

The Broadsheet

Read How We Survived Covid-19



*Issue 31
Spring 2021*

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Editor's Note

I write this Editor's Note for *The Broadsheet* feeling joy and relief. Once the Covid public health crisis locked its firm hold on the Merrimack community, I questioned whether or not we would ever be able to resume publication. *The Broadsheet* became an early fiscal casualty of the pandemic, as the College administration found itself shifting understandably into survival mode. My staff and I were busy working on what would have been our 31st issue when circumstances forced us to cease operations. We lost a number of promising articles still in draft and important members of my staff to graduation and other responsibilities. Thanks to the support of so many members of the administration and faculty, however, we have finally returned to our feet.

Readers will recognize quickly that Covid-19 has made its mark on this revived 31st issue. It features three essays devoted to fallout produced by the pandemic. Fortunately, all three showcase the saving power of many resources, including inner strength, unwavering energy, resolve, and innovation. The Ryan Brooks article showcases the determination of new Writers House Director, Assistant Professor of English Emma Duffy-Comparone, to foster programming designed to ensure the Writers House remains a space devoted to inspiring creative expression among all students and faculty. Gab Tretton's feature focuses on an innovative solution devised by faculty for creating social and scholastic coherence in the pandemic-era split classroom. And Josh Noonan's hybrid essay, which blends elements characteristic of memoir and diary, details his experience as a student spending the entirety of his senior year "Zooming" into class meetings from home.

Finally, this issue of *The Broadsheet* introduces a new look, thanks to changes in the composition of its production staff. Alongside English major staff writers Brooks, Tretton, and Noonan, Communications and Media major Katie Lecher has stepped in as staff photographer, and Graphic Design major Fiona Casey has taken charge of formatting and design for the magazine. The issue, therefore, now draws interdisciplinary integrity and creativity from the School of Liberal Arts, an example in miniature, perhaps, of the way in which the entire Merrimack community continues to empower itself through collaboration.

Professor Vatalaro

Meet the Team

Professor Paul Vatalaro has served as a full-time faculty member of the Merrimack English Department since 1991. He currently chairs the department, continues to serve as founding faculty editor of *The Broadsheet*, and teaches courses specializing in British Romanticism. Initially funded by a Provost Innovation Fund Grant, *The Broadsheet* appeared in its inaugural issue in May 2013. *The Broadsheet* remains committed to exploring issues relevant to the academic field of English studies, to the Merrimack English program, its students, faculty and alumni.

My name is Joshua Noonan and I am a senior. Since high school, I have expressed great interest in the field of writing. I often enjoy the creative ways in which different entertainment media tell stories. I also major in Philosophy, which involves high concept discussions of life and its purpose that really speaks to my restless mind. I offer remote Philosophy tutoring for other Merrimack students and assist with the understanding of concepts such as ethics and virtue. As a senior this year, I am grateful that I get to finish my academic career with this official intern position. In a way, *The Broadsheet* feels both fitting and emblematic of my personal college growth. In the future, I hope to continue writing in some public form.

My name is Ryan Brooks. I am a student in the Honors Program. I am also a consultant and Writing Fellow in the Merrimack Writing Center. I volunteer at the Writers House, and I write for the Honors Program newspaper, *The Northview*. I also run a group called Writing for Wellness, in which I work with students to overcome the challenges of mental health through reflective writing and journaling. I am a huge advocate for mental health on campus, and my goal is to break down the stigmas surrounding mental health and serve as an advocate for students who struggle with it. I have a passion for writing, and I want as much experience as possible writing professionally for my future career. I also love working with Professor Vatalaro and the rest of *The Broadsheet* crew.



Professor Vatalaro
Faculty Editor



Joshua Noonan
English & Philosophy Major
Law, Ethics & Society Minor



Ryan Brooks
English & Secondary Ed. Major



Gabrielle Tretton

English & Secondary Ed. Major

My name is Gabrielle Tretton and I am currently a sophomore at Merrimack College, double majoring in English and Education with a concentration in secondary education. I am actively participating in campus programs and organizations such as Jumpstart, FYE Mentorship, and now *The Broadsheet*. Each opportunity has allowed me to get more involved in the Merrimack community and I can't speak highly enough about every one of them. I am from a little town in the tiniest state of Rhode Island and was raised to appreciate every experience as they come. My current experience as an undergrad is nearly halfway through, but once I get my teaching license in Massachusetts I plan to head back home and hopefully teach in the same classrooms that I was taught in.



Katherine Lecher

Communication & Media Major

Graphic Design & Film Studies Minor

My name is Katherine ("Katie") Lecher and I found out about *The Broadsheet* from my boss who is the Media Center Director, Kevin Salemme. I met Kevin my freshman year when he convinced me to change my major to Communication and Media. I've been one of his student photographers ever since and that led me to becoming the official photographer for this issue of *The Broadsheet*. My passion for aesthetics stretches beyond my professional career aspirations. I had the honor of being President of the on campus club Art Warriors this year. Apart from my creative endeavours as a student, I carry a passion for the arts in every aspect of my life.

