



OPINION

OTHER VOICES



University of California at Berkeley graduate Tyler Lyson stands in front of Sproul Hall on the closed Cal campus in Berkeley, Calif., on Monday, May 11, 2020. Lyson watched his parents' financial collapse in the Great Recession, a decade ago. He vowed he'd find the security they never had: He would get a college degree. (Inset): This May 8, 2020 photo provided by Mireya Benavides shows her in Del Valle, Texas. The 17-year old had considered a community college to save money, but instead chose the University of Texas-San Antonio. She knows it will be a financial squeeze. (AP)

Class of 2020: Fear of the future

Corona clouds a class with crisis

By Sharon Cohen and Jocelyn Gecker

CALIFORNIA, May 19, (AP): Tyler Lyson watched his parents' financial collapse in the Great Recession, a decade ago. He vowed he'd find the security they never had: He would get a college degree.

The 27-year-old won a full scholarship to the University of California-Berkeley and, on Monday, will become the first in his family to graduate from college. "I'm supposed to be doing great," he said.

Instead, he feels powerless and panicked, with a political science degree that he fears may prove worthless. He has a 7-month-old baby and his wife, a United Airlines flight attendant, fears losing her job. In the past several weeks, he has applied for about 35 jobs, all over the country.

He's also considering the military. "Unfortunately, they always need people," he said. "And the benefits are so good."

More months ago, the graduates of the Class of 2020 seemed all but assured of success. The economy was booming. The stock market had closed the year strong. The unemployment rate, on the decline for years, had dropped to a 50-year low of 3.5% in February. Jobs outnumbered applicants, and fears of a recession had faded.

Then came the pandemic, shattering the economy. Last month, more than 20.5 million jobs vanished as the unemployment rate soared to 14.7% — the worst since the Great Depression. The high hopes of graduates crashed as corporations slashed budgets and rescinded offers of jobs and internships.

For working-class students who defied the odds to get a college education, it's hard to be optimistic about the future. There's a sense of an unending crisis, with loans due and family members laid off.

These graduates will be competing not just with experienced workers but with those in another Class of 2020 — high school graduates who aren't college-bound or have put their dreams on hold to join the job hunt, in some cases to help newly unemployed parents.

Others are opting for a two-year junior college instead of a four-year program or taking a gap year or have decided it's not worth paying tuition for schooling that may be conducted only online.

In California's agricultural Central Valley, the county of Merced has six high schools with about 2,500 graduating seniors, many from low-income or immigrant families. Typically, about 40% head to college and the rest go straight to jobs in mechanics, construction, agriculture and hospitality — industries that, for now, are wiped out or stagnant.

"The future looks very, very grim," Merced's assistant superintendent Constantino Aguilar said. "Where do these students go? A lot of doors have been closed. We're trying to plan for our students' futures and there is nothing out there for them."

Still, some high school grads are determined to proceed with their college plans despite the economic chaos.

Mireya Benavides, 17, had considered a community college to save money, but instead chose the University of Texas-San Antonio. She knows it will be a financial squeeze. Her single mother, a school custodian, is the sole support for her and three siblings and was out of work part of this spring.

Benavides hopes a work-study program — and maybe eventual scholarships and loans, along with financial help from her mother — will be enough to make ends meet. She said she's confident something will work out. College has always been next on her agenda.

"If I don't go to school, where would I be?" she asked. "Who would I become? I want to have a future. I just want to point myself in the right direction and move forward."

So does 22-year-old DJ Brooks, who finds himself in an uneasy limbo. Just months ago, he thought he'd be welcoming family for a June graduation celebration at Carleton College in Minnesota as the first in his family to earn a degree. He'd worked two jobs while in school, helping his mother pay her bills. He figured he would have a job lined up, likely as a counselor, having earned a psychology degree.

Instead, he's navigating what he calls a "sea of unexpectedness," sending

'This is like a safety net'

Thousands defer plans to quit military

WASHINGTON, May 19, (AP): Army Sgt Antonio Gozikowski was planning to leave the military next month and head to college.

After serving for six years, the dental assistant's goal was to become a dentist, and then return to the Army in a few years with his expanded medical skills. But now, with the coronavirus forcing universities to consider virtual or reduced schooling this fall, he decided to take advantage of a new Army program and extend his military service for six more months.

Across the military, uncertainty about future jobs or college opportunities is driving more service members to re-enlist or at least postpone their scheduled departures. As unemployment, layoffs and a historic economic downturn grip the nation, the military — with its job security, steady paycheck and benefits — is looking much more appealing.

