



SABINNA PIERRE | ASUO PRESIDENT CLASS OF 2020
Associated Students of The University of Oregon president Sabinna Pierre gives an inspiring speech as part of the University of Oregon's virtual commencement ceremony in 2020. EUGENE REGISTER-GUARD

Seniors concerned UO to host sports event but not graduation

Jordyn Brown
Register-Guard
USA TODAY NETWORK

When the University of Oregon announced in early February it would have a virtual commencement ceremony for the second year in a row, the university was met with frustration from some students — not because they wanted to shirk COVID-19 guidelines, but because they believed it was a double standard.

UO's virtual commencement ceremony is scheduled for June 12. A week later, the 2020 U.S. Olympic Team Trials for Track & Field will be held at Hayward Field on UO's campus.

UO also announced this month it will host five collegiate track and field meets at Hayward, starting the weekend of April 2 and ending with the NCAA Championships June 9-12, the same week as graduation.

The university is not involved with the planning or organization of the Olympic trials. The trials are run by TrackTown USA, an outside party that contracts with UO for the use of Hayward Field.

Spectators are not welcome at the first NCAA meet, UO said.

While the university is unwavering on a virtual commencement, it is look-

ing at adding some form of in-person activity for graduation.

For some students, though, it's not enough.

"I just want the (Olympic) trials and graduation to be held at the same standard — so either they both happen or they both don't," said Morgan Leone, a 22-year-old UO senior graduating in June. "And if they both don't, it's unfortunate they couldn't make it happen. (People) worked really hard for both of them, but I would love to see them both happen regardless."

Spring sports moving forward

The Olympic trials for track and field has been held at Hayward Field six times since 1972, though the first year only included men's events. The 2020 trials will be the seventh.

They are organized locally by TrackTown USA, a Eugene-based nonprofit organization that runs other large-scale track and field events. TrackTown has contracted with UO to rent space on campus for these events before, and this year is no exception.

The 2020 Olympics, which were postponed globally because of the COVID-19 pandemic, are scheduled to be held July 23 through Aug. 8 in Tokyo.

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UO considers in-person grad activities

The Olympic trials being contracted out to a third party doesn't change students' call for UO to seek alternatives for graduation.

"That really frustrated me in the sense that they're kind of hiding behind TrackTown," Leone said about UO. "I feel like they've been using that as an excuse. I feel like the university tends to forget that we are also paying students and paid a lot of money to go here."

Leone is one of 1,600-plus people who have signed an online petition for UO to reconsider the decision to hold a virtual commencement and include more student input on alternatives.

The petition points out changes such as increased access to vaccines in Lane County, along with the track and field plans as reasons to reconsider.

UO announced there may be some opportunity for in-person activities at commencement, though the actual commencement ceremony will still be virtual. However, it's still unclear what these activities could be.

In a typical year, each school and college at UO (the business school, college of arts and sciences, etc.) has its own smaller commencement ceremony. This is where students actually have their names read and walk across stage to receive their degrees. Then there is a separate, university-wide commencement ceremony with speeches from UO President Michael Schill and other guests.

When asked whether these smaller school-specific ceremonies still were being considered, Blancett said UO is "actively exploring how it might add an in-person activity to complement planned virtual commencement ceremonies," but had nothing more to share at this time.

Students suggest safe alternatives

Leone set up a template email that students could fill out and send to UO leaders suggesting a way of doing in-person commencements. The program she uses shows about 200 people have used the template.

"It's basically suggesting doing many different ceremonies throughout the day at many different locations, without families, so Hayward, also at Autzen field, the EMU lawn," she said. "Everything I wrote followed the extreme risk guidelines, so it'd be 25 people outside all socially distanced ... it would be very strict, but at least families could tune in and watch."

With about 30 minutes per ceremony, following the most stringent guidelines the state has set, Leone said she calculated it would take a couple of days to get through the 2021 graduates, but it would be possible.

"I don't want anyone to think I'm disregarding COVID or trying to push for unsafe COVID activities," Leone said. "I just figured there are other universities working really hard to try and make something else safe. (UO) can absolutely do that for the seniors."

In the statement, UO's Blancett said UO is "eager to recognize students' successes and achievements in meaningful ways."

"The health and safety of our community is a top priority, as is the ability to remain flexible while adhering to a rapidly changing guideline that may become more or less stringent over time," she said. "The safety of our campus community remains a top priority and a guiding principle as we navigate moving operations in and out of different risk levels."

Contact reporter Jordyn Brown at jbrown@registerguard.com or 541-246-4264, and follow her on Twitter @thejordynbrown and Instagram @registerguard.

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