

The Empty Campus (S1 E5): “Back to School”

Matt Baier:

The *Empty Campus* series was originally produced in Spring 2022 as part of the *Honors Seminar in History* with Professor Katherine Jewell. Students conducted 36 oral histories with various members of the campus community about COVID-19 at Fitchburg State.

These interviews are now housed in the university archives and available for researchers. To interpret what they found, the students constructed five thematic episodes, remastered in Spring 2023 for *Perseverantia*, by Matt Baier.

Find out more about The Empty Campus and our other series at www.fitchburgstate.edu/podcasts.

[series theme fades in]

[0min 34sec]

Benjamin K. Hill (Host):

Students and faculty were away from campus for six months in September 2020. The university would return to in-person lectures and classes. What did this look like? How did the university develop a contingency plan in the event of an outbreak? What was quarantine like on campus? This is episode 5: Back to school.

[1min 04sec]

[series theme fades out]

Benjamin K. Hill (Host):

Planning for the return to campus started almost immediately once students were sent away in March 2020. The university needed a way to make sure that students could practice social distancing, conduct regular testing, and – should a student test positive – provide a safe place for students to quarantine and isolate.

Tasked with managing the university's COVID response, Dr. Laura Bayless had a lot on her plate.

[01min 27sec]

Dr. Laura Bayless:

So we were trying to figure out what can we do to help keep campus as safe as possible. You know, bring people back.

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Benjamin K. Hill (Host):

The national uncertainty surrounding the pandemic was present at the university. As a residential assistant. One of Miranda Gustin’s primary responsibilities was to enforce university policies.

[01min 46sec]

Miranda Gustin:

They didn't want to adhere to everything. So they just – a lot of the time, people did it just to, just to just to get at you – because, you know, they were mad that you couldn't, you wouldn't leave them alone. Because their friends or all of their friends were in their room, and they're not supposed to be. You know, like, it was really hard.

We had to distance people during fire alarms, and I think that was crazy. I think the first time I ever reprimanded somebody, it was for – he had one – he had his mom over to help him with something. And I had to be like, “No, you have to leave.” And it's, like, how do you tell someone that they can't see their mom?

And it was, like, hard because it's, like, are we going to allow people to leave campus? Like some schools did – like, they couldn't leave campus at all. You know, they were stuck there and you can't see your parents. So, like, it's like, are we going to do that? And yelling at somebody's mom was definitely a low line. Like, how do I do that?

Like, that's not my – I didn't give birth to that kid! You did! Like, you have full rights over him. But I'm yelling at you, like, because you're breaking the rules. I think that was, like, the hardest moment for me.

[02min 53sec]

Benjamin K. Hill (Host):

Where did this all come from? Why were students disgruntled in particular about the university specific policies?

Because of his position as Student Trustee, Steve Olson was able to give some insight into this.

Steve Olson:

A lot of the decisions that came down from administration came down very sudden. Pretty much going into effect next week. And it's very similar to the mask mandate. Now, I understand the politics of that mask mandate being lifted. They don't want students to

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just go around not wearing masks. But it's things like, “oh, you're gonna have a vaccine mandate. And if you don't get vaccinated within three weeks, you're gone.”

Like, you will be disenrolled – or unenrolled – from the university, gone kind of thing. You need to give students a little bit more of a heads up than that. Say, “we're working on this.” “Hey, we might try to do this.” It's – they needed to give us more of a heads up. They needed to involve students more in the discussions.

And that has been a thorn in my side ever since. “Here's something we've been working on for three months. Hey, students, this is the thing. By the way, we didn't talk to the Student Government Association about it” – you know, the representative body for the students.

[03min 56sec]

Benjamin K. Hill (Host):

The student COVID guidelines came from other state schools or university's negotiated collective bargaining agreements with faculty unions. However, the University does not give its Student Government the power to negotiate and did not approach Student Government on most decisions regarding the pandemic.

