



An empty high school in Lakewood, Colorado on March 16, 2020. | RJ Sangosti/Denver Post/Getty Images

“I just want my family to see I got handed a diploma”: 5 students on how coronavirus has affected senior year

Graduations, proms, and other end-of-year celebrations have been postponed or entirely canceled.

By Terry Nguyen | terry.nguyen@voxmedia.com | Apr 1, 2020, 7:00am EDT



In the face of school and college closures nationwide due to the **novel coronavirus**, life for most students has continued on — just indoors. Students have migrated online to stream lectures, attend courses, and take tests (as part of **Zoom University**, some college students joke) likely for the remainder of the year. The pandemic has forced campuses to abruptly cancel their spring terms in a matter of days, making the last moments of the academic year especially bittersweet.

For soon-to-be graduates in both high school and college, though, the pandemic threatens to impact several meaningful milestones — events like graduation, prom, grad night, and other end-of-year celebrations that would've brought together family and friends before they move onto the next chapter of their lives. These students didn't have the chance to say proper goodbyes or make the most of what should've been their final days on campus. Here are five high school and college seniors on how they came to terms with Covid-19 affecting their final academic year, what commencement celebrations mean to them, and their hopes for the future.

These interviews have been shortened and condensed for clarity.

“I’m the editor-in-chief of my school paper ... we’re working to publish stories on what students are doing at home.”

Alexis Bamford, 18, high school senior in Montgomery County, Pennsylvania

Graduation, for our school and my family, is a huge deal. It's such a universal milestone, and everyone I know has graduated and walked the stage. The seniors usually have an event called "Reflections," where students and organizations perform, and then there's Class Night, which is a big barbecue night where people wear a T-shirt of what college they're going to. The school district has no information yet on what's going to happen. There have been jokes about us having a Skype graduation among my friends and I, but it's unfortunate. My family and I postponed my grad party indefinitely, and I even had my graduation dress picked out since last June.

Right now, everyone wants to stay connected with each other and connected to the school. I'm the editor-in-chief of my school paper, The Knight Crier. We're an entirely online publication, so editors are working to publish stories on what students are doing at home. It's very strange though that we're having staff meetings over FaceTime because we're so used to seeing each other. I'm also in the school's audio-visuals club, which produces a morning TV show that the entire school watches. That has also been affected, but the production team put together a morning show that could be streamed online a couple of days ago, so that was nice to see how other clubs are finding ways to keep doing what they can.

The events calendar isn't necessarily wiped out but we can't count on

anything that has been scheduled previously. Personally, I'm very Type A and like to have a schedule or plan, but I realized there's something valuable about not having a schedule, taking things as it is and being grateful for all the people working hard to help each other.

“It felt like everything we'd been working for ... was all gone in an instant.”

Courtesy of Ashley Jones

Ashley Jones, 18, high school senior in Orange County, California

The day before our theater class was supposed to load all our props and equipment into where we were supposed to perform, our school announced that all extracurricular activities on campus would be canceled until April. At the time, we still had to go to school. But the next day, we were told that we couldn't go to school until the end of March and that date has now been extended until April 24. There were a lot of sad faces, and people were crying. It felt like everything we'd been working for, things you look forward to even as a freshman, was all gone in an instant. It felt awful. My friends and I are worried about missing prom, senior awards night, and all those big senior tradition moments that we've been looking forward to all these years.

The school closures didn't really hit me until I heard that my choir show wasn't going to happen, and then I realized what a big deal that was. We host a big choir show every year, and the program financially needs it

since we invest money in costumes, lighting, a band, and sound. We spend all that money before we even sell a ticket, so if the show is off, then that'll be a huge financial hit for the program and what it does next year. For theater, we have to buy the rights to the show, and we also buy materials to make costumes and the sets. It's really hard to make back that money as well if there's no show this year, especially when the arts are so defunded for other things like sports. And even if the school postpones the musical until the fall, I can't really perform in it because I'll be in college.

“I just want my family to see that I got handed a diploma.”

Courtesy of Cyle Mendoza-Ramirez

Cyle Mendoza-Ramirez, 17, high school senior in Monterey County, California

It felt like a really hard and sudden break-up when I was told this was my last day of classes, of seeing most of my peers. We didn't expect it to happen. I actually distanced myself for a few days after and didn't respond to any texts or calls from my friends because I couldn't accept that was how my year was going to be over. I didn't want to lash out or have a breakdown in front of them. I'm in a group chat with other seniors, including the class president, and we're thinking of doing a big mural in front of our school as a gift to the class of 2020. Regardless of what happens, we want to have something to commemorate what happened during our senior year.

