THE REAL PANDEMIC

HOW AMERICA BELIEVED THE CORONAVIRUS PROVED THE EXISTENCE OF EDUCATIONAL INEQUITY

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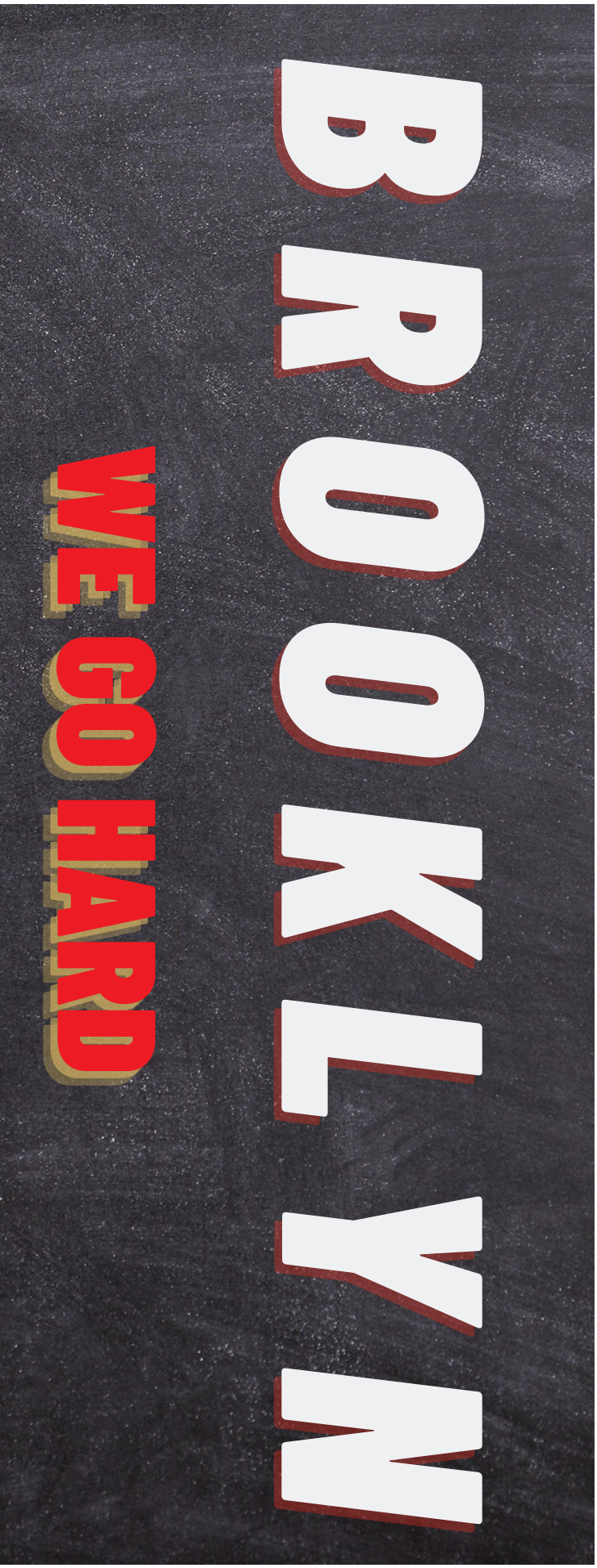
Brooklyn



IN THIS ISSUE

PART 1

Kayla A. Dorancy

02 **INEQUITY IN NYC PUBLIC HIGH SCHOOLS**

SCHOOLIN' REMOTE, an analysis of the effects of the pandemic on public school students of color

23 **CITATIONS AND OTHER RESOURCES**

REFERENCES, SOURCES, AND OTHER MATERIAL used to support and highlight areas that the study discusses

24 **WORD ON THE STREET**

QUOTES from students, personnel, and vendors about public school education

PART 2

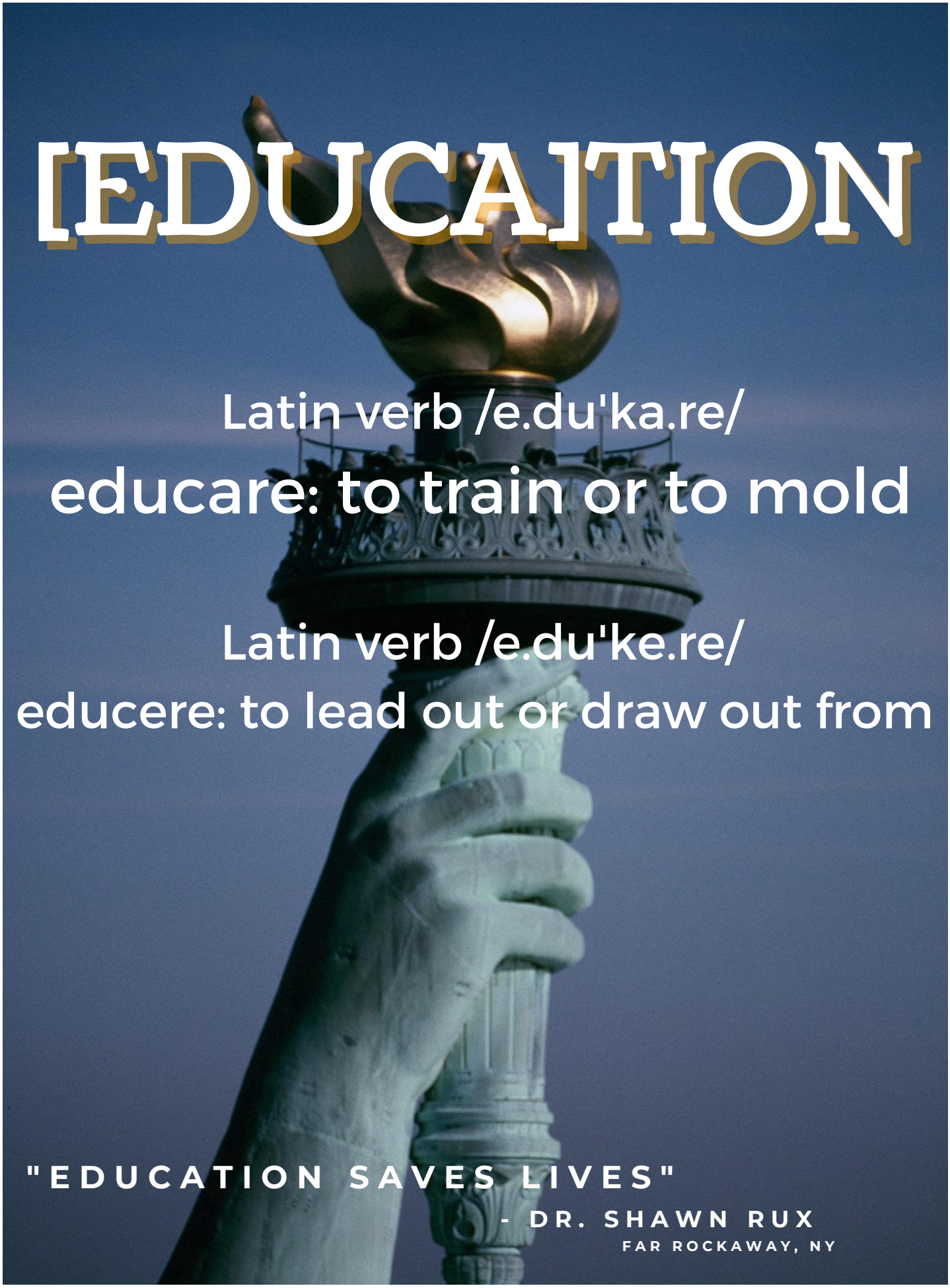
Marissa Mann

01 **THE IMPACT OF THE PANDEMIC ON CUNY**

BROOKLYN COLLEGE VS. COVID-19, a study focused on the role of the pandemic in CUNY student and employee lives

08 **WHAT'S THE WORD?**

QUOTES from students and faculty about public higher education


[EDUCA]TION
Latin verb /e.du'ka.re/
educare: to train or to mold
Latin verb /e.du'ke.re/
educere: to lead out or draw out from
"EDUCATION SAVES LIVES"
- DR. SHAWN RUX
FAR ROCKAWAY, NY

SCHOOLIN' REMOTE, the High School Public Education Experience

Kayla Dorancy, CUNY Senior and College Advisor -- talks public schools, pandemic, and community.

It's June 26th, the last day of school. Usually, my students come running into my pocket-sized office space in the back of the fourth floor, bustling with talk of the future; this day would be no different. Hugging me, almost to the point of cutting off my circulation. My seniors would be ecstatic! All year they talked about how ready they were for adulthood — ready to leave high school. My juniors, or my babies as I call them, would be waltzing in right behind the seniors complaining about how they were stuck here another year. "My poor babies" I would think, "I remember feeling the same way."

But none of this happened.

It's June 26th. Instead of jubilant talk of the future, my seniors call me crying:
"Virtual graduation? A joke."
"It's not fair."
"I'm over it. Remote learning is so stupid."
"I wasn't ready."

What could I say? They were not wrong. For many, remote learning changed the way education was delivered and only made existing problems worse.

As I said, they were not wrong... nobody was ready for life in the pandemic.

College Ready (Or Not!)

My father often says: "Presence does not always lead to availability.

Availability does not always lead to access. Access does not even determine full exposure."

College and career readiness is an element of high school that is introduced towards the end of a student's secondary school tenure. In the Mayor's Equity and Excellence for All agenda, the Department of Education emphasized the importance of transitioning high school students to adulthood in the most encouraging, and developed manner.

Although I am unsure of how many contracted agencies in the New York City Department of Education serve to assist with the college process, I am familiar with one major way the DOE has attempted to render these services citywide: College Access for All. College Access for All, or College Access, is a program intended to expand college opportunities to students by rendering services of post-secondary support.

As a school team, they create a college-friendly culture in the school environment, in addition to making holistic plans for a student's future. Almost every NYC school has a College Access team, with the few exceptions of some smaller schools and transfer schools.

Unfortunately, smaller high schools and transfer high schools rarely have the opportunity or access to College Access teams. The DOE rarely focuses on the needs of smaller schools, even if they are in a bigger building. If external team members are not available to be placed in a school, the "College Access" team will be made up of teachers or similar personnel in the school, who are delegated the responsibility of helping students with their graduation process — alongside their other work of teaching, coaching, and/or administrative tasks.

At times, the teachers are untrained in the college process' applications and intel —

it is also time consuming from their full-time job as a teacher or coach. Students who do not have an established, equipped College Access team do not receive the same quality of exposure and support as those who do. At South Shore, this was their reality.

When my employer's company, All Guiding Stars, was awarded a contract with the DOE to begin services similar to College Access — we utilized many resources and expanded services atypical of college advisory services. Mimicking the college readiness process of private schools and other institutions with high college enrollment percentages, our company built a plan to introduce college planning targeted for students from marginalized communities. Recognizing the impact that poverty, abuse, and miseducation can play in a student's life — cultivating college and career ready students begins the moment we get them. We aim to combat all negative reinforcements from society, school, and home that students face about college or vocational schooling; while in turn preparing them to be the best applicant and person they can be.

In collaboration with Project MOVE, the after school program, we put kids on a path to college and career-based success from sophomore year. Students were engaged by going on trips to colleges, tunneled into skill-based clubs to build their resumes, and began their file towards their college process. Although a student's college process begins as a senior, preparation begins freshman year. Cultivating and encouraging the dreams of students is necessary to the college process because it allows for holistic, determinative planning. It makes our job easier. The role of College Access should be viewed as one that is not only to bridge the achievement gap,

but also the aspiration gap.

Although College Access is an initiative to give low income, marginalized students a route to their dreams, it is inequitable only when it begins at the starting point for the college process as students with privilege and financial opportunity. College Access must help build their dream, and senior year is far too late!

Access in itself is not equitable if the rendering of services is not catered to the demographic it serves.

At the Shore

South Shore Educational Complex was originally known as South Shore High School. Built in 1970, not too far from Canarsie High School, was originally a school of black and white students. Upon white flight, the normalized racial violence and harassment occurring in the school disappeared — in addition to its first principal Max Bromer. The school became a predominantly black institution.

