

## **The Silent Pandemic**

### **By Wallace Truesdale**

On Wednesday, Feb. 17, I opened my laptop and entered the Zoom link for my Data 101 class at Rutgers University. As has become the usual, I entered a room made up of muted microphones and turned off cameras, with the exception of my professor. While waiting for the official start time of the class, he shared his troubles caused by the recent winter storm in New Jersey. Once the clock hit 12:00 pm, he started his lecture to an audience of 88 students, for a class where over 150 students are currently enrolled.

As March approaches, the threat of Covid-19 has kept the United States in stasis for almost an entire year. Despite the change in circumstances, several businesses have attempted to resume normal operations. Universities are no exceptions, as thousands of students have traded in college campuses for familiar bedrooms.

However, while these students were sent home for their safety, another threat has begun to plague these students that, left unchecked, could have effects as impactful as Covid-19. Without their normal coping mechanisms available and little change to expectations, students are gradually failing to handle the mental toll placed on them. In order to avoid this new pandemic from becoming fatal, the current system must be examined to understand how to better support students.

This problem may have initially eluded so many due to universities' handling of students when they transitioned to online learning during spring 2020. New York University student Shazia Ahmed held hopes for a productive fall 2020 online semester due to her experience with the spring 2020 semester. "There were lots of... helpful policies that were put in place for students like the pass/fail policy, and lots of professors were very lenient", Ahmed said.

However, as Ahmed and many other students would soon find out, the same understanding attitude demonstrated in the spring 2020 semester would not transfer to the fall 2020 online semester. "Some professors were operating under the philosophy that because there were no tuition costs... they were going to teach at the same caliber or have same expectations they would have if they were in person", Ahmed stated.

Universities began to employ a concerning behavior that has grown the longer the pandemic has continued. They began to act as if a pandemic was no longer a significant factor in student performance. The threat of Covid-19 continued to be a reason for students to not be on campus, but no longer stands as grounds for not having satisfactory grades. "To be honest, I haven't felt any attempt from my teachers to make this easier at all", said Notre Dame student Malcolm Field. "We're kind of on our own."

The faces of students and teachers, or lack thereof, over Zoom lectures already foreshadow a troubling story if this method of thinking is not addressed. The faces that are present show fatigue. Students are exhausted from juggling the anxieties expected of a young adult entering society and the constant vigilance required to stay safe during a

global pandemic. Teachers are reaching their limit lecturing to blank screens, as student engagement has reached an all-time low.

“Now, you have to unmute your mic to talk, there’s a chance the professor might ask you to turn your camera on... That’s an added anxiety, so no one’s asking questions [in class]”, said Kean University student Isaiah Edmunds. Edmunds has decided to take the semester off during the current spring 2021 semester after reflecting on the fall. He has decided to put this newfound time into his personal projects, which primarily includes growing a following on the popular streaming website Twitch.tv. “If we’re in online school, and I’m not learning sh\*t, and I... go into a field I’m passionate about, then I’ll be innately behind”, said Edmunds.

The issues seem to only pile on for students. While technology has made physical distance an easier obstacle to overcome, it has now become a question of whether or not attending college is worth it. Assignment deadlines are unmoving. Students are feeling unprepared to join an increasingly competitive job market. Moreover, an ever growing disconnect has been created between students and their peers, teachers, and schoolwork. College has never been more unattractive, and this poses a serious problem for universities whose high tuitions are largely dependent on customer demand.

University of Maryland School of Social Work adjunct lecturer Kimberly Street has expressed sympathy for both students and teachers during this time. “A lot of my students work service jobs... because it allows them to go to school. Their income was completely wiped out”, Street recounted. It is far from uncommon for students to work jobs to support themselves in school, and Street elaborated on how many of her students had concerns that far outweighed a test or a paper. “If your basic needs are not being met... you don’t care about the theory of social work. You’ve got to eat”, Street said.

Her reasoning has sound backing. The United States has only just begun bouncing back from the effects the pandemic has left in its wake. In New Jersey, in April 2020, the number of new cases never peaked past 5,000 on any given day, but this past winter, the state has seen as many as almost 7,500 new cases in one day, according to the New York Times. In the United States, the recorded death toll as of writing this has reached over 498,000, according to the New York Times.

People are still struggling to afford basic necessities such as food, water, or heat. Families and friends are still mourning loved ones lost to complications from Covid-19. It is a time characterized by loss, of time, experiences, and people. People are turning to different methods of coping. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, overdoses have increased over the course of the pandemic. An adoption of the present as the new normal runs the risk of setting up current and future generations, including students, for failure.

Colleges and universities are representative of a bigger issue at play. The system is moving too fast for the people it is supposed to be uplifting, and shows little to no sign of slowing down to help them. Both Edmunds and Ahmed noted the attempt several of their

friends' colleges made to move their students back on campus. Many of those colleges would reverse that decision soon after the initial move in date, and some would do with little refund to the payment made for housing.

New approaches need to be formulated to not only re-engage students, but also actively tend and help maintain their mental well-being. "There are some things that make us check ourselves as a profession", Street stated. Street found one solution to bring her classes together. She has started setting aside time at the beginning of each class for students to simply talk and air their personal grievances. She's been happily surprised to see the students exchanging resources to help each other out in their various situations. "I will continue to do that after this. You've got to give people a chance to say 'I'm hurting'", Street stated.

Students want to be shown that their mental health is as important to their educators. Moreover, they want a reason to hope for things to get better.

"I might try and come back next semester, but if it's much of the same thing, then I'm just going to do what I'm doing right now and hope for the best", Edmunds said.