

**Texas State University-San Marcos
Commencement Team: Engaging the Campus Community**

Micky's Script

**Begin presentation
(slide 1)**

Micky, Kristin, Jennifer are on stage while audience arrives.

Slide 1 is on as audience arrives and presentation begins.

After everyone sits, Micky changes to slide 2.

**Introductions
(slide 2)**

Thank you for joining us this afternoon to talk about the Commencement Team at Texas State University-San Marcos.

At Texas State, commencement is coordinated by staff in the Curriculum Services office, we're part of the Provost office.

I'm Micky Autrey, Director of Curriculum Services, and also in this discussion are Kristin McDaniel and Jennifer Jahns.

**Discuss Texas State and NAACO
(slide 3)**

Texas State is a new member of NAACO this year and we are excited to join this organization. It looks to us that ideas and event planning are at the heart of NAACO, and that involves so many complex issues. Lucky for all of us - Commencement presents a never ending list of opportunities to work on!

Like so many events on our campuses, commencement is always changing, as our student numbers change, as the event requirements change, we thought NAACO functions as a commencement team, and so it might be helpful for us to talk about our university commencement team and how we strive to work through some of those changes.

Our team discussion is organized into 3 sections:

1. Who we are and why a commencement team was formed.
2. How our team currently functions.
3. What our team envisions for the future.

We've saved some time at the end of the discussion if anyone has ideas or comments to share and some questions.

Introduce university (slide 4)

Texas State was established in 1899 as a teacher's college and through the years has changed names several times to reflect the expanding mission and service to the state of Texas.

We're located about midway between Austin and San Antonio in the Texas hill country, and are a largely commuter university. We have students driving from all over central Texas.

Our fall 2008 enrollment was about 30,000 and our current spring count is 28,000. For graduation, these students bring many, many guests from all over the state to celebrate with them.

More university intro (slide 5)

With our current enrollments, we're the 5th largest public university in the state and we offer 200 academic programs, both undergraduate and graduate. Those include 100 undergraduate, 88 master's, 7 doctoral, and 1 professional practice doctorate.

From those programs we graduate about 6,500 students each year. For commencement planning purposes, we consider the candidate count which is around 7,500 per year.

To teach and assist those students we employ about 3,500 faculty and staff.

And, we maintain over 200 buildings stretched over 450 acres in San Marcos. We're a pretty large and spread out campus.

Campus picture (slide 6)

Here's our campus in San Marcos. We're fortunate to work in such a beautiful place...

We're proud to bring guests to campus for graduation, and have lots of scenery for them to enjoy...

The Curriculum staff work here in the Kellam building on the 10th floor and from our offices we can see the campus much like what graduation guests can see.

Across the river from us is the building where graduation ceremonies are held in Strahan Coliseum.

Intro Strahan (slide 7)

Strahan is the largest event building on campus and it was constructed in 1982 as a basketball and volleyball facility. This is what it looks like from the inside. The seating capacity is about 7,000.

That capacity has been a driving force in how we organize commencement ceremonies with the number of students graduating and the number of guests that they bring. We use the student and guest numbers to plan the arrangement of colleges in each ceremony.

We hold commencement ceremonies at the end of each semester in May, August, and December. The May and December ceremonies are arranged by academic college into 4 ceremonies over a two day period (Friday and Saturday), and August into 3 ceremonies (Friday only). Generally we try to group larger colleges with smaller colleges to more evenly distribute the students and guests throughout the ceremonies.

Each ceremony includes both undergraduate and graduate students. This college arrangement is under constant review because of Strahan's seating capacity and our growing student count.

Commencement set up (slide 8)

Here's a shot of how we begin to setup in Strahan transforming this basketball gym into a more ceremonial setting like commencement.

Students entering the Coliseum as graduation candidates, see a similar view as they walk in.

You can see the Coliseum isn't completely set up in this picture. It takes a lot of work to get this basketball gym ready for 30,000 people.