By the mid-80s, the school became known for its inner-city violence. From stabbings in the hallways to shootings in the rotunda, South Shore lived up to its reputation.

In a school that held 5,000 young people, students from as far as East New York and Ocean Hill/Brownsville attended, and there were often clashes between students before and after school. In the 1990s, crack cocaine and crime ravaged low income communities — areas

from where many of the students came. People were reluctant to send their children to a school known for its violence. As a result, in 2010 the school was closed down because of the growing safety issues. The school was broken up into 5 different schools, separated by floors and wings: Victory Collegiate High School, Brooklyn Bridge Academy, Brooklyn Theatre Arts High School, Brooklyn Generation School, and Academy for Conservation and the Environment. At night, Young Adult Borough Center (YABC), serves as a PM school.

In 2020, the school stands the same. I work at Victory Collegiate High School. Located on the 4th floor, the school holds no more than 450 students. Still predominantly black, much of the staff is also predominantly black and brown. The household geographic demographic has been consistent since the 1980s; a majority of my students reside in East New York, Canarsie, and Brownsville.

The breakup of the campus into individual schools was to not only combat safety problems, but enhance the delivery of education for the number of students it can hold. 10 years before the division, intentions for the break up were the same. In 1997 the campus sectioned off a part of the school and named it Scholars Institute -- where everyday 300 students were receiving a better, more comprehensive education than the 4,500 other students. Smaller class sizes, specialized classes, and more -- these students were shielded from the violence and distractions that most of the other students housed in the same building were exposed to. Today, we see a similar breakdown of the campus applied to Victory.

The students at Victory Collegiate were broken down into academic houses based on their grade status — CUNY,

SUNY, HBCU, and Ivy League. The Houses are relatively small and classroom sizes are no more than 20-25 students. As the intentions of the breakup were to enhance education and adulthood success, the school encourages students to aim for the Ivy Leagues and other distinguished and prestigious institutions.

While many in the education field understand that the aspiration gap is not mutually exclusive to the achievement gap. Low income students and students of color who aspire to attend top tier college institutions must be supported to achieve a seat at those schools. Many schools attempt to close the aspiration gap by encouraging young people to aim for prestigious institutions. However, the missing factor is the school's inability to create a plan to bridge students to their dreams. Schools have a responsibility to build a plan catered to the student for them to have a fighting chance to compete for a seat against private school, specialized high school, and suburban students. Thus, there is inequity when leadership and staff do not create these comprehensive plans and resources with students and ultimately hinder these opportunities for them.

Reflective of many schools with predominantly students of color, the support students at South Shore need to get there is inadequate. With limited course options that exclude physics or trigonometry, lack of Regents support for students to aim beyond just the basic Regents diploma, lack of SAT/ACT prep, and lack of academic tutoring — the students are unequipped with the rigorous academic requirements and being sold false hopes of getting into Ivy Leagues without those classes and SAT/regent scores. As a result, students end up in low tier CUNYs and SUNYs. I saw this with many of my seniors from the graduating class of 2020 attended only CUNY

community colleges or low tier SUNYs, with the exception of a few students who were accepted to top tier CUNYs.

When my company and the after school program arrived in 2017, it was determined to change the school culture. By working with school personnel such as the Community Partnership Director, programs were cultivated and executed to begin sending students on college visits, college support no longer only came from teachers and guidance counselors, skill-based clubs, and other forms of exposure to incorporate professionalism and academia. However, more work by the school leadership needs to be done towards establishing a rigorous curriculum for students and support for success in those courses as well as standardized testing.

Our company works to not only see our students successfully graduate, but continue to see them thrive in a work or college environment.

March Madness

My role was critical to the school community. Post-secondary assistance and advisory is an asset in any building , and I see myself as one. Seniors and juniors are not only overwhelmed with the emotions of leaving high school, but also unschooled in all things technical when it comes to college.

In March of 2020, I remember balancing a multitude of things. Since March was college acceptance month many of my seniors made it their daily routine to inquire about the status of their acceptance and/or to find out when they should expect to hear from their dream school. Additionally, I began post-secondary plans with my students going into trade schools, completing financial aid, planning with juniors, planning a college fair, and my personal life. I had a lot on my plate.

By this time, we were also well aware of the spread of COVID-19 in the United States — specifically, the growing numbers in New York State. Naturally, we invested in boxes of hand sanitizer, Lysol wipes, and face tissue. As my students were constantly leaving and entering our office, we prioritized hygienic practices of encouraging students to use the sanitizer by the door and wiping down almost every touched surface at the end of each day. It was brought to my attention immediately before the quarantine that many students came into our room to utilize our supply because classrooms were not equipped with sanitizers.

We were crazy to think it would be solved simply with hand sanitizer and Lysol.

School's Out!

On March 13th, Mayor Bill De Blasio announced the decision to switch to distanced learning. To be frank, I don't believe any members of my team understood what it meant or truly understood the magnitude in which our lives would be disrupted. We waited until the weekend passed to inquire about what distanced learning looked like.

"Remote learning", we were told.

So, on Monday, March 16th, we sprang into action. However, we were at a crossroads. The school had not confirmed a plan on how classes would resume the next week. As a result, my boss had us learn almost every platform he could think of, at a basic level-- ZOOM, Google Meet, Google Classroom, Discord, and some others.

I was confused. I understood how to use all the applications, but I did not understand why I had to learn all the applications. After I inquired, I learned that the Department of Education's Chancellor Richard Carranza

decided it was best to have school leaders decide on school structure, without any restrictions, leading to further confusion. We didn't know what applications to use. We did not have updated ATS reports, which are forms with student and parent contact information. We needed to know the student schedules, and were not made aware about when classes would officially resume for the school!

There was no plan. Nobody who should have had a clue, actually had one.

COVID, the Cyberbully

We are in the age of technology. Almost everyone I know has a smartphone, personal laptop, or some other device. something like that. However, I quickly discovered that the number of students with inadequate technology or internet service was larger than I thought.

When classes resumed March 23rd, the school decided to use Google Classroom and ZOOM to host classes [this was before ZOOM was restricted two weeks later.] My concern at the time was collecting enough workable hours. Previously, I would complete planning for college events, preparing the office for student presence, or organizing the work computers and space when I was not working with a student. However, I did not have any of those activities to pass the time. Therefore, most of my hours depended on me working with students.

I encountered two problems: reduced hours and losing touch with students.

The reduced hours came from the lack of revenue my company had because they had not billed the Department of Education for services at that point. There was no use in billing it by the time everything went remote because Central [TWEED], the DOE headquarters, would have delayed the process. It wasn't

until my employer applied for and received the Paycheck Protection Program (PPP) loan, the loan allocated to small businesses by the Paycheck Protection Program to ensure employees get paid, that we received regular payments for our work. Fortunately, This was considerably a small, manageable problem to me because I was still being paid a decent amount to help pay for supplies in my household.

My biggest concern was reaching out to the students. Many of them come from single-parent households or low income neighborhoods and worked after school. I was genuinely concerned about their ability to keep up with school work and their overall mental health. The abrupt discontinuation of in-person classes prevented me from collecting personal, direct contacts with my students. Realistically, I was unable to communicate with about 50% of my students at the end of the semester.

I learned that many of my students did not have access to technology. This led to many problems. Many students did not have a laptop or personal computer at home. Many students utilized our school's computer lab to complete work after school. Many teachers accepted handwritten work throughout the school year. Considering these circumstances of the time, it was not a necessity to have a computer at home. Therefore, I later found out that many students applied for laptops and did not receive it until weeks later. An example of unequal resource access that affected their schooling as many were behind in school work material, the college process, and other commitments they had.

If students had the technology, many of them had to share it among family members. This was extremely difficult as many schools were operating in

different ways. Some students were required to participate in video calls for hours, while others had to submit online work. The frustration was relatable because in my case, I shared a laptop with my sister. This was difficult for all of us because the scheduling of laptop use was limited. Although some students had the technology, the unequal use of technology was prevalent in many households.

Internet service was an issue as well. Many students expressed throughout the pandemic concerns about unstable internet connection, the falling out of the internet from timely and collective use, and concerns about their internet bill. What would surprise many, but certainly not myself, were issues of technological comprehension. Many students found it difficult to navigate Google Classrooms and other online servers for classwork. As I stated earlier, many of my students were ill equipped in completing the technical side of college work. Ultimately, these factors made it hard to virtually acknowledge my students and meet with them.

In an attempt to reach out to them, I depended on the senior advisory team — a team of teachers assigned to a group of students to ensure the completion of the graduation process for their students. I contacted many of them to receive updated contact information as well as parent information; however it would take days to get responses. Further, some of the numbers they provided were the same as the unavailable ones on the ATS forms.

By May, after months of constant attempts to contact students, my team and I had only spoken to about 55 out of the 130 students I had (42.3%) and been consistently talking to about 25 (19%). I was not only disappointed with the lack of technological resources being

provided to my students, but I was also infuriated by the lack of leadership instruction to adapt to or combat that challenge.

10% Physical, 90% Mental

Humans need social interaction — it is in our DNA.? Throughout the year, I noticed that my students gravitated to the personal and relatable qualities that my team were comfortable to share. From relationship advice to sharing music to resume-building, the students took more initiative in their classes because they understood and respected our expectations for them.

I have fond memories of after-school clubs and doing hallway sweeps. After school, students would rush out to grab some food -- only to come back to our office to complete work or go to their club. Whether it was culinary, gardening, art, or academic prep/college support -- they showed up to a comfortable space to be themselves and build something towards their future. During hallway sweeps, low academic performing students to the valedictorian would walk to class hearing the sounds of me and my coworkers counting down the days left of school. Students laughed, dapped us up in the hallways, or simply stated once we glanced their way:

“Okay, I’m heading to class!”

We made it our priority to help them enjoy, appreciate, and take advantage of everything available to them between the walls of South Shores. Constant interaction and communication foster a relationship that is necessary to cultivate successful young adults. Our personal connections are more than getting students to class but exposing them to their potential. A part of my job made me realize that the insecurities teenagers have are temporary, yet they require a mature mindset and confidence to help defeat it. We assured them --

the way you think about yourself determines the way you carry yourself.

In March, I found myself feeling insecure. I was unsure of how I would continue my work effectively and maintain my relationships with the students. Pessimism controlled my mind, and certainly controlled my work. With technical barriers already in place, my confidence in my work drastically decreased and it was almost burdensome to consistently reach out to a junk or spam box of student email.

As we approached May, I was relieved to hear from some of my students. They expressed more concerns than I expected. Heavy workloads, unstable WiFi -- but what I didn't expect to hear was the death of a parent, anxiety from work, contracting COVID, lack of food and food options, and more. Almost every day, I was doing wellness checks. It was all I could do. I was not equipped to assist them through their grieving process, and certainly not in the professional capacity. We reached out to advisors, who took days to respond -- then they reached out to leadership, who took days to respond. By that point, we were overwhelmed with the accumulation of support we needed to provide for our students while balancing the college work.

Much of our work ended up being completed late. I felt extreme compassion for my students' home situations. My work hours were no longer set, I was working 12 hour days and readily made myself to those 3 am emails/texts as well. Sometimes I would complete the process for them if they gave me their information because many of them worked or had to take care of siblings. Accountability was hard to establish because many students genuinely did not have enough hours in the day to complete their work -- and I was

unwilling to ask them to work late hours. Today I still assist students who went missing in action because they have the ability to complete it. Regardless, we worked hard and late.

Ultimately, I learned that I cannot support my students if the schools are not supported. I had a hard time keeping my connection to all 130 of my students. Without leadership, nobody navigated what was going on.

Quality Education is a Right

I am committed to providing students with the best quality education I can give. I am the grandchild and child of educators, so I was born into a space that prioritized education and felt a natural readiness to advocate for its protection. protect its space. Every student, all around the world, deserves a quality education. Every student in America deserves a quality education. My students deserve a quality education.

So, my team and I did our best to render that.

