

# As the Pandemic Continues, College Students Return to a Different Campus

*Young people from across the country weigh in on how Covid is impacting their college experience.*

By StudentNation

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A class is conducted by a instructor wearing a face mask on the steps outside the classroom on the campus at State University of New York at Stony Brook. (Photo by J. Conrad Williams Jr./Newsday RM via Getty Images)

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*Colleges and universities nationwide have reopened for in-person learning and students are grappling with an environment very different from the one they left. The administrative response to Covid has varied coast to coast, with some institutions mandating vaccinations, others requiring masks indoors, and still others simply offering recommendations. All students are dealing with new classroom guidelines and procedures, while many are experiencing on-campus life for the first time. To better understand the changes, we asked a range of students to tell us how Covid is impacting their college experience, including student organizing efforts for equity and justice.*

**I**n May of 2020, I submitted the last final exam of my undergraduate education from my childhood bedroom. I graduated in my parent's kitchen, watching my school's president congratulate my class through Zoom. That fall I began a PhD program in political science at CUNY Graduate Center. I have now started my second year and all my classes are online. After a full year in the program, I have still only seen my professors and the members of my cohort through a screen.

While participating in virtual classes I often find myself craving socialization and peer interaction. I think about how, before Covid, I took this aspect of education for granted. I've been lucky to have professors who put in the extra effort to make my learning experience seem as "normal" as possible, scheduling time before and after class meetings for students to talk and try to get to know each other. Although this has helped slightly, I still find the conversations forced and uncomfortable.

Despite these misgivings, Covid has helped improve my academic experience in a few ways. It is much easier to attend class if I'm sick or not feeling well, and I can take or teach classes from anywhere in the world with an Internet connection. More importantly, Covid has highlighted important preexisting disparities within our society. The virus has sparked meaningful conversations about equity and justice in numerous sectors of public life, such as education, housing, health care, and workers' rights. More people are starting to see how our government systems can often ignore our nation's most vulnerable populations, even amid a pandemic. I hope that these discussions continue, and eventually lead to positive change.

–Cassidy Morales, *City University of New York*

**A** year and a half after the Covid pandemic first forced us to leave campus, the separation from my friends and fellow fossil fuel divestment organizers still feels like an expectation. Even as I embrace the long-awaited opportunity to share physical space with my peers on returning to campus—made possible by my university community's high rate of vaccination and level of access—I remain keenly aware that we may have to adapt our plans for strategy meetings, information sessions, and public demonstrations at any moment. The reality of the ever-spreading Delta variant and general uncertainty around what this pandemic holds for the future loom in the background of the “normal” pre-pandemic life on campus many of us want so desperately to reclaim.

But if the last year and a half has taught me anything as a student organizer, it's that the possibilities for creative intervention and disruption of the status quo are boundless. When we couldn't occupy an administrative

building or storm a football field to call for climate justice, for instance, Fossil Fuel Divest Harvard channeled its energies into hosting a virtual Earth Day comedy show, filing a historic legal complaint, and securing a pro-divestment bill in the state legislature. As the circumstances of the pandemic evolve, so will the tactics we bring to bear—likely, a hybrid of complementary online and in person activism. No matter the mode of communication, it seems clear that the vast inequalities and structural injustices visible on the societal microcosms of our campuses—ones only exacerbated by Covid-19—will continue driving students to take action. The appetite for institutional accountability on the defining issues of our day, from climate change and systemic racism to labor rights and migrant justice, has never felt stronger. This academic year will test our resolve as students in many new and unexpected ways—but more than ever, it will test our willingness and ability to leverage the privileges and resources available to us in order to further a vision of equity and justice within and beyond campus walls.

—Ilana Cohen, *Harvard University*

**A**s I approach my senior year of college, the prospect of having a “normal” last hurrah seems increasingly unlikely. For a brief time during the summer, it looked like we would be returning to a fall semester similar to my sophomore year—unmasked lectures, in-person club events, and a social life unhindered by health and safety regulations. Needless to say, we were excited, if not slightly overwhelmed. And although we remain hopeful for avoiding future tight-knit pods or lengthy quarantines, the uncertainty of the continuing Covid pandemic ensures that we all remain at the edge of our seats.