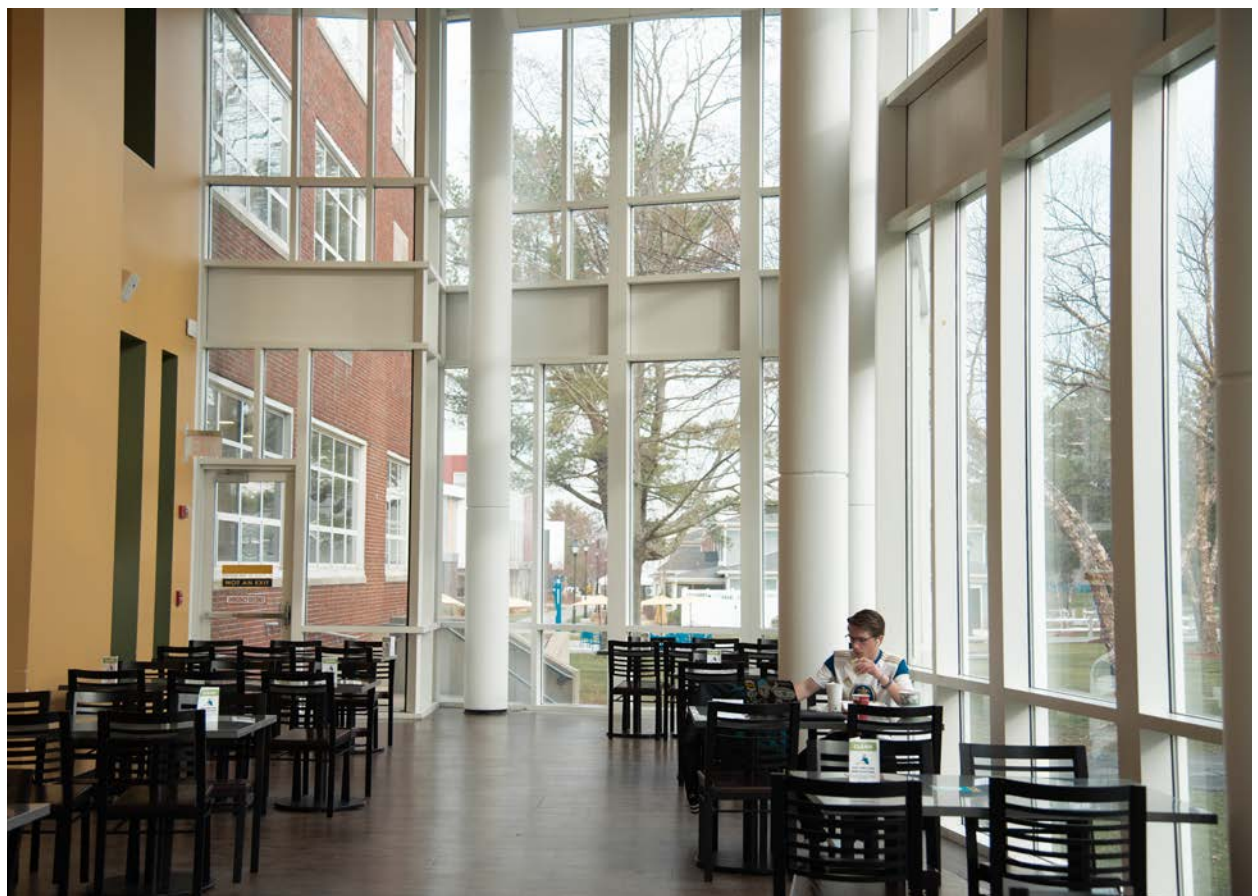


Fiona Casey

Graphic Designer Major

Visual Storytelling & Marketing Minor

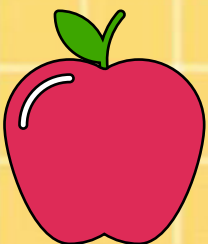
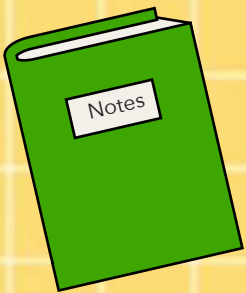
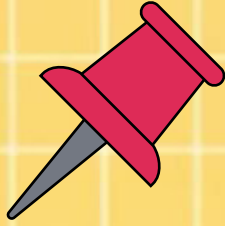
My name is Fiona Casey and I am a rising senior here at Merrimack College. I came to Merrimack with a certification in Graphic Communications from a technical High School. Since then I have worked on and off campus to expand and sharpen my skills so I can grow as a Graphic Designer. I worked in a printing department for a year off campus to learn more about the technicalities tied to production and I also work on campus as a Student Ambassador. I am currently the only design major working on *The Broadsheet* due to my experience in using Adobe InDesign. Working on this publication was an amazing experience and I'm honored I got to be part of the team.



New Classroom Facilitator Program Provides Entrée to Professional Life

by: **Gabrielle Tretton**

The Classroom Facilitator Program began at Merrimack College in 2020 and has been running for just one year now. As a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, faculty scrambled to accommodate two student groups, those attending classes live and those attending online. Crisis mode forced faculty to learn new technology that most had never tried before, such as Zoom and Blackboard. To help professors adjust to such a crazy situation, the College administration established the Classroom Facilitator position. The program aimed at providing assistance to professors, who would need to juggle two audiences, and transferring some responsibility to a student facilitator for ensuring that online attendees were getting the best experience possible. Faculty and administrators knew how important it would be that the voices of online students were heard just as much



as the voices of those sitting in the classroom. Additionally, the initiative demonstrated the administration's commitment to creating conditions under which Merrimack students could connect with their professors. Students selected to serve as Facilitators would also benefit from working closely with faculty and gaining experience

organizing, facilitating, communicating and managing a large group of people. Early returns indicate the program has succeeded. I would know—I'm a Classroom Facilitator myself!

My name is Gabrielle Tretton and I am a sophomore at Merrimack College, working toward a degree in English and Education, with the goal of becoming





a high school English teacher. I have been blessed to enroll at an institution that offers numerous opportunities for me to dip my toes into the waters of a real adult career, rather than waiting to be thrown into a profession immediately after graduation. Though practically every course I have taken so far in my program of study has provided some exposure to the career world I'll be entering, nothing quite measures up to the demands of my Classroom Facilitator role. This hands-on job opportunity takes place on campus and I work alongside a

licensed professor as part of a guided practice working on the other side of the classroom.

Let me be more specific about the the job. My responsibility involves bridging communication between students and the professor by addressing student questions that don't necessarily require a response from the instructor. Most importantly, I ensure that online students get the most out of their classroom experience. Each Monday, Wednesday and Friday I attend class and take a seat in the front row. I greet students as they walk in the

door and take down their names for attendance. Meanwhile, the professor fastens her Ipad to a rolling tripod, facing the front of the classroom with Zoom software launched for online students to join. Circumstances created by the Covid-19 pandemic forced Merrimack to accommodate students who opted not to come to campus for the year by providing them with the opportunity to attend remotely. This means that, while class is in session, the professor addresses two audiences—one directly in front of him/her, participating from classroom seats, and the other online, sometimes at home, sometimes from their dormitory rooms. The rolling tripod enables the instructor to move the Ipad to wherever she wants the camera's focus to be. In most cases, the arrangement allows remote students a view of the professor lecturing at the front of the room, but no sense of their peers in the classroom. I make sure students not included in the camera shot don't remain invisible. Once I have finished getting the on-ground students settled, I log onto the Zoom software myself in order to take the attendance of students present online, and then

I monitor the online Chat function to make sure students haven't attempted to reach out with questions for the professor. Soon after, the professor begins the class meeting and I continue to monitor the experience from the online student's perspective and ensure that the quality of the presentation is up to par. What's more, I also keep my eye on the Chat room to summon the instructor's attention whenever a student poses a question. Outside of classroom activity, I also respond to student emails and send out reminders. As an added bonus, the professor with whom I am working occasionally offers me an opportunity to teach a class on my own!