At the beginning of April, we worked to confirm virtual college sessions with admissions officers from private and public institutions every Friday until June. We held financial aid sessions once a month. We led resume building workshops. We conducted weekly check-ins. We created a montage video of our yearly activities with an incentive. With these activities, a few of our students slowly began picking up where they left off. Roughly about 25 students participated. A number less that we hoped for, but it was better than none. We did our best to productively engage them.

It required all hands on deck at all times. all the time. With my students, I was able to continue our connections through group chats and Google Meet calls just to talk and check in. As much work as it was, I enjoyed their virtual presence.

However, this wasn't shared with all the students I once had these relationships with. Some of the most bubbly, unpredictable students were distant and gloomy and some of the most academically determined were losing hope in their future. What could've changed all this?

Lack of leadership, technological support, and mental health support.

Leadership was an aspect of remote learning that could not be taught in 3 days through professional development. Equity in resource distribution is a part of remote learning that was underestimated. Well-equipped mental health access was not available at a time it was needed most, to a demographic that needed it the most.

Leadership is supposed to be the unnerved force that has the will and a way to provide for students, regardless of the circumstances. The lack of initiative taken by people who are responsible for ensuring not just quality education, but making sure students have hope in education, disheartened me. It requires accountability and is a direct correlation to the ineffective, unequal distribution of resources. Obscure leadership shields the cycle of poverty and pipeline to prison complicitly.

The irony behind remote learning was the lack of technological comprehension by everyone. The Department of Education did not consider the struggles for parents and students -- especially those with disabilities and Multilingual Learners to share technology or learn how to use it with limited guidance. Even the Department of Education itself had to restrict certain platforms like ZOOM and extend permissions to vendors later on because G-Suite emails did not permit cross domain online interactions. Public school not

providing quality technology and technical services is another form of inequality because these are skills that should have been cultivated before the switch and taken into consideration.

Everyone stresses the importance of mental health, but nobody took the time to acknowledge the work needed to protect it. Our students faced re-traumatization of racism and classism. From combating emotions about the state of our country during the protests of the murder of George Floyd and racist enforcement of the social distancing rules to the individualized issues at home -- the mental conditions of my students were adversely impacted and no one could get to them in time. Mental health of students, particularly marginalized students, must be protected at all costs. If not, they fall susceptible to the conditions in which they exist. It is our responsibility to ensure a hopeful future.

Always Here

Many different organizations have been covering remote learning. From the perspective of the student, the parent, the teacher, and more. We see the prominent problems — technology, mental health, academic support, and much more.

Yet, these are issues that have always existed.

These issues were not created by the pandemic. Low-income students have suffered from lack of technology and internet service, mentally unhealthy students have always suffered from coping strategies to deal with mental illness, low academic performing students have always needed academic support, and inner city public school students have always needed the same resources available to suburban and private schools. Inadequate leadership is an intolerable problem in the DOE that our

unconsciously bear. It is an issue that precedes our pandemic and will succeed only if it is not acknowledged. This is leadership from more than just the chancellor, but those in our schools who hold titles and who establish principles and direct the ways to foster relationships with our students — and what we do with those relationships.

If we acknowledge the existence of the problems highlighted by the pandemic, then we make visible the lack of resources inner city students always endured and suffered at the hands of the public school system. We must acknowledge the long-standing survival of inequitable resource distribution and unequal place our inner city public school students have in comparison to suburban and private school students.

Painting the Full Picture

Whether we return to in-person learning through hybrid or full-time classes, the problems low income students of color face during the pandemic still remain.

In order to create effective solutions to dismantling the systemic inequity in the distribution of these resources, the full picture must be examined and that includes the truth in the reality for these students.

Many articles on the student perspective or needs during remote learning either exclude or briefly touch upon the realities of many students, like those I served.

In an article written during remote learning in May, a middle school student expressed her satisfaction with the online school environment. She expressed her ability to complete her work has improved "without being interrupted by disruptive students and teachers who seem unable to manage them." Being able to work in a distract-

ion free environment, at her own pace, has allowed Veronique to thrive. She has the ability to own technology that allows her to make progress in her work from the comfort of her own home. Her narrative also excludes the mental state of students her age during an active time of awareness and the resurgence of anger towards police brutality. As hopeful as her story is, it is the fortunate reality of circumstance that only exists for some students.

Some charter schools are reporting their success with student engagement. For a Queens student, he is also thriving in a home environment to complete his school work because there are less distractions and have the ability to do that at their own pace. In response, consultants at Teaching Matters, an organization to improve professional development in teaching, "say the teachers they work with in New York City public schools each have at least one or two students who are thriving remotely. That leaves another 20-plus students who are not." Teaching Matters does not elaborate on why there is a high number of students ineffectively impacted during remote learning. This leaves an unfinished understanding about the reality for students in public schools.

In some articles pertaining to reopening school, they briefly mention marginalized communities that are impacted by remote learning. For students in temporary housing [homeless] and those with special needs, remote learning was a poor option to continue the school year. They mention parents who struggle to keep students engaged while balancing work and child care. Many of them suggest that classroom settings are better for these students [and parents] to accommodate their needs. It is important to consider that classroom settings make it

easier to appear that students are thriving with no excuse, however this is not true for many students.

Other articles mention or explain the concerns that I bring up as well, however they are limited and the existence of these problems are misrepresented. The notion that the pandemic is the cause for issues around mental health, technology, ineffective teachers and more is misleading and misrepresents the way we think about real solutions. Many solutions that come about are opening school, redesigning online classrooms, or proactive teaching that individually will not fix the problem.

We must look at the problems with remote learning as problems with education and society. The reality must not only be inclusive, but holistically understood. Many of these articles exclude the trauma students of color, especially low income students, faced during the pandemic. Marginalized groups must be understood in respect to retraumatization of racism and classism that is reinforced by the pandemic specifically. Whether it was the racist social distancing enforcement by NYPD, the constant exposure to police brutality online, or reinforcement of their poverty by having to accept food from pantries, difficulty with health care, or struggle with internet service — these students are navigating emotions without the mental help and support of professionals. Some students admitted they had trouble sleeping, and would focus their school work at night time. Others would call me to talk about their anger towards the police. Tackling the emotional damage of racism and classism present during the pandemic impacted many young people who balanced their mobilization with their schooling.

During the pandemic, I found myself having mental breakdowns after being con

-stantly exposed to police brutality and racist policing. Feelings of grief after hearing the murder of Elijah McClain, anger towards the opposition to arrest the murderers of Breonna Taylor, the shock from viewing the murder of George Floyd, and the resentment to society after reading about the difference in social distancing enforcement by the NYPD changed the way I worked. It was sometimes hard to continue working or I was so activated to research and spread information that I barely ate. These articles do not reflect how this trauma impacts student work, psyche, and life.

Narratives that aim to challenge the issues of education today can not ignore or simply caption the conditions in which students live because it eliminates the visibility of their problems and simplifies them to be a result of their home conditions — instead of acknowledging the DOE's role in maintaining these conditions. Resource distribution, teacher ineffectiveness, and lack of leadership existed long before remote learning. These are issues innate to the design and history of the New York City public school system.

Whether we are in the classroom or online setting, inequity exists. Yet, articles lead people to believe that this is innate to solely remote learning. The carrying over of these problems to remote learning made it more apparent and regardless if students return to a classroom setting, the issues will remain of students not having technology, lack of mental health resources, dissonance in school culture, and more. However, we must acknowledge how classism and racism always affect our students' ability to prosper in education. If the right resources are distributed and the dedication of leadership is active, remote and classroom learning can be successful. There is no reason why remote

learning cannot work for everybody, especially low income students of color.

Taking the First Step

I know I was not able to do all that needed to be done for my students the way I intended and imagined in October. Reflecting on my experience, we were all to blame. However, I take accountability for my inability to provide my students the support they needed during the pandemic and incapability in tracking them all down. This school year, I vow to continue advocating for the needs of my students assertively and passionately.

I challenge everyone to rethink the way we see inequity before, during, and after the pandemic. We are all educators in some way or form.

So, I call on all educators, in all capacities, to take responsibility. Commit to utilizing school budgets equitibly to expose students of color to rigorous academic courses, academic, technological, and mental health support, and commit yourselves to a comprehensive plan that gives them a real position to attend high tier college institutions and thriving job fields. Together, let's create real solutions; not just re-opening school, but using our time and resources to give students exposure to the support they need -- remotely and in person.

Everyone, call for accountability of leaders responsible for dismantling the inequities that have existed in the New York City public school system since the creation of the Civil Rights Act in 1964. After all, that is our job.

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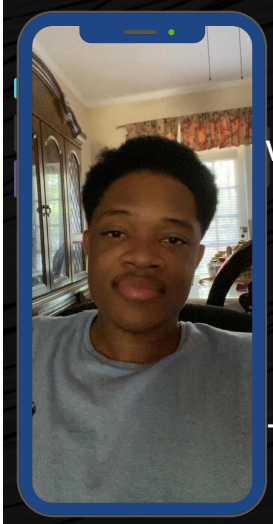
WORD ON THE STREET!

Q: WHAT DID THE PANDEMIC SHOW YOU ABOUT EDUCATION AND SOCIETY?

"[There was] nothing I was not already aware of pre-pandemic. The system needs a huge overhaul!" - KB, Youth Advocate



"Some kids go to school to feel normal and escape what's at home, and the fact that they don't have choice... make you think of things you take for granted."
- Aymar, High School Senior

"They [DOE] didn't really care about work from jump and it just show the students was waiting for something like this to happen"
- Tati, High School Graduate

"We're only as prepared as the planner. If figure heads and stakeholders are poor planners, the people who are helping the students won't be able to function at a full capacity to provide the best services to the students"
- Abe J, College Advisor and Advocate

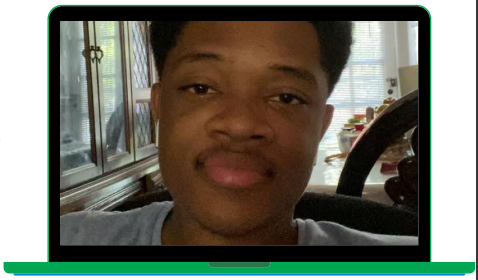
WORD ON THE STREET!

Q: WHAT ARE THOUGHTS ABOUT ISSUES DURING THE PANDEMIC?

"Students lose motivation when they aren't in a school environment and try less in their work"
- Brianna, High School Senior

My personal connection with the youth I device was greatly affected. It has me rethink my cause and impact on the youth I service. Going into remote it was more about just keeping that personal connection with them."
- KB, Youth Advocate

"I'm not gonna lie and say nobody reached out, but after a significant amount the time. Even the DOE. But during the early stages, nobody reached out."
- Aymar, High School Senior



"As a society, we have provided the bare minimum in regards to quality education." - Breyanna, Advocate Advisor

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First, I am most grateful to Professor Jeanne Theoharis for the opportunity to participate in a project of great significance and her guidance in framing my story.

I extend this gratitude to the Social Science Research Council and President Alondra Nelson for granting me the ability to use their platform in a way to build bridges to understanding inequity.

To KB, Abe, Tatiana, Brianna, Aymar, and Breyanna -- thank you all for your vulnerability, honesty, and trust to share your thoughts and experiences with me.

