



Commencement 2023 Review Task Force

Final Report

July 19, 2023

Table of Contents

- I. Introduction and Task Force Charge
- II. Overview of Task Force Work Plan
- III. Task Force Membership
- IV. Context
- V. Summary of Task Force Findings
- VI. Task Force Recommendations

I. Introduction and Task Force Charge

On June 6, 2023, President Nariman Farvardin commissioned the Commencement 2023 Review Task Force to review and analyze the failures of the 2023 Stevens Commencement and answer three fundamental questions:

1. What was wrong with the planning of Commencement 2023?
2. What went wrong with the execution of the plan?
3. What are the key lessons learned and recommendations?

To answer those questions, Task Force members reviewed documents related to the planning and execution of Commencement 2023, emails, and notes of phone calls with parents, alumni and graduates, and interviewed many key individuals involved in the planning and execution of various elements of Commencement.

This report describes the actions the Task Force took between June 9 and June 30, 2023, and details their findings and recommendations. The review was expedited to allow for the recommendations to be shared with those planning the 2024 Commencement. The Task Force was as thorough as the time constraints allowed in their review and evaluation, and this report summarizes the findings from their information gathering efforts and offers specific recommendations based on what was learned.

II. Overview of Task Force Work Plan

The Task Force members reviewed contracts, communications and documents related to the 2023 Commencement and interviewed key members of the Stevens community who were involved with the planning and/or execution of Commencement 2023. Commencement 2023 fell short of the Stevens strategic priority of “Excellence in All We Do,” and the Task Force was committed to understanding why we did not meet that priority and ensuring that future commencements achieve our collective goal of excellence.

The Task Force convened numerous times over a four-week period to discuss the investigation, conduct interviews and review findings. All meetings were held virtually, and relevant documentation was uploaded to a confidential shared site for all Task Force members to review.

The Task Force interviewed people from the Stevens community with direct involvement in either the planning or execution of various components of Commencement. All Task Force members participated in or reviewed notes from those interviews. The interviewees were asked to answer the three questions that the Task Force was charged with answering, in addition to other questions relevant to their involvement with Commencement.

We reviewed the 2023 Commencement events in their entirety, but our focus was on the main University Commencement at the Prudential Center and the Charles V. Schaefer, Jr. School of Engineering and Science (SES)/School of Systems and Enterprises (SSE) naming ceremonies at Newark Symphony Hall (NSH). While there were challenges at other ceremonies, these two had significant failures that required our focus.

III. Task Force Membership

Appointed by President Farvardin, the Task Force members were intentionally selected to represent the broad spectrum of the Stevens community. Many Task Force members also played a role in the 2023 Commencement and were able to share their experience and relevant knowledge.

The Task Force members include:

- Mr. David Fernandez, Chief Risk Officer (Chair)
- Dr. Anthony Barrese, Interim Dean, School of Systems and Enterprises and Teaching Professor
- Dr. Cindy Chin, Vice President for Enrollment Management
- Dr. Christos Christodoulatos, Professor, Civil, Environmental and Ocean Engineering
- Mr. John Dearborn, Member, Stevens Board of Trustees and President, Stevens Alumni Association
- Dr. Darinka Dentcheva, Professor, Mathematical Sciences and Chair of the Faculty Senate
- Mr. Robert Gonzales, Assistant Dean of Operations and Administration, Schaefer School of Engineering and Science
- Ms. Maria (Sin) Ouckama, Associate Provost
- Ms. Gab Poska, Class of 2023 (Undergraduate)
- Ms. Sakina Rizvi, Class of 2023 (Graduate)
- Dr. Dibyendu Sarkar, Professor, Civil, Environmental and Ocean Engineering

IV. Context

The reputational and relationship damage to Stevens Institute of Technology resulting from the failures at Commencement 2023, particularly the SES and SSE ceremonies held at NSH, cannot be overstated. What should have been an outstanding milestone in the educational journey of students and a celebratory moment for their families—some of whom traveled thousands of miles and included the elderly and infirm—became a source of justifiable anger toward and criticism of Stevens. Instead of leaving their years as students as happy, proud, newly-minted alumni, many graduates of the Class of 2023 left with a bitter memory. Negative publicity compounded this situation.

