

Commencement in The Age of COVID-19



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The Situation

Short-term

Because of COVID-19, college campuses have been forced to close, moving to remote learning for the remainder of the year. As a result, many schools have chosen to postpone or cancel graduation.

For seniors, that means losing out on the celebration of the culmination of years of hard work.

Long-term

As a result of the current situation, students and parents may be questioning whether the institutions they have been paying tuition to for the past few years care about their wellbeing.

In order to cultivate them as the next generation of donors, it will be important to acknowledge the challenges they are facing and provide ongoing support.

How Students Feel

What They Value

Openness

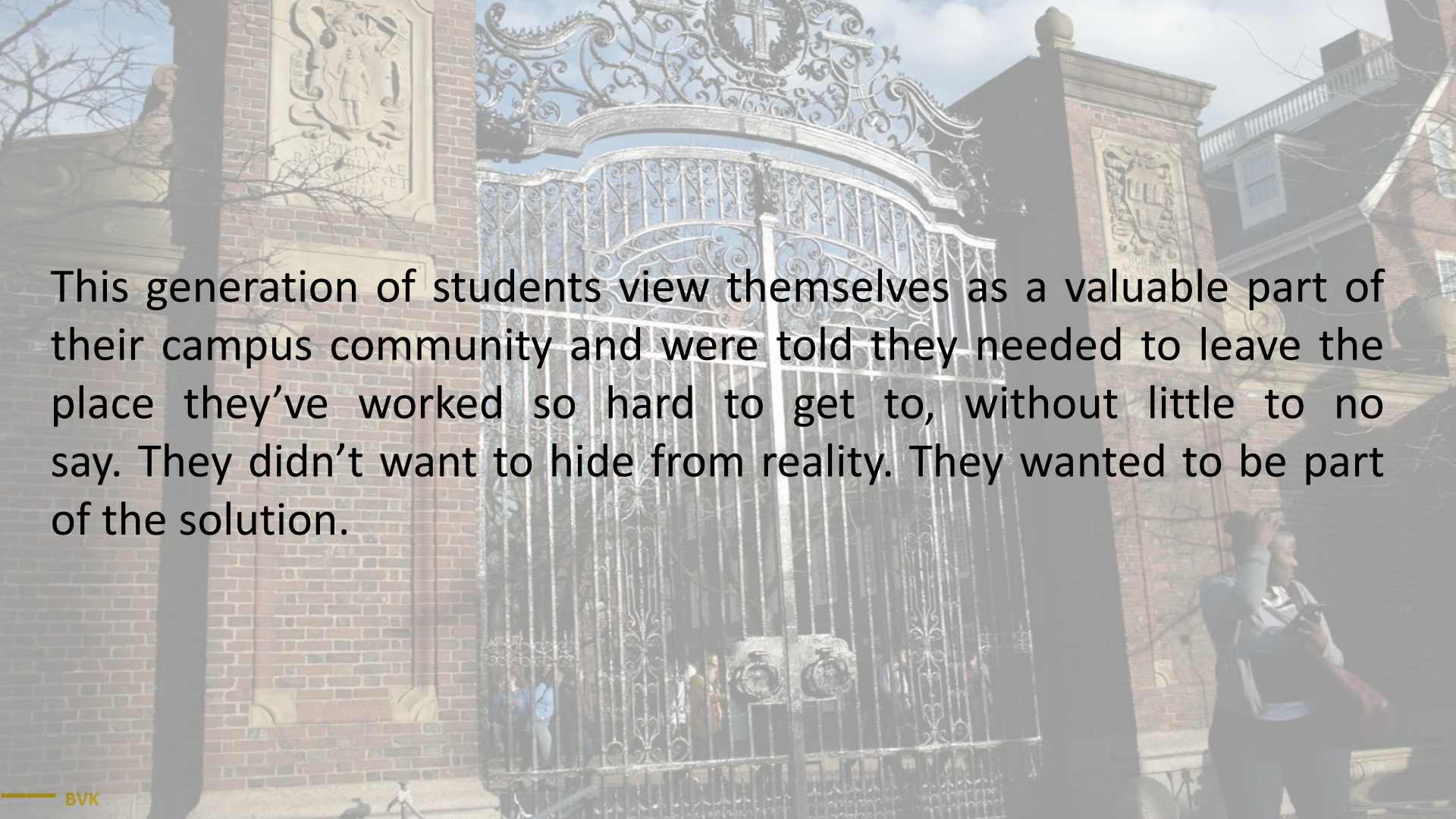
As a global generation, they seek inspiration and ideas from a variety of sources and embrace the differences that make everyone unique.

