

To: Institutions using the HEDS COVID-19 Institutional Response Student Survey
From: Kathy Wise and Charlie Blaich
Re: What graduating seniors say about their worries and concerns
Date: May 27, 2020

On our COVID-19 Institutional Response Student Survey, we asked students an open-ended question about their biggest worries or concerns as they thought about the next few months. Like all of us, students are worried about a lot of things. They are worried about their health and well-being, and the health and well-being of their family and friends. They are worried about a host of financial issues – losing jobs, getting jobs, how they’re going to pay for school, rent, and food. They wonder if they’re going to get refunds from their college or university for this spring so they can cover new expenses. Students struggle with the move to remote classes and figuring out how to do them well. They worry about missing internships, research opportunities, athletics, and study abroad. They worry about the belongings they’ve left on campus. Some wonder when they’ll be able to travel home, while others wonder if they’ll be able to return to the U.S. to complete their education. Students feel isolated, are concerned about lost motivation, and worry about their mental health. They worry about how long the pandemic will last and what the world will look like when it’s over. As we said, our students have worries “like all of us.”

In this memo, we’re going to focus on the responses of one group of students – seniors who are graduating this spring. While this spring has been disruptive for all students, seniors are in a unique position. They will not have an opportunity to return to complete their college educations in the ways they’d imagined. Their final weeks of college have been nothing like they expected. As final exam periods finish and virtual graduation ceremonies take place, we wanted to share what we’ve heard from seniors who took our survey and offer a few suggestions to institutions about ways to support these soon-to-be alumni.

This will be a hard memo to read. The world took a dramatic turn for these students just as they were about to begin a transition that, in the best of times, can be nerve-racking. COVID-19 has blown up much of their hoped-for plans and celebrations, and their comments reflect a great deal of pain due to these abrupt changes. The good news is that *the things we do matter*. We will highlight actions and responses that seniors mentioned in the survey as being helpful – things that people at their institutions have done to ease their concerns and help them move forward. Continuing to care for and interact with graduating seniors and new alumni in these ways will provide these members of our community the support they need.

Background information

Institutions are still administering the COVID-19 Institutional Response Student Survey. For this memo, we looked at data from students at 24 colleges and universities that administered the survey in early-mid April. There were just over 2,000 graduating seniors in the data set, and we reviewed a random sample of roughly 500 responses to the open-ended question, “What are your biggest worries or concerns as you think about what’s coming up in the next few months?”. In the next sections, we’ve summarized the themes we identified in seniors’ responses. We’ve included many quotes from students in this memo. We’ve done this because students can articulate their worries and concerns far better than we can by summarizing them. We have included the quotes as they were written on the survey, although we occasionally corrected spelling errors and we removed information that would identify seniors’ institutions. Sometimes students wrote about several themes in their response. When this happened, we excerpted their response to only include the part that connected to the theme at hand.

We start by reviewing seniors’ comments about the academic work of their final semester. Then we discuss their thoughts on losing social connections and the rituals and anticipated events of graduation. After this, we move to

sharing students' concerns about what comes next. We conclude by reviewing the things people at institutions did to support seniors and help them cope through the difficult transitions they experienced this spring. We also offer a few suggestions for ways that we all can continue to support our seniors after graduation.

Struggling with the transition to remote learning

The biggest worry that students, including seniors, identify on the HEDS COVID-19 Institutional Response Student Survey is “doing well in college now that all of your classes are online.” Students, from first-years to seniors, worry about getting poor grades and not learning material that they’ll need later on. They struggle with the loss of being torn from their on-campus homes and communities and moving to environments that are in no way optimized for full-time academic work. By habit, most of us talked about sending students “home,” but the reality for many students is that college has become their home. The places they lived before coming to college, even in the best of circumstances, feel increasingly remote. This sense of displacement is amplified because it’s taking place in the midst of a national crisis.

Seniors reported all of these concerns. But seniors’ concerns about doing well in their newly remote classes are amplified by the fact that these are the last classes they’ll take in their undergraduate careers. Many seniors frame their spring classes as the capstone of their college experience, and they worry that the shift to a remote format will lead them to end college on a bad note. Seniors worry about “being successful in class since it is not the same experience” and “staying motivated and not quitting my education.” They also worry that this last term could hurt their GPA and diminish their prospects for graduate school. Finally, they worry about completing comps, senior theses, and senior projects in a new and unfamiliar environment where they can’t access many of the resources they had on campus. Seniors want to finish their college education in a way they can be proud of and meet the standards they have set for themselves.

Here are some examples of what seniors wrote regarding their concerns about doing well in their newly online classes:

- “Taking comprehensive exams digitally. As previously mentioned, I have limited service given that I live outside of our city, and am concerned about my internet cutting out during my exam and me being penalized for this, especially if it is an online written and a Zoom oral exam. I am also concerned that I will be unable to find a quiet place to 100% focus on the exam, as I do not live alone & have limited space to work for my exam. While I understand the [institution removed] tradition and requirement behind comprehensive exams, it will be difficult given these issues and the significant limitations in access to faculty study resources and limitations in time that those in my major can study together.”
- “Concerns about finishing work and doing well in classes due to decreased motivation from lack of class time and time with peers.”
- “Finding my way to complete this work as my motivation is nearly non-existent. It’s pretty hard to value completing menial school assignments when I’m worried about family members contracting this and dying.”
- “Academically speaking, I’m worried about finishing my thesis. I’m having a really difficult time staying focused on my schoolwork—not because I want to goof around at home, but because I’m very anxious and can’t seem to focus on anything, even my hobbies—and I don’t have access to technological resources to finish my thesis. I’m afraid that I might not have the focus to rethink and rewrite the chapters requiring R and STATA, and because I don’t have Microsoft Word or a desk space, it’s especially difficult to work on my thesis. I’m worried that I will get a low grade on my thesis and tank my GPA.”
- “All of my class and thesis deadlines fall in the same week, and I am worried about completing everything to the standards I prefer.”