Where we've been and where we're going (slide 9)

We've experienced large growth at the university in the last 10 years and here's a quick look at some of the major changes that have occurred because of the growth.

In May 2000 we held 3 commencement ceremonies with 1,600 candidates and 12,000 guests. Those ceremonies were separated into undergraduate and graduate students.

Because of the growth, we've changed the arrangement to combine undergraduate and graduate students by academic college so that students and guests see the full scope of the university rather than just the undergraduate or graduate experience. We thought it was important for undergraduate students to see the importance of a graduate degree with the hooding.

We estimate that by spring 2010, we'll have about 3,300 candidates for the May graduation and they'll bring 30,000 guests with them. With those numbers we're planning for 5 ceremonies over that 2 day period.

Staffing (slide 10)

Here's another slide of commencement changes over the years. In this 10 year period, staffing needs have changed to keep up with the student and guest numbers.

You can see that we've significantly added staff from the Curriculum and Provost Offices, the undergraduate advising centers, the Graduate College, faculty and the police department. Also we've expanded the number of offices involved in the ceremonies.

The workers from these offices are stakeholders in commencement and they bring a wealth of ideas and solutions.

Forming the team (Slide 11)

Why we formed a team?

It started several years ago when our Athletics department began planning for a baseball conference tournament to be held in the complex down the street from Strahan Coliseum. Many logistical issues were quickly discovered. This tournament was planned for mid-August on the same weekend as our summer graduation ceremonies, and those events were to use the same parking and most of the same staff.

Also, in mid-August Texas State celebrates one of our distinguished alums President Lyndon Johnson with a summer event called the LBJ picnic. We quickly brought a group together across campus to plan and resolve conflicts and that initial group sparked the idea for a commencement team.

One of the issues we discovered in planning those 3 August events was the need to designate graduation a "Presidential Event". The facilities staff told us right away that their work schedules were prioritized based on the event designation.

I remember thinking at the time, "This is absurd! Don't we already think of commencement as a presidential event, a priority for all of us on campus!"

So we formed a campus group, initially called the Presidential Commencement Committee, and each of us worked with our divisional Vice Presidents to get the official designation for commencement in hopes to prevent future conflicts. That also helped us plan work schedules and maximize staff resources.

As the group was working through the event issues, we also realized a need to assess our effectiveness and evaluate our efforts. We wanted to make sure that our time was spent wisely.

Explain membership (slide 12)

The initial group that was formed has evolved into a team of graduation workers who are the experts in their areas. Here's a list of the offices represented on the team.

The members bring their experiences and ideas together and have developed a draft mission statement. It's an evolving process.....

**Mission
(slide 13)**

To engage the University community in the planning, implementation, and continuous improvement of our commencement ceremonies with a goal of achieving excellent results.

**Calendar
(slide 14)**

Here's an annual picture of how connected the team is to the ceremonies. Since we graduate in May, August and December, the team meets the following month to report on the successes of the ceremonies, to start planning for the next graduation and to talk about issues and ideas. You'll see the team meetings each semester and then followed up with sub group meetings.

This is a good snapshot of the work over a year's time that's needed to put commencement together and how the team's involved.

Kristin will share with you how the team currently functions.

Kristin's Script

#1 Communicate Accurately and Consistently (slide 16)

Of course it is important that staff, faculty, guests and candidates receive correct information. This can be difficult when you have 8 undergraduate college advising centers, a Graduate College office that serves graduate students, and the Provost Office all receiving questions by email and phone, posting information to their own websites and some are mailing candidate instruction packets.

In our committee meeting, we discuss our common practices and policies and individual candidate instructions so that it is clear what should be communicated to students. We want to make sure that a student calling the Education advising center and a student calling the Science advising center receive the same information regarding University policy and general ceremony information. If a team member misunderstood a policy, or was given the wrong information we can quickly clarify the policy with the help and advice of other Team members.

During our Team meeting, we often realize that certain issues would be better served in a smaller group, or sub-group, with Team members who have more involvement in those areas.

