

Harvard Postpones Commencement Indefinitely? Tele-Education and Tele-Medicine

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Founded in 1636, Harvard commencements began in 1642, a handful of graduates alone in its early years, nine in 1642.

There were few college entrants at that time. In the 17th century after the school's founding, there were no graduates in five years, one alone in 1652 and 1654.

Lots of eating, drinking, and "dancings" were part of early commencements that were conducted in Latin.

No one got a diploma until 1813. Anyone wanting one had to enlist a calligrapher to draw it.

One of my relatives, an older generation cousin, produced Harvard's diplomas for the class of 1956 and others for a number of years during the post-WW II period.

No honorary Harvard degrees were awarded until 1692. The first one to a non-academic went to Benjamin Franklin in 1753.

In 1936, George Bernard Shaw declined an honorary Harvard degree offered him, saying the following in part:

"... I cannot pretend that it would be fair for me to accept university degrees when every public reference of mine to our educational system, and especially to the influence of the universities on it, is fiercely hostile," adding:

"If Harvard would celebrate its three hundredth anniversary by burning itself to the ground and sowing its site with salt, the ceremony would give me the greatest satisfaction as an example to all the other famous old corrupters of youth, including Yale, Oxford, Cambridge, the Sorbonne, etc."

Harvard and graduate school taught me to think. I did the learning on my own, mostly post-formal education.

Held indoors throughout most of its history, Harvard commencements shifted outdoors in 1922 to accommodate larger graduating classes, their families, and an array of notable alumni and invited guests, in total numbering up to about 30,000 in recent years, including faculty.

Through my graduation from the college as a class of 1956 member, it never rained on an outdoor Harvard commencement.

My mother, Sarah Lendman, graduated with me in the same class, the first and likely only mother and son to do it in Harvard's history.

She attended evening classes for \$5 a course, earning a Harvard degree for \$175, a major achievement for her with everything on her plate at the time that included being the main caregiver for her aged parents.

Back then, higher education was affordable for virtually anyone, the will to successfully complete the academic curriculum the only requirement.

Attending today entraps millions of students in debt bondage because of exorbitantly higher education costs — at a time when career opportunities are a shadow of what they were post-WW II.

In case of rain or other inclement weather that could endanger public safety, festivities are shifted partially or entirely indoors — no easy accomplishment with thousands filling much of the Harvard yard outdoors.

In March, Harvard president Lawrence Bacow announced the indefinite postponement of this year's commencement because COVID-19 mandated social distancing.

In lieu of traditional ceremonies and festivities, commencement on May 28 will be virtual, taking place online, diplomas sent graduates by mail.

Recalling the splendor of my commencement 64 years ago in mid-June, this year won't be the same.

Normal festivities are weeklong events, including activities for returning alumni, a 25th class reunion the most notable one.

In 1956, a Symphony Hall concert for Harvard alumni alone by the Boston Pops led by famed conductor Arthur Fiedler highlighted the week's festivities.

In March, tele-education replaced classroom lectures, instruction, and discussions at Harvard and other schools of higher education, continuing as long as current conditions last.

It's not the same as faculty and students together in classrooms.

In mid-March, Harvard cleared the campus of students indefinitely, emptying dorms, sending students home or to find other housing accommodations if remained in the area.

Days earlier, Harvard announced that online classes may continue in the fall semester later this year.

Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences Claudine Gay said continuing them this way indefinitely will require "rigorous and creative" solutions.

No Internet existed in my day. Even with it, education without classroom interactions isn't the same.

According to one Harvard faculty member, "(i)t is obviously a much more challenging proposition to do a semester from start to finish online."

Science courses with laboratory work can't function properly.

Tele-medicine is challenged the same way. Doctors and patients interfacing online prevents close-up examinations as needed.

It can't be done via a computer or cell phone screen with audio the same way as close up in person.

Most of my doctors are handling things this way. Calling to make an appointment runs into a recorded message with instructions, getting a live person on the phone to speak to not easy.

When people have health issues and need medical help, it's woefully inadequate if not face-to-face.

It's frustrating when there's no one to speak to, or when connecting with a live person is taxing and much more time consuming than normal.

How long current conditions will last is uncertain. If normality returns in warmer weather, followed by a second wave of coronavirus outbreaks, abnormal procedures could last well into next year, a grim possibility.

Most disturbing is that what's going on perhaps was planned and implemented by US dark forces for their own self-interest, including economic collapse intended to increase their super-wealth by free government and Fed money, along with buying troubled smaller firms at fire sale prices.

Use of chemical, biological, radiological, and other banned weapons is longstanding US policy.

The great recession of 2008-09 benefitted Wall Street and other favored corporate interests at the expense ordinary Americans and small business.

A similar plot may be unfolding now, for how long and how destructive to most people to be known in hindsight.

Dominant monied interests are protected by the state. They'll survive and prosper ahead, likely consolidated to larger size.

Thousands, many millions, of shutdown small and medium-sized businesses nationwide won't reopen, jobs for their workers gone.

Since the neoliberal 90s, the US was thirdworldized, its privileged class more wealthy and powerful than earlier.

The disturbing trend continues, a darker future likely awaiting the vast majority of Americans when the current storm ends.

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