

# CAMPUS LIFE

## Viewpoint: Students Lament End of Fall Commencement

By Mary Cat Davis  
Senior Staff Writer

NC Wesleyan's December 2021 graduates are receiving their diplomas, but they will not hear "Pomp and Circumstance" until May 2022.

The college returns to holding one graduation ceremony per academic year this semester after 2020's Covid-safe winter commencement. Despite the college's formal decision, the December 2021 class hopes the administration will reconsider for next year's winter graduates.

A December 2021 graduate myself, I wondered how local and international students felt about this decision. Our class is the first one to be affected by the change, which has been a common topic of conversation among my peers. I asked President Evan Duff to share the factors that led to this decision, while presenting thoughts from my classmates during the interview.

Dr. Duff said the administration decided to transition back to one commencement in the late summer of 2019. Administrators considered the approaches of similar-sized institutions, finding that most moved to one formal celebration while allowing students to complete their degrees throughout the year.

December 2019's graduation was supposed to be the last fall ceremony, but Covid-19 forced postponement of the May 2020 ceremony until the following December. "That's the only reason we did a December commencement last year," Dr. Duff said. "It was technically to bring back the spring graduates but we also allowed December graduates to participate."

Dr. Duff said that elimination of fall commencement enables the college to funnel resources used for two commencements into a more elaborate ceremony in spring. This includes high-profile speakers, alumni gifts for graduates, and "other aspects of the students' experience." "It was a decision we made and communicated two years ago," Dr. Duff said. "But this is the first time that December graduates feel the change."

When applying for graduation, students are responsible for a \$120 fee. Dr. Duff said 30 to 40 percent covers the student's regalia, while the remainder goes toward processing fees, the printing of

diplomas, and the commencement ceremony itself. "The college probably puts in more than 50 percent that's not covered by the graduation fee," he explained.

A December graduate himself, Dr. Duff said he understands how the winter class feels. He noted that his son plans to graduate with Wesleyan's class of December 2022. "I have a personal opinion about it," he said. "But, looking at the big picture, looking at what our peers are doing, and looking at the other ways that we could benefit the students, that's why the decision was made."

Dr. Duff confirms that students were not included in the 2019 decision. He said this transition does not prevent students from moving forward with their plans and he hopes to see December grads return for the official commencement in May.

Wesleyan students may finish their degrees in August, December, and May, Dr. Duff noted, pointing out that there has never been a commencement for August graduates.

The president believes students would want ceremonies at all three times. "I think we know what their opinion would have been, but sometimes you have to make tough decisions for reasons that not everyone is going to understand," he said.

Dr. Duff's assumption aligned with the eight students interviewed for this article. Tobias Borzel, a business administration and mar-

keting major, said he's disappointed that there will be no December commencement. He will head home to Germany after fall semester, unable to return in May due to the expenses associated with travel—it would cost \$1,000, he estimates—and the retention of his visa. "I'll be working during that time," he said, "and the biggest problem I have is the finances."

Borzel said commencement is a special occasion for international students, whose families look forward to celebrating on campus. Commencement ceremonies are not as common in Germany, making graduation a long-anticipated event for Borzel, who expressed his sadness about leaving his classmates without a traditional celebration. "I would have liked to share that moment with family and the friends that I made here at NCWC," he said. "It feels disappointing leaving this place without an actual commencement and I wouldn't want other students to face the same situation."

Though he realizes this decision cannot be reversed at the conclusion of the semester, Borzel hopes that the administration will consider alternatives for next fall's class. He suggests utilizing The Dunn Center as an alternative venue to the Rocky Mount Event Center. He said the senior class would not need a ceremony as large as the usual May event, adding he was willing to pay a higher gradu-

ation fee to help defray the costs.

Rocky Mount native Latarsha Powell shared the same sentiment, saying she would pay additional fees to make winter commencement possible. She wondered why The Dunn Center was not an option. Powell said she has witnessed several commencements in Minges Auditorium and would be satisfied with that. She feels the administration's reasoning is a "little bit of a cop-out," especially with access to an on-campus venue. "We want the same experience as spring graduates," she said. "We want the pomp and circumstance."