Realism

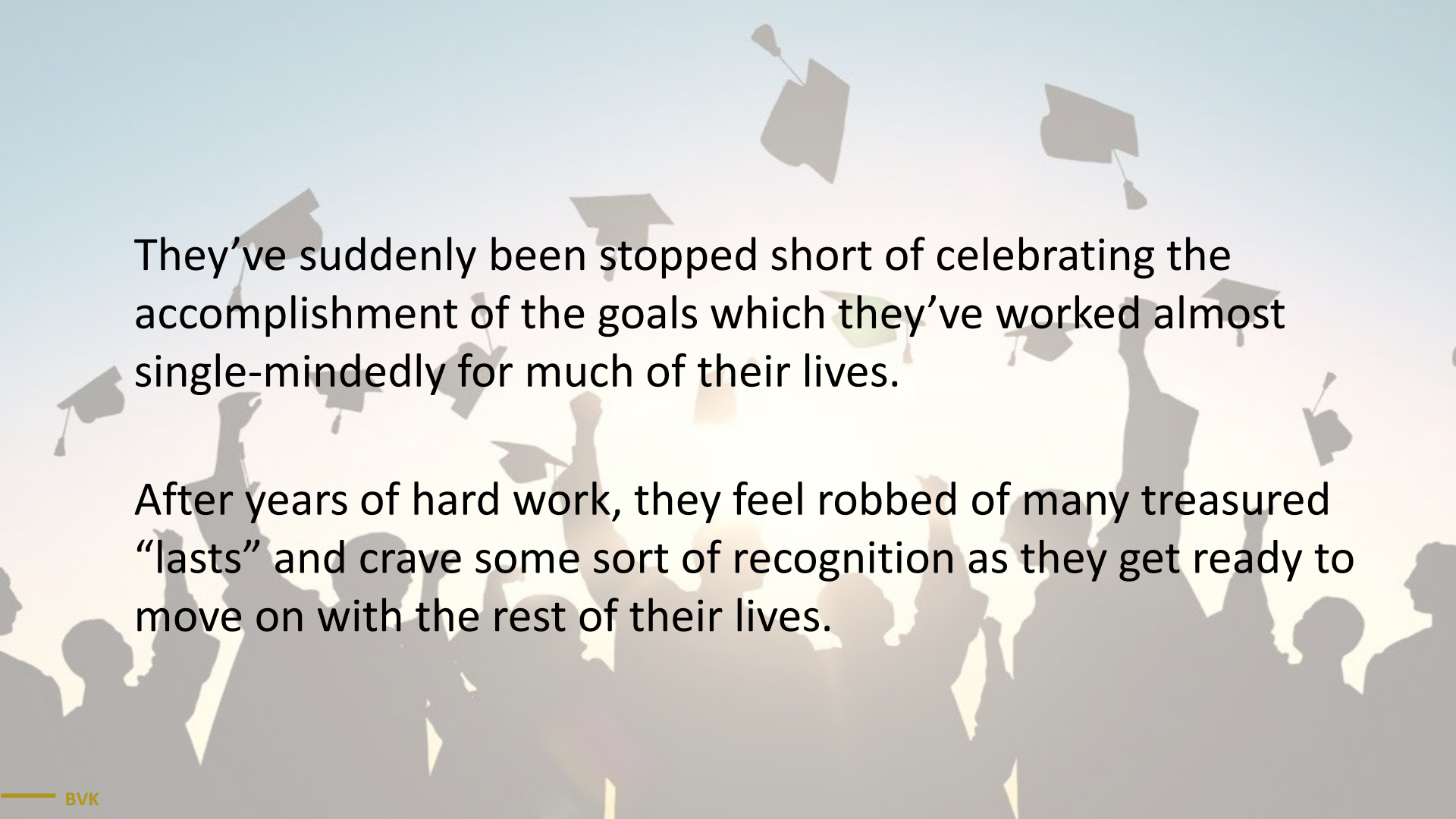
Coming of age during an era of disruption, they recognize grit as a key to success, and pick themselves up when things don't go as planned.

