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SMC organizes a 'CARmencement' for both 2020 and 2021 grads

By Vera Kochan



Saint Mary's grad, class of 2020, Matalyn Ament is all smiles in the sunroof of her decorated car. Photo Vera Kochan

In an effort to honor its graduates who studied through an abnormal education experience hindered by COVID-19 restrictions, Saint Mary's College rallied to create a "CARmencement" ceremony that followed all of the protocols of social distancing.

So as not to leave out last year's Class of 2020, SMC scheduled the event to take place over a three-day period: last year's grads, of which 125 students returned for the ceremony from 9 a.m. to 2 p.m. on May 21; undergrads from the Class of 2021 from 9 a.m. to 7 p.m. on May 22; and graduate and professional studies students (a combined two-day total of 731 students) from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. on May 23.

The unexpected rainstorm that occurred the Thursday before, put a bit of a scare into SMC's Assistant Vice President of Alumni & Community Engagement (and this year's Coordinator of Commencement 2021), Mary Poppingo, who said, "You can't rain on our parade!"

Typically commencement planning at SMC always begins in October, but with COVID restrictions looming over the college, it wasn't until January of this year that it appeared there could be hope for some form of graduation recognition.

The Commencement Committee was made up of approximately 40 members and volunteers that were broken up into subcommittees: Steering; Program; Communications; and Logistics, in addition to student representatives. All of the college's departments pitched in to help make the most of an unusual situation. "This is a very special time," stated Dean of the School of Economics and Business Administration Elizabeth Davis, PhD. "To be able to achieve this in an unusual way speaks to the adaptability of the school to make this a significant event for the graduates."

SMC Program Director of the Department of Business Administration Mary Alice McNeil added, "I appreciate that we're honoring the 2020 graduates."

This year's Commencement speaker was Angelica Garcia, EdD. An SMC alumna, Class of 1998, she is currently the president of Berkeley City College and the first person in her family to attend college.

In 2019, she was awarded the Saint Mary's Signum Fidei Award for exceptional participation in the goals of higher education, and was the first woman of color so honored.

Running like a well-oiled machine, each grad's car was required to enter a check-in zone just prior to getting into the official "CARmencement" line on the Saint Mary's Parkway. Each car stopped at the stage in front of Chapel Lawn where the grad exited the vehicle and had the opportunity to hear his or her name called while posing for photos with a diploma cover (all recipients will receive their actual diplomas by mail between June and August). The parade route continued counter-clockwise along De La Salle Drive before returning back to the Guard Gate and exiting the campus grounds, altogether taking about 30 minutes per vehicle. The campus-wide "CARmencement" celebration will be available for viewing via livestream on SMC's Commencement webpage.

Along the route, cheers and good wishes could be heard following the procession of graduates who were clearly grateful for the experience to acknowledge their achievements after more than a year of unprecedented educational trials.

Dean of the School of Science Roy Wensley, PhD. said, "It's exciting that these students are able to come back." By the looks on their faces and the ear-to-ear grins, it was apparent that they wouldn't have missed it for the world.

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[back](#)