The Provost Office staff serves as the meeting facilitators of each sub-group. We set up the meeting, take minutes; follow up on projects and ideas; however it is up to the other Team members to put everything into action.

From this Objective, we have formed a Communication Sub-group. This group is made up of representatives from the Provost Office, of course, the University Police Department, and several Academic Advisors. This group reviews the commencement website for updates on design and "user-friendliness". They also meet to draft changes to candidate instructions that are then sent out to all advising centers for inclusion in their instructions.

An example of a communication issue is...

Communication Issue (slide 17)

Students forgot to officially change their name with the University; therefore their desired name does not appear in the commencement program.

1. We received a complaint from a student that their name did not appear as they would have liked in the commencement program.
2. We added the issue to the team meeting agenda to try and discover ways to better inform the students of the way their name appears in the student information system and ultimately the commencement program.
3. The team decided that offering a draft of the commencement program online would give the students the opportunity to double check their information.
4. With the help of the communication sub-group, statements were drafted to include in the graduation application, website and candidate instructions.

Not only was this a great service to our students, but it relieved pressure from the Academic Advisors.

#2 Comply with Safety Codes and Laws (slide 18)

The next objective is to comply with all safety codes and laws.

As Micky mentioned earlier, we are expecting (for Spring '10) 3,300 candidates and 30,000 guests, with different needs and abilities, to visit the Coliseum over a two day period. Given this high number of visitors, it is important that we provide the safest and most accessible environment possible.

Our facility was built with the specifications and codes applicable in the 1980s, so constant improvements are being made as we become aware of safety issues and new codes.

Our Safety/Emergency Sub-group draft emergency plans and procedures and help the team understand their responsibilities in case of an emergency. This is a very important objective for our team...they are very interested in their role in emergency situations and are concerned for the safety of candidates, guests and the staff in their offices.

The safety sub-group also helps identify and manage modifications to Strahan Coliseum for safety and accessibility.

Safety Issue (slide 19)

Each semester, we request a report from UPD to find out if any incidents occurred in or around Strahan Coliseum, basically anything relating to our event.

We found that several guests were losing their balance in the higher seating areas of the coliseum. Known to many as the nose bleed section. We tried to identify possible causes for the fall, we want to know where they happened, what were the conditions that day (rain, extreme heat) Is it possible that someone fainted from the heat? Temperatures can reach 100 degrees during our August and May ceremonies. Or was the fall from a puddle left after rain?

We then added the issue to the Team meeting agenda to find out what ideas the team had, did anyone witness a fall?

The team decided that this was definitely an issue that would be better served by our safety subgroup.

The subgroup determined that a modification needed to be made to the coliseum to prevent these falls. Whether it installing a non-slip coating on the steps, or installing handrails.

The subgroup met in Strahan Coliseum with the design and construction office as well as athletic facility managers to discuss modifications to the coliseum.

It was clear that the addition of extra handrails would be beneficial to guests searching for seats in the higher seating areas.

The installation of the handrails was scheduled and upon completion, the group inspected the handrails to be sure that they met our expectations as well as our codes and laws.

The completion of projects, such as this safety issue, is very rewarding for our team. They receive tangible results from every project that we complete.

#3 Understand Roles and Responsibilities (slide 20)

Our team comes from different buildings around campus and we have different job responsibilities, however we are all stakeholders in commencement.

It is important to meet your colleagues and build relationships with them so that on the day of the ceremony, you know who to connect with for specific issues. For me, I have found it very satisfying to have a list of contacts in my head...and when an issue arises I know exactly who to call and their number is already programmed in my cell phone.

It is also important to understand the pressures and concerns of others and how they relate to your own. One issue might affect all of us – but in very different ways.

For example...

Crowd Issue (slide 21)

Ex. Candidate and guests that attend cause a strain on the campus and city.

Academic Advisors: "How am I going to line up all these candidates?"

Provost: "How are we going to fit all these candidates in the seating area?"

