THE PIVOT
ONE PANDEMIC, ONE UNIVERSITY
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ONE PANDEMIC, ONE UNIVERSITY

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DUKE UNIVERSITY PRESS
Durham and London
2022
To the teachers and scholars who have welcomed me into their world of ideas. To the colleagues who have strengthened my attachment to storytelling. And to the students—smart, engaged, and ambitious—who have reminded me of the essential work of a learning community.
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THE COURSE OF A PANDEMIC

ONE PANDEMIC DAY, when I found myself at home laboring over a laptop—as with pretty much every pandemic day—I searched the Duke University website with the term pandemic. What came up quickly was an opinion piece written by Gavin Yamey, a professor of global health and public policy at Duke. “We cannot make the world safe from pandemic diseases by looking away after an emergency fades, nor by hoping that infectious diseases stay within the borders of far-away nations,” he wrote. “It is time for us to end the cycles of panic and neglect and invest reasonably and rationally in outbreak preparedness every day and everywhere.”

That was a commentary from 2018. Now it could be read as a warning unheeded—as the Duke campus, and the world beyond the Duke campus, would come to understand two years later.

WINTER WARNINGS

Mid-January 2020 was weirdly warm and weirdly wet; temperatures were shooting up as much as thirty degrees above normal. There were even thunderstorms, not among the wintry phenomena expected in Durham, North Carolina. Was the world askew? But on Duke’s campus, everything felt
right; everyone was gliding into the second semester of the academic year. Nothing out of the ordinary in the usual excitement, the usual activities, the usual pressures.

Then, on January 21, an update from the administration: “Duke officials continue to closely monitor an outbreak of a novel coronavirus that emerged in Wuhan, China, last month and has begun to spread to other countries.” Duke Kunshan University is the university’s biggest footprint in China. As a partnership between Duke and Wuhan University, it has the mission, according to its website, of “building a world-class liberal arts university.” Partnership means lots of back-and-forth, a reality that underpinned an accompanying advisory: “Anyone who has recently returned from China and is sick with fever, cough, or difficulty breathing should seek medical care right away and call ahead to the doctor’s office to inform them of recent travels and symptoms.”

Over the next several days, the messages kept coming, with an increasing sense of urgency. One case in the United States had been registered, then fifty-three cases; Chinese authorities had enacted a travel ban for the area around Wuhan, the epicenter for the outbreak. Duke officials were monitoring the spread of the virus to a number of countries, including Italy, South Korea, and Japan, and were “assessing the impact on current and future programs in those areas.” In the event of “sustained transmission,” likely precautions in affected parts of the United States would include “staying home when ill and practicing respiratory and hand hygiene.”

Duke’s president, Vincent E. Price, announced that a campus task force had been meeting for a while and would be overseeing Duke’s COVID-19 response. Duke physicians were “in regular contact with federal, state, and local public-health officials and are deeply engaged in planning for a potential clinical response should there be an outbreak in this region.”

By early March, with the approaching spring break, the advice to students, faculty, and staff was that they should “reconsider any nonessential personal international travel, particularly to areas that are experiencing outbreaks of COVID-19. In addition to the possibility of illness, you may face unexpected travel restrictions that make it difficult or impossible to return to campus.” If they had traveled from or through an area of high contagion, students might have to self-quarantine on campus.

Noting that COVID-19 seemed especially dangerous for older adults, the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute at Duke suspended classes. That gesture, it turned out, signaled a bigger shift in the educational work of the university.
On March 10, Price sent out another update. On-campus classes would be suspended, and Duke would make the transition to remote instruction; to help with the transition, spring break would be extended, even as students were being discouraged from returning to campus. “Students who do remain in campus housing or in the Durham area should be aware that access to many facilities and services—including dining, recreation, and libraries—will be limited. In addition, student activities and gatherings will be curtailed.” There were other suspensions, other limitations: No nonessential university-funded travel, both domestic and international. No in-person events for more than fifty people, whether taking place on campus or off campus. Then, in a separate posting, word from the centerpiece of the campus: “In the interest of public health, Duke Chapel is closed to visitors until further notice…. The chapel staff will continue to pray regularly for Duke, Durham, and the world, and offer online resources for prayer and worship, as well as broadcasts of recorded services.” Lights would remain on inside the chapel, “as a symbol of communal hope.” Other attractions went dark for visitors: the Sarah P. Duke Gardens, the Duke Lemur Center, the Nasher Museum of Art, the Duke Athletics Hall of Fame. All buildings would go into a controlled-access status, meaning they would require a Duke ID, the DukeCard, for entry.

An announcement of “workplace adjustments” followed. Duke would “strongly encourage managers to allow staff to work remotely on a temporary basis if possible.” With the “daunting” challenge of delivering courses remotely, a team of learning specialists would be providing advice to faculty on everything from how to hold class meetings online to how to communicate with students beyond class time.

**A SILENT SPRING AT DUKE**

For students, technical advice was hardly the prime need. A March 17 note to undergrads acknowledged that “this is a moment that has been characterized by widespread anxiety, uncertainty, [and] social and geographic disruption.” Through the end of the semester, the university would shift all courses to a Satisfactory/Unsatisfactory grading standard, though students fixated on a traditional letter grade would have that option. (A similar policy was later announced for graduate and professional students.) “Duke will include a designation on undergraduate students’ transcripts, indicating the extraordinary circumstances encountered in the present semester.”
Even the planned pomp and circumstance would feel the impact. Members of the Class of ’20 would not have their scheduled graduation ceremony. As the president put it, “I share your disappointment—and sadness—that our campus will remain quiet this spring, without the joyful celebration that marks the passage of another year.”

Part of the quiet on campus was attributable to what was contained in another March announcement: the suspending of all sports activities, including games and practices. Duke’s conference, the Atlantic Coast Conference (ACC), said in turn that it would “cancel all athletic-related activities, including all competition and practice, through the end of the 2019–2020 academic year.”

The Duke message-making mirrored the unfolding higher-ed saga as it played out everywhere. That became clear with the work of a colleague (and a Duke grad), Jeff Harris. In less eventful times, Harris headed the Duke in DC office. Now he was faithfully compiling and sending out a regular survey of pandemic developments, highlighting developments in higher education. Duke played it smart in many ways, and it’s unusually well resourced. But it was hardly alone in its trajectory, in its shifting to meet the circumstances.

In the early days, I, along with deans, campus communicators, and others, would be hearing from Harris twice a day. By the end of the spring semester of 2021, he had provided more than four hundred updates.

As the pandemic became a thing, we learned that the president of Catholic University had tested positive for COVID-19. At Dartmouth, the same result had come for one undergrad and one grad student, both living off campus. MIT was cutting back in facilities-related areas, including custodial, mail, construction, repair, maintenance, and transportation services. As a sign of the weird endpoint of the spring semester, Emory, like Duke, was allowing students to request Satisfactory/Unsatisfactory grading in place of letter grades. Harvard was postponing commencement. Princeton was launching a “virtual activities calendar,” a recognition that nonvirtual activities were largely gone. Brown was imposing a hiring freeze for the current and following fiscal years. Ohio Wesleyan was canceling its planned 3 percent tuition hike; likewise, the University of Chicago was freezing its prices. The University of Akron was cutting nearly a hundred faculty positions. Yale was waiving campus parking fees for at least a month. Dartmouth was mandating that all on-campus employees be screened daily for COVID-19 symptoms and was directing all events drawing ten or more people to be canceled, postponed, livestreamed, confined to virtual space, or otherwise modified.
North Carolina State was requiring face masks of students, faculty, and staff with the start of the fall semester. Looking to the fall, Harvard and the University of Southern California were advising new international students to stay at home, since they wouldn’t be allowed to enter the United States to participate in remote instruction. At Kansas State, the Wildcats were suspending all organized team activities after fourteen student athletes had tested positive. Stanford was extending the faculty “tenure clock” as an acknowledgment of the new constraints around conducting research; was closing its volleyball, basketball, and tennis courts, while prohibiting picnics and barbecues; and, in one iteration of an ever-expanding travel policy, was subjecting travelers to or through the state of New York to a fourteen-day self-isolation period. The University of Alabama was reporting more than 500 COVID-19 cases; Ohio State was reporting 228 student suspensions over pandemic-related transgressions; and Cornell students were petitioning to have a freshman TikTok star expelled for flouting coronavirus rules.

More and more colleges and universities were moving their admissions acceptance date to a later time, while most already had gone test optional. More and more were announcing that remote education would be the fall semester standard.

In April, Duke’s academic year, such as it was, was winding down—even as students were being enticed to enroll in a summer session with a new and expanded list of online courses, including “Macroeconomics of COVID-19,” “Epidemics in the Age of Interdependence,” and “Disease through the Ages.” The rules for working on campus were tightening up. Before reporting to work, “all individuals should take their temperature and assess any potential symptoms,” now expanded to include “fever, cough, shortness of breath, runny nose/sinus congestion, sore throat, muscle aches, and headaches.” Based on new recommendations from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), “all individuals should wear a mask or cloth face covering in public.” And they should “continue to practice social-distancing measures of maintaining at least six feet from others to prevent the transmission of the virus. Do not gather in groups and avoid crowded places and gatherings of five or more people.” Respect, too, the hand-hygiene routine—washing those hands with soap and water for at least twenty seconds.

Shortly after those reminders were posted, Durham and North Carolina imposed a “stay-at-home” order. With that policy in place, only “essential” staff and faculty would be reporting to campus “to support critical on-site
research, safety and security operations, facilities, student-support services, and patient care.”

Price again, this time in a note to faculty and staff on “Securing Our Financial Future”: “While it is too soon to determine with precision the magnitude of disruption to our finances, it is clear that the impacts will be both severe and prolonged. All of our formerly reliable sources of revenue—tuition, research grants, clinical revenue, private philanthropy, and income from our investments and endowment—will almost certainly be significantly and adversely affected, even as we face increased expenses in our education, research, and patient-care services.”

Every area of the campus would have to “pause” new expenditures, including contracts, service, or consulting agreements; computer, office, and lab equipment; renovations; furniture; travel and entertainment; meetings and conferences. Staff hiring would be similarly paused. For the fiscal year beginning in July, there would be no salary increases for employees making more than $50,000 a year; lower-paid employees would receive a one-time $1,000 payment. Something else that wouldn’t be happening on a campus that was in a perpetual process of building and renovating: construction projects, except those related to safety, repairs, infrastructure, virus research, and a small number of obligations to new faculty.

**A RESTRAINED RESTARTING**

With the summer, Duke was, naturally, beginning to shape the 2020 fall semester. As an example of an essential service, the campus bus system was planning to follow a protocol “ranging from a three-step disinfectant process to requiring physical distancing aboard all twenty-five buses.”

Duke as a whole would ride into the fall semester with a multipronged plan. One of its components would be the Duke Compact, a statement of mutual commitment to community health and behavioral standards that every student and faculty and staff member would be required to agree to before the start of the semester. Fall classes would begin on August 17, with exams ending before Thanksgiving. There would be no fall break.

Those classes would be configured in one of four formats: face-to-face, now relatively rare, in newly configured classrooms and other spaces on campus; online (live with a regular meeting time); hybrid (face-to-face with significant online components); and online asynchronous, in which lectures would be recorded for viewing at any time but discussion and lab work would move online.
At the end of June, Price reported a big shift in the planning: “It is sadly clear that the persistence and spread of COVID-19 are trending in the wrong direction nationally, in North Carolina, and in Durham.” Such circumstances explained “the very difficult decision to decrease the on-campus residential population by about 30 percent.” That population would be primarily first-years and sophomores. According to a later statement, “Since first-year students are starting their college careers and have many similar needs for support, advising, and academic engagement, we decided it was important to begin their time at Duke in the most cohesive way possible.” Since sophomores “share many of these same characteristics,” they were included in the cohort. A lot of juniors and seniors, no longer officially included in the on-campus residential population, would settle in off-campus apartments.

Students would be tested for COVID-19 before showing up for classes or moving into residence halls. The university would also be implementing “regular pooled community testing” to identify and address any potential outbreaks among students or anyone who had frequent contact with students. Students, along with every faculty and staff member on campus, would complete daily symptom monitoring. Face masked and socially distanced, they would still find life on campus limited: no in-person performances, concerts, lectures, conferences, or symposia.
With the start of undergraduate classes, 5,765 tests had been administered, producing 11 positive results. The university was updating its “COVID testing tracker” every Monday; from all that tracking, students were being assured that “overall, undergraduate compliance with wearing face coverings and several of the other Duke Compact expectations has been very high.” But restraining socializing habits was no easy thing: “It has been more challenging for students to maintain a social distance of six feet and to gather in groups of less than ten people.... We recommend eating and hanging out outside on the lawns and plazas, where you will have better opportunities to engage with friends while staying apart.”

A strange start to the school year was expressed in a restrained season for sports. Home games would proceed without spectators; fans could support the football team—whose home opener, against Boston College, was set for September 19—with a “fan cutout” of a favorite individual or maybe a favorite pet. “Images placed in the seats will help replicate the game-day atmosphere in the stadium as well as provide an enhanced visual presence for the television audience.” About a week before that home opener, the ACC announced “comprehensive standards for testing, hygiene, medical monitoring, and other practices that are essential for students to compete safely in team and individual sports.” Duke said it would impose stricter protocols, including daily COVID-19 testing, for student athletes and coaches in sports seen to be at higher risk for infections. Those student athletes would be temporarily “sequestered” after each home or away game until they were cleared by testing and medical monitoring.

By early September, more than 37,000 COVID-19 cases, in all fifty states, had been reported at colleges and universities.

At the end of October, Duke’s COVID-19-related reminders were becoming more pointed. “Don’t Give Each Other COVID” was at the top of one statement. “You know the routine” for preventing transmission. Still, the virus was on the rise nationally, and many universities were seeing rapid increases in student cases. “The situation on campus is getting more serious, and more students are being affected by the virus each week.” Getting through the semester, then, required a course adjustment. “What can you do at this point? Lots. Sit farther apart when you’re eating with people, don’t crowd couches or benches or common rooms, be okay with being the ‘awkward’ person who stands farther away, stay close to home even when it feels like everyone else is out.”

A follow-up took a tougher tone, warning that students would be held “progressively accountable” depending on “the severity of the violations.”
Some students had lost their right to remain on campus and would have to work remotely. Others faced charges that could result in their suspension or permanent expulsion—a point of information that was highlighted in bold type.

On November 6, students received a roundup of things to know as the semester was drawing to its early close—beginning with the fact that “all plans for the spring semester are subject to change on short notice based on local and national public-health conditions.” There was guidance about limiting your circle of contacts; avoiding higher-risk settings; getting vaccinated for the flu; what to do if, off campus, you developed symptoms or tested positive. And: “Rest and spend time doing things that give you life. It’s been a tough semester!”

About a week later, official word went out about plans for distributing vaccines “when available.” Duke experts would review safety and efficacy data for any approved vaccine to ensure the science supports its broad use. Based on CDC guidelines, vaccines would be offered in a phased approach, giving priority to healthcare workers (later extended to those sixty-five years of age or older, and then to “frontline essential workers,” including college and university instructors and support staff).

In the last full week of the fall semester, the COVID tracker received results from 15,532 tests administered to students, faculty, and staff. Between November 14 and 20, there were twenty-four positive results: five undergraduates, eight graduate or professional students, and eleven faculty or staff members, six of whom had been working remotely and had not been on campus. The positivity rate was 0.15 percent. Since the start of the program on August 2, Duke had completed 178,084 tests.

The spring semester return to campus in January followed much the same pattern as the fall; Duke required all students to have immediate COVID-19 testing when they arrived. The big change was in the population of the campus. There had been a plan to send the first-years and sophomores home and to replace that population with juniors and seniors. Now students living on campus in the fall would be able to remain there, and juniors and seniors were also invited back. About 20 percent of undergraduate classes would be taught in person, a slight increase from the previous semester. University officials noted that one lesson from the fall was that in-class transmission was not an issue.

March 8 brought a new tone in the messaging. Officials pointed to “a noticeable one-week increase in positive COVID tests,” with forty-six undergraduate cases. That was up from the previous week’s total of twenty-two.
Most infections were pegged to students socializing (unmasked) or traveling. Between March 5 and March 9, 102 undergraduates tested positive; one day’s total of 32 positive undergraduate cases was the single-highest daily count within the student population since the pandemic began. Following a steady rise in positive tests, the university released a weeklong stay-in-place order on March 13. Over the week, students would have to remain in their Duke-provided housing, “except for essential activities related to food, health, or safety.” In-person classes would need to switch to remote delivery.

That message sunk it, and the in-place mandate expired as planned. Next up: plans for commencement. The university’s website celebrated with “Congratulations, Class of 2021!” Of course, “It’s been an extraordinary year and we are excited to gather with the Duke community, in person and online, to celebrate a class like no other.” The celebration would include the now-familiar safety protocols; only graduating undergraduate students were permitted to attend, “with the ceremony broadcast to family and friends around the world.”

The fall of 2021: This would be the third academic year into which the pandemic would intrude, now with the rise of new variants and the resulting spike in infections almost everywhere. Duke would require all faculty and staff to be vaccinated as a condition of employment. “Those terminated for noncompliance would not be recommended for rehire with Duke in the future.” There was a small protest outside Duke University Hospital, with one nurse telling reporters that “individual choice” should be respected. In the end, compliance was nearly universal; one university official, when I asked about vaccine-resistant faculty and staff, said the number was fewer than five.

In some aspects—the now-familiar face mask imperative, frequent testing, pared-back communal dining—the campus hadn’t been able to put aside the pandemic. But the new normal seemed to be approaching the old, prepandemic normal.

The promise of normal times turned out to be premature; the expected trajectory—crisis, recovery, gradual normality—shifted as students returned for the spring 2022 semester. For a time, the fast-spreading Omicron viral variant propelled a variant in the learning enterprise, as courses once more moved online. That was for two unsettling weeks. A university statement had the essence of an understatement: “This is an uncertain time for all of us. We have to make decisions with the best information we have, and that sometimes means quick and potentially disruptive changes.”
My home became my pandemic workplace. That was broadly the case around the university, though some found such an arrangement challenging. A pandemic-time survey of staff and faculty highlighted concerns about setting work-life boundaries, enduring social isolation, and wrestling with technology issues. Whatever the drawbacks, people liked the work-from-home advantages of avoiding a commuting routine, enhanced productivity, and flexibility during the day. Imagining life after the pandemic had passed, 74 percent expressed a preference to work remotely three to five days per week; just 3 percent favored no remote work.

My version of home-based isolation was relieved by reading; my shelves were becoming weighed down with books, including higher-ed books, from a history of academic tenure to an assessment of the global university. Plus, a resource that, for me, has withstood the test of time, almost thirty years and counting: the Fall 1993 issue of *Daedalus, Journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences*. Duke’s then-president, Nannerl O. Keohane, wrote about “The Mission of the Research University,” which she saw as occupying “a distinctive niche in both space and time, compounded of equal parts of intensive localism and a generous sense that members of a university are citizens of the world.”

The pandemic, I thought, allowed a fresh look at the campus, its identity, and its purpose: What did the pandemic reveal about the character of a campus? What is a campus, anyway? What does it do? What are the consequences when, at least in a sense, it goes away?

There’s the campus as a physical space. To Keohane, “The campus, quadrangles, cloisters, common rooms, and libraries are closely linked with the experiences of discovering and sharing knowledge.” Such physical elements “evoke intense memories for members of the university in diaspora and, despite their similarities of focus and function from one campus to another, set each university apart as unique in its own fashion.” That physical space helps position the campus as a space for learning. Learning entails “the give-and-take, the intellectual ferment that comes from the coexistence of people of different ages, at different points along the route to intellectual sophistication, tucked into the same small space and required to interact with one another in sustained and ordered ways.” And the flip side of learning: the campus as a space for discovery. In Keohane’s words: “The higher prestige accorded to research, the availability of more trustworthy interinstitutional metrics for judging whether it is well or poorly done, the comparative rarity...
of the skills required to do it well, and the undeniable fact that it is often more pleasurable to pursue one’s own work at one’s own pace rather than to translate it for the uninitiated, combine to give research an undisputed primacy in the self-definition of the university.”

Keohane used the phrase “a company of scholars,” a community bound together by a devotion to knowledge. To see the campus as a “company” is to see it as a place of caring. And in a pandemic context, the caring was at once institutionalized and individualized. That is, the campus as a space for collective well-being, and the campus as a space for individual well-being. Then: the campus as a space for personal growth. Students should be reminded of “the importance of service to others and the balance of work, love, and leisure in a good human life.” The campus, then, should celebrate the “multiple purposes” of an education—not just as a platform for launching students into a career, but also as a platform for launching students into the fullness of life.

Keohane touched on the opportunity and the obligation “to replicate ourselves through producing new scholars.” We expect a campus to be providing a space for renewal, to be establishing a process for bringing on new community members, and for sending out members to the world. The campus is also embedded in “a larger human culture.” Far from being an enclosed space that is somehow immune to, or shut off from, society, the campus is a space where societal issues play out. It is a platform not just for addressing intellectual curiosity generally, but more concretely, a space for improving the human condition. Keohane referred to knowledge sharing as “a responsibility,” and not just a side venture in the work of a campus. Such a responsibility is perhaps most obvious where, as at Duke, the pandemic focused attention on a health system coping with the sort of global crisis imagined, back in 2018, by Duke’s own Gavin Yamey.
THE CAMPUS AS A PHYSICAL SPACE

THE FIRST THING I’D OBSERVE about pandemic-time Duke is that, well, Duke pretty much wasn’t there, at least for most of us and for most of the time. The campus as a physical space, essentially, was operating only behind the scenes—or really, in a world reoriented to be online, behind the screens.

BRICKS, STONES, PIXELS

Much of pandemic-time Duke—classes, concerts, creativity workshops, group workouts—would unfold, for me, in the defined, confined, and decidedly beyond-campus space of a sunroom, recently appended to my house; it had become much more lived-in than I could have anticipated from my normal-times routine. This was my classroom, my lecture hall, my concert hall, my study space, my workout area. It may have been a Monday, a Blahday, a Whatever Day, and for me it was the familiar line of windows opening to the reliably sturdy (I hoped) presence of pine trees and the random busyness of backyard squirrels.

The familiar reproductions of the usual-suspect early modernists—Cézanne, Whistler, Turner, Monet. The same low-maintenance plant, the only kind likely to survive my version of plant-care habits. The familiar
laptop that, after too many false starts with too many internet providers, adapted itself to Zoom without freezing and entering a meltdown mode. The familiar gently tilting chair—chair squeaking would not be seemly over Zoom—that delivered a reasonable level of comfort as I plowed through reading, played videos, and aimed to be as “present” as possible in the company of all those faces in all those little Zoom squares.

Often my home would be the starting point for a good long walk—sometimes to campus, and more than sometimes to a family-run ice-cream parlor with its season-appropriate peach or pumpkin ice cream. (The couple that ran the parlor had immigrated from El Salvador more than two decades earlier; they were the proud parents of a Duke student.) As for the neighborhood, very much embedded in the urban feel of Durham—well, it too felt the weirdness. A newsletter reported the sighting of “a mother black bear and her two adolescent cubs”; that came on top of the sighting of “a pack of three coyotes darting from one yard to another.”

If it happened to be a Sunday circuit around campus, I might be treated to a joyous, somewhat echoey vibe from the quasi-outdoor Catholic Mass. While it was livestreamed, it found a physical setting in the university’s largest parking garage, along Science Drive. Religion and science could indeed coexist, so long as worshippers followed the guidance to “park on Level 3 of the garage” and to “gather for Mass on Level 4.” Humanity, at least in this context, was assigned to a higher plane than the automobile.

I Zoomed in to talk with John Noonan, vice president for facilities, to get an overview of how it felt to be maintaining a pandemic-time campus. This was late in the pandemic; Noonan, dressed in a Duke sweater vest, had been through a lot. “There’s been COVID, and then there’s been trying to come out of COVID,” he said. “The Duke Facilities world is not what it used to be.” As the pandemic set in and buildings emptied out, his crews had to throttle down heating and cooling and other systems. Later, they’d have to get the physical campus fully running again—for example, flushing out water mains to remove the “bad stuff” that might have settled in. They were making adjustments everywhere: following more aggressive protocols for cleaning; adjusting air flows and filters in HVAC units; adding signs and stickers to promote social distancing and limits on bathroom occupancy; installing hand sanitizer stations “all over the place.”

By the spring of 2022, on the other end of the pandemic, with more and more competition for workers nationally, he was confronting a human-resources challenge: how to fill job openings in areas ranging from housekeeping to carpentry. For a time, Duke students endured long waiting
times and some cutting back of the hours of dining locations. Their experience with staffing difficulties, though, didn't mirror the widely reported experience at Michigan State University, which had closed two of its dining halls for dinner and then asked faculty and staff to volunteer in keeping the operations going.

Campus construction, with few, critical exceptions, had been paused and would come back gradually. But maintenance issues were forever. Noonan was dealing with supply-chain issues and inflationary pressures (construction costs were rising at something like an annual rate of 12 to 14 percent). There was a big roofing project coming up on a huge campus science building. In prepandemic times, the process was pretty routine: You do the design, you get a design-based estimate, and you award the contracts. Now there was pressure to order materials early, even as the design was still taking shape, with the hope of locking in prices. And there was no certainty around the delivery time and the ultimate cost: “In the old days, we would talk about value engineering. So you'd look at the expense and, say, you'd change the type of countertop to something that would cost less. These days, by the time you choose the new countertop, inflation has already taken away any cost saving.”

There was “a running joke,” Noonan said, that he kept leaning on. “I've learned a lot. But I don’t ever want to use that learning again.”
The Duke campus is itself a complicated notion. Two contiguous campuses, with an adjoining medical center, make up the greater Duke. There’s the more intimate, less imposing East Campus, which for the past two decades or so has provided housing and dining for first-year students. And then, at the other end of the accurately if generically labeled Campus Drive, the iconic, photo-friendly West Campus. Both were constructed within the same seven-year period. Some often-cited (in Duke circles) praise came from Aldous Huxley, in 1937, not long after Duke became Duke. It seemed to him to be an architecturally brave new campus, or at least an architecturally soothing new campus: “These buildings are genuinely beautiful... the most successful essay in neo-Gothic that I know.”

The Huxleyan praise is good for Duke official histories, but my favorite take on the architectural program is a bit more recent. That came in 1991 with an essay in the South Atlantic Quarterly, by Duke art historian Annabel Wharton, called “Gender, Architecture, and Institutional Self-Presentation: The Case of Duke University.”

Wharton’s analysis is anchored in a history of the university’s early days and in gender-role expectations that played out for decades beyond the founding. First the “neat, neo-Georgian core of the women’s campus,” the current East Campus, modeled on Jefferson’s University of Virginia. It gives “a neat, quadratic impression,” reinforced by “its three-foot-high stone enclosing wall.” And down the road, West Campus, which, through its landscaping, layout, and Collegiate Gothic architectural style, “invites investigation and promises the excitement of discovery.” In contrast to “the uneventful refinement and order” of its companion campus, West—with its highly textured surfaces, towers, pinnacles, and arches; and adornments like gargoyles, crests, and bosses—“exploits ambiguity and anticipation.” The buildings of East, the women’s campus, were finished by 1927. Enough of the construction of West, the men’s campus, was finished by 1930 to allow it to function as a campus. Wharton quotes from old view books for prospective students: There’s the “Gothic restlessness” of West, and then the “Georgian repose” of East. In her words, “The message is clear: Learning is experienced on West Campus; decorum is learned on East.”

East or West, wearing a mask would have seemed merely a Halloween-suitable gesture until spring break 2020, the dividing line between normal Duke and improvised Duke. That genuinely beautiful campus described by Huxley was suddenly a shrinking asset, still there, as an essay in stone, brick, and glass, but troublingly serene. For the remainder of that semester, students would have to stay away. What was left behind by students would have to stay,
at least for a while, left behind. “Traditional move-out operations will not be possible,” said a Student Affairs official—making an important, though obvious point. Moving crews moved through the emptied-out dorms and packed up possessions to be shipped home. The crews teleconferenced with the former residents for real-time guidance (the list of items declared off-limits for shipping extended to liquids, including shampoo). Alternatively, students could store their belongings for the summer. Eventually students were offered the chance to come back to campus in June and clear out their rooms through their own muscle power; that procedure involved designated time slots, so that social distancing would be preserved.

What remained of the 2019–2020 academic year turned into an exclamation point. So much for going away for a fancy college education! The coming fall semester was a question mark. Then it became a sad-faced emoji; the physical campus would feel constrained and contracted.

Some first-year students pushed back against the prospect of a semester (or more) detached from a normally functioning campus. On a Duke University subreddit site (that is, a Duke-oriented online community), someone identified as the parent of an incoming freshman had this to say: “A lot of people don’t want to pay the premium tuition for an at-home-online-classes experience when the campus experience is such a huge part of the package.”

In the end, 174 first-years chose a gap year; typically the range is from 30 to 50. Beyond those first-years, 288 students (juniors being the largest cohort) took a personal leave, either for a semester or for the full academic year; 206 of them specified pandemic-related reasons.

In our conversation, Kimberly Blackshear, who runs the evocatively titled Time Away Office for Duke, emphasized the efforts of the office to ensure “continuity and connections” for those away students. She also pointed to the breadth of their “pandemic-related reasons.” Some felt they needed to be close to home, because of the pressures on their home environment. Others seized on one effect of a society in lockdown: the opportunity for remote internships that would serve up really cool things to do, with companies like Apple, Facebook, Amazon, SpaceX, and Tesla. The physical space of the campus was no longer shaping the student experience; other spaces might be more alluring.

**A TESTING TIME**

There were some new wrinkles—some new features on campus—as the first-years and sophomores arrived for a fraught fall of 2020. In the heart of West Campus, a shimmering glass pavilion that, in normal times, hosted
major speakers, had evolved into a center for hosting COVID tests. For any new or returning student, a negative result on this particular test was the ultimate admission ticket; a positive test would send the student off to a quarantine site. As the semester went on, students would submit to regular testing to identify and address any potential outbreaks. They would also complete daily symptom monitoring.

One mid-August morning, things were already heating up and a line was already building up—a socially distanced line, to be sure. A staff member checking in the students was rallying them to ramp up their enthusiasm for swabs up their noses, telling them they were too young to be looking so tired and anxious. (The social distancing was encouraged by the requirement to sign on for a specific time slot.) The waiting students seemed to appreciate the light touch. Then it was time to get swabbed.

Meanwhile, on East Campus a different spectacle unfolded, in the form of a tent alongside the dining center for first-year students; it was full of Duke gear and ringed by cash registers, a sort of pop-up store. Branding opportunities, in the durable form of Duke T-shirts, would prove to be pandemic proof. Students, duly swabbed and proudly T-shirted, would filter into a “de-densified” campus.