The Task Force took seriously its responsibility to identify significant points of failure in the planning and execution of Commencement 2023 and to make recommendations for the future. It is important to note that this effort was conducted from a perspective of hindsight which is always clearer than the environment experienced when managing a program in real time. Additionally, with the limited time, not all points of failure were investigated to their root cause, and certain judgements were made in these conclusions and recommendations that warrant deeper consideration by the leadership of the University as they plan for next year.

While this report concentrates on points of failure in the planning and execution of Commencement 2023, it should be noted that an enormous amount of effort to provide a successful event was put forth by many. But for some of the shortcomings, Commencement 2023 could have been a successful celebration for the Stevens community.

V. Summary of Task Force Findings

In reviewing materials and learning about the planning and execution of the event, the Task Force determined that planning and staffing for Commencement 2023 was insufficient for the complexity and multi-part, multi-venue nature of the event and the large number of graduates and invited guests. An organizational structure—different than that which served the University in prior years—was needed to match the increased complexity of the 2023 event, with clear definition of roles, responsibilities and decision-making authority. Risks related to the significant changes in the Commencement structure of prior years and those risks introduced by the impact of real-time changes imposed by the venues themselves were not accurately estimated, including a failure to manage those risks. The details of the changes are outlined later

in the body of this report. In addition, there was a need to test the plan more diligently in advance of the event or to develop risk mitigation and contingency plans.

Examining the planning for Commencement, the Task Force found that the plan was based on the following factors with little or no room for error and no contingency plans:

- An agenda for the day with little contingency for time delays.
- A no-show rate of 15%, based on prior years' experience, at NSH, with no contingency should more attendees arrive.
- Inadequate training and preparation of staff members, University volunteers and service providers, especially given the changes from prior years.
- Inadequate planning for and failure of the ticketing and scanning system.
- Inadequate transportation resources to move participants between venues.
- Inadequate signage and real-time communications to assist in the complex logistics of the 14,000 people that arrived at the Commencement ceremony in the morning at the Prudential Center.

Given the complexity of the event and these inadequacies identified in the Task Force's review, the plan faced significant challenges in execution.

In addition, during execution on the day of the event, delays in starting and executing the main Commencement created confusion among all attendees regarding the logistics of the post-Commencement activities, impacting the successful execution of the event.

A key factor that resulted in the failure to execute Commencement 2023 was overcrowding at NSH. The overcrowding occurred because of a failure of the ticket scanning system, unregistered graduates and guests without tickets entering the venue and the arrival of graduates and guests from the graduate ceremony in the afternoon due to the delays in event start time.

This unanticipated overcrowding quickly and significantly overwhelmed the capacity of the venue and the capability of the University to execute a successful event.

The Task Force determined possible reasons for the higher number of attendees at Newark Symphony Hall than estimated:

- Failure of the ticket scanning system thereby negating any means of access control.
- Confusion in the minds of graduates and guests about the number of guests allowed at Newark Symphony Hall (4 versus 20 at the earlier main Commencement ceremony).

- Schedule delays in the morning ceremony, which caused delays in the afternoon ceremonies resulting in attendees arriving for the SES/SSE baccalaureate degree ceremony (originally scheduled for 1 p.m.) when they should have been at the graduate ceremony (originally scheduled for 3:30 p.m.).
- Some graduates who had not registered for Commencement showed up resulting in inaccurate estimates of “show rates.”

Furthermore, there was a need for additional and clearer communications during the execution of the event. The main ceremony ran approximately 50 minutes longer than anticipated; however, no schedule adjustments were made or communicated to attendees, leaving graduates and guests to believe that the afternoon ceremonies were going to start on time. Perhaps more importantly, the responsible parties did not intervene during the execution of the event, leaving administrators and volunteers unfamiliar with the details of the plans to intercede and to make ad hoc decisions based on dynamic circumstances.

Background

Even in ordinary years, Commencement is a complex event involving many units of the University. In 2023 Commencement became exponentially more complex with a decision to move to an all-University Commencement ceremony for the conferral of degrees, and multiple, smaller name-reading ceremonies.