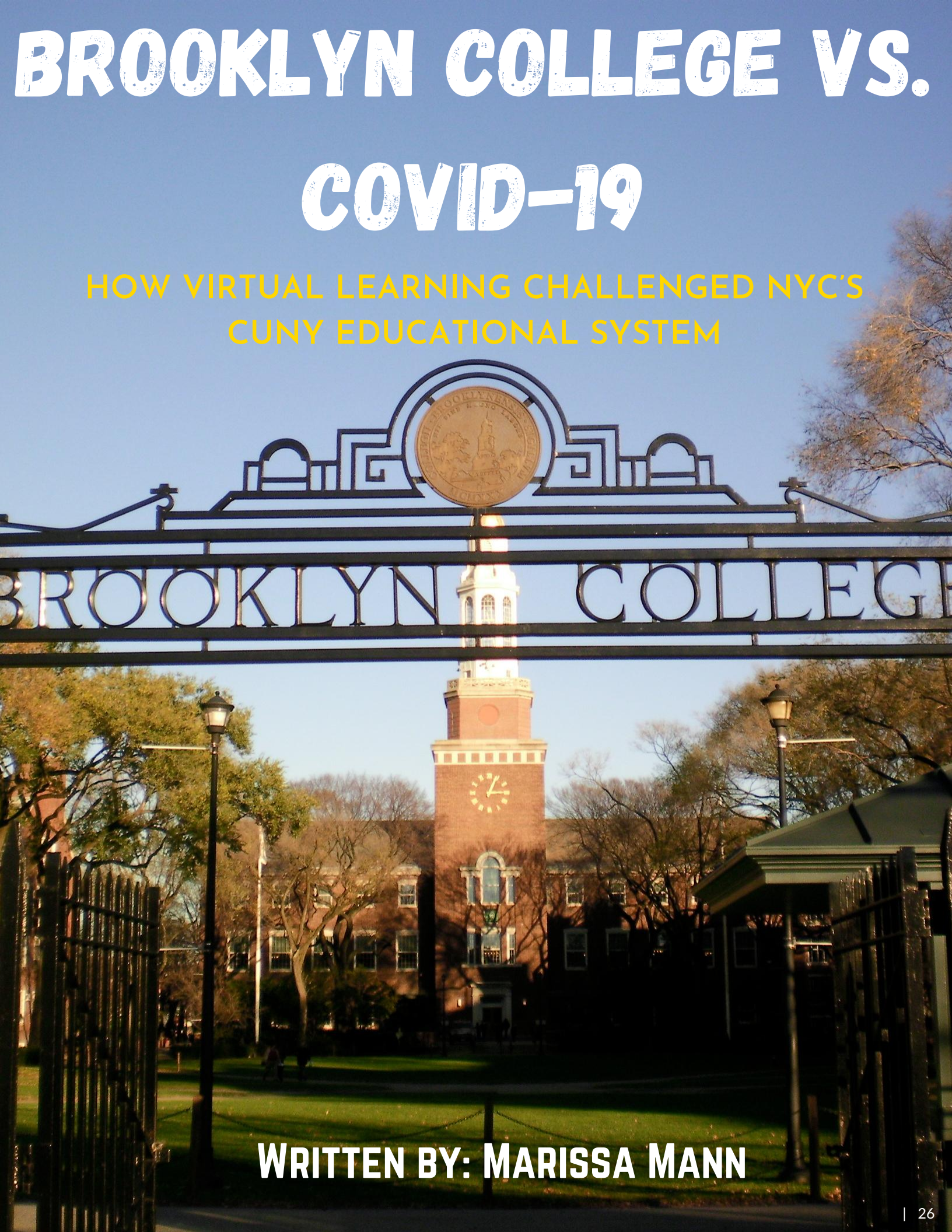
Also my aunts, Jill Dorancy and Nadira Udairam, I appreciate your editorial support in ensuring the strength of my narrative's framework and impact.

Gracefully, I acknowledge my parents, Rubain and Radicka Dorancy; who instilled in me the courage and initiative to stand on the side of justice and equity for all people -- thank you.

Finally, to you -- the reader, for your time to challenge the status quo.

BROOKLYN COLLEGE VS. COVID-19

HOW VIRTUAL LEARNING CHALLENGED NYC'S CUNY EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM



WRITTEN BY: MARISSA MANN

Table of Contents

About the Project.....pg. 2

Virtual Learning Struggles as a Student.....pg. 5

What's the Word? (Student Excerpts).....pg. 8

Virtual Learning Struggles as a Senior.....pg. 11

Does CUNY Really C.A.R.E?.....pg. 13

Virtual Learning Struggles as an Employee.....pg. 16

What's the Word? (Employee Excerpts).....pg. 18

The Professors' Struggles.....pg. 22

What's the Word? (Professor Excerpts).....pg. 24

So What Now?.....pg. 26

The Final Word.....pg. 31

Conclusions.....pg. 39

Acknowledgments.....pg. 40

About the Project

I recently graduated from City University of New York (CUNY) Brooklyn College (BC) in the Spring semester of 2020. I came in as a transfer student in 2018 knowing exactly what career I wanted to pursue: speech-language pathology. Brooklyn College was ten minutes away from my home and had a good reputation for their program in this major. Plus, this school had historical significance in my family, as both my mother and uncle immigrated to this country to pursue their higher education at Brooklyn College. Choosing this school to be the place where I continue my learning seemed like a no-brainer to me.

Collection of My Personal "Campus Life" Photos

And I was absolutely correct. My two years at BC were life-changing for me. During my time at Brooklyn, I was a very involved student on campus. I first started by attending and participating in student club events. Then, through networking in these social groups (and just exploring around campus), I eventually gained multiple leadership positions in three student clubs. I also landed a job as a College Assistant (CA) in the Black and Latino Male Initiative (BLMI) program on campus. My job there was to mentor students in the program with any guidance they needed to enhance their academic and personal success at the college.

By the school year of 2019-2020, I gained numerous titles on campus. I was not just a regular student, but now a senior in the class of 2020; as well as a CUNY employee and a close academic associate to the numerous professors I built strong bonds with through research collaborations and classes. These four major titles were not just appellations I was proud of. They allowed me to gain a unique insight into the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the Brooklyn College community; insight that no regular student

would truly see or even acknowledge. The transition to remote learning allowed me to experience hardships in different areas of my campus life, and learn about the struggles of other employees, seniors, students, and professors who were affected by this change.

With this project, I aim to highlight the inequalities I faced during my experience transitioning into virtual learning at CUNY Brooklyn College. I want to bring awareness to the struggles that similarly affected me and possibly thousands of other students and faculty across the CUNY educational system, and how the school's and NYC government's response to the pandemic possibly changed the lives and views on education indefinitely.

The current media emphasizes in detail what is going on in terms of financial actions and remote learning policies. However, the media does not truly show many narratives on the personal experiences or effects that virtual learning has had on the various members in the CUNY educational system community. There is limited research on the views that students, faculty and staff hold about these policies and the events that have unfolded during the Spring 2020 transitional period.

My project aims to demonstrate the views that members of the CUNY Brooklyn College community have on the certain financial actions and remote learning events that have taken place within the institution. I am using their narratives on the ersonal effects that occurred in their lives and my own to paint a picture on the similarities and differences of hardships that students, faculty and staff all endured; both from the pandemic and the virtual learning policies the school, CUNY system, and NYC government instituted.

Highlighting the personal experiences and opinions that members of this community have can show to the public and foremen of the CUNY educational system what specific groups of people in their institutions were overlooked when creating policies to aid the community during this tough time. This information can hopefully allow them to recognize these groups and consider their experiences when formulating reform policies in the later semesters still enduring remote learning during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Methods

For my auto ethnography. I interviewed 15 people from the Brooklyn College community to provide additional insight on the struggles endured throughout the multifaceted experiences at the college. With their consent, I sent out surveys with specific questions pertaining to the potential experience

someone may have had based on their identification at Brooklyn College. I recorded their answers through a digital form. I personally knew a majority of the interviewees, all of which I had interactions with on campus.

I also used external sources, such as website entries and newspaper articles to gain additional facts and information.

PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHIC

VIRTUAL LEARNING STRUGGLES: AS A STUDENT

Being a college student is not easy. Between classes, homework, extracurricular, and work, I felt very stretched thin in life. I had too many eggs in multiple baskets and struggled to balance them all. However, all of that changed on March 11, 2020. On this day, New York State Governor Andrew M. Cuomo, announced that all CUNY schools will begin preparing to transition to remote learning for the rest of the Spring semester. Later that day, CUNY Chancellor Félix V. Matos Rodríguez concurred with this statement, affirming:

"The transition to distance learning protects our students and all of our campus communities, while enabling the University to ensure academic continuity, safeguarding students' ability to finish the semester and protecting their financial aid. Our 25 campuses, including dorms, libraries, and research facilities, will remain open. The health and safety of the University community remains our top priority and I am glad that this measure allows CUNY to continue serving its students while alleviating pressure on our area during this public health threat."

NYS Governor Andrew Cuomo at a Press Conference on March 11, 2020

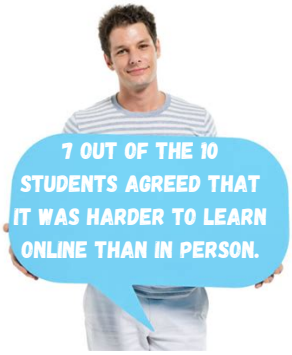
I never truly struggled academically. Family and friends always labeled me a "prodigy." I skipped two grades in my former educational years, graduated high school with my Associate's Degree magna cum laude at 16 years old, and was on track to graduate from undergrad this year as a double major at 18. Personally, I feel that I was just put in environments that allowed me to thrive and truly improve on my work ethic, but that's a whole other story for another time. With my academic history, I was a student that was always able to be successful in my studies no matter the subject or method of learning. Well, I thought that until distance learning took place.

Having my in-person classes converted to online was a blessing and a curse for me. On one end, all of those eggs and multiple baskets became one basket. My extracurricular activities were now to be done virtually, so I did not have to stress about travelling all over the place per usual. And even though one of my jobs qualified me to be an essential worker, I had stopped working there due to my underlying health conditions. I felt a lot of the usual weight on my shoulders lighten in a matter of days. Unfortunately, on the other end, I started to finally find a struggle within my academics.

The struggle did not occur within my actual grades, I was still confident in my abilities to end the semester with an "A" in all my classes. The struggles occurred internally. For one, I found it extremely hard to retain any of the information I was learning in my classes. I am typically a student who learns well by listening to lectures and taking notes based on what I hear and see. I am a very visual and tactile learner, so handwriting notes helps me retain it even more. However, with remote learning, a lot changed in terms of how teachers gave work. Within my three classes, only two decided to do asynchronous online lectures. Yet, only in two of the lectures, I ended up actually taking notes.

Most of my online lectures included new activities being inserted, such as documentaries or the screen sharing of slides. Teachers reverted to sending us their powerPoints and notes on the topics. Although it was good to have all of the necessary information in front of me, it did not really help me because I did not have to write physical notes anymore. It may seem more tedious but note taking is crucial for my learning.

Then, with homework and quizzes, those things became significantly less in difficulty as well. All assignments and tests essentially became open book work. Even though it became easier to succeed in school, I still felt like I was losing important parts of my education.

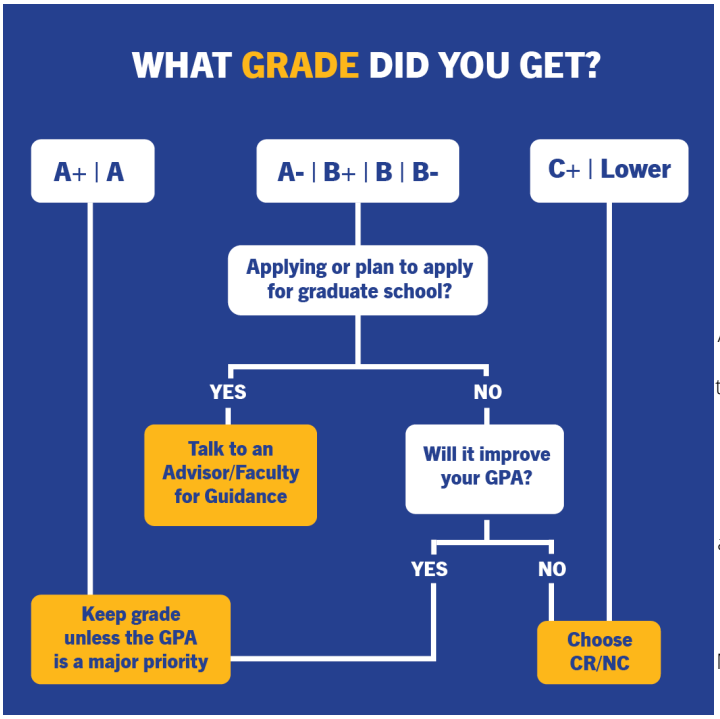


Another reason school became mentally harder for me was due to a lack of motivation. Every day on the news and on social media, there were constant updates on death tolls and newfound changes to the virus. People were in stores or online fighting to obtain basic household necessities, such as toilet paper and food. Travel bans were being put in place and the world was starting to go into lock down. The world outside felt like absolute chaos.