- “Thesis is huge. And I really wish grades were adjusted to have lower thresholds. Honestly, I’m doing my work all day every day but it’s just hard to be as focused or to feel as proud of the work I’m doing. I’m trying really hard, but I don’t want this to cost me any downward shift in my GPA.”
- “I still enjoy learning, but it’s hard to do all the work I committed to before the pandemic given the new routine. ...I genuinely don’t know how I am going to do my work – I tend to just tell myself to suck my emotions up and deal with it. I am begging [institution removed] faculty to seriously consider extending thesis and cushioning students’ GPAs tomorrow. I am a perfectionist and will strive for the high grades I received last semester no matter the circumstance, but I would rather not lose my mind in the process.”
- “My biggest concerns are about my capacity to finish out the academic year and complete thesis in a way that I can be proud of, looking back.”
- “Finishing everything with good grades. Because now I’m online and all my grades are declining.”
- “I am concerned about my grades. I need my GPA to go up in order to get better scholarships to grad school which is difficult now.”
- “I am just looking for graduating. I haven’t been able to focus much on school because of all the situation and where I am living right now. I am not at home and I do not have my own personal space to do my things online. I am worried that I am not completing all of my tasks and disappoint[ing] my professors. I enjoy going to class and participate, but now everything is different, and I just find it really hard to keep doing all the work.”
- “I have more classwork and responsibilities in April than I’ve had ever. I am really struggling to keep up with my coursework and my Honors program thesis on top of that.”
- “Failing a class as a senior. This is a new method of learning and I worry that the class I struggled in at school (Latin) will only get worse from home.”
- “Not finishing my academic career at [institution removed] as well as I hoped.”
- “I am most worried about feeling motivated to finish college, classes, and especially my senior thesis (in this unexpected and disappointing manner) as the consequences of COVID-19 continue to increase, as more people get sick and die. It’s hard to feel like it’s a worthwhile endeavor to get through the next month of school because there’s real tragedy beyond the walls of my home.”
- “I wanted to finish my last semester with straight A’s, but then the pandemic threw me for a loop the first couple of weeks which my grades suffered from – just finishing strong.”
- “I worry the most about completing my classes with a good grade. While I am home, I am still working and they are not as respectful about my time as a student as my job on and off campus in [institution removed], but I still have bills to pay and responsibilities at home. I worry about not having enough time to finish my work and because I cannot leave my small house that I share with a large amount of my family, I lack a place to study and concentrate.”
- “Trying to achieve the grades I would have been able to if I were still on campus through the online setting.”
- “I’m worried that my GPA will suffer because of potential consequences from getting assignments in late due to the extra stress in my life. I plan to apply to law school to enter in the 21-22 school year, so I can’t afford to pass/fail classes that could increase my GPA. However, I feel far less confident about maintaining my 4.0 midterm GPA as it seems impossible to figure out if I’m doing assignments correctly. Things are moving so fast that it’s hard to tell what my professors are asking of me.”
- “The uncertainty is scary. I am worried about how online classes could affect my grades. The pass/fail option is nice, however, as I am taking both of my capstone classes, I feel it is important for me to have a letter grade on my transcript. I would feel more confident getting the grades I deserve in the classroom rather than online.”

- “I need A’s in my classes to get my GPA up, but with the stress of this transition I’m very worried about not getting A’s, so I’ve thought about going Pass/Fail. But if I do that, my GPA won’t be helped, and I’m scared it will look bad to graduate programs.”
- “I’m concerned with how this will affect my last semester as a senior in [major removed] who may have to do a capstone project online. It’s definitely going to be difficult to produce the same quality project that we could have made if my group was able to meet in person. It will be a challenge that everyone will have to try and overcome.”
- “My senior project is completely at a halt and there is no way we could do any testing or further progress to our design at home. Also my grades, I do not feel as connected with the material as I would if I were in a classroom with a whiteboard.”

Low grades can have an especially devastating impact on students in their last semester of college. Even if seniors have done well throughout their academic careers, they may still need to complete required courses or a required number of credits during their last semester. So, the possibility of failing a necessary course, or courses, because they are struggling with an unfamiliar remote format and thereby failing to graduate weighs on some seniors.