Over the next few months, Duke would fare a lot better than other places. Some individual campuses would report thousands of COVID-19 cases. Just a few miles away, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill suspended on-campus instruction in mid-August, about a week after the start of classes and not long after clusters of the disease had prompted fears of an uncontrollable spread. Just before UNC went online, a spokesperson for Orange County, North Carolina, told the Chronicle of Higher Education, “I don’t think it’s surprising we’re seeing cases crop up.” After all, that university—like so many universities—brought together thousands of students from around the state and country, where they might have had higher case rates, and then put them into shared living spaces. Some students most likely arrived infected, and then, before symptoms set in that might have prompted them to get tested, spread the virus to others. Around the time of the massive student exit, the dean of UNC’s school of public health struck a plaintive tone—a blend of bluntness, scolding, and resignation—in assessing the earlier decision to reopen the campus: “We have tried to make this work, but it is not working.”

One thing that made it work at Duke was the sizing-down of dorm capacity, so that students would be housed in single rooms; bathrooms, too, had reduced capacity. A lot of dining-area tables and chairs disappeared or
were replaced with standing tables, even as Adirondack chairs and other outdoor-friendly furniture showed up in all kinds of places. The dining reconfiguration was prompted by a finding from contact tracing: Clusters of infected students were traced often to communal dining. Guarding against that would mean not just controlling the number of congregating students, but also reducing the amount of time they would likely spend in the area. When students ate, their masks came off, conversation activity ramped up, and with all that, the chances of viral transmission increased. (Late in the academic year, viral transmission, in this case among staff, put new pressure on the dining system. Duke officials announced that “as a safety precaution,” the dining spots on East Campus would be closed for a time, a stretch that turned out to be a couple of weeks.)

Dining on campus is basic to the hanging-out experience. But on this reconceived campus, “casual” dining, in the form of a spontaneous decision around food options, location, and companionship, was out. Students could order their food and grab it from one of various campus eateries through an app, which took the somewhat unappetizing designation Duke Dine-Out Mobile Ordering Express Pick-Up. An additional option on the app allowed students to have the food delivered to one of several locations close to clusters of dorms. Duke, in its depopulated state, presented the common
scene where grab-and-go boxes, as much as backpacks, were a student signifier. Outdoor trash bins, sometimes overflowing with those food-conveying boxes, provided a related signifier.

With all those procedures in place, the dining scene earned some observations in the Chronicle, the student newspaper, from Jake Malone. As a senior, he had experienced years of normal-times dining at Duke: “Based on the current dining policy, the ideal Duke student leaves their room, walks all the way from their dorm to the Brodhead Center, picks up their mobile order, and walks all the way back to their room to eat their food.” Some of his peers fed off the availability of outdoor dining, generally in the neighborhood of Brodhead, where many campus eateries are based. Then, he noted, it started getting cold: Outdoor dining was increasingly uninviting, and indoor dining was increasingly unavailable. “Maintaining our physical health is a top priority, but the changing of the seasons and the tighter dining restrictions will deliver a blow to our mental health,” he went on. “And that’s because our community building is reliant on food. We as human beings love to eat together. Shared meals have always held a crucial role in providing an occasion to see our friends.”

Shared meals might have been off the table, but those knowledge-hungry students—certainly all the first-years concentrated on East Campus—had to eat. I tracked down Valerie Williams, manager of the East Campus Marketplace; her job had to be performed as Duke was adjusting to the pandemic, and it couldn’t be performed from a distance. Consider her an “essential worker.” Williams was soft-spoken, particularly through her face mask; both of us had the issue of our snugly worn masks making our eyeglasses fog up, to the point that everything, even invitingly arranged food, seemed to be misted over. Williams had been at Duke, always in food services, for more than forty-four years. She recalled that she interviewed on a Labor Day Monday, got the call later that day that she was hired, and started right away—originally at $2.50 an hour, and with assignments like deboning roast turkeys and preparing sandwiches and salads. (“I knew nothing about deboning a turkey,” she told me, “and at the end of that first day I didn’t want to eat turkey anymore.”) Her grandmother had been in a similar role at Duke; Williams still had the check stub of her grandmother’s last paycheck from the university, in the late 1960s, for $17.35—compensation for two weeks of work. There were other family connections to the campus. Her aunt and uncle worked alongside her in what was, at the time, just about the only dining spot on campus.
Williams told her grandmother that she could imagine staying in that Duke role a year or so. In turn, her grandmother advised her to work conscientiously and to look for opportunities to keep advancing. That's exactly what she did. She became a head cook, an assistant manager, and eventually a manager.

At eight o'clock on a Wednesday morning, the first-years were streaming in. It was well into Williams's working day; typically she would arrive around four o'clock in the morning to configure the day's “game plan,” and she would stay until after four o'clock in the afternoon. Some changes had been made since my last visit a couple of years ago. There was the addition of plexiglass barriers around the tables; there were behind-the-scenes changes as well, like the rule that staff members would wash their hands regularly and switch out any shared utensils every twenty minutes. I was surprised at the size of the breakfast crowd (these were sleep-deprived teenagers, after all), but Williams told me breakfast was a big draw, typically eight hundred to eleven hundred students. Cold breakfast started at 6:45, then the hot-breakfast mode kicked in at 7:30, right through 11:00. Lunch was unveiled just a half hour beyond that, at 11:30. Particularly in a grab-and-go environment, a lot of food left the Marketplace with every meal. According to Williams, some students would leave carrying three food containers; her operation was using thousands of containers (environmentally sensitive—no Styrofoam) every day.

As we took in a motivational message that read, “Always stay humble and kind,” Williams walked me through the array of food stations. One was displaying mini croissants, lemon and poppy-seed muffins, and apple fritters. Another was filled with fruit—strawberries, pineapple, cantaloupe, watermelon, along with yogurt and cottage cheese. A third was all about omelets-to-order, with the add-ons of bacon, ham, cheese, peppers, onions, mushrooms, spinach, tofu, and more. A fourth was weighed down with waffles, and nearby were stations with breads and bagels, oatmeal and (we were in the South, right?) grits. Finally, cereals. There were the usual, like Cocoa Puffs and Raisin Bran, but the favorites for students, Williams said, were Frosted Flakes and Cinnamon Toast Crunch. All of which might be topped off with one of four juices and regular milk, oat milk, or Silk milk. Later in the day, naturally, the food stations would evolve and offer, for example, vegan-friendly eggplant dishes; gluten-free muffins and cookies; tacos and burritos cooked to order; and pizza from a wood-fired oven.

Williams regretted the pandemic-time loss of monthly meals conceived, at the Marketplace, as special events: A cruise-ship theme dinner, with every
food station representing the cuisine of a different “port” stop. A Black History Month dinner, with a menu (ribs, greens, oxtails) selected by members of Durham City Council, who were invited to chow down with the students. One pandemic-related adjustment was a dining feature configured for the fall move-in day: five thousand boxed lunches. To make the big Tuesday move-in work, the preparing, wrapping, and packing of turkey (again!) and veggie sandwiches had to be started Monday at midday. Then everything was stored in refrigerated trucks brought in for the occasion.

I asked Williams how all of her food-based work had affected her cooking interests at home. She laughed and said, “Cooking is the last thing I want to be doing after being around food all day.” With a Marketplace breakfast (maybe muffins, grits, and sausage) and lunch there later on (maybe baked chicken), she was good for the day. Williams was proud of her team of about seventy people. She said they were quick to spot and attend to a team member who seemed to be having trouble with a task. She made a couple of best friends—steadfast friends over the course of forty years or so—through her work. Those colleagues both retired in the past couple of years. She thought hard when I asked her what kept her going, what made a working day rewarding. “Seeing people happy,” she said.

While eating would seem to be a human necessity, a necessity of the learning environment is the ability to wander around library stacks, grab books of interest, study in that space, and socialize (quietly) near, say, the sociology titles. Early in the pandemic, the physical library was checked out, unavailable. But not quite, as my favorite tune of the academic year suggested. I wasn’t alone in being a fan: Duke’s “Library Takeout” song became a viral (in every sense as a modifier) hit, meant to promote the library system’s “contactless” approach to book requesting and borrowing.

The song, with accompanying animation, was the product of Duke music librarian Jamie Keesecker, who had earned a Duke-based PhD in music composition. As the Chronicle reported, Keesecker’s partner, an intensive-care nurse, had spent much of the COVID-19 summer working long hours at Duke Regional Hospital. In the meantime, Keesecker and his three-year-old daughter were working their way through quarantine with a tub of crayons. For the roughly three-minute library-takeout video, wrote the student reporter, Lillian Clark, “Keesecker thought he would write something simple, synth-pop.” But once the beat came together, he started adding layers with synthesized horns and percussion, used computer effects to give his voice an eerily robotic quality, and didn’t stop. “The song oscillates between two chords topped with sounds that sparkle, while stick figures dance in a choppy
animation style that reminds Keesecker of the Sesame Street he watched as a kid. It’s electrifying and funny.” One online commentator, picking up on the video from YouTube, called it the only good thing that had come out of the pandemic.

KEEP YOUR DISTANCE

“Library Takeout” was more than a good, clever thing. It was one indication that Duke had figured out what it would take to keep going. As the 2020–2021 academic year went on, the libraries, in the spirit of continuity, allowed students, faculty, and staff to reserve study space, and also to reserve in-place equipment like video-viewing stations and color photocopiers. The physical campus was there in all its familiar features, but it had to be operating differently.

The imperative to keep going meant that it would not be cool to invite COVID-19 cases onto campus. It would not be cool, that is, to invite a campus shutdown. Even the workings of Duke’s intra-campus bus system, the preferred transport choice of students, showed off a comprehensive strategy. Each bus would run at 50 percent capacity, with every other seat marked off with a red “X” to support social distancing. Masks were mandatory. At the same time, each bus was fitted with a “decorative wrap,” making it a wandering billboard, with images of masks along with community-minded messages: “Why are we all proud to wear our masks? You are why.” “Wearing a mask shows… kindness. Respect.” “Wear a mask to keep those near you safe.”

At one point—2:45 on a Friday afternoon, near Duke’s health clinics—I hopped on one of those Duke buses, the H-2, which veers between campus and some off-campus parking sites. I was looking for a particular driver, another pandemic-time essential Duke worker, Michael Eubanks, aka Big Mike, who would be beginning a shift of about seven hours. I wasn’t sure I had found him. But it was Big Mike who waved me in. “You looked bewildered,” he told me as I boarded; from his driver’s seat, he read me as someone who needed guidance. He went on to explain that it helped him in his job to be sensitive to body language. He found himself paying attention not just to bewildered expressions, but even to a person’s gait, to how the person swings his or her arms. And to whether a passenger looks comfortable with engaging in small talk. “I want to see if there’s room for a little humor, even a little sarcasm. But not every passenger cares to socialize. And that’s okay. You never know what someone has gone through when they walk through my door. They could be having a family issue, or a health issue.”

A PHYSICAL SPACE
For Big Mike—who had acquired that name from following a weightlifting routine—there seemed to be no issue in being true to his identity as “a people person,” according to his self-description. “I hope everyone is well,” he said to the bus-riding collective. And then, “Let’s ride!” (“That’s one of my catch-phrases,” he told me.) “Slow down, I got you,” he called out to someone racing to the bus stop. “Do you think I’m going to forget you?” he joked with someone who seemed anxious that his destination stop might be overlooked. And with those scurrying off the bus: “Looking forward to seeing you again!” Or, “Goodbye, my friend!”

Big Mike, about a dozen years in this job, had been written up a couple of times in campus publications. One writer called him “the pseudo-parent we all sometimes need—never afraid to tell us what we’re doing wrong (i.e., putting our feet on the seats), yet always there to remind us of the things we’re doing right.” Big Mike talked with me about driving students back late at night after they had spent some serious time in the library, asking them how their day had treated them, trying to award them a few laughs along the way. I stayed with him for several consecutive runs of his route, watching him deftly manage some of Duke’s sharp curves, point out dangerous intersections that would benefit from prominently flashing caution lights, and find an alternative route to avoid a water-main break. I learned that he remained in awe of the students and the “amazing things” they did as undergrads and beyond; that he was proud of their social-justice work, from protesting against sweatshop labor to agitating for a living wage for campus workers; and that he was, in fact, bothered by those who, on his bus, were needlessly freewheeling with their feet. Just where have those shoes been all day, after all?

And deepening his plunge into life advice, he shared some thoughts about trying to discourage students from reckless behavior, like excessive drinking. To be a good friend, he would tell students, they needed to look out for their peers: “They’ll complain about you today. But they’ll love you tomorrow.”

A vegetarian who pointed to his bagged lunch of tuna and boiled eggs, Big Mike talked about the long quest to find structure and discipline in his own life: Growing up, in Durham, frustrated that his TV watching was confined to PBS (“no cartoons”). Acting aggressively toward other kids—until he found a mentor in a sixth-grade teacher, who told him he was a smart student, but that he needed to redirect his energy more positively. Joining the army, where he earned his GED and got a glimpse of the wider world while stationed in Germany. Eventually training himself to be detail-oriented
and sharply observant, to the point that he can predict a motorist’s behavior by watching a car just emerge from a parking spot. And, before arriving at Duke, driving a school bus for twenty years.

During the pandemic, Big Mike was enduring a reduction in hours, and so in pay. Part of that was the university’s new spirit of budget-mindedness. It also came from his anxiety about possibly catching the virus and spreading it at home. Still, when he outlined for me “the five things we all look for in a job,” he said his current job satisfied every criterion: decent pay; good benefits; minimal commuting time (allowing for more family time); getting along well with management (or, as he put it, using a job-appropriate metaphor, a management that “won’t throw you under the bus”); and finding in the job something you like, or even something you love (“I love my job,” he declared).

For most of the academic year, visitors couldn’t take the bus, or any other conveyance, to visit Duke’s Nasher Museum. The building, on the edge of West Campus, is made up of a series of interconnected white boxes that are meant to permit easy circulation among the galleries. Sleek and streamlined, if not notably Duke-like in appearance. Now those white boxes were boxed off. Visitors couldn’t indulge in the lofty mission of the museum to “stimulate intellectual discourse, enrich individual lives, and generate new knowledge,” except through occasional online reminders of its past exhibitions.

Eventually the Nasher did open, gingerly, at first over a series of Thursday afternoons in the spring of 2021. I took advantage of the semi-opening and was pulled into “Graphic Pull: Contemporary Prints From the Collection.” In the exhibition galleries, I lingered over the edgier offerings, particularly the portfolio of lithographs Guerrilla Girls’ Most Wanted: 1985–2008. The graphic works spoke to the social-justice concerns that are so regularly expressed on campus—in this case, the Me Too movement. In one, a naked woman is reclined and wearing the iconic gorilla mask, with these words, really a pushback against art history, popping out of a yellow background: “Do women have to be naked to get into the Met. Museum? Less than 2 percent of the artists in the Modern Art sections are women, but 83 percent of the nudes are female.” Another of the collective’s wryly conceived works, which was displayed nearby, was built on the theme of “The Advantages of Being a Woman Artist”: “Working without the pressure of success”; “Not having to be in shows with men”; “Knowing your career might pick up after you’re eighty”; “Being reassured that whatever kind of art you make, it will be labeled feminine”; “Being included in revised versions of art history.”
As the Nasher text said, “Using various printing techniques often in poster or billboard format,” the collective was keen on alerting audiences to “the exclusion of marginalized communities from museums, galleries, and the pages of art museums,” with a strong focus on gender equality. “Though most of the works from this portfolio are more than twenty years old and many of the statistics outdated, the issues they combat remain widespread through the United States today.”

In true Duke fashion, I walked out of the Nasher with free stuff. That was in the form of a tote bag imprinted with a message that coupled social-justice and COVID-19 concerns. On one side: “COVID-19 is not a hoax, but deadly real. Alcohol, garlic, and sunlight are not cures or preventive measures; bleach and hydroxychloroquine are dangerous and should not be ingested or injected. As we await the vaccine for COVID-19, protect yourself and those you love. Wash your hands, maintain social distance, cover your face, and at all costs, if you feel sick, call your doctor or your community health center and demand to be tested!” On the other side: “Thank the workers of the world: The farmer. The shopkeeper. The postal worker. The delivery person. The barber and the butcher. The teacher and the sweeper. The clerk and the doctor. The nanny and the nurse. To the frontline we say, Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.”

I stuffed the tote bag with posters, buttons, and knickknacks. The giveaways all spoke to a particular genre in the visual arts family, which I might call the art of persuasion—for example, a refrigerator-ready magnet that read: “Stop the spread. Mask-up. Back-up. Wash-up.”

All of that was the creation of Carrie Mae Weems, a prominent Black woman artist whose art is in the Nasher’s collection. Her project for the Nasher was in the form of graphically bold public-service announcements and statements of encouragement about surviving the pandemic. “Don’t worry, we’ll
hold hands again,” read one giant banner draped over one side of the Nasher; it also showed a row of people holding hands. Other Weems-conceived banners and yard signs were draped on and displayed outside different campus buildings, including the president’s house, and around Durham as well.

A LITTLE TASTE OF NORMAL

The campus always comes alive in the spring. Now an insertion into the 2020–2021 academic calendar that was pandemic sensitive—a Wellness Day—had the effect of, for a while, returning the campus to something that felt normal. From that day, one keepsake for me was another free Duke thing, a Frisbee from Duke Recreation. It was imprinted with the intramural sports schedule for the fall of 2019. Right—the fall of 2019, a year and a half or so earlier. Someone back then, I assumed, had overestimated Duke’s demand for basic Frisbees, so there was a considerable stockpile left over for giveaway purposes. Or maybe someone had imagined that it would be enduringly important to know the dates for flag-football registration—preserved on a plastic disc as long as the plastic would survive. (Forever?) How odd to be reminded of the grabbing, shoving, tackling character of campus intramurals, now pretty much all forbidden actions.

This day, a Monday, was a gap in the academic schedule that students had been asked to fill with good things for, well, their well-being. I looked over the schedule with interest. Some elements were, invariably, online; some didn’t feel quite right for my life stage: “Zumba and Belly Dancing,” for example, along with “Intersectional Sex Education” and “Make Your Own Plushie.” About those particular offerings: I could conceive of them being creatively linked. But what I was really seeking was every link I could find to the physical campus.

Just outside Baldwin Auditorium on East Campus, John Brown’s jazz quintet was setting up. Brown, who happened to be the newly named vice provost for the arts, had begun at Duke some twenty years ago; back then he was an adjunct faculty member in music who was teaching bass guitar. We chatted for a while about his current assignment. He said the pandemic year had provided at least the small blessing of getting his campus arts administrators to buy into a shared vision. Breaking down all kinds of barriers, say, between the performing arts and the visual arts. Seeing the arts as essential to creating a community. And making exposure to the arts something that all students should feel they need and should expect from their time on campus. “Putting the arts everywhere,” as he said.
Before the jazz started, Brown jokingly offered the standard line about audience members cutting off cell phones; nearby leaf-blowing equipment carried on unperturbed. The audience was sparse—basically, a few students hanging, somewhat precariously, off the branches of a nearby tree. Some others would later wander by. But I was into the jazz, and the performers seemed to appreciate my applause, so why not ride with the intimacy of the musical atmosphere? Though I couldn’t help but think ironic thoughts around some of the standards on the program. “Days of Wine and Roses” and “The Nearness of You” suggested times of close contact. Moments that, sadly, had largely dissipated, as we all faced the sad reality that close contact might be not just daring, but dangerous. Still, jazz never made me feel bluesy.

Sited along Campus Drive between East and West, the Freeman Center for Jewish Life, welcoming students on this Wellness Day, had secured an impressive pile of Fruit of the Loom T-shirts. The raw, white material was judged suitable for tie-dyeing, which was a free-form activity near Freeman. A student’s laptop, dangerously parked in the tie-dyeing zone, displayed a sticker that was just right for the academic year: “Oy Vey.” Tempted as I was to get into the tie-dyeing action, my inherent cautiousness kicked in as I observed inadvertently painted students. “I like it on my hands,” said one about her colorful condition. “It’s like a badge of honor. And all over my legs and feet. I like that.”

I had never gone for the Jackson Pollock look on myself. But purely for learning purposes, I did listen intently to the expert tie-dyeing guidance offered at the scene: First, shape the virgin shirt into something like a squeezed-together pie. Then ponder the relative virtues of producing crazy cool swirls versus crazy cool stripes. As for the eventually well-worn shirt, don’t neglect to wash those items separately so other clothing wouldn’t be infected by running colors.

Not running, but walking with some determination, I headed over to the heart of West Campus and the Brodhead Center. In normal times, the building is geared to any student appetite; it houses a great array of food stations, from East Asian to classic Southern, all enclosed in a giant glass cube. With all the cautions around a pandemic still being served up, the food scene was still largely takeout. A lot of the eateries were closed, yellow caution tape cordoned off seating areas, and floor stickers advised patrons to keep their distance by six feet. I did succeed at tracking down and purchasing a mango smoothie (for five dollars and sixty-five cents) and I walked outside to enjoy it on a fast-warming afternoon. In search of some shade, I sat across
from a student who seemed relaxed in his own way (I guessed that he was a student); he was strumming a guitar and chanting “Thank you, Jesus.” Just beyond us was a sign planted by the Catholic Center advertising “Wellness Day Confessions.” Below that line the invitation continued: “Come for reconciliation, or ask Fr. Mike to pray for something for you! We’ll be right here on the quad.”

I would have confessed that my search wasn’t for spirituality. On Wellness Day, this was the well-populated quad on display, after all, and I was drawn to the newly invigorated scene. One mysterious element of the scene, for me, was an avid spike-ball match. I had heard of a spike-ball craze on campus, but I hadn’t witnessed it. The four players here were endeavoring to bounce a ball, and then control it, off a small trampoline-like contraption. Basically it was a version of volleyball, with some soccer mixed in. Right next to that group of competitors, two students, with the appropriate sports equipment, told me they were playing lacrosse. Though I couldn’t figure out a two-person lacrosse competition. Meanwhile, nearby, the chapel bells were establishing some kind of mood as they rang out a mini concert. The set ended with “If I Were a Rich Man” from the musical Fiddler on the Roof. I couldn’t quite figure that out either. It might have been an endorsement of financial wellness for Wellness Day.

My longest quad encounter was beyond the realm of chanting, chiming, or competition. I at last discovered, in the flesh (or the fur), sixty-four pounds of golden retriever—the famous campus figure Nugget. Naturally, Nugget had her own Instagram account—“a peek into the life of your fav duke dog, woof!” The tipoff that I was in the presence of the Instagram sensation herself came from her adjacent owner, Keith Upchurch, a 1972 Duke graduate and a former journalist. Helpfully, he was wearing a T-shirt with the word “Nugget” across it along with an outline of Nugget herself. “She loves all people,” Upchurch told me. “She doesn’t love all squirrels and cats.” He added, “Her tail doesn’t stop when she’s on campus.” Sure enough, a stream of students stopped by for some golden moments with Nugget, who was panting from exhaustion, I was told, after chasing down spike balls that had been sprayed all over the place. (Student tributes poured in with Nugget’s passing in the spring of 2022.)

Who benefited more from these nuggets of good feelings? The dog, lapping up all the affection? Or the students, for whom this simple bonding with a large but cuddly canine signaled, if nothing else, reconnecting with the ordinary? For a stressed campus, the way to wellness might be through the return of simple pleasures.
GOING IN CIRCLES

Whether it was a Wellness Day or a neutral day, when I couldn’t take in the campus directly, with pandemic limitations, I would sometimes take it in on the periphery. That was by walking a three-mile circular trail carved out of Duke Forest and wrapping around the university’s largely idle golf course. Occasionally masked members of the cross-country team zipped by—basically a blur of legs. Occasionally I picked up on leisurely talk among fellow walkers; one day on the trail, I took in a meaty conversation fragment about carnivorous plants.

And circles within the circle: On this Wellness Day, I spotted what I took to be a hawk, flying in ever-widening circles just above a swampy section. In fact, I had approached the Stream and Wetland Assessment Management Park, or, cleverly enough, the SWAMP of Duke Forest. On the edge of West Campus, the SWAMP is a restored section of a stream and floodplain; it includes an earthen dam and a storm-water reservoir. Full disclosure: If there’s anything I’m worse at than identifying flowers and plants, it’s identifying varieties of birds, except for noting that they are, well, flying things of some variety. So much for the lasting impact of my natural history lessons at summer camp. In any case, I concluded that I had spotted a red-tailed hawk. The giveaway was the hefty size and the mottled brown coloring. According to a “Birds of Duke Forest” checklist, the red-tailed hawk was “usually present” in the forest and “seen most days” in the forest’s “appropriate habitat.” I checked with Curt Richardson, a professor of resource ecology at Duke’s Nicholas School of the Environment, who had waded into the SWAMP some two decades ago as its visionary figure. Richardson said there are several red-tailed hawks in the area. “They sit in the dead trees at the entrance of the pond and survey for frogs, voles, and other small creatures,” he told me. “They like the open view so they can survey for game.”

My hawk was circling assertively, determinedly, purposefully. It was pursuing its quest for... what? A new feeding? A new vista? A new companion?

Later on Wellness Day, I saw a small cluster of students still reveling in quad life; they were no longer Nugget-distracted, but rather watching a boxy, blinking, robot-like thing that, just like the hawk, was going in circles, but here was keeping its little wheels firmly to the ground. It resembled nothing so much as my canister vacuum cleaner at home, though it was performing its job more hyperactively. As it moved about, it was inscribing chalky circles. Circles for containing quad-sitting, socially distanced students. I thought
of how the whole effect resembled what Nugget would look like if she was chasing her tail, round and round.

I learned from Scott Thompson, Duke’s director of landscape services, that the robotic worker’s usual job was to paint the university’s athletic fields. It was known by the somewhat aggressive brand name of Turf Tank. A lot of its work assignments were preprogrammed, including a social-distancing program; some of its Duke-specific assignments were “customizable,” allowing these circles to be arrayed to suit the quad’s dimensions. There were about two hundred freshly laid-out circles on West Campus and an additional seventy-five or so on East Campus. The paint being used, Thompson informed me, was a water-based, athletic-field paint. “With a single painting, there is very little to no impact to the grass. Hopefully, by the time graduation comes, the grass will have grown and the circles will fade away.”

Several circles in my day, repeating themselves, building on themselves, or disappearing from view. I thought back to a reading I had been led to by English professor Tom Ferraro. That was Ralph Waldo Emerson’s “Circles” essay. “Our life is an apprenticeship to the truth,” Emerson wrote, “that around every circle another can be drawn, that there is no end in nature, but every end is a beginning, that there is always another dawn risen on midnight, and under every deep a lower deep opens.” What I took from Emerson wasn’t just the familiar idea that in every ending is a beginning; rather, it’s a vision of interlocking circles, on connections begetting new connections.

Even in my masked-up state, I looked to seeing—without the artificial aid of a computer screen—campus landmarks as a comforting encounter with the familiar. Comforting but discomforting. All that emptiness. Once, I ran across Ferraro, likewise wandering the campus, with a few accompanying family members. Given our shared state of social isolation, “You’re one of the half-dozen people I have actually laid my eyes on,” he told me later. Again, comforting but discomforting. Through the barrier of face masks, it took a little while to recognize each other.

The third week of April, the approaching end of academic year 2020-2021: Come Friday it would be LDOC (the Last Day of Classes) in the Duke vernacular, and the pandemic-time campus, in an echo of Wellness Day, would be alive with lots of students—face masked, to be sure. To start the day, I had taken a virtual climb up 239 steps to the top of the Duke Chapel tower. That’s a Duke tradition, though more typically in nonvirtual space. Along the way, I had looked at rarely seen features of the tower: The gallery of the Benjamin N. Duke Memorial Organ, built by the Netherlands-based
Flentrop Organ Company, with its more than five thousand pipes. (The virtual guide reminded me of the origin of the expression “pulling out all the stops.”) A storage room that had once served as a mini museum of Duke memorabilia, and which still holds a cornerstone of Trinity College, Duke’s predecessor institution. The “cabinet” where the university carillonneur sits and maneuvers the cables that move the clappers that strike the fifty bells, the largest of which weighs more than five tons. And finally, the top of the tower, 210 feet tall, which provides a full-circle view of the campus and Durham. “Congratulations on completing your virtual Duke Chapel tower climb,” I was told, with prerecorded enthusiasm.

Exhausted from the virtual ascent, I found a relaxed aura in my own ground-level tour of the quad. Students were sprawled out everywhere; I counted up to eight in one of those robotically configured circles. A couple of students were asleep next to an empty box labeled “Papa John’s Crust-Stuffed Pizza.” Others were enjoying a chicken quesadilla, secured from one of the Brodhead Center’s eateries. And one student was mildly annoyed when I interrupted him to ask what he was reading; it was Ovid’s *Metamorphosis*, which, he said, he needed to finish off for his last class of the semester. Noting his progress with the book, I figured he would have to metamorphose into a speed-reader to meet his goal. The Duke Recreation people were back, and so were the free Frisbees. There were cases and cases of free Dasani Purified Water, all enhanced with minerals for a pure, fresh taste. More fulfilling for me was a free “Tillandsia Air Plant,” with an accompanying card that promised, “With proper care, your air plant will bloom—what a treat!” When I read the “proper care” advisory, I registered it as a serious challenge.

I asked someone about one exceptionally long line, which snaked into a nearby building. It was, I imagined, for more free stuff. The student said it was for T-shirts imprinted with your academic major. Or she thought so; in any event, she had joined the line to see where it led in the land of free things.

While I avoided that participatory event, I did allow myself to join in a game of Jenga: You build a tower of wooden blocks, and then you take turns to remove a single block, the goal being not to cause a total collapse. According to the rather wry description of one of my student competitors, it was a metaphor for the power structure of society and its fundamental fragility. It was, more mundanely, a test of engineering acumen. Predictably, disaster followed my short-lived success at structural stability. I wondered if I might have done better at the nearby cornhole—a more mindless game, which would have had me throwing a little bag right into the hole where it belonged.
For me, the most alluring element of LDOC was the Poetry Fox, the clever creation of local writer Chris Vitiello. Since it was still April, it was still National Poetry Month. National Public Radio was reporting that this fractured time had been good for very little, but it had been good for poetry—as signaled by the response to Amanda Gorman’s “The Hill We Climb,” the poem she delivered on Inauguration Day, and by the fact that during the pandemic, visits to a poetry website had shot up 30 percent. Vitiello said this about his work: “I bang out custom on-demand poems on vintage typewriters. Also, I’m a giant fox.” A relative awarded him the fox costume; the look impressed me as resembling the costumed Blue Devil, the Duke mascot, with the aesthetic additions of whiskers and a goofier smile. That, combined with his long-standing poetic devotion, set him on this trajectory. On this LDOC occasion, he ended up writing forty-six poems, over three hours. “Usually I’m faster than that, but the poems were on the long side for me.”

He was seated at a table set up just outside the Brodhead Center; a hand-sanitizer bottle provided the inevitable reminder of our prosaic circumstances, and a desk plaque advertised, “Custom Poems!” I inquired about the typewriter. It was a Royal Quiet De Luxe, circa 1960. “It’s a delightfully consistent and hardy machine built before the capitalists discovered planned obsolescence,” Vitiello told me. “And, since typewriters have become a thing in recent years, there are all sorts of supplies available for the machines, as well as retailers of classic machines.”