With all of this going on and being stuck at home, school work became less of an importance to me. It was hard to find the motivation to actually be productive and get out of bed. I was already having some mental sadness due to other personal events going on in my life. However, with the addition of a pandemic, for a while it just started to feel like an apocalypse was taking place. It made me start to wonder if school even mattered anymore. Plus, with how easy school work became, I spent little time or effort on my classes since I knew I was going to pass regardless.

Then, another major announcement was made almost halfway through the semester. On March 24th, the Chancellor - announced the Credit/ No Credit Grading Policy. This policy stated that "students will have 20 days after they receive their grades to decide if they want to convert any or all of the letter grades they earn in their classes to Credit/No Credit (CR/NC) grading."

After that announcement, I truly lost a big chunk of my motivation to learn in my classes. This was my scapegoat to give mediocre work for the rest of the semester and cover it up with a non-letter grade option. Fortunately, I ended up getting out of my rut and pulling through until the end of the semester (since it was my last anyways). However, the effects of virtual learning to my mental strength as a student was ghastly eye-opening.



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What's the Word??

Excerpts from the Interviews

Q: Describe your home life during quarantine. What hardships did you face? Did your home life affect your school life?

"My home life did not affect school but we did not have many hardships. My dad lost his job so we had to be careful about spending."

"Staying home. Not having peace to do my work and conflict with other people working as well. My wifi stopped working and my laptop as well."

"Lack of an environment for focus and concentration."

"My life at home was pretty intense on my mental health. Some of the hardships I faced was dealing with my health with parents who may not understand it. I also faced hardships regarding post- graduation employment, as COVID ruined potential job opportunities for this year."

"My home life had a lot of anxiety. We didn't step outside for three months because I live with two people that are immunocompromised; my dad has lung cancer and my mom has diabetes. My home life didn't affect my school life because I was under the same pressure as before and the pressures didn't change."

"There were hardships during quarantine, my father tested positive for COVID and it was a difficult time, this affected my school life because I couldn't focus as much as I did because I was so worried for my father."

"Grief for the dead, dying, and struggling."

"My relatives are nosy but it's not too bad."

"I slept a lot during the day. I stayed up all night which is when I completed most of my schoolwork. My whole family is well and healthy so I did not face much hardships. I did however miss my friends A LOT. At some points, I did get tired of only seeing my family."

Q: How was your school work load during the pandemic?

"My test were made more difficult in my opinion. The workload was the same."

"Moderate, not that bad in retrospect but took plenty of time to get done however."

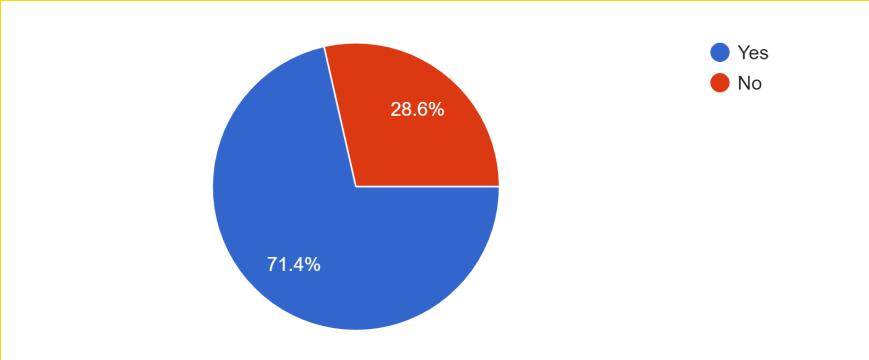
"A lot. There was a lot of information and some things needed to be shown hands on."

"I had less assignments. And the work got easier to do. I was learning less."

"Things were somewhat easier. One of my classes relied on an asynchronous approach with the use of discussion boards which I hated. I am very self-conscious about my writing. My professors had to adjust course requirements because we lost a lot of time in the transition to remote learning. My courses became very expensive because I had to order a lot of the books I needed to complete my research assignments. Under normal circumstances, I would have just gone to the library or borrowed them from a professor."

"Over whelming, but being home gave me the chance to balance my workload out."

Q: Did the transition to Pass/Fail grades affect how you viewed your current classes? How exactly did it affect you?



"I made me realize I cant take online classes. I need to be learning around others so we can learn from each other."

"I knew I was going to fail one of my courses and I felt relieved to be able to change it to NC instead of it affecting my GPA."

"I was less worried about classes because if my grade was not something I like I knew I had this option to fall back on."

"It put doubt on my self-worth."

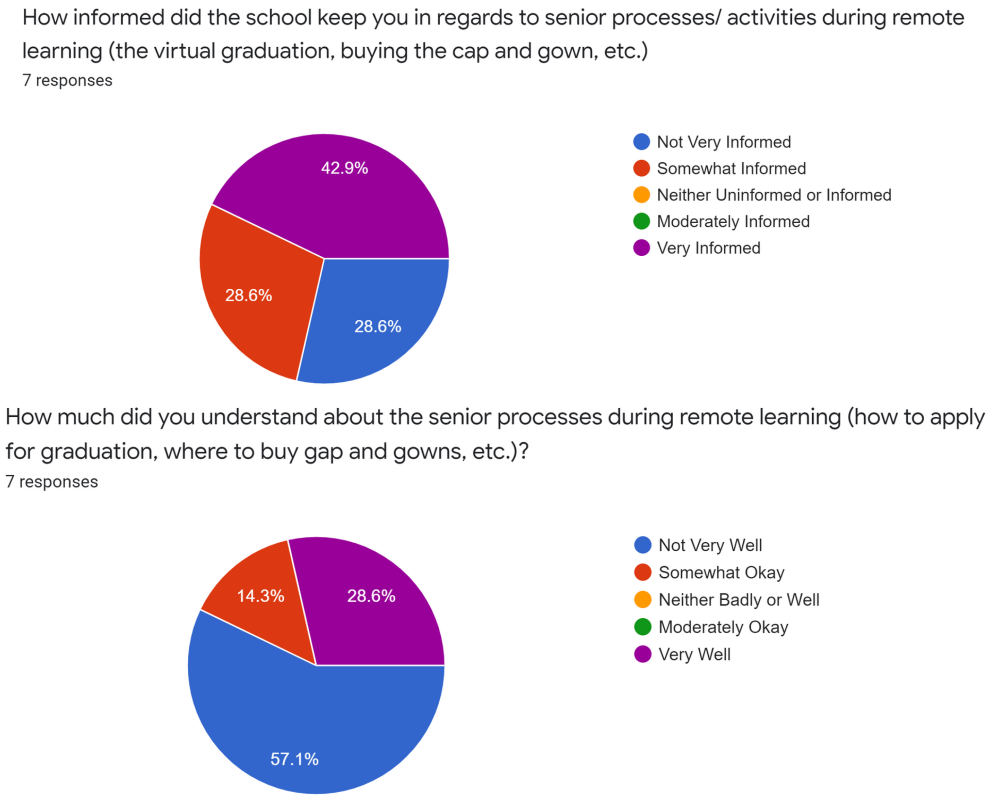
"Halfway through the semester I could not care less about anything academics related so the pass fail option was welcomed."

VIRTUAL LEARNING STRUGGLES: AS A SENIOR

My Senior Portrait for Brooklyn College

The year 2020 was planned to be my year. So many significant life changes were going to occur and I was overly ecstatic. I was graduating from undergraduate school. Then, I was going to graduate school, and I was planning to dorm a school upstate instead of staying in the city. I was finally going to live on my own and truly get to start becoming an independent adult. Unfortunately, a lot of my plans were altered due to the pandemic. The struggles I faced as a senior didn't stop there, though. At Brooklyn, I experienced major problems as a student in my senior year.

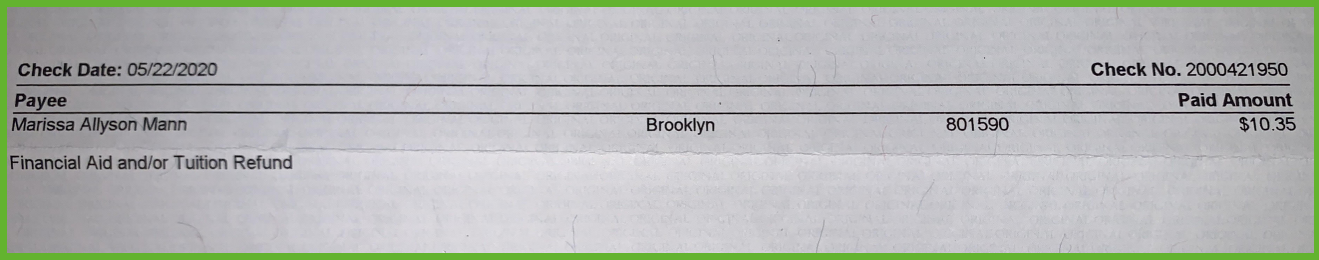
Once a student reaches their senior year, many things occur. Experiences such as senior portraits, buying class rings, preparing for graduation, and more are what is to be expected. At Brooklyn College, and most colleges, students go through the process of applying for graduation and preparing for their future endeavors after they get their degree. I had to do all of these things this year, but it was not an easy feat whatsoever. For starters, I experienced a major miscommunication trying to understand the steps necessary to graduate before the pandemic took place. I felt it was hard to get clear cut information from the school about how to apply for graduation. I solely relied on verbal information given by peers and coworkers of mine. Most seniors I came into contact with also felt this way; everyone seemed so lost on what they had to do.



Results from survey questions for seniors

Then, when the pandemic came, this confusion seemed to increase, even with the communication from the school increasing as well. The graduation ceremony was now converted to be a virtual celebration. The school's administration made great efforts to keep students updated by sending out emails with new information on a weekly basis. I read every email they sent, yet I still couldn't figure out how to order my cap and gown until a week before the ceremony was to take place! In the charts above, this confusion on the senior processes seemed to be a common trend for the seniors I interviewed as well. I honestly cannot explain the exact reasoning as to why the senior processes were so complicated to comprehend with the amount of communication the school gave. Yet, I can say that this was a prime example of when quality outweighed the quantity.

DOES CUNY REALLY C.A.R.E?

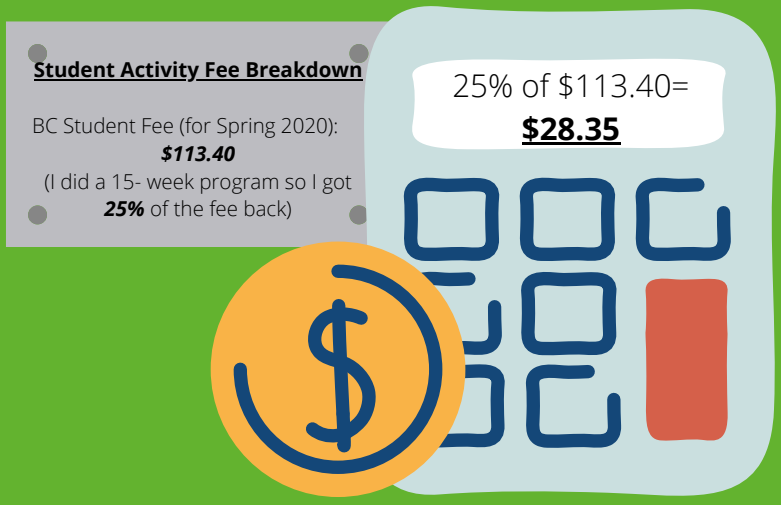


Check Date: 05/22/2020 **Check No.** 2000421950

Payee			Paid Amount
Marissa Allyson Mann	Brooklyn	801590	$10.35

Financial Aid and/or Tuition Refund

MY BIGGEST ISSUE with the transition to remote learning stems from this single picture. That is one of the two refund checks I received for my Spring semester of 2020. The second payment was a student activity waiver fee of $28.35. Why is the refund such an issue to me? Let me explain.