Here are some of the comments seniors made about their fears of not graduating:

- “My inability to learn or lack of motivation to do the work will be my doom, and I will fail my classes and I will not be able to graduate.”
- “My biggest concern is that I’m going to fail all of my classes because I don’t have the time and energy to dedicate to them like I did when I was on campus. I don’t have a structured environment or anywhere where I can go to actually work and make progress. I am stuck working in the middle of chaos, and I’m expected to do well because I want to be able to graduate and eventually go to grad school. I feel like all of the work I’ve done this semester has been for nothing.”
- “I am worried I will not pass my courses and will not be able to graduate with my degrees.”
- “I need to actually graduate which requires doing work that I’ve been putting off for weeks.”
- “Genuinely I have had very little motivation or ability to get any homework done. I am so scared that I am not going to graduate even with pass/fail, with everything going on my mental health is down the toilet and it’s so hard to motivate myself to do anything – I’ve had trouble fully voicing this to my teachers – but I’m literally so nervous there’s less than a month left and I am behind on so much work!!!”
- “Some courses have ceased to evaluate or return graded assignments, eliminating grade feedback. This raises significant worry and/or anxiety over grades and whether we will be able to pass our classes. This is a particularly large concern for graduating seniors who cannot simply retake the courses in concern next semester.”
- “My biggest worry is that I will perform so poorly in my classes that I will not be able to graduate.”
- “That I won’t graduate on time because I don’t have the proper resources at home to succeed in the last month of classes; i.e., stable internet, a peaceful home environment, a fully functional laptop.”
- “I’m worried about graduating, one of my courses that I need to graduate has been especially tough and I have not been able to get much help from [the professor].”
- “That I won’t be able to graduate because online learning is very difficult for me and it does not pair with my learning style and it is showing in my classes because my grades have gone down since the switch. There is a reason that I chose a liberal arts education and I am not currently receiving it.”
- “Finals are going to be an issue for a couple of my classes since the professors are not interested in giving take home tests, and I have no webcam. I am also worried that I will be denied the online tutorials that I intend to take over the summer which will allow me to graduate.”
- “Being a graduating senior, I am most fearful that there is a chance I am not going to pass my classes and therefore will be forced to return to [institution removed] when I cannot afford it.”

Missing the celebration and the people

Many seniors feel like they're losing the crowning moments of their college experience. They're missing out on all the fun and celebratory events that they've looked forward to for years. As one senior said, "I have lost the end of my year. It is hard to feel proud of myself, or like anyone cares, when I am just quietly finishing up my senior year alone in my apartment. It all feels fake."

Here are other examples of what seniors wrote about lost moments in their last semester of college:

- "My Senior Year has been stolen from me because of events out of my control, the biggest last few weeks I was supposed to be enjoying myself, going to conventions with club members, and getting help from my Fraternity. Now, there's nothing left and nothing makes completing all this work worth it..."
- "How will seniors be celebrated – we have missed Vegas, Grad weekend, thesis party, senior dinners, all things we have looked to for four years. I don't want to be lumped together with next year's graduates or miss any of these things."
- "As a senior, whenever I think about my college experience, I'm so overcome with heartbreak about how it ended that I feel no pride for getting to this point. Every milestone that passes while I'm alone feels awful, and I know that it's only going to get worse in the next few months as the bigger events come up, like turning in thesis and graduation."
- "I basically just lost the end of my senior year. Now I'm 'transitioning' into a nonexistent professional world. The beginning of my career is about making sure me and my loved ones don't get sick. And I'm still sad about losing all the rites of passage that come with this stage of life."
- "I am just worried we will not have an in-person senior week and graduation. I have been looking forward to celebrating with my senior friends. We have all worked so hard and deserve to have a little fun before entering the work force."
- "Being a senior makes it even harder – leaving friends, involvement, and life as we've known it for the last 4 years so abruptly, and I don't think many professors understand the struggles that current seniors are going through that make it harder to do the work. This was a hard semester before the virus because of 'senioritis' and everything being 'the last time' and wanting to enjoy the last of our college years. Having it all ripped away suddenly makes it all so much worse."
- "Everyone is so focused on giving my class a big celebration and whatever, but that's not what we want. We want the time with our peers and professors that has been taken away and above all else, we want the normal rites of passage that all other classes are afforded."
- "I want to do my last semester of college. I want to do the presentations, I want to say goodbye to my colleagues, I want to be at [institution removed] before I graduate."

It's not just the celebrations around graduation that seniors miss; they also feel the loss of the graduation ceremony itself. This ceremony is the symbolic culmination of four years of hard work and a ritual transition to the next phase of their lives. If asked to picture a graduation ceremony, most people would probably think of crowds of students in caps and gowns, processions, speeches, students walking across stage to receive their diplomas, and shifting their tassels from the right side of their caps to the left side. Prior to this spring, no one would have pictured a virtual ceremony mediated by a computer screen. But this is what graduation has become in the COVID-19 era, and many seniors mourn this loss. They understand why they can't have a normal graduation, but many of them still want one. In the words of one senior, "I just want to have a graduation ceremony." Another wrote that they worried about "being able to have a commencement that I have worked so hard to earn." While some seniors advocate for an in-person graduation at a later date, others worry that they might not be able to get back to campus for graduation next year. The prospect of not being able to celebrate their

achievements face-to-face with their fellow students, faculty, and staff saddens many seniors. As one student wrote, “I just know the day I wake up in bed, open my computer and email out my last piece of college work will mark my graduation and it depresses the shit out of me.”