The planning of the 2023 Commencement began in the Fall of 2022. Because of growth in Stevens undergraduate and graduate student populations and a desire to allow more family and friends of graduates to attend, a venue was sought that could accommodate a larger number of people. Also, to maximize attendance and make travel most efficient, it was decided that the main Commencement and individual naming ceremonies would be held on the same day in the same venue.

Initially, MetLife Stadium was selected as the site for the one-day Commencement event that would include a university-wide event and individual naming ceremonies later in the day. MetLife Stadium became unavailable because of events beyond Stevens’ control. The Prudential Center in Newark was then identified as the alternative venue to accommodate Stevens’ desired Commencement exercise.

The Prudential Center is home to a National Hockey League (NHL) franchise and the contract negotiated between the Prudential Center and Stevens in the late fall of 2022, included a provision that the NHL would have priority over Stevens in reserving the venue, if necessary. Initially all ceremonies were to take place at the Prudential Center. However, in the Spring of 2023, the Prudential Center advised Stevens to enact its

contingency plan, so an alternative plan was devised which would include a main University Commencement at the Prudential Center, scheduled to be completed by 11:30 a.m. and naming ceremonies at two other venues in Newark: NSH and the New Jersey Performing Arts Center (NJPAC). It was not made clear to leadership if it would have been possible to revert all Commencement ceremonies back to the Prudential Center after the hockey playoffs were no longer scheduled.

These factors, combined with late-occurring venue changes with necessary logistical consequences resulted in a cascade of unforeseen interdependencies and risks. Given the numerous and significant changes in the 2023 Commencement ceremonies, it is now obvious that the planning and decision-making responsibilities that worked well in previous years were inadequate. Accountability, roles and responsibilities and decision-making authority were unclear during both planning and execution. Although briefings to leadership made assurances of a cohesive and logistically well-orchestrated event, leadership was not aware that the plan was inadequate for the event's complexity. In addition, the plan was never tested for readiness.

The Plan for Main University Commencement and SES/SSE Naming Ceremonies

Main University Commencement—Prudential Center

The plan for the main University Commencement was to include undergraduates and graduates from all schools in one Commencement exercise. This Commencement ceremony would be led by the President, Provost, and the platform party, which included members of the Board of Trustees, faculty, and senior administration. It included keynote speakers, the conferral of degrees for both undergraduate and graduate students and the Ph.D. hooding ceremony. It was decided that names of individual graduates would not be read at this ceremony. The event was scheduled to begin at 10:00 a.m. on May 24, 2023, and to be completed by 11:30 a.m. Each graduate was allowed up to 20 tickets for friends and family to attend the main Commencement. After the main ceremony, graduates and their guests were invited to enjoy Grad Fest which included food and drinks outside of the Prudential Center (or at the name reading venues) following the ceremony until it was time to be transported by shuttle to their respective venues for their individual school naming ceremonies. The name-reading ceremonies were led by the Deans of each school. The President and Provost were not scheduled to attend the school name-reading ceremonies.

SES/SSE Naming Ceremony at Newark Symphony Hall

The Schaefer School of Engineering and Science (SES) and the School of Systems and Enterprises (SSE)

undergraduate degree candidates were scheduled to begin their respective naming ceremony at 1:00 p.m., with graduate ceremonies for SES and SSE following at 3:30 p.m. However, the 1:00 p.m. ceremony did not start until approximately 2:30 p.m.

According to the NSH contract, the seating capacity was 2,700. The total number of expected graduates for SES/SSE undergraduates was 627, who were each allowed four guests for a total of 3,315 graduates and guests combined. University Events applied an 85% 'show rate', based on prior years' experience, which would result in 2,665 anticipated graduates and guests, within the seating capacity of NSH, but too close to the capacity should estimates not be accurate.

due to delays in the main ceremony, shuttle bus delays and overcrowding at the venue.

Each graduate was permitted four tickets for friends and family to attend their respective naming ceremony. With the provision of only four tickets per graduate and at the prior attendance rate of 85% for Commencement ceremonies, the capacity of NSH would have been adequate. However, the arrival of unregistered guests and graduates, as well as graduates and guests who were scheduled to be at the later graduate ceremony (due to the delayed start), combined with the failure of the ticket scanning system led to a severe overcrowding issue at NSH for the baccalaureate name-reading ceremony.