A religious studies and psychology major, Powell added she was unaware of the change until staff informed her on a trip to the registrar's office. Powell said her friends and family were hurt that she would not experience a winter ceremony, as she doesn't plan on participating in May. She intends to begin her master's program in March and expressed little interest in walking with another class. "I'm upset that I spent \$120 on the graduation fee, \$40 on a stole, and \$8 for my tassel just for it to sit in my closet," she said. "I don't want to celebrate next year. I want to celebrate today."

Powell hopes the administration will take the feelings of next December's class into consideration. She suggests asking the group about their interest in holding an additional ceremony and then using existing resources to pay for it, adding that she never expected an event at Rocky Mount Event

Center, where May 2021 graduates walked. "We paid just like everyone else, and we did the work like everyone else," Powell said. "At least get a perspective of who wants to hold a December ceremony."

Angela Groeneveld said she understands the administration's desire to create a more formal May commencement, but argued that eliminating a December ceremony is not the solution. She said that a small celebration without a speaker would be enough for her. "I believe something would be better than nothing," she said.

Groeneveld will soon return home to the Netherlands and her student visa is set to expire. The psychology and criminal justice major said she prefers a winter commencement due to travel concerns stemming from Covid-19. Obtaining a tourist visa for herself and her family would be difficult and it is unlikely she can return in May. Groeneveld expressed her disappointment that she will not have her moment to celebrate her hard work. "I don't care much about the attention or recognition," she clarified. "But it's the one moment where my parents and family can look at the graduation and be proud of the person I became."

Bailey native Kayla Hawley agrees that December graduates should have a separate commencement, especially for students like Groeneveld and Borzel who cannot return in May. She urges the administration to consider students like them. What would they want for their children if they were

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one of my mother's closets and I saw the Xbox. I was super happy on the one hand, but a bit sad on the other."

His family serves traditional food at the Christmas Eve dinner and lunch the next day. Italians emphasize both meals, Pupuleku explained, "because it's important to spend a lot of time with the family, eating a lot and enjoying the time spent together."

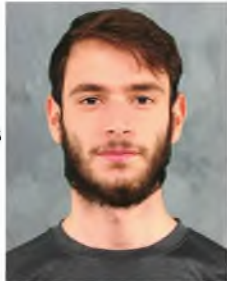
He related that at the Christmas Eve dinner many Italians eat fish, but that his family tends to serve meat dishes. Meals

begin with appetizers and sliced baguette with cheeses (e.g., grana padano) and salami, as well as skewers of mozzarella balls, cherry tomatoes, basilicum, olives, and salami.

Traditional drinks include blonde beer, white wine and Italian aperitifs: Spritz and Hugo. The Spritz is a drink comprised of the Aperol liquor, prosecco, and sparkling water, while the Hugo is a drink done with elderflower cordial, prosecco, and a top of sparkling water.

The first course is lasagna alla Bolognese. The second course is roast veal with roast potatoes. During the meal, his family serves red wine or beer. For dessert there is more panettone, consumed with an espresso coffee or grappa.

Pupuleku said that last year during the pandemic, his family followed its usual traditions, except for attending Mass. This year he intends to spend the holiday in Florida, where he'll celebrate with his uncle's family.



Haizyd Pupuleku

**Cadeyrrn Rendle**  
Cornwall, England

Cadeyrrn Rendle begins the Christmas holiday by watching the film "The Snowman" with his dad, mum and brother. "It's my mum's favorite," he said.

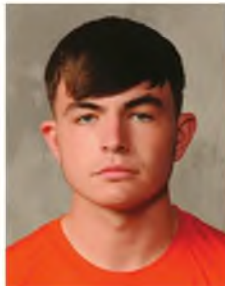
Christmas Day is full of socializing, as Rendle and his family drive around his hometown, visiting and exchanging gifts with family and friends. "We wish everyone a happy Christmas and New Year," he said. "We do that before we open our own gifts at home."

Rendle said his most memorable Christmas gift was a push bike. It was special because it allowed him to take rides with his father. "That Christmas day, my father and I could go outside and ride together," he said, relishing the memory.