Students had signed up for poetry that would be personalized, though personalized from a fox. They were greeted by “Hello, my friend!” Then they were to serve up a single word. From there the Poetry Fox would type out, then read out, a poem inspired by the prompt. For the reading, he’d remove his head. (That last phrase has to be one of the weirdest I could configure, though in the moment, and with the need to project to an audience, it made perfect sense.) But this fox would not be outfoxed by students throwing out unwieldy phrases or obscure words. “Words never stump me. You can always do something with a word, and it’s great when I get a word I don’t know and get to learn a new word. I appreciated getting the word thinking, because it was an abstract noun on a day full of concrete nouns, and the word opaque, because it’s an adjective and I’ve always liked the look of that word, starting and ending with vowels and with a Q in the middle.”

A quick survey of students in line revealed lots of food-related words. It was approaching lunchtime: Cornbread. Pesto. Toast. Burger. Also some more evocative selections, many pointing to things bursting free or being
uncontrolled: **Bloom. Balloon. Hairy. Mermaid. Iridescent. Skull and Crossbones**, stretching the single-word limit. And **Dead Phone**, also stretching the single-word limit while memorializing a phone that was, in fact, dead; the student gave me the context, and he even hauled out the sadly inert phone as evidence. My word was **Circles**. The Poetry Fox started click-clacking away, evidently at a typing pace that had him bypass the shift key for creating capital letters. After a few minutes, he delivered this to me:

> they tell you / that to get ahead / you must move / in straight lines / the rectangular / trajectories / of those who / make decisions / and move inexorably / forward/ but they make / sharp corners / as they move / and dent the world / so i move in circles / swooping arcs / roundabouts / meanders / i circumnavigate / even the territory / of a postage stamp / and i always somehow / get there / like a sunrise / rolling up / a horizon.

The poem was rubber-stamped, in red, with a paw print and the signature “FOX.” Post-delivery of the poem, Vitiello offered these reflections: “For college-age people, this is absolutely a moment that is made for poetry, that almost begs for it. Regardless of one’s politics, the Trump years were exhausting for, among many other things, their public speech. It was omnipresent and constant; it was loud and violent, even dangerous; and it was as unsubtle as possible. Poetry can, of course, be all of that too. But that’s its power for younger people right now—it’s an alternative space where public speech can mean differently, have ambiguity and awe, beauty and hilarity, be gentle and loving or wild and nonsensical. And, at a time when reality seems like a few dystopian novels fighting with each other, poetic reality can feel so real that you just want to sign a lease to live in it.”

For young people who, over the past four years, had been steeped in that form of public discourse, poetry, in the words of the Poetry Fox, “is basically a paradise.”
MY FAVORITE BOOKSTORE, maybe almost everyone's favorite bookstore, is The Strand, in Lower Manhattan. It apparently was struggling through the pandemic, but managed to hang on. Whenever I make it there, I invariably leave with a small pile of unexpected purchases. One was *Liberal Education and the Democratic Ideal* by A. Whitney Griswold. An imposing book title and author name—who could possibly argue with someone so named? When the book was published in 1959, Griswold had been president of Yale for almost a decade. His musings were now mine to mine, for seven dollars and fifty cents.

“At its best,” Griswold wrote, “teaching is a two-way process, an exchange of thought between teacher and students, by which both profit and the thought exchanged becomes ennobled in the transfer. I do not see how we can make very great compromises with this principle without dashing our hopes for conversation and for higher education as well.”

Fair enough. But what Griswold could not have imagined is a transfer proceeding pretty much screen-to-screen. What became of teaching and learning during the pandemic?
At home in the fall of 2020, a sleek metal coffee table, sturdy though it is, was straining to hold onto much more than the small Griswold volume. The top of the table was a landscape of books, among them *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, Chekhov’s *The Cherry Orchard*, Melville’s *Billy Budd*, and *The Collected Poems of T.S. Eliot*, with a bookmark at “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock.” There were many other texts, all in the category of assigned reading rather than recreational reading, and making for multiple, colorful, potentially collapsible towers on the coffee table. Anchoring the towers were three pads, their oddly pink sheets filled from margin to margin with my class notes, really my misshapen scrawling—a marker that I pin (proudly, defensively?) on my left-handed penmanship.

The books, the notepads, the computer stuck in a Zoom mode—all indicators of going to college. As the academic year started, I started with my own project: taking on the role of a student and shadowing a bunch of courses.

My earlier phase of going to college had come more than four decades ago, when the accompanying insecurities hinged on connecting with socially confident peers, rather than connecting over a shaky internet. (I do remember showing up to college in a conservatively striped, indifferently knotted necktie; I have no idea why, except that there’s nothing that says newfound independence like “ugly tie.”) In more recent decades, I have held onto the campus experience—writing about Duke developments for the university’s magazine, teaching writing and journalism, advising students as they looked to life beyond Duke, displaying my endurance (if not some newfound athleticism) on the university’s tennis courts.

My current campus experience as a pseudo-student would be remote. I talked about that with two experts in higher education, Matthew Rascoff, associate vice provost for digital education and innovation, and Shawn Miller, director of the Learning Innovation group at Duke. (Rascoff would later head to Stanford to lead its digital-learning efforts.)

It turned out that the China-based Duke Kunshan University (DKU), just over thirty miles from Shanghai, with which it shares a province, provided a template not just for containing the virus, but also for delivering an education. While it had supported graduate programs for several years, the institution had matriculated its first class of AB (bachelor of arts) students just in 2018. So it still enjoyed the ethos of a startup enterprise. At the beginning of 2020, the pandemic was closing in on DKU, which operated on
four undergraduate terms, each spanning seven weeks. Miller’s group was given an urgent assignment: help the institution move online for what was left of term number three. The COVID-19 outbreak had occurred in China while 579 DKU undergraduates and more than 100 faculty members were scattered across time zones, marking the Chinese New Year.

As described in a case study issued through Ithaka, a not-for-profit educational think tank: “With travel restrictions, it was clear that classes as normal were not going to be able to resume. Many airlines canceled return flights to China until later in the spring, and travel restrictions within China also meant that many students, faculty, and staff were not going to be able to return to campus.” (Paralleling the published case study was a lessons-learned webinar sponsored by Ithaka and led by officials from Duke and Duke Kunshan; it drew a few hundred participants from US higher-education institutions. The webinar was put together in March 2020, just one month after the DKU pivot and just days after Washington State had announced the first death from COVID-19 in the United States.)

Duke Kunshan acknowledged the pandemic reality with a to-do list that turned out to be transportable to the home campus in Durham: Given the urgency around delivering courses, rely mostly on technologies that were already in place, like Sakai, the familiar learning management system, and Zoom, the soon-to-be ubiquitous platform for video conferencing. With faculty and students spread all over the globe, along with a recognition of the need for interaction online, offer a mix of synchronous (real-time) and asynchronous (called up on demand) learning. In response to all the pressure on faculty, produce a series of webinars around topics like “Best Practices for Communication, Interaction, and Building Community Online.” And recognizing the stresses on students, emphasize services like online faculty office hours; online counseling sessions; flexibility around leaves of absence; different ways to assess performance in class; and avenues for addressing various inequities—some students had left behind their laptops at Duke Kunshan, while others were stuck with poor internet connections.

A few months later, as it became clear that North Carolina and much of the United States would be headed into lockdown, the same team got the same request—shape a new form of learning with face-to-face learning disappearing—for Duke. “Our staff were so exhausted from DKU,” Miller told me. “It felt like we were breathing for about three seconds as we went from planning for DKU to planning for Duke. Of course, we had to think on a much bigger scale.” He talked about the initial adjustment, from March through the summer of 2020, as not really having the character of well-thought-out online
teaching. It was closer to "emergency remote teaching," or even something akin to "first aid" rather than a robust and healthy educational program. "When everyone was in this crazy lockdown situation, we didn't want to put faculty in a place where they were pressured to do even more."

The team from Learning Innovation, then, configured a "Keep Teaching" website. It included advice geared to a Zoomified classroom: making class sessions as interactive as possible, using Zoom breakout rooms to manage small-group discussions, using class polls to gather student input, adapting tests and quizzes for a remote environment, encouraging group work among students. It delved into "low-tech" teaching strategies that faculty might deploy: having students create TED talks applying course content, having students create podcasts, having students carry out discussions in online chat spaces. In the higher-tech realm, sure, you could think about making your own videos. But what would make videos viable was keeping them short and aiming for clear audio—fancy production quality being less important.

Some basic advice was to "communicate early and often" with students. Frequent online office hours would help sustain the communications channels. And there was this caution about a new learning reality: "Do not overwhelm students with options. Learning new technologies takes time, and may isolate some students with limited access."

Miller went on with his narrative of the great pivot: "Then we started getting questions from faculty. They'd tell us, This seems to be going okay, but if I were to do it well, what would that look like?" Such questioning accelerated with the approaching fall semester. And so a shift was made from "emergency remote teaching" to "flexible teaching." A new website popped up, headed by a list of guiding principles: Design the course to be student centered rather than, say, predefined by chapters in a textbook. Keep workloads appropriate, being mindful of what really mattered for learning. Create experiences that didn't so much borrow from your face-to-face course but rather reconceived the course, to take advantage of the opportunities from digital delivery. One of the widely recognized dividends from the diversion to digital, after all, was that students might embrace the ability to watch—and to rewatch—pretaped lectures according to their own schedules. There was no real excuse for missing a lecture. And there was a lot of flexibility to keep returning to the parts that, at first viewing, seemed confusing. A bonus from learning asynchronously.

Linked with those principles was some guidance about technology, and not just the technology for lecturing to students by way of prerecorded videos. One example I learned about was Hypothesis. Its name made it sound
somehow speculative. But it’s a tech tool that lets students comment on webpages and documents that are publicly accessible on the web.

Karrie Stewart, an associate professor of the practice at Duke’s Global Health Institute, used Hypothesis with her graduate students. In her seminars exploring ethics in global health, she told me, she found it to be a good substitute for the intimacy of a seminar room. She also compared it to a serious-minded book club (or an article-reading club): The students’ commentary hinged on their close reading of the material. She said it proved to be particularly useful for English-as-a-second-language students, for whom the physical seminar room might seem stressful and judgmental.

Another professor, Lauren Ginsberg, associate professor of classical studies, described for me how this techy form of close reading and collaborative annotation had been working in her “Age of Nero” course. Each week, following a class session, students were reading one to three articles about some important aspect of Nero’s reign—say, the idea of, and evidence for, Nero as a mass persecutor of Christians. They would make original posts, introducing a fresh point about some so-far-uncommented-on part of the article. Or they would make response posts, where they were engaging with someone else’s ideas. She observed that the process “leads to a rich discussion—the kind we would love to have in person—but centers that discussion on the minutia of the article. The goal here is to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of academic arguments within the wider context of our course.”

That pedagogical goal seemed especially appropriate to the subject matter, given the scholarly uncertainty surrounding Nero. As Ginsberg explained to her students: “There are no good textbooks for the age of Nero. In fact, most Roman history textbooks provide a barely accurate caricature based on one type of evidence and modern stereotypes. At the same time, reevaluations of Nero and new evidence appear annually. For this reason, this class will not privilege schematic overview lectures where I explain to you the ‘correct’ image of Nero. Instead, we will all investigate together the controversies and exciting new perspectives on the Age of Nero through reading cutting-edge work and discussing where that takes us.”

Given all the pandemic pressures, “flexible teaching” had to reflect an interest in being student-centered. In Rascoff’s words: “Recognize that they’re feeling socially isolated, and that there’s a need for more connection. The basic idea is to see the time together with students as something very precious. So if your content delivery can happen in the asynchronous mode, in your live teaching, you may want to do more with breakout rooms. You can’t expect students to spend seven hours over Zoom and to be fully
engaged right to the end. You need to design the course to sustain their intellectual energy. In this very cold, online environment, where faculty are not getting constant cues from students, faculty need to be proactive about expressing empathy and soliciting feedback. It’s not a matter of our telling faculty what to do. Rather, it’s our saying, here are some ways of figuring out what your students need.”

It really comes down to being humble, he told me. “Many faculty thought they knew how to teach. Nobody thought they had mastered how to teach online. So can we question some of our assumptions and take a more curiosity-driven, more exploratory approach to what we do? It’s scary to do that, when you’re there as the expert in front of your students. But that’s part of what happened in this moment. Everyone recognized that they had to be a learner.”

And what could be learned from all that flexible teaching that might outlast the pandemic? Imagine online courses that are built into summer internships, Rascoff suggested. With that combination, students might stay connected with the academic community even as they take that plunge into the “real world.” In such a way the practical and the theoretical might be more strongly connected for them. Or imagine online courses as a component of study abroad. That might be an attraction particularly for engineering students, who, because of a specialized curriculum, generally don’t study abroad in great numbers. But aspiring engineers, if given the ability to engage online for some of their technical education, might be more inclined to be global learners.

Rascoff pointed out that the presence of such hybrid models in professional education—not so much in undergraduate education—was a recent Duke development, one that was sure to spread beyond this initial experience of teaching differently. Shortly before we talked, Duke’s divinity school had announced a new hybrid version of its traditional Master of Divinity program. According to the program description, “The Hybrid MDiv offers remote coursework in a flexible format so that students can balance professional and personal responsibility while engaging in deep theological study that will transform their faith and prepare them for service in the church, academy, and world.” The curriculum would combine remote coursework with weeklong “residential intensives.”

With the academic year still unfolding in an unfamiliar way, faculty were caught in “the liminal space between an emergency response and a future that’s uncertain,” as Rascoff put it. He did seem certain, though, that the future would find a Duke education reaching new audiences, aided by
offerings online—those in search of a professional degree, and also alumni lured by the promise of lifelong education. During the pandemic, Duke rolled out a “Forever Learning Institute” geared to alumni. It was rich with online offerings, most of them faculty led, on such themes as “Emotions: Heart, Head, and Humanity”; “Duets: Conversations Between Creators and Performers”; “The Ripple Effect: Inciting Change and Inspiring Others”; “Social Media and Social Movements”; “Civic Engagement in American Democracy”; “Polarization in America”; and “The Bionic Human: Advancement in Medical Devices.” Rascoff told me that alumni-exclusive online programs, along with hybrids like the new MDiv, could respond to society’s needs in a thoughtful, strategic way, even as they could make Duke more accessible to more people.

Rascoff and Miller shared some Learning Innovation numbers underpinning the pivot. Between January 1 and December 31, 2020, members of their group handled 3,059 requests for faculty support, more than double the number of the previous year. They conducted sixty-four virtual workshops, on topics ranging from assessment to Zoom. And they worked with Duke faculty on sixty-three courses over Coursera—an online platform for professional development, personal enrichment, and certifications—that drew more than 2.1 million enrollments, including Duke undergraduates.

IMPROVISING UNDER THE CIRCUMSTANCES

I held onto a souvenir of a pandemic academic year, sealed airtight in its Ziploc bag as it had been when I first grabbed it. It’s a pair of goggles from what’s called the Upside Down Challenge Game. Here’s a description from the relevant website: “Did you know that the human eye naturally sees everything upside down, and your brain flips the image so that you see the world the way you do? The Upside Down Challenge Game literally reinterprets your reality by showing your mind what your eyes actually see. This inventive inversion turns even the simplest of ordinary tasks into a real skill challenge. Oh, and it’s a hilarious ton of fun too!”

Having provided a learning opportunity, if not a ton of fun, my upside-down goggles were a keepsake from a course that, through that fall 2020 semester, kept on meeting in real time and real—if somewhat improvised—space. An early-fall afternoon with “Sensory Biology” did several things for me. It pointed to the appeal of learning things and seeing people in physical space. It offered an example of COVID-inspired innovation. And it provided a useful metaphor: Everything was upside down.
The course met in a gently sloping section of the Sarah P. Duke Gardens, described in official Duke language as “an artful expression inspired by nature.” In a normal year, that slice of artfully reconfigured nature draws more than 600,000 visitors. This was not a normal year, and as official word had it, “In keeping with Duke University’s campus-wide health and safety measures to curb the spread of the COVID-19 virus,” the gardens would remain closed indefinitely. But we had special permission to be here. Escorted by a gardens gatekeeper (quite a precise job description in this case—a gate was unlocked for us), we sprawled out near a small pond renowned for entrapping badly aimed Frisbees. The professor, biologist Sonke Johnsen, came across as easygoing, someone quick to engage a nearby student about the season in varsity swimming—the proverbially sunny personality, and appropriately so, for a scientist who studies bioluminescence in sea creatures. That day he was dressed casually—it was the gardens, after all—in jeans, a salmon-colored short-sleeve shirt, hiking shoes, and a face mask with a polka-dot pattern on a white background.

Even beyond the class setting, Johnsen had to make a few modifications for a pandemic semester. “Normally, this is a literal hands-on class, with many sensory demos that require students to be in close proximity to each other,” he told me. “So I had to modify the demos to meet the COVID distancing protocols, which often led to late nights of brainstorming with my wife.” One clear need was to have the students sit far enough apart; after seeing a photo from a school in China, he had thought of adopting the idea of having students sit within oversize Hula Hoops. Johnsen and his wife would spend a whole day trying to find a way to buy them, and failing that, how to build them out of PVC pipe. “We eventually gave up when I realized how hard it was going to be to carry them to and from class, so I settled on large beach blankets to keep everyone both comfortable and spread out. That worked well and also created a fun space, which the students needed.”

For a more or less typical class meeting, Johnsen had the students work through a set of sensory-minded scientific papers with imposing titles and the always-requisite colon: “Feeling the Beat: Movement Influences Infant Rhythm Perception.” “The Myth of Upright Vision: A Psychological and Functional Imaging Study of Adaptation to Inverting Spectacles.” “Adapting to Inversion of the Visual Field: A New Twist to an Old Problem.”

The main business came with the goggles, which he distributed to everybody. “Straight from Etsy, in their own bags, with lots of sanitizing,” he assured the students. “These things are yours to keep. Nobody wants anything that’s been worn on your face.” He proceeded to put the students through
a set of goggles-driven exercises. Writing out their full names on a piece of paper, when every letter they formed was upside down. Performing a version of that so they would form each letter to read “correctly” through the goggles. Crafting their names upside down with their eyes shut. “I feel like I’m going against gravity,” one of the students complained. In making this upside-down adjustment, Johnsen said, “You gotta love the capital I and the capital H. Then there are the really hard ones, like the lowercase a.” In this alien sensory world, good luck if you’re trying to form individual letters that present lots of curving and minimal symmetry.

To top off the exercise, a few students volunteered for a short, mock competition: running with their upside-down goggles. The competition was very messy; if they weren’t exactly running in circles, they ran in anything but a straight line. “Any way you move, it feels like you’re moving the wrong way,” one of the students remarked. From another: “It started out well. Then the ground was where I thought it shouldn’t be.”

The lesson was all about what happens when feedback is thrown off-kilter. With no reliable feedback, there’s no mechanism controlling your handwriting, no mechanism guiding you as you run a prescribed path. You’re operating like a thermostat meant to heat a room to a certain comfortable level, but that instead travels wildly into sauna territory. “One of the main goals in the class is not just to talk about the aspects of sensory biology that students think they know about,” Johnsen explained, “but also to show them all the hidden processes going on that they never dreamed of.”

Prepandemic, something else had been beyond imagining for the instructor and his students: an academic year when in-person connections would be so precious, and their absence so painful. After we had abandoned our disorienting goggles and returned to an otherwise disoriented world, Johnsen talked about why he had chosen to teach in person. From the previous spring and the much-discussed “pivot” to everything online, he had seen how hard Zoom classes were on his students—and on his daughter, a student elsewhere. “I thought the gardens would be perfect, because they would be remote, quiet, and empty, and also because it would be an interesting destination for students who were mostly stuck on their computers in their dorm rooms.” Sure, teaching or taking a class outside was hot in August, buggy for much of the fall, and rain was always a threat. But in any event, students almost unfailingly showed up. Such faithfulness, according to Johnsen, was an engagement indicator: “Attendance—aside from enforced quarantines, housing issues, and one or two medical-school interviews—was basically 100 percent for the entire semester, which was a first for me.”
A first for Jody McAuliffe, a professor of theater studies, was teaching her introductory acting course online. Her fall semester syllabus lured me into the course—the only time I would do something dramatic in my course-taking career. It had some readings that seemed right in providing a scaffolding for theater, from Chekhov’s *The Cherry Orchard* to Jean Benedetti's *Stanislavski: An Introduction*. And it included a contemporary play, *Appropriate*, by Branden Jacobs-Jenkins.

Late in the semester, Jacobs-Jenkins Zoomed into the class—a virtual visit that exploited a feature of the Zoomified classroom. The cumbersome task of arranging guest-speaker travel instantly became a relic of a different age. Jacobs-Jenkins took questions about how he worked with actors, how conflict might serve as the essence of what makes a scene a scene, how he structured the play, and how he decided on the intriguingly ambiguous title—*Appropriate* as in asserting ownership, or *Appropriate* as in fitting in or belonging? He also put the students through some creativity-inspiring exercises. Take three minutes, for example, to write a dialogue. And then a dialogue that has to incorporate elements of a word list: *thunderstorm, cupcake, Taco Bell, Ariana Grande*, and so forth. Consider the double meaning of *play*, he told the students, and imagine introducing touches of randomness and surprise into whatever you might create.

*Appropriate* has echoes of *The Cherry Orchard*, in which family members wrestle with the prospect of selling off an estate deeply rooted in their own aristocratic history. (McAuliffe mentioned that the Chekhov play was among her favorites; she played the character Charlotta, a governess, in one production.) The legacy of Russian serfdom is always in the backdrop. In *Appropriate*, it's the legacy of slavery: Members of what had been a plantation-owning family are brought together by the death of the family patriarch. When an old photo album is hauled out, a Southern stew of guilt, shame, and accusation is the result. It turns out that one visual theme of the album is Black people who seemed to have been lynching victims. How to process that secretive past? As McAuliffe observed, “The essence of drama is struggle.”

In their inaugural meeting, McAuliffe asked the students to sketch the gains, dramatic or not, they anticipated from the course. Many expressed an interest in developing confidence, improving their public speaking, finding a way to inhabit the personalities of others, stepping out of a comfort
zone, destressing. What I hoped to gain was an answer to a question for which I had no ready answer: Could acting, as a subject, be taught online? Particularly the coaching aspects of the subject, with students presenting monologues, or acting out short scenes from the readings, or using some apparently bland object to spark an invented story.

The answer came quickly: Yes, but with differences. Those differences flowed from the pretty serious challenges of performing while detached from others. Sometimes, students together in a scene couldn’t be sure in which direction to turn in connecting with a fellow performer. Sometimes the circumstances were distracting for students. In that first class meeting, one had to mute himself because he was staying in a campus-owned hotel, and the housekeeping staff, at the moment, was vacuuming nearby. McAuliffe worked to have the students be mindful of less obvious distractions, like swiveling in their computer-facing chairs; to be self-aware with hand gestures, facial expressions, and the like—of acting, essentially, for the camera and not onstage. She summed up the experience by noting that “life in Zoom is weird.” Still, she added, “we get an intimacy we don’t get in theater.”

Through it all, McAuliffe reminded the class that actors, Zoomified or not, need to figure out the character’s intentions—a quest that, naturally, entails reading deeply into the character’s personal history, interactions with others, and emotional needs. In *Appropriate*, is a character’s intention, maybe, to recover? To distract? To hide? To deny an accusation? Their job, she told the students, is to excavate, to see how much rich information there is to be mined in the text. Acting is “one of the few activities in life in which selfishness is rewarded,” she said. “You focus on what you want—what your character wants.”

When she had the chance to look back on the semester, McAuliffe told me that one-on-one sessions for monologue work, along with one-on-two sessions for scene work, went reasonably well on Zoom. “I wouldn’t say they went better than they would have in a live class, but that they went well in a different way.” Because the sessions weren’t in front of the whole class—at least in shared physical space—it could be less intimidating. As she described it, “The situation presented less stress for shy actors.” As a shy guy myself, I questioned whether addressing a bunch of heads arrayed on a computer screen would really be more inviting than the familiar alternative: speaking out in the setting of a physical class. In my time as a virtual student, I noticed a lot of students interrupting other students, sometimes just because they were missing the cues of a raised hand or a shoulder shrug,
along with a lot of student reticence when it came to on-screen discussions. In some ways, this technology-driven version of course taking seemed to exaggerate personality styles: Some students were always in the mix, seemingly enjoying the spectacle of their performance, and others were thoroughly in the background, sometimes with their cameras off.

As McAuliffe told me, the biggest challenge was consistently keeping a high level of engagement. “It’s very easy to ‘check out’ on Zoom. In the live classroom, the atmosphere is like that of a rehearsal room, in which everyone is involved in and contributing directly to the work going on in the room.” Still, I could see that the pivot to online did highlight, at the very least, the need to recognize that students take to different learning environments in different ways.

The 2020 fall semester was her very first at Duke for Kaimei Gescuk, and her curriculum was delivered completely through a computer screen. Electing McAuliffe’s acting seminar, she told me, was a bit risky. The first in-class monologue had her play the role of Franz, a young member of the plantation family in *Appropriate*. It was a challenge to carry the role—at a very emotional point in the action—without being able to draw on the energy of others in the same physical space. It felt more like acting in front of a mirror than in front of an audience. But that in turn made her feel, to validate one of McAuliffe’s observations, less vulnerable, more willing to put herself out there.

When Gescuk was not alone on camera, but rather acting along with another student, “Zoom would always create a barrier in the fluidity of the scene,” she said. “The timing was a little delayed—the back-and-forth wasn’t that seamless. And stage direction is meant for full-bodied movement, not just for your Zoom self from the shoulders up. It created a lot more emphasis on the fine-tuning of facial expressions. Your emotions really had to show in your face.” She agreed with McAuliffe that in the Zoomified class, “the engagement piece was much harder. You want to be getting the advice of other students. But Zoom creates a kind of curtain of separation.”

At the same time, she told me, the course via Zoom amplified the importance, for the actor, of the small gestures that McAuliffe kept a relentless focus on—the twitch of an eye, the nod of the head, the tug of an ear, all those facial expressions. For Gescuk in particular, a tentative psychology major on the premed track, one revelation was how important empathy—the ability to get inside someone else, to really figure out what defines and drives another individual, to identify with a perspective other than your own—is to an actor. And, she recognized, to a future doctor.
At Duke, many of those future doctors would be spending a chunk of their fall 2020 semester in a gateway science course. How would a lab experience translate into an online offering? My only college-level lab experience was in an intro biology course. The excellent thing about it was that the biology professor, who projected a memorably regal bearing and a vaguely New England accent, had the dual distinctions of being the department chair and being the son-in-law of writer E. B. White. It would have been too perfect had the creator of Charlotte’s Web somehow influenced my future professor to become a very special biologist: an arachnologist. It would have been too perfect had that same professor celebrated the quality of my lab write-ups, which I thought demonstrated a certain faithfulness to White’s own The Elements of Style, if not much understanding of the elements of biology. None of that happened, and so my one science semester resulted in a barely passing grade.

Given that rigorous science background, I thought I’d look into the teaching of physics labs, in their fall 2020 version, from a safe distance—far removed from actually taking them. I tracked down Ken McKenzie, lab supervisor in physics for the past twelve years. Before that he was a physics teaching assistant. From the time the impact of the pandemic had first been felt, “A great deal of material had to be redesigned, restructured, and rewritten,” he told me.

For the physics classes that came together, virtually, that meant offering “kit-based experiments.” (It also meant finding faculty members to replace several graduate-student teaching assistants; if they were international students who were stuck in place overseas, they couldn’t be employed by a US university.) Putting the kits together was harder than other options: having McKenzie do the experiment himself and distribute a video of it for the students to analyze; or having the students download a set of data that he would provide them. “Certainly everyone teaching science during the pandemic is operating under different requirements and constraints,” he said. “For us, planning for the fall, I believe there was a shared sense that preserving the hands-on aspect of our labs was quite important, and that it was feasible.”

In talking about two lab sections for physics majors, Physics 1641 and 1651, McKenzie reeled off quite a product list: “The kits for the physics majors required some parts and equipment from what we had available on our laboratory classroom shelves. So these were all loaned out and distributed to students for the semester. In 1651, for example, we loaned out
kits containing an assortment of electronic components—multimeters, a solenoid, Hall effect sensor chips, in addition to batteries, magnets, wires, and those sorts of items.” The frosting on the physics cake was a basic handheld oscilloscope. In 1641, while the contents were pretty comparable to the kits prepared for the equivalent lab course for nonphysics majors—metal balls, string, measuring implements—each kit also contained a laboratory rod stand and a dynamometer, which measures the torque (or twisting force that causes rotation) and the rotational speed of an engine.

Parts of the mechanics labs hinged less on presupplied kits than on household materials and a cell phone. The cell phone has both a video camera and an onboard accelerometer, which is used, in conventional circumstances, to detect the orientation of the phone. As deployed for the lab, a student could record a video of a moving object on a phone and then import the video into lab software, which would perform frame-by-frame calibrations. “You can scroll through the frames in the video and click on the moving object each time. As you do this, the software is able to generate a list of positions. Then you can plot this data, and analyze it, and think about the physics of that motion.” Because Duke has a site license, the software was free for the physics students.

McKenzie said the department worked to keep the cost low for students and to find vendors that wouldn’t run out of something. It also distributed a fair number of loaner kits to students who expressed a need. And it asked students to get creative with materials. “We saw experiments held together by tape or supported with paper cups, books, cardboard, or recyclables.” For spectroscopy experiments, many students created cardboard or cereal-box stands. They used paper clips to make electrical connections, or “found something novel to use” as a ramp if a piece of wood was not available.

A physics professor, Josh Socolar, worked up a kit consisting mostly of common items that students could obtain themselves: a Slinky, some rubber bands, string, a measuring tape. One Socolar-designed experiment asked students to slide a coin down a tilted surface and film it. “It’s not that simple, of course,” McKenzie explained. “You need to align the camera, calibrate length, measure angles, and repeat. That’s part of the experimental process. Considering how simple it is, it’s a great experiment for the start of the semester. You can do quite a lot with it. You need to use the concepts of acceleration, friction, and forces.” Some of the lab sections—notably those attracted to electromagnetism—were built on concepts like polarization and optical interference. They required less common items, like a digital...
meter, which records electricity use with precision, and diffraction film, which breaks up white light into the colors of the spectrum.

For all the imaginative energy applied to physics labs, some experiments just weren’t workable away from the lab setting. One of his favorite experiments has to do with driven oscillation, which refers to an object vibrating with an amplitude and a frequency that can be measured. “You need to put together a contraption. You need a lab stand, a plastic damping plate, a spring, pulleys, and an electromechanical driver that can push and pull. You also need a sine-wave generator, and banana cables to connect it. These sorts of doodads are the bread-and-butter of a physics laboratory classroom. Unless you live under the same roof as a science teacher and have this kind of equipment just sitting around, it’s unlikely to be an experiment that is possible at home.”

MEETING THE PANDEMIC MOMENT

This wasn’t just a fall semester with a pandemic-influenced teaching style. It was a semester in which the pandemic and its impact became a subject for courses. One was “Virtual Museums.” The (virtual) course was taught by Maurizio Forte, a professor of art, art history, and visual studies, and looked at the impact of the COVID-19 era on museums and cultural institutions. It enrolled twenty students from five different time zones, stretching from Oregon to China and Singapore.

