremony (see Table 1).

Table 1. Public and private universities of various sizes host two commencement ceremonies.

University of Pittsburgh	Public, mid-sized
Penn State University	Public, large
University of North Carolina - Chapel Hill	Private, mid-sized, elite
Georgia Institute of Tech	Public, mid-sized, elite
Rice University	Private, small, elite
University of Florida	Public, large
University of Miami	Private, mid-sized
Cornell University	Private, mid-sized, elite

Sources: [University of Pittsburgh](#), [Penn State University](#), [UNC Chapel Hill](#), [Georgia Tech](#), [Rice University](#), [University of Florida](#), [University of Miami](#), [Cornell](#)

Both the University of Pittsburgh and Penn State University hold fall commencements, and Joe McCarthy, the University of Pittsburgh's interim provost and senior vice chancellor, maintains that it is "important that we can celebrate our students' accomplishments in a timely way" (McPoyle, para. 7). State universities like the University of Florida and the University of Miami follow suit similarly. Elite universities, from private institution University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill to public institution Georgia Tech, also host two ceremonies. In addition, Rice University has a smaller student population than CMU, yet still offers two ceremonies. Tier 1 university and Ivy League member Cornell hosts a recognition ceremony in December akin to a commencement ceremony ("Office of Commencement Events"). Therefore, addressing this issue is not a matter of student population size because massive universities like PSU, midsize universities like U Pitt, and small universities like Rice all offer a fall commencement. Academic institutions of various sizes, both locally and nationally, often offer two commencements for accessibility reasons, so CMU should consider the benefits of holding a second ceremony in a similar fashion.

Implementation and reevaluation: Conducting a "trial run" allows for early identification of flaws, collection of feedback, assessment of feasibility and impact, and risk reduction before full implementation. CMU could conduct a trial run of a fall commencement ceremony for data over five years and consider the costs and student satisfaction resulting from it. Following a first-year pilot, CMU can consider changes to timing, venue, and other logistics that would ease future implementation. After five years, the university can reevaluate and, based on the student feedback and realized organizational demands, redesign the fall ceremony, improve accessibility for the spring ceremony, or revert to the current policies and practices..

Conclusion:

In summary, the lack of a regular fall semester commencement creates accessibility barriers that disproportionately disadvantage certain student groups and diminish the recognition of their achievements. International and low-income students, in particular, face challenges returning for the spring ceremony due to visa renewals and travel costs. This oversight not only undermines

the diversity essential to a quality education but also contradicts CMU's commitment to inclusiveness. To address these concerns, CMU should, and can, establish a smaller, proportionally-sized fall commencement to honor the contributions of fall graduates and ensure all students receive the recognition they deserve.

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