Here are some other comments seniors made about not having a regular graduation ceremony:

- “I think I’m the most worried about commencement plans. I do not see an actual commencement happening at all this year (going all the way until December into early 2021). I hope that [institution removed] is still able to celebrate the class of 2020 with a real graduation perhaps in the summer of 2021. I think it would be extremely upsetting if the school were to just celebrate with a virtual commencement and go on without an actual one, no matter how delayed it would be.”
- “I want to have an in-person graduation, even if that means delaying it significantly.”
- “As a graduating senior, I’m pretty mad/upset that I won’t be able to celebrate my achievements that I’ve been working toward the past four years in the form of a traditional commencement ceremony. I feel robbed of this experience.”
- “I really wanted to celebrate my achievements with my friends and family, but because of COVID-19 it does not look like I will be able to do so.”
- “MYSELF AND THE ENTIRE CLASS OF 2020 WANT AND DESERVE A IN-PERSON GRADUATION. WE LITERALLY DO NOT WANT A VIRTUAL ONE. WE WERE ROBBED OF EVERYTHING AND THE LITERAL BARE MINIMUM YOU COULD DO FOR US IS GIVE US AN IN-PERSON GRADUATION AT A LATER TIME, WE DON’T CARE HOW MUCH LATER, WE WANT AND DESERVE ONE!”
- “Seniors really wanted an in-person ceremony commencement. Really upset that this can’t happen. Other universities are doing their graduations in the summer... why couldn’t we do that?”
- “Not experiencing a commencement to celebrate the hard work we all put in (I appreciate the gesture for online – but commencement is by nature an intimate event that cannot be replicated online, though I will still gladly attend and appreciate the effort put in).”
- “Graduation. If graduation takes place any time after 6 months or so of our intended date, I believe that a very small amount of students will return for it, myself most likely included.”
- “Not having a real graduation. I worked very hard over the past four years, and my parents have spent a lot of money to see me graduate.”
- “As a senior, I have nothing to look forward to. No scheduled graduation or opportunity to see all my friends at once.”
- “We want a graduation that doesn’t ruin 2 classes worth of graduations. There shouldn’t be a joint graduation in 2021, there should be an opportunity during winter break for fall semester grads and 2020 grads to graduate and walk at their own graduation. Walking in spring of 2021 does not feel fair to either class of grads and will cause restrictions for family members for the class of 2020 and 2021.”
- “No graduation is horrific, and the substitutes being considered are severely lacking.”
- “Losing the honor of my hard work through a graduation ceremony because I won’t be able to attend the next one.”
- “I believe no matter what, we want to have a graduation, even if it needs to be postponed again. I would never want to have online graduation, although I know some schools are defaulting to that. I think that this is one of the biggest days of our lives and I want to have that in person, with the people I’ve spent the last four years with.”

Seniors’ comments about missing the last part of college were not just about missing the celebrations and special events. Seniors also talked about missing people they care about at their institution – friends, professors, staff members, and all the people they developed relationships with while they were in college. Saying good-bye is

never easy, but many of this year's seniors won't have a chance to say their good-byes. And even if they did, those good-byes were often rushed as campuses rapidly dispersed. One student wrote that they worried about "maintaining connections at [institution removed] both now and after graduation." Another wondered about "keeping up with friends who I haven't seen and might not see again." And another worried about "never getting to see some staff or faculty again, never getting to see some of my peers again as I graduate." Seniors want to thank faculty and staff who have helped them, and they want to feel closure as they move on.

Here are some of the comments seniors made about losing social connections:

- "Not having an in-person graduation, missing my friends and the life I had at [institution removed] without ever getting closure or a chance to say goodbye."
- "As a graduating senior, I'm upset over the senior events that have now been cancelled and all the friends, professors, and faculty I couldn't say goodbye to."
- "Graduation and if I will be able to fully wrap my mind around the fact that I am done with my time at [institution removed]. Never having those final goodbyes."
- "I really wanted to be able to continue making connections at [institution removed] and now that my time on campus has come to an end, I will not be able to make those connections."
- "My worry has been since the semester has been cut short for me, I won't be able to spend time with friends, especially those of us who are seniors, in the last 2 months before graduating."
- "I am worried that I will not have the opportunity to have a proper graduation, see my friends who live in different states, etc."
- "Friendships dwindling and not having closure from [institution removed] since I am graduating."
- "I'm genuinely more concerned about the friendships more than anything else."
- "I think I am most worried about my social and emotional health. I am very sad that I will not be returning to [institution removed] as I am graduating, and the prospect of potentially not seeing many of my friends again is hitting me very hard."
- "I'm just worried about the standard stuff of never seeing my college friends again for a very long time and never getting to have proper goodbyes."
- "I am really sad about graduation and feel that my college experience is going to end without any connections with people, and I am worried that I will lose touch much more quickly with my peers and professors."
- "Losing touch with all the friends I have made at [institution removed] that I did not have the chance to say goodbye to."
- "I just want to be able to spend [one] more week at school with my friends for senior week/graduation as we never got to say goodbye to one another or professors who have helped us these past 4 years."
- "I do not like how we don't know when the next time [is that] we will see our friends and/or celebrate our accomplishments. My friends at [institution removed] are my support system and they are the people I need to be with during this time."
- "That I won't be able to say goodbye and show my appreciation to friends and professors since I am graduating."

Post-graduate employment and graduate school

As heartbreaking as missing graduation is for many students, one concern dwarfs all others – finding a job after graduation. In the words of one senior, "I'm devastated by losing my last 2 months at college, but my biggest worry is the job market after my graduation." Seniors are distressed about trying to find a job in an economy that is in shambles. Unemployment is climbing to levels not seen since the Great Depression, and companies are not hiring. Students wrote that their biggest worry is "finding a job in a global recession," "finding a job in a time of a

dead economy,” and “graduating into a job market where millions of people are unemployed.” One student asked, “How do I enter a working world that is in chaos?”