The prospect of filling in for the instructor obviously excited me and



I jumped at the chance to teach a college level class, enrolling students my own age, allowing me to get a feel for what it will be like when I eventually take responsibility for my own class. I was able to experience how students respond to real course content in comparison to the other brief moments I have spent at the front of a classroom delivering a presentation. Needless to say, I found performing for an hour and fifteen minutes in front of a room full of people more intimidating than standing for ten minutes during a class presentation. The atmosphere of the classroom feels very different from a teacher's perspective than from a student's sitting at a desk. I became acutely aware of how many times students appeared responsive to points I made throughout my presentation, not to mention the overwhelming joy I felt when they did respond. I invested a great deal of effort into showing enthusiasm for what I spoke about, hoping that my enthusiasm would energize and carry over to my students. The tremendous stress that comes with adopting the teacher's position pressured and

thrilled me in unexpected ways, something I didn't realize I would love so much.

Running a class meeting afforded me practice time using teaching strategies I have observed my own professors using, such as waiting for a moment or two for students to respond, prompting answers a certain way, or getting students to complete an activity in order to involve students more in the content. The process allowed me to get a jumpstart on what it will be like to teach in my own classroom one day. The Classroom Facilitator post has given me a completely different perspective on classroom dynamics—one I thought I wouldn't get until after graduation, or maybe through my third pre-practicum at the earliest.

Observing the instructor to whose course I was assigned put me in a novel position, because it exposed me to teaching strategies I might not have noticed were I a student enrolled in the course. The Facilitator role enables me to focus my attention on how she teaches, on her pedagogy, rather than on what she might be teaching, which would be the case were I one of her

students. For example, at the beginning of each class, the professor poses a series of true or false questions to the class by saying something like, "True or false: Parents who are restrictive and demand mature behavior wind up with rebellious children." As a result of her posing the question in this way, I noticed that the students seemed reluctant to vocalize answers. So, when I got the opportunity to incorporate those observations into my own pedagogy, I asked the class to raise

hands if they regarded the statement as true. Then I waited a moment before I asked them to raise a hand if they regarded the statement as false. This strategy seemed to encourage students to participate, perhaps because I had not made it a requirement for any one student to verbalize his/her thoughts. My strategy yielded a very positive result and increased student participation. Experimenting with different approaches to teaching from a teacher's vantage turned into quite an



advantage and will no doubt serve me well when it comes time to seek a full-time teaching position. My Facilitator job contributes to my income now, while I'm living and learning on campus; perhaps more importantly, though, it promises to contribute to a stronger resume when I present this kind of experience to a future employer.

The benefits don't stop there! The Classroom Facilitator position connects me with faculty on campus who have a lot of knowledge and experience in areas that are unfamiliar to me. Furthermore, faculty to whom I have been introduced because of this job have contacted educators outside of Merrimack in order to help me establish additional connections and set me up for success

once I enter the job market. Don't just take my word for it, many other student Class Facilitators speak positively about their experience in the program and, to my surprise, come from outside the Education program.

A teaching assistant position for an aspiring English-Education major might seem like an obvious job opportunity, but after reaching out to other students working in the CF program I realized that I am the only one! I learned that Criminal Justice majors also find the position very alluring. Part of the reason is that administration and faculty rushed to create the program as a mitigation measure at the height of the Covid crisis. Therefore, only those of us connected to faculty who had a hand in creating the program, or had relationships with professors who were recruiting Classroom Facilitators for their own courses, knew about the job opportunity. A number of Criminal Justice faculty got onboard.

While I was preparing this feature for this issue of *The Broadsheet*, I spoke with other students in the CF program and learned their experiences mirrored

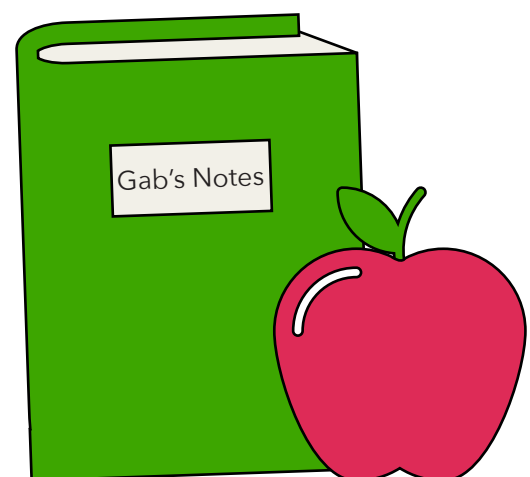


my own. They expressed feeling more comfortable and more confident about the ways in which what they were learning in their subject field would translate to real life. Sophomore Daley Tagan, in her second semester as a Facilitator, for example, said the CF experience proved a “really helpful recap that serves as a reminder of the basics of my major.” She added, “it has prepared me well for a lot of careers in law enforcement and the prison systems... [and] opened up my horizons to different employment opportunities through the connections I’ve made.”

Conversations such as this one along with my own experience in the program helped me recognize the importance of observing and creating first-hand an inclusive atmosphere in the classroom and remaining receptive to learning as you go when it comes to being an effective educator. The Classroom Facilitator program has opened my eyes to much that goes on behind the scenes as a teacher. I have begun to appreciate the ability to manage so many people all at once. Going forward, I have a better

understanding of what I need to focus on in order to be the best teacher I can be once I conclude my studies at Merrimack.

This spring, eight of us serve alongside professors in their courses. By this time next year, I anticipate that number will continue to grow as the benefits for such a position become more well-known among the undergraduate population on campus. I can’t imagine that the prospect of working side-by-side with faculty represents an opportunity students would pass up. The Classroom Facilitator position has provided me with an incredible experience I won’t forget. I feel smarter from what I have been able to learn through the position and I feel more confident in my abilities to go forward with my career, as do my fellow Classroom Facilitators.