Among those students was Alec Waxman, who came into the course as a double major in art history and computer science; he had done internships with auction houses and art galleries and had worked for a company on virtual-reality and augmented-reality projects. Waxman joined in a group project for the class, “Tales from the Time of COVID,” which took the form of an online exhibition. “As students,” they said in introducing the exhibition, “we are part of the Zoomer generation, marked by online classes and banished from our physical schools.” They referred to “a whole range of emotions and experiences, including reminiscence, exploration, conflict, introspection, and emptiness.” Waxman provided an image from his time at home the past spring; it showed Park Avenue in New York, close to the building where he lived, looking in the direction of downtown. Generally congested with traffic and pedestrians, Park Avenue was looking desolate. His text noted that for months, “I did not leave my New York City apartment at all, except to take walks in my neighborhood with my dog,” a Cavalier
King Charles Spaniel that, presumably, likewise welcomed a release from its homebound status.

The “Virtual Museums” course felt “relevant and practical,” Waxman told me, because pretty much every museum, with COVID-19, would come to rely on virtual tours to engage the public. His coursework culminated in his own virtual tour through the Nasher Museum’s “Graphic Pull,” which I eventually visited in real space. As the museum said on its website, “The inherent characteristics of most prints—reproducibility, general ease of distribution, and collaborative elements—make them particularly efficient at communicating ideas to large audiences.”

For Waxman and a student partner, making the exhibition come alive on computer screens was fairly elaborate: Borrowing a task-appropriate camera from Duke’s Visual and Media Studies group. Taking in the exhibited works in detail to figure out which might be singled out—decisions that largely relied on personal taste, but that also accommodated the nuances of showing art online. Figuring out the fine points of lighting, given the viewer’s interest in moving around the exhibition space. Deciding on the right viewpoints and the right places to pause for an extended voiceover. Finally, running the video through an editing program. “This was the first time in college that I actually created a deliverable product,” he said.

The single course I found with the pandemic embedded in its title was “Climate, Coffee, and Coronavirus: Why Ecology Matters to Human Health.” Listed across Biology, Environmental Science, and Global Health, it was taught by Julie Reynolds, associate professor of the practice in the Biology Department and the Program in Education. The “Coronavirus” segment was an add-on from the time the impact of the pandemic was just being felt. Originally she had conceived the (in-person) course around a title like “Coffee, Chocolate, and Wine.” In that form, it would explore ecology through the study of three commodities that we care about—or that we absolutely rely on, to cite the significance, for me, of a daily delivery of caffeine—and are in danger of losing.

“Ecology is the study of interactions between organisms and their environment,” Reynolds said in her revamped syllabus. “To understand many pressing world issues—from the food we eat to disease outbreaks to climate change—you must understand ecology.” From the start, she used the model of a flipped classroom: Students would be expected to read and watch and interact with material online, and from there, they were to come to class—that is, to their screens—prepared for discussion.
Around the subject of the coronavirus, the students worked through journal articles, news stories, PowerPoints, and videos. There was one very sobering survey, from a health blog, of "The Five Deadliest Outbreaks and Pandemics in History," pre-COVID-19: the Black Death, the 1918 Spanish Flu, HIV/AIDS, the Plague of Justinian, and the Antonine Plague, along with recurring episodes of cholera. There was an assessment from Science of how clinicians were tracing the "ferocious rampage" of the COVID-19 virus through the body, "from brain to toes." There was an analysis from the Economist of "pandemic proofing the planet," and from the Washington Post, several simulations outlining how an outbreak like an imagined "simulitis" would spread exponentially and how to "flatten the curve." ("Let's see what happens when 'simulitis' spreads in a town of two hundred people. We will start everyone in town at a random position, moving at a random angle, and we will make one person sick.")

Then there was a 1995 CDC report on "Factors in the Emergence of Infectious Diseases" highlighting ecological changes and agricultural development; human population movements, caused by forced migrations or conflicts; globalization, as expressed in phenomena from high-volume travel to food production; and deficiencies in the public-health infrastructure.

And from the Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society, there was a reading assignment on "Human Viruses: Discovery and Emergence," which called for "a coordinated, global surveillance network," given the fact that "emerging viruses are everyone's problem." The paper came to the "unavoidable conclusion" that "we must anticipate the emergence and/or discovery of more new human viruses in the coming years and decades. By no means all will pose a serious risk to public health but, if the recent past is a reliable guide to the immediate future, it is very likely that some will." Those words of all-too-resonant warning dated to 2012.

Much of the discussion in the ecology course happened through Zoom breakout rooms. That was a device to get students to drill down on discussion topics, with each group coming up with something concrete out of their back-and-forth—a written statement, often in the form of policy recommendations. The goal was to simulate a regular classroom and to bring students together as real classmates. "It's a little cheesy," Reynolds, a virtual-teaching novice, told the students. "But I'm trying to create a sense of community online." I joined in one of those initial breakouts, where the task was to find out what the students had in common. Those who popped up on my screen all lived in Durham that semester, were taking most of their classes online,
had a sister, were fans of Chick-fil-A, were from the South, pegged themselves as coffee drinkers, and liked professional basketball. Twenty-three percent of Reynolds’s students overall were living on campus, 60 percent were off campus but in Durham, and the rest were scattered around the world.

That breakdown of geographic distribution came from a class poll, an exercise that Zoom technology accommodated efficiently. A second poll asked, “Do you know anyone who has had or currently has COVID-19?” Eighty-six percent answered yes; 58 percent said they know someone close to them with COVID-19.

The pandemic and the other themes on the agenda for the course were “very personal,” Reynolds remarked; they “affect us all.” Later she would relate just how personal the pandemic was for her. She had come down with COVID-19 the previous summer, and had been contending with multiple, long-term side effects since that time. One of her frustrations, she told me, was that she could never figure out how she had contracted the disease. She had done everything she was supposed to be doing: masking in the company of others, social distancing, mostly remaining at home. “One of the goals was to have the students think about the environmental basis of emerging diseases. And this seemed to be an interesting layer of the narrative—how it came to be that we were all collectively experiencing a pandemic.”

Reynolds had wrestled with how much to share with students about her own circumstances; ultimately, she concluded that her struggle with the disease provided an important lesson about a far-reaching global crisis and an unfolding global tragedy. (Now and again, she would rely on a familiar colleague to help with the teaching. That was her father, James Reynolds, a professor emeritus of biology at Duke. His scholarly work focuses on human interaction with the environment, including land degradation and desertification.) Some weeks after launching the course, she sent out this message: “I seem to be among the long haulers who, even after a mild COVID infection, is plagued with breathing issues months later. I am taking it easy and getting excellent medical care, but I wanted both to acknowledge my absence from class recently as well as to remind everyone to continue to take precautions to avoid transmission of this disease.” Her plan would be to lead the class as often as she could and to be available for office hours, “with the caveat that sometimes speaking triggers constriction, so I may need to reschedule.” She concluded by thanking the students for their understanding.

One of those students was Dennis Harrsch. An insight from the course that had stuck with him, he told me at the end of the semester, was that climate change is going to make infectious diseases and their spread more
common. Several of the assignments dug into that connection: Melting permafrost in the Arctic carries pathogens that are likely to cause new human-borne diseases; the human disruption of ecological systems can have unforeseen repercussions, including animal-borne diseases traveling to new locations. The most “pressing and striking” course-related conversations, he added, focused on how those twin crises, a rampaging pandemic and a warming planet, disproportionately were affecting Black and brown communities.

For Harrsch, Reynolds’s struggle with COVID-19 made the disease “much more personal and frightening.” He added: “Not that I wasn’t vigilant and careful before hearing of her experience. But it really drove home the way that COVID goes beyond statistics on the news…. It was difficult to hear each week that she still was not feeling well, and it underscored what we were learning about the disease.”

As for Reynolds, at the end of the subsequent academic year, 2021–2022, she reported, “I am doing very well, and teaching in person this past year has been a real joy after a year of online teaching.”

THE ENDURING SEMINAR

Learning about Duke’s fall 2020 plan to go online academically led me to explore a big question. A big question for me, at least, having earned my undergraduate degree at a small college that taught small classes. Maybe the principles of particular subjects—acting, for one—could be communicated online. But what about the aura of a seminar in general—the easygoing back-and-forth that makes a seminar a community of learners?

The professor who could help answer that question was Tom Ferraro in English. Ferraro offered a syllabus that was true not just to his pedagogy, but also to his personality. “Do not underestimate Dickinson,” he said in one of his many memorable, if pithy, class moments—this one, in reference to a set of Emily Dickinson poems being considered. “That’s the only thing that’s going to irritate me.” Somewhere in my class notes is his mention of a former student who became a consultant and, in short order, was leading an exercise in corporate “downsizing.” It was a memory prompted by one of the assigned books, Mohsin Hamid’s The Reluctant Fundamentalist, which imagines the post-Princeton trajectory of an increasingly disenchanted and disengaged consultant. Somewhere else in my notes is Ferraro’s analysis of a misunderstood cultural phenomenon, the Village People, whose “YMCA” somehow became associated with Trump campaign rallies. The spark for that
discussion is now murky for me, but there’s nothing murky about the catchiness of the Village People (even in a seminar of serious-minded people).

A syllabus is a syllabus, generally speaking, with all the flair of a quasi-legal document. This one, for “The Art of Reading,” was pure Ferraro. A quote from Bruce Springsteen—one of several quotes sprinkled through the syllabus, spotlighting cultural icons from Henry Adams to Bobby Darin—pretty much said where the instructor was coming from: “Seriousness and joy; that’s how I approach my work; that I learned from my mother.” This would be a course, first and foremost, in “the pleasuring intensities of sustained reading during the age of cyber-immediacy and virtual intimacy: the visceral texture it offers, the analytic trenchancy (including capacity for contradiction) it demands, the repartee it solicits, the essaying that honors it, and the kinship of word and thought it ultimately inspires.” In short, it would wrap students into a learning community.

When he first met the students virtually, Ferraro said they should not expect to be pulled into something “experimental or innovative.” It would be a seminar, with the familiar trappings of a seminar—close reading, free discussion. But not all the trappings: “We’re supposed to be around a table, joined together and protected. But I can’t really see your eyes. Your faces are really small; maybe I need a larger screen.” Based on their on-screen
backdrops, the students were, geographically speaking, all over the place: a dorm room, a bedroom at home, a kitchen, somewhere outdoors (with the student face masked). Then came the rules of classroom conduct, translated from the seminar room to the Zoom space: “Don’t mute unless you’re busy playing an electronic game. If you’ve got to swear at the dog, that’s fine.” And the more basic rule: “We’re all in this together. Resist the zero-sum game, where everybody is contesting for a piece of the pie. If our collective knowledge goes up, we all benefit.”

Ferraro talked about the thinking process behind reading, the intellectual challenge of filling in the blanks and sorting through the ambiguities of the text. And then the pure joy he found in teaching, which he would carry on with a bit of theatricality and a lot of authenticity. Yes, there was his nonteaching side, the administrative committee work that was occasionally consuming and that he would occasionally refer to. But the students arrayed in their little Zoom boxes would be “my hope and my salvation.”

At the end of the semester, I asked Ferraro if he thought he was able to hold onto the seminar model. Zoom necessitated some changes from his usual style. It forced him to be “more direct,” as he put it—to call on students more deliberately, to prod them to speak up, to “put the brakes on” his own tendency to steer the conversation. But he found the students to be aligned with his objective: “Not only to learn how to read the text, but also to learn how the text reads you.” For example, how to process Melville’s *Billy Budd*. When students consider the effects that Billy has on the characters around him, how might their own “aggressive suspicion” implicate them? How do they rationalize what draws others to Billy? “You’re damned if you think you know,” in Ferraro’s words. “And you’re damned if you don’t know.” It’s part of his seminar-room process of “thinking critically not only about the text, but also by means of the text.”

Just beyond the fall semester, there was one ideas-driven, virtual get-together outside the curriculum, sort of a Duke thing but not exactly a Duke thing, that seemed very meta—a conversation about conversation. In its sometimes awkward dynamics, including people talking animatedly while muted, it captured the weirdness of the everything-online moment. It did that even as it wrestled with the task of capturing the moment through language. Virtual access was provided by Duke University Press, publisher of the journal *American Speech*.

That was the first-ever virtual vote of the American Dialect Society, which was driving toward its 2020 Word of the Year, a thirty-year tradition. More than three hundred virtual attendees took part in the deliberations.
and voting. The winning word was COVID. A year earlier, the word basically didn’t exist. It had since evolved into a ubiquitous qualifier: COVID crisis, COVID relief, COVID baking, COVID hair, COVID vaccine, COVID idiot. The most likely to succeed was antiracism; the most useful was before times; and the winner in the digital realm of wordsmithing was doomscrolling. With two special categories added, pandemic-related honors went to the phrase social distancing, and Zoom-specific recognition to you’re muted.

The program went way beyond its allotted two hours, an indication of the intense lobbying for competing Word of the Year candidates, like unprecedented and 2020—both words a sort of shorthand for “unalloyed misery.” Words and pseudo-words that felt right for an academic year shaped by a pandemic.
IN HER _DAEDALUS_ ESSAY, Nan Keohane, the former Duke president, wrote that the modern American research university is a hybrid—a convenient term in a remote-learning time—of two earlier traditions. German universities around the third decade of the nineteenth century developed the model of focusing almost solely on research. American universities in the latter part of that century combined this with the examples of Oxford and Cambridge, which emphasized undergraduate teaching. But the hybrid university, this “peculiarly American shoot,” was foreshadowed by Franklin and Jefferson, who asserted the practical importance of knowledge “in the nation’s service.”

That’s a good, rousing phrase: in the nation’s service. With COVID-19, it took on new urgency.

**HEALTH MATTERS**

The pandemic provided all kinds of opportunities for researchers to be public minded. In a spring 2021 White House briefing, Anthony Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Disease and White House senior adviser on the pandemic, singled out a Duke Human Vaccine Institute study that might hold the promise of developing a universal vaccine. It
would target all forms of coronavirus that move from animals to humans, now and in the future. The study’s senior author was Barton Haynes, director of the institute; the lead author was Kevin Saunders, the institute’s director of research. “There have been three coronavirus epidemics in the past twenty years, so there is a need to develop effective vaccines that can target these pathogens prior to the next pandemic,” Haynes said in a news release. “This work represents a platform that could prevent, rapidly temper, or extinguish a pandemic.”

Fauci referred to the team’s recent paper in Nature, which outlined the so-called pan-coronavirus vaccine. It triggers neutralizing antibodies via a nanoparticle; the nanoparticle in turn is composed of the coronavirus part that allows it to bind to the body’s cell receptors and is formulated with a chemical booster called an adjuvant. In trials with monkeys, the experimental vaccine completely blocked infection and produced impressively high “neutralizing antibody activity.” The finding was still preliminary—the vaccine had only been used in nonhuman primates—but Fauci characterized it as “an extremely important proof of concept that we will be aggressively pursuing as we get into the development of human trials.”

As a new school year loomed in the summer of 2021, Kanecia Zimmerman, an associate professor of pediatrics, and Danny Benjamin, a pediatric infectious disease specialist at Duke Health, took to the opinion section of the New York Times. They addressed what had become a curiously contested idea: that school-age children should be masked, a gesture that would appear to be basic for controlling viral spread. As they put it, in stark terms: “If we send children to school without masks, we increase their risk of acquiring COVID-19. Some could suffer illness or die. If we close schools, millions of children will suffer learning loss, and many of them may suffer lifelong effects on their physical and mental health.”

Around the same time, the Times, in its news pages, was reporting on an anxious return to classrooms. “Nationally, 62 percent of parents support masking requirements for unvaccinated students and school personnel, according to a poll from the Kaiser Family Foundation. But in an indication of how politicized the debate remains, more than two-thirds of Republican parents oppose school mask mandates. And nine states, led by Republican governors or legislative majorities, have banned school mask mandates, according to research from the Center on Reinventing Public Education, a think tank.”

Benjamin, Zimmerman, and colleagues had developed the ABC Science Collaborative to pair scientists with school and community leaders. Their
aim, they wrote, was to make sure that decision makers “had the most up-to-date, scientific information pertaining to COVID-19 and K-12 schools.” Between March and June 2021, the collaborative collected data from more than one million students and staff members in North Carolina schools—reaching into a hundred school districts and fourteen charter schools.

During that time, more than seven thousand children and adults acquired the coronavirus and attended school while infectious. Because of close contact with those cases, more than forty thousand people were sent into quarantine. Through contact tracing and testing, however, the researchers found just 363 additional children and adults became infected. “We believe this low rate of transmission occurred because of the mask-on-mask school environment: Both the infected person and the close contact wore masks. Schools provided this protection without expensive screening tests for the coronavirus or massive overhauls in ventilation systems.” One takeaway from the data, then, was that quarantine could be eliminated for those appropriately masked—even where cases might pop up, in-person learning need not be interrupted, and the closing of school buildings could be considered only a last resort.

Because North Carolina had a mask mandate for all K-12 schools, the researchers could not compare masked schools to unmasked schools. To understand the preventive impact masks could have, they looked outside North Carolina for comparisons. “Data from our research and from studies conducted in Utah, Missouri, and Wisconsin shows that school transmission rates of coronavirus were lower when schools enforced mask mandates. By contrast, one school in Israel without a mask mandate or proper social-distancing protocols reported an outbreak of COVID-19 involved 153 students and twenty-five staff members.”

Schools that did not require masks would have more coronavirus transmission, Zimmerman and Benjamin wrote. “With the evidence now clear that universal masking is linked to lower spread, why not require universal masking? Why seek to gather hundreds of unvaccinated, unmasked individuals in an enclosed space for several hours a day, five days a week?”

Shortly after that piece was published, I talked with Jean Gleason, a Duke graduate student in public health who had been anticipating a summer in Malaysia. There she would be working on a project related to what she described as “a multicountry early-warning system designed to identify novel zoonotic prepandemic viruses”—viruses that jump from animals to humans and have the potential to spark a pandemic. Instead, with cases growing worldwide and the uncertainties around international travel (including a
likely long quarantine on either or both ends of the trip), she found herself working closer to home, in the lab of her Duke mentor, Gregory Gray. Gray is a professor of medicine, global health, and environmental health. He had received some attention for identifying, in the course of COVID-19, a new coronavirus in a Malaysian child with pneumonia; the coronavirus had apparently jumped from dog to human. Such coronaviruses “are likely spilling over to humans from animals much more frequently than we know,” Gray said. “We are missing them because most hospital diagnostic tests only pick up known human coronaviruses.” He wanted to identify viruses new to humans before they could cause a pandemic, really to create an early-warning system. “These pathogens don’t just cause a pandemic overnight. It takes many years for them to adapt to the human immune system and cause infection, and then to become efficient in human-to-human transmission.” Therefore, the value of catching them early as a risk factor in the next pandemic.

The now lab-based Gleason set about analyzing samples taken from pneumonia patients in Sri Lanka. That’s one of five countries—along with Malaysia, Vietnam, Kenya, and China—in Gray’s scope of interest. The lab was deploying a set of assays, amounting to a sophisticated molecular diagnostic tool, to detect a coronavirus. A total of a thousand patients from those countries, all of whom met the clinical definition of pneumonia, provided the samples. As Gleason explained to me, it made sense to be zeroing in on pneumonia, in part because of its prevalence. Pneumonia affects children and families everywhere, but it is especially rampant in South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa. Sri Lanka, then, is among the hotspots. She was working on two hundred samples, using the assays to uncover “pan-species” indicators of coronavirus.

SCHOLARS IN THE MAKING

Gleason’s account reminded me how deeply the pandemic was felt by the newest cadre of scholars in the making: Duke’s PhD-seeking students. A wrap-up of the graduate school’s Summer Research Fellowships pointed to some necessary nimbleness among its beneficiaries.

In the summer of 2020, biology graduate student Carlos Pardo de la Hoz was supposed to be doing fieldwork in Alberta, Canada. “Instead, I spent most of the summer doing bioinformatics analyses of cyanobacterial genomes to understand their evolution.” In classical studies, Antonio Lopiano was planning to conduct “a ground-penetrating radar survey at the
archaeological site of Vulci in Lazio, Italy, an ancient Etruscan and Roman city.” Instead, he explored “the depths of the library’s collections.” A PhD seeker in cultural anthropology, Christopher Webb, had to veer from plans to collect data in Washington State. The focus of his fieldwork was the use of Indigenous ritual to heal veterans from trauma. “It was an incredibly challenging summer, as I have small children and was locked down inside my home with them (which makes academic writing all but impossible).”

With the subsequent pandemic summer, 2021, the cadre of future PhD’s continued to demonstrate innovation amid the interruption. If they couldn’t be out in the field, they could be sharpening their digital toolkit.

Which is exactly what a couple of graduate students in history reflected on. Sarah Amundson was working on a dissertation tentatively titled “Red Light Relations: Prostitution and Power in Charleston, 1850–1945.” With archives still closed, she spent some of the summer engaging in “trial and error” with a software package called Gephi, which allows users to visualize and analyze large networks. It seemed relevant to her interest in plotting relationships between historical actors in her dissertation. Tayzhaun Glover was looking at fugitive-slave flight in the Windward Islands and the abolition of slavery in Martinique and Guadeloupe. In his words: “I was unable to travel abroad this summer because of the COVID-related restrictions in France and the Caribbean. I instead chose to explore some of the digitized content that France’s Archives d’Outre-Mer has made available. I realized that much of my research will be centered around digital research, so I took a course in the beginning of the summer that explored digital humanities and doing research using digital methods.”

Among the graduate students who successfully rode the currents of the pandemic, one, at least for me, stood out. That was Jacob Harrison, a PhD candidate in biology. He was the lead author of a study appearing in the April 2021 Journal of Experimental Biology: “Scaling and Development of Elastic Mechanisms: The Tiny Strikes of Larval Mantis Shrimp.”

Harrison was interested in animals with “spring-actuated mechanisms.” Adult mantis shrimp—which can throw punches so powerful that they can kill their prey in a single strike—have opaque exoskeletons, which makes their inner workings invisible. But the exoskeleton of larvae is much thinner and fully transparent. Working in Hawaii, Harrison and his team could see how the animals manage to store all the elastic energy and then how they produce the spring that gives them their punching tendencies. They were able to observe tiny muscles in the larvae’s body contracting during the snap. What proved to be a newsworthy finding was that punching behavior was
a big deal early on: The mantis shrimp were punching away at the tender age of just nine days.

The team scooped up its samples well before the pandemic hit. Harrison noted, “It can be incredibly challenging to sift through a bucket teeming with larval crabs, shrimp, fish, and worms to find the mantis shrimp.” It was also challenging to get the tiny (0.16-inch) larvae in a position to be filmed; it would require an improvised setup, including a toothpick and some glue.

The sampling was done, but with the pandemic, Harrison had to adjust his research ambitions. “Though I had finished the initial project, we were planning on returning to Hawaii or new field sites to start looking at mantis shrimp larvae in a more comparative context.” The plan was to be looking at other larval mantis shrimp species. “There are over four hundred species of adult mantis shrimp, and each one must go through its own larval phase. So how similar or different are larvae when looking across multiple species?”

Still, the project made waves in the media. In addition to places like Science News and news outlets all over the United States, its findings were picked up in the United Kingdom, France, and New Zealand. Harrison told me: “I already knew that mantis shrimp are incredibly charismatic animals, and mantis shrimp science often gets some wonderful press. But being a graduate student, it was my first experience in the media. So I was amazed at all the attention my research was getting.”

RESEARCH WITH RELEVANCE

Other research spoke to concerns of the moment beyond COVID-19. In the Washington Post, Duke political scientists David Dow and Erik Wibbels, along with PhD candidate Mateo Villamizar Chaparro, summarized their work on migration. They were interested in what happens when migrants are sent back to Guatemala, a country that had received the most US deportees after Mexico. With a couple of research partners, they interviewed 1,357 deportees as they entered Guatemala, specifically Guatemala City. As they wrote: “We randomly invited them to participate in our study as they entered a chaotic scene outside the airport. We followed up with 340 of them who agreed to participate again over subsequent months to learn about their experiences. Our data provide a rare, systematic view of the human impact of US deportation.”

Among their findings: Deportees arrived in a city where few of them had ever been, with very little to their names. Many left their families in the United States; more than 80 percent of the deportees interviewed left at least
one US-based family member. Likewise, many left with considerable savings and other assets in the United States, suggesting that they contributed to the American economy. (They also struggled to reclaim those assets, providing an important motivation for remigration.) Their lives in Guatemala immersed them in “bleak circumstances.” Three to six months later, most were unable to find work; many were preyed upon by gangs and the police. More than 60 percent had no source of income in the months after arrival, and among those who did, the work was mostly informal and piecemeal. “Not surprisingly, 78 percent of our respondents say they might or definitely intend to return to the United States in the coming year.”

“Our study makes clear that deportation is deeply traumatic and destabilizing,” the researchers concluded. And any immigration policy that’s built on expelling people and that doesn’t consider what comes after is likely to backfire. As long as deportees cannot find work, as long as they are separated from families, they’ll be tempted to remigrate.

Another study fed into the immigration issue from a different direction: those who are apprehended at the US southern border. It was co-led by Sarah Bermeo, a public policy professor at Duke. Researchers started with data—obtained through a Freedom of Information request—from some 320,000 family-unit “apprehensions” by US Customs and Border Protection. Those data reveal the city and department (roughly equivalent to the state) of birth for those apprehended. The research question concerned the root causes of migration from Honduras, particularly the interconnected roles of climate change and violence. Honduras is one of the poorest countries in the Western Hemisphere, has rising levels of food insecurity linked to climate change, and has one of the world’s highest homicide rates. In addition to “these consistent issues,” back-to-back hurricanes had a devastating humanitarian impact and severely affected infrastructure and food security. And, according to the study, “The effects of COVID-19 contribute to what was already a desperate situation for many in Honduras.”

Prolonged droughts were contributing to increased apprehensions, the researchers found. And when the homicide rate was higher, the magnitude of the association between drought and apprehensions increased.

The magnitude and duration of the pandemic meant that for many Duke researchers, there was a long pause. One of those was Paul Baker, professor of earth and ocean sciences. Baker is credited with coining the term “geogenomics.” He wonders how the physical environment explains biodiversity—how different species of plants, for example, evolved separately because of the physical barrier of the Amazon. And turning that around: How do we use
the genetic information encoded in those plants to figure out, say, when the Amazon formed or when the Andes rose up? He told me: “I’m a broadly interested scientist. I’m not narrowly confined. I like geology, chemistry, biology.” And he’s long loved South America. As a child, he collected stamps from the region. Early in his career, he ran a research ship that extracted cores from the bottom of Lake Titicaca, which straddles the border between Bolivia and Peru; the lake is 120 miles long and 50 miles wide and has an average depth of 500 feet. The cores would help researchers figure out how climate conditions in the environs—warm, cold, moist, dry—changed over big swaths of geologic time.

“COVID interrupted my long-planned field work in the Amazon and offshore in the Atlantic about as much as you could imagine,” Baker said, “canceling our major international ocean-drilling expedition and greatly delaying our major on-land scientific drilling expedition.” A couple of years back, he received a National Science Foundation grant of more than $2 million to fund the research. The Amazon-Andean rainforest hosts more than half of all terrestrial plant species. As he noted in a project summary, “The origin of the great biodiversity observed in tropical South America has spurred debate for over a hundred years and remains one of the foundational problems in modern science.” He and his colleagues were planning to collect core samples from ancient sedimentary basins at sites transecting the Amazon basin from the Andes to the Atlantic. For some of the sites along the Amazon, the planning extended to arranging for a barge for transporting all the drilling equipment.

But travel-related concerns, one frustrating feature of the pandemic, made it tough to do scientific field work—especially since, for a time, “the Amazon was ground zero for COVID-19,” Baker recalled. There were other issues. Securing shipping permits, customs clearances, and more depended on a relatively responsive bureaucracy, but the bureaucracy was less than responsive during the depths of the pandemic. The sea-based aspect of the project, which was meant to be deploying a ship with a derrick extending more than two hundred feet above the waterline and capable of supporting a million pounds of weight, was done in, in part, by basic bureaucratic inertia: The Brazilian navy never came through with the standard permissions. (Baker reminded me that the Trump-era US ambassador to Brazil was Todd Chapman, a Duke graduate. Notoriously, Chapman played host for Brazil’s president, Jair Bolsonaro, at a July 4 barbecue that proceeded mask free. Three days later, Bolsonaro tested positive for the virus.)
For its land-based work, which Baker hoped would be restored in 2022, the team planned to be drilling about one and a quarter miles beneath the surface. They would be recovering sedimentary samples spanning the entire seventy-million-year history of the region, which they would later analyze. They were aiming to answer lots of botanical and geological questions: What is the history of plant diversity across the Amazon basin? How does diversity relate to such environmental drivers as the Andean uplift? Are there any clear extinction events throughout the Amazon forest? What is the history of tropical South American climate from the Late Cretaceous period (ending about sixty-six million years ago) to today? To what extent did the Amazon or its major tributaries present barriers to groups of organisms inhabiting opposite banks of the rivers?

Even as Baker was stung by COVID-19-related roadblocks (or sea barriers), a Duke colleague, conservation scientist Stuart Pimm, could revel in a pandemic-time distinction. One of five new species of Darwin’s wasps described by South American scientists in the journal *Zoo Keys* was named in his honor. The wasp is native to the cloud forest of Colombia’s tropic Andes. Pimm had led numerous studies documenting threats to endangered species in the region. He also has a nonprofit, Saving Nature, through which he works with local conservationists, community organizations, and property owners to purchase and restore critical patches of threatened land.

*Dolichomitus pimmi* is described as having a tiger-striped orange-yellow body; amber-hued, black-tipped wings; and a somewhat menacing-looking head and jaw. It lives in or on its prey, feeding on the prey’s living body before eventually killing it. Its genus, Darwin wasps, earned its common name because the great naturalist once famously said the wasps’ fascinating but grisly behavior made him question the existence of “a beneficent and omnipotent God.” For his part, Pimm, in a news release, said the newly discovered wasp “is lovely, in my view.”

As Pimm’s comment suggested, pandemic-traumatized humans might look to animals for solace. The American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA) was reporting that between March 2020 and May 2021—the course of the pandemic at its peak—about one in five households, in a national survey, had acquired a dog or, for some inexplicable reason, a cat. I had grown up with beagles—instinctive affection providers and indiscriminate eating machines—so I was alert to a media briefing, featuring the university’s expert on all matters canine. This was part of a pandemic series organized by Duke’s Office of Communications; on this
occasion, the expert was Brian Hare, a professor of evolutionary anthropology and codirector of the Duke Canine Cognition Center. He studies how dogs think and solve (or don’t solve) problems. And now there was the problem, from a canine perspective, of humans, who had been largely homebound for a year and a half or so, planning to break their Zoomified habits and return to the workplace.

Especially if dogs were mere puppies as the pandemic took off, they would not take well to feeling deserted, Hare warned. They would likely register their anxiety through such behaviors as damaging furniture, scratching away at the doors confining them, chewing things, soiling their surroundings, whining, crying, howling, or otherwise making a scene. After all, noted Hare, that’s why we love dogs: They’re socially bonded with us, as an evolutionary dictate. He went on to talk about the soothing impact of not making a big deal of departure—not jingling keys, for example—and also the options of doggie care, enlisting a dog walker, or simply wearing down the soon-to-be-stranded animal with an intense bout of exercise. Or creating distractions through chew toys and peanut butter snacks.