CUNY Brooklyn College, just like a large number of college campuses across the United States, decided to provide students with a refund of part of their spring semester tuition, as certain parts of their tuition fees cannot be applied virtually for students. On March 30th, CUNY approved the Student Activity Fees Waiver Policy. This policy made universities within the CUNY system waive 25% to 50% of the Spring 2020 Student Activity Fee for students enrolled in CUNY colleges, depending on the students' length of weeks spent in classes for that semester. Another major reason students also demanded a tuition refund was due to the feeling that the quality of online education does not compare to the quality of education provided in person. Therefore, it is not worth the same price as it was at the beginning of the semester.

Different schools had different catalysts and rules in providing their students' refunds or some type of financial assistance. For example, the state legislature in New Jersey passed a bill in

May that required higher education institutions to provide students 25% of their tuition from their Spring semester. For colleges in New York State, the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act Higher Education Emergency Relief Fund (HEERF) Student Emergency Grant was implemented as a financial assistance source for students. The act is described as the following:

"After the President's declaration of national emergency on March 27, 2020, the CARES Act Higher Education Emergency Relief Fund was enacted to provide funds to institutions to provide emergency financial aid grants to eligible students whose lives have been disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic, to cover expenses such as food, housing, course materials, technology, health care, and child-care expenses. The Student Emergency Grant funds must be made available directly to students meeting eligibility criteria in section 484 of the Higher Education Act (HEA). Institutions have the responsibility of determining how grants will be distributed to students, how the amount of each student grant is calculated, and the development of any instructions or directions that are provided to students about the grant. Students cannot apply for assistance directly from the U.S. Department of Education but should contact their institutions for further information and guidance."

One of the determining criteria for this assistance is based on a student's Free Application For Student Financial Aid (FAFSA) application for 2019-2020. This application assesses a student's financial need based on their household's size, parental income and student income. I was never able to qualify for financial aid because my household has a flow of income that is slightly above what financial aid deems a need-based criteria.

New York State on PAUSE:

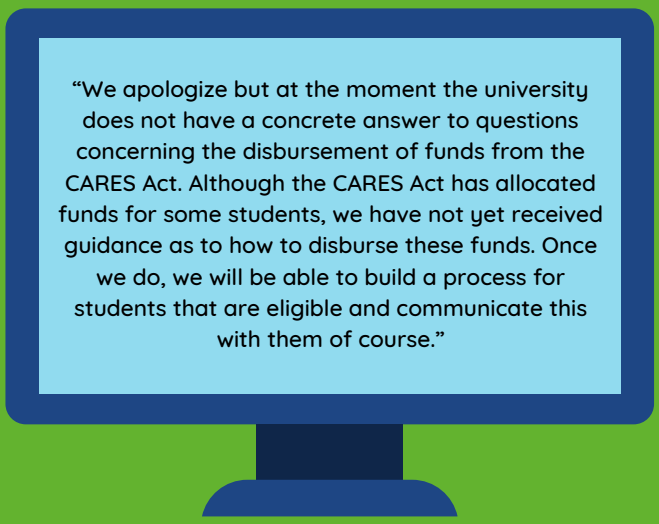
A 10-point policy executive order to assure uniform safety for everyone. It includes a directive that all non-essential businesses statewide must close in-office personnel. It came in effective on March 22, 2020.

Therefore, when I learned of this I was extremely frustrated due to the inequality of this rule. Even though I feel all students should've been able to get an equal amount of financial assistance/ tuition refunded back, I understand the logic of doing it based on a student's financial need. However, I could not comprehend why they would do it based on a student's 2019-2020 FAFSA application. That application assesses the household income from tax information a year prior to the application date. My family's

financial status from that time was not going to reflect their current one due to the pandemic. Thousands of people in NYC lost their jobs due to the New York State on PAUSE executive order by the Governor. My father was a victim to that unemployment as well. We were fortunate that my mom was an essential worker during this time or we would have fallen into very hard times. If I was able to input information on my family's current financial status at the time rather than old, inaccurate information, I would have definitely been able to qualify for FAFSA. Then, I could've obtained an actual, substantial refund from the school's own refund policy and through the CARES act.

The CARES act did not just exclude students who were in similar financial predicaments as me. It also excluded undocumented and international students as well. In Section 484 of the Higher Education Act (HEA), it states that students have to be "a citizen or national, permanent resident, or other eligible noncitizen," and, "have Social Security Number verified." FAFSA applications also require students to input a social security number. Criteria like this, among others, automatically excludes hundreds of students as well. If this act is targeted to help students who are in financial need, yet excludes thousands of students who are in said financial need, who is it truly focused on helping?

Despite extensive research, I still cannot pinpoint from my tuition fees for that semester where the refund of $10.35 came from or why it was that specific amount. One of my interviewees even shared an email with me that they received from the financial aid office at Brooklyn, which stated this about the CARES act:



This message further implies that there was a possible inconsistency within the guidelines on how the school distributed financial aid to students amidst the Spring 2020 semester. I heard conversations from classmates and peers who received almost $1000 in refunds. However, I was subjected to the short end of the stick.

VIRTUAL LEARNING STRUGGLES:
As An Employee

As I mentioned before, I had a job that I stopped working due to the pandemic. Fortunately, that was not my only source of income. I also had a job on campus as a CA. My job required me to mentor students within the BLMI program, helping to ensure their success in college. BLMI focuses on providing a space of solidarity for black and latino male students on campus to unite and uplift each other in their success. This program is inclusive regardless of gender for there is a large number of black and latina women in the program, including myself. I was a peer to the students I mentored, which allowed me to be an empathetic guide for my lowerclassmen in their studies. My role in the program was amazing for me, because I built leadership skills while networking and getting paid. When the pandemic came, however, things slightly changed for me.

Interesting Fact:

Black and Latino Males typically graduate at lower rates than White and Asian males at community colleges and 4-year college institutions.

My usual role as I said was mentoring my group of assigned students. My group consisted of 7 peers who were navigating their lives on campus. When the pandemic came and the conversion to remote learning occurred, my job required a bit more action. In the program, there are hundreds of students enrolled as members. Higher ups wanted the organization to reach out to each and every student in the program and check on the student's current status. We had to ask them how they were, if they were experiencing any insecurities (food, financial, technological, etc.), and direct them to services on campus or outside of campus that can provide them with the necessary assistance. After we recorded their answers, we wrote it down on a chart and it was color-coordinated by my bosses based on level of insecurity. I already did this with a majority of my own mentees, since I grew close to most personally. Moreover, I was asked to reach out to a larger group of students and inquire as well. It felt a bit uncomfortable for me to ask strangers about such intimate details, but their responses are what drove me to do this project.

Talking to these students revealed to me a lot of the struggles that people were facing in this pandemic. It felt surreal to me to imagine how someone you may see walking down the hallway or sit next to in class can be facing such unimaginable plights. Some students were experiencing food insecurities. Some were having problems maintaining their home life and their classes. Others were having financial struggles due to losing their jobs. A few students couldn't even qualify for some of the financial assistance programs offered by the school due to their immigration status.

All of this struggle and hardship was being experienced by the members of the Brooklyn College community and it blew my mind. The role I had to execute was a bit overwhelming for me. Not due to the quantity of work, but due to the intensity of the work. I was used to socializing and talking to my mentees, and making sure they were doing well in their classes and getting their work done. So it was a major shift to now talk to people and make sure they were eating consistently or not dropping out of school due to the intensity of their home life.

Nevertheless, I was grateful that the school and program was taking initiative to try and assist the students in this community. I was extra grateful to help and be a part of the outreach. It demonstrated to me how resilient the Brooklyn College community is. This made me want to shed light on the struggles of those in the community, even if it's through the tiny step of sharing my own story.

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What's the Word??

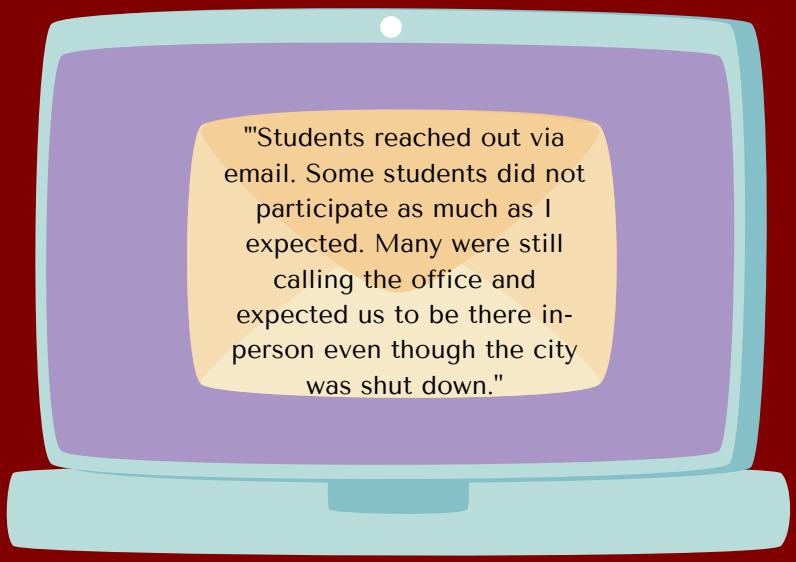
Excerpts from the Interviews

A major, common struggle for employees at CUNY Brooklyn College was the lack of engagement with the students. After the transition to virtual learning, employees in various offices experienced a drop in student engagement. Here's some of their experiences:

"As expected, student engagement decreased drastically due to the online transition. Students were so focused on trying to adjust to remote learning, pass their classes and focus on a virtual commencement that they were not always interested in participating in an online activity especially when there's no incentive (e.g., giveaways), which is understandable. I still kept in contact with students for personal chats via email and social media platforms."

Renee Straker,
Assistant Director for Student Initiatives at Brooklyn College

More Responses...



Q: What hardships did you face during remote learning?

"As usual the hardship is a limited budget but during remote learning, we were told that we couldn't use our budgets AT ALL so we were unable to provide tangible incentives like prizes to encourage more participation and engagement."

"Issues with software to perform my job. This was resolved by IT."

"Technology, wifi, ergonomics and lack of movement...being at work, you had a wider range of movement while now you're "confined" to your house."

"Main hardship is just keeping students engaged."

Q: Describe the overall school environment during this time.

"It seems like everyone is kind of just going with the flow."

"Not promising..."

"A lot of anxiety and frustration due to budget cut and course cancellation."

"Frustrating. Students were frustrated, faculty were frustrated and staff were frustrated with the sudden change of remote learning. Speaking on behalf of myself only, I wasn't prepared."

THE PROFESSORS' STRUGGLES

Every student has that one teacher that has impacted them tremendously. Luckily for me, I did not have just one, but a handful. And some of them were members of the Brooklyn College community.

I grew close to a few of my professors either from being in class and engaging with them or working on research with them outside of the classroom. Getting close to my professors, and having a mom who is a teacher herself, allowed me to see a different struggle on the other side of the virtual learning commotion. I was able to see that teachers had struggles similar to their students, plus more.

From just watching my professors, I saw how much they struggled adjusting to the transition to online learning. For many professors, it was their first time teaching online and they had to learn how to maneuver their technological devices. Most teachers, including the two I interviewed, received training on how to use programs, such as Zoom and Blackboard provided by the school. However, in my classes I can see they still had many problems while using it. In one of my classes, my teacher had to constantly call on her husband and daughter to help her share her screen or adjust certain settings. She would spend almost 30 minute sometimes trying to figure it out. The students would try to help her and we were patient with her as well, since she was such an amazing professor. However, it showed me that online learning can be inefficient and an inconvenience at times. One of the professors I interviewed even had to adjust their whole, original lesson plan just to fit the online dynamic of things.

Plus, on top of the changes at work, they had to also deal with hardships at home. Here are some of the experiences of the professors I interviewed:

"I had issues with child care. While it was great to be home with my daughter, with a working partner, I was left to balance school work (and teaching synchronously) with a child. I have always balanced work and child care but this balancing increased during remote learning."

"(1) Enormous increase in workload, both because of having to figure out how to adapt course work, and also because remote learning is considerably more time and energy consuming for the instructor than face-to-face learning....