The Writers House

An Inclusive Space for Creative Minds

by: Ryan Brooks

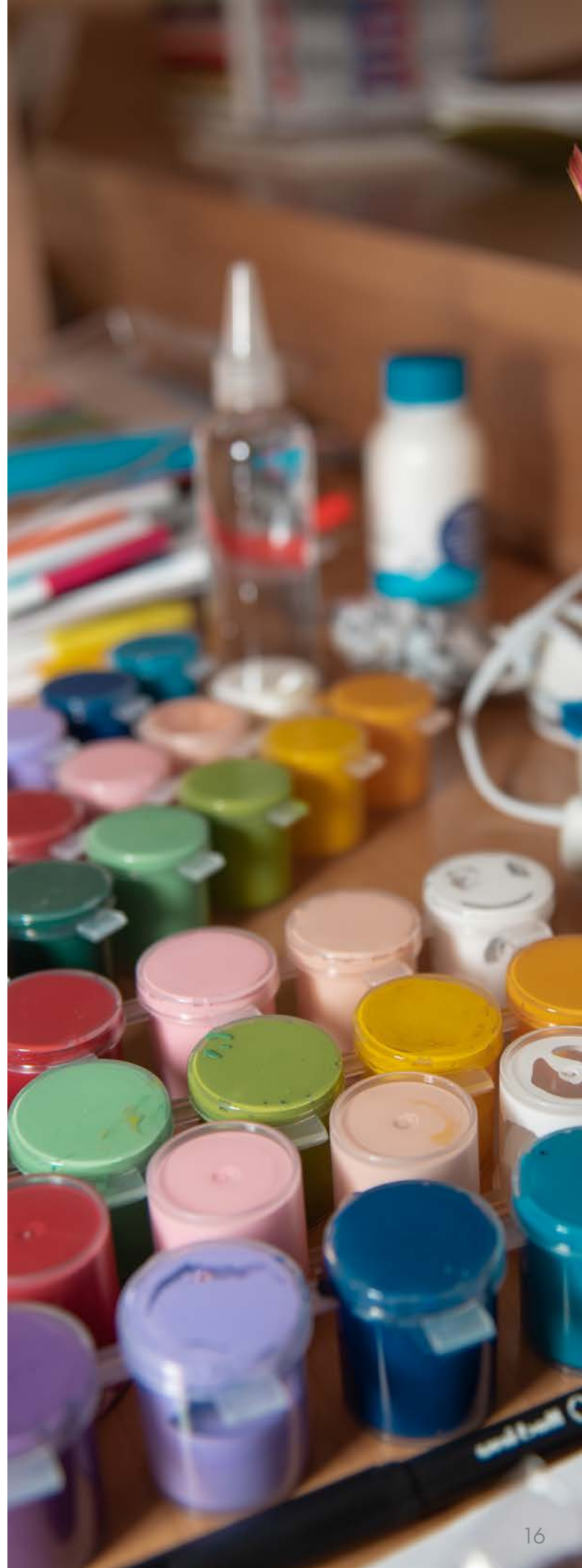
Though called “Writers” House, the Merrimack Writers House is not a space designated exclusively for writers or for English majors. Rather, it serves as an inclusive space for creative minds and creative expression. Whether you consider yourself an artist, a filmmaker, a photographer, a writer, or someone who simply pursues creative hobbies or interests, the Writers House represents the ultimate sanctuary on campus to foster your passion. Located in the Academic Innovation Center behind the Merrimack Athletics complex, the Writers House fosters an atmosphere in which students support and inspire one another’s growth, not only as artists but

as people as well.

Emma Duffy-Comparone, Assistant Professor of English, specializing in Creative Writing, this academic year assumed the role as Writers House Director. Last month Professor Duffy-Comparone published with Henry Holt her first collection of short stories, *Love Like That*. The collection garnered almost immediate recognition and praise among reviewers, many of whom had received advance copies. *Vogue* magazine, for example, named *Love Like That* a Best New Book of 2021, and *The National Book Review* placed the collection in its list of “5 Hot Books.

Publishers Weekly and *Ploughshares*, among other major outlets, have praised the collection's originality and its author's skill. Professor Duffy-Comparone's first challenge in her new Director's role was to revive the Writers House after its closure during much of the Covid-19 outbreak. Pandemic public health guidelines mandated making significant changes to the Writers House layout and operation. The six-foot social distancing in all public spaces mandate made it more difficult to accommodate even modest numbers of students. Large, interlocking tables, at which students gathered for Writer's Circle and other activities, had to be removed, room capacity had to be reduced, and many scheduled events had to be postponed or canceled. These circumstances caused the Writers House to slump.

Despite restrictions and setbacks, Professor Duffy-Comparone and student Event Coordinators Meghan Smith and Dan Roussel managed to revive the Writers House by hosting several "COVID-friendly" events, and they recruited student volunteers interested in helping out. The Writers



House sponsors numerous events and fosters student-run groups, which Meghan Smith regards as “the heart and soul of the space.” Programming includes visits and readings from renowned authors, the hosting of a Writers Circle, and sponsorship of the Writing for Wellness project, an initiative that devotes itself to improving student mental health through therapeutic writing. Let me say a little more about each of these initiatives.

The Writers House hosts visiting writers typically every Wednesday evening. We have been fortunate

enough to welcome big-name authors, such as Alice Sebold, author of *The Lovely Bones*, and poet Cynthia Huntington, who met with students and then read aloud from their work. After their readings, authors take questions from the audience, regarding creative inspiration, writing habits, publishing, and craft. Meeting these authors, hearing their advice, and learning about their own approaches to creative expression is an honor and a rare privilege. During the pandemic, events have been held over Zoom, so everyone in the Merrimack community



is welcome to join. The Zoom links are posted through The Dean's Desk email feed.

Senior Dan Roussel runs our Writer's Circle. Typically, Writer's Circle activities consist of students spending thirty minutes writing a creative piece and then an additional thirty minutes sharing their work if they choose. Students offer feedback to one another. The group creates an incredibly welcoming, encouraging safe space that welcomes all students. Writer's Circle meets currently by means of Zoom, so anyone is welcome to join. Talent in writing is not required; all students need is a passion for writing and creative expression.

I coordinate the Writing for Wellness sessions. I've structured the program based on principles espoused in Julia Cameron's *The Artist's Way*, which help students discover their inner artists through journaling and reflective writing activities. I make sure this group remains an inclusive, confidential safe space for students to discuss the challenges of mental health and learn writing-based self-care and coping strategies.



Beginning next fall, Meghan will be running a new book club called No Shelf Control. The club will welcome all readers and those interested in joining should stay tuned for updates!