Hare’s expert commentary was a sign that shaking off pandemic-time habits would have its own challenges. It was also a reminder that research is relevant: better living, for us and our canine companions, through science.

Especially in a research university, a faculty member’s research record is basic to advancing through the ranks, and certainly to earning tenure. With the pandemic, it wasn’t just a growing set of travel restrictions that intruded on research. It was the whole mix of personal and professional complications. A political science professor commented in the student newspaper that his commitments had “effectively doubled”—carrying out his academic work, that is, while caretaking for young children stuck at home.

Like a lot of its peer schools, Duke allowed faculty to extend the decision timeline for tenure consideration. “COVID-19 poses numerous challenges to maintaining our research and educational missions,” Provost Sally Kornbluth said in a note to faculty. “I am concerned about undue stress that may be placed on you—our pre-tenure, junior faculty, who may be worried about your progress to tenure while juggling unprecedented personal and professional obligations.” The university would allow those on the tenure track a one-year extension; deans could request additional accommodations for their faculty. Making that an option and not a mandate was important. For some, the pandemic might have eliminated distractions, and a tenure delay might have been a career setback.
I found a striking example of pandemic-time productivity after tuning into Beverly Mclver on YouTube. Mclver is a professor of the practice in Duke’s Department of Art, Art History, and Visual Studies. In one of her presentations, she described “painting furiously”—finding a “beautiful opportunity” to stay at home and “do what I love, which is to paint.” McIver grew up in Greensboro, North Carolina. The infamous 1979 Greensboro Massacre—the subject of pandemic-time Duke programming—unfolded right in front of her family’s apartment. At the time, she was working at a McDonald’s across town, but her mother and a cousin witnessed the events, and the family Ford Pinto was shot through with bullet holes.

When I talked with her, McIver referred to a particular work that came out of both the pandemic and the presidential election. It was inspired by the mantra “Enough of Trump” and was a project for People for the American Way (PFAW). The painting, the portrait of a friend’s son (looking like he had had enough), was translated into a poster; was reproduced on a billboard in such electoral “swing states” as Wisconsin, Michigan, Arizona, and North Carolina; and was even projected onto the Amsterdam News Building, a historic rowhouse in Harlem. (Just before we talked, she had finished off a portrait of PFAW founder Norman Lear.) As part of her productivity, she did a self-portrait; she painted herself lying down, on her side, and hovering above her were the stenciled words “Zoom Funk.” Even when Duke went largely online, she kept her painting courses in person. She told me: “I hate Zoom. That’s why I created that painting.”

One more example of work that captured the moment: Mass shootings in the spring of 2022 (Buffalo, New York, and Uvalde, Texas) brought fresh media attention to public policy professor Kristin Goss, who for years has analyzed and interpreted gun-related survey data. She noted in one of her papers that “Americans’ social identities are becoming more and more neatly organized along partisan lines.” In 2000, Democrats were about 21 percentage points more supportive than Republicans of measures meant to control guns. By 2016, that gap had opened up to a “staggering” 58 percentage points. As she put it, “Increasingly, being a good Republican requires supporting gun rights, while being a good Democrat means supporting gun regulation.” Goss saw little promise of resolving the differences.

During the pandemic, I learned about Goss’s students shaping a class constitution as a sort of operating manual. The process that she guided was careful; it would have shot down anything like a sloppy Second Amendment.
THE CAMPUS AS A SPACE FOR COLLECTIVE WELL-BEING

THE NORMAL RULES OF ENGAGEMENT couldn’t hold on a pandemic-time campus. That is what experts were saying. Early in the pandemic, Cameron Wolfe, a Duke infectious disease specialist and a frequent expert source for the media, declared: “The wearing of any mask, including cloth masks that folks will now see for sale widely, is very satisfactory at me preventing you [from] getting sick. That’s the public-health part of this. When I walk down the street wearing a mask, I’m doing that for other folks around me, not fundamentally for me.” And beyond the face-masking imperative: “Being prepared to put a pause on things should be the first step.... If we consider ourselves to be data driven and we see the data heading in the wrong way, it’s nonsense to think we can continue doing the same thing and expect that [infection] trajectory to change.”

Later, Wolfe’s two boys, then five and seven, got some attention for participating in a clinical trial, which was looking at a vaccine for young children. Wolfe and his wife, who is also a doctor, said they hoped sharing the story would reassure other parents about the safety of the vaccine.
SAFETY FIRST

There was a vital gesture if I wanted to hang out on campus. It involved calling up a symptom-monitoring app—the “SymMon,” in Duke lingo. The app had been developed by Duke’s Office of Information Technology (OIT); the questioning, which would change somewhat over time, was based on CDC recommendations and filtered by Duke experts. Every morning, a reminder would appear in my email. I would be asked if I was being plagued by, or was clear of, a set of symptoms: cough, shortness of breath, fever, chills, runny nose, congestion, muscle pain, GI issues. If it all checked out, I would be good to go. Students went through the same routine. If they ignored the app for too long, they would be notified that their DukeCard had been deactivated. That was a pretty serious matter—and a fine way to ensure compliance—since the card provided everything from access to classroom buildings and dorms to the “food points” purchased for meal plans.

The chief information officer for OIT, Charley Kneifel, told me the app was absorbing up to 28,000 of the surveys every day. Kneifel, a chemistry PhD who said he loved problem solving, had an excellent pedigree before embarking on his Duke career: He was chief information officer for the American Kennel Club. In the spring of 2020, his team had to deal with the immediate priority of building an infrastructure for remote learning. Building SymMon was a month-long process that fed off existing tools, including an app used in clinical studies. That summer, a version was rolled out for some of the first returnees to campus—football players—and a bit later for those making the return to research labs. Like the rest of the university, his group had to work remotely through the development phase, which meant long days and nights capturing and sharing information over Zoom and Microsoft Teams.

The daily surveying was just one aspect of a pandemic-time routine. There was entry testing for all incoming students, and symptomatic testing for those experiencing symptoms. The most sweeping—or most swabbing—program was surveillance testing. Students would receive an email specifying when they would be taking part in a test. Early in the pandemic, they would be tested twice weekly. Student athletes and small populations of students who, according to the most recent data, were seen as more likely to be infected would be tested more often. They would visit one of the several screening sites on campus, and, with phone in hand (as always), they would call up the SymMon app to scan their test kit. Then they would take a self-administered test—just a five-minute process, they were assured. The instructions would...
begin with, “Insert cotton swab into right nostril,” three-quarters of an inch or so; continue with “rotate three times along inside edge of nostril”; and from there, “repeat for left nostril.” Having navigated their nostrils, students would place the swab into a collection tube with a barcode, and the tube would be deposited into a cooler at the collection site.

Those at Duke most closely following—and responding to—the infection trajectory were participating, virtually, in an Emergency Management Committee around COVID-19. It started meeting in January 2020. Wolfe was one of the first people to whom the group’s convener, Kyle Cavanaugh, reached out; the two had worked closely together during the Ebola outbreak in West Africa in 2014 and the Zika outbreak in 2016.

Cavanaugh’s committee brought together expertise across a range stretching from infectious diseases to mathematical modeling, from environmental safety to behavioral science. There were representatives from, among other areas of the university, Employee Health, Student Health, Duke Health (the university’s sprawling healthcare network), General Counsel, Public and Government Affairs, and Student Affairs. On the day I visited, Cavanaugh began with a “catch-up,” a review of the past twenty-four hours, including the disease metrics attached to the United States, North Carolina, and Durham, along with those for Duke’s hospitals. Among the questions for driving discussion: What capacity might be needed for isolating students in the event of an outbreak? What signage is effective around masking mandates? When might it be safe to hold gatherings, and how to communicate word of any possible transmission? Cavanaugh ended the meeting with a sendoff that defined the new normal: “Be safe, everybody!”

The overall charge was to “rally the entire enterprise” around preventing the spread of the disease, in the words of Cavanaugh, now adding to his role as Duke’s vice president for administration and emergency response coordinator. (In the spring of 2022, Cavanaugh—a scholarship player on his college’s basketball team—would start a new role apart from Duke, as president, administration, for the National Basketball Association.) Whenever I Zoomed with him, he was talking from his (real) office; he said he felt a strong need to be present for colleagues in familiar space. The Emergency Management Committee, as he put it, had “spent very little time in the whining space and a whole lot of time in the problem-solving space.” Many of those representatives had never met each other, he told me, much less coordinated as a group.

However overused as a descriptive, unprecedented really described the challenge, and the effort to address it. No assumption could be taken for granted in understanding the course of the virus. No decision could be seen
as fixed in planning for the semester ahead. And the keep-the-campus-safe priority would reach beyond infection control measures. Duke, like its peer institutions, was feeling the financial pressure of lost revenue from such generally reliable areas as clinical care, campus housing, campus dining, sports venues, conference services, and (on a rather empty campus) even parking. Plus, it seemed the endowment would be taking a big hit—even as pandemic-related expenses, notably for testing, were mounting. So the university imposed salary freezes, and it suspended retirement plan contributions. (Both steps would be reversed later in the pandemic.) At the same time, it said it would look out particularly for lower-paid employees and “protect as many jobs as possible.” Well into the long pandemic story—in early 2022—Cavanaugh would tell me that at Duke, “not a single job was lost to the pandemic.”

Cavanaugh explained that Duke had benefited from the head start—namely, Duke Kunshan University (DKU), the joint educational venture in China. Duke officials had long been paying attention to cases of the virus coming out of Wuhan in China, which happened to be the site of Duke’s partner university in conceiving DKU. (DKU opened in 2014 with some Duke graduate programs, along with a “global learning semester” for undergraduates from Duke and other universities; a four-year undergraduate degree program began there in 2018.) With cases rising in China, DKU would offer a template for containing the spread: face masks, social distancing, reducing the population on campus. As Cavanaugh described the trajectory: “It quickly moved from being an issue mostly of concern with our work with DKU, to an issue related to our travelers coming from and going to China, and then rapidly to this being an international phenomenon, where we were looking at faculty, staff, and students we had deployed internationally, were traveling internationally, or were returning internationally.”

Duke also had a head start in dealing with cases and suspected cases. For their 2020 spring break, sixty-one students from Duke’s Fuqua School of Business had formed a cohort for some global gallivanting. Almost all would test positive for the coronavirus. Several received medical care outside the United States; the rest, after they came back to Durham, had to quarantine themselves in off-campus housing, under medical supervision.

Whatever the advantages of the head start, an atmosphere of agitation was a campus feature. Consider the East Campus bridge. For decades, it has served as an unofficial free-expression area—raw, unfiltered, and interestingly apart from the institutional Duke. There was one painted line that endured throughout the pandemic: “This too shall (under)pass.” Sort
of funny as a comment on the bridge structure (in fact a street-supporting underpass). Sort of aspirational as a prediction around the pandemic. Also, in the same area, a more pointed message, unveiled in a banner hung by the Duke Graduate Student Union (an informal collective not officially recognized as a union): “Duke is reopening during a pandemic. Duke workers demand pay, safety, a seat at the table.” Alongside the demands, the hashtag “#SolidarityNotAusterity.” A union representative told the Chronicle that the Duke administration’s decision to reopen campus in the fall of 2020, allegedly without consulting their workers, was “appalling.” “The people who do the work necessary to operate Duke’s classrooms, research labs, dining halls, and facilities are going to be forced back to work with little concern for their health and safety.”

A university spokesman responded that Duke was “taking great care to prepare for fall semester, with the health and safety of our students and employees our highest priority, and with plans based, first and foremost, on the best available medical and public-health research and guidance.” Duke was in regular contact with managers and front-line workers about their experiences and concerns, he said. It had “already implemented rigorous new hygiene and sanitation processes for the twenty-thousand-plus employees who have been working in our hospitals, clinics, labs, residence halls, and other parts of campus safely and without interruption since the onset of the pandemic in March.”

A nearby installation, on the bridge’s support wall, had an even more arresting effect; it provided a visible reminder of the times, a sign that the pandemic was inescapably present. Two young Durham-based brothers had pasted up a hundred copies of a sad testimonial: the New York Times front page listing 1,000 of the then 100,000 American deaths from COVID-19. The passage of time wasn’t friendly to free expression, and with months of wind, rain, and temperature shifts, the front-page copies were peeling off the wall, almost on the verge of tumbling onto the road. The fragility of the installation seemed to mimic the fragility of the lives it had documented. Someone had X-ed out the original 100,000 reference and replaced it with 300,000. And newly written on top of the display, in red paint, was “Wear a mask.”

DRAWING ON THE AVAILABLE EXPERTISE

At the time of the 2020 spring break pivot, Steve Haase, a biology professor, had been teaching his “Host-Pathogen Interactions” course. It quickly turned into a COVID-oriented course. To meet with me, he Zoomed in from what
he jokingly called his “man cave now turned into a nerd cave,” in rural Chatham County. Now and again in his remote location, he would temporarily exit the Zoomified work world to check on a henhouse full of chickens.

When I read a summary of Haase’s research, which focuses on biological clocks, I wondered how it might be tied to a COVID planning group—but, in fact, Haase’s expertise helped inform Duke’s pandemic-containment strategy. To make the connection clear, Haase gave me a mini lesson in “molecular biology 101,” as he put it. He researches what’s called gene expression. Gene expression refers to where and when genes are “turned on” or “turned off.” When a gene is on, it is transcribed into RNA molecules that are eventually translated into proteins—the workhorses of the cell. For Haase, measuring gene expression in the organisms that he works on means tracking thousands of specific RNAs. The tracking shows, over time, which genes are on, and which are off. How does that relate to COVID-19? It turns out that the COVID-19 genome (referring to a collection of genes) is RNA. So as students and others would get their nasal swabs, measuring the presence or absence of the coronavirus could be the same thing as measuring the presence or absence of RNA.

In biological-clock mechanisms, genes can turn each other on and off in succession. As Haase explained: “It’s similar to modeling how a virus spreads. It can go from one person to another to another, or from one to many, and that happens over time.” With COVID-19, he said, it’s all about preventing a brushfire—an isolated spark of transmission—from becoming a raging wildfire. His COVID-minded modeling team developed an “adaptive testing strategy.” The group examined testing data in real time. Based on what they saw, they would make adjustments so additional sampling at Duke could surround a “positive signal.” The igniting spark would not become a wildfire.

A couple of modeling initiatives responded to advice from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Early on, the CDC had recommended a fourteen-day quarantine period. Then it shifted the suggested time frame to ten days, or seven days with a negative test. Haase told me the shifting recommendations weren’t based on a lot of data; for one thing, the CDC was concerned that a fourteen-day stretch, even if medically defensible, might induce “quarantine fatigue.” So it seemed important to closely follow students who were being pulled into quarantine because they had presented symptoms, had tested positive even while being asymptomatic, or had been identified through contact tracing as potentially exposed. (Haase stressed that the Duke data were being collected in aggregate for this purpose, and student privacy
Better health through frequent testing.
Photo: Megan Mendenhall/Duke University.

was being protected.) “If the student becomes positive, over what time frame does that happen? How many students turn positive after fourteen days? After ten days? There’s never going to be a simple light switch. You don’t just turn off the quarantine after a set number of days with complete certainty.”

As the pandemic persisted, Haase remained interested in figuring out the optimal quarantine length for COVID-19 infections—especially on college campuses. Writing in the Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA) Network Open, Haase, along with research collaborators, looked at data from 301 students and staff at four universities, including Duke, between September 2020 and February 2021. At the time, the individuals were all unvaccinated and had all tested positive for COVID-19. They were tested throughout a ten- to fourteen-day quarantine; follow-up testing continued at least weekly throughout the academic year. A commitment to keeping transmission rates low, the study argued, would require different endpoints for a quarantine (and for testing). If the quarantine was restrictive, meaning designated housing with a private room, a good time frame would be eight days. If it was nonrestrictive, which might include interactions with household members, a good time frame would be ten days.
Then, in the *JAMA Health Forum*, Haase and collaborators anticipated the arrival of vaccines and the opening of the 2021–2022 academic year. The aim there was to evaluate the use of surveillance testing and quarantine in a fully vaccinated student population—like Duke’s—"for whom vaccine effectiveness may be affected by the type of vaccination, presence of variants, and loss of vaccine-induced or natural immunity over time." An elaborate simulation study, factoring in everything from the frequency of surveillance tests to the number of contacts associated with positive cases, produced a clear conclusion: Even with universal vaccination, surveillance testing and quarantine would remain “important mitigation strategies” on campuses. Which was the formula that Duke would follow.

A big part of the testing story at Duke was the role played by Tom Denny, a professor of medicine and chief operating officer of Duke’s Human Vaccine Institute. “My biggest fear throughout the fall [2020] semester,” he told me early in the pandemic, “was that my team would get infected, and we’d lose the ability to keep operating.” So his team would grab the vaccine as soon as it was available.

He and his colleagues had seen previous episodes of infectious outbreaks: the version of SARS (severe acute respiratory syndrome) that appeared in 2002, H1N1 in 2009, both of which were relatively quickly contained. This was something else. “We had been down this road before, but the road was never this unpredictable.” For the institute, adjusting to the COVID-19 reality started with a clinical interest: mapping out the immune responses of people who had been infected. Could you discern in detail the body’s own campaign against a coronavirus assault? If so, you’ve traveled some distance in engineering the sort of countermeasures that might turn back an infection, or protect against an infection.

Attacking the disease—and in our conversation, Denny reached for a war-fighting analogy around the coronavirus—was one dimension of the institute’s work. As infection rates started going up everywhere, Denny and colleagues started to focus on a long-recognized prevention strategy: More testing would mean fewer infections. That was true, broadly speaking, and also in the context of the campus population. “We knew we would have to do a lot of testing to contain the spread—to identify who was positive for the virus early on, and then to pull them out in order not to create new transmissions,” Denny told me.

University leaders saw the big role of the Human Vaccine Institute in making that happen; they moved quickly to allow it to build up its infrastructure.
Students would be tested twice a week. And a few weeks into the fall semester, Denny would be regularly spending his early morning hours sifting through information from the previous night: results from about 2,600 daily tests through the fall of 2020, and eventually, 3,200 tests.

Denny had started his career in the early days of HIV, some thirty-five years before COVID-19. With COVID-19, he said, “We saw many of the same challenges. There were a lot of people infected by a new pathogen we didn’t know a lot about, and we needed a lot of resources to do the testing.” Those resources included the reagents, test tubes, and other supplies needed to carry out the testing; as the virus spread globally, Denny had concerns about whether the supply chain would hold up or be stressed to the point of collapse. They also included much of what was already in place at the institute, like robots that could be reprogrammed from HIV-related work. The new robotic assignment would be to take the daily samples and, in just three hours, make them into pools of five. (Even with the robots, the institute would end up hiring staff for three essentially around-the-clock shifts.)

What did pooling, now with the help of robots, mean? Denny explained the concept to me: “Imagine doing fifty thousand tests on individuals. That would cost you a lot of money, and it would grab up lots of supplies. Imagine, then, combining samples so that you’re left with just five thousand tests. You’re cutting down on a lot of expenses, you’re cutting down on the precious reagents required for the testing, and also, typically, you’re managing to test in a faster way.”

As he helped Duke work up its testing plan, Denny realized that speedy results would be important. “When you’re doing surveillance testing, you want to get it done so it has an impact on preventing a spread. If it’s taking three days to get the results, you have people who, unknowingly, are positive but are still walking around. They’re potentially acting as spreaders.” Denny’s team managed a turnaround time of twenty-four to thirty hours between grabbing a sample and analyzing it. They had looked at pooling five, fifteen, or twenty samples. Five would provide an especially high level of sensitivity; that became the standard at Duke. But if the infection rate were to rise, the frequency of testing of students and the number of samples batched together would both be ramped up.

The basic rule of pool testing is that if the batch tests negative, it will be put aside. If a positive test emerges, the individual specimens are flagged for follow-up testing—a process of shifting from the macro to the micro, or, as medical experts refer to it, “deconvolution.” From there, the infected
individual—now with a “medically actionable diagnosis,” in Denny’s words—would be contacted by Student Health or Employee Health.

Denny’s team was looking to vanquish the virus in lots of ways. One example: Their assays, or virus-assessing procedures, allowed them to figure out exactly how much virus was carried by a particular student. Such a finding, in turn, would have a lot to do with how the student, if symptomatic, would respond to treatment and how likely the student would be to infect others. If a student was found to be carrying a high viral load, then, a lot of contact-tracing energy could go into figuring out the web of recent interactions.

Contact tracing had become the domain of Laura Andrews, associate dean of students. Every week during the 2020 fall semester, she told me, fifteen to twenty student cases would be identified; typically each case involved tracking down three or four contacts. Ever since the surfacing of the pandemic, Duke’s Employee Health division had found itself in the contact-tracing business. During the previous summer, contact tracing was extended to the student athletes, who had made an early return to campus as team practices kicked in. So a template was in place.

Along with Andrews, some colleagues from her Student Affairs division would be redeployed to help out. Volunteers were drawn from other areas, particularly areas whose work had been dampened by the pandemic, like the groups that plan campus conferences and events. One fruitful source of volunteers was Duke’s Osher Lifelong Learning Institute (now interrupted), which offers continuing-education classes for retirees, many of them Duke-connected.

When a student tested positive through a COVID-19 test, a Student Health staff member would call to let him or her know the result, to talk about what isolation would look like, and to provide word that a contact tracer would be in touch. The contact tracer would follow up with questions about the student’s recent activities and behavior around those activities: whether people were together for, say, more than fifteen minutes; whether mask wearing and social distancing were prevalent; whether they were congregating inside or outside. Contact tracers were trained to turn students into storytellers around their college lives, since important details might not surface otherwise. As Andrews explained: “We try to orient people in space and time. So, take me through your breakfast, take me through your lunch. How about the collateral information that you may have access to? Can you pull up your texts, or your calendar, or your financial transactions?”
Or, with fuzzy memories, chart out their use of the ubiquitous DukeCard, the ticket for everything to food purchases to entry to campus buildings.

"Our first resort," Andrews said, "always is to build rapport with the student, to help them understand that this is confidential, to make them feel confident that what they are sharing with us is going to the right place. We know that this is a really vulnerable time for students, a really scary time for them." Sometimes, though, they would have to be nudged when they were asymptomatic—when they were showing no symptoms, felt perfectly fine, and wondered if something was off with the test.

Usually students were “super helpful in giving accurate information,” Andrews told me. They were also super interested in reaching out, at their own initiative, to those who were potentially exposed. (Contact tracers would discuss the circumstances of the exposure; they would not reveal the name of the likely source of exposure.) Andrews estimated that some 95 percent of the fall semester students whom Duke brought into quarantine had learned of their exposure before getting the official word. “We tell them that giving us the correct information, honest information, means we have the opportunity to prevent a spread, that they’re doing a favor to people they may have exposed unknowingly. Also, our contact tracers have turned out to be amazing COVID detectives.”

From multiple interviews, they could figure out, for example, that stories weren’t lining up around whether students had dropped in on a party that turned into a spreader event. Choosing not to reveal relevant information could be grounds for a student-conduct investigation. But information they did choose to reveal would not get them into trouble, even if that behavior violated student-conduct standards.

Students with some degree of a viral encounter might find themselves segmented, for a time, from their peers. In line with that development, I learned some new vocabulary peculiar to the pandemic. Quarantine locations were meant for students who had symptoms or were awaiting a COVID-19 test result, or had known COVID-19 exposure. Isolation locations were meant for students who tested positive for the virus. (Those campus terms in other contexts were used interchangeably.) If a student was in a quarantine location and tested positive, he or she might need to be moved to an isolation location.

In either spot, such students would be cared for by the Isolation Care Team (ICT), which sounded either corporate or icky, or both. Awkward abbreviations aside, the team had a caring, and a sizable, portfolio. It would, for starters, arrange shuttles through a private van service, each van being outfit-
ted with “special isolation barriers for your protection,” and with its driver committed to following “all sanitization guidelines” from one transported student to the next. Among its other tasks were handling the temporary housing and dining, and checking in with their charges by phone, text, and email as well as periodically on-site.

Marcy Edenfield headed ICT, a departure from her “real” Duke job as senior director of venue and production management. (Her group would continue a version of its customary work by producing pandemic-time virtual performances; they included a couple of student theater productions livestreamed but staged without an on-site audience.) Still, she told me, the skills that she and her team of twenty or so had developed over the years were relevant with this new reality. And most on her team, with such titles as director of ticketing and senior production technician, were redeployed with her. Experience in areas like procurement, project management, the efficient running of a complex enterprise, and communicating with customers all “transferred perfectly” to this new project. Another experience that proved to be useful was de-escalation. Edenfield’s venue-management colleagues had been trained in de-escalation, since, as she noted, “Events can be wonderful, but you have to maintain control of the crowd.”

For the students—having themselves and their dorm stuff uprooted, knowing they had to be alone for ten days—it was physically and emotionally exhausting. “Some were okay. Some were devastated. Others were angry. Trying to address all those things at the same time was really hard. There were definitely bad days and low points for us.” The vast majority of the students with whom her team engaged were asymptomatic. So the need to isolate or quarantine “was a surprise, certainly not something expected by them.” As her dining vendor would observe, none of the students in isolation or quarantine was having a great day. Everyone’s job came down to making things a little bit better for them.

While students responded in different ways, worried moms and dads needed to be assured that their children were being cared for, whether that meant providing emotional support or providing medications. “The biggest challenge for us was that no two cases or no two students were the same,” Edenfield said. “I kept trying to imagine if I had to watch my child go through this, what would I hope to see?”

The quarantined students were sent to one of two locations: the Avana, an apartment complex five miles from campus, and the Lodge, near Duke’s medical center. Both were operated by the university. Two students, one confined to the Avana and the other to the Lodge, had some quarantine-related
reflections in the Chronicle—thoughts that were fixated on food. “I opened my fridge before every Zoom class for a snack because, honestly, why not? It’s free food and I’m a college student,” one of them, Jocelyn Chin, recalled. “After getting tested (ouch, my right nostril), being driven back to [the hotel], and taking a bath while listening to a podcast about the end of the American Empire, I picked up my dinner from the large meal box next to the stocked refrigerators on the first floor. I ate dinner while sitting in my two-and-a-half-hour philosophy lecture, during which I received an email informing me… I tested negative!”

Ben Wallace, isolated for four days in the other hotel, was a viral sensation, in social media terms—37,800 likes and 455 comments—for sharing a montage of the food Duke provided him. “NYU students were using TikTok to show how their boxed meals were screwed up. Someone who was supposed to get a Caesar salad instead got a box with a packet of balsamic vinaigrette and a bag of chips. That’s not a meal at all.” Wallace, who said he appreciated the contactless delivery of his food, posted his own quarantine diet on his TikTok account. Breakfast was an RX bar and a banana bread muffin; lunch was a veggie and hummus wrap; dinner was a black bean burger with French fries. All washed down with Fiji water.

ICT did a lot of its communicating with students, shut off as they were, over email or by phone. And even with that remote form of communicating, along with those occasional tough moments, some close relationships developed. Some students stayed in touch with caring-team contacts. A few of them would be hired for university box-office work when the box office, part of Edenfield’s normal oversight, returned in the fall of 2021.

By that time, the campus seemed to be committed to a routine—face masks remaining a wardrobe necessity—though with the expectation that such measures soon would be in the realm of memories rather than mandates. Or so it seemed, until Omicron, a super infectious strain, arrived. On the last day of 2021, a message went out to students about the “disappointing reality that requires us to once again revise our plans.” A few days earlier, North Carolina had reported the highest daily number of new COVID-19 cases since the beginning of the pandemic, representing a 60 percent jump over the previous one-day record. “We have also observed an incredibly high number of positive cases across our workforce this week, and increasing numbers among students who are already here in Durham.”

With that array of bad news, all classes would be remote through the second week of the 2022 spring semester; likewise, at the start of the semester, on-campus dining would be grab-and-go. Students would be “strongly
encouraged to delay their return to campus.” The idea was, as always, to limit the spread of infections, and also, given the dimensions of the spread, to avoid overburdening the university’s testing infrastructure.

The seesawing prompted mixed reactions. In the *Chronicle*, one faculty member, public policy professor David Schanzer, observed that “Duke is allowing high-risk activities,” notably having students show up for basketball games, “but then barring until January 18 the main reason students are here on campus—which is to engage in the very low-risk activity of attending in-person classes. How does this make sense?” Let’s learn to live with this, he wrote. “Let’s get back to class.” Showing, in the same forum, a different perspective on pandemic matters, law professor James Boyle complained that the university was wrong to be having spectators flock to basketball games and to be pushing people back into classrooms. All of that, he suggested, might contribute to the spread of the virus and so increase the pressure on the university’s own health system. Duke was operating through “an opaque decision making process,” in his view, “with an inadequate exemption procedure that fails to protect all of the vulnerable members of our community and their kids.”

From January 3 to January 9, 2022, with its start-of-semester entry tests, Duke reported 871 cases among students, faculty, and staff—a 2,710 percent increase from the period from December 6 to 12, the last week Duke had reported test results. The positivity rate was 5.88 percent. For four weeks in a row, the active cases topped seven hundred; the positivity rate hovered just below 5 percent. Duke’s contact tracing went away. The numbers were too large and the spread too rampant. Denny, the leader of the university’s testing effort, noted that pooling would no longer work efficiently when around 5 percent of the samples were positive. At that point, the testing team would have to break up pools and retest the samples individually. Denny told me that throughout January his team was running twenty to twenty-two hours a day to manage the testing.

As a feature of the new semester, the university was distributing KN95 masks. They were designed to capture smaller particles than the familiar cloth masks, including the Duke-brand blue mask to which I had grown quite attached because, after all, it was frequently attached to my face. The upgraded masking recommendation was one feature of a January presentation by Kyle Cavanaugh, the administrator now seasoned in coordinating the university’s coronavirus response. For all the sobering statistics around Omicron, Cavanaugh told Duke’s faculty senate, the Academic Council, that not a single student or faculty or staff member had been hospitalized
with the new strain. The vast majority of those infected—all of them fully vaccinated—had been asymptomatic.

Later in the semester, a Chronicle editorial asked, “Should Duke continue to test asymptomatic individuals, or should the university approach COVID-19 as an endemic virus?” The editorial referred to the resources that continued to be dedicated to widespread testing, along with the relatively mild nature of Omicron for those who were vaccinated. The Duke community “has some soul-searching to do as we transition to exiting this pandemic and prepare for life with in-person classes without this all-dominating virus.”

Just before spring break, it seemed that a threshold had at last been crossed. According to another announcement from the administration, beginning later in March: “Required surveillance testing for asymptomatic vaccinated students will end. Surveillance testing will continue at a limited number of sites across campus for unvaccinated students, staff, and faculty who are required to test each week, as well as those who wish to do so voluntarily.” The announcement recapped recent history. Duke had launched surveillance testing in August 2020. “Since then, more than 1.2 million COVID-19 tests have been administered and processed by the Duke Human Vaccine Institute. This extraordinary effort allowed Duke to quickly return to a residential experience and in-person instruction, and protected the health and safety of our community.”