Will we end up transitioning to virtual learning? Can I plan for my friend's birthday party in mid-October? Should my club be hosting in-person events? How seriously are other people taking the Delta variant? It's the uncertainty of the pandemic's future direction that affects every aspect of college life—putting a damper on what we can and can't plan for. Am I allowed to look forward to things, or will I raise my hopes just to end up disappointed?

Constantly adjusting expectations for what is normal is not only tiring logistically but also pulls on our emotional strings, and takes up space that would otherwise be reserved for focusing on our studies. If there were a future date intended to mark the sure-fire end of the pandemic, perhaps the upcoming challenges would not be so frustrating—but it's the continued uncertainty surrounding the next few months and the lack of clarity for what we should expect that has the greatest hold on our anticipatory fall semester.

—Teresa Xie, *University of Pennsylvania*

I graduated in May 2021, so nearly 40 percent of my college career was marked by the pandemic. I'm also a qualitative researcher on a nationwide longitudinal study that has been surveying college students' experiences during Covid since April 2020. A lot has emerged from our data since then—particularly regarding the on-campus social networks (with peers, professors, mentors, etc.) that were paramount to the college experience, that provide a wealth of social capital post-graduation, and that were severely disrupted by Covid.

This has a lot of implications. How can students, especially first-years and sophomores, organize to improve their institutions without having a lived, collective experience

on campus? Students' educations were reshaped by their shelter-in-place environments, many of which were structurally inhibitive to engaging in life and work as a college student. Students were left to fend for themselves, and pre-existing inequities were further exacerbated. Women, for example, reported taking on increased social responsibilities while sheltering-in-place with their family. Many Queer students had to leave the safe spaces they found on campuses to return to home environments that were more hostile to their identities. Students suddenly went from being independent emerging adults to being breadwinners and essential workers, caretakers, and 'children' again in their parents' homes. College was never an equal experience, but Covid has made that more visible and deepened the inequities.

–**Miranda Dotson, *Northeastern University***

**W**orkers at Harvard University are facing a historic landmark in their fight for labor rights during the first fully in-person semester since the onset of Covid. Every major union on Harvard's campus—including the Harvard Graduate Students Union and the dining hall workers' UNITE HERE Local 26—is bargaining for a new contract this fall. That's over 12,000 workers who are currently demanding fair pay, strengthened labor rights, and necessary protection from a university that has routinely chosen to push their needs to the sidelines, even amid the pandemic.

Despite its \$40 billion endowment increasing by 7.3 percent in 2020, the university has weaponized the pandemic as an excuse to further reduce dining hall workers' hours and avoid hiring new staff as a way to cut costs. This even when existing staff is being overworked to

accommodate the demands of safe in-person dining for all students. So far, Harvard's actions have meant dramatic cuts to food options and an increase in the use of disposable plates and silverware to account for the labor shortage. This is just one example of many—the gyms, for instance, are also understaffed.

Now, for the sake of both its students and its workers amid this pandemic, the university must make a commitment to respect the demands of those 12,000 workers, especially when many of them have been risking their lives from the beginning of the pandemic to keep the university running. We were told time and time again that we are in “unprecedented times.” In response, Harvard should now act with an unprecedented commitment to justice and fairness.

—**Sofia Andrade, *Harvard University***

**C**ovid-19 has transformed my college experience. Many students, including myself, use all of their energy just trying to stay engaged in online class. Being on the computer for nearly eight hours every day drains my motivation, but, somehow, I must keep working at the same pace of a normal school year.

Because of how much effort it takes, many students are getting burnt out. This leaves little opportunity to fight for the causes that matter on their campuses especially considering the demands of part-time jobs, unpaid internships and school leadership positions. Most of the services for students' associations and advocates have moved online, making them harder to meaningfully access and limiting how quickly students can organize. And while petitions and online movements can reach further, it's hard to make any noise in the ears of people who are either

unable to access technology or not occupying the same digital spaces. If students are completely drained by online classes, it is much harder to hold their administration accountable, or even to get the proper education for which they paid.