In addition to student-led group activities and visits from accomplished authors, the Writers House hosts a variety of weekly events on Thursdays. As a new recruit to the Writers House crew, I have had the honor and the pleasure of working closely with junior Meghan Smith, the organizer and visionary behind these events. Meghan

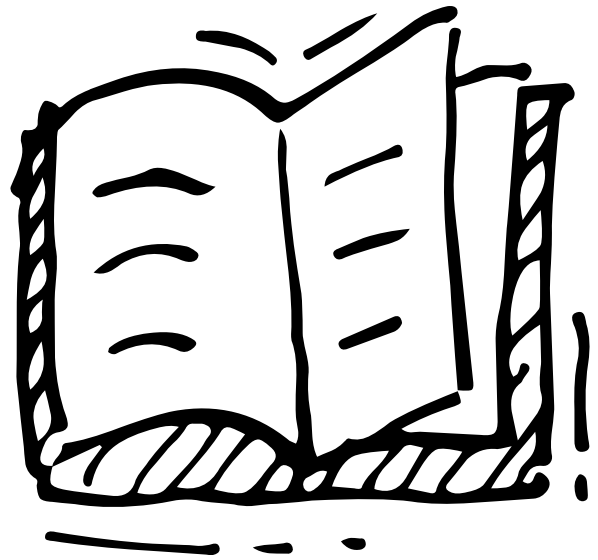


has spent many hours planning all kinds of events, ranging from trivia nights, and journal decorating, to Murder Mystery Nights, and most recently, a Bob Ross Painting Night, in which students attempted to follow a Bob Ross painting tutorial. The Writers House sends out a weekly email providing details regarding these events, and it also posts about them on their Instagram page. Students are encouraged to follow us @mc_writershouse and sign up for our mailing list in order to stay up to date with all things Writers House.

When I interviewed Meghan for this article, she said she believes the purpose of all Writers House events is to “give students and faculty an escape from the traditional day-to-day requirements of academic courses while boosting creativity.” She added that the main purpose behind activities launched during this pandemic year involves providing “our on-campus community a chance to be together in a space while still adhering to the requirements in place, and to keep our remote students connected as much as we can by offering Zoom options.”

Most importantly, Meg noted that the Writers House varies its events “in order for the majority of the campus to feel represented and welcomed.” Personally, I’ve found that absolutely everyone is welcome to attend Writers House events, regardless of that student’s major. According to Meghan, “It always makes us feel great to have students from different disciplines attend our events.” She encourages everyone in our community to contact us with any ideas for future events!

Though I am a rather new member of the Writers House crew, my involvement in its programming has changed my life. I experienced a rocky start at Merrimack. I ended up leaving campus to commute, a move precipitated by poor mental health and an eating disorder at the beginning of my freshman year. Because I was in such a dark place, I withdrew entirely from life on campus and struggled to maintain friendships. I went into my sophomore year without any friends as a result of self-isolation, which depressed me. I didn’t believe I belonged anywhere on campus. Never did I think that merely signing up for a



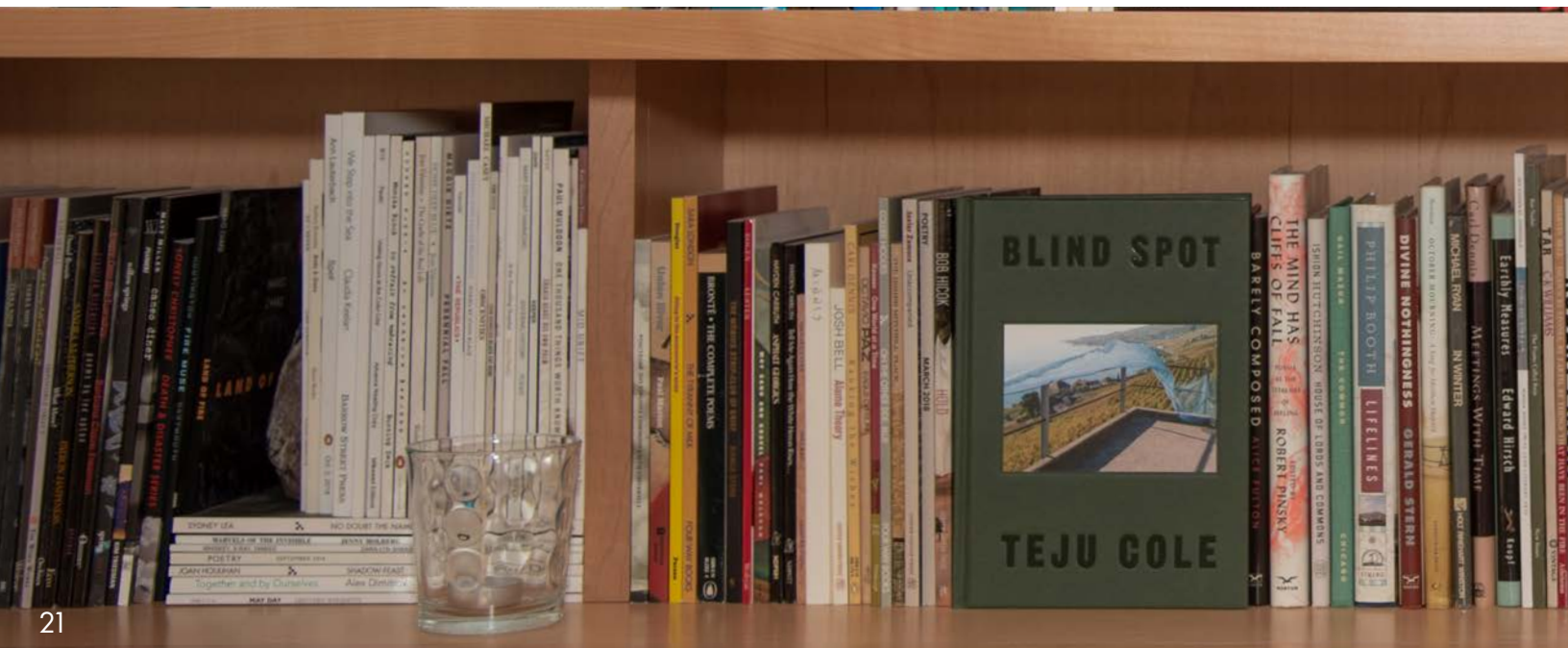
Creative Writing course last fall, taught by Professor Duffy-Comparone, would change my life forever. In meeting her on the first day of the semester, I instantly felt comfortable around her, particularly because of her friendly, welcoming demeanor and wonderful sense of humor. I shared with her that I love to write in my spare time, so she introduced me to the Writers House and the many different events it sponsors.

