

The Empty Campus (S1 E4): “Extracurriculars”

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.

[0min 36sec]

[series theme fades in]

Unnamed Student:

One of the only ways that the majority of us communicated and interacted was with video games, through online modality, FaceTime. That was kind of our only social interaction.

So the club didn't really do anything during COVID because it was next to impossible to have anything.

Maddy Waterson (host):

Welcome back to *Perseverantia*. I'm your host, Maddy Waterson. This is “Episode Four: Extracurriculars.”

[series theme fades out]

In the last episode, we looked at the essential workers at Fitchburg State. In this episode, we will be examining campus life when the students returned to in-person in the Fall of 2020. How did campus life transition with the implementation of COVID-19 protocols?

Before we look at the extracurricular, we wanted to touch upon one of the biggest demonstrations that occurred at the University in recent memory, the Unity Rally.

Over the summer of 2020, coinciding with the pandemic, was the continued reckoning with racial justice and the murder of George Floyd. Students wanted to bring that

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activism to campus and create a chance for reflection and positive change. The President of the Black Student Union, Dimitri Moore, describes the Unity Rally and the purpose of the event.

[1min 47sec]

Dmitri Moore:

The Unity Rally was pretty much a bunch of, I want to say, speeches from a variety of different members across campus. I took apart more so as a representative of the Black Student Union because at the time I was currently serving as president.

We also did have faculty members as well as higher education members. So we did have Dr. Bayless. We even did have campus police, have our Chief actually come out and really make a speech more in terms of what is happening.

Very much all of these speeches were really talking about equality. It was really bringing up essentially – what is going on, what are the problems, the challenges that people, you know, like me, people of color, African-Americans really are facing?

It really just was a goal to bring to light. And it wasn't moreso of a goal of let's bash. It was more of a goal of we need to address the hatred and understand that hatred has no home here.

[2min 47sec]

Maddy Waterson (host):

The unity rally took place on the main quad, and the speeches were delivered on the steps of Thompson Hall. The campus community turned out in great numbers to support the demonstrations.

Dmitri Moore:

It was an amazing sight, especially being on that stage, seeing everyone – the whole quad essentially filled up. It was very nice to see that. You really saw all walks of life. You saw males, you saw females, you saw athletes, you saw, you know, your little straggler students that you probably see like once a year on campus and stuff like that.

We very much succeeded in creating a form of unity, even if it was just for that moment. And it was really – it really goes to show how when the topic of equality comes, Fitchburg State really shows up.

And I was very I was very proud of this university in terms of how that event was

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displayed, especially with everything going on with the pandemic. Crowd was very different. They had masks and everyone was six feet apart for the most part. But it was very – it was a very memorable experience.

Maddy Waterson (host):

The Student Government President, Kerry McManus, spoke upon the planning and student support of the Unity Rally.

[3min 58sec]

Kerry McManus:

It was truly a phenomenal experience – to look all the way down the quad and Percival steps. And to see the entire thing filled pretty much down to, like, I think it was like the Anthony Student Service Building was when it started to taper out. And then there were students further back. Filling up that much space at a time that we hadn't seen that many people on campus, it was really cool.

Maddy Waterson (host):

The Vice President of Student Affairs, Dr. Bayless, explained the administration's support for the Unity Rally, as well as the COVID regulations to ensure the safety of the participants.

[4min 26sec]

Dr. Laura Bayless:

And the Unity Rally was actually during the Fall of 2020, and it was sponsored – the civic event that was initiated by students. And just to see the way it played out was fascinating. It was a rally in the way you would think, and it was out on the quad and the speakers were on the Thompson porch where the rocking chairs are.

We put circles on the grass six feet apart, so everybody who attended had their own circle so that they would be safe when they needed to be masked, you know. So it was good to gather everybody together. And it was a pretty powerful event, I thought.

Maddy Waterson (host):

The Unity Rally was a highly successful event with a large turnout from the campus community. However, the Unity Rally was an anomaly regarding student involvement on campus.

Campus clubs and organizations were not allowed to hold in-person events due to COVID guidelines, which showed to decimate student involvement. Liam Foley, member

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of the fraternity Alpha Phi Delta, explains the struggles organizations faced during the pandemic.