WE'RE ALL IN THIS TOGETHER

The safety demands of several semesters in a pandemic brought concerted efforts to build up, or appeal to, a campus culture. I talked about that with Gary Bennett, Duke’s vice provost for undergraduate education. Also a professor of psychology and neuroscience and a clinical psychologist, he reminded me that he was normally teaching two courses relevant to campus life in a pandemic: “Public Health Communication” and “Changing Health Behaviors.” Duke’s “messaging” to students, he said, relied a lot on principles that came from behavioral medicine. One fundamental principle: Don’t expect behavior to switch with a simple prompt, as in, I was bad. Now I’m going to be good. “If you’re just trying to force people into a behavior change, they’re either going to reject the message or make a change that’s short-term. There are many examples where that kind of messaging has gone wrong.”

So there was a lot embedded in Duke’s emailed updates for students: Recognition that none of this was proving to be normal or easy, and that the push would be to educate students rather than to punish them. Transpar-
ency about the decision making, including clarity about the rationale for whatever was being asked of students. An overall tone of support, backed up with information about the skills students would need in managing a changed reality. (Though the tone would sharpen when the overall good behavior appeared shaky.)

Before they could come to campus, students had to sign a code-of-conduct pledge. Through the Duke Compact, they committed themselves to monitoring their symptoms daily; wearing face masks—distributed widely around the university and produced in the deep-blue color that was identifiably Duke blue—in all public spaces; maintaining appropriate physical distance; avoiding large gatherings; honoring travel restrictions; staying home if feeling ill; participating in contact tracing; and, if needed, self-isolating. (“By agreeing to this Duke Compact, I pledge to be personally responsible and accountable.”)

The Duke Compact had a soft-enforcement mechanism: a volunteer team of employees that roamed the campus Wednesday through Saturday, morning, evening, and nighttime, whenever students might be out and about and, in some fashion, socializing. That was the C-Team, for Care and Compassion. I searched the Duke website for that curious term and came up with an amusingly unrelated analysis from Duke Corporate Education: “How to Make Your C-Suite into a World-Class Team.” Interesting, but not as interesting
as the informal campus patrol squad. In their four-hour shifts, someone calculated, team members registered about twenty thousand steps on campus. They worked in pairs, first assembling at the University Center Activities and Events Office—appropriate if somewhat ironic, since there were basically no activities or events on campus. They then fanned out to encourage mask wearing and, of course, physical distancing as well. Sometimes they did a little rearranging, as when groups of Adirondack chairs in a dorm courtyard had been too closely packed together. As they came upon congregating students, they’d make comments like, “We all want to do what’s best so Duke can stay open.” Team members said they wanted to support doing the right thing, favoring encouragement over admonishment.

A Duke Magazine writer recorded an exchange that modeled gentle persuasion; it was between a C-Team pair and three students enjoying lunch in one of those courtyards, on West Campus. (One resident adviser had summoned the team over concerns about a video-game tournament in a dorm lounge. When the roving team diverted from their path and arrived to check, thereby upping their count of twenty thousand steps across campus, all the students were keeping their distance and had masks on.) “Hey, friends?” called out one of the pair, who happened to be a dean. “If you’re done eating, can I ask you to put your masks back on?” Three masks went back on. As a member of a different C-Team contingent told me, “It’s amazing how many students would suddenly remember to pull their masks up as soon as a C-Team member approached.”

To lessen the intimidation factor, C-Team people sometimes wore a sort of identifying uniform: T-shirts with endearing animal images, designed to appeal to student attachments and also to reinforce the familiar messaging. Proper social distancing was the equivalent of two Nuggets (Nugget being a dog popular on campus), four Peaches (Peaches being a cat popular on campus), and ten campus squirrels (squirrels being an ever-present source of distraction on campus). And they were big on handing out rewards for good behavior, notably, free smoothies from a campus eatery, as well as face masks—an always appropriate clothing item. One team member apologized for slowing down a student runner—conscientiously masked for the run—to hand her a coupon. “How many miles?” he asked her, as she thanked him and set off again.

While it wasn’t quite the viral phenomenon of the library’s “Viral Take-out,” a song, a rallying cry in rap form, did emerge from the wanderings of the C-Team. Duke’s Muslim chaplain, Joshua Salaam, was the creator; the announcement of his hiring a few years earlier pointed to his record not only
in working with Muslim youth, but also as a hip-hop and rhythm-and-blues artist. The rap went as follows: "Who needs a mask? / I got a mask. / I'm going to give it to you. / You don't even have to ask. / Don't hesitate, because COVID is fast. / Duke's gonna make Corona a thing of the past."

Duke's efforts to contain COVID-19, very much a thing of the present, became the subject of a study from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Published in the fall of 2020 in the CDC's Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report, and based on the work of Duke researchers, it highlighted two of the main strands of Duke's strategy: widespread testing of students, and the pooled-testing approach for identifying infections. Through the length of the study (August to October), just eighty-four student cases had emerged, with 51 percent asymptomatic—that is, showing no symptoms but infected, and capable of infecting others, just the same.

For all of its early success, Duke, even before the Omicron wave, wasn't immune to setbacks. At one point, an apparent threat to campus health highlighted an older concern, about the health of the campus social system. Near the midpoint of the 2021 spring semester, in early March, officials wrote students about "a noticeable one-week increase in positive COVID tests." Most of the students had attended unmasked off-campus gatherings or had traveled; most were males and first-years. From contact tracers had come word that more students were failing to disclose relevant information. At the same time, the surveillance and Student Health teams were reporting "a trend in which students—later determined to be COVID-positive—are experiencing symptoms but not reporting these" on the symptom-monitoring app. "So many of you are working diligently to protect your health and that of our community," the message concluded. "It's urgent that we keep this up through the rest of the semester."

A few days later, undergraduates learned from the latest "Dear Students" mass email that they would be required to stay in place for a week. It was a turnabout that became big news for outlets ranging from the local media—always fixated on Duke doings—to CNN and NPR. Over the past week, more than 180 students had been put in isolation for a positive COVID-19 test; an additional 200 had been asked to quarantine as a result of contact tracing. That was by far the largest one-week number of positive tests and quarantines since the start of the pandemic. For their part, university officials emphasized that short of a testing regimen designed to detect such an uptick, a wildfire-like spread might have been the consequence.

In-person courses, including lab classes, would shift to remote-only delivery. If they lived in Duke-provided housing, students would have to
remain in their room or apartment “at all times except for essential activities related to food, health, or safety.” The usual gathering spaces would only be open to residential students for essential activities, such as food pickup, and only during limited hours. “If this feels serious, it’s because it is,” concluded the statement. “The restriction of student movement—coupled with a renewed dedication to following social distancing, masking, symptom monitoring, and other public-health guidelines—gives us the best path toward curtailing further [infections]. Our ability to complete the semester, commencement for our seniors, and the health and safety of our community, including your fellow undergraduate students, is hanging in the balance. Now more than ever we need you to come together as a Duke community to meet this challenge together.”

COMMUNITY DIFFERENCES AND CONVERGENCES

Embedded in the stay-in-place order was some pretty specific assigning of blame for the rise in cases. Officials pointed to “unsanctioned fraternity recruitment events that took place off campus”—recruitment events (that is, parties) reflecting the decision of most fraternities to sever their ties with the university, or to “disaffiliate.” The breakaway fraternities had formed a new group called the Durham Interfraternity Council (IFC; an ironic nod to the existing Duke Interfraternity Council, and now, with this arrangement, avowedly Duke-free). And they began recruiting new members. A Student Affairs administrator told the Chronicle that the disaffiliated fraternities would no longer have access to university “funding, facilities, communications, housing, and direct advisement,” adding that “Duke students are still Duke students, which means that the members of these organizations are still expected to follow all Duke policies [and] procedures.”

Pegged as it was to fraternity parties, the lockdown sparked a “Sue Durham IFC” petition drive. “We are asking Duke University to sue Durham IFC for reckless endangerment of students, elderly faculty, staff, workers, and the Durham community at large,” according to the petition. “Their rush events have taken things from all of us—Duke basketball, freedom, sanity, health, etc.—as they selfishly host super-spreader events that can result in death. There is no excuse; it has been a full year—too long to not know the results of their actions. Their behavior is the product of generations of preferential treatment and freedom from consequences.”

Within a couple of days, more than fifteen hundred people, most identifying themselves as Duke students or recent graduates, had signed on. (An
earlier petition drive, targeting Duke’s fraternities and sororities as emblems of “a fundamentally broken system, made for white people and designed to propagate white supremacy,” had drawn a smaller response, though with some sharp commentary.)

Comments on the online petition ranged in tone from aggrieved to hard-hitting: “Would it be so hard to care about other people?” “I want graduation. Thank you.” “It seriously angers me that one valuable week is just gone because some boys decided they couldn’t wait to party and their membership in a historically rich, privileged, and white organization was more important than the health, safety, and lives of every single one of their peers.” “This is a pandemic. We are trying to have some sense of normalcy. Go to class. Safely and carefully see friends from time to time. Unfortunately fraternities have felt the need to put everyone at Duke at risk physically and end whatever was left of the school year by holding rush. This is not okay; it shows a sense of entitlement and brazen indecency.” “People are dying. And some of the most privileged people among us are still partying because they have no regard for others and are used to being absolved of all responsibility for their actions. Do better, Duke. Do better.”

With all the scrutiny, it was hard to document the long-term impact on Greek life—except that more and more, it was shifting off campus. Just over a year later, the Chronicle, in an editorial, observed that a neighborhood group had been campaigning to kick out fraternities—described as “a public nuisance”—from several houses they were occupying. The editorial faulted Duke’s administration for postponing the annual spring rush, which the groups rely on for membership and funding, from the spring of freshman year to the fall of sophomore year. It also noted that the administration had been gradually eliminating housing dedicated to Greek organizations and other so-called social-living groups. Then came the movement to disaffiliate. “No longer bound to Duke University’s policies and procedures, these organizations are free to behave and discipline based on their own judgment (or lack thereof).” The editorial was titled “Bring Frats Back to Campus.” That seemed unlikely to happen.

But the pandemic had coincided with, and made more urgent, a conversation about privilege. Student Heidi Smith wrote in the Chronicle that she had a hard time imagining how Duke life, particularly given the pandemic pressures, felt for financially disadvantaged students. She saw a message in other students wearing expensive Gucci sneakers, thinking nothing of flying home for a weekend break, grabbing an Uber instead of using the city-bus pass that the university made available, or skipping over Duke’s prepaid meal
plans in favor of frequent restaurant meals. In a presentation Zoomed into a Duke audience, Harvard economist Ray Chetty offered some statistical context to Smith’s concerns. He cited data showing the only 5 percent of Duke students come from the bottom 20 percent of income distribution, while 15 percent come from the top 1 percent.

On a Sunday, the first full day of the lockdown, I strolled the campus and came upon just a few students in random activities; a few were digging into boxed meals, outdoors, in nothing like close proximity to their peers. I did pass one fellow walker along Campus Drive, the main campus roadway. He was not wearing a mask and was smoking a cigarette, a posture that would have earned him a double penalty on Duke’s mask-minded, no-smoking campus. But he seemed too old to be a student. Just someone enjoying a quiet scene. After a week, the university reported “a significant decline” in case numbers, and it relaxed the lockdown.

In their update for students, officials essentially declared victory, and they spread the credit widely: “We’ve heard you clearly that you want to successfully complete the semester and to support our seniors on their way to graduation. Given the collective effort we’ve seen from you this week, we know these goals are within reach.” That word came days after a weather-related warning from the DukeAlert system: “A tornado has been sighted or radar indicates a thunderstorm circulation that can spawn a tornado in the area near Duke’s main campus in Durham.” Another signal—complete with wailing sirens—of an academic year disrupted.

Of course, the Duke community, whatever the socioeconomic circumstances it represents, exists in a larger community. The squabbling that gave rise to the Durham IFC was a reminder that whatever happened in one setting had reverberations in the other. One emblem of that interrelationship was Durham mayor (at the time) Steve Schewel, who earned his bachelor’s and PhD from Duke, taught in Duke’s Sanford School of Public Policy, and founded a local alternative weekly newspaper.

Through the depths of the pandemic, Schewel recorded video messages that registered a mix of concern and optimism. The first, a “Day Twenty-Nine” message in April 2020, came shortly after Schewel had declared a state of emergency for the city, closing theaters, recreation centers, and gathering places. Then came a stay-at-home order. “As a community, we are in pain,” he said; it all seemed “shocking, sudden, and scary.” At that point, Durham had lost its first life to the virus and 208 residents had been infected, 17 more than the day before. Thousands of Durhamites had lost their jobs and scores of businesses had closed their doors, some to never reopen.
Schewel acknowledged that the burden of COVID-19 was not equally shared, and that it fell particularly hard on communities of color and immigrants. Still, current infection rates put Durham in a much better place than North Carolina as a whole, in line with infection rates of South Korea, celebrated at the time as the country doing best at containing the virus.

By day fifty-seven, Schewel was highlighting “the suffering of our people,” including the emotional toll of isolation, loneliness, and loss. Thirty lives had been lost in Durham, with some 800 cases, including 180 from the federal prison at Butner. But because Durham residents had been following pandemic protocols, he said, the expected surge of cases had never come. At the same time, by enlisting local farmers and restaurant workers, the city was managing to provide some 80,000 meals a week to schoolchildren, along with 22,000 meals to adult members of their households. For all the good news, evidence of inequalities was inescapable: There were twice as many infections among Blacks as among whites, and the economic consequences were especially consequential for Blacks and Latinx.

Schewel’s seven-month update came in October, and he reported some 80,500 cases of the virus, nearly 100 lost lives, and especially distressing numbers from the Latinx community, which had accounted for 80 percent of the cases. (The case numbers reflected that community’s involvement in the construction trade, considered an essential industry that had to keep operating.) Schewel expressed concern for businesses just managing to hang on “through sheer grit and ingenuity,” and also for those facing evictions, with up to a third of Durham residents struggling to pay their rent. For him as a leader, “This virus is humbling,” he said. He added, “We’re going to get through this and build a stronger, more equitable city.”

I wanted to hear more about Durham, Duke, and pandemic-time safety, and I headed out to meet Schewel in his office—one of my few pandemic-time, in-person office meetings. That was in City Hall, which dates back to the 1970s and was memorably called, by a mayor of that era, “a pollutant to the visual environment of Durham.” It had been recently renovated. Schewel’s office had some memorabilia from Duke and Durham-based North Carolina Central University, along with assorted curiosities: championship rings from the Durham Bulls minor league club, a baseball cap with the USS Durham insignia, a collection of books ranging from The Facilitative Leader in City Hall to Welcome to the Bull City. Plus a couple of trinkets from Durham’s sister cities, such as an elaborately molded bottle, from the sister city in Romania, containing, Schewel assumed, some alcohol-based brew that he had resisted sampling.
Schewel told me that Duke and Durham have had “an incredibly important but also an ambivalent relationship to each other over the decades.” He pointed to “some real setbacks recently,” particularly a proposed regional light-rail system that, in the view of some, Schewel among them, the university helped derail. Still, he singled out Duke and the Duke Health System for its work during the pandemic. “One of the reasons our death rate in Durham is so low is the fact that Duke is giving great medical care,” he said. “That has made a real difference. You look at our death rate compared to other communities, compared to the national average, and we’re way better. I don’t give Duke all the credit. But I certainly give it some of the credit.”

Schewel added that Duke made several gestures that served as examples for the community to follow. One was the decision—dating all the way back to March 2020, as the pandemic was just setting in—to withdraw from the ACC basketball tournament. “That was nationally and locally a very significant moment in helping people see how serious this pandemic is, and what kinds of actions we were going to need to take as a society. When Duke pulls out of a basketball tournament, a lot of eyes are on that decision. A lot of people were paying attention who were not normally focused on issues of public health.”

Medical advice from Duke continued to inform the city’s decision making, Schewel said. From the beginning, that advice was crucial for Durham’s stay-at-home order, and then for a face-masking order—the first such order in the state. “The fact that Durham stepped out helped a lot of other cities step out. It also helped the governor step out.” Schewel brought in Katie Galbraith, president of Duke Regional Hospital (one of the health system’s three regional hospitals), to cochair a task force on Durham Recovery and Renewal. That task force, in turn, drew on the work of graduate students in Duke’s Sanford School of Public Policy. Breaking into ad hoc research teams, the students gathered data on everything from when, why, and how Durham residents were complying with public-health orders; to what models existed for opening up schools safely; to what vaccine-related messaging most effectively targeted minority communities.

And the city leaned on the behavioral science expertise of a Duke think tank that wryly calls itself the Center for Advanced Hindsight. The center helped build and promote a website, Back on the Bull, which included a running list of residents who took the pledge to do their part, and to share it with others: “I’m doing my part to help get back to the things I enjoy doing in the place I call home. I’ve committed to get vaccinated when it’s my turn, continue wearing a mask, and support local businesses responsibly.”
(There was an accompanying list of restaurants and other enterprises “committed to your health and safety.”) The website hosted short videos from community leaders who had joined the ranks of pledge takers, including Duke’s president, faith leaders, and Schewel. And it offered printable posters to promote shopping and dining, with messages harking back to rally-the-public efforts during wartime: “We Wear. We Care. Mask Required for Entry.” “Let’s Get Back on the Bull. Reopening the Right Way.” “The Road to Victory Is Six Feet Apart.”

Six feet apart was, of course, a recurring theme for Duke students. But did Schewel worry that some of those students might become viral spreaders? Just a week or so into Durham’s stay-at-home order, a resident sent him some unsettling, real-time images. Schewel hopped into his car and drove over to check out the activity. He came upon a keg party in the backyard of a home, not far from downtown Durham and Duke’s campus; it was a weekend afternoon. Nothing too wild, he said, but still in violation of the order, which limited the number of people clustered inside or outside. He announced himself as the mayor of Durham—not his usual style in making an entrance—and told the crowd, “There needs to be fewer of you, and you need to be further apart.” They apologized and complied with the request.

Even with a couple of well-publicized outbreaks, early concerns about the role of Duke students in community transmission never evolved into a big issue, Schewel told me. The university was seen (certainly by its own students) as making the pandemic a focus of community action, which helped manage community anxieties.
THE CAMPUS AS A SPACE FOR INDIVIDUAL WELL-BEING

IN A CHRONICLE COLUMN near the start of a new semester (the fall of 2021), Jules Kourelakos wrote about the “duck syndrome.” Addressing his fellow students, he observed: “You’ve probably got a lot in common with the average duck: calm and effortless looking from the outside, yet paddling furiously under the surface to keep your head above water. Between classes, jobs, and extracurricular commitments, the work just keeps coming and coming—yet we go out with our friends on Friday night, smiling, pretending we aren’t running on the fumes of Thursday’s all-nighter.”

With the pandemic, those classes, jobs, and extracurricular commitments felt very different. And the pressure to keep going, to keep paddling through all the uncertainty, was more intense than ever.

STUDENTS UNDER STRESS

Duke sent out early gestures of caring about its students, some of those gestures responding to pandemic-related financial pressures. A student assistance fund eventually distributed 5,534 grants totaling over $5 million to 2,662 students (some students received multiple grants). Those grants covered a range of learning-related needs: travel expenses for students to re-
turn home; rent in Durham for international students who were stranded because of travel restrictions; support for international students who, eventually, would get back to their home countries but were facing unexpected costs, including hotel charges that popped up with the need to quarantine; housing, food, and utility expenses for students whose personal or family incomes were severely affected by the pandemic; emergency medical bills and medical insurance premiums; funding for internet services; replacement of textbooks that were left in dorm rooms.

That assistance fund, meant for students at every level of study, extended from April to August 2020—the initial pivot period. As the 2020–2021 academic year approached, Duke’s Karsh Office of Undergraduate Financial Support reached out to undergraduates specifically. If they had “experienced an income reduction or job loss as a result of COVID-19,” they were invited to “apply for a reconsideration of your Duke financial aid.” The university ended up providing additional aid to more than two hundred students, totaling over $2 million.

Meanwhile, the graduate school was allowing PhD students to apply for extensions to their standard funding package. In normal times, the graduate school guarantees coverage of tuition and mandatory fees in years one to five. In light of COVID-19, the school announced, students whose progress was seriously affected could apply for an extension in stipend for year six. For both the summers of 2020 and 2021, similarly complicated by the pandemic, the graduate school identified funding and employment opportunities that drew large numbers of PhD students. (For that first summer, it guaranteed such an opportunity for every PhD student who sought it, including those past their sixth year.) Also for both summers, it offered career-enhancing “Graduate Academy” mini courses, like “Online College Teaching,” “Teaching with Digital Archives,” “Digital Humanities: Working with Text,” and “Communicating Your Research to Non-experts.”

The graduate school reaffirmed a commitment to “a supportive and actively inclusive climate,” “excellent mentoring and advising,” and “accessible mental-health services.” And it provided a pressure-relieving message: “We will continue to urge flexibility in deadlines and modes of achieving key milestones, such as preliminary examinations, and PhD students with teaching responsibilities will have a choice about their teaching modality during the pandemic, given health and safety concerns.”

There was another concern felt university-wide: Would the new, pandemic-inspired way of delivering classes compromise the ages-old
dynamic between teacher and student? Like many of his fellow instructors, Sönke Johnsen, the professor who brought his biology class to the gardens, scheduled individual meetings to learn more about his students and to make sure they were okay. Students were being challenged not just by the pandemic and associated economic issues, he told me, but also by the national election in the fall of 2020. Early in the semester, a vote among the students brought the outcome of canceling class the week of the election, especially since the class meeting fell on Election Day itself. As the election approached and stress intensified, Johnsen also cut back on homework assignments.

Several students told me that the Johnsen course, in the real space of the gardens, was irresistible, and that a professor who so obviously paid attention to their well-being was vital to keeping them on track. One of them, Mayra Navarro, explained that all her other classes were over Zoom or asynchronous, meaning that students could tap into prerecorded lectures according to their own schedules. Convenient, but convenience isn’t everything. Not moving from her chair and desk, and watching her classmates just through their Zoom squares (“if they had their camera on”) was fatiguing, she said. Sure, the class had its challenges, even in the general quiet of the gardens: rumblings from the campus buses that ran alongside the gardens; the chopping of Duke’s medical helicopter, which would take off and land from the nearby hospital. But those interruptions were altogether more tolerable—more natural—than “hearing classmates without having them unmute themselves.”

Back in April 2020, Navarro had been sick with COVID-19—a circumstance that made human-to-human contact, even contact filtered by face masks, seem especially meaningful: “Although I consider myself an introvert, having to self-isolate in my bedroom for two weeks has definitely made me crave more safe, in-person interactions after recovering. The power of simply being able to be safely around people in person is incredibly reassuring and healing. The feeling I had when I was finally able to join my family at the dinner table after recovering from COVID-19 is the same feeling I had when I came to class—a calmness in the presence of other living, breathing, three-dimensional people.” The in-person gatherings in the gardens, she said, “contributed greatly to my ability to stay positive, motivated, and connected this semester.”

But it was no easy semester for most students to stay positive, motivated, and connected. That was the case even for those like Navarro who, in a manner of speaking, were experiencing the campus. For one thing, it was a com-
pressed semester. Classes started in mid-August and ended before Thanksgiving; if those classes drove toward a “normal” semester’s workload, the workload over the compressed schedule might have felt heftier than normal. Also, there was no official fall semester break. (One of the professors whose course I was Zooming into, along with others I heard about, would manage to carve out unofficial versions of a break.)

One possible consequence of the pressures of keeping up with courses online (along with the absence of many of the usual extracurricular outlets) was a spike in academic-misconduct cases. By the end of the fall semester, Duke’s Office of Student Conduct and Community Standards would receive 243 reports of academic misconduct; the equivalent caseload from the previous year was 89. Most of the cases involved “unauthorized collaboration.”

With the end of the 2020–2021 academic year, the same office sent a “Year in Review” report to students: “As you can see in the overview shared here, this year was a particularly unique year due to COVID-19 and the associated conduct implications. Although there was a significant increase in the volume of cases and resolutions issued, the majority of these cases were related to COVID, and most matters were resolved with educational, developmental, and reflective conversations.” Those conversations fed off 390 “academic” incidents, 16 “bias” incidents, and 1,703 incidents tied to COVID-related rules.

The Chronicle, the student newspaper, was interested in the implications of the “academic” category. Its reporting referred to online sites like Chegg, a self-advertised homework help site, though one that boasts its own version of an anticheating “honor code.” Critiques of Chegg underscored problematic aspects of an online learning environment: posting exam questions for others to download and collaborating with peers during quizzes, lab write-ups, or tests. In February 2021, the International Journal for Educational Integrity published a study focusing on the use of Chegg in five STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) subjects. The study showed that “contract cheating requests”—requests for homework or exam help channeled to third parties—could be “put live and answered within the short duration of an examination.” Student requests posted for the five subjects increased by almost 200 percent from April to August 2020, compared with the same stretch a year earlier. The increase corresponded with “the time when many courses moved to be delivered and assessed online,” said the study’s authors. “The growing number of requests indicates that students
are using Chegg for assessment and exam help frequently and in a way that is not considered permissible by universities.”

Beyond a pandemic year, would campuses be right sized in terms of educational integrity? Maybe. As the Chronicle reported, “Some professors think that reducing student stress is essential for reversing the trend.”

If there was any single group of stressed-out students, that would likely be the internationals. An analysis in the Wall Street Journal highlighted “a chaotic spring and summer for foreign students and the colleges and universities they planned to attend.” In early July 2020, during that chaotic summer, Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) announced a policy shift. International students attending schools with online-only instruction would not be permitted to remain in the United States. They would have to either leave the country or transfer to a college or a university committed, even in pandemic circumstances, to in-person instruction. A lawsuit, initiated by Harvard and MIT, followed; it claimed that the directive had “thrown colleges and universities across the country into confusion—and our students and prospective students as well.” Duke joined fifty-eight other institutions in filing an amicus brief. ICE then backed away from the changes. Through all of the mixed signals, US consulates around the world had been sending a consistent signal, one certain to discourage international students. They had paused nearly all routine visa processing. Students wouldn’t be able to schedule the in-person interviews required for a visa.

In the Journal article, Ted Mitchell, president of the American Council on Education, pointed not just to the pandemic reality, but to the political reality as well. Well before the pandemic struck, he said, “a climate of harsh rhetoric on immigration and concrete actions taken by the Trump administration, such as the travel ban and slower visa-processing times,” had served to drive down international enrollment. The United States, long the dominant nation in drawing students from across the globe, was no longer a welcoming place.

I was introduced to Axelle Miel, a first-year Duke student from the Philippines. Her story in many ways was typical of Duke’s international cohort. She was drawn to Duke by the curriculum in public policy and, more broadly, by a curriculum-planning freedom that she would not have found as a university student in the Philippines. The opportunity to continue her violin lessons was also important, as was the assurance that her financial need would be fully met. Before applying, she had never visited the campus in person, though she did research its academic offerings deeply, and she plugged into a few video blogs by current students.
As I Zoomed with her, I noticed her very Duke-style Zoom backdrop, with “Duke” repeated in the official type style and with lots of blue. At that point, she was conceiving a self-designed major that would focus on music and other cultural expressions as contributors to economic development. “I really wanted to be on campus for the fall, despite the pandemic being at its peak,” she told me. But the US consulate in her home city of Cebu was largely shut down during the summer months, so for a visa appointment, she would have to travel by plane to the capital of Manila. Travel within the Philippines was severely restricted and involved all sorts of medical clearances; on top of that, her visa appointment was postponed several times. She finally got her visa approved in late October. “But by then, the semester was almost over.”

During the fall 2020 semester, then, Miel studied remotely from Cebu, the oldest city and the first capital of the Philippines. (She told me that “99 percent of the time,” US and other universities outside the Philippines wouldn’t look beyond students from well-resourced, internationally oriented high schools in Manila. She had sought out the only international school in Cebu that offered the International Baccalaureate Diploma Program.) “Online classes surprisingly turned out to be not so bad for me in terms of time management—my time zone was twelve hours ahead of North Carolina.” Most of her classes were at half past eight o’clock or a quarter after ten o’clock in the morning, eastern standard time, so she just had to stay up a little bit later than usual. “The real challenges lay in the Wi-Fi and socializing. Because I had a really poor connection, I would get kicked out of Zoom in almost every class I attended. It was very frustrating.” Most of her campus-based club meetings and social events were held between four o’clock in the afternoon and eight o’clock in the evening (EST), which, for her, was between four o’clock and eight o’clock in the morning. So internet connections aside, campus life in a virtual setting was a challenge.

With her visa in hand, Miel managed to travel to Duke for the spring semester. She reflected on life on an actual campus with that first-year effusiveness: “It is just so surreal to be surrounded with people who are doing incredible things and be supported by professors who want to see you succeed.”

After years of fast-paced growth in that population, with 2020–2021, Duke saw its international enrollment (defined as non-US citizens) drop dramatically. Among first-year undergrads in the fall of 2020, there were ninety-nine international students. That was down from 161 the previous year. In the fall of 2021, the number ramped up to 175.
NEED A FRIEND?

For students on campus during the “de-densified” fall, a consistent theme was the set of complications around peer interactions. A resident adviser in a first-year dorm mentioned coming across a note on a dorm bulletin board. If you need a friend, the note read, here’s a student ready for a college friendship. The name and a phone number were provided. (That account brought to mind those classified ads, pitched to a different demographic but still pandemic sensitive, in the New York Review of Books: “A year in lockdown . . . no more! I’ve had my shots. Ready to roar.” Or, “Ivy-educated, antibody-positive millennial classicist available for intergenerational adventures and errands in NYC.”) The resident adviser said he was happy to see the reaching out for a social connection—“perhaps the most essential aspect of a Duke experience”—but unsettled by the awkwardness of the approach. He also referred to “the sheer number of first-year students” who, as they arrived on campus, “seemed overly elated to meet me. I was likely one of the first nonfamily people who those first-years had interacted with for about five months.”

In a Zoom call with me, one of those first-years, who seemed enthusiastic about all things Duke, went on about how awesome it was to be doing the college thing. I asked him how he was making friends. He did have some college friends, he said. But then he offered this: He had never seen some of those friends without everyone being socially distanced and face masked. With the return of normal life, whenever that might be, he wasn’t at all sure he would recognize them.

Maybe the sense of a misshapen social environment explained the burst of popularity around the so-called Duke Marriage Pact; when it was offered as a thing, more than 4,500 students quickly signed on to try to find their perfect match. Coming out of Stanford a few years earlier, Marriage Pact was brought to Duke by the student government. It had students fill out fifty questions about their preferences and values—political affiliations and religious leanings, and also responses to questions like “How kinky do you like your sex?” and “Are you comfortable with your child being gay?” From the responses, students would be given a (presumably) compatible match as a romantic partner. “Between a global pandemic, panic-buying toilet paper, and revolts against the government, it often feels as if we are already living in a dystopia,” observed Chronicle columnist Yumi Tsuyuki. “For the Duke community, the pact has largely been an entertaining social experiment to meet more people in a year where socialization is painfully restricted.”