–Georgia Dalke, *Red River College*

I'm part of HCHS4Diversity, a student-led school integration campaign at my high school that started in June 2020, while my home city, New York, was being ravaged by Covid and the country was reeling from systemic racism. It was an incredibly stressful time—but Zoom helped our campaign in many ways. We were able to meet with students, parents, activists, and integration experts we ordinarily never could have accessed. We were able to host online forums and call-your-council-member sessions. Organizing safe protests was much more difficult, but HCHS4Diversity held two: one in September 2020 and one in May 2021.

We don't, however, know what our campaign will look like this upcoming school year. High school classes will be in person, five days a week, but, at least at the beginning of the school year, students will have less flexibility to meet up at school. Commutes and extracurriculars previously canceled due to Covid will take up a significant portion of our day. However, we can still use Zoom as a way to meet. Though our campaign was born online, we are ready to embrace the advantages of in-person learning. We can talk to people face-to-face in more spontaneous ways and build the relationships that can sustain us through hard times.. Covid is a catastrophe, but it also helpfully exposed existing structural inequities in a way that is impossible to



ignore. There is an increased awareness of the need to improve access to quality education, and that makes our mission easier.

–**Aruna Das, *Hunter College High School, NYC***

**I**n a sense, everyone is starting over. When the pandemic began, I was a freshman who had been in college for barely five months. Now, I am a rising junior who has been taking online classes at home three times longer than I was ever on campus. That is a big deficit to make up.

I'm sure others would agree that the prevailing feelings going into reopening are a combination of excitement and anxiety: excitement that we will get the chance to be in college rather than just "in college" again, but anxiety over the virus as it continues to persist, and the uncertainty that causes for the rest of our time in school.

–**Joaquin Romero, *University of California, Riverside***

**E**ntering a university building after a year and a half of isolated activities like board games with my parents and isolated New York City park walks was overwhelming. With my ID card and green "campus access granted" badge ready on my phone, I stepped into my first class of the semester. The other 15 students trickled in before class started and we stumbled through the return to small talk and first-day icebreakers. Our (doubly masked) professor began class and I spent most of the session straining to hear my classmates over a portable air filter and through three layers of cotton masks. Although I was overjoyed to be back on campus, and impressed by my university's dedication to strong health policies like mandatory vaccination and universal masking, the accessibility concerns that student activists have shared since the

announcement of returning to in-person education became immediately apparent and pressing. How do we keep everyone safe in class while ensuring all students have their needs met for an accessible education?

I'm encouraged by the care of my professors and fellow students to speak loudly, create solutions in the moment and organize for built-in accessibility policies. I'm also inspired by the work of the National Center for College Students with Disabilities and DREAM, which stands for Disability Rights, Education, Activism, and Mentoring. They both, often in conjunction, organize virtual events for students, offer mentorship, and host chapters across the country to support student-led accessibility efforts. As the pandemic has continually renewed our knowledge of deepening disparities in our country's systems, this semester gives me hope that more students will become organizers for accessibility on their own campuses.

—**Madeleine Janz, *The New School***

**A**s a first-year PhD student, I am already observing how the Covid pandemic has damaged our pursuit of equity and justice at the Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C. Part of our campus ministry program gives students like me the opportunity to help some of those most in need in the nation's capital. Services include tutoring middle school children, assisting the elderly, working with homeless persons, and helping veterans. Many of these programs have been canceled altogether because it is considered too unsafe to be in contact with some of these populations, while others have become virtual, which has truly lessened their impact.

Hence, those communities that need the most assistance, especially now during a pandemic, are the ones most negatively affected. This has an outsized impact on efforts for equity and justice.

Moreover, this does not apply only to communities outside of the student population. It also applies to university staff and students who are not financially secure. Many of the janitorial staff are working harder and saving less, which can be quantified through the increase in visits to the campus food pantry. Students who are more reliant on grants and scholarships must take on multiple jobs amid a full course load to make up for the decrease in available funding.