The Newark Fire Department then cleared a portion of the venue to adhere to fire code, leading to a string of ad hoc decisions that needed to be made so the venue would comply with capacity constraints. A decision was made to prioritize seating inside NSH for guests (parents and families) instead of the graduates. Graduates were then lined up, which extended from inside the venue outside into the parking lot, until the time their name was called. However, graduates felt disrespected and, even then, not all guests were able to be admitted into NSH to see their graduates walk across the stage. Conditions outside NSH were hot, and no provisions had been made to provide water to those who waited outside. Newark Police provided crowd control assistance and water bottles.

What was wrong with the planning of Commencement 2023 (specifically the main Commencement and SES/SSE naming ceremonies)?

The Task Force uncovered many points of failure in the planning of Commencement 2023. They include: a failure to appropriately assess the risks related to the significant changes to Commencement structure; insufficient communication and preparation; insufficient event registration processes; and larger numbers of attendees participating in the events at NSH than registered or estimated. In addition, insufficient training on many levels, insufficient communication about event schedules and logistics before and during the event and a lack of adequate and appropriate event support to plan and manage, which the event exacerbated the core problems.

A. Need for enhanced risk assessment and mitigation plans

- Given the complexity of the day's events and magnitude of the change driven by the venue changes, there was a need for enhanced risk assessment to identify potential points of failure and the ability to manage the risk of failure. The change in Commencement structure from prior years and the additional change from one venue to three was significant, and risks related to those changes were not effectively managed, including the following:
 - Not recognizing the logistical difficulties associated with having Commencement ceremonies at three different venues without much of a time gap between the ceremonies considering weekday traffic in Newark and likely delays.
 - Scheduling back-to-back ceremonies with different ticket allocations per student (20 tickets per student for the Prudential Center ceremony and four tickets per student for the subsequent school ceremonies).
 - Severely underestimating the number of potential students and guests in NSH for SES/SSE undergraduate name reading ceremony, possibly due to unregistered attendees, attendees joining the wrong ceremony due to previous delays, and ticket scanning failures.
 - Inadequate contingencies for the complexity of the events.

B. Assignment of Accountability, Responsibility, and Decision-Making Authority

- The accountability and responsibility of those involved in the planning and execution of both ceremonies was not clearly articulated. Roles and responsibilities were not clearly defined.
 - A substantial portion of the responsibility for the naming ceremonies was placed on the individual schools. Communication about the roles and responsibilities of each school was not clearly defined or

consistently communicated, which was reflected in the different outcomes of the naming ceremonies.

- The role and decision-making authority of the Commencement Executive Committee was ill-defined and largely informational and perfunctory.
- Insufficient oversight of the venue preparation and set-up at the Prudential Center led to a delayed start and slower procession of graduates than anticipated during the main Commencement.
- Inadequate preparation and monitoring of the main Commencement agenda to ensure the allotted times for each portion of the program were estimated appropriately.
 - For example, how long does it take for each student to process in? How long are each of the speeches? How long does it take to travel between venues and participate in Grad Fest?
 - The Ph.D. hooding added time to the main ceremony, causing further delays, and it is unclear that this was the proper audience to conduct the hooding ceremony.
- An effective communication protocol was not developed for on-site volunteers and staff and attendees.
- Lack of protocol and plan to manage problems and challenges during ceremonies, specifically at the SES/SSE naming ceremonies.

C. Registration/Ticketing Process

- Graduates were required to RSVP for each event, but those who did not RSVP entered the main Commencement and their respective naming ceremony.
- Assumptions were made about the “show rate” based on past commencements. Traditionally, the undergraduate show rate was 85% and graduate was 70%. The school naming ceremony venues were at capacity based on the assumed “show rate” but no contingency plan was in place should the “show rate” increase.
- Technical failures and inadequate selection of the ticket scanning system, as well as inadequate deployment of and training on ticket scanning devices led to a cascade of problems resulting in no access control and overcrowding.