Resilience

Attuned to social, political and economic realities, they have a hopeful yet level-headed view of their future.

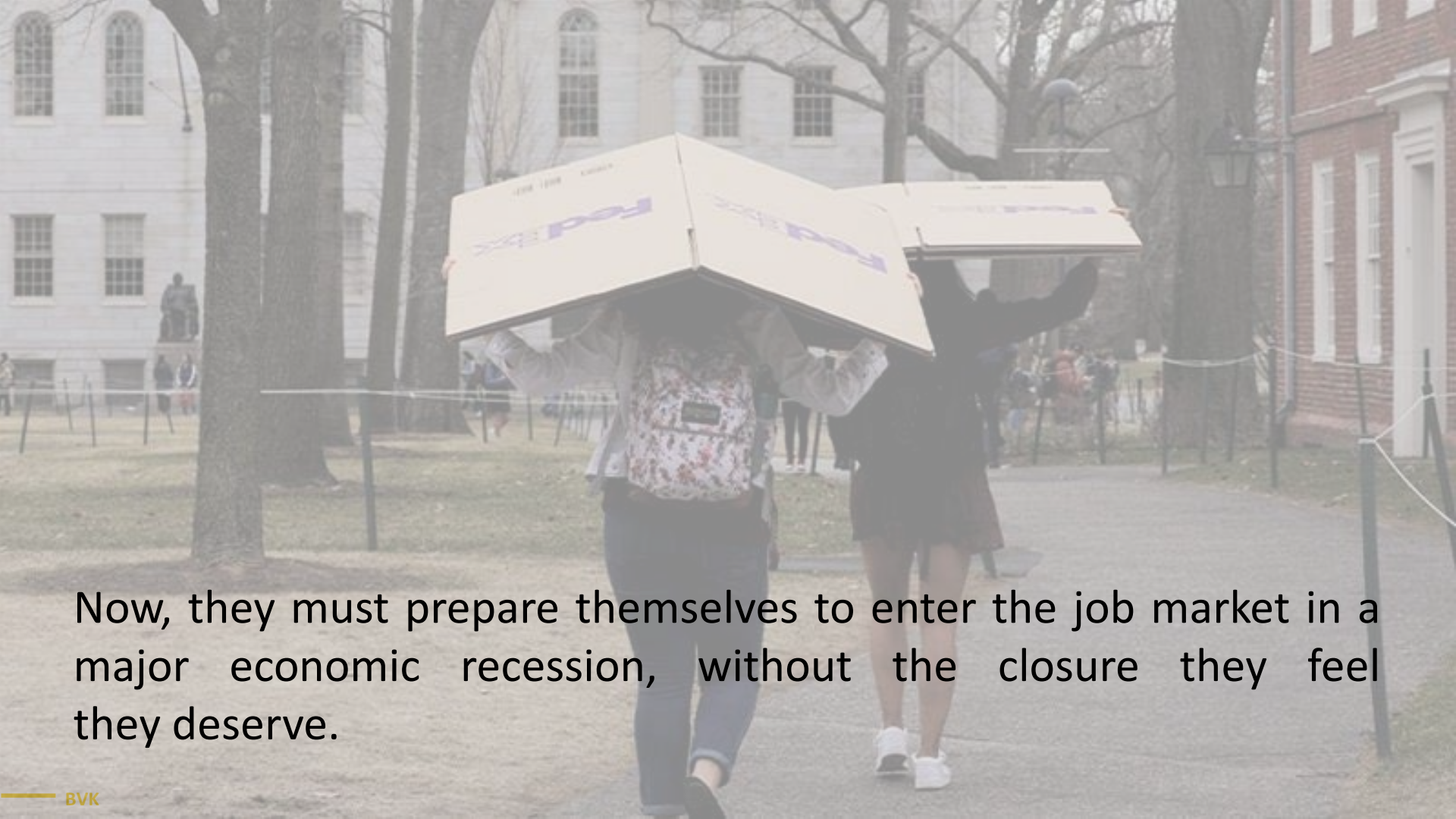


This generation of students view themselves as a valuable part of their campus community and were told they needed to leave the place they've worked so hard to get to, without little to no say. They didn't want to hide from reality. They wanted to be part of the solution.

The background of the slide features a light blue to yellow gradient. Overlaid on this are numerous dark silhouettes of graduates. Many of the silhouettes have their arms raised, and several graduation caps are shown in mid-air, as if they have just been tossed. The overall scene conveys a sense of collective achievement and celebration.

They've suddenly been stopped short of celebrating the accomplishment of the goals which they've worked almost single-mindedly for much of their lives.

After years of hard work, they feel robbed of many treasured “lasts” and crave some sort of recognition as they get ready to move on with the rest of their lives.



Now, they must prepare themselves to enter the job market in a major economic recession, without the closure they feel they deserve.

“Devastated, confused, angry are the kind of emotions that me and a lot of my classmates are going through. We understand public health and public safety ... but commencement is truly one of the most memorable events in our lives. So I think we’re all pretty astounded that they would think that this was the right decision at this time.” UCLA Student (LA Times)


“The last several days have left me and many of my peers in a state of shock, confusion, awe, and fear.”

Harvard Student (NY Times)

*“For a lot of us, this is a group journey,” she said.
“Our families have been with us through it and
this is a moment we were all hoping for
together. It feels like it’s being ripped away.”*

UC Irvine Student (LA Times)

Why Commencement Matters

