

## **Welcome Back, Welcome Home?**

As a senior at Barnard now, I've experienced a wide spectrum of the college experience in a 'post'-COVID-19 world (as the disease is still at large): from partaking in the full, in-person experience for freshman and half of sophomore year, to relocating home for half of freshman and half of junior year—reverting to the lifestyle of a version of myself even pre-high school—to living on campus but attending classes remotely in the rest of junior year, and now partaking in the full experience while balancing weekly testing, no in-person dining, and on-again, off-again visitor restrictions.

A few months ago, I remember looking back on the trajectory of 2020 and the early stages of 2021 and I almost laughed, thinking about how even in the midst of a global pandemic, Gen Zers all quickly adapted to Zoom classes and made Dalgona coffee, accepted TikTok challenges, and tagged their friends to repost about pretty mundane things about their lives. And yet, we just as quickly sobered as our news screens filled with images of anti-Black violence, major political events such as the storming of the United States Capitol, hate crimes against Asian Americans, natural disasters like wildfires and hurricanes, and through it all, the tireless work healthcare heroes were putting in to stall the Coronavirus. We collectively held our breath through the presidential race, trials of perpetrators of police brutality and hate crimes, the race for a vaccine, and major legislative decisions of domestic and international importance that were and continue to be made. Through it all, many of us stood in solidarity by extending our compassion to these different immediately affected groups. We educated ourselves, shared this information with others, and fundraised and spoke up for these different causes online and in-person, changing our own and others' worldviews.

Despite longing for the social activities that college frequently invokes and the sting of having to leave behind many pre-professional and extracurricular experiences, I have argued to many that I learned a lot more about myself and the world during the months of March 2020 through January 2021 than I had in the years of college that had been “normal,” pre-COVID. Of course, these are all lessons that unfortunately came at the price of the horrifying toll incurred by COVID-19.

I think we can all say that the fragility of human life and health was emphasized to us, along with the importance of family, whether we were related by blood or not. Some did not have a home or stable family life to go back to, and independence took on a new meaning for them. Others who *did* go back home might have navigated tumultuous family dynamics, as everyone faced these internal reflections simultaneously and in the gaze of one another. Some may have faced more academic stressors, more family-related stressors, or both. Losses unrelated to COVID-19 still happened. With so much time to ourselves, in our thoughts, and away from the diverse people that would normally shape how we grow from college, many of us took a hard look at where we were in our lives—both personally and professionally, to assess if we were moving in the direction we wanted. Personally, instead of being shaped by in-person experiences with other people my age, I became an avid consumer of the news as well as the media and also an observer of the responsibilities of married life and parenting, those of both my parents and my older sister.

My friends from home who go to college outside of the city, even just in upstate New York, were able to continue living on campus much earlier than I, and were even sent home later. From the perspective of a NYC college student, we really *were* hit with the brutest force of understanding as to the seriousness of the pandemic, as New York is so densely populated with so many jobs that involve in-person work, is so diverse, and is such an international hub, and accordingly, apt for the virus. Despite this clearly unique impact on my college experience as a student in NYC, I strangely did not feel anything. I was grateful for my home and for the lessons it was teaching me from the unprecedented syllabus of COVID-19. At the same time, due to this totally new set of societal, interpersonal, and emotional issues to grapple with that would not have been encountered during a traditional college year, I relaxed the expectations I held for myself in other domains of my life that I normally would have more time to devote attention to, which became visible to me in my grades...and my waistline. But I've grown to accept these imperfections, as everyone should for themselves during these unprecedented times.

Back on campus, I think we've seen similar adaption, along with, understandably, a craving for the effective 1.5 years of "crazy, exciting college" many feel like they were shortchanged. At least last spring, I felt a greater sense of collective cautiousness and

compassion among people, as no one really knows what others have experienced as a result of COVID-19 and how they were affected by it. Anyone who knows the epidemiology of COVID-19 likely has a greater awareness of our surroundings as a student in Morningside Heights/Harlem, which is bolstered by the attention many academic departments and classes have dedicated to it in their teaching.

I've also noticed a much greater use of our outdoor space, people studying, eating, and mingling under outdoor tents even if there's rain pounding the sidewalk around them. As a senior, I also do not personally know many members of two whole classes of students, and am unable to distinguish between them, as they also deal with their transition to a college experience in a post-COVID-19 world. I'm excited to try to get to meet more of them. I unfortunately haven't seen some Barnard employees that I saw regularly before the lockdown. I miss them.

While it's easy to lament the limitations that are placed on how we are able to interact in person, I think our interactions have been made all the more sweeter. Humans have always been innately social creatures, but we now approach others as profoundly changed people and with an appreciation for the moment. This appreciation comes from both looking back at the opportunities that we lost due to COVID-19 and looking ahead with the acknowledgement that the time we have with each other, and in any stage of our lives, such as college, is limited and something we should make the most of, no matter the circumstances.