D. Training

- With Stevens employee volunteers being an integral and valued part of Stevens Commencement, unlike in previous years, there was inadequate volunteer training and support staff in their assigned roles before the day of

Commencement. Therefore, volunteers and staff were not fully prepared to support Commencement. In many cases, roles were assigned the evening before Commencement. However, given the level of failures, volunteer preparation could not have prevented the issues presented.

- Insufficient training for individual school representatives tasked with managing their respective naming ceremony.

E. Event and Resource Support

- The Task Force found no evidence that financial resources from the University were lacking for a successful event.
- The Office of University Events was not appropriately staffed with the right level or number of either full-time or part-time, temporary staff to manage an event of this magnitude and complexity, especially on top of their other responsibilities throughout the year.
- There did not appear to be any delegation within the University Events team during the planning of Commencement. Others on the team reported not having full awareness of decisions and plans that were put in place.
- The level of support provided by each venue was inconsistent.

What went wrong with the execution of the plan?

Based on the Task Force's review, the plan for Commencement 2023 faced numerous challenges that impacted the successful execution. The failure to execute the plan effectively was due to a lack of a clear organizational and governance structure, failure of the responsible parties to adequately respond to problems as they unfolded at NSH, significant overcrowding by unregistered graduates and more guests than the four allotted tickets for NSH, an ineffective ticket distribution and malfunctioning ticket scanning system and lack of effective communication. More detail on each of these challenges is provided below.

A. Assignment of Accountability, Responsibility, and Decision-Making Authority

- Lack of experienced University Events professionals at the NSH naming ceremony site. There was not a main point of contact from University Events present at NSH. While there were University Events staff at the NSH ceremony, they were charged with specific aspects of the event and were not knowledgeable about the plans for the entire event.

- Lack of clear expectations of the support the venue could provide, NSH in particular. For example, we understand that at NJPAC, where the School of Business had its naming ceremony, there was more support from the venue than at NSH.
- There was not a proper protocol among the Stevens University Events team members, school representatives and employee volunteers on how and when to escalate problems.

With the lack of experienced University Events staff on site, Stevens employee volunteers, whose direct responsibilities are not in the areas of events and Commencement planning, assumed responsibility for managing the chaotic events.

B. Venue Access Control and Ticketing Process

- Inability to adequately estimate the number of graduates and invited guests, including unregistered graduates and guests who showed up and were permitted entry. The overcrowding at NSH significantly overwhelmed the venue and the ability to execute a successful event.
- A complete breakdown in access control. Inability to effectively scan tickets at the entrance to NSH led to people entering the venue without the appropriate tickets which resulted in overcrowding. It appears that more than the four invited guests per graduate were admitted to the venue in addition to families of graduate students being admitted prior to their scheduled naming ceremony.
- Insufficient testing and deployment of ticket scanning devices and a back-up plan should the technology fail.

C. Communication Protocols

- Lack of on-site corrections. As the main ceremony was significantly delayed, there was no communication to participants and guests about changes to the program.
- No effective communication channel with staff and volunteers on the ground.
- Lack of effective communication with graduates and families in real time.
 - For example, during the main ceremony, there was no announcement that the afternoon ceremonies would be delayed. Both Stevens'

employees and graduates and their guests were worried and started leaving thinking they would be late.

- There were also communication challenges during the afternoon ceremonies, thus potentially causing the SES graduate ceremony guests to arrive early (on-time), impacting on the number of seats for the SES/SSE undergraduate event.

VI. Task Force Recommendations

What are the key lessons learned and recommendations?

Stevens Commencement 2023 Review Task Force recommends that the student, parent, and family experience be at the forefront of future commencement planning and execution goals. Accountability, responsibilities and decision-making authority need to be clear at the start of planning and throughout execution. A committee structure that includes an oversight committee and a set of “working groups” with assigned responsibilities and goals must work collaboratively and in parallel. The people responsible for planning and execution need to be capable and sufficient to manage the complexity of Stevens' growing commencement numbers. Lastly, proper planning with adequate contingencies built in is necessary for future success.

A. Student Experience

- Keep the student and family experience at the forefront of future Commencement planning; this may include having ceremonies on multiple days and reconsidering the program for Commencement activities and ceremonies.
- Choose a Commencement location and venue that limits significant logistical coordination for graduates and their families and friends.
- Identify a location that has the capacity for students' desired number of guests.