A high-angle, wide shot of a large crowd of graduates at a commencement ceremony. They are all wearing black academic regalia, including caps and gowns. The graduates are seated in rows, and many are looking towards the front of the ceremony. Some graduates have personalized their caps with various designs, including names and symbols. The overall atmosphere is one of a significant, shared event.

Traditions provide a comforting sense of connection and belonging especially in times of uncertainty.

1

"Traditions act as a compass for all human relationships and personal interactions, the qualitative experiences of family life, and ultimately, the development of civilized societies themselves. Predictability and tradition gives comfort in an otherwise shaky, unknowable world."

– Psych Today

- + Traditions provide **shared values and mutual comfort** – particularly craved in tumultuous times.
- + Traditions create a **sense of belonging** and unite college communities. ¹
- + Traditions create **intergenerational links** between the current participant and those before them. ²
- + Graduation is steeped in tradition and is **all about community and connectedness.**

1. Source: Psychology Today

2. Source: Psychology Alive

Graduation provides self-satisfaction and psychological reward.

2



"It's the ceremonial aspect of it, after 4 years **it feels good** to have a big ceremony to conclude the chapter"

– UW Madison Senior

"Happy memories, such as graduation ceremonies, **create stronger bonds** with the institution"

– Behavioral economist, Carnegie Mellon University

- + Commencement ceremonies are a **psychological reward** for the hard work of college. ^{3, 4}
- + The acknowledgement **releases dopamine in the brain**, one of the four happiness chemicals. ^{3, 4}
- + Graduation is a satisfying opportunity to **reflect and reminisce**.
- + A positive emotional association with commencement **increases loyalty** to the institution.

