This spring and summer, our Peak Education community, along with the rest of the nation and the world, experienced major upheavals to our personal, professional, and academic lives. While each individual or family felt the impact differently, there is no doubt that the COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting Stay-at-Home mandate challenged us all, severing our social ties, disrupting our normal school routines, and impacting our jobs and financial security.

Alongside the new challenges of the pandemic, 2020 has witnessed renewed attention to the persistent cruelties of racism—particularly within the system of law enforcement—in our city and country. As expressed in our message earlier this summer, we stand in solidarity with the black community, other persons of color, and allies demanding racial justice. We reaffirm our commitment to the social justice work in education that we have been engaged in for over 20 years.

Given the present situation, we feel that our work in southeast Colorado Springs is as important as ever. Heading toward the start of a new school year, we are in the process of creating a series of innovative, interactive, and engaging programs for students and families in the fall—with much of these likely taking place online. With the hire of Jasmine Rainey, our new Director of College Counseling, Peak Education is expanding its college counseling and scholarship application support services. Furthermore, we remain committed to reaching more students in our community. By hiring a new Assistant Program Director, Lauren Taylor, we are working closely with our new partners at North Middle School, Manitou Schools, and Fox Meadow to enroll new Peak Education Scholars.

As with every crisis that tests us, we are amazed at the strength, resilience, and solidarity that people tap into, both for themselves and to help others. In this newsletter, we chose to feature three Peak Education scholars who encountered the challenges of COVID-19 at an important transition in their lives. Read on to find out how they experienced—and conquered—the additional hurdles thrown up by the pandemic, as well as what silver linings they discovered along the way.

Sincerely,
Carlos Jimenez, Peak Education CEO
Kyland Pacheco
Rising High School Student

Kyland Pacheco is one of 28 Peak Ed Scholars who will be making the big transition from middle school into high school at the end of this summer. He is set to attend Sierra High School in the fall. Despite the changes brought on by COVID-19, Kyland is looking forward to returning to the classroom and is determined to make the most out of high school.

"I am hoping to get a scholarship out of high school to a college of my choice," said Kyland. While he is unsure what he wants to study in college, he intends to be prepared to go, adding that he aims to get good grades and set himself up for success.

According to Kyland, Peak Education will be an important resource when he begins navigating the college application process. When asked what advice he would give to an incoming Peak Ed scholar he said, "Just listen and focus."

In spite of the turbulent situation in the summer of 2020, Kyland said he’s found a silver lining in the time he gets to spend with friends. Peak Education wishes Kyland the best and remains excited to support him during his transition to Sierra High School.

Felina Gentile
College Graduate in the Workforce

Like most graduating seniors transitioning to life after college amidst a pandemic, Peak Education Alumna Felina Gentile faced some challenges this spring, but she has definitely landed on her feet. In fact, the impact of COVID-19 unexpectedly allowed her to transition from an intern, to a part-time worker, to a full-time employee (and then some!) in retail account management at T. Rowe Price. "It sounds more glamorous than it is," she stated with a laugh in a recent conversation with Peak Education, but she finds the work engaging. Like many of her peers, she works from home, which has its pros and cons. She appreciates the flexibility and is happy to skip her daily commute allowing her to save money for other things. On the other hand, she misses the opportunity to connect with her team at work and socialize with friends.

Reflecting on her final semester at UCCS as an International Business major, Felina admitted that it was sometimes harder to study and that taking an art class online without the space and materials normally available in the studio was a challenge. On the positive side, though, she noted some silver linings. For instance, one of her classes, already an online format, was taught by a professor who is normally quite busy traveling. However, due to Stay-at-Home orders, he became more available to his students online. She also credited the school for doing a good job with the transition, given how fast it happened. Professors were quick to switch to online formats, which were in some ways better; online discussion boards, for example, allow students to give and receive more feedback from everyone who might not have the chance to contribute to a live conversation or who might be more confident doing so in writing than in person.

"People are more willing to connect than you think, especially people in Peak Education. We like to help because we have gotten so much help ourselves."

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Felina Gentile, UCCS Class of 2020

Felina herself exudes confidence in her communications of all types, and she credits Peak Education in part for this. “All of the emails and check-ins helped. It got us used to communicating digitally, which is really different.” At the same time, the college visits and community service outings helped her feel comfortable with all of the live introductions and icebreakers she would encounter in college and beyond. “One of the biggest things I remember from Peak Education was our trip to the Challenger Learning Center. We had mock interviews with NASA astronauts. Talking to adults like this gave us a window into things we would do in college. It was good networking practice.”

When asked what advice she would give to incoming Peak Education Scholars, Felina encouraged them to take advantage of all the different opportunities. “Go interact with the other Peak Ed Scholars more. Go and do the community service. Connect more with the upperclassmen, as they will become a big resource for you,” as was the case for her when it came to completing scholarship applications. “Don’t be afraid to reach out. People are more willing to connect than you think, especially people in Peak Education. We like to help because we have gotten so much help ourselves.”