[5min 20sec]

Liam Foley:

It was primarily online for a year and a half, I would say. So it was extremely difficult to, you know, have any events. So we were constantly searching for virtual modalities that we could do for events. We also, it just, like – it hurt social relations in the chapter because people couldn’t hang out with each other as much. We couldn’t interact.

So it kind of hurt the whole brotherhood aspect. And that's one of the primary reasons that a lot of people join a fraternity.

Maddy Waterson (host):

The sudden change of in-person to online modalities was a significant change for clubs and organizations. Prior to the pandemic, there were little to no online opportunities, thus making the transition all the more difficult.

Starr Brosseau describes one of the largest clubs on campus prior to the pandemic. Fitchburg Activity Boards, also known as FAB efforts to move online, caused the loss of numerous FAB members.

[6min 05sec]

Starr Brosseau:

So we started meeting online via Google Meet and we eventually dropped down to just an E board and then just a few chairs. And then, over time, you know, we thought things were going to return to normal so much faster than they did. We were just kind of holding on to hope that we were going to remain in-person or come back to being in-person.

And when it took so long, we lost even more chairs. So we ended up down to like, maybe, six or seven consistent members.

Maddy Waterson (host):

In addition to memberships of clubs and organizations on the decline. Students were not attending virtual events as well. FAB President Miranda Gustin articulates the lack of interest in participating with online events in the struggle of planning those events.

Miranda Gustin:

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It was really just as hard to plan these events that I know nobody wanted to go to. Not that I didn't want to go to them. I found events that, like, I enjoyed being a part of, but it took everything out of me to sit there and stare at a screen for arguably much longer than the person who was attending it. Because it could be whatever, I had to actually pay attention and participate.

Maddy Waterson (host):

Foley best summed up the experience of clubs and organizations on campus.

[7min 10sec]

Liam Foley:

This was basically for the entirety of Greek life. It killed participation, recruitment numbers went down. People started to disaffiliate from the organization – and overall involvement, morale, and participation just completely went out the window.

Maddy Waterson (host):

During a time of such uncertainty, there was one constant: the Student Government Association advocating for the student body. Student Government Senator Starr Brosseau spoke upon reliability of student government during the pandemic.

Starr Brosseau:

I was so blown away and so relieved that as soon as the pandemic hit, we just got all the virtual components together and it was like we didn't skip a beat. We met, I think. I mean, we had the first two weeks off and I think we met right after that, not even knowing what everything was going to look like moving forward. Like we had no idea what we were in for. How long that this was going to last. And we just didn't skip a beat.

It was really great to see how resilient we are as an organization, even though, you know, we've gotten very small. Over time, it became harder to recruit than it was before. I just feel like it got more difficult, but I think we got stronger as an organization, and it was just such a relief to know that every Tuesday we were hopping on our computers and meeting and getting things done and being able to see each other because everything else was just so unknown. It was really nice to have something reliable like that.

[8min 33sec]

Maddy Waterson (host):

Student government was one of the few clubs on campus that held consistent meetings during the pandemic. Despite the lack of student involvement. There was no reduction

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in student grievances. Student Government President Kerry McManus explains the frustrations of students.

Kerry McManus:

Student government was pretty up in arms, and the student body in general was. We threw around the word petition, we threw around all of those those strong words as much as we could. We tried to get the students on board with this. A lot of students were really fired up and angry because we had been coming back to school, which was stressful enough for many students, and then we were coming back in a pandemic.

It was even more stressful. And then we were coming back in a pandemic with no health services in case people were to get sick. The after effects of us constantly emailing and constantly being up in arms about what was happening. And the sheer level of students that were really riled up about it was astronomical.

Fitchburg State, we've never truly – like we've had our [inaudible], we've had our moments where things affect every student and every student stops and takes a minute and they're like, “Oh wow.” But we've never had something change on the university that has sparked such a drastic response.

[9min 36 sec]

Maddy Waterson (host):

Similar to clubs and organizations, athletics had struggles of their own. Athletics were under strict COVID guidelines. The senior Director of Athletics and Recreation, Matt Burke, explains the work his department faced.