UPD: "How many guests will be attending with these candidates, and will there be sufficient seating and parking?"

Risk Management: "How many of these candidates will have elderly or disabled guests, is there sufficient seating, parking and enough shuttles?"

Musicians are thinking: 3,000 candidates, will we have to play the recessional music for 30 minutes?

Even the citizens of San Marcos are thinking how will I get to the grocery store with the traffic and road blocks?

It is important to be open to others and their individual concerns.

I think team discussion leads to knowledge of others and understanding of individual job responsibilities. On the day of commencement, when I might have to call Rocky in Materials Management and say "I need 800 folding chairs right now" He won't think "who is this stressed out person and why are they calling?" He will remember..."oh this is Kristin, she is working on commencement today and really needs those chairs" Since we have met before in our team meeting, he understands my responsibilities. In the end, we build valuable relationships that make our job much easier.

Action Items List (slide 22)

One way of keeping the team engaged and informed is to keep accurate records and track all ideas that are brought up in the meeting. This list also contains suggestions that come from non-team members on campus and even guest or graduate comments. The biggest mistake you can make with a team is to not take their ideas seriously. It is important to address all ideas, however big, small, to show the team that it is worth their time to speak up and contribute to the discussion and to participate in sub-groups.

Issues cause people to become engaged and motivated to resolve the issue. Teams are formed because people see it as a perfect channel to voice their concerns

Tools to Stay Connected (slide 23)

The following are different tools that I use to keep the team informed in between team and subgroup meetings.

The first tool is email; I use regular email updates to inform the team of progress with an issue...or to get their input on an idea or suggestion.

The second tool is what we just discussed, the action items list. I make sure to keep this current and available to all team members.

The third is to continue to schedule our team meetings, three times a year...and to meet with the subgroup, as needed.

The fourth is web development. We are constantly improving web resources for our team. The commencement team has their own homepage within the commencement site with archived meeting minutes, upcoming meetings with agendas, and something that I feel is the most important resource is the TEAM ROSTER.

The team roster contains the name, contact information and department of each team member. While searching for an answer to a commencement question, someone might find this team site and think this is something they would like to be involved in, but aren't sure that their job is relevant to the team. I hope that when they view our roster and discover how diverse our team is (from Provost Office to UPD to Custodial Services to University Bookstore), they will feel confident to contact us and join the team. We are always looking for new members.

Jennifer's Script

(slides 24-25)

I want to start with a couple of quotes. I'm not sure who authored the first quote, but I've heard it often in classes and workshops I've taken and I feel it is relevant to the objectives of our Team.

"Teamwork is the ability to work together toward a common vision."

What we've discussed thus far today demonstrates our campus' willingness to come together to work toward common goals and common visions improved commencement ceremonies...and striving for excellence in these ceremonies.

(slides 26-27)

The second quote is one I like even more. Perhaps because I'm a big sports fan...Vince Lombardi was an excellent, motivational coach. He was able to turn a losing football team into a Team with confidence, and a vision. So, whether your on a Super bowl winning football Team or a Commencement Team, you can find inspiration and motivation in his words.

"Perfection is not attainable. But if we chase perfection, we can catch excellence."

This directly applies to everything in life. You can apply it to your home life, your relationship with your spouse, and to co-workers, the Team that you have or may build in the future. So, we'll keep those quotes in mind as we talk about our Team's future...

(slide 28)

As Kristin just discussed, the development of our commencement website will be a vital part of our success as a Team. One of our main focuses when we look at improving our website is a more comprehensive staff home page. You can see an example of our current home page at the bottom of this slide. Kristin is our webmaster and she is working to include NAACO as part of our general staff information page.

We want to foster our new relationship with NAACO by including information about the organization on the staff page and by adding links to the NAACO site so that our staff can become involved as affiliates. We hope to broaden our Team to include as many points of view as possible. Though we know we cannot implement every idea, we do want to attend to them and address them as necessary.