Intrigued by the possibility of meeting others with similar creative interests, I decided to attend Writers Circle for the first time. It was one of the best decisions I have ever made. I have never met a more welcoming, friendly, accepting group of people in my entire life. As someone who frequently writes

about personal experience struggling with mental health, I was so incredibly thankful for the overwhelming support I received from the Writers House crew. I decided from that day forward to attend all Writers House events and become involved by volunteering my services to help Professor Duffy-Comparone and Meghan in planning and setting up groups and events. I cannot recommend enough that other students take advantage of the Writers House. It cultivates a community that is an inclusive safe haven for all creative minds. It serves as a space in which we push each other to develop our creativity, as well as a safe place to hang out and decompress. I went from having no friends to having many, and for the first time in a long time, I found a

place to which I truly feel I belong.

Don't just take it from me, though. The Writers House has fueled the creativity of several other creative people across campus. Paige Means, a first-year transfer student here at Merrimack, is one of them and I had a chance to talk to her at length about the impact of the Writers House on her Merrimack experience. Paige told me her start at Merrimack was anything but ordinary. She began her studies not in the fall, but during the current spring semester and in the middle of a pandemic. Making friends and getting involved proves a difficult task for so many individuals. Navigating that process under the strict social distancing protocols posed by COVID-19 and the pressure created



by being a commuter and a transfer student intensifies the challenge. Fortunately for Paige, she had enrolled in Professor Duffy-Comparone's English Sophomore Seminar course. Paige spoke with Professor Duffy-Comparone about her many creative hobbies, and Professor Duffy-Comparone introduced Paige to the Writers House crew, of which I was a member. We managed to convince Paige to attend our first event of the semester, Speed-Friending. Paige describes her experience at the Speed-Friending event to be extremely rewarding: "I met some really cool people, and I've been going to events ever since!"

Paige emphasized how important it was for her to meet "amazing students who enjoy the same things...[she] did."

She added that, though this was only her first semester at Merrimack, she met "friends [she] knows [she] will be staying in touch with even after college is over." She regards this as a rare circumstance and attributes it to the ability of the Writers House to foster a "low key atmosphere" in which students can easily be themselves. Paige said she considers the Writers House "the coziest place on campus," equipped with a gas fireplace, twinkle lights, and plants. She credits the Writers House with inspiring her creativity. While acknowledging the pandemic as a formidable impediment, she believes the Writers House helps her remain motivated to reinvent her creative processes by "being around people... who believe in [her] abilities." Most

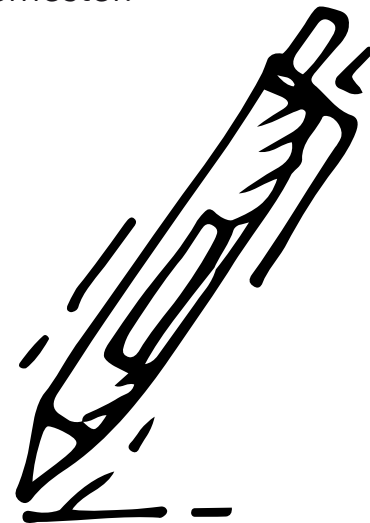


importantly, Paige emphasized that the Writers House community doesn't focus on perfection in creative projects, but rather simply encourages students to "do something that fills their souls while enjoying the process."

Paige underscored how much fun the Writers House events are. Her favorite event was the Murder Mystery Night we held in March. Conceived by Meghan Smith, students who participated in Murder Mystery Night each played the role of a different character. The activity involved discovering the identities of two mafia members. "We all had roles that we dressed up for. We were having so much fun that we played for over three hours! It was one of the events that really bonded us all in the Writer's House," Paige recalled. Though she was upset that our detective and I discovered her to be one of the mafia members, she considers that night as the most fun-filled evening she's had in a long time! Paige said she "HIGHLY" recommends that other creative minds across campus take advantage of the Writers House: "You get to meet like-

minded people who are fun to be around."

Over the past two semesters, establishing a sense of community has become more important and maybe more difficult than ever. The Writers House crew beat the odds generated by the Covid-19 pandemic and managed to put together an incredibly successful year full of memorable events, groups, and most importantly, new friendships. I can only conclude that, if we managed to do so during such tumultuous and restrictive times, we should really look forward what lies ahead once the pandemic is finally behind us. We hope that creative minds across campus will take advantage of the wonderful groups and events in the Writers House for the upcoming Fall 2021 semester.







Survival Mode and the Covid-19 Pandemic

Reflections of a Remote-Only Senior

by: Joshua Noonan

COVID-19. PANDEMIC. QUARANTINE.
SOCIAL DISTANCING. NEW NORMAL.

A little over a year ago, few people would understand the bitter significance of hearing those words and phrases. By Spring 2021, dreadful statements of this nature continue to generate widespread anxiety and fear. This evolving crisis in some form sharply impacted each and every person of this planet. Currently, I am a senior at Merrimack College, preparing to graduate. Back in 2019, I envisioned a more extravagant set of experiences before I left college: maybe a fun senior excursion to a casino or invitations to adventurous parties. Back then, the dark reality of a new disease was invisible. Instead of getting the send off I had anticipated, though, I transitioned from attending classes as a

commuter (who was already somewhat distant from campus residents) to remote-only status, meaning, I would not physically be on campus at all during my senior year. Who would have thought that I would be spending my early twenties confined to my home? During this alone time, I developed a set of concrete observations about my situation and I hope this article will speak for many remote-only students, those who want their distant-learning voices heard. Maybe I can articulate an understated or even a hidden perspective. Most of all, I want to explain how I survived the world coming to a complete stop during the 2020 spring semester, and how I continue to contend

with this new and shocking reality.

Prelude to Panic

For those that are traveling in or to a high-risk environment or location during spring break: the college urges you to practice self-isolation for 14 days at your residence, away from campus, as recommended by federal and state health agencies. (Merrimack College email update: March 5, 2020)

The Covid-19 crisis did not strike suddenly overnight. Instead, let us begin in February, when none of us knew a looming shutdown of schools, manufacturing plants, offices, and all public spaces lay on the horizon. Somehow I felt something was off during my last full week on campus before spring break. In the beginning of March, I had just finished my Theories of Justice midterm (I'm an English and Philosophy double major). I felt somewhat empty and tired. There was already talk of COVID cases spiking as a result of an international conference held in Boston, and the stock market had registered one of its worst days. Although I was preoccupied with my college studies, I began to feel



uneasy in the back of my mind. When I visited Market Basket during spring break week, I saw an older man sneezing into his hand. I watched from a distance, as fears started to creep in. Does he have the virus? Am I going to get sick in the coming weeks? I had a sense that some downward spiral was hunting me. My seasonal affective sensitivity was in full swing, as the short, cold winter days seemed to bring nothing but disappointment. Usually, these chilling emotions would last a couple of weeks. When I returned from spring break, I was going to spend some time with friends on campus. I did not do this enough when I could, but at least I was making progress at the time. Little did I know that this spring break week would mark the beginning of a year pursuing my

degree in remote-only mode.

