

Gear up for graduation

Experienced grounds managers tell how to put extra color into the biggest weekend of the year on their campuses BY JASON STAHL / MANAGING EDITOR



Masons fix the main center island marker at UNC for graduation.

Every spring, grounds managers on college campuses see it coming like a monster thunderstorm, its towering purple thunderheads causing feelings of both excitement and dread. The event — graduation weekend.

This exciting time gives grounds managers the opportunity to showcase their handiwork to a large audience. But it's also stressful because so many additional chores are added to the regular, daily workload of maintaining the campus.

A common sense approach

At Illinois State University, graduation ceremonies are held inside, but that doesn't let Director of Grounds Operations Mike O'Grady and his crew off the hook. Before and after the ceremonies, people spend a lot of time outdoors, so the whole campus has to look sharp.

"We cancel vacation time prior to graduation," O'Grady says. "We work two to three hours overtime each day two weeks prior to graduation, sometimes three weeks depending on the growing season.



Mike O'Grady

All of this is done to detail the campus to a degree we'd like to keep it all the time. Hours and manpower, however, don't allow it."

The biggest problem with the overtime is the budget, says O'Grady, especially after a tough winter like this past one. "My overtime budget includes snow removal time, so if we've had a tough winter that budget is depleted," he says.

Student help during the weeks leading up to graduation isn't much of an option, says O'Grady, given that the students are

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Sprucing up mulch beds prior to graduation at UNC is a must.

Grounds managers show off their handiwork during graduation.

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busy studying for finals. "We also don't have the number of students we used to because we don't pay them a lot of money," he says.

Another challenge for O'Grady and his staff is installing flowerbeds in Illinois in mid spring. Frost is always a possibility. "We're not safe to plant until May 15, and graduation this year is May 7 through 10," O'Grady says. "We're really taking a gamble with the flowers we plant around the buildings used for the ceremonies. We plant those at the last possible minute."

The rest, O'Grady says, is simple maintenance. He calls it an "orchestrated method," where his staffers work in zones. But the number of crew members per zone isn't hard and fast. O'Grady will move them around for the sake of catching up on certain tasks. It all comes down to doing what needs to be done.

"If we see that some areas of campus are being used for activities that need addi-

tional cleanup, we'll let other areas go in favor of those," O'Grady says.

Time to impress

Graduation is definitely a time to impress for grounds managers, especially because you have alumni revisiting the campus and parents who might be considering sending their children there some day. In that regard, Chris Fay, Grounds Superintendent for the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, looks at the role of grounds manager as gracious host.

"I try to take a little extra time to visit the campus and talk to the visitors and even offer them rides in my golf cart," Fay says. "As a grounds manager, it's a great feeling to hear how nice they think the campus looks."

At Fay's school, alumni weekend coincides with graduation, which means six to eight classes, some who graduated 50 years ago, will be there to inspect the campus.

With so much work to be done, Fay is thinking of his strategy months beforehand. The list of tasks from the previous year is updated from January on, based on monthly meetings with a supervisor. "We



Chris Fay

get information generated through different offices that tell us when and where the independent graduation ceremonies are," Fay says. "We also identify the places where families gather to take photographs and make sure those areas are well-groomed."

Fay's staff alone can't possibly handle the trucking in and spreading of the 90 cubic yards of mulch needed for the ceremonies, so he subcontracts that out.

PR bonanza

"It's our biggest public relations tool," is how Michael Loftus, Director of Facilities for the University of Delaware, says of graduation weekend.

Commencement is held outdoors at the school's stadium. Since it takes a week to set up all the chairs, the field has to be ready at least a week before the ceremony. That requires some special turfgrass care.

"We spray growth regulators to keep it (the turfgrass) from growing," Loftus says. "Then, once the commencement is over, we're mowing right behind them as they're taking the chairs down."



Michael Loftus

Individual colleges at the University of Delaware will have their own convocation ceremonies at a dozen different locations, so Loftus tries to identify these sites ahead of time.

Like O'Grady, Loftus divides the campus into zones with different crews responsible for each zone. He lets each crew do its own prioritizing, but once the graduation schedules are revealed, the priorities are adjusted.

"This is definitely the biggest event of the year," Loftus says of graduation. "Spring is sprung, and to top it off you're trying to get ready for commencement." **LM**