We are also part of an organization in Texas known as TACRAO, the Texas Associate of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers. TACRAO addresses issues of admission, registration, student applications, and many more items. They also include some commencement related information in their meetings.

We want to use both of these organizations to our advantage to pursue improvements to our Team, on the web and in our ceremonies. We are very excited to make use of the many resources these two options are opening to us as a Team.

(slides 29-30)

In addition, we are expanding the student and faculty home pages. This screen shot shows our current faculty web page with information on their arrival times and instructions for the ceremony, as well as how to volunteer before and during the ceremony.

The student home page shown here is pretty comprehensive, but we do want to further improve it by utilizing staff and student input.

(slides 31-32)

During one of our Team meetings, it was suggested that surveys would be an excellent way to pull information from graduating candidates that we might otherwise have not heard from. The Communication sub-group will be reviewing the draft of the student survey you see here for further improvements. The Team intends to implement the survey after our Fall 2009 ceremony in December.

We're including questions such as "Did the ceremony meet your expectations"...and a box for their comments. One thing we've realized is that we do not know what a student actually expects to get from a ceremony from their perspective. We are interested to hear their input...and to implement ideas as they are fit, or possible to do so.

The Team also hopes to develop both guest and faculty surveys. These would allow us again, different perspectives than what we have from a group of people who can not always be a part of our Team.

The Team's objective for all surveys is continuous improvement, as our Mission Statement says, for achieving excellent results.

We will use constructive feedback and insights to better prepare for our ceremonies, address pertinent issues, and improve our ceremonies. As we continually evolve as a Team and determine where future priorities lay, this survey feedback will help guide our decision making.

Another project we are looking forward to is setting up annual team safety meetings. These meetings will be led by the University Police Department and our Office of Risk Management. We will cover things such as emergency evacuation procedure from the Coliseum; how to perform CPR (for staff interested in learning this), and the location and use of the AED equipment that is being installed throughout the Coliseum.

(slide 33)

Another quick quote..this time from basketball coaching legend John Wooden. "Success comes from knowing that you did your best to become the best that you are capable of becoming." This quote actually speaks volumes for a Team like ours...

How can we be a truly successful Team without input from groups such as students, guests, and faculty? We need to address issues that we're aware of as staff, but also those issues of which we are currently unaware. We need to move our Team from being unconsciously uninformed to consciously informed. In other words, we can't "fix" what we don't know about. But by knowing what is important to other groups of people, we can achieve meaningful ceremonies.

(slides 34-35)

In summer 2008, our President made the decision, based in part on our Team's recommendation, to move to a 5th ceremony...effective May 2010.

The 5th ceremony addition will allow our university to spread the over-capacity crowds during our ceremonies more evenly throughout the two day period. We're hoping that traffic will flow with less congestion, and that our guests will be able to get in and out of the Coliseum and the city with more ease.

We are also hoping that this change will allow us to seat all candidates on the Coliseum floor. A common complaint after our spring ceremonies has been the feeling of being "left out" of the ceremony by the students that we have to seat in our gold seats. The gold seats are not on the floor, but are actually areas we reserve from where the guests would typically be seated. This causes a multitude of logistical issues for our office since we plan out how to wrap students and line them up for the diploma presentations.

At any rate, the hope is that all students will fit on the floor for each ceremony, thus helping all student feel included in their big day.

These are just a couple of the many reasons a 5th ceremony will benefit our campus. BUT, by adding this ceremony, we are also creating budget and staffing issues.

Without the Team we currently have in place, adding a fifth ceremony would be much more overwhelming. Not only will a 5th ceremony have budget implications, it will affect staffing before and during commencement and time management of persons involved at all levels...

We want departments and divisions across campus to begin now estimating what type of impact a 5th ceremony will have for them. Then, the Team can use that information to search for effective ways to reduce cost, or find solutions to staffing issues before the semester is upon us.

Team feedback and work prior to Spring 2010 will allow us to transition smoothly. The Team will form a sub-group to focus solely on this transition. We want to review current policies and procedures and determine if adjustments are needed. And if so, what are those adjustments.