During a typical Christmas morning, Rendle said, his family enjoys eating chocolate. Then at 2 p.m., they eat their big holiday meal; this always involves extended family, he said. In his house, traditional foods include turkey; stuffing; crispy, golden roasted potatoes; and various vegetables—"all taste better on Christmas," he said. For Rendle

a highlight is pigs-in-a-blanket-sausage, wrapped in bacon and covered in gravy. Adults drink champagne while kids have soda.

Last year's holiday was subdued, due to the pandemic. Rendle said the family was not able to socialize, instead exchanging gifts among themselves at home. "This year, we'll be returning to our old ways," he said.



Cadeyrrn Rendle

## Health Services Director Gives Covid-Related Guidance for Holidays

Despite decreases in Covid cases in the area, Wesleyan Health Services Director Jessica Brys-Wilson urged members of the college community to exercise caution during the holiday break.

She was interviewed in late November. (Editor's Note: This was before the advent of the omicron variant. As of early Decembers, health experts were still studying its virulence and transmissibility).

**Q:** From a personal perspective, what was this fall like for you?

**A:** This semester has been much more manageable for me. We've had fewer Covid cases, and we've been able to get test results rapidly this semester. Along with the updated quarantine policy, that has dramatically reduced the number of students who needed to quarantine on campus.

**Q:** As of Thanksgiving, what are the totals when it comes to number of Covid cases among members of the NCWC community since fall semester began?

**A:** As of November 22, we've had 35 student cases and 11 employee cases this semester.

**Q:** Have there been any hospitalizations this fall, due to Covid?

**A:** We had one student hospitalized prior to fall semester check-in.

**Q:** Have any students had to drop out this semester due to Covid—either before or during the semester?

**A:** I'm aware of one student who was diagnosed and hospitalized just before check-in. That student had a more severe case than what we have typically seen and was not able to return to campus for the semester.

**Q:** What are the latest vaccination totals for students?

**A:** For students, the total is 01.4 percent partially vaccinated (estimated), and 55.3 percent vaccinated.

**Q:** Who should get a booster vaccine for Covid? And where can you get one?

**A:** The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) now recommends booster shots for all adults age 18 or older who received a mRNA vaccine (Moderna or Pfizer). In the local area, Walgreens, CVS, the Nash County Health Department, and UNC Nash Health Care are all giving booster shots.

**Q:** What other illnesses have you treated this fall in the health center?

**A:** When it comes to contagious illnesses, we have had a stomach virus, tonsillitis, a

viral upper respiratory infection, bronchitis, pneumonia, and flu. There have also been secondary bacterial infections like sinusitis and ear infections.

**Q:** Who should get a flu shot?

**A:** Most experts are expecting a very active flu season. We've already seen some on campus. I recommend that anyone who doesn't have a contraindication get a flu shot this year.

**Q:** As students prepare to head home, what are some important steps to take to ensure wellness during the winter months and while spending time with family and friends?

**A:** Students should monitor themselves for any symptoms prior to gathering with others, especially the elderly or those with underlying medical conditions. They should encourage others not to attend if they are sick. They should wash hands frequently, gather outside when possible, and social distance when possible. Eating a healthy diet and getting enough rest will help keep their immune systems working their best. If they haven't already received their Covid and flu vaccines, they should consider that as well.

**Q:** Let's talk about the Christmas and New Year's holidays. What are some important considerations—for Wesleyan staff as well as students—in determining whether to gather with family and friends?

**A:** I think that everyone should consider the vaccine status of the people with whom you're gathering, whether the gathering is inside or outside, and whether social distancing will be possible. You may want to consider wearing a mask, even if not required by the venue/host, to protect yourself.

**Q:** What's the latest from the state and CDC on what kind of winter we should expect in terms of Covid?

**A:** It looks like North Carolina is seeing a decline in cases here lately while other places in the country are seeing their delta wave just beginning. With colder weather and the holidays approaching, it's likely that we will see a bump in numbers as people gather indoors, particularly in areas with lower vaccination rates or that are just now experiencing their delta wave. Hopefully, though, with more people having been vaccinated and already infected, we'll see numbers generally decline over the next few months.

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