Some students said that it is difficult to use their institution’s career services remotely. One senior said, “I have been trying to utilize the career services to continue my path to starting a career post-graduation. But to me [this is a place]...where one-on-one interactions are better for me than email or Zoom.” Another worried about “not having as easy access to the professional development resources on campus” now that they are home. Seniors who have already accepted job offers worry that their offers might be rescinded or that they will have to start their new jobs in a remote, work-from-home environment instead of face-to-face in an office. With shrunken job prospects, seniors worry about finding a place to live, paying the bills, and paying their student loans. One senior wrote they worry about “paying my bills and loans since I am jobless and have to take care of housing and food alone.” They are afraid of losing independence and having to rely on their parents, which might put a burden on parents who are also struggling. As one senior said, “It feels like I’m walking out into a world where I will be in debt, living with my parents, and without any hope for a job.” Another echoed this saying, “I am not going to get a job after graduation, so I’ll have to move in with my parents and mooch off of them.” Some students even fear that they might become homeless after leaving college.

Here are some of the things seniors wrote about their concerns about finding employment after graduation:

- “My biggest concern is being able to find a job after graduation as lots of displaced adult workers, who have more experience than I will, are in the market for new jobs as well.”
- “The worst labor market will make the process of job hunting even harder.”
- “I’m not getting paid anymore so I don’t have a job and can’t get unemployment, and I’m trying to find a post grad job and it’s just gotten even harder with so many people unemployed.”
- “I’m entering the job market during this pandemic. Getting a job is unlikely, despite the best efforts of myself and Career Services. As I have no income, I will have nowhere to go come May during a public health crisis.”
- “I probably won’t be able to get a job because the economy is crashing, and no one is hiring, and we can’t leave our houses. This sucks.”
- “My biggest fear is finding employment and what the state of the economy will be in following this pandemic. I am fearful that I will not be able to find employment in my industry as our country recovers from this. With some companies losing thousands each day, I am afraid that they will not be hiring in the next few months.”
- “I have not gained enough experience in my field since I was not able to complete my internship to its full potential, so I feel as if I will not be ready for a job right out of graduating from [institution removed].”
- “I am graduating, and places have taken down all of their applications for new positions. My work study money will run out, and I will be out of a job. That is the biggest stressor in my life at the moment.”
- “I am worried about graduating. I’m incredibly worried about finding a job in an industry that relies on mass gatherings.”
- “My largest concern is job security; I am lined up to start work in September, and while Career Services assured me that in speaking with my employer I should plan as if everything is normal and I do not need to reach out to them, I am anxious about losing my offer. I’m not really sure when the best time is to reach out to my employer regarding this.”
- “Will I find a job after graduation?!? Am I going to receive support in this regard from [institution removed] after I graduate?... I appreciate the support that’s been given so far from [career services]. (Resume books – genius!! This should be done always!!) But I wonder if it will stop after graduation. What if I don’t have a job by that time... That’s definitely a worry.”

- “I secured a job post-graduation that I believe is relatively secure; however, it is located in NY which brings about a lot of worries. I have worked out a remote working agreement with my boss until I can move to the city, but I am nervous about eventually needing to move especially since I am in a high-risk group (asthma).”
- “I am worried about finding work. I am worried about student debt and not being able to pay for it.”
- “That my degree will be worth less than it was going to be, that I will be put on the streets and that there will be no jobs or further education open to me.”
- “I don’t know where I’m going to live, I have no employment prospects and my parents work in tourism so they’re also struggling, and I can’t contribute greatly to the household. The only thing I’ll be able to find is grocery store work and while I’m thankful, it’s also not enough and I feel I have wasted time and money in college.”
- “I worry most about my employment and ability to secure a permanent job given the state of the economy. I worry that I may lose some of my independence because of unforeseen expenses and decreased job opportunities.”
- “I worry about having work, and also having had an insufficient teaching experience, as right now I’m paying money (10 credits) for a student teaching practicum in which I am literally never interacting with children now that school is cancelled. I also am worried about whether I’ll be able to take the [state licensure exam] and get a license secured as soon as I’d planned.”
- “Finding a job in the current market especially since my industry (events) is a major problem right now, and people will be fearful for a while.”
- “I have to graduate. Somehow, during a time when tons of people are being laid off, I have to find a job amid this crisis and hope someone can pay me so I can pay back loans. Do you know how nervous I am about not finding a job? And then on top of that my house has a single-parent income and my Dad’s job isn’t going so well because construction has been halted. If this damn virus doesn’t end by next month, I have no idea what we’re gonna do.”
- “As a senior I am terrified of entering a world that is no longer able to sustain me. I am worried I will be unable to find a job in the industry I have dedicated myself to. I am worried about my inability to pay my loans due to lack of work.”
- “Since I’m graduating, I’m most concerned about getting a job before the end of the year. I’m doubtful that there will be any sort of paid summer internships anymore and I’m not sure exactly where to look since so many people are getting laid off.”
- “I am graduating this year, and I feel extremely worried that I will be entering the workforce at a debilitating, if not already weak, economy. I am trying to stay hopeful and grateful for having my mom’s support, but I know that after some time, I will want to help with her expenses and become independent. ...I am also very worried about how I will repay my student loans. I understand there is a suspension for the time being, but I need to have an income stable enough to start repaying my loans.”
- “I’m graduating. Is anyone hiring? Am I applying for jobs in the worst possible moment of the economy? How will this affect me long term?”
- “Finding a job! I have no clue what to do and if people are hiring and I’m so stressed about it all I have put it off because I don’t want to think about it because it is so stressful and I’m in a state of limbo where nothing is happening and I don’t know how long that will last. Everything feels frozen. And I don’t want to bother people for references and connections if they may be stressed and uneasy.”
- “Money... I am graduating and moving out and into an unstable economy. I’m unemployed now (after COVID-19) and actively losing money at the time when I expected to be getting a third part-time job and making more. I’m concerned about housing next year and about how difficult it will be to find employment in my chosen field. I don’t want to work as a delivery driver as a college graduate, but we

are all going to have to make some adjustments in the wake of this pandemic and we will have to do whatever we have to do to survive it economically as well.”