(slide 36)

An area that has already come up for discussion is volunteering. We know now that additional staff will be required in the future...if nothing else to give some of our tired feet a break now and then, but more likely they will be a welcomed addition to our current staff. The Team is looking for ways to motivate staff across campus to volunteer before or during commencement.

We saw the staff home page on the commencement site earlier...and it is set up with a volunteer tab to explain the various types of work in which a person could participate. If any of your universities have volunteer programs, this is an area of interest that we would love to learn more about.

(slide 37)

Our faculty currently serve us at commencement by becoming faculty marshals, graduate and undergraduate marshals. These marshals lead the faculty and students during our processional, diploma presentations, and the recessional...so, in other words...during the ceremony itself. What the Team would like to do is ask for involvement prior to the ceremony as well.

We hope to add faculty from each of our 8 colleges to our Team for their input...their opinions on the areas that would benefit from further faculty involvement. Of all people on campus, faculty play some of the most vital roles in a student's life...so to have them actively helping before and during commencement will bring a greater appreciation to the students for how dedicated their faculty actually are...and possibly give faculty a greater appreciate for their student's accomplishments.

(slide 38)

Regarding student outreach...our Team recently asked a graduate student to participate in our meetings. The student gave immediate input regarding the hooding of our master's degree candidates. We weren't able to comply with all of the requests of the graduate students, but we did make concessions that pleased the student by adding additional language regarding the significance of the master's hood to the Provost's speech at commencement. It was a good compromise that added value to the graduate students, and helped us address an issue we had to that point, been unaware of.

We are also requesting that our Associated Student Government send an undergraduate representative to attend our meetings. We are hoping this student will give insight to the undergraduate perspective as well as take information back to the students for their awareness.

(slides 39-40)

As we look to our Team's future and the direction we should take, we also want to take time to evaluate ourselves.

Has our Team been effective?

Have we made improvements to our ceremonies?

Are we energized about our purpose as a Team?

We believe the answers to these questions are all YES. Our Team has effectively determined specific issues that were negatively impacting our ceremonies. We've addressed these issues, such as the handrails Kristin mentioned earlier, and we've improved the environment in the Coliseum. We've improved our communication across campus, and we've begun building lasting relationships that we will continue to build on for our future. We know there are additional concerns to address and we have sub-groups of volunteers willing to invest their time to achieve excellent ceremonies.

(slides 41-44)

As I conclude today, I do have one last quote....this time the quote is not from anyone in the sports arena...it is from Harry Truman...

"It is amazing what you can accomplish when you do not care who gets the credit."

We began our Team with an issue that needed immediate solutions. By coming together as a Team, we found that we were able to achieve a solution, acceptable to all involved, in a timely fashion...I'm not sure any one particular person, or group ever received credit or praise from that accomplishment. But the sense of respect gained from knowing other viewpoints and the feeling of achievement that was felt by resolving that issue has now evolved into a Team that meets on a regular basis. To see each other face to face and discuss different viewpoints and issues across campus.

We are constantly striving to learn what is important to other groups on campus and to include those groups in our Team. We believe that if everyone has a voice in commencement, the true meaning of commencement will come through in the ceremonies themselves.

So..what is the meaning of commencement? What makes a successful commencement ceremony? Students feel meaning based on the initiation of a goal, hard work towards that goal and the pride of achieving a degree...the final result of their work. Guests feel the meaning of commencement in part, by seeing their students' accomplishment...and realizing the sacrifice that each has made. Maybe faculty feel a special meaning in the appreciation of their students walking across the stage...And as staff, we feel success after a hard semester's work...after working 3, 4, and soon to be 5 ceremonies...we feel success in the greater numbers of graduates that are walking across our stage each semester.

Everyone has a different view point...each viewpoint is part of our Team, or is should be...

As long as we have commencement, we will have issues and challenges that need to be addressed. We are confident that these issues will be resolved because of the effective team that we have formed.