



## 'Getting You to the Other Side': As COVID-19 Disrupts High School Graduates, Colleges are Ready to Meet Them

UNLV's associate vice president of enrollment and student services provides tips for high school seniors as they transition to college.

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or high school seniors, the spring season brings prom, cherished end-of-year memories with classmates and friends, visits to college campuses, and, to cap it all off: graduation.

**F** The opportunity to cross the stage and grab that diploma is an 18-year moment in the making. So it makes sense that graduating seniors all across America are feeling a heavy sense of loss this year as the COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted these and other milestone moments.

It's also likely disrupted their end-of-year schoolwork and brought on new anxieties about what their chosen college expects from them in the coming months. For seniors who still haven't been admitted to college, but want that opportunity, the worries might even be greater.

"There are students who feel like this pandemic has hurt their chances to go to college, and now they may have given up altogether because they cannot imagine how it could work in this setting," said [Steve McKellips](#), associate vice president for enrollment and student services at UNLV. "And for admitted students, they're worried that they somehow need to 'pass' or 'win' the pandemic in order to keep their admission to college."

Both assumptions, McKellips said, are not true.

"The pandemic has demonstrated the power to shut much of the globe down, but it's not strong enough to stop people from achieving their future state," McKellips said. "We are in the business of getting students to the other side, and we're committed to finding a way to do that."

For both sets of students, McKellips said, colleges across the country are working in overdrive to serve them. They're working to quell fears, make adjustments to traditional admissions requirements, and bring resources and services to students right where they are – virtually.

UNLV in particular has [extended the application deadline for first-year students from May 1 to July 1](#), moved [New Student Orientation](#) and admissions visits online, and is hosting online/social media tours for students who haven't yet had the chance to walk the campus. For the incoming Fall 2020 class, the university has also [waived the requirement to submit test scores for orientation and course placement](#).

"There's plenty of stress and anxiety about college circulating among graduating high school seniors right now, but we're working hard to do what we can to help keep additional stress and anxiety at bay," McKellips said. "I want students to know that we're here for them."

Here, McKellips addresses the common questions and concerns he's hearing from both prospective students and incoming UNLV freshmen, and provides tips on what students should do now, and over the coming summer months, to be prepared for college.

## What are some ways for graduating seniors to stay connected with their chosen college, even if they can't physically be there for orientation or visits?

We know that a lot of students may have been saving their campus visit for the spring, wanting to ensure that all of their admissions and financial aid requirements were taken care of. But then all of a sudden, the spring visit season got taken away. There are many students who missed that opportunity to walk the campus and experience it first hand.

I want students to know that the help available before the global pandemic began is still there, it's just that now you'll have to access it with a computer. The orientation and the migratory processes we use to bring a student here are all intended to take the "you" who only understands the life you have currently and expand it into

something greater at UNLV. We want to introduce you to our family and make you feel welcomed, and we'll do so with whatever medium or digital channel that the student prefers.

I think the best piece of advice I can give to an incoming freshman is not to be afraid to raise your hand and say, "I'm over here, and I have questions!" We're trying to be as widespread and flexible as we possibly can to deliver services to our students so that they don't feel so isolated. This transition might be a little difficult, but don't forget that there are people standing there with their hands out, waiting to help you get to the other side.

## How can incoming freshmen make the most of the summer before college begins?

I think the one thing that students — and their parents — need to hear more than anything is that it will be OK. This pandemic has made some things different, but there's no extra layer of requirements that have been placed on a student's shoulders because of the pandemic. The pandemic doesn't change anything that they need to do.

All we need from students is to say, "Here I am," and we'll deliver everything they need directly to them. They just need to be present in technology so that we can reach them. Other than that, they need to recognize that this is the space we're all currently in, and that we want them to do what they need to do to be safe and healthy, and comforting to themselves and others.

## Is there any additional academic prep a student needs to do given that they may have lost out on instructional time because of the closure of high schools across the country and in Nevada?

No. In fact, the anxiety comes from thinking you're missing something.

One of the things that I think students, and especially parents, need to hear is that when we look at a student and evaluate them for admission, we've got 3 ½ years of academic history to work with. Usually, when we look at a senior for admission, we really only see six semesters, or three years worth of academic credentials because many students apply in the fall of their senior year.

We made our admissions decisions because we believe these students can be successful. If we're convinced of that, there's nothing that's going to happen in eight weeks of a global pandemic that's going to make me suddenly think that a particular student went from able to miraculously unable.

The most important thing is for students to focus on getting through it.

## How can students deal with the uncertainty of whether their college will meet in person or online in the fall?

We on college campuses across the country are all adjusting accordingly to the unprecedented situation that we've found ourselves in, and that means being able to deliver coursework online. I think students can feel assured by this, and, at UNLV in particular, know that we're committed to the highest level of classroom instruction — whether it happens online or face-to-face.

We would all prefer face-to-face instruction, and we're putting in every effort to make that a reality. At the end of the day, our institution runs better when we're all doing this together, on campus. There's a beehive of intellectual energy that kind of requires the hive, if you will, and we'd all love to get back to that.

But at the same time, we also believe in taking care of everyone, so we're not going to commit to preference and risk health.

I think the important thing for a student to remember is, regardless of the medium, our priority is to take care of our students, and make sure that we're interacting and communicating with them, and teaching them in the safest way possible. If learning has to happen online, or if it's a hybrid approach, we've proven this semester that we can step up to and meet the challenge.

## What advice would you give to parents whose child's senior year has been upended?

Parents need to prioritize creating a healthy environment for their children as they prepare to go off to college.

I recently met a mother who conveyed that she was worried that her son might lose his good homework and studying habits during the pandemic. But I want to reassure parents that from the college's perspective, it's OK if your child isn't at his or her peak during this time.

Another important reminder for parents is that there are humans behind the university making compassionate decisions. We understand that this pandemic has had an impact on everything, and has put some families into very difficult situations where family income is suffering. We're committed to doing what we can to help. If you have problems or you anticipate challenges, call us and reach out to us — let us walk you through what we can do to help.

I'd like to be part of the dialogue because, as someone who has been doing this work for years, I have ideas and we can offer access to resources that parents may not know about.

## What are the most prevalent concerns you're hearing from incoming/prospective students, and do you have any advice to put them at ease?

Throughout the nation, I've consistently seen and heard references to loss: loss of graduation, loss of senior prom, loss of time spent with classmates, loss of special memories. These seniors have spent their whole career thus far being told, "Wait 'til you graduate, it's going to be a great thing!" They've witnessed their friends graduate, their siblings and other family members. But now there's no graduation ceremony, and no graduation party. In the blink of an eye, that huge moment is gone.

This sense of loss is bringing up feelings of true grief. For an 18-year-old, their high school commencement ceremony is their high water mark. They haven't been able to put it into the context of other huge life moments yet.

I want to reassure them that we'll reach out to them, we'll bring them forward and take them to this new place. We'll do our best to move them out of the notion that something got taken from them and into a new beginning. I hope they see the university as taking them to the next step. You may not have been celebrated in the traditional way, but let us celebrate you!

## Why is now the time to continue with college plans and not put them off for a year or more?

I would go so far as to say that the COVID-19 environment makes it even more necessary to be studying at a university because the workforce experience right now is going to have some challenges. Hiring is going to have some challenges, and opportunities are going to be fewer.

If fulfilling the college dream was originally part of your plan, then this gives you an opportunity to advance yourself, and be ready at a different level when the economy and employment opportunities respond back in full force.

To me this is the perfect opportunity to prepare for whatever is on the other side of this pandemic – get to college, get your degree, and be ready for the full speed ahead nature of what's to come.

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