- “Since I am graduating, I am very stressed about paying off my student debt. It was already going to be a very difficult task for me before, and now with the virus in play, I am worried about getting a job that will pay enough to help with my debt.”
- “We have not gotten anything from the college about how to approach post-grad plans. This is disheartening as I am feeling very stressed about my future career opportunities as I am graduating into a terrible economy.”
- “Looking for jobs and planning for the future in all this is impossible, and I will be expected to start paying loans next year, somehow, with no income and, due to COVID and my other health concerns, no means of getting income.”
- “Because I am a senior, my great, all-consuming worry is finding a job. I fear that no labs will be hiring because everyone is trying to conserve money and human subjects research is indefinitely stalled.”
- “I have been having a very hard time finding a job; although I have succeeded academically, I do not feel like my achievements matter.”

Seniors also worry about how COVID-19 and the changes in their education this spring will affect their plans for graduate school. Some students worry about the status of their graduate school applications in this uncertain environment; others have been accepted to graduate school but don’t know if classes will start on time or if they will be face-to-face. And they don’t want online graduate classes. The seniors who had planned to take a year or so off before going to graduate school, perhaps to make some money, don’t know what will happen now. In essence, like the students who’d planned to graduate and go into the job market, the students who’d planned on graduate school now see their plans being broken by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Here are some of the things seniors wrote about their concerns about going to graduate school:

- “What is going to happen with my medical school application?”
- “I’m going to grad school at USC in Los Angeles and I have no idea when I’ll be able to actually go out there or how to pay for it all because now there’s no way for me to get a job.”
- “Finances. My summer job is no longer guaranteed to happen, and I had to reject my graduate school acceptances because I now absolutely cannot afford to go for at least a few years. I can’t get a job in my field without a Master’s.”
- “My family insists that I go back home to China, but if the travel ban continues, this would mean that I won’t be able to come back for graduate school on time. I’m still debating what to do in this situation. If I stay in the US, living costs would be my biggest concern.”
- “How long it will be before I can take the LSAT?”
- “I am worried about how long it will be necessary to continue quarantining. I am supposed to be starting law school in the fall and I am very worried that it won’t be possible to do so because of COVID-19.”
- “Not knowing as I continue into graduate-level education whether it will be in-person or not.”
- “Graduate school not beginning on time or going online, not being able to generate earnings this summer to help pay my graduate school tuition.”
- “Starting graduate school online and missing the chance to create new social/networking connections. Not being able to acclimate to the workload and expectations online.”
- “I don’t want to have to start grad school online. I’m considering deferring for a semester if that is the case.”

Graduating seniors wrote about a lot of worries and concerns in response to our survey. Some of these worries—finding a job, leaving friends, going to graduate school, worrying about finances, figuring out what comes next—

are normal worries for seniors, while other worries—like missing out on the last part of their college experience or concerns about doing well in newly online classes—are not. But even “normal” senior concerns take on a different tone in these COVID-19 times. There is so much uncertainty in the world, and seniors feel that acutely. They’re at a transition point in their lives, and transitions come with uncertainty in the best of times. And we are far from the best of times. Seniors who have been planning for post-college life, often for years, now feel like their plans have been ripped away. As one senior wrote, “All my post grad stuff that was lined up is now off the table.” Another senior added, “What the fuck am I going to do about a job? Grad school? Traveling? All my potential plans have to be put off until a new ‘normal’ takes shape post-pandemic.” Still another senior wrote, “I am not sure if my plans for the Peace Corps are still going to happen. I have no idea what I am supposed to do. I feel so isolated and nervous. I have been trying to file for unemployment and it is overloaded, my loan company won’t answer, and I am losing it.”

What institutions have done to help

Many of the same seniors who made the comments we just reviewed also identified actions that people at their institutions had taken this spring that eased their concerns during the transition to remote learning and helped them move forward. They identified these actions in their responses to another open-ended question on the survey, “What have you appreciated most about your institution’s response to COVID-19?”. First, regardless of the concerns seniors have about missing their graduation ceremonies or doing well in their classes, many of them recognize that canceling face-to-face classes and sending everyone away from campus was the right thing to do. Here are some of the comments seniors made to that effect:

- “Though it is really depressing not to have an end to senior year, I’m happy that they called the ball early instead of leaving us in limbo.”
- “You got us out of school early, no one contracted the virus at school. The college did what it should have done, regardless of any student grumblings.”
- “You guys are trying your best to not endanger people’s lives. Not every decision has been ideal, but they probably couldn’t be.”
- “I appreciate that very few of us have gotten sick from the [institution removed] community, I am thankful for that.”
- “President [name removed] has made it very clear that they care very much about the well-being of the students. I have consistently been pleasantly surprised by decisions made. [Institution removed] has found a perfect balance of ensuring that the proper public health decisions are being made, yet still trying to accommodate the student body.”
- “You were right to send us home, even if it’s heartbreaking.”

