
Amplified

Jim Paterson

nxiety

COVID-19 is taking a mental toll on students as they plan for college, but college admission counselors say connections can ease uncertainty.

For many students struggling through high school closures and rapid changes to their postsecondary plans, there has been one overriding theme during the last six months: uncertainty.

Instead of savoring familiar traditions and farewells, they faced months of upheaval that tossed around every aspect of their lives during a period that should have instead been focused on excitement about the next stage. Added to that, they are looking ahead to an uncertain future in college and perhaps even long-term in the world beyond that.

"The version of high school and college that's been guaranteed for many generations is now contingent on an ambiguous and uncertain return to the way things were," said Jaime Meline, associate director of college counseling at the Marin Academy (CA), a private college preparatory high school in San Rafael.

"There are so many unknowns and it creates a lot of anxiety," said Christine Loo, director of college counseling at the Stony Brook School (NY). "That's what anxiety really is—a fear of what we don't know and can't control. And these students certainly have faced that."

A survey released in late July by Junior Achievement (JA) indicated that among students from 13–17 years of age, two-thirds were worried about attending school in-person this fall, with nearly 40 percent having said they were "extremely concerned" or "very concerned." About 70 percent said their parents are worried.

About one quarter of the young people responding said they were concerned "that their dreams won't come true," and a similar number felt they might not be able to have job or career that will pay enough. In a separate survey in May, JA found one-third of students planning to attend college said they are less excited, with the biggest concerns being the academic quality (58 percent), dorm life (53 percent), missing school events (44 percent), and dining halls (40 percent).

SELF-CARE

Like others who have critical roles providing service to frustrated, confused, and frightened people during the pandemic, counselors who work with students and their families have remained on the job, often in difficult circumstances with new challenges affecting their own emotional well-being.

Many report that they've had to be aware of the toll the job takes on their own mental health—and find they can't serve their students well if they don't separate their work from their own lives.

"I tell my friends who work in other industries that my job is coronavirus," said Breanne Boyle, master counselor at the college consulting firm Collegewise and president-elect of the Western Association for College Admission Counseling. "I can't get away from it. Everything I do every single day now is related to how coronavirus is affecting education as a whole and the families I work with."

She said she knows the coronavirus crisis is even more dramatically impacting colleagues at colleges and high schools.

"We need to be easy on ourselves," she suggested. "This is an industry of warriors. We fight for students and advocate for what is best for them, and it's been exacerbated by this pandemic. It's okay to take a day off—even a week. Take time for yourself. You aren't helping your students if you are fried every day."

She said she limits her intake of news and pulls away from work in the evening and on weekends. "It also means keeping my families informed, but only once or twice a month. I am not helping them process all of this, especially if they are inundated with information and can't keep up," Boyle continued. "We should project the calm we'd like them to exhibit."

She said she follows recommended guidelines for personal health, including getting outside to exercise safely, and sleeping and eating well.

"Practicing self-care is cliché for a reason—we need it and it's important," she said.

Gina Gerrato-Greenhaus, head of Greenhaus College Consulting in San Diego, agreed. "I know that this has taken a toll on a lot of people and we are all looking forward to a time when things will get back to normal," she said. Since March, Gerrato-Greenhaus has maintained social connections; gotten outside; and taken up more gardening, which she didn't have time for or as much interest in previously.

"I think this is a good time to be productive, enhance your creativity, and look toward the future," she said.

Maintaining personal and professional friendships is key, said Jaime Meline, associate director of college counseling at the Marin Academy, a private college preparatory high school in San Rafael, California.

"I will be the first to admit that at the beginning of the pandemic, my emotional well-being was secondary to that of my students and my focus was primarily on them," she said. "I spent my day hours meeting with them, and my nights making them handmade graduation gifts or editing their waitlist letters."

Connecting with others helped her find balance. "I asked, 'Are you feeling burned out too, or is it just me?' The pandemic has forced me to understand that sharing my own vulnerability with trusted colleagues can actually allow me to be more present for my students during those many hours over Zoom," Meline said.

Keeping track of any signs of excessive stress or severe mood changes is important, experts say, and increases might suggest it's time to contact a professional. The American Counseling Association offers tips for self-care and the Centers for Disease Control offer ways to cope emotionally with emergencies.

Meline emphasized that she, too, found it was very important to separate work from her personal life.

"Now, when I feel the urge to respond to my students in the evenings, I remember that boundary-setting is as much for them as it is for me. In the same way I want my students to step away from their computers and recharge, I too need time to let go of the ups and downs of 2020 and prepare for our new normal. We all need the time to step away, go for a walk, and refocus on ourselves."

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Meline, Loo, and others working with high schoolers have used a range of strategies to help them manage shifting postsecondary plans and changes to the admission process. But at the same time, counselors have had to come up with ways to address the emotional concerns of college-bound students.

"Their worries are varied and serious," said Gina Gerrato-Greenhaus, head of Greenhaus College Consulting in San Diego. "For one thing, they are thinking: 'Am I going to be paying $50,000 just for a bunch of online classes?'"

Breanne Boyle, master counselor at the college consulting firm Collegewise and president-elect of the Western Association for College Admission Counseling, emphasizes that the concerns are wide-ranging and unique for each student.