2) The tremendous stress involved in caring for / reaching out to students, many of whom were hit very hard by health-related problems in the family, work-related issues (loss of income in some cases, mandatory increase in work hours in other cases)...

(3) The loss of work space (while also having increased workload) -- needed to conduct all work in the same small apartment that family members were also using for work. (4) The loss of access to regular exercise, which, prior to the transition, had been an important facet of managing my own mental health."

Learning of some of the professors' experiences truly altered my view and complaints during virtual learning.

For instance, earlier before I explained that I struggled to learn due to the new ways of teaching the professors were providing us with. I did not like some of the ways the teachers provided information or taught online. Yet, I understood why teachers did this conversion. For one, just as students had to adjust to this new way of learning, teachers had to adjust to this new way of teaching. And with the pandemic going on, many students and professors themselves had severe, personal effects from it. Students were worried about their income, access to technology and other aspects that school became the least of concerns. Therefore, many professors that were trying to be considerate of students chose not to overburden them with work, which can lead to them failing classes, dropping out, etc. To make such a considerable choice, especially in such a limited time and under immense pressure, it was truly admirable to me.

See what Professors had to say on the next page.....

What's The Word??

Excerpts from the Interviews

Q: How did student attendance, engagement, and activity change in remote learning? What impacted this in student lives (if known)?

"Dropped dramatically. Many students' lives were affected much more intensely than my own (and most of my colleagues). I knew that some students had illness in the immediate family, requiring them to either take care of family members or assume more responsibility at home, or both. Many students faced loss of jobs or reduction in hours; I know of at least some students who experienced *increase* in work hours, negatively affecting their ability to devote the effort that they would have wanted to their class work."

"Student attendance was quite steady. While students may not have signed in for synchronous sessions, they engaged with the coursework on Blackboard and everyone but two students were able to complete the requirements for the course. I also took more time to reach out to students to ensure they were doing OK and could access the class and course materials.I had students who had loved ones pass away due to Covid-19; students who themselves were diagnosed with Covid-19 so I made myself more accessible to them and again, was very flexible with regard to the completion of assignments."

Q: Describe the overall school culture during remote learning.

"On the one hand, pretty abysmal. There is no pretty way to describe it..On the other hand, I was tremendously inspired by the perseverance and positive attitude and optimistic spirit of a great many of my own students, and the same with my colleagues. In that respect, Brooklyn College is an amazing place to work. I have taught at other universities and can honestly say that the student body at BC is one of a kind."

"I think that the overall school culture was very supportive but as adjunct faculty, I felt that there not enough communication with regard to what I knew would be budget-cuts, rising tuition costs etc. given the economic implications of Covid-19."

SO... WHAT NOW?

A Slight Look into the Pandemic's Aftermath

I graduated from Brooklyn College on May 28th, 2020. To say I was able to finish two degrees in the midst of a pandemic is truly a proud moment for myself. My time at Brooklyn, and in the CUNY educational system, is done for now.

However, for hundreds of thousands of people, that is not the case. COVID-19 is still very present, and the effects that it has had on all the members in the BC community is still very real and lingering. The pandemic and transition to online learning impacted everyone in this world some way, somehow. We were able to finish the Spring 2020 semester, but what now?

A shot of Brooklyn College"s East Quad

For the Students...

After the experiences of the Spring 2020 virtual semester, it seems as if the CUNY educational system has taken various precautionary efforts for how the Fall 2020 semester will unfold. On August 14th, the Chancellor released a statement saying, "We are preparing for a range of scenarios that combine in-person, virtual and hybrid instructional modalities. Thanks to the diligent work of so many in our system, 48 percent of the Fall 2020 courses that are open for student registration are already scheduled for hybrid or online delivery." All of the CUNY institutions have opened up classes for registration and have multiple strategies in place on how classes will be taken.

The direction the schools choose to head in are contingent on New York City's Coronavirus Reopening Plan set in place by Governor Cuomo. There were four phases set in place in this plan. Currently, in mid-August of 2020, New York is in phase 4 of this plan. Phase 4 allows certain non-essential businesses to begin re-operation, small gatherings up to 50 people to take place in various areas, and numerous outdoor areas have reopened at less than half capacity. The reopening plan for Phase 4 also includes guidelines for Higher Education institutions to follow in order to operate. The guideline states that these institutions have to follow requirements that address their plans for reopening buildings, monitoring social distancing rules, containment of possible COVID-19 cases, and emergency shutdown of the school's grounds.

Institution	Fall 2020 7/16/20	Fall 2019 7/18/19	Fall 2019 Census Count (Target)	% Fall 2020 Towards Fall 2019 Target on 7/16/2020	% Fall 2019 Towards Fall 2019 Census on 7/18/2019	Difference (%)
Baruch	14,732	15,204	18,679	78.90%	81.40%	-2.50
Brooklyn	13,951	13,287	17,811	78.30%	74.60%	3.70
City	10,518	11,306	15,465	68.00%	73.10%	-5.10
Hunter	18,490	18,286	23,193	79.70%	78.80%	0.90
John Jay	12,369	12,629	15,880	77.90%	79.50%	-1.60
Lehman	11,270	11,242	15,143	74.40%	74.20%	0.20
Queens	15,644	16,153	19,923	78.50%	81.10%	-2.60
York	5,026	5,425	8,337	60.30%	65.10%	-4.80
Graduate School	1,866	1,872	3,603	51.80%	52.00%	-0.20
Journalism School	99	126	232	42.70%	54.30%	-11.60
Professional Studies	2,648	2,392	3,558	74.40%	67.20%	7.20
Labor & Urban Studies	152	183	364	41.80%	50.30%	-8.50
Law School	441	532	626	70.40%	85.00%	-14.50
Public Health	650	570	746	87.10%	76.40%	10.70
Medical School	184	132	351	52.40%	37.60%	14.80
Senior Total	**108,040**	**109,339**	**143,911**	**75.10%**	**76.00%**	**-0.90**
Medgar Evers	3,678	3,868	5,798	63.40%	66.70%	-3.30
NYCCT	10,728	12,325	17,036	63.00%	72.30%	-9.40
Staten Island	9,549	10,245	12,782	74.70%	80.20%	-5.40
Comprehensive Total	**23,955**	**26,438**	**35,616**	**67.30%**	**74.20%**	**-7.00**
BMCC	14,286	16,443	25,500	56.00%	64.50%	-8.50
Bronx	6,087	6,255	10,040	60.60%	62.30%	-1.70
Guttman	317	427	1,023	31.00%	41.70%	-10.80
Hostos	3,249	4,392	7,120	45.60%	61.70%	-16.10
Kingsborough	6,886	8,671	15,505	44.40%	55.90%	-11.50
LaGuardia	10,496	9,748	18,285	57.40%	53.30%	4.10
Queensborough	8,611	10,365	14,035	61.40%	73.90%	-12.50
Community Total	**49,932**	**56,301**	**91,508**	**54.60%**	**61.50%**	**-7.00**
Grand Total	**181,927**	**192,078**	**271,035**	**67.10%**	**70.90%**	**-3.70**

Mid- July CUNY Fall enrollment records by by John Verzani

Interestingly, it seems as if many students do not want to repeat their experiences from the Spring 2020 semester. Student enrollment has dropped about 3.7% across the 25 CUNY institutions in comparison to enrollment during this time last year. That is the equivalent to almost 10,000 students. Based on an article by Gabriel Sandova, the cause of this drop possibly stems from personal, financial, and health reasons. Students' lives were greatly affected through the pandemic and the shift to virtual learning and many are still trying to recover from those effects.

For the Employees/ Professors...

Amidst the pandemic, the economic climate across the United States took a real hit. Almost every type of business and institution suffered a financial loss due to the lock-downs. And higher education institutions were among them. On July 30, the Chancellor made an announcement addressing the budget and fiscal effects CUNY has suffered due to the pandemic. He stated that for the Fiscal Year (FY) 2021, "The adopted budget totals $88.2 billion, a reduction of more than $9.5 billion from FY 2020, and it includes agency savings initiatives of more than $1.5 billion." This cut in funding from the government is huge, and it is affecting the lives of so many of the CUNY faculty and staff.

Early July, CUNY laid off 2,800 adjunct professors and part-time staff members. As a response, the Professional Staff Congress (PSC), the union for faculty and staff at CUNY, filed a lawsuit against the system. The goal of the lawsuit was to get these faculty members rehired and to stop the further loss of jobs.

The outrage for the cuts and possible future ones also sparked a new movement to arise called "#CutCovidNotCUNY." It was started by the BC Anthropology Department in mid April, after department chairs were told that they would have to cut 25% of their classes for the Fall 2020 semester and prepare for a possible increase in class sizes. A New York Times Article claims, "The administration has said the projected savings from terminating adjuncts and ballooning classes at Brooklyn College would be $1.4 million." In a petition letter statement to Chancellor Matos-Rodríguez and Brooklyn College President Michelle J. Anderson, this organization furthered explained the reasoning for their cause and outrage:

"Faculty, staff and students of Brooklyn College, like all New Yorkers, have had our lives upended by the COVID-19 pandemic....To cause further trauma for the Brooklyn College community by cutting 25% of course offerings and eliminating the jobs of many of CUNY's

most precarious workers is outrageous. Furthermore, it undermines Brooklyn College's core mission to "educate immigrants and first-generation college students from the diverse communities that make up our city and state." Announcing massive, preemptive cuts to our already underfunded college before every dollar of federal stimulus, every college reserve fund, and every cost savings from our campus shutdown has been publicly accounted for sends the message that Brooklyn College can withstand such cuts.It cannot...

Cuts that will cause hundreds, if not thousands, of adjuncts across the CUNY system to lose their jobs and health insurance in the midst of a public health crisis are morally repugnant, especially when there has been no announcement about reductions in pay for employees on the Executive Compensation Plan.The PSC's Delegate Assembly has resolved that our union 'stands by the principle during the pandemic of keeping everyone working, getting paid and maintaining health insurance and rejects any attempt to anticipate or resolve budget difficulties by dismissing or not reappointing employees, including contingent and part-time employees and student employees...'"

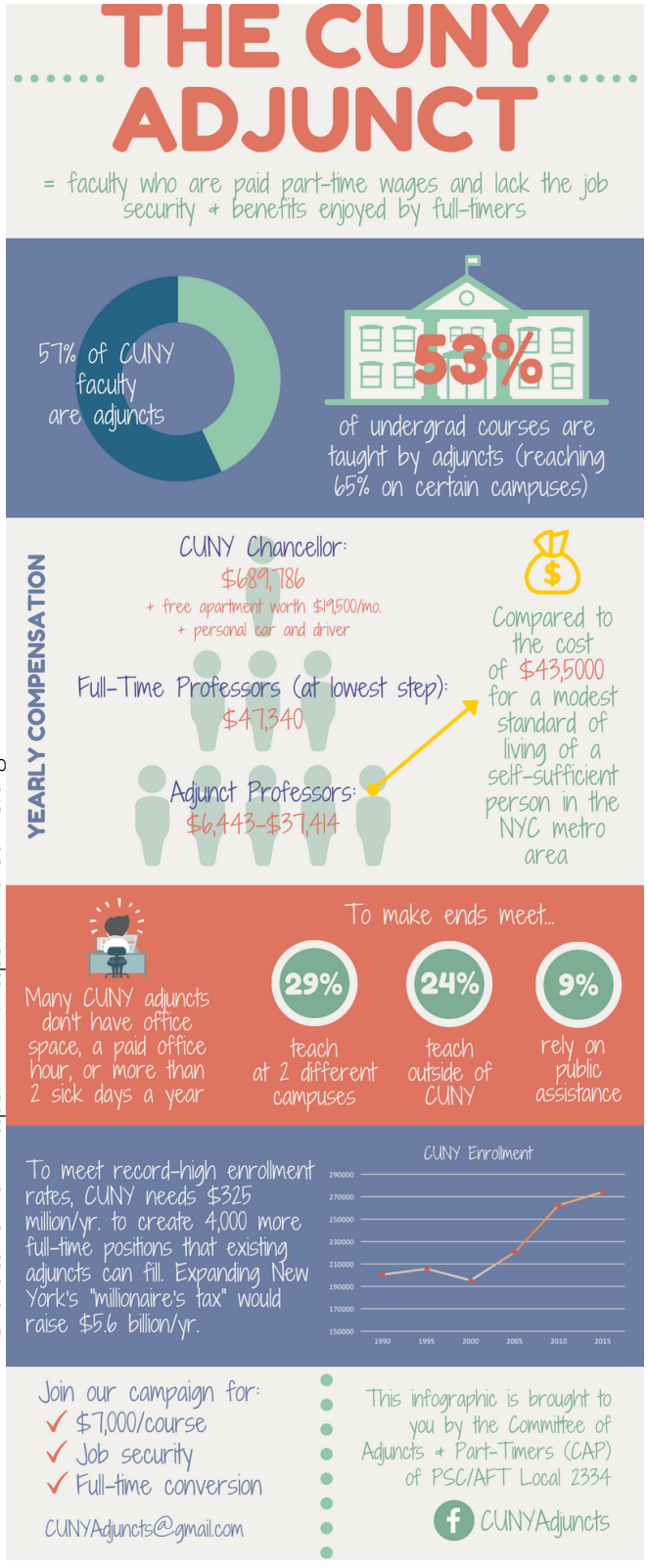


Chart take from https://www.https://7korstrike.org/

These cuts are just one of the few examples of how the adjunct faculty at CUNY have felt insecure in their professional standings. Other similar movements, such as "$7K or Strike" have existed before the pandemic trying to bring light onto the financial injustices

adjunct professors have faced in the CUNY system.