And even though the spring semester was so disruptive, one senior said that the thing they most appreciated about their institution’s response to COVID-19 was “being able to be with my family at home during this time.”

Many seniors appreciated the personal care, understanding, and support they received from people at their institutions during the challenging time this spring. Here are some of their responses to the question, “What have you appreciated most about your institution’s response to COVID-19?”:

- “The care and understanding I have received from my professors.”
- “The support and concern that I have felt from professors.”
- “The response from professors and students.”
- “The faculty has been really kind and accommodating.”

- “I’m really happy with how my professors responded. No one pretended that online classes were just as good (‘cause they’re not), and they’re really trying their hardest to make this great for us and I really appreciate that.”
- “My teachers being so understanding.”
- “The care shown by President [name removed] for the seniors and students who are having a hard time with this change.”
- “My teachers’ responses have been caring, on time, and they always are updating me.”
- “The honesty and caring tone of communication.”
- “The empathy, the responsiveness of faculty and staff, the way everyone has gone above and beyond their call of duty to ensure students are still connected to the campus one way or another.”
- “That they acted quickly and have showed their concern for students.”
- “The empathy and seeing familiar faces/voices in videos from [institution removed]. The staff and faculty have clearly been making efforts to keep us connected.”
- “A lady who works at [campus coffee shop] reached out to me via email to check in. Hearing from others that other faculty and staff have done similar things is well-appreciated and kind.”
- “Residence Life & Student Affairs have done so much for students and worked tirelessly on the ground to get students safely off campus.”

Seniors also valued clear, frequent, and honest communication from their institution. In addition to the valuable information provided by these communication efforts, seniors took the messages as a sign of the institution’s care and support for them. As one senior wrote in reference to their institution’s communications, “...a lot of love and support seems to be coming from the administration and that has made a lot of this transition process easier. It’s really quite a devastating experience but I hope I can stay connected to [institution removed] once I graduate in May.”

Here are some responses from seniors to the question about what they appreciated most about their institution’s COVID-19 response that related to their institution’s communication efforts:

- “The clear and reasonable messages from the school.”
- “The bulleted emails from President [name removed] providing definitive answers and encouraging words. These have kept me and my family informed and calm.”
- “[Institution removed] hasn’t stopped the flow of communication, and that has been helpful. Even though I may not need those campus resources, knowing they are there is comforting.”
- “I appreciate the college’s efforts to respond and send announcements as soon as they can to update their students and faculty. I also appreciate the online resources that are being provided.”
- “Constant communication with students and transparency about the next steps, as well as the university’s proactiveness.”
- “University admin has gone above and beyond to keep students informed of their decisions and plan of action.”
- “The communication and the flexibility professors have given students. They know some of us are parents and have jobs and they’re being flexible with those things.”
- “You were all very quick in making decisions and letting us know how you were responding and what we need to do in response. My siblings who attend other schools did not have such quick and direct responses which has caused stress for my family. We appreciate your hard work and effort to make sure we are well taken care of!”
- “I appreciated the transparency. Whenever there was the potential for a rumor, there was a long email sent to squash the rumor with facts.”

- “Having been contacted by the President, my teachers, my friends and so much reaching out means the world to me.”
- “I have most appreciated the constant communication and updates from President [name removed]. I think he has been very responsive and caring about the situation. I also enjoy seeing Dean [name removed]’s Instagram posts of campus. They definitely help to keep morale up.”
- “How quickly they have informed students and how they have consistently checked in with us, such as through these surveys. I also personally emailed the President with a few of my concerns and was pleasantly surprised that he didn’t only read my email, but also replied addressing my concerns. I feel like I am considered as an individual during this time and I think that makes [institution removed] stand out among other schools during this time.”
- “A few of my professors have been very comforting in this time, constantly answering questions and ensuring that they are making this as non-stressful as they possibly can.”
- “How much they have tried to keep an open connection with the students about what is going on and how well they handled getting students a refund.”
- “I appreciate the real time updates we received from the university as things were happening very quickly in the beginning over spring break. Also huge thank you to the faculty and staff who have been working so hard with this change to their curriculum and have been doing a great job of keeping students updated along the way. I don’t ask for perfection in a time of unprecedented circumstances, just that we be kept in the know, which has been happening and for that I am very appreciative.”

Seniors also pointed to a number of actions that their institutions took that had a positive impact on them: refunding room and board, continuing to pay for student work, adopting pass/fail grading, and committing to holding a face-to-face graduation for their class in the future. Here are examples of institutional actions that seniors said they appreciated:

- “Tuition for room and board refunded.”
- “My refund check.”
- “I do feel the college has been financially generous. I appreciate being kept on as a student employee as well as the room and board refund.”
- “I really appreciate that [institution removed] is giving us a refund for room and board.”
- “Student employment said they would supplement with some pay after I lost my work-study position.”
- “Student employment weekly deposits, no late fees for tuition payments, anything money related.”
- “The reimbursement checks have gone out, which brought me closure for my final semester on campus.”
- “I appreciated the refunded housing check. It helped financially.”
- “Helping me pay for a flight back home in March.”
- “They have communicated well. I also got a nice refund that will help me pay for future rent and professional exam fees.”
- “The PASS/FAIL option!! THANK YOU THANK YOU THANK YOU!!!!!!”
- “Moving all classes to Pass or Fail has relieved a lot of stress in my life. I feel easier about handing in assignments that I may have not been able to completely finish or flesh out given the circumstances.”
- “I very much appreciate that [institution removed] has taken the time to design a graduation ceremony for us in December so we don’t have to miss out on an important life event or the chance to say goodbye to our professors and close friends.”
- “Still hosting a graduation means the world to us seniors.”
- “Assurance that seniors will be having a physical graduation and all other senior week events.”
- “I also REALLY appreciate [institution removed]’s effort to have a graduation ceremony because that is very important to me and I have been seeing many other universities just cancel theirs.”

