

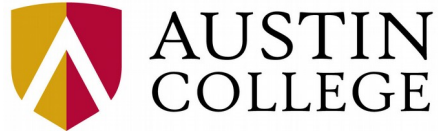
May 13, 2020

To the Department's Graduating Seniors,

We live in interesting times, to paraphrase the supposedly Chinese (but actually English) lament. To the many of you with whom I have spoken this semester, the COVID-19 pandemic and its many disruptions have been on your minds along with most everyone else. For you in particular, hours away from that traditional rite of passage toward semi-official adulthood in US American life, this probably changes things. And how could it not? You have had to watch it unfold from the sidelines as you gauge exactly what of the future you've imagined and prepared for is salvageable into a workable plan. None of this is easy.

I write to you as the department's chair and on-duty representative while my colleagues wrap up their sabbaticals. I also write to you as an alum; sixteen years ago, I was in your shoes. I was part of that half-step who came before you who had to figure out how to move past the disruptions of 9/11 and then the Great Recession, each fraught with a million unanswered questions. If you'll allow this anthropologist to share his two decade assessment of this community, I have reason to believe that you're going to be more than fine. You see, there are durable truths about AC students. For instance, people have a unique tendency to find their way into fountains on their birthdays. And when was the last time an AC student answered "How's it going," like a responsible social actor? Most relevant to this situation, AC students, each in their own way, tend to want to contribute to a change in the norms of the conditions they're in. You're ones who are impatient to see the world change and design your future around contributing to it. In other words, you want to actively be the disruption. Those of you who have spent much time in our department in particular have been studying the processes and patterns which make and break those norms. Such a study has given you insight into the frameworks that make social distance and isolation so hard to perform and sustain and also why the simulacra of remote-everything is no substitute for genuine human connection. From this perspective, I propose that you have been preparing for this future all along.

A real college education has long been the surest preparation for an uncertain world. You haven't been training for a hyper-specialty which may or may not exist next year. You have spent the last four years in earnest pursuit of growth and development, making a serious investment in yourself. You have developed a sense of comfort with intellectual discomfort. You have read and studied things which you could not have anticipated, subjects which you



perhaps thought you could not master, and yet here you are. Above all you have been working on an approach to others, a kind of arms-length curiosity from which to learn their sense of reality. This critical approach to human beings will always serve you, no matter how remotely we connect with each other. The world may have fired its starting pistol when you weren't fully in position, but you're ready to run.

I know you may have wanted to hear from my senior colleagues as well. You still can. If I may suggest, it is not the faculty who move on at graduation. You know where to find us, and we want to hear from you as you find your next vantage from which to see the world.

May you make the most of interesting times,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads 'Brian Watkins'. The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name 'Brian' being more prominent than the last name 'Watkins'.

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