3



Graduation is a key memory to draw back on when they need reinforcement in the future.

*“It’s a place marker for this point in your life. Like a save point. It is a memory maker of what you have achieved, a mental steppingstone. **It helps with motivation** continuing forward.”*

– Anonymous Graduate, Reddit

- + 70% of individuals experience imposter syndrome⁵
- + The tangible memory of graduation day **legitimizes the graduates' efforts** and provides an accessible touch point to draw back on.⁶
- + It acts as a **cognitive anchoring point**.⁶
- + Graduation is less about the ending and more about the new beginning.

5. Forbes

6. American Psychological Association

Graduation acts as a critical marker of transition or rite of passage.

A group of graduates in black gowns and caps are silhouetted against a bright sunset sky. They are standing on a hill, and many have their arms raised in celebration. Several graduation caps are seen flying through the air above the group.

4

*“Graduating is such a concluding moment to college; I **don’t know what I would do moving forward. I’d just feel so incomplete.** ... The college experience is literally working yourself up to this moment.”*

- Senior at University of Kentucky

*“I don’t think we ever thought we wouldn’t be back for commencement and all of those rights of passage markers, to have that all erased, there’s going to be **a profound emotional effect.**”*

-President of Drew University

- + The graduation ceremony is the closest thing most Americans have to a **rite of passage** into adulthood. ⁷
- + Commencement provides **closure for the graduate** and a signal to others of their new position.⁷
- + Without the details of graduation such as the caps, tassels, walk, and pomp, **years of education simply merge into life.** ⁷
- + Graduates who did not attend their commencement ceremony often express regret. ⁶

Graduation is a moment of pride and accomplishment for the entire family.

5



*“A college graduation ceremony is **not for the student so much as it is for the parents/family.** They deserve that moment to feel proud that their child is graduating college, giving them the chance to have bragging rights and feel like they set you up for success.”*

– Anonymous Graduate, Reddit

- + Graduation is the moment of **acknowledgment for those who supported financially and/or emotionally.**
- + It could be a lifelong dream to see the first generation of a family graduate. ⁴
- + It creates a **sense of accomplishment for parents** that they successfully raised their child.
- + It serves as important **role-modeling** for younger siblings, relatives, or friends. ⁸
- + **It acts as a motivator for others** to attend that university.
- + It is tangible evidence why the graduate may have been less available for those close in their life during their time in school. ⁸

Key Takeaway

Graduation represents the culmination of one of the most significant periods of transformation in a person's life. Feeling robbed of such a critical component diminishes the power of the entire experience.

How Can We Address This?

The Opportunity

In the absence of the traditional commencement ceremony, create a phased approach of online and offline experiences that highlight and resolve the missed emotions of pride, achievement and connection felt by students.

Phase 1: Tradition

- Recreate key traditions – like Seniors' Week – leading up to graduation, which live online and are highly shareable
- Develop key touch points that build comradery and shared experiences – just in a new way
- Build energy and community online through user-generated content and brand sharing

Phase 2: Recognition

- Whether or not you have an online commencement ceremony or not, it's important to acknowledge and celebrate the graduation day
- Develop a series of offline (perhaps a special mailer) and digital initiatives that highlight the graduates and most importantly, draw acknowledgement from family and friends.

Phase 3: Closure

- Host a unique, in-person celebration for all spring 2020 graduates – separate from other graduating classes – to create a self-identifying and unique level of closure.
- Focus on shared experiences, stories and successes that will bond this class to each other and your brand for life.

**INTERESTED IN DISCUSSING COMMENCEMENT IDEAS THAT
WILL CREATE LASTING MEMORIES FOR YOUR 2020 GRADS?**

We would love to talk.

Email us at highered@bvk.com.