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The first-year student on the Zoom call with me, like most of his peers, was taking most of his courses over Zoom. In the student universe, “Zoom fatigue” became a common expression. I found a scholarly take on those concerns through Edna Andrews, a Duke professor of Slavic and Eurasian studies, who shared her paper with me that appeared in *Glossos*, a journal of languages and linguistics published by Duke University. After classes were pushed online the previous (2020) spring semester, she had interviewed a group of students and faculty at Duke and neighboring institutions. Comments from both groups, she wrote, drifted a bit into positive territory but a lot into negative territory: initial expectations of failure and disaster; extraordinary relief at the end of the semester and a sense that the experience ended better than anticipated; a deeper appreciation of the face-to-face classroom experience; a lament that everything took three or four times longer to do in the disembodied context; a desire not to ever teach or learn this way again.

She wondered, Why did students and faculty alike fail to embrace remote teaching and learning as a preferred form of interaction? “It is not unusual for many students (and even faculty) to spend lots of time in virtual chats, email and texting, Facetime, WhatsApp, games, etc. These are not people who lack experience in online, web-based enterprises. Why did it take so much more energy and concentration?”
Surveying a lot of relevant scholarship, Andrews concluded that distance learning feels “impoverished”; it can only approximate the “multidimensional factors and functions” in face-to-face interactions. For one thing, learning by Zoom complicates community building, which relies on well-understood rules of behavior and a shared sense of responsibility. It also inhibits social intelligence, defined as the ability to perceive and anticipate the intentions of others.

Over the summer of 2020, Duke’s Office of Assessment conducted a student survey, followed by focus groups, that was meant to guide faculty in their fall semester planning. The survey delved into responses to the “emergency remote teaching” from the past spring. In the wake of that shift, the majority of students reported a decreased level of overall well-being. Their comments underscored the sense that a big part of going to college was being on campus; anything different diminished the experience: “I regressed this term. I went backward. I had to go back to my childhood home with rules and restrictions.” “I was already struggling with severe depression and have felt extremely isolated…. I don’t have a normal sleep schedule…. I can’t separate a work environment from a home one or get any work done.” “Not having access to the library with multiple monitors and high-speed internet was frustrating and difficult.” “Any course that added work or tried to maintain the same amount as before was unequivocally worse.”

One administrator captured the challenge quite evocatively. In a message distributed by the Learning Innovation group, Amanda Starling Gould, in Duke’s Franklin Humanities Institute, made this observation: “Our students are … in a state of reduced mental health. They are coming to us tired … lonely, scared, frustrated, angry, and potentially grieving because of the pandemic and the recent protests and the state of the world (not simply because they are required to do courses online), and we need to keep this at the forefront of our minds when we are designing and teaching our courses. We aren’t necessarily teaching happy, excited, [contented], and connected students.”

As instructors, she added, “we must first and foremost, recognize that each student has a body; understanding that in this particular moment those bodies are incredibly stressed; understand that stressed bodies learn differently/less well/more slowly; take this into consideration [when] designing our classes, our assignments, and our assessment … in this particular moment.” The aim, as she put it, was “not just to be kind, but to increase learning outcomes.”
WHAT SURVEYS WERE SAYING

Before the fall 2020 semester began, Gould's perspective found validation in the CDC's Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report. (The same publication would also write up Duke's COVID-19 response plan.) The CDC study looked at an age cohort between eighteen and twenty-four as they coped with a COVID-19 world. It found "at least one adverse mental or behavioral health symptom"—such as substance abuse and "serious suicidal ideation"—among almost 75 percent of survey respondents.

There were other assessments, pretty much mutually confirming, of student mental health. The Student Experience in the Research University (SERU) Consortium ran a survey on the impact of COVID-19 on students at nine public universities. The report concluded that "undergraduate, graduate, and professional students are experiencing significant mental-health challenges"; between one-third and two-fifths of the survey group screened positive for "major depressive disorder and generalized anxiety disorder." The SERU researchers called those statistics "alarming," and said they signaled "significant challenges to colleges and universities as students return to campus—whether physically or virtually—in the upcoming semester."

Similar concerns came through in a report from Active Minds, which calls itself "the nation's premier nonprofit organization supporting mental-health awareness and education for students." (A couple of years earlier, the same group gave Duke a "Healthy Campus" award, as one of seven colleges and universities notable for promoting student health, especially mental health.) Active Minds surveyed 2,051 students; almost 75 percent reported their mental health had worsened, worsened somewhat, or worsened significantly since the beginning of the pandemic. They highlighted personal stress or anxiety, disappointment or sadness, feelings of loneliness or isolation.

Vice Provost Gary Bennett told me: "The epidemic we were concerned about before the pandemic showed up was emotional well-being among college students. Whenever I would get together with peers, that was always an area of discussion. The pandemic hasn't made things better for students. The question is, how much worse has it become for them? Students report feeling more stressed, more isolated, more depressed. These are perfectly reasonable feelings to be having during a pandemic. We're making a mistake if we imagine our students should be feeling more positive. This has been an extraordinary challenge for everyone, particularly for students. On top of the pandemic, they are navigating the complex developmental challenges that come from being in college."
Bennett’s Office of Undergraduate Education asked undergraduates to complete a ten-minute online survey; the survey, done at the end of the fall 2020 semester, focused on social relationships, stress, mental health, and well-being. The Duke-specific findings were consistent with the findings from that cluster of more universal surveys. For Duke students, loneliness and social isolation were a significant problem. Almost half in the survey rated social isolation as “very” or “extremely” stressful. And about a third reported feeling lonely “most of the time” or “always” in class—something that made sense, given the fact that a lot of their time was class time, and in most cases, “going to class” meant looking at a computer screen. (The comparable figure was 4.6 percent in a pre-pandemic survey, called the Student Resilience and Well-Being Project, or, in Duke administrative lingo, SRWBP.) Here’s a breakdown of the top ten sources of stress:

* Lack of scheduled breaks during the semester (77.8 percent rated “very” or “extremely” stressful).
* Compressed timeline for the semester (67.2 percent rated “very” or “extremely” stressful).
* Global and/or national responses to the pandemic (67.1 percent rated “very” or “extremely” stressful).
* The 2020 US elections (65.3 percent rated “very” or “extremely” stressful).
* Concerns about missing out on curricular or cocurricular opportunities (62.4 percent rated “very” or “extremely” stressful).
* Managing your academic workload (61 percent rated “very” or “extremely” stressful).
* Constraints on hobbies, activities, and/or leisure time (58 percent rated “very” or “extremely” stressful).
* Concern for your mental health (57.2 percent rated “very” or “extremely” stressful).
* Zoom fatigue (55.6 percent rated “very” or “extremely” stressful).
* United States and/or international politics (54.3 percent rated “very” or “extremely” stressful).

Students in the survey said they were invested in their academic work. But accomplishing their academic tasks was not without its complications. Almost 45 percent indicated that they had experienced moderate or severe symptoms of depression and anxiety over the past two weeks. More than 18 percent reported feeling overwhelmed and unable to handle the demands of life fairly often or very often over the past month. The comparable figure,
in SRWBP days, was 3.6 percent. And compared with a typical semester, contact with faculty outside of class seemed to have decreased—another element of a socially isolated campus experience.

To drill down on the meaning of all those survey results, I made my own key contact, with an expert in Duke’s Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS) group. That was Jeff Kulley, director of clinical services. Kulley had been with CAPS for some two decades, originally as a staff psychologist and coordinator of alcohol and substance-abuse services. A college experience twisted out of shape by the pandemic, he said, was bound to exert an emotional toll, particularly for first-year students. “They had a lot of expectations about what college was going to be like, including the opportunity to form connections easily, to try out different identities in their new social circumstances, to lean on their peers in a competitive environment. The usual challenges, including the challenge of adjusting to life away from home, were still present. But the positive opportunities to meet those challenges—like making new friends—were less available.”

Kulley told me that CAPS, over the fall semester of 2020, had seen a fairly significant downturn in cases. That seemed surprising. But he was quick to explain that several factors were likely at work, including a relatively depopulated campus and Duke’s promoting of a tele-mental-health service for students. Through that service, called Blue Devil Cares in its Duke-specific iteration, students in a moment of struggle or difficulty, even those living across the United States or internationally, could immediately connect with a trained counselor. They could look to Blue Devil Cares for one-time guidance around their circumstances, or they could schedule a series of therapy sessions. The availability was 24/7. (Given professional-licensing restrictions, counselors working within the structure of CAPS could only link up with students based in North Carolina.) CAPS also attuned itself to the ills of the wider world by tailoring programs specifically for marginalized groups. A “Black Women in Solidarity” workshop, for example, invited participants to create topics that might include “friendships and sisterhood, job and career, practicing self-care, health and fitness, relationships, spirituality, and sexuality.”

CAPS is physically contained in a newish building, Duke’s Student Wellness Center, which advertises itself as connecting with nature: natural light flowing in from a multistory atrium lobby, long benches carved out from logs, a serenity-inspiring rock garden, lots of contemplative spaces. (There’s also a Steinway Spirio piano, a high-tech update of the player piano, suitable for student musical exploration.) For those students who would visit CAPS,
the nature of a fall semester visit was largely virtual. As Kulley explained, the idea of a counselor and a student sitting in an office, separated by six feet, both wearing emotion-obscuring face masks, was not a therapy-friendly alternative. There were upsides: The virtual counseling session might be more attractive for a student who suffers from social anxiety, and also for a student for whom trudging over to CAPS might seem inconvenient.

On a computer screen, you can see a person’s face more closely. That close-up view allows you to discern smiles, laughs, smirks, the onset of tears. But in a therapy session, just as in a theater class, you don’t see body posture, which is an important nonverbal cue in gauging what a person is expressing nonverbally.

Throughout the pandemic, the “presenting concerns” shown by students were, by and large, familiar: anxiety, depression, procrastination, self-esteem issues. “Students who are coming in now who maybe have an anxiety disorder, who are depressed, are seeing that issue compounded or exacerbated by the pandemic,” Kulley told me. “As treatment providers, we find that one of the things the pandemic does is take away some of the important tools in our toolbox to help students. For example, in treating depression, you want to activate certain behaviors, such as exercise or social activity. Well, it’s very difficult to encourage a student to go to the gym during a pandemic if they don’t feel it’s safe. It’s very difficult to encourage a student to socialize more with friends during a pandemic. The student can do it virtually, but that’s not quite the same thing.”

Such mental health matters have emerged, over the past decade or so, as commonplace in campus counseling centers. Kulley pointed out a newer phenomenon: students coming in with problems of motivation. That theme popped up as I looked over the subreddit for the Duke community. One comment—tagged “Freshman feeling hella burned out”—went: “I’m at the point where I leave all my work and studying for just before deadlines/exams even though I have time beforehand. I spend most of my time avoiding schoolwork and wasting time on my phone or some other crap, it’s really bad. I can’t concentrate during Zoom classes, and I’m basically skipping all of my lectures. I’ve lost all motivation, even though I know I should be doing my work.”

A sensitive-seeming response came from a self-identified Duke professor: “Trust me when I say you’re not alone. Everyone is burned out—including your professors, probably. I know I can barely keep on top of all my work, classes, research, editing, etc.” Then some advice from the same source: “In my experience, the best plan is to just force yourself to do a little bit every day (start with the easiest thing and spend as little time as possible on it.) Feel
good about doing a thing. Doing something is always better than doing nothing. And once you start doing a little bit every day, you can maybe eventually do a little more.” Elsewhere in the strand came advice from someone who had taken the Koru mindfulness classes offered by CAPS; Duke advertises the class as providing skills that can help calm and focus your mind, including breathing exercises and guided imagery. “Doing guided meditations still helps me when I feel too stuck to do anything else…. Try to do at least one thing purely for fun (that’s not on your phone!) and one separate thing to take care of yourself (e.g., laundry, going for a walk, showering) each day. Helps my self-esteem to at least feel I did something worthwhile with my time instead of just feeling paralyzed by anxiety.”

That one exchange struck me as illustrating the pandemic-aggravated pressures of campus life. When almost nothing feels normal, anything can seem overwhelming. Problems anchored in motivation were “certainly at a higher level than they were prepandemic,” in Kulley’s view. “Everyone struggles with motivation from time to time. The fact that so many students are seeking help now is notable.”

Like Gary Bennett, Kulley was hopeful that some mental-health issues would diminish as the pandemic diminished. Postpandemic, “there’s going to be a lot of visible strength and resilience,” he said. “The pandemic is challenging students’ ability to cope, and many will emerge with coping skills that other generations of students did not have to develop. Those past generations did not have to adjust to a long period of isolation. None of this is going to be erased quickly from the collective consciousness of today’s students. But I also think that for most of them, even if they’re seeming really depressed at the moment, so much of how they’re feeling is situationally driven. It’s almost normal to have some kind of depression in these circumstances. When circumstances start to change and improve, so will their mood and their functioning.”

And perhaps a positive carryover from a stressful time: a new awareness of well-being on the part of students. Kulley mentioned something student leaders had shared with planners for the last day of classes (LDOC, in Duke parlance)—in more traditional times, a rather raucous occasion. What those students wanted was a prominent place on the program for guided meditation. They were lobbying not for mindless celebration, but rather for mindful self-care.

“I would not have wanted this for our students,” Bennett said in our conversation. “But I’m impressed with the way they’ve managed it. And I’m confident they’ll be stronger coming out of it. Our goal has to be creating
resilient young people—not by helping them to avoid moments of adversity, but rather by helping them navigate those moments in ways that make them stronger.” Bennett went so far as to project that this generation of college students would not simply bounce back; they would emerge postpandemic as the (or at least as another) “greatest generation.”

From his home in Raleigh, which in normal times would have meant a serious commute to campus, Bennett demonstrated part of his own resilience program. Once when we connected, late in the afternoon, he made an immediate suggestion. That was to switch out of Zoom in favor of a more traditional audio conversation: “I’ve been on Zoom since seven this morning, and my eyes are completely falling out of my face.” So as he talked, he walked, with no intervening screen images; as he navigated his neighborhood, I could hear the soothing sounds of chirping birds.

With its not particularly soothing, sometimes scathing satirical column, the Chronicle, the student newspaper, would offer some relevant, if irreverent riffing around the relentless attention to students and their emotional states. This one, titled “First-Year Survey: Existential Dread Edition,” included bar charts purporting to illustrate how the newest students were planning to spend their time at Duke. The highest percentages were in the categories “Cry a lot,” “Dissociate during Zoom class,” “Contemplate existence generally,” “Dread the future,” and “Binge [the TV series] Bridgerton.”

HEALING THROUGH LEARNING

How to attend to student well-being in class, virtual or not? Professors like Sönke Johnsen were conspicuously caring as they interacted with their students, even as they were clear in their commitment to seeing students learn. In the courses I observed, professors openly acknowledged the weirdness of it all, sending out a comforting message that we’ll make the best of it. In the first meeting of his “Martin Luther King, Malcom X, and Black Liberation” course, Omid Safi (“Brother Omid,” as his Zoom identifier read), a professor of Asian and Middle Eastern studies, referred to “the weird funkiness that is having a Zoom class.” The course was among those I faithfully followed, from a distance, in the fall of 2020. Safi identified with a tradition of “valuing face-to-face communication,” of “being in the presence of others,” he said. “Normally I ban laptops, I ban cell phones. I want people to bring their full presence. I want you to be present with your heart, to bring the wholeness of yourself into our conversation. The more
you bring of yourself, the more engaged all of us are going to be. The less Zoom fatigued all of us are going to be.”

Tom Ferraro, in his English seminar, similarly acknowledged the odd dynamics of this teaching moment: We’re all in this together, was the suggestion, and that was an element of the authenticity that helped in forging a community. He began one class by telling the students: “I know how tired we all are. It’s hard on us.” The syllabus reflected his choice to avoid works that he might have assigned at a different time, but that now might be read as “heavy-handed anticipations of COVID.” One was Henry James’s In the Cage, in which a telegraphist, confined to a “cage” at the post office, scrutinizes the super-succinct prose of telegraphs to flesh out personal lives. Were we really looking, right now, for a story of social isolation? “For once, I can say the stuff you’re facing is harder than what I’m facing,” Ferraro said. He went on to press the class to take advantage of his virtual office hours. In such a context, he assured them, he could lean on the example of his Italian mother and apply the “tough love” routine. “But I can be avuncular, too.”

Reading offers “equipment for living,” Ferraro told me; it extends the gift of “consolation and courage, along with uncanny insight.” He talked about being “super attentive to the intellectual needs of students—taking all the meetings they wanted, working with them on their writing, working with them on their thinking.” At the end of the semester, he announced he would cut them some slack on their final grades. The idea behind the gesture was to address their “ferocious nervousness,” but also to encourage their “taking intellectual risks” in their final assignment.

And so Ferraro ferreted out the essence of teaching a seminar, here and now—with the ever-present display of students in virtual boxes, and with the backdrop of a pandemic that seemed a long way from burning out. Maybe it could be seen as “doing the work of therapy,” he said. Intellectual inquiry would enrich the student soul and the student psyche.

I kept finding professors similarly working to engage students—promoting them as stakeholders in the success of a course. One was Kristin Goss, a public policy professor. In her course write-up for “Political Analysis for Public Policy,” a core, or required course for majors, Goss included a “special statement” acknowledging this online-only fall semester. “Let’s just put it out there,” she wrote. “We’re teaching and learning at a very challenging time. Whether this class succeeds or fails will depend on our ability to build a sense of trust, respect, and community in an unnatural, suboptimal learning environment (Zoom) surrounded by a precarious social,
economic, and political context. We are building this class together.” During that challenging time, she added: “Many of us will be unusually stressed, anxious, even occasionally depressed. That means that we—students and instructors—will need to be intentional about showing kindness, compassion, and patience toward one another.”

The syllabus outlined some of the ways Goss had reimagined the course: transforming it from a large lecture format into three small, twice-weekly seminars; eliminating exams and replacing them with reflections and short skill-building exercises; making the core assignments a set of “deliverables” for an actual policymaker, so that students could imagine themselves making “a real-world difference”; disregarding the conventions of grading on a curve; building in individual check-ins and writing tutorials for students.

Goss took firm steps to give students ownership of the course, which she divided into three sections along with a Friday all-sections discussion. A starting gesture was the charge to students to draft a class constitution; as a finished document, it would be presented on a background of pseudo-aged parchment. “We the students of Public Policy Three Hundred and One, in order to form a more just class,” it began, “commit to establishing mutual understanding and respect, cultivating a supportive learning environment, upholding proper Zoom standards, and securing the Blessings of Knowledge and Free Thought.” Goss herself would fill the position of executive—or “Self-Appointed Benevolent Dictator.” A legislative body would have the power to petition the executive; a judicial branch would enjoy “the prerogative to review proposed changes to or under the syllabus for consistency with class policies.”

According to the class-crafted First Amendment: “No individual shall be treated differently based on their respective identities and perspectives. The class shall serve as a place where thoughts and ideas can be shared freely and without fear of judgment.” A subsequent amendment specified that “All class members should be accommodating to any extenuating circumstances (e.g., mental and physical care, technical difficulties, etc.) that may prevent complete participation and engagement in this course.... While promptness is important, all parties shall assume good intention for any delays in submitting assignments or returning grades and feedback.”

One of the course’s “senators,” Sophia LeRose, told me that drafting the constitution, involving as it did lots of give-and-take in virtual breakout rooms, was the sort of exercise that contributed to a public policy education. (Senators weren’t necessarily voted into office; at least one of the class sections awarded the role randomly.) She also said it set the tone for the
class for the rest of the semester: “Everyone was willing to speak up and offer their own opinions and even refute each other respectfully.”

As it happened, I had requested to join a Zoom meeting of one section of the multisection class; that request was relayed from Goss to the students, and it sparked its own deliberative process. According to LeRose: “After some brainstorming, the senators created an ‘anonymous poll’ that the class filled out. We decided if a single student in the given section was not comfortable with you joining, we would not have you attend. Thankfully, my section and another section were very comfortable with you joining.”

Another student senator, Elise van den Hoek, who grew up in the United Kingdom, told me the course worked well, even in Zoomified form, in part because it combined the rigor of policy analysis with attention to “what was happening around us.” She and her classmates watched a documentary on the women’s suffrage movement and read up on Black Lives Matter, and from there discussed the power of collective action; read a Supreme Court decision and listened to a podcast that illuminated the historic struggles, particularly over land rights, of Indigenous peoples; delved into the celebrated book by Isabel Wilkerson, *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents*; and considered the complexities of unfettered speech when social media is so steeped in false information, science-denying advice, and conspiracy theories. Reaching for relevance emerged as one technique for keeping students focused, interested, and conceiving themselves as stakeholders in their learning.

That was a sampling of the public policy curriculum in action. Elsewhere in the curriculum, as her “Intermediate Spanish” started up, Lisa Merschel, senior lecturer in Romance studies, had her students complete a brief survey. There were basic questions about how they would be learning—for example, whether they’d be living on or off campus. But also questions meant to have the students introduce themselves and reach within themselves: “What hopes or expectations do you have regarding this course?” “Do you have any concerns?” “I invite you to share something about yourself... (for example, a hobby, a TV series that you love, a novel you’ve read lately, something you’re looking forward to this semester, something you did this summer, etc.) to get to know you better.”

Such signals were noticed. A student in the Spanish course, Georgia Price, said Merschel “was by far the best professor I’ve had since the shift to virtual learning, and I am so grateful to have had her to lean on for support during such an uncertain and difficult semester.... Even in the smallest things that she said and did, I could tell that Professor Merschel truly cared about our learning and well-being.”
On the first day of class, Merschel told her students that she had been reading articles about the best ways to engage students over Zoom. One of the tips she came across was to keep looking directly into the camera. To a student like Price, such a deliberate practice provided a form of eye contact that, in her words, “made me feel connected and valued.” Within the first two weeks, Merschel would meet with all of the students in small groups after class. She was determined to get to know them personally, if virtually. And she built on that by opening each Zoom session fifteen minutes early and hanging around fifteen minutes after class. A few weeks into the semester, she began to host in-person “office hours” next to Duke’s student center; students would sign up for a time slot and meet with Merschel, socially distanced, face masked, and with a freewheeling agenda. Price recalled talking about topics beyond the confines of classwork: her own interest in seeing the area around campus become more bike friendly; her professor’s experiences living abroad and her path into teaching; how both were adjusting to Duke during the pandemic.

As the fall semester proceeded, Merschel worked to stretch her teaching beyond the Zoom conventions—connecting the learning to student lives, much as Goss had connected public policy basics to world events. She departed from the easy path of “PowerPoint slides and monotonous drilling of vocabulary,” Price said, and deployed “tons of different technologies” to make language learning “more engaging and interactive.” They included collaborative-learning tools like VoiceThread and Google Jamboard, along with Lyrics Training, which hones language skills through music.

“The most meaningful part of Professor Merschel’s class, for me at least, was the sign-off at the end of our meetings,” Price told me. Usually it was un abrazo—“a hug.” Sometimes it was “I see you” or “I’m here with you.” Such sign-offs, brief as they were, “never failed to lift my spirits, even in the most stressful weeks of the semester.”
Nan Keohane’s Model—exploration, risk taking, developing the mind and the imagination—gets to the work of the campus beyond the formal instruction of the classroom. My loftier and earlier guide to the campus, A. Whitney Griswold’s *Liberal Education and the Democratic Ideal*, reminds us that both liberal education and the residential college were founded on mutually reinforcing goals: “The liberal arts to train men and women to think for themselves, to learn by themselves, to go on educating themselves for the rest of their lives; the residential college to initiate and foster that process…” He went on: “Only part of the process can be accomplished through formal instruction. The other, and not always the lesser, part is accomplished in the social life and intercourse of students outside the classroom.”

**Extracurricular Adjustments**

For a pandemic-time campus, what would that other, not necessarily lesser, element look like? Duke lists an astounding 741 student groups: groups that are residential, selective, and non-Greek; groups that are offshoots of academic departments; groups appealing to preprofessional interests; groups feeding off cool interests; groups whose members are fired up by performing; groups
organized around sports; groups that are environmentally minded; groups that are ideologically defined; groups that are driven by community service; groups built on a shared identity; category-defying groups recognized by the student government. There was Round Table, a residential group founded “on the three pillars of student, faculty, and community interactions.” The Statistical Science Majors Union. Duke Pre-Dental Society. Duke Robotics Club. Duke Swing Dance Club. Club Quidditch. Duke Electric Vehicles. Duke Friends of Israel. Duke Habitat for Humanity. Duke Persian Students Association. Plus, the Duke University Historic Sword Club, which pointedly said this about itself: “Hundreds of years ago, Western martial arts began losing its sword traditions and knowledge in trade for gunpowder-based weapons. In recent years, there has been a growing attempt to bring back that lost knowledge. This club is part of that effort.”

An effort to keep going defined a lot of those student groups, all of them largely online for 2020–2021. Weston Lindner told me about Duke Moot Court. Both before and during the pandemic, he was vice president of the team, which competes in arguing matters of constitutional law. The 2020–2021 (somewhat) made-up case, as Lindner sketched it for me, involved a First Amendment speech claim. It imagined a business owner who made wedding stationery and a soon-to-be married woman who wanted to commission his work. When the woman’s same-sex partner walked in, the shop owner backed off the agreed-on service; he would provide the couple with just blank stationery. (In our conversation, Lindner enjoyed engaging with another vexing argument, about the relative merits of Duke and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He was a merit scholar in a program whose students spend time at both institutions.) During the academic year, the team, formerly unranked, jumped to twenty-third in the country. It also earned high rankings for oral advocacy and brief writing, both separate categories of competition.

Lindner credited some of that performance to the push to connect. He and others were determined to build a close-knit spirit within Moot Court. First-year students were drawn to the team, he observed, as a place to find the community that wasn’t easy to find on campus. There was a lot of thinking on your feet, an expectation of verbal dexterity—skills that would be sharpened through practices that focused on reading the relevant case law, developing arguments, and providing feedback. The team ran the sessions in small groups—essentially, as virtual breakout sessions—with leaders encouraged to be attuned to the group sensibilities. In the past, all thirty or so members would be expected to come together at one time and in one (physical) place.
Now the strong small-group closeness transferred to the larger group; that ramped up their work ethic and contributed to their competitive edge.

The Chronicle was the student group reporting on the shifting campus scene. Its editor for 2020–2021, Matthew Griffin, told me that, during the pandemic, in many ways, the work of the student newspaper felt more like a job than a student activity. Its treasured quarters on West Campus, seemingly not rehabbed for several decades, and reached by an ascent (by my count) of exactly forty steps, was only intermittently populated. Students were pretty much removed from the physical office and its delightfully tacky decorations: a somewhat current Donald Trump caricature (“The Failing Duke Chronicle. Fake News”); a headline from 1941 (“Rose Bowl Beckons Mighty Devils”); a headline from 2003 (“North Carolina Drops Sixth Straight to the Blue Devils”)—that one from the archrival Daily Tar Heel. The traditional Chronicle town hall semiformal and formal social events and dodgeball match against the student government were gone, or assigned to virtual space. Also gone was the news coverage exclusively focused on the campus; the sturdiest of Collegiate Gothic architecture couldn’t shut out the global phenomenon of the pandemic.

In his farewell column, Griffin wrote that for all the pressures of an academic year during a pandemic, “I’ll never forget the feeling of documenting history.” The past year “was also the hardest of my life,” he observed. “Covering the constant barrage of news was exhausting. What’s more, we had to cover it while we worked remotely from our childhood homes, far away from our lives and friends at Duke; while we navigated the return to an unfamiliar campus; while we wondered whether our loved ones would get sick. I often felt overwhelmed. I wondered some days whether I had the strength to keep from falling apart, let alone to run a newspaper.”

Away from Duke, that rather poignant student-journalist sentiment had been expressed earlier, back in the fall of 2020. The Daily Gamecock, the student newspaper of the University of South Carolina, announced that it would be “going dark” for a week. An editorial led with the statement that “We’re not okay.” The fall semester was proving to be taxing. “The days have become a structureless blur of breaking news, online meetings, quarantines, and, of course, our usual course loads.... We haven’t been sleeping. We’ve forgotten to eat. We’ve been staring at screens for hours on end. Our negligence of our mental health has started to impact our physical health, and it’s also affected our ability to produce the highest-quality content possible.”

Being a student in a pandemic was rough. Reporting on the pandemic as a student journalist, even while living through it, was even rougher. “There
Pandemic-time persistence was a theme for a lot of Duke groups, like the Duke Impact Investing Group (D11G). In its work and its profile, it seemed to represent a kind of familiar Duke formula: students largely majoring in economics, computer science, and public policy; heading toward careers in areas like consulting, finance, startup ventures, and public affairs; and concerned with doing good things in the world. Prepandemic, the group had worked with one business that did direct-to-consumers deliveries of fresh meats, dairy products, and produce from North Carolina growers, ranchers, and food artisans. Another business aimed to replace single-use disposable containers, the containers commonly used for restaurant takeouts and that end up cluttering landfills, with a model similar to a borrowing library: You return your used container to the next restaurant from which you’re grabbing food, and the container is washed and sanitized for another user. During the pandemic, they worked with a nonprofit that targets homelessness by, among other things, using innovative technology to build housing efficiently.

The pandemic restrictions weren’t a big burden in that kind of work; D11G was accustomed to remotely latching on to clients. Connecting with their fellow members, numbering almost two hundred, took some imagination. It often came down to virtual get-togethers carefully formatted to include getting-to-know-you features: ice-breaking exercises, games designed for friends to play online, versions of speed dating. Their big public event, a talk by a Duke alumnus with a long record in social-impact investing, was efficient to pull off virtually. But as the three D11G “partners” explained, it would have had even more meaning, with a wider range of possible interactions, in some campus setting.

On a Zoom call, those partners, students Erik Jia, Jessie Xu, and Luke Qin, talked about the way of doing business they were trying to hold onto. The group organized itself through a hierarchy: the partners, really the strategic thinkers; the project managers; and the analysts who worked under the project managers. With the sign-off of university officials, the group would invest a piece of a one-time $100,000 university grant in startups and small businesses. D11G’s noninvesting offerings included “data-driven analysis and solutions to clients,” along with pro bono consulting services. In Qin’s words, clients “love working with students—they love the energy students have, the passion they have for working with businesses that have a social impact.” Plus, for a lot of startups, pricey consulting contracts would
be out of reach. (These students clearly were comfortable operating in the corporate-speaking space, with the frequent deploying of terms like interfacing, prioritizing, onboarding, scaling, deliverables, and actionable steps.)

Jia talked about the appeal, to this student generation, of an enterprise that would apply business practices to “impactful” work, while Xu stressed how DiIG provided “experiential learning” beyond the bounds of the classroom. Sketching some personal history, Zia signaled that the partners were not exactly entrepreneurial novices. As a student, he was well aware that his peers were putting stress on their backs as they lug around book bags, and he worked on a project to conceive and market a lumbar-support cushion. That effort traced back to his high school days.

RECREATIONAL RELEASE

The extracurriculars that might be lumped under recreation, from intramurals to workout classes, were, like so much else, complicated by the pandemic. Beginning in the fall of 2020, Brodie Gym, on East Campus, had been turned into a COVID-19 testing site. Wilson Recreation Center, on West Campus, had several closures: racquetball courts, the climbing wall, and the “functional training space.” Students could reserve space in the weight room, cardio area, track, and pool, all socially distanced. As for the basketball courts, “Only one person per hoop, and members must bring their own ball.”