Ariona Iverson
High School Graduate

As with the rest of her senior cohort, Ariona Iverson’s graduation from high school this year did not go as planned. In a recent conversation with Peak Education, she remembered the rapid cancellation of sports and classes and her move to Virginia to be with family as being very stressful. However, Ariona remains on track to begin college in the fall, whatever it may be like.

Right now, she plans to take classes online at Pikes Peak Community College for one year and then go to the University of Colorado at Colorado Springs in the fall of 2021.

When Ariona started helping other people and rearranging her friend group, she found that she started to better herself.

Thinking back on the years that brought her to graduation, Ariona cited Peak Education—and specifically the support and care of Ms. Vennita Browning—as a critical part of her success. “Peak Ed definitely played a huge role in the end of middle school and in high school,” she said. Ariona explained that these years were tough ones for her, and Peak Education was a kind of “backbone” that helped her stay on top of her academics. Ariona described Peak Education as being “family-oriented,” meaning that staff, students, and families within the program share a supportive connection.

Ultimately, Ariona was able to graduate from Sierra High School in three years and also receive some college credit through GT Pathways at PPCC. While she is unsure exactly what she wants to study, Ariona is considering exploring exercise science or sports sociology and is looking forward to entering college and making that transition towards adulthood.

When asked what advice she would give to incoming Peak Education students, she said that it is important to take advantage of the resources offered throughout middle and high school. She mentioned that the scholarship opportunities were especially beneficial for her.

Ariona Iverson, Sierra Class of 2020
Speaking more generally about success in high school, Ariona offered a lesson that she learned during her first few years at Sierra. She explained that in her 9th grade year she was struggling to stay out of drama and out of trouble. Yet, when Ariona started helping other people and rearranging her friend group, she found that she started to better herself. “I made sure that I had my mindset right and everybody that was around me also had a similar mindset, if not the same,” she said.

Despite the stress and uncertainty of the COVID-19 era, Ariona has found unexpected silver linings in her own life. She says that spending more time with family reminds her how much she relies on them.

In closing, from all of us in and around the Peak Education community, we extend our congratulations and well wishes to all Peak Ed scholars and families, past and present. We are so pleased that, despite everything, we are able to feature some of your voices and express our anticipation of another great school year! 🎉

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**Message of Condolence**

During the past months, several members of the Peak Education community have experienced personal losses of friends or family members. From all of us, we extend our sympathy and condolences; we wish peace and comfort in these times of grief and loss.

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**Class of 2020**

Lara Bergman - Colorado State University - Pueblo
Claude Bigirimana - Regis University
Raena Brown - Colorado State University - Pueblo
Emma Caro - Pikes Peak Community College
Israel Castanon - Colorado State University
Lizeth De La Rosa-Vasquez - University of Colorado-Colorado Springs
Ka’Shon Dunlap - Pikes Peak Community College
Olivia Fernandez - Northeastern University
Itzel García-Vazquez - University of Colorado-Boulder
Destiny Horton-Pope - Pikes Peak Community College
Ariona Iverson - Pikes Peak Community College
Yuliana Mendoza - Pikes Peak Community College
Luz Elena Morales - Pikes Peak Community College
Fatima Munoz - Colorado State University
Sebastian Myers - Lake Forest College
Emmanuel Olvera-Velazquez - Pikes Peak Community College
Aldo Quintero - Undecided
Bryan Roman - Pikes Peak Community College
Darling Sigala - Pikes Peak Community College
Abby Steffonich - University of New Mexico
Alyssa Taylor - University of Northern Colorado
Aiden Torres - University of Colorado-Colorado Springs
Tyrese Vanhorne - University of Cincinnati
Nevaeh Vasquez - Pikes Peak Community College

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**Recent and Upcoming Events**

**College-Success Summer Program with Jasmine Rainey:** In late July, Jasmine held a 4-day virtual program helping prepare high school students for college application success. Students, be sure to check out new resources at the College Corner on our website: https://www.peakedu.org/college-corner.

**Senior Sendoff with Lauren Taylor:** In late July, Lauren organized this virtual event to congratulate seniors and support them with the transition to college.

**Social Enterprise Launch:** Coming soon this August, Peak Ed will launch a new paid college counseling service. This is an exciting new way to reach more students across the city.

**20/21 Program:** While it will likely be virtual initially, Peak Education programming will return in September.

**Mentor Program Orientations:** We are excited to announce the expansion of our mentoring programming. Organized by Benedict Wright, both our College Mentoring and new Near-Peer Mentoring programs will begin in late August or early September.

**Indy Givel 2020:** Peak Ed is returning to Give! this Fall. The Give! fundraising campaign runs from November 1st to December 31st.