"Everything from elementary schools to universities is closing down and there's no saying how it's going to go when the fall semester

opens," said Gozikowski, adding that he's hoping schools start opening up for spring semester. "This is like a safety net. I have a source of income and I'll be able to continue working."

Gozikowski, who is from Cherry Hill, New Jersey, and is serving at Fort Hood, Texas, is one of hundreds of service members who are taking advantage of newly developed, short-term extensions being offered by the military.

As of last week, the Army had already exceeded its retention goal of 50,000 soldiers for the fiscal year ending in September, re-enlisting more than 52,000 so far. And the other services have also met or are closer than planned to their target numbers. The influx of people re-enlisting will offset any shortfalls in recruiting, which has been hampered by the outbreak. And that will help the services meet their total required troop levels for the end of the year.

"We're hiring," said Army Secretary Ryan McCarthy. "Like anything, market dynamics come into

effect and people will see where the opportunities lie."

Sgt Maj Stuart Morgan, the senior Army career counselor, said Gozikowski was able to take advantage of a new program designed to help soldiers who were planning to leave this year but are now worried and reconsidering their options. The program allows them to delay their departure for up to 11 months to get them past the peak coronavirus period. By early last week, he said, 745 soldiers had signed up.

"What we're seeing this year, which is directly related to COVID, is we do have a population of soldiers that what they were expecting at the end of transition has suddenly disappeared," Morgan said. "And now you have a soldier that is trying to go through a transition period that is now facing uncertainty on the outside."

The Air Force is already expecting to fall short of its recruiting goal by as much as 5,800 as a result of the virus. And that gap, the Air Force said, could be filled by service members who decide to re-

enlist or extend their service.

So far, the number of Air Force personnel who have withdrawn their requests to leave the service or have asked to extend their enlistment is 700 more than last year at this time, including 230 pilots and medical staff.

For one pilot, the opportunity to make that sudden change of course was a relief. In discussing his plans, he asked that his name not be used to preserve any future employment options.

Nearly two months ago, he was in Miami taking an airline certification course and getting ready for his next career. For months, he and his fellow pilots at Scott Air Force Base in Illinois had been talking about which airlines were hiring.

"Everybody was getting out," the 10-year transport aircraft pilot said in an interview from the air base. "The conversations were like, oh, who got picked up by Southwest, who got picked up by American, who got picked up by Delta. And then the whole coronavirus thing started to play its course."

or resumes at a time of furloughs and hiring freezes. He'll probably return to Chicago to live with his mother.

"I don't have a backup plan," he said. "I had higher hopes." It took just a few weeks for the pandemic to derail Tariq Murphy's future. In December and January, the Morehouse College senior was flying high, interviewing for internships. In March, it all fell apart.

The school was forced to close and Murphy, a marketing major, had no place to live. Morehouse put him and about 30 other students up in a hotel. He's now plotting his next steps, with \$88,000 in debt hanging over him.

"I can't sugarcoat the fear," the 28-year-old New Jersey native said. "I'm someone who likes to have a plan. It's sometimes hard to sleep. I said to my dean it's like a nightmare that never ends."

Some graduates have managed to find work despite the shrinking opportunities. After graduating from Morehouse, Grant Bennett will return to the high-tech firm in Silicon Valley where he interned last year.

"I kind of have survivor's guilt," he said. "I see a lot of friends struggling and I feel very cozy knowing I have something."

He's definitely one of the lucky ones. Historically, college graduates entering the work force during a recession have faced setbacks that can last a decade or longer.

It's a "frightening" time to be looking for a first job, said Jesse Rothstein,

a senior economist in the Obama administration who teaches public policy and economics at Berkeley. "If you don't get a good job when you start out, it hurts you not just now but for years to come."

In the short term, young graduates are more likely to be unemployed or settle for lower-paying work. They often miss out on valuable training that can set them on a career path and, once the economy recovers, they have permanently lower employment and earnings, Rothstein found in a study published last year on the impact of the 2008 recession on college grads.

Whether the Class of 2020 will face long-term setbacks depends on the severity of the recession and the speed of economic recovery, he said. The longer it lasts, the worse the damage.

As he struggles to find work, Tyler Lyson is considering leaving Berkeley to move back home to Post Falls, Idaho, where it's cheaper, even though it would feel like giving up on his dreams.

As a teen, he watched his family lose everything in the recession. His father's construction business collapsed and the family had to leave their foreclosed house so quickly that they dumped just about everything they owned into a pit and set it on fire.

"I watched it all go up in smoke — everything we owned," Lyson said. "Ever since then, I knew I needed to go to college and have something to fall back on."

editor's choice

