

(UN)DOING COLLEGE, COMMUNITY, AND RELATIONSHIPS IN THE TIME OF CORONAVIRUS

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I can pinpoint the exact moments the depth and severity of the COVID-19 pandemic became real to me: First, an email on March 10th informing me that any Lea Elementary School volunteers who had travelled during Penn's spring break would not be allowed to return for at least two weeks, and second, an email on March 11th (my birthday!), informing me of Penn's decision to send all students home and transition to entirely online learning. In the five months since those two emails, my position at the intersection of three identities—a mentor at an elementary school, a teaching assistant for first-year students, and an undergraduate student—has given me valuable insights into how we can move forward into what looks increasingly like it will be an entirely virtual school year.

Mentoring

On a typical Tuesday afternoon, I arrive at the Henry C. Lea Elementary School just before the final bell rings at 3:09pm. I've worn many hats at the school, but this is my favorite: I'm waiting for six students I will accompany to Musicopia, an orchestra in Center City Philadelphia. I first visited Lea as a newly-minted first-year student volunteering with Music and Social Change, a Academically-Based Community Service (ABCS) course that supports music programming in West Philadelphia public schools. Since then, I have spent more time at Lea than almost anywhere else, granting me the incredible privilege of getting to know countless students both in and outside of Lea's music classrooms.

COVID-19 represents my longest absence from Lea since I arrived at Penn three years ago. After the announcement on March 10th and the subsequent closure of both Penn and the School District of Philadelphia, I went from visiting the school almost daily to not going there or engaging at all for the duration of the District's six-week break from instruction. Even once instruction restarted, my engagement was limited to teaching a thirty-minute lesson once a week for the only one of Lea's four cellists who was able to participate in virtual lessons.

Our last trip to Musicopia before COVID-19 struck the United States was the week before my birthday. I mentioned to my students that I would be 21 the next time I saw them, and one of them observed that they had known me since I was 18. Those three years are a massive portion of both of our lives—three years ago, they were just beginning to play violin and I was just taking my first steps into adulthood in a city far from where I grew up. Since then, I have watched them come into their own as musicians and people and they have seen me grow to love Philadelphia as home and grow into my interests as an undergraduate. These sustained personal relationships are, without a doubt, the most valuable products of Penn's current relationships with local public schools. They are not a replacement for other kinds of support that Penn is obligated to provide (like PILOTs) but they are a critical resource, especially now.

As we begin the fall semester, I encourage school leaders to remember this and take advantage of the resources Penn has to offer—in particular, its students. I know from my own experiences that being a college student is incredibly isolating right now and, based on the 52 in-depth interviews I have completed with parents of young children in Philadelphia for my senior thesis, I believe that many K-12 students and their families feel just as isolated as I do. Encouraging college students to maintain pre-existing relationships with K-12 students as well as establish new relationships with others can provide an important point of stability and care during times of enormous societal upheaval, separation, and confusion. In addition, pairing college students with educators and families can offer a valuable form of assistance as teachers work in this new school year to try to redevelop their entire curricula on short notice and as families try to manage the complex at-home learning needs of their children.

Teaching

If the first few days after the world moved online were filled with worry over how I would continue to engage with Lea, the extra week of Penn's extended spring break was filled with worry about if/how the ABCS class for which I serve as a teaching assistant would survive the transition to virtual instruction. The professor and I spent that first week coming up with lesson plan after lesson plan before eventually realizing that we couldn't make any major decisions about the course before talking to all of our students about their specific situations and needs. Over the course of a week of meeting with each of our students over Zoom, we got a much clearer idea of activities they thought would be worthwhile, the amount of time and energy they had for schoolwork, and their situations as human beings.

Obviously individual meetings with students are not feasible for all classes—small seminar classes are very privileged in that way. However, professors have a responsibility to give students a voice in what their classes will look like. This is always an important part of building fulfilling academic experiences, but it is especially so during this pandemic. Students of all ages, from kindergarteners to graduate students, have experienced a massive loss of agency over the past few months. It is therefore all the more valuable to grant them/us agency in whatever ways are possible in a classroom setting. This ranges from small actions that have become relatively accepted (e.g., allowing students to choose their own topic for a final project or surveying the class to find the best time to meet synchronously) to more radical decisions about involving students as co-constructors of the class. Regardless of where exactly they fall on this spectrum, professors should build concrete pathways for students to express their preferences about their classes and, critically, listen to and respect students when those preferences are expressed.