B. Commencement Organizational Structure

- Establish a formal Commencement governance model with clear accountabilities, responsibilities and decision-making authority.
- If school-specific ceremonies are continued, ensure that all schools have well-defined committees with proper leadership, that they understand their responsibilities and that they have proper resources and support to prepare the events well in advance.
- Include faculty representatives in the planning process to gain their perspective and experience.

- Consider the creation of a student focus group to help address Commencement planning throughout the year, rather than including them on the Commencement Executive Committee.
- Consider contracting with a professional events management consultant/vendor, either with planning and/or execution.
- Benchmark against other schools of comparable size to identify best practices.
- Clearly communicate roles and responsibilities for those involved with graduation, including the addition of Commencement support in job descriptions of appropriate personnel.
- Utilize the Stevens Emergency Management Team to help assess risks and manage emergencies during the event.

C. Commencement Ceremonies Structure

- Divide Commencement into two or more days, for example, but not limited to the following suggestions.
 - Consider having the university Commencement on one day and individual naming ceremonies and doctoral hooding on other days.
 - Consider separating Undergraduate Commencement and Graduate Commencement into two separate days.
 - Avoid back-to-back events as they do not provide adequate time in between should timing not work as planned or other challenges arise.
- If a one-day event is desired, choose a venue that can accommodate all events (without last-minute switches, i.e., MetLife and Prudential). Also, the venue must be dedicated to Stevens for the entire day.
 - Choose a venue that can accommodate the desired number of guests per graduate.

D. Preparations

- Develop standard playbook and to-do lists for Commencement planning (i.e., timeline of activities and assign owners).
- Develop emergency and contingency plans should there be challenges that arise.
- Develop a logistics plan that outlines each step of the program, timing, participants, etc., for the entire event.
- Training for Stevens employees and other volunteers should be done well in advance of the event date(s).
- Test for readiness during various stages of the planning with adequate timing allowed to amend the plan and build in contingencies for unexpected events.

E. Communications

- Develop robust internal (to Stevens staff and volunteers) and external (to families and graduates) communication plans including a Commencement 2024 channel (and beyond) to educate families about the logistics, deadlines and requirements.
- Develop a method to contact the attendees and volunteers should there be any change in logistics or urgent time sensitive matters.
 - For example, there may be vendors that can collect cell phone numbers of attendees during Commencement registration so that they can be communicated with as needed, especially should there be an emergency.
 - Utilize Microsoft Teams or other internal communication tools for Stevens employee volunteers to communicate during the events.
- Plan on overcommunicating with everyone on all matters, especially logistical and especially should the need arise.
 - There should be clear responsible parties and a hierarchy to manage communications during the day of the event. For example, if there will be a production company, who should communicate with them from Stevens? How will a message be delivered to those on the platform and/or the attendees?

F. Other Ideas and Suggestions for Future Commencement Events

- To improve the overall student and family experience at Commencement, we suggest Stevens consider the following:
 - One free picture from the professional set that was taken of the students as they walked across the stage.
 - Free video download of the clip from when the student walked across the stage as a thank you from the Alumni Association, and to receive it, ask for current addresses and emails.
 - In the absence of receiving diploma covers on-site, the Alumni Association could provide pennants or something small as a token of welcoming the graduates as alumni.
- In lieu of back-to-back speeches/remarks, consider utilizing video montages or introductions.
- Establish clear responsibility, accountability and decision-making authority for Commencement planning and execution through clear committee structure.
- Examine and, if necessary, realign the reporting structure of the Office of University Events and/or the owner(s) responsible for Commencement planning and execution.

- Repair relationships with the class of 2023 and their families. The Task Force suggests that a committee or group be formed to determine the best approach to mending those relationships.
- Consider ways to more obviously identify Stevens employee volunteers from the support at the venues and clearly define these roles.

G. Open Questions for Consideration

- Does the proper organizational and reporting structure exist for the Office of University Events to manage Commencement in addition to the normal on-campus events throughout the year?
 - If not, additional resources may need to be provided to the team permanently and/or temporarily to help with Commencement planning.