I'm a part of the Filipino American community, and our club has been practicing for our city's Asian Festival since last year. It really hurt because we worked so hard for it, and my track season was also canceled. Our school announced that our prom, which was on April 25, wouldn't be happening a few days ago on Twitter. I'd already bought my prom suit and graduation outfit, and I was planning to run for prom king but that's not going to happen now. I also already paid for my graduation cap, gown, and a sash with a Filipino flag, but it hasn't been discussed yet whether graduation, which is on the third week of May, is off. What my peers and I feel is, even though prom is canceled, all we want to do is meet on the stage and graduate with our families watching us. I wouldn't mind if it was delayed. I just want my family to see that I got handed a diploma.

“I graduated high school 10 years ago, so I didn't think I'd see the day that I'd walk across a graduation stage and receive my college diploma.”

Courtesy of Zach Bruhl

Zach Bruhl, 27, senior at the University of Oregon majoring in journalism

I'm a nontraditional student and not very much a campus life type of kid, and since I don't spend a lot of time socializing I didn't lose a lot there in terms of my campus life. Still, it's disappointing for me because I graduated high school 10 years ago, so I didn't think I'd see the day that I'd walk across a graduation stage and receive my college diploma. I have

a very large family; my dad remarried and all of my siblings were going to come up and see me, so we were all going to be together for the first time in 11 years. We were all looking forward to that, but from what I know right now, my dad and stepmom are still coming in from Hawaii. For me personally, I'm moving forward with my graduation weekend. I might have some cake and throw a little barbecue with some close friends and just do what we can. I mean, we're still graduating college. It's still an exciting moment, despite not having all the fanfare that comes with an actual ceremony.

I'm a very hands-on learner, and being in a classroom where I'm able to sit with a professor and chat or go to their office hours, those are things I take advantage of when I'm on campus. I'm taking a photojournalism class, and we don't have access to cameras. To think that in my last term, these things won't be available ... That's a seriously different learning experience compared to what I was expecting the class to provide. It's really taking a toll on me in the past few weeks as I decide what course of action to take. I've considered delaying a semester to come back in the fall and fully reap the benefits of the journalism program we have, but there's a lot of factors that will go into that decision.

“I know community colleges aren't taken seriously, but I created friendships, made memories, received my first ever paying job, all in the two years that I was there.”

Iman Alamri, 20, sophomore at Reedley Community College majoring in liberal studies. Alamri is planning to transfer to California State University, Fresno in the fall.

A week into online instruction, the chancellor said there will be no more face-to-face classes for spring or summer semester. This was not what I expected my last semester to be like. All these lasts just came by and left, without me knowing. I know community colleges aren't taken seriously, but I created friendships, made memories, received my first ever paying job, all in the two years that I was there. And now it is all gone.

I didn't know when it was going to be the last time I walked into the Reading and Writing Center where I'm a tutor. I did not know when it was going to be the last time I ate lunch with my tutor friends and shared memes with each other. I did not know when it was going to be the last time my boss came out of her office and cheerfully said, "Good morning, Iman!" I did not know when it was going to be the last time I drove 15 minutes to campus and struggled to find a parking spot. I did not know when it was going to be my last time walking into my favorite class of the day.

On March 23, our chancellor sent a mass email saying that the graduation ceremony would be canceled and that the school was working to develop "virtual and remote celebrations." That really set me off. I earned this! I worked above and beyond to achieve in my classes, just for it to be recognized in some silly virtual graduation? I was extremely upset by this news. I have been in the honors program since I've stepped foot on campus, and I've looked forward to the day when I would be wearing the gold honors stole. What bugs me most is that I have experienced discouraging looks whenever I mentioned to other people that I am going

to a community college, and I couldn't wait for the day when I wore that gold honors stole upon my graduation gown and walked across that stage while my name was heard over the speakers, just so I could prove to them that community colleges are not something to just scoff at.

Ironically, what makes this unfortunate turn of circumstances bearable is knowing that I am not the only one. I am among the millions of students in this country not able to walk across the stage on graduation and celebrate my achievements with the people I love. In some way, this worldwide pandemic has brought us together and knowing my generation, we will come up with a way to make up for our losses.

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