Matt Burke:

At first, you know, the really bizarre thing was we didn't have sports at all. You know, we were really – some people took a lot of time off, like accrued vacation time they didn't have a chance to do before. And we really were just kind of constantly planning but not able to do what we thought we might be able to do. You know, in the fall, you know, we lost a full calendar year. Every sport lost the season somewhere in there. And each time, like when we shut down initially because of the spring season, we started getting ready for the Fall – thinking we might have a chance to play the fall.

Did all the work to get ready for that and then that got canceled.

[10min 18sec]

Maddy Waterson (host):

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Eventually, COVID restrictions started easing up for athletics and allowed sports to finally practice and to start their seasons.

Matt Burke:

Last spring, when we first restarted sports – you had to have a mask on at all times inside or outside, on buses. And then when we got to the fall sports, we were able to remove the masks, except when you were inside. So if you're in the locker room or if you're on the bus, you had to have a mask on, but you could compete without the mask on.

But indoors you had to compete with the mask on. So, like, soccer had no mask, volleyball had a mask – it just depended on the sport and the risk level associated with the sport.

Maddy Waterson (host):

In the Spring of 2021, sports were finally getting back into the swing of things. However, sports were not back to normal. Softball player Audrey Johnson explains the changes the softball team experienced to stay in guidance of the COVID policies in order to have a season.

[11min 06sec]

Audrey Johnson:

So it's completely different from a complete normal season still, because all we did was play NESCAC mask and we had to play it four times instead of two. And we just practiced from four or five days a week to like two days, two days a week. Completely not normal as it usually is. We played 20 games compared to our 40 – and we still had to wear masks, which is restricting for when you're breathing, especially inside. It just wasn't normal as it would be my freshman year before COVID.

Maddy Waterson (host):

Student athletes were enthusiastic that their respective sports teams were allowed to practice and start their seasons. But the loosening of COVID guidelines did come at a cost. Hockey player Zach Cormier tells the story of multiple COVID outbreaks for the hockey team.

[11min 50sec]

Zach Cormier:

It was, I'd say, halfway through October. We had two waves of COVID go through the team, which was bizarre in itself. But the first wave was right before our first game and

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[laughs] all of our hearts dropped off because it started on a Monday. Three teammates went down. Tuesday four teammates went down. Wednesday, another five teammates went down. And then Thursday, all of our coaches got it. So right then and there, we're like, are we even going to have a season or are they going to shut it down? Because we weren't the only ones to have that issue right from the start. But the protocol was we had to quarantine for, I believe, 10 to 11 days. So as the season progressed, we started to get better, not as much cases. And during that time it was fun because we're just back on the ice having a game finally.

But at the same time, you can interview or talk to anyone who plays at the college level or even high school level. It is a different atmosphere without fans – just as the fans really bring the heart and soul to a hockey game. And it just felt like a scrimmage at some times. When there's a big hit, there wasn't commotion. When someone scored, there wasn't cheering.

[13min 08sec]

Maddy Waterson (host):

It is an understatement to say that campus life diminished during the pandemic. Clubs and organizations weren't allowed to meet in person. Virtual events constantly had low turnouts, and athletics had strict restrictions, even canceling seasons outright. It was definitely a dark time for student involvement at Fitchburg State.

Clubs, organizations and athletics provide students with an opportunity to develop community, take on leadership positions and, most importantly, feel a sense of belonging.

The pandemic took away a full year of student interaction, a loss that will have many long lasting effects at this University.

[theme music fades in]

Perseverantia is a production at Fitchburg State University. I'm your narrator, Maddy Waterson. This podcast was produced as part of Dr. Katherine Jewell's Honors History Seminar in History in the Spring of 2022. 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, as well as 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.

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[14min 26sec]

Robert Morrison:

This is Robert Morrison, a senior from Wethersfield, Connecticut, majoring in video game design. – *[Perseverantia Podcast Network theme fades in]* – And you're listening to *Perseverantia*, the Fitchburg State Podcast Network.

[Perseverantia Podcast Network theme fades out]