On March 23rd, Penn students officially began online classes. Especially during those first few weeks, I heard horror stories from my friends and my students about professors who were failing students for missing more than two synchronous class sessions (even with solid reasons) or adding more difficult assessments to maintain the “rigor” of their classes. There was a general uproar over these choices, and rightfully so since we are in the midst of the twin pandemics of COVID-19 and systemic racism. Compassion and grace MUST be the centerpieces of our teaching as both teachers and students endure the constant trauma of visceral experiences of inequality, separation from our peers, disruption of our lives.

Professors must accept that this fall will be another abnormal semester and that many students will not be able to give school the amount of attention it would normally receive. I have faith that meaningful learning will occur, but that learning will look much different than what we think of as normal. Accordingly, it cannot be assessed in the ways we are used to—professors should think creatively about how to build learning assessments that embrace the inevitable collaboration between students instead of penalizing it. In Music and Urban Spaces, the class in which I assistant teach, we are building this into our syllabus by assigning two versions of each of our major projects: a “first draft” that students complete working in groups that is not graded (other than for completion) and a “final draft” that students complete primarily on their own and for a grade.

Learning

When Penn announced that all students living in on-campus housing would have to leave, I had the luxury of choosing between several options: I could go home to South Carolina to live with my mom, go to Boston to live with my dad, or find an off-campus apartment in Philadelphia. I chose to remain in Philadelphia with the (misguided) hope that the District would re-open and I would get to see my students again. This is illustrative of my general experience during COVID-19—I have not faced the struggles with food, housing, internet access, or any other number of factors that have been barriers to my classmates’ engagement in online learning. Because I did not experience those barriers first-hand, I will not attempt to speak on them. I did, however, experience the overwhelming isolation that has characterized the college student experience since March 11th. Even though I stayed in Philadelphia, it was incredibly difficult to watch as my closest friends—along with thousands of my classmates and professors—scattered to the four winds.

This was exacerbated by the ways my professors handled the transition to online learning. Even as I was in constant communication with the professor of Music and Urban Spaces and with our students about our class’s transition to online learning, I received almost no communication from my professors about my own classes. I am lucky that I did not have to contend with making the decision to return home to a different time zone or organizing my schedule around sharing devices with other family members—if I had, I would not have had the necessary information to make those decisions until the end of Penn’s extended spring break. As it was, the gap in communication damaged my relationships with my instructors.

As a student during a crisis like this pandemic, it is vital to feel that your teachers care about not only your academic success, but your general wellbeing. Not communicating with your students until the last possible moment does not indicate the presence of that kind of caring relationship. This feeling is not limited to just students—I have seen it reflected in the stories of K-12 parents I am hearing through my senior thesis research. Communication from schools and teachers is reassuring, even when it is just to say that there is no news yet.

As a sociology major and education minor, the vast majority of my classes are small and discussion-based. This was a blessing and a curse during COVID-19: on one hand, my classes *could* continue in an online format without losing anything integral to the course, but on the other hand the fact that the transition was relatively simple meant that my professors were not forced to be as creative as professors in classes that were more impacted. Four out of my six classes took a “business as usual” approach, one stopped altogether, and only the sixth took what I felt was a more creative and understanding approach to teaching during a pandemic. In this sixth class, we regularly spent the first thirty minutes of class “checking in” with each other—saying briefly how we were doing and what was on our mind, good or bad. This was an incredibly important opportunity for all of us to get support and advice from our peers in a time where we were all dealing with varying levels of trauma.

Thus far, my experience preparing for the fall semester has mirrored my experience during the transition to online learning in the spring. Only one of my professors has reached out to gather student preferences on what our course will look like in the fall and

it took many of my professors weeks past the deadline to post prospectuses or syllabi to PennInTouch. I hope this is because they are taking the time to reinvent their classes for the fall to include radical discussions of COVID-19 and racial justice, but I worry that they will try to carry on as if this is a normal semester. The issues of isolation we all experienced last semester will not get any better—for the first year students who have not had time on campus to build relationships, they may even get worse. Professors must intentionally make space in their virtual classrooms for checking in on students' physical, mental, and emotional health and for building real, compassionate relationships with and between students. In practice, this means sacrificing some instructional time for personal discussions, giving students breaks (within and between class sessions), and reaching out to students individually as much as possible.

Much has been said about the loss of rituals and ceremonies for college and high school students: the Class of 2021 will not have a HeyDay and I doubt we will have a graduation (or at least, a graduation that resembles anything we've seen in the past). There is nothing inherent to those ceremonies that makes their loss sad; their loss is sad because they are times where our school community is visible. Without those reminders, it is easy to get lost and feel alone. But it doesn't have to be this way: if we are intentional about using school to build and maintain relationships, we can combat some of the isolation we are all feeling.

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