

### COVID-19 vs. Me

I had a great senior year of high school (all 3 quarters of it). The most important year of my high school career started out great, from going to homecoming with my closest friends, eagerly making my graduation announcements, going to every high school football game, and watching my boyfriend play his heart out on the soccer field every week in the winter. Four years of hard work and amazing memories led up to the most important milestone of my life thus far: my high school graduation. Sadly, COVID-19 ruined this very special milestone for me. All of the tests, assignments, club meetings, and volunteer work I had completed over the course of my academic career meant nothing to me if I couldn't walk across that stage. I received my high school diploma, one of the biggest accomplishments in my lifetime, being masked up in the safety of my own car as my teachers lined the sidewalks with encouraging posters waving in their hands. I appreciated their effort in trying to make our less than ideal situations better, but it was depressing to say the least. Instead of hearing my name echo over a loudspeaker, shaking hands with my principal, and reaching for my long awaited high school diploma, I sat in my living room surrounded by my immediate family and watched a picture slideshow of myself and the rest of my graduating classmates.



After about a month of being officially graduated, however, I was given the chance to walk the stage and experience a graduation after all. I was so excited, but it just wasn't the same. It took place on my high school football field with countless chairs spread far apart. No family members were permitted to spectate and my peers and I had to remain fully masked as faculty was trying to reduce the spread of COVID-19. This was not a difficult task for them considering a majority of the chairs remained empty throughout the graduation ceremony. Only a small fraction of my classmates even showed up. It just felt wrong. This was a moment I was supposed to share with the classmates I had grown up with and known for years. It boggled my mind as to why the majority of them did not want this smidge of normalcy during those strange and unknown times. Why didn't they want to experience this important moment? Perhaps the monumental academic milestone that is a high school graduation, was not as important to others as it was for me.



COVID-19 affected me in other ways as well, and introduced me to the world of online learning as I entered my first year of college at

ASU. Prior to living on campus, I was hopeful that my freshman year would be more normal. My first time living away from home, starting long distance with my boyfriend, and leaving behind the only friends I had ever known was hard enough as it was. Beginning this new journey during a pandemic was extremely heavy and difficult for me. I walked into class on my first day of college accompanied by only one other classmate. Fully masked up, we still expressed the most clearly visible faces in that classroom as dozens of black zoom boxes stared back at us. This clarified the “classroom” culture for the remainder of my freshman year as a sun devil. Given this, I eventually adopted a completely remote learning career as the COVID-19 cases were spiking on campus. Not to mention, my roommate and I were isolated and lonely, as depressing as it sounds. Freshman year is the year that is normally meant for making connections and relationships with new people. But how? There were no events. There were no football games. Hardly anyone showed up to classes in person. COVID-19 was the root cause of all of this and it impaired my ability to create meaningful connections with my fellow peers during my freshman year.

Currently, COVID-19 is slowly becoming a figment of the past. Early into the pandemic, this once fear-provoking and ruthless virus scared many into never leaving their homes. Teachers and professors would do their best to teach hundreds of students from behind a computer screen. Children were forced out of classrooms in likely the most cognitively sensitive points of their lives. This virus drove countless companies out of business, postponed weddings, parties, and other gatherings, and prevented people from gathering in religious sanctuaries. Lockdowns had to be ensued in the most high risk cities across the globe. COVID-19 manifested all of these societal disconnects, and many more. But today, we are taking the vaccine and doing whatever we can to eradicate the virus altogether. Now that we have learned more about the virus and how to beat it, COVID-19 no longer invokes as much fear in the general public. Rather, at this point in time, it seems to act more as a symbol of hope and progress. People are going back to work, children are back in the classroom, religious masses and ceremonies are starting up again, and some colleges are finally returning to back to their normal procedures. My college campus no longer looks like a ghost town, I have finally attended numerous on-campus events, and ASU football games are always packed with spectators. We have come a long way since the first few COVID-19 cases were recorded, and as we progress into the future and leave the virus in the past, we should remember the strength and growth we have gained through overcoming adversity.

