The long-awaited spring 2020 held many anticipated moments for me as a second-year graduate student. This semester meant I would experience many last events with my cohort, students and staff, begin a new practicum experience, continue the job search, and most importantly, graduate with my master’s degree. While COVID-19 has changed how these moments look, I have been very thankful to be working for institutions that work incredibly hard to ensure these experiences will happen to the degree they are capable.

When the news about COVID-19 began and institutions were turning to distance learning, my emotions were a state of numbness. This numbness was a neutral reaction. I was not sure how to process the state of our country, but my focus was on converting my work to an online scope and supporting students as they returned from spring break. The first two weeks felt like months with the amount we were adjusting to and restructuring in our worlds. To me, as both a student affairs professional and as a student, it all felt surreal.

Eventually, I was faced with reality. I thought about every moment I would have had this semester. From celebrating and saying goodbye to seniors on campus to traveling for potential job interviews, it all came rushing to the front of my mind. This was my last semester in grad school and none of this would look like how I had pictured for so long.

While this realization set me back, I realized something important. I had been caught off-guard by this feeling because I had been focusing all my energy on the transition. Whenever I was asked how I felt about my last semester, my answer never felt sincere. I realize now that was my mind not coping with my current reality. I needed to begin to take care of myself, think about the present, and prepare for the future. This pandemic has taught me more about myself than a normal semester could have. I am sharing the lessons I have learned (through the lens of a graduate student) that I hope can assist others during this time.

**Be Transparent and Patient**

Busy culture is all around us. There are so many extracurriculars and projects in the higher education field for us to be involved with. Now, with the shift to online, these assignments and projects may seem monstrous. Whether it is purely the energy it takes to perform such a large task or remote work has left you with minimal motivation, you need to note your ability to progress. Be transparent with your supervisor and professors. This opens a stage for a
conversation about adding members to the project team, finding projects more suited to you, or simply giving you time to generate enough motivation to move along.

Be patient with staff, faculty, and students around you. If you are not feeling the sluggishness from the changes that have happened, it does not mean that others around you are not. Encourage an atmosphere of patience and transparency to help your team work to the best of their ability.

Expand Your Circle: Take Advantage of the Ability to Connect
If any other graduate student is like me, my job search has been hindered by the pandemic. There are multiple times that I have been at a loss of what I will do this summer. It is hard to remain positive in uncertainty around the job market we are entering.

What has kept me optimistic is the reality that many other people have been granted similar amounts of free time just like me. This is a perfect time to tap into your resources and expand your professional network. Reach out to your mentors, staff, professors, and cohort to ask them if they have connections in certain areas or fields you would like to enter. This time is perfect for seeking advice, sharing experiences, and growing your circle for the future.

Be Present and Reach Out: Make the Most of the Time Left
What has been difficult about this current reality is how abruptly we left those who were part of our daily routine. We are missing times we spent with others that meant most to us. Now more than ever, friends and colleagues are both easy to reach but so far from us.

What has meant the most to me during this time is utilizing video streaming services to talk to different people I have been missing. Whether it is our weekly staff meeting, after-work cohort group calls, student meetings, or lunchtime video calls with friends, I do my best to be present. I have come to realize how essential these calls are to improve my week. Even if I am feeling defeated in every aspect of my life at that moment, seeing another face and hearing about their day helps me find joy. I realize how much time I have left to be a graduate student with my friends, students, and colleagues; I want to soak up every last moment I have with them.

Take Care of Yourself: It’s Okay to Grieve
I shared that it was a particularly slow processing time for me when we began shifting to distance learning. It took me so long to accept this current reality because I needed to grieve my losses. There is no rulebook on how each individual should act during this time of uncertainty. Each
person needs the time to accept the current reality and what it means for them. I do believe that in the grieving process, we should think about what comforts us and can help us carry on.

I finally let myself grieve without the guilt of needing to finish a project or an assignment. This process looks different for everyone, and I do encourage you to allow yourself to let out a heavy sigh and relax your shoulders. The past couple of weeks have been a whirlwind. We may not have the answer to everything right now, but we can take care of ourselves until we do. Whether you go to bed a little earlier, call up a good friend, go on a long walk, read a book, catch up on a series, or do absolutely nothing, we need to allow ourselves to slow down to make sense of the current reality.

The current circumstances are not ideal for anyone. This time will teach us most about ourselves, students, colleagues, institutions, and our field. For you, the Class of 2020, please know that your work has not gone unnoticed. I hope the best for your present and your future. Many are extremely proud of how far we have come and will support us wherever we intend to go. I encourage all professionals and soon-to-be professionals to take time for themselves and care for one another. We will make the most of our current reality with the support of each other.

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