Hiding at Home

The College has purchased Zoom Enterprise to assist with remote virtual meetings for faculty, staff and students. This technology will allow departments, college units, athletic teams, student groups, student government, as well as one-on-one advising and even when appropriate class lectures to be delivered in a live synchronous format. (Merrimack College email update: March 17, 2020)

During the second week of March, the unsettling reality of COVID-19 arrived. I scrolled through countless event cancellations, case numbers and worldwide news updates. My generation's intimacy with social media made it hard to break away from reality. Glued to that small, bright screen, my phone acted as a gate between old and new normals. Among the flood of unnerving news bulletins, the moment NBA officials decided to cancel the 2020 season made it clear that there would be no turning back. I could only imagine telling myself months earlier that a virulent, deadly illness would become capable of forcing the

cancellation of an entire professional sports season. Perhaps the oddest detail of my reaction was that I generally do not follow sports. However, I recognized the normality that these athletic seasons represent for other individuals, making it unnatural to have them stripped away during a global emergency. Most people know someone who loves to follow sports and sometimes that sense of passive connection enables everyone to feel something's lost when something interrupts that reliable schedule.

As my heart raced and my appetite sank, I entered a more digital world than the one I recalled seeing in *The Matrix*. While I have always been a person very familiar with technology (my family and close friends often come to me when they have an issue with their smartphones or laptops), I had never heard of this "Zoom" application before. For the next week or so, I would repeat the same haunting mantra to myself: "The world is ending". As stores began to shutter up, it felt as though there would be no economy in a few weeks. There were even moments when I struggled to prepare for Zoom class meetings, often arriving on camera with a messy

frazzle of brown hair. Dark circles caused by sleepless nights framed my eyes, making them appear purple, a cold color to match the somber nature of this time period. Unexpectedly, however, these class Zoom sessions proved somewhat relaxing. Seeing other students' faces (as well as faculty) brought back that sense of connection I never appreciated enough. That feeling did not last too long, though, as a swarm of regrets raced through my mind. Why didn't you seek out your campus friends sooner? Why did you avoid the Onstagers? What about *The Broadsheet*? Regardless of my self-criticism, there was nothing more I could do now but remain at home.

Accepting Fate

Although I have no answers for you this evening, I am comfortable letting you know that many things have changed since we announced we were going to remote learning for 30 days and then returning on April 14th. That announcement on March 13th seems like a lifetime ago. (Merrimack College email update: March 29, 2020)

As I reached my first full month of online learning, my stress levels mimicked the viral curves. For a few days, my heart stopped racing and I could eat more again. However, things turned around with a surge of midnight panic and disruptions in my sleep. Up and down my emotions would whirl around, while still navigating another college semester. I became accustomed to Zoom, as if it were nothing more than another mundane routine. A generic sense of boredom replaced the feeling of comfort with which I had become accustomed. Although I am someone who spent a lot of time at home anyway, even the small things I enjoyed doing dissolved for now. I missed the stores. I missed my friends. My addiction to the news media was getting worse, as I raged through walls of text on my phone's home screen. I slowly restrained myself over time, focusing my attention on school and video games.

When I finally reached Easter, the harsh truth was clearer than ever: virtual learning really was the "new normal." I resented that wording then, and I still do now. It was a matter-of-fact

declaration that broke any delusion of hope I harbored. No flattened curve was coming, nor a return to mask-free campus classes. As I reflect on my experience now, I feel a small tinge of jealousy about how the next Merrimack class will be closer to the old normal than I have been during my last three semesters. Just a week ago, I received an email from the College saying the administration anticipates that the fall semester will feature live, on-campus classes, indicating that most normal activities will resume as well. Although I am happy that other students will not have to experience the same struggle my classmates and I did, my senior year is mostly gone now. I like to imagine a parallel universe, in which the virus really did go away by that mid-April deadline for which we were all hoping. Would I have been as regretful as I might be now? Would I still make the same mistake of neglecting to forge friendships on campus? Unfortunately, I believe I would have. As brutal as accepting reality was, the isolation of virtual learning made me appreciate social interactions I once ignored.



Spring Breeze of Hope

We are even planning for the possibility of remote learning for some part or all of the Fall semester. However, I want to reiterate that I do not expect that outcome unless public health and government officials mandate remote learning. (Merrimack College email update: April 19, 2020)

While I remained concerned about the future, my anxiety started to settle down at this point. I was determined to finish this partially broken semester, writing the last of my final papers within weeks. In some ways, I started to wonder if this bleak situation

provided some benefits as well. For example, one of the major annoyances of going to campus for classes was the traffic. I would need to leave about an hour before my classes, even accounting for the usual delays on Interstate 495. But if you live in New England, you know how often other drivers screw up. Not having to leave home also made it easier to keep track of meals, as I did not need to plan for fitting in a crispy chicken sub between lectures. On the other hand, I had grown tired of my weekly routines around February and remote-only learning lacked the dynamism and camaraderie of the live classroom.

Longer days provided a lift. I took more walks down a rail trail near my house, becoming accustomed to the late spring breeze of uncertainty. Since the quarantine began, outside light seemed in some ways unreal, a side effect of being inside more often, as any reminder of the old world became a distant memory. By May, I began to feel more like my old self again. Yet I remained cautious and vigilant, avoiding contact with other people who walked along the trail. Days blurred together, forming a collage of computer screens


and typing sessions. As I said before, I am a huge technology buff, so I found this new experience very manageable. I am a fast typist, able to write an entire paragraph in a few minutes or so. Taking stock of gains and losses, I recognized that, while I missed opportunities for social contact with friends and classmates, I benefitted by not having to commute and by spending so much time working with technology.