"Students are worried and parents are probably more worried. There are questions about the fall and what colleges will be doing with the campus, safety, health measures, residence halls, classes, and other issues," she said. "We need to support the students and families we work with and whatever their needs are."

FAMILIAR UNKNOWNS

The uncertainty is something college teams will be aware of because they and their students already have been experiencing it, said Donnell Wiggins, assistant vice president for strategic enrollment management and dean of admission at the University of Dayton (OH).

The university has beefed up its counseling staff and other supports, Wiggins said. It has also proactively and more aggressively reached out to prospects and enrollees, especially those who might have difficult circumstances that have made the current confusing situation even more challenging. They are, for instance, offering opportunities for "special circumstance appeals" related to financial aid or fees.

Adrian Flores, college transition coordinator at one of three campuses for the Carmen High School of Science & Technology in Milwaukee, has seen a variety of issues arise with his students, more than 90 percent of whom live in poverty.

They often don't have the materials, technology, or time to shift to coursework or college exploration online and may have stressful home and work circumstances—some even working long hours as essential employees. (One of his students was working 15 hours a day while trying to complete high school assignments, and another has been supervising siblings through most of the day and evening.) It's often hard to imagine the unique ways they struggle, he said.

"People working with these kids will have to lead with empathy. Even the smallest thing might be a lot harder for them," Flores said.

Flores and Wiggins urged high school counselors to use their remaining communications with graduates to ensure the students understand that support is available at colleges. It's a message that should be echoed in communications with all students in the COVID-19 era, they say. But counselors should also prepare their students for a new reality.

"There was so much they didn't get to experience in an important time in their development, and they have been so isolated," Wiggins said. "So, what can our institutions do? How can we elevate their sense of

belonging during these times? I'm expecting kids to want to be more social and more engaged, but that engagement will have to look a lot different than it has in the past."

While many of these students have become comfortable and competent with online connections—it was a big part of their lives before the pandemic—they are now a bit "Zoom tired," Meline said.

Flores agreed and said it will be important for all professionals working with these students to make a variety of connections. "Not everything has to be a call to action. Despite the delays and how complicated things have gotten and the need to accomplish so much, we have to slow down and relate to these students personally," he said.

Gerrato-Greenhaus suggested that since some activities and organizations that students expect on campus won't be available, colleges should think of alternatives to improve student comfort and emotional health, including online events and in-person programs that adhere to appropriate health and safety protocols.

Loo noted that several colleges have canceled some sports, a blow to those who have for years been active in athletics or rely on them for scholarships. Many students just expect sports to be part of college life and a way to connect to others and the campus. In those cases, other options to create an inclusive campus culture should be explored.

FIVE TIPS

Here are five things that can help your students with the emotional upheaval they have faced during the COVID-19 pandemic:

- **Offer lots of info.** Facing so much uncertainty, students and their families want good information they can count on.
- **Reach out regardless.** The issues students have faced this year are unlike others previously seen, so it's likely their responses may be different and emotional concerns may not present in typical ways. Normal dorm room conflicts, for instance, could be heightened. Isolation from home may be felt even more dramatically. Existing emotional problems can be ramped up. It may require more proactive involvement by professionals.
- **Make connections, carefully.** Students have benefited from the availability of online communications and doing things virtually, but they are also are weary of it and want personal connections. Counselors may have to make an extra effort to check in personally, while recognizing that in-person contact or other gatherings may make students uncomfortable and reluctant to seek help with academic, health, or personal issues.
- **Don't sugar coat…** Students don't need to be given false hope or a rosy forecast at all times. They want certainty about some things and an honest assessment of risks and potential changes.
- **…but offer normalcy.** Incoming college freshmen, especially, have dealt with so much uncertainty. They are looking for things to be as normal as possible, especially at this time of their lives that is supposed to be so exciting. Look for ways to make things seem familiar—signs of a return to expected patterns.

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DIFFERENT NEEDS

Wiggins said the concern and attention to social justice issues may have also heightened student emotions, and Gerrato-Greenhaus points out that counselors also should recognize that students with existing mental health issues may find those are amplified. "The students who have issues with depression or anxiety for instance—those will perhaps be more intense," he noted.

It will be key to stay alert to the effects of these unique and unfamiliar experiences, she said, providing support even when it may not seem necessary and offering a lot of information to combat the uncertainty that has existed and will persist.

"Over-communication is important," said Meline. "The families who feel institutions are radio silent have the least amount of trust. These parents are understandably resorting to Facebook groups, which are full of speculation and little concrete information."

Campuses having parent webinars, frequent parent email communications, and transparent reporting about COVID-19 and their contingency plans are most likely to stabilize enrollment and make students and parents comfortable and stress-free, Meline said. She suggests they become "sounding boards" for students and their parents too.

Loo believes professionals also can make it clear to students that they are not alone, and that others have similar experiences and concerns.

"Everybody had a wonky last semester. Nobody has been able to test. Everyone's activities have been canceled. That is the context for every senior who has been impacted in similar ways—and students should understand that so they don't feel alone in this. We don't want to put the word out that everything will be awesome, but that we can adjust and get through this."

Jim Paterson is a writer and former school counselor living in Lewes, Delaware.