As can be seen in all aspects of American life, those who were more fortunate before the pandemic are even better off today, and those that needed assistance before the pandemic need even more now. This is true of those who work and study on campus, and of those who the campus can no longer assist due to health and safety reasons.

—**Sam Fouad, *The Catholic University of America***

I have never struggled to understand university administrators as much as I have in the last year. In the first few months of the pandemic, it felt like there was some compassion reflected in flexible academic accommodations—but that flexibility vanished when the 2020–21 school year began. As someone whose personal circumstances require me to limit contacts, I struggled to obtain permission to attend classes remotely at the time, being told instead to defer my law school admission. Imagine my sense of relief when, three weeks before

orientation, incoming students were told that classes would be held online. Remote learning was incredibly challenging, but at least I was able to stay safe.

As we begin a second academic year during a pandemic, I'm even more frustrated. Stanford insists on in-person instruction, without much regard for students' medical conditions or personal circumstances. It seems increasingly likely that the Delta variant will cause another surge significant enough to force a return to remote learning as the fall quarter progresses. Indeed, many Stanford students have already been infected with Covid, even though only a fraction of students are even yet on campus. Why put students through the financial and emotional strain of moving with such a forecast? Why force them to attend indoor classes when many have medical conditions that, even if vaccinated, could lead to severe complications? The anxiety and worry my classmates and I are experiencing could have been avoided with an option to learn remotely. Instead, schools have been rigidly enforcing rules that leave their students asking: Whose well-being do they actually care about?

–**Leehi Yona, *Stanford University***

**O**ver the past 18 months, NYU graduate students have faced myriad barriers to continuing—and in some cases, providing—an education. From taking care of their own children while teaching shaken undergraduates, to participating in seminars from across the world remotely because of draconian visa restrictions, PhD and master's students have surmounted nearly insurmountable feats. After trudging through an unsettling few semesters, graduate students fed up with high tuitions and prohibitive university policies fought hard for a new contract. As a

direct result of these physical and virtual union efforts, graduate students of all stripes will reap benefits like 30 percent higher hourly wages, expanded leaves of absence, and a considerable child care fund, to name the most important. For all the disastrous things Covid has done to the student experience, it has shone a light on disparities that could simply no longer be ignored. I'm entering my last semester of school in a year when the pandemic remains unpredictable, but I'm heartened to know I will be completing my degree, aiding faculty, and mentoring eager college students with the support of an organized graduate community.

—Alana Pockros, *New York University*

**G**raduate students occupy a strange, liminal place in the university. Both worker and student, we are endowed with authority but subject to restrictions, protected by some university policies yet expected to maintain a degree of independence. Over the past year and a half, we have borne the brunt of our universities' failures: teaching on Zoom with little training or support, grappling with lowered stipends and departmental funding, and coordinating between overstressed undergraduates and underpaid administrators (while being underpaid, or unfunded, ourselves). We labor intensely but invisibly, balancing research with endless administrative tasks and teaching duties. It's an engrossing life, but a chaotic, precarious one; often it seems on the brink of extinction. What we need from the university, in this time of dwindling job prospects and continued Covid risk, is recognition of the important work we do—how we hold up universities like pillars; how much easier it would be for us to do our jobs with more protections in place. Unions are agitating for these, and have succeeded in some cases. The

benefits these new graduate contracts provide will be a boon for everyone teaching, learning, and building a life at a university—not just its graduate workers. On campus this fall, where we are still masked in class, I won't see more than a quarter of my fellow graduate students' faces. But I know there is strength, resilience, and temerity there.