Despite this, Joe Cautela and other student leaders were understanding of the University's position.

[04min 19sec]

Joe Cautela:

And I would say the school really tried to the best of their abilities to implement COVID policy aligned with other state schools. And they were, of course, being advised by health boards, by the government, etc..

So I think, with how unpredictable COVID was, it's really hard to be critical of any efforts that were to keep the students safe. Or not just the students, but the campus community safe.

Benjamin K. Hill (Host):

Testing was required for resident students. When students tested positive for COVID 19, they had two choices: isolate at home or move into a designated residence hall until they produced two negative tests.

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Miranda Gustin was unfortunate enough to need to move to that quarantine residence hall.

[05min 03sec]

Miranda Gustin:

Mara 4 was used as a COVID dorm, and – not gonna lie – it was not the best of conditions. It definitely wasn't a five star hotel. Arguably, it wasn't even a two star hotel. So it was not fun. It was just a bed and some blank old walls and that was it. You know. And then we got frozen meals. One package – not one package; like, one box. Like a care package of frozen meals. And we got nose swabs every day.

And that was the only connection you had to people. And, it was like, “Oh, there he goes. And like it was interesting watching people who had moving bins, moving from one one side of the campus to the other – because you knew exactly why they were there.

So it it's kind of like a walk of shame [*laughs*]. And it wasn't it wasn't fun.

And as an RA, a lot of the time, those who tested positive with COVID would knock on your door and be like, “Hey, I have COVID, what do I do?”

And you're like, “Back up!”

[06min 00sec]

Benjamin K. Hill (Host):

The university, even today, struggles with COVID mitigation. Testing is still available to all members of the campus community. Laura Bayless and President Lepidus are working with the state to continue to develop strategies as the pandemic moves into the endemic stage.

President Richard Lapidus:

So it's going to take a while for everything to bounce back, for people to feel more normal again, comfortable. Part of our job is to do that, to try to keep trying to engage populations in different ways.

[6min 30sec]

[Empty Campus *theme fades in*]

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Benjamin K. Hill (Host):

Perseverantia is a production of Fitchburg State University. I'm your narrator, Benjamin K. Hill. This podcast was produced as part of Dr. Katherine Jewell's Honors History Seminar in History.

Special thanks to Asher Jackson and the staff at the Amelia V. Gallucci-Cirio Library, Kisha Tracy, and the Fitchburg State University Economics, History and Political Science Department, and the Fitchburg State University Honors Program.

You can find all episodes of *Perseverantia*, as well as our bibliographies and our entire archive on our website: sites.google.com/fitchburgstate.edu/FSUCOVID19.

[07min 15sec]

Steve Olson (post-script):

Hi, this is Steve Olson, one of the executive producers of *Perseverantia*.

[Empty Campus theme fades out]

At the time of this recording, it's the last day of classes for the Spring 2022 semester./ Three of us on this project are leaving this project as our final mark on the university – and couldn't be happier to have it end this way.

On behalf of the graduating seniors, our production manager, Joe Cautella the Third, who you heard from earlier in this podcast, our library liaison, Benjamin Hill, and myself – as well as the rest of the team on the *Empty Campus* project – I'd like to extend a very special thank you to Dr. Jewell, whose guidance and passion for digital history made this whole project possible.

We walked into a cramped computer lab in January with no clue what a digital archive even looked like and walked out not only having curated one of our own, but also recording and putting the final touches on a podcast series based on that archive.

So thank you, Dr. Jewell, so much for your work this semester and helping us out here. We can't wait to see what the future holds.

[series theme fades out]

[8min 08sec]

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[Perseverantia Podcast Network theme fades in]

Jeffrey Verge:

This is Jeffrey Verge, a major in Business, with a concentration in Management, class of 2024. And you're listening to *Perseverantia*, the Fitchburg State Podcast Network.

[Perseverantia Podcast Network theme fades out]