Routines

Merrimack College will be opening for the Fall 2020 semester one a week earlier than originally scheduled in order to avoid the possibility of an outbreak due to traveling that may take place over the fall holidays or a second COVID-19 wave expected in the late Fall. (Merrimack College email update: July 10, 2020)

Prior to the pandemic, I noticed myself growing tired of my old college routine: getting to school an hour before class, waiting quietly for class to begin, and walking around the same campus locations. Instead of promising an opportunity to do something

novel, Zoom became another repetitive routine. Online class meetings all seemed to follow a particular script:

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- 1. Put on a decent shirt (so I don't look like the tired and frazzled person I really am)
 - 2. Log onto Google calendar
 - 3. click Zoom link
 - 4. confirm to join audio in Zoom.
 - 5. Repeat for a few months (without holidays or break weeks)

Performing these steps made me feel I was climbing into a hamster wheel, rolling around with no escape. One may argue that I did have the option of returning to campus for live or even hybrid classes (something the College offered all students), but that seemed even worse. A routine of mandatory weekly Covid-19 testing (which has now become daily as of this writing), avoiding people I wanted to be around (commuters were/are not allowed to gather with residents anymore) and wearing a mask everywhere on campus.

Despite the repetition, I felt

somewhat lucky that I could opt out of the “new normal” and remain at a distance. I didn’t want to find myself in a situation requiring me to pretend I was interested and engaged. I preferred to remain honest (especially with myself) that I failed to find the new Covid-19 Merrimack an attractive option. I would rather take the full distance required to keep the community safe rather than embrace the hollow promise of “a new normal” evolving toward the old normal. Why risk my health for the illusion of social interaction? Throughout the fall, these thoughts and many more lodged in my pandemic-conditioned mind.

Furthering support for my position at the time was the difference between fully remote and mixed classes. Whereas fully remote mode features students and instructors meeting by means of Zoom, mixed classes (remote and live students) are split into two groups, challenging professors to address and include both, and challenging students to feel included. I experienced no audio issues with the fully remote class meetings, as everyone’s microphone was on the same playing field. Unfortunately, I cannot say the same regarding mixed classes. When

you try to engage remotely with a group of students sitting in the classroom, it is often hard to hear the comments they offer during discussion and the questions they pose to the instructor.

During this semester, I had to take my senior capstone seminar class in English. The course was not a disaster; however, circumstances made it a little uneven. Since the English program delivers the course in seminar format, class meetings consist mostly of discussion. Unfortunately, I often had a hard time following along, because I could not hear comments my live classmates were making. I could hear my professor just fine, so at least I was able to write a decent thesis essay. And other remote students made some very clear arguments during discussion I could interpret and connect with and their voices were usually nice and clear. I understood, though, that I was missing something and that the course was designed to be better than it was during these circumstances.

This new academic world looked odd to me while I was at home. Everyone on campus wore face masks and a small Plexiglas barrier stood between the

professor and the live students. In a way, being fully remote allowed me to pretend that this was the old normal. I didn't need to wear a mask and keep my face partially hidden away from the frightening and socially distanced world. So, this experience proved a mixed bag. In the case of my senior seminar class, I missed some of the benefits of participating in a seminar with my senior English major classmates, but I felt lucky to avoid conforming to social-distancing protocols. I'm beginning to see a pattern here.

An Underwhelming Finale

Over the next few weeks, we will learn more about several contributing factors that will dictate our final approach to this year's Commencement, and we will continue to work with the state and local authorities on our approach. (Merrimack College email update: April 1, 2021)

A rapidly growing annoyance forms in my mind. This was supposed to be my senior year, my final chance to connect meaningfully with the campus community, but there would be no senior week for me. Many of my senior classmates on campus would

have an opportunity to celebrate what it means to be leaving college behind. As I examine my situation now, I find myself regretting the loss of three semesters of my academic life. The social bridge between earlier days and the future has been permanently broken. I feel somewhat ripped off, as if the grand image of college presented to me during 2017 orientation looks now like an empty promise. Rationally, I understand why these restrictions needed to be put in place; however, that acknowledgment does not make it any less sad in hindsight. Though I chose online learning to the alternative, I understand that meant sacrificing even a partial opportunity to experience my best senior year possible.

I see that some people will probably read this reflection and regard me an ungrateful individual. You get to hide far away from the frontlines of viral surge, yet you still complain? I tend to beat down on myself quite a bit, so I understand the criticism. However, I have also come to realize that my reactions remain as valid as anyone else's. A lingering fear of the virus tugs at me, which is the real reason I chose to attend

classes remotely. Walking this tightrope between fear and missed opportunities is quite a daunting task, and I never want to downplay the more serious sufferings other people experienced during the pandemic. Logging into Zoom has become somewhat of a recognizable chore, waiting for the same sound glitches and awkward pauses to greet me each morning. However, this experience has also allowed me to learn to type more quickly, as I have another window open, so that I can take notes during a lecture. As I said before, I was already familiar with technology, giving me an advantage in the field of virtual learning. Unfortunately, Zoom seems to dampen the dynamics of a class meeting. This experience encourages me to wonder if I've become the cubicle drone I never envisioned I would be. Zoom also extinguishes the buzz created by a real social setting. I wish I could say goodbye to my hard working professors in person, and the friends with whom I should have spent more time. Now at the close of my final semester of college, I feel a sense of comfortable tiredness and regret.

Final Thoughts

The early months of the pandemic yielded a roller coaster of personal pains and comforts. For every heart-racing hell, there was a safe-haven of virtual convenience. For every person not seen again, there was a day without having to worry about commuting to campus on time. While losing critical senior year memories, I cultivated self-development. Consequently, I hope the pandemic has formed a more active future for me. Disconnection from college peers has also triggered in me a stronger desire to socially engage. When it is safe again, I will go to bars, parties and whatever else gets offered to me. I will be a different Joshua, one who has seen the brink of societal collapse and become familiar with emotional distress. Attending college in fully remote mode challenged as much as it changed me. I wonder if I would be as involved with responsibilities had the old normal remained. For one, the memoir you are reading would not exist, and nothing I've written so far maintains the same personal edge as this piece does. There is something truly fascinating

about how personal conflict fuels the writing process. Since last year, I have reached out to friends more, hoping to build a network of relationships for the future. I even decided to seek out new responsibilities, such as virtual Philosophy tutoring on Zoom. And regardless of what the post-graduation life holds in store for me, I will always be grateful that I managed to survive (so far) a difficult situation. Furthermore, though the pandemic ramped up my anxiety level almost daily, my academic situation turned out more positive than it did for other students. I recognize the long term benefit of endless typing and screen sharing and I believe I have grown stronger during these challenging times. Deep down, though, I also know I am still, in some ways, the same restless college freshman walking into a Merrimack open house event with so much hope and so many prospects to consider. I have decided to keep the door open to face what could be, but to slam the door shut on what could have been. This duality shall continue to chafe against my composure, as I move into the unknowns of post-collegiate life.

