Dear Members of the Harvard Community,

Since the announcement last week that we would move to online instruction and ask students to leave campus, one of the questions I have been asked most frequently is, “What about commencement?”

I love commencement. I love seeing our community come together to celebrate the academic accomplishments of our remarkable students. I love seeing their families brimming with pride as they participate in a ceremony that is almost as old as the University itself. I love watching members of our reunion classes enjoy one another’s company in spaces old and new, reminding all of us of the power of what Emerson called “the long winding train” of Harvard graduates.

So it is with an especially heavy heart that I write to inform you that our 369th Commencement Exercises, which would have taken place on Thursday, May 28, must be postponed. Given the advice we are receiving from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, other public health officials, and our own faculty, who are among the world’s leaders in infectious disease, epidemiology, and virology, it is difficult to imagine how we could safely hold such a large gathering this spring. We recognize that people need to start making plans soon, so we thought it best to provide guidance now.

No virtual gathering can possibly match the splendor of our usual festivities, but we will come together online on Thursday, May 28, to award degrees so that everyone will graduate as expected. Each School at Harvard will also host its own special online event and afterwards deliver diplomas through the mail. We plan to host an in-person celebration sometime later, once we know it is safe to bring people together again. By then, we will be eager not just to celebrate our graduating students, but also to recognize and acknowledge the sacrifices that so many have made to ensure the well-being of our community. We intend for this ceremony to have all of the pomp, circumstance, and tradition that is typical of a Harvard commencement—with as many of the traditional campus festivities that typically precede commencement as possible.

While commencement is a happy occasion for all of us, it has special meaning to the members of the Harvard College Class of 2020. We recognize that delaying the ceremony may impose new burdens on some of our undergraduates. We will endeavor in our planning to enable as many students as possible to return to campus to be awarded their first degrees in the company of their friends and classmates. We are also exploring opportunities to bring reunion classes together in the future. At this point, we don’t know when, but we will be in touch as soon as we have information to share.

I wish we could give a firm date for this celebration now, but I ask for your patience. Everything about this year seems to be turning out unusual. When we do hold commencement for the Harvard Class of 2020, I sincerely hope it will also be unusual, but only because it will be among the most joyous commencements in the history of the University.

Sincerely,

Larry

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Lawrence S. Bacow
President
Harvard University