—Sara Krolewski, *New York University*

**T**his semester I will be studying at Freie Universität in Berlin. Germany has seen its notably bureaucratic systems move quickly because of the pandemic, and students are demanding that the environmental crisis be taken with the same urgency. This September, Germany is set to have a national election and university students are playing a central role in pushing environmental policies forward. The Green Party and the Fridays for Future movement have thrust the climate change discussion into Parliament and they have staged protests, largely organized by students, that resonate around the world. The pandemic has shown what reactive, reeling politics looks like, and climate change is getting worse by the minute. Earlier this summer, Germany was hit with a historic flood that took at least 117 lives, and students are feeling the pressure to do something. Students at my university are organizing for and supporting climate friendly politicians, but they are doing it with an awareness that the clock is ticking. The sense of emergency in regards to climate change has been heightened by the pandemic, and my classmates have something to say about it.

—Paul Gordon, *Freie University, Berlin*

**T**he pandemic has made campus life difficult for many reasons. Where before I could spend hours slinking around libraries or residence hall common areas, the atmosphere has now completely changed. People want you to be on campus as little as possible, for obvious reasons, but something significant has been lost from the college experience as a result.

Wearing masks in classrooms is hard—so much of what a person is saying is portrayed through body language, predominantly through facial expressions. This means that classroom discussions, student socializing and even office hours are hampered. It definitely takes some getting used to, and is a stark contrast to what in-person classes were before, but is just a small sacrifice in comparison to having to do Zoom classes again.

But the biggest change that the lasting pandemic has caused for my college experience has been with travel. I am an international student, and although I have been able to get into the US through a visa exception rule passed by the government, traveling home if there were an emergency, or even just to spend a holiday with family, has become extremely challenging. The culture shock, being away from family and the impracticalities of going home have made my college experience a much more lonely and confined one, especially at the beginning. Hopefully, for everyone's sake, the situation improves, but for now it is only possible to make the best of it.

**–Kate Graham-Shaw, *New York University***

**A**s a first-year student, I approached the semester with apprehension. Although I knew I would be able to live and learn on campus, the steady spread of the Delta variant made me worry that I would start college the same

way I ended high school: stuck in my room, mostly isolated from my peers. And indeed, there are new requirements for masked gatherings, Covid testing, and the like. But my fears about a subdued, limited atmosphere were wholly unjustified. Despite the public health restrictions, the air of excitement is palpable.

That excitement might be our greatest asset. Although I've only been here a few weeks, I've already witnessed the dedication and vigor my classmates bring to everything they do, from cross-campus scavenger hunts to orientation workshops. And I can already see how that enthusiasm will translate into activism and organizing. After more than a year of online learning, my class is determined to make the most of college in every way possible. And after witnessing (and participating in) the movements for justice over the past year, we're determined to direct that enthusiasm towards positive change.

My first-year class is one of the biggest and most diverse in my university's history. It's full of students fresh off of a gap year, who bring their recent experiences with community service and advocacy to bear in the classroom. But most of all, it's full of students eager to do all they can, in spite of—and because of—all the challenges of the past year.

—**Sadie Bograd, Yale University**

**W**hen New York City experienced catastrophic flooding at the start of the school year, my education closely resembled the beginning of the pandemic, with classes canceled or moved to Zoom. The effects of the flood only lasted a few days, but by now we are painfully aware that this will not be the last time we meet virtually.



Uncertainty is now a given. It is difficult, if not impossible, to make plans for next month, much less commitments to internships and study abroad opportunities, when nothing is guaranteed in an ongoing pandemic. This uncertainty, then, has only amplified the sense of isolation brought on by virtual meetings.

As a club leader on campus, remote student organizing efforts were extremely challenging. With people scattered all over the country—and the globe—last year, activity engagement decreased dramatically. Without being able to gather in protest, interact face-to-face with those that we want to help, and be inspired by the energy of our peers in-person, the motivation to participate in anything more than an online discussion was low.

At the same time, the pandemic provided many of us a unique chance to learn about ourselves, the injustices in the world around us, and the role we would like to play. Weaknesses in the university systems were highlighted through their failure to take care of students' physical, mental, and financial well-being. There is hope that after more than a year of reflecting and observing, returning students will have a combination of anger, determination, and craving for social interactions that will help clubs on campus enact meaningful change at our school and the city around us.

—**Jessica Shuran Yu, *Fordham University***

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