- “I cannot express how grateful I am that [institution removed] plans on hosting a commencement ceremony for the graduating seniors. This whole period of transition has been very hard, and we’ve had to mourn the loss of many senior events we had been looking forward to for a long time, but knowing a graduation ceremony is in our future has kept me positive through it all.”

It was instructive to read comments from students who, on one hand, described their sadness, sense of loss, and even anger at events this spring, yet on the other hand, expressed gratitude for the support people at their institutions have given them. Some of what we’ve read in the higher education press about students’ concerns about their institution didn’t cover the other half of the story.¹ Students who are deeply upset about the impact of COVID-19 on their lives and their college experiences can also be grateful for the good things that their institution has done. After describing their concerns about whether or not they could return to their home country after graduation, their family’s health and safety, and their struggle to keep their spirits up, one senior said:

“I am just so absolutely thankful to how the community at [institution removed] has looked after us in these unprecedented times. The college administration has worried a great deal about our well-being, and it shows that they are doing everything in their power to ensure our well-being. I will never forget the care and support the [institution removed] community has shown us in these testing times, and I pray I am able to return the favor in time one way or another. Thank you!”

Turning back to the quantitative survey evidence, students who felt more supported by their institution’s response to COVID-19 had the strongest sense of connection with their institution. Since most of the students whose comments we reviewed in this memo are now our alumni, it’s in our pragmatic interest for them to feel a strong connection with our institution. Beyond that utilitarian interest, in these difficult times, it helps people to know that there are institutions that have their interests at heart.

Suggestions

First, we suggest that you take the time to read the open-ended comments on this or any other survey that you’ve administered and take those comments to heart. For the philosopher Jennifer Church, taking something to heart means considering something in a way that allows disruptions to our thinking and assumptions about that thing.² So, to us, taking students’ comments to heart means reading their comments in a way that is open to the possibility that our ideas about students are wrong or, at the very least, insufficiently nuanced. We’re not suggesting that everyone should do a layers-deep qualitative analysis of open-ended survey responses. Just read them carefully and with an open mind. Doing so is a way of honoring our part of the bargain we made when we sent out a survey. We asked students questions. Many of them thought about those questions and responded. Listening to what they’ve said is the next part of that conversation.

Second, we suggest continuing the many helpful things that we described above. Continue to reach out to these graduating seniors now, over the summer, and next year to let them know that they are still part of your community. Celebrate their achievements at your virtual graduation ceremony and in other ways. Help them celebrate their accomplishments with family and friends. Let them know that you are proud of their resilience and hard work in these trying times, even if things didn’t work out as they had hoped. Find ways to help them say good-bye and thank you to the people who supported them during college, and create mechanisms to help them sustain the relationships and networks they formed in college. Show them that your institution is still a resource for them and ask them how you can help. Find concrete ways to support them as they try to find jobs, apply to

¹ See for example <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2020/04/20/students-sue-universities-tuition-and-fee-refunds> and <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-05-01/angry-undergrads-studying-online-sue-for-billions-in-refunds>.

² Church, J. (2002). Taking it to Heart: What Choice Do We Have? *The Monist*, 85, 361-380.

graduate school, and figure out next steps. Connect them to other people and resources that can help them in these endeavors. Most importantly, let them know that you are with them for the long haul – their relationship with you did not end at graduation. Reassure them that you will be there for them, in good times and bad, during COVID-19 and beyond. Too often, we hear from alumni who feel like their alma maters only reach out when they want a donation. Now is the time to show your soon-to-be alumni that you care about their hopes for the future and that you will be there to help them pursue those dreams long after they take their virtual walk across the graduation stage.

Given the importance of communication that we noted above, a useful guide is the May 6, 2020 report “Part 2: Effective COVID-19 Crisis Communication” from the Center for Infectious Disease Research and Policy.³ The report highlights six principles of crisis communication:

1. Don’t Over-reassure
2. Proclaim Uncertainty
3. Validate Emotions—Your Audience’s and Your Own
4. Give People Things to Do
5. Admit and Apologize for Errors
6. Share Dilemmas

We can say that some of the comments we’ve read from students echo these strategies. There’s much more about these strategies in the report, and it’s worth a read.

We will continue to send out reports on the patterns that we’re seeing in the HEDS COVID-19 surveys every couple of weeks.⁴ In our next report, we will focus on how staff are experiencing their institution’s response to COVID-19. Please let us know if you have any questions, comments, or ideas about how we can best analyze and report the data from our surveys.

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HEDS Consortium – www.hedsconsortium.org

³ <https://www.cidrap.umn.edu/sites/default/files/public/downloads/cidrap-covid19-viewpoint-part2.pdf>

⁴ <https://www.hedsconsortium.org/covid-19-institutional-response-surveys/>