Among my interviewees was Adjunct Assistant Professor Aleah Ranjistsingh. I was in Professor Ranjitsingh's Africana studies class my first semester at Brooklyn College. She was one of the few exposures I had to a Caribbean- American professor in a higher education setting, which was a personal blessing to me coming from a similar ethnic background.

During the interview, I inquired about how she felt her future career in CUNY would be affected if remote learning continued. Her initial response was, "As an adjunct, my future at CUNY is always up in the air…" She further elaborated on the experience of being an adjunct in CUNY by stating,

"**Being an adjunct is a constant feeling of being expendable. As contingent faculty, there is no job security and even though I have the support of my Chair and my department, I still have to think about things such as class enrollment as low enrollment can mean that a class may be cancelled. This then would mean that I am teaching one less class so my income is decreased. The Covid-19 pandemic further revealed how expendable adjuncts as - needed but contingent. As budget cuts were announced, adjuncts were the first to be fired.**"

As a response to the rise of remote learning, she gained online teaching certifications at two CUNY campuses in hopes that she'd gain a slight advantage in securing her job as a professor. However, adjuncts such as her, who teach as well as any full-time professor, should not have to essentially "prove" their worth to a system that could barely function without their presence.

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The Final Word

Excerpts from All the Interviewees

Q: Looking back, if you worked in the CUNY administration how would you improve technological resources to schools/ professors during the transition to remote learning? (Professors and Employees)

"I think the administration and particularly the The Roberta S. Matthews Center for Teaching and Learning did a good job in carrying out almost daily workshops."

"That is a difficult question. I have strong opinions but at the same time I don't feel fully qualified to pass judgment because obviously the administration has been operating under severe budgetary constraints. Perhaps the most important change I can suggest is to be much fiercer advocates for the needs of students and of the colleges in the fight for increased resources -- for example fighting back against the governor's failure to raise taxes on the wealthiest New Yorkers, which amounts to an attack on the institutions that benefit working families and poor families (such as CUNY)."

"Provide technology for the work to get done and training."

"I think they did a good job of making training available even though a tremendous amount of information was presented which can be overwhelming for some. There is always room for improvement."

"Improve the ability to spend budgets especially for those who work in Student Activities."

Q: Looking back, what could the school have done better to make remote-learning easier for you to complete work and pass? (Students/ Alumni)

"I think one of my professors could have been more cooperative. We asked for extra credit a lot of times and it was never given."

"They could've communicated better or increased their access to certain services run a bit better. Also work out the distribution of refunds better."

"I think it would have been better if there were more easier programs that teachers could have used, I noticed some teachers struggle with the technology and made it harder to learn because of technical difficulties."

Q: If you were able to create a pandemic remote-learning plan for your school, describe how it would look. (All participants)

"I am not sure how to answer this fully but I would say that in addition to lending students laptop and other devices, also ensure that students have access to dependable internet/wifi through adding wifi plans to these devices or providing devices which can allow internet access."

"I honestly think it was handled the best that anyone can really expect it to be handled."

"Every one needs internet access, technology and support with finding a work space, possibly not in their home, where they can be successful."

"All classes would be online and asynchronous or students would have the option of attending the designated class time or watching the recorded lecture on their own time. Students would be given 24 hours to complete a test or quiz instead of given a specific time as to when to start and end the test. Class presentations could be audio or video recorded by students and watched by the professor instead of students trying to do it live while on a video call."

Q: What impact did remote learning have on you as a CUNY employee at Brooklyn College? (Professors/ Employees)

"It was very easy to feel isolated but there were Department check-ins."

"It's been stressful."

"I think at most, the only way I was impacted was being just as unsure as to what's going to happen next as anyone else and thus not having solid answers for anyone when asked about it."

"Challenges with adapting my course and assignments to online. Felt a bit out of touch with students. It was overwhelming for everyone."

"I am currently expanding my professional network with persons that I've met in virtually programs and being able to add to my skill set the more virtual platforms that I engage in. With this new experience, I can offer more to the BC community."

Q: What impact did remote learning have on you as a CUNY student at Brooklyn College?

"Remote learning didn't have much of an impact as a student as I had class once a week, but I do feel like even though it was a once a week, I had trouble paying attention in class. It wasn't as engaging or motivating as before."

"It [would've] made me confident at working at home if given the correct equipment."

"It made me more independent. I didn't have to get up and go on campus; I just had to watch lectures online and write notes."

"It made me realize how in times of needs, these public educational systems will cut out those at the "bottom of the totem poles" with a quickness."

"It showed me how terrible professors and Academia ethics are."

"It made me realize that I could study at home even with all the distractions."

"Learning PATIENCE , and actually trying online classes . I always had a fear of online classes but I have never tried them."

"None. I think CUNY did way better than the DOE."

Q: How do you feel the future of your career in CUNY will be affected if remote learning continues? (Professors/ Employees)

"It will be difficult. But I am not going anywhere. I love the college and the amazing students that I get to work with every semester."

"I'm being open to whatever comes my way."

"I think that at most, our department will have one of the harder times justifying why our role is so important and we may be under more of a microscope."

"Incorporating the use of technology which is long overdue. Ability to service students remotely should allow for more flexibility in work schedule and telecommuting opportunities."

"It is already affected because in Student Activities, we thrive on physical interaction and participation from students but I am positive that as more virtual platforms become available to engage students, my career will be okay.."

Q: How do you feel the future as a student in the CUNY system will be affected if remote learning continues?

"I won't like it."

"I believe future students would struggle a lot when it comes to forming reliable bonds. I think being in person teaches you how to communicate and come out of your shell more. I was lucky enough to be comfortable with my peers, know their work ethic, and converse outside of class. Yet if a professor is not open to students talking or answering questions on video call, students wont have the opportunity to engage with each other.

Students would also not have the same resources that they could've had on campus. For example, clubs, sports, job opportunities, counseling, advisement, library, or living the culture of being in college. Especially those students that come from strict households, BC or being on campus would've been a different environment for them-at least to step out of their homes and see new faces and meet new people."

"It would be great if more classes were offered online. Especially higher level science courses. Most science professors always said online teaching and testing is never an option but it is! And it took a pandemic for them to figure this out."

"As someone who studied visual arts and media at Brooklyn College, I'll say that it would not be efficient for students in many majors at CUNY to have remote learning. Many of our classes / majors were designed to be in person, and can't necessarily be graded or taught efficiently online (Ex: Film production and theater classes). Once the pandemic ends, CUNY should return back to its old system, so students can receive the most out of their education."

"Some students may drop out."

"Horrible, Cuomo wants to phase out in class teaching to save money."

"I felt like it made me better at studying at home because before quarantine I could not concentrate at home and was always at the library."

"I'll be fine. I am taking a remote class this summer and I plan to be successful."

"If it continues, the culture of education may be ultimately changed forever and some studies may end up dropping."

"Yes because no one wants to pay full tuitionon to be on a leapfrog."

Q: What has remote learning revealed to you about students, school personnel, and the CUNY educational system? (All Participants)

"It has revealed that we are indeed resilient."

"Many students and also many school personnel are quite vulnerable; their lives, and CUNY as an institution, have been severely disrupted by the pandemic and by the failures of the federal government and also the state government. But at the same time, it seems to me that the students and school personnel have stuck together and faced a really terrible period with grace and with high spirits."

"We need each other."

"Above all else, it revealed how dependent students are on their colleges for resources like technology, food, and physical space."

"To be more flexible with expectations when it comes to students. Always think of what can go wrong when creating assignments. CUNY is way behind with using current technology in teaching and in the work environment (e.g. MS Teams)."

"Remote learning has revealed to me that CUNY was in no way, ready for this type of learning and as a result of that, it left the community frustrated and sometimes frantic to get things done."

"Some people have it better than other."

"CUNY system is pretty outdated and should be more modernized but I can at least study a little bit at home."

"Income inequality is a pervasive issue in our city. Many people don't have the resources they need to reach their potential."

Q: What has remote learning showed you about society and education? (All Participants)

"It has showed me that society does not value education nor teachers, many of whom had to quickly become up to date with online learning platforms in order to maintain a continuity of learning which is important for student success."

"Nothing that wasn't already evident before: Our most powerful political and economic institutions have long neglected and even attacked public education at all levels, and have undervalued and neglected students, faculty and staff at public schools and public universities. That dynamic has had consequences that were, frankly, foreseeable once a major crisis hit."

"We have a lot to prepare for."

"It has shown how poorly prepared we are to handle situations like this and how drastic of an impact economic disparities can have in the midst of crisis."

"Human interaction is important. It is difficult to balance distance learning/teaching with other priorities at home. Teachers in public schools are under-valued."

"It showed me that society needed to have extreme patience as everyone figured out the best way to give the students the educational opportunities they were seeking with the least amount of concerns."

"A lot of the things we think are impossible has become possible!"

"Remote learning showed me that it's harder to do online classes than physically being in person."

"Access to technology and competence using technology is required for students, teachers, parents, and professors. Income inequality was also another theme. I think institutions need to be more aggressive in providing everyone with the "stuff" they need if we are going to continue remote learning. I have had to order so many resources for myself and for my daughter so that we can make our home a somewhat functional learning environment. I know everyone can't do things like that or do may even know what they need to be successful."

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FROM PAGE 39

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CONCLUSIONS

Based on the autoethnography, it can be concluded that the common struggles that students, faculty, and staff faced during the Spring 2020 virtual transition were financial inequalities, issues with the technology side of learning, and worries for the future.

Students experienced financial inequalities in terms of the distribution of financial aid, while faculty and staff experienced their financial inequalities career wise. Many employees and professors lost funding for their departments or lost their entire jobs through the online transition and the financial effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on CUNY. In terms of technology and learning, all of the members expressed some degree of negativity towards online learning. For students, they did not like the educational aspect, for they felt they were not learning or retaining information as well as they would during in-person classes. For employees, some expressed issues with the decrease of communication they had with the student body. While for professors, they expressed technological issues teaching online and having to alter their teaching style/ student-teacher dynamic. All members expressed, to various degrees, a difficulty balancing their home life with their work/ school life.

In terms of the future, all members expressed different degrees of worry for their future. For many students, they worried about the quality of their education down the line. They also debated whether they would be able to truly adjust to a completely online education. For faculty and staff, some of their worries stemmed from job insecurity and how their careers would look down the line if the constant budget cuts CUNY is currently experiencing persist. Further research should investigate formulating remote-learning plans that can benefit all members of the CUNY education system equally as the popularity of remote learning continues to rise.

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