Some recreational programming was retooled for virtual space. I glided in, virtually, for guided mindful meditation, offered, in the session I sampled, by Meg Flournoy. In what might be called her real job, she’s a career coach at Duke’s Fuqua School of Business. She was turned onto mindfulness by her graduate school mentor. More recently, she was presenting sessions on how mindfulness could advance such work objectives as “divergent thinking, job satisfaction, the improvement of focus, leadership flexibility, and reducing stress.” It sounded like the perfect panacea for my personal pandemic-inspired anxieties. And what about other wellness seekers? At this hour—this was screen time at eight o’clock in the morning—students were not notably mindful, or even notably awake. No one else having shown up, I found myself with the best imaginable teacher-student ratio.

Flournoy seemed happy enough, on her end, about that ratio. We talked about an online course I had taken, back in the early days of the pandemic, that had mindfully deployed the art of Philadelphia’s Barnes Collection, which is a rich repository of Impressionism. Through that virtual encounter, I would thrust myself right into one of Cézanne’s Mont Sainte
Victoire compositions. Feeling myself right there, somewhere on the mountain, breathing it all in. Flournoy told me, in turn, about her passion for producing works with colorful fabrics. So a lot of colors would be swirling through our early morning session.

As we got started, Flournoy said I should let go of the heaviness of the day’s burdens. If I couldn’t squash down those burdens, I should assign them a label and send them off, down a river, where they’d be out of mind. For now, my job was to be centered in the present moment. Through my breath. In and out. In and out. About four minutes of that. Then a longer stretch of mindfulness, with mindfulness toward others included in the mix. Today would be a new day, a beautiful new day, with the opportunity for a fresh start. I should concentrate on the gift of gratitude, kindness, joy, grace, love. The source of all of that, it turned out, was inside of me. I could imagine that positive energy as a glowing sphere. The glow would radiate blues, reds, greens, yellows, oranges—an explosion of colors, as if grabbed off a Cézanne palette and gloriously attaching themselves to all my words and actions. And I should resolve to pass along that glowing sphere, that burst of beauty, so that someone else, in this new day, might feel the same uplift. Feeling good about myself as I made others feel good about themselves. And so a link was formed in the human chain.
I also signed up for a yoga class. The instructor was a hyperenergetic—naturally—Samantha Lipman, who has a PhD in biomedical engineering from Duke. (An anatomy course at Duke had reinforced her interest in the “alignment-based style of yoga.”) She taught some in-person classes to students—socially distanced and face masked—earlier in the pandemic. Not at all socially distanced from my computer screen, I appreciated her starting advice, which was to give myself permission to put aside my mental to-do list, to let go of my day, to no longer be in it. Yoga, as she demonstrated, would have us move in directions we’re not quite used to. Part of the challenge, then, would be to find a comfort level with poses that are different from our regular daily movements: forward folds, backbends, twists, one-legged balancing, hand balancing, inverting.

It was a huge challenge overall not just to comprehend that vocabulary, but also to remain focused, by way of Zoom, on Lipman’s confidently expert and seemingly effortless lead. Just like her—by some generously stretched definition—I had to be maneuvering my shoulders, my back, the placement of my hands, the pace of my breathing; to position myself for planks (hard to do) and lunges (not so hard); to release the tension in my (reliably tense) neck; to shape myself into a (very shaky) pyramid. And to ignore the barking instructions of the two dogs who wandered into the camera frame. Lipman identified them as a “lab/hound/who-knows-what-else mix” and “a Carolina dog, a.k.a. an American dingo.”

Later, Lipman explained to me that the practice of yoga was particularly well suited to this time of COVID-19. “Learning techniques to focus on breathing, to move the body, to learn to be present and develop focus are all good things to help reduce anxiety. Doing yoga as part of a live Zoom class can be a good way to feel a little more connected to others, since you are all doing the same movements, even if you aren’t in the same room.” She also acknowledged the challenges in teaching such a class over Zoom. “My teaching is guided by the energy of my students, whether it’s a knowing smile or wide eyes conveying something like, ‘You want me to do what?’ I miss seeing my students’ faces, being able to read the room and see how what I’m teaching resonates with them.”

I suspected my inept performance would have resonated badly with Lipman, or with even the most tolerant observer. Still, she came across, even on a screen, as a motivator; she told me that as soon as you start affecting the body and the breath, you also affect the mind. I liked her message, even as my most confident move in the class was the final resting pose. “Flexibility and openness in the body often lead to flexibility and openness in the mind.”
she said. “We are most often held back by our beliefs about ourselves. There is a feeling of empowerment that comes from experiencing these changes in our bodies—a belief in yourself that you can do things you don’t think were possible or change things you thought were unchangeable.”

SPORTS, SORT OF

I thought it worth exploring, on a deeply sports-interested campus, how pandemic restraints bedeviled the Duke Blue Devil. Some years back, the website survivingcollege.com described Duke’s mascot as “the epitome of badass,” in purely aesthetic terms. “From the muscles to the cape, you can’t help but fall in love with this mascot.” The suit, unoccupied, weighs ten to thirteen pounds; that weight “increases significantly” with the accumulation of sweat, I learned from Duke cheerleading coach Alayne Rusnak. As for the job description, in normal times, the Blue Devil is a devilish delight at home sports events and other celebratory occasions. In these not-so-normal times, I discovered, there was still a Blue Devil. What did it mean to be a social-distancing Blue Devil? Sticking with a long-established rule, I got in touch with Rusnak, the designated Athletics Department liaison, and provided some questions. A few days later, responses came from the official Duke Blue Devil email account.

The Blue Devil reported that they (I use that pronoun purposefully, because the gender specifics of the Blue Devil are unknown) first encountered a Blue Devil predecessor freshman year, at “Countdown to Craziness,” where student fans congregate and cheer to welcome a new basketball season. The future was clear. “I immediately knew that I wanted to be dancing in Cameron Indoor [Stadium] and bringing the same energy that he had. There’s something special about the way fans’ eyes light up when they see him walking around campus or surfing at basketball games.” They went on to revel in devilish memories from their own service: “There is no other feeling in the world quite like standing center court at Cameron Indoor, clapping your hands over your head as Cascada’s ‘Every Time We Touch’ builds to the chorus through the speakers. You can spin around and take in the whole stadium, with each person sharing that moment with you. Then, the beat drops and everyone, including the Blue Devil, starts to dance.”

Well, no communal dancing this fall semester. “The Blue Devil has been taking to the internet in order to spread positivity and school spirit,” I was told. They mentioned having attended, virtually, a birthday party for a fellow mascot, the BraveHawk, at the University of North Carolina at Pembroke.
On the home front, they were doing a bit of role modeling, and a bit of spirit rousing. “I have shot videos showing the Blue Devil working from home and practicing social distancing during the pandemic. The cheer squad and I have also prerecorded videos that play on the scoreboard during games to keep spirits high”—though the inspiriting presumably was geared to the athletes in the fan-free game sites. “My position has shifted from creating a lively atmosphere at games to leading the community by example, so that we can eventually return to life the way it was before the pandemic.”

“Even if I personally am not feeling full of spirit at a particular moment, the Blue Devil is committed to spreading school spirit to Duke fans,” said the self-referential Blue Devil. “Especially in this time, when so many of us feel disconnected from our peers and communities, the Blue Devil’s role has temporarily shifted from high-fiving students and cheering for our sports teams, to reminding fans and anyone who will listen that we are all in this difficult situation together. It’s so easy to get caught up in what is wrong with the world right now. So I feel a special responsibility to try and show fans that we are still Duke, and we are still amazing.”

The head basketball coach, Mike Krzyzewski, declared he wasn’t big on cardboard cutouts sprinkled through the stands as fan substitutes. Instead, game time in Cameron Indoor Stadium featured several rows of twenty-foot by eight-foot fabric screens; each screen was packed with images of the widely celebrated (or derided) Cameron Crazies, some painted in the familiar blue. Images of the Blue Devil made a couple of appearances in the multitude. Recordings of the pep band were piped in, and thanks to strategically arrayed speakers, recorded crowd cheers cascaded from one section to the next—mimicking the call-and-response routine of a live audience.

In a write-up for the Chronicle, student reporter Evan Kolin underscored the unsettling experience of taking in a game (an away game, in this case). Reflecting on “the honor of covering a Duke basketball game in person,” something that “is sure to be a rare occurrence this season,” he said: “I knew I probably should write something documenting my experience. But to be honest, I didn’t really know what I’d write about.” Sure, the absence of fans lowered the energy level to about zero, and the effect of having no fan reaction, not even around some spectacular dunk, was jarring. What he found himself ruminating on was everything that normally leads to the tip-off: the “buzz” around campus, including the makeshift community, just outside Cameron Indoor Stadium, of camping-out students, all aiming for a precious spectator’s spot at a home game. And all missing at this moment.
As the (remote) fans anticipated the familiar March Madness, something else would be missing. For the first time in more than a quarter century, in 2021, Duke would not play in the NCAA tournament. Following a positive COVID-19 test within the program, the Blue Devils were forced to withdraw from the Atlantic Coast Conference tournament, the hoped-for stepping-stone to the NCAAs. The team had won its first two games in the tournament. It was set to face Florida State in the quarterfinals. Kevin White, director of athletics at the time, made the announcement: “Since last March when the pandemic started, we have listened to our medical experts and always put safety at the forefront of any determinations regarding competition. As a result, this will end our 2020–2021 season.”

For his part, Coach K expressed his disappointment, while acknowledging that the season had been “a challenge for every team across the country.” The pandemic “is very cruel and is not yet over,” he said in a statement. “As many safeguards as we implemented, no one is immune to this terrible virus.” But even before his team officially shortened its season, the coach was questioning why college basketball was being played in the midst of the pandemic: “People are saying the next six weeks are going to be the worst. To me, it’s already pretty bad.”
It wasn't the only high-profile team to end the season early. Back in December, this word came in a university announcement: “The student athletes on the Duke women's basketball team have made the difficult decision to conclude their current season due to safety concerns. We support their decision, as we have supported the choices made by all student athletes at Duke during this unprecedented time.” The women's team had been on pause for a couple of weeks because of two positive COVID-19 tests and contact-tracing results within the program's “travel party.” New coach Kara Lawson, who was hired the previous July from the Boston Celtics—the first female assistant coach in Celtics history—had gone public in her view that “I don't think we should be playing right now. That's my opinion on it.”

For some of its sports, Duke was able to pull off a relatively intact, if condensed, fall 2020 season. Others shifted their competition to the spring: field hockey, women's and men's soccer, volleyball, and women's and men's cross-country. As officials in Duke Athletics put it, there were a lot of mitigation measures. Student athletes were tested every day. For all away competitions, they traveled by charter plane or charter bus. And when they decamped to hotels, they stayed in single rooms. The COVID-19-related expenses, along with all those matches without any paying fans in the stands, meant a lot of stress on the athletics budget— one expression of which was a temporary salary cut for most staff in the department. A disrupted financial model was a legacy of a disruptive pandemic.

“All head coaches and staff have really had to make adjustments,” Nina King, senior deputy director of athletics, told me. (King would be elevated to director of athletics with the 2021-2022 academic year.) “The health and safety protocols around testing, practice, travel, meals, etc. are numerous and really shifted how we operate.” Adjusting, coping, and getting through 2020-2021 had been “a team effort” across Athletics, which includes the Recreation and Physical Education divisions, as well as the university's golf course. There were the efforts to create what King referred to as “some sort of 'atmosphere’” in game-day facilities— those photo-imprinted screens in Cameron, fan cutouts and imported crowd noises elsewhere. I couldn't resist doing a double take whenever I walked by the field hockey stadium, one feature of which was a set of friendly looking, if not especially animated, cardboard fans. Just a few rows of them, which meant they could model social-distancing behavior without complaint.

And beyond the newly conceived characteristics of game day: “When state and university mandates severely limited the number of people that
could be in the same space indoors, we created satellite weight rooms both indoors and outdoors, so that we could have multiple places for lifting weights, which would allow teams to spread out. We had to create distanced indoor and outdoor spaces for meals and team meetings."

The pandemic might have had an effect on future sports seasons as well. Jon Scheyer, the associate head coach for men’s basketball—later named the future head coach—talked on a North Carolina radio show about the weirdness that had hit recruiting. (When Coach K was quarantined because of potential COVID-19, Scheyer scored his first win as a temporary, at that point, head coach.) “It’s changed dramatically,” he said. Normally, college coaches “would’ve seen these guys two or three times in person already. Now, obviously, you take away the opportunity to see them play in person and evaluate them. And then you get a lot out of meeting someone in person or doing a home visit or a school visit. We’ve done Zoom visits, just like everybody else, and we’ve had to make some decisions without seeing guys in person.” Likewise, the recruits were being deprived of the routine of getting to know coaches and potential teammates in personal space.

**CREATING STUFF**

In a characteristically warm fall day in 2020—this was Durham, after all—I happened upon a group that, in normal times, would be crammed into personal space with Duke fans. By the main bus stop on East Campus, I watched an informal, pop-up appearance by the Duke University Marching Band, affectionately known as DUMB in the greater Duke world. They played some standards from their repertoire—notably the Duke fight song, predictably titled “Fight, Blue Devils, Fight,” along with a bit of Beyoncé, Usher, and Taio Cruz. Rousing enough, but with a tiny crowd of curious students.

For the band, as for the basketball teams, it would not be a standard season. Before the start of the semester, the band director, Jeff Au, had told his group, “To answer the question on most people’s minds lately, we are well aware that things will not operate this year as they have in the past.” Not surprisingly, in such constrained musical circumstances, the number of first-year members dropped to about thirty from the usual fifty or sixty. Still, looking to a time when music making would again be a thing, Au mentioned that he wasn’t giving up on the band prospects who had dropped away. And his messages to his band members were hardly all downbeat: On at least one occasion, he adjusted his email signature to read: Jeff “played mah trumpet with a face mask and it was not at all traumatic” Au. (He told
me he continued to play his trumpet, at least a few minutes every day, for pandemic-time relaxation.)

Operating in a different way meant that DUMB had to be smart around COVID-19 concerns. One basic question for the band: Since flute playing, for example, entails deep breathing and sometimes forced exhaling, would it produce the risk of acting like a viral spray gun?

Au called my attention to a series of pandemic-inspired, aerosol-related studies, some cosponsored by the College Band Directors National Association. In the early days of the pandemic, results—like the aerosolized particles themselves—were all over the place. Science magazine reported one study, out of the University of Colorado at Boulder, found that musical instruments “can produce aerosols in the range of sizes that can carry the COVID-19 virus. These aerosols can also stay airborne for long periods of time, and different instruments produced different amounts. For instance, the trumpet and clarinet, which run straighter from the mouthpiece to the instrument opening, had higher concentrations of aerosols.” On the other hand, there was research from the University of Minnesota published in (naturally) the Journal of Aerosol Studies. The researchers pointed to a “human thermal plume effect,” referring to “the upward air flow created by a person’s temperature being higher than the air around them.” The majority of the aerosols, then, appeared to be carried safely upward by the draft.

Aerosol trajectories notwithstanding, the band directors association landed on a set of musical standards. Every band player in rehearsal would have to wear a mask—tight enough so that “an outline appears after it is removed”—with the additional feature of “multilayered bell covers” for players of wind instruments. Some of the language around the recommendations was bewilderingly technical, a meshing of the medical, the musical, and the indecipherable: “The bell covers for woodwinds and brass should be made of a multilayer cover, with the center layer being made of MERV-13 filter material, or a three-layer, surgical-style mask using a standard such as GB/T32310.”

So Au reminded those on wind instruments to cut a slit into one face mask for playing and, when they were done playing, to be doubly masked. Everyone had to honor social-distance parameters. The set distances depended on whether they were playing (in which case the separation expectation was just over eleven feet) or pausing (seven-and-a-half feet); they also depended on what instrument they were playing (percussion, wind). Those guidelines, he explained, related to familiar rules around the spacing of marching band members: A marcher aims to keep a constant pace or step size while marching,
so that he or she might cover five yards in precisely eight steps. Practices were “low intensity”—shorter, less frequent, and focusing on eight or ten songs for the semester, rather than the usual portfolio of fifty or so. One of his themes for practices, Au said, was “less stress.” It was all about “keeping the group fully together” until standard operations resumed, “hopefully in the fall.” Until then, “It’s just a matter of having something that feels like a seminormal activity.”

I learned that Au was a Duke history maker. Back in 2006, he added “Every Time We Touch” to the band’s performance; it was then played during the basketball season. Since then, it had been adopted by the students as an unofficial anthem—a bit of music I would catch several times during the 2020–2021 academic year, as performance limited as the year was.

The promise of several bits of music led me to a Friday night concert. It was virtual, though with some pleasing visual accompaniment—birds in flight and pictured in other birdlike contexts, a painting in a grid pattern against a striking green background, floating musical scores. The concert came about through a commission to four composers in the Music Department’s graduate program. “The parameters of the commission were unorthodox,” according to the accompanying commentary. It involved meeting “the compositional and performing challenges created by the COVID-19 pandemic by creating short works” that could be performed remotely—as in this concert—by the Ciompi Quartet, Duke’s in-residence string quartet.

One of the composing students, James Budinich (“Rotation Study”), had found inspiration in Danish composer Pelle Gudmundsen-Holmgreen, whom he was researching for his PhD dissertation. Budinich was drawn to Gudmundsen-Holmgreen’s practice of organizing notes not into strict beats (a beat being an unchanging tempo or a steady pulse in music), but rather into looser sections. That technique would work in ensuring the performers stayed together as they performed remotely. Ryan Harrison (“Disconnected”) had landed on “aleatoric” music, or music that leaves one or more elements to chance. He said, “I composed the piece in distinct sections, because I didn’t want a continuous stream of music that would be hard for musicians in different spaces to keep together.” In some passages, each member of the quartet would have four motive fragments composed of two pitches. “The performer gets to choose the order and tempo of the patterns they play, so they aren’t required or expected to play together.” James Chu had invested his composing energy in “Mk,” referring to “mark,” a studio composition in which each musician overdubs his or her part. His mother is an artist and a tea-ceremony master, so Chu grew up with the sounds of the
ceremony. His intent was to "create a space in which the listener can experience a communal sense of warmth through the soundscape of the tea room."

And Maximiliano Amici explained his "Mirage" as building off homorhythmic sections, which make it easier for the players to stay together, alternating with sections where a single instrument predominates. He was reaching for "a meditation on solitude and insularity"; he wanted the work to reflect "the challenges that we face as we go through the social isolation" imposed by the pandemic. "While physically distanced musicians playing from their private spaces do present a unique sort of beauty, they express also an intrinsic melancholy, as they embody a form of loss."

Demonstrating musical expertise, whether through strings or on an aerosolizing instrument, was never in my repertoire. My strongest musical memory from childhood is of the family beagle retreating to the far corners of the house—looking forlorn as only beagles can look forlorn—as I struggled to hit clear notes on the clarinet. I had long been drawn to the visual arts, though; for me, getting absorbed in visual culture is an aspect of wellness. I spent a chunk of one summer in a painting program (or programme, locally speaking) in England's Lake District. We were painting in the spirit, and not far from the lakeside house, of the Victorian-era art critic and watercolorist John Ruskin, for whom "truth to nature" was the artistic imperative. For another painting summer, I found myself in the Umbrian hilltop town of Assisi; it's best known, artistically, for the late thirteenth-century cycle of the life of St. Francis, attributed (with some dispute) to Giotto.

Neither experience secured my artistic reputation. In the Lake District, I found myself impatient with the stay-still-and-paint-something mandate; I identified more with the get-up-and-go sensibility of Wordsworth, wandering as he did, lonely as a cloud. In Assisi, I deployed the reds, yellows, and ochres of the town for a Mark Rothko-inspired composition of shimmering horizontal shapes. The instructor was clearly distressed over my shaping and shimmering attempts. She grabbed the brush from my hand, applied her own corrective touches, and pronounced the work done.

Feeling eager to get creative, if somewhat less eager to show off the limits of my creativity, several times during that peak pandemic academic year, 2020-2021, I sought out the virtual programming of DukeCreate. It offers "hands-on workshops"—usually of the in-person variety—"designed to help Duke students, staff, and faculty develop a variety of creative skills." One creative offering was "Paint Like Bob Ross," which sounded at once delightful and daring. I had read a piece in the Atlantic that asked the question, "Why Is Bob Ross Still So Popular?" As the writer, Michael J. Mooney, put it, "A
Bob Ross level of positivity is contagious.” That certainly sounded like an inviting kind of contagion. “As the coronavirus pandemic has spread and the world has gone inside, tens of millions of people have turned to old *Joy of Painting* episodes,” Mooney reported. “Bob Ross is the ultimate calming presence.”

Preparing to profit from such a calming (though long-deceased) presence, I set myself up in my sunroom. There, just next to my upside-down goggles—that equipment not being conspicuously useful for this exercise—I reached for my freshly acquired art supplies: an eleven-by-fourteen-inch canvas, a round brush and a flat brush, a mixing palette, a paper towel, a water cup, and then the acrylic paints—pink, yellow, blue, white, green, purple, and black. The workshop was taught, remotely, by Christine Holton. She’s a “mixed-media teaching artist,” with a portfolio that ranges from abstractions to pet portraits. She welcomed us to her version of *The Joy of Painting*; we would be re-creating Bob Ross’s *Autumn Fantasy*, a work, we were told, that “depicts a serene landscape and highlights brilliant colors.” We would learn “how to blend paint smoothly on canvas,” and explore “how to show depth and space in a landscape painting.” And we would leave with “a complete eleven-by-fourteen painting.”

Holton zoomed in tightly on her own blank canvas. We were meant to follow along as her composition took shape, and to listen to her accompanying narrative—the basic Bob Ross formula. She started us off gently: Take the thicker brush; dip it in water; thin out some scoops of the pink on the palette so that it’s a lighter pink; and beginning at the top of the canvas, go back and forth and spread the color. “This is all background,” she told us. “It doesn’t need to be a perfect gradient. You can have streaks in it.” I, for one, needed the reassurance.

As her canvas grew into a more recognizable work of art (and mine remained not recognizable as much of anything), Holton served up some favorite quotes from the extensive collection of Rossian wisdom: “You need the dark in order to show the light.” “However you think it should be, that’s exactly how it should be.” “Go out on a limb; that’s where the fruit is.” “We want happy paintings. Happy paintings. If you want sad things, watch the news.” And, of course, “We don’t make mistakes. We just have happy accidents.” She offered, as well, her own painterly advice and encouragement: “If it’s drippy, the paint is too thin; you’ve got too much water.” “Don’t press too hard on the brush.” “It’s fun to play with color mixing. You learn so much.” “Fill in those spaces with green and dark brown. There’s no way to get it wrong.” “You don’t need to make everything super regular.”
thing in composition theory is an odd number of shapes”—though Ross once insisted that he would sometimes apply even numbers of shapes, just to upset the critics.

The trees—which we began shaping as silhouettes, simple vertical lines—emerged as one of the greater compositional challenges. We were guided to highlight the tops of the trees with a lighter green, which would help the eye of the viewer travel up the canvas. To stagger the trees as an indication of receding distance—the lower on the canvas the trees are, Holton reminded us, the closer they are. To make the trees “dimensional,” by highlighting one side that would be capturing light—maybe through dabs of pink, yellow, and light brown—and then painting the other side, the side in shadow, with a darker brown. And to add some texture through “blobby strokes, irregular strokes” of the brush, along with an interesting smudging effect—achieved by way of “one of my favorite tools when I’m painting: my finger.”

Showing off her animal-portraitist side, Holton finished off her painting at the very bottom, with the delightful suggestion of a squirrel: “Just a little spiral for the tail. Maybe a little cartoonish.” (After all, Bob Ross once said, “This is a happy place: little squirrels live here and play.”) Then she urged us to sign the work—“like a real artist would, in a lower corner.” Finally, she urged us to hold up our work to the camera. The affirming superlatives followed: “Beautiful! Gorgeous! Oh, my gosh! I love these! We have some star painters.” This high-velocity demonstration was fun to try to keep up with, at least for me, as a decidedly nonstar and reliably slow painter. But more than a little frustrating. It was easy to imagine the instructor looking over the creative work-in-progress of each of these eager painters, delivering doses of encouragement and advice. Easy to imagine, but tough to accomplish in a Zoomified workshop.

A different DukeCreate program, also right for the moment, attracted me because the act of creation here wouldn’t even attempt to be Bob Ross-like, but instead would be so individual, so anything-goes minded, as to be built on happy accidents. That was “Make a Self-Care Zine,” advertised as a form of self-expression that “will be all about how you’re taking care of yourself in this pandemic.” It was taught by Janelle Hutchinson, a designer and photographer for the Duke Libraries. The hand-made booklets would be about anything we wanted, from bad poetry to offbeat observations. Filling them up would be, she assured participants, “a fun little way to be artistic and to express yourself.” I liked the randomness.

Hutchinson had us start with an eight-and-a-half-by-eleven piece of paper, fold it just so, cut it just so, watch a newly shaped booklet emerge,
and start filling it in. ("If we were in-person, it would be so much easier to show the folding part.") For the first page, we were to consider this question: How do you know if you’re having a bad day? Our job was to craft an answer by writing or drawing something. And so on for the pages that followed: What do you do to make your day better? How would you describe a day that felt really, really good? (She offered the pleasing sequence of a Sunday on the beach, a visit to the lighthouse, and the treat of some late-day pizza.) What was one good thing—say, your newfound devotion to puzzles—that has emerged from the pandemic? What have you learned during the pandemic about the world, or about yourself? How have you helped others through these days of misery? What is your biggest hope after the pandemic is finally over?

We had, in the end, expressed ourselves, and, perhaps incidentally, we had done a little caring for yourselves. “We did it! We made a zine!” Hutchinson declared. “Hopefully it’s filled with all kinds of things.” Someone remarked in the chat, “The coolest activity ever.”

**SPIRITUAL UPLIFT**

Religious attachment is an eternal interest of mine, though not an interest I’ve really put into practice. Personal beliefs aside, Duke’s motto is *Eruditio et Religio*, so being faithful to Duke’s self-image would mean exploring what life in the pandemic meant for religious life.

I connected with Emma Mehlhop, who was happy to sketch her religious education as a student, including her surprising discovery of her Jewish heritage. Over winter break a couple of years earlier, her grandmother had mentioned her own (previously obscured) Jewish background—meaning that the family’s Jewish lineage, according to tradition, extended to Mehlhop. She started going to Shabbat (the marking of a day of rest by lighting candles and reciting a blessing) and observing Jewish holidays during a study-abroad semester in Vietnam, of all places.

In 2020–2021, her senior year, most of her religious practices were virtual. Among those virtual encounters was a seminar series built on lessons from Judaism about racial justice, along with another on how Jewish identity would fit into career choices and other postcollege doings. The latter delved into “friendship and relationships” as a theme, with plunges into the commentary of Maimonides, the foremost intellectual figure of medieval Judaism. Channeling another thinker on friendship, Aristotle, Maimonides wrote of “three types of friends: a friend befriended for the sake of benefit, a friend
befriended for the sake of satisfaction, and a friend befriended for the sake of higher purpose.” The most interesting category, the third, implied “a situation where both desire and focus on a single objective—doing good. Each will desire to draw strength from the other in order to attain this good for them both. This is the type of friend [the mishnah] commanded of us to acquire—for example the comradeship between a teacher and disciple.”

From there, Mehlhop and her seminar group pondered a range of questions: Could she think of people in her life in each of the three categories? Would she add more categories? Which of these types of relationships did she most want to pursue in the future? Are there certain types of relationships she wished she had more of, or less of, in her life? How would that friendship formula apply to a romantic relationship? Which of the categories did she think her friends fell into at Duke?

As absorbing as she found the seminar, the idea of absorbing Judaism over a screen, in general, was tough for her. “It was really hard not to be in person. A lot of Judaism centers on community, on being together physically, on praying together and sharing a meal around the Shabbat service. It was so sad to me that we would lose the ability to sing together. One person would begin a song, and the rest of us would be muted behind our screens.”

Still, in a pandemic-inflected senior year, Mehlhop looked to Jewish Life at Duke as a consistent connection. She valued the offerings, she told me, especially given how her other campus activities, such as the dance groups into which she had poured a lot of creative energy, had exited the stage. And just a few weeks before graduation, Jewish Life provided one of the culminating moments of her time at Duke: her bat mitzvah, a coming-of-age ceremony usually held after a girl reaches the age of twelve or thirteen. As she was learning her Torah portion, she had worried about what the ceremony might look like in the pandemic. Would it be virtual? Would she be reciting in a completely guest-free setting, with the podium on which the Torah would be read, known as the bimah, placed outdoors? Eventually, the ceremony was held in the sanctuary of Duke’s Freeman Center. Mehlhop was allowed to invite seven friends, who would socially distance themselves.

Mehlhop’s experience, shaped as it was by a reinvented notion of a faith community, recalled, for me, some recently delivered words of inspiration. They came from Joyce Gordon, director of Jewish Life, in the early days of the pandemic, just as Shabbat was becoming virtual and “we got into the habit of logging on to Zoom at five o’clock in the afternoon each Friday, seeing the faces of our Duke Jewish community in Brady Bunch-style boxes.” One lesson quickly learned, she went on, was that ritual was more necessary than
ever. “Community rituals are powerful and soul nourishing; their absence has made many of us feel a sense of loss during this time.” Given so much uncertainty, “logging on to our virtual Shabbat each Friday has become a meaningful weekly ritual for our students and for me.” Shabbat had retained its power as “a grounding pause in our week,” she noted. It was a tradition that had sustained the Jewish people for centuries. And so the virtual Shabbat had become an important touch point for a Duke Jewish community in a digital diaspora.

Maybe the most serene and satisfying—almost sacred—activity for me, in the virtual domain, was beamed out of Duke’s most venerable and recognizable space. As a university, Duke is not even a hundred years old, so it is not notably tradition driven. But one majestic, musical, spiritual exception played out over the holiday season: the performance of Handel’s Messiah. Duke offers no more suitable setting, no better place to handle all that Handel, than Duke Chapel, a Neo-Gothic concoction designed to soothe the soul and elevate the senses. For almost ninety years, the performance had been a campus ritual, right as final exams are in their final phase. It’s a time when, presumably, the whole community is looking to take a break from the rigors of academic life, to embrace an immersive and uplifting encounter. It’s a season of celebration and anticipation. One calendar year, one academic semester is over. Another awaits.

As the fall of 2020, with all of its disconnections, was receding, something more uplifting was returning. I was tuned in to Duke Chapel. Tuned in remotely, that is. There was nothing soaring about my sunroom and nothing Gothic about my computer screen, but through the miracle of Zoom, I was placed inside the chapel and spotting elements of the familiar holiday array: rows and rows of brilliant red poinsettias. And as the camera tracked along the chapel aisles, I took in rows and rows of pews, all empty of concertgoers. Such a mixed picture provided reminders of normal times. Reminders of what was out of joint with these times.

On the computer screen popped up the wonderfully named Zebulon Highben, director of chapel music, as he introduced the program, titled “Handel’s Messiah: A Chapel Tradition Reimagined.” That reimagining, he said, meant adherence to pandemic protocols, from COVID-19 testing of the participating performers to the testing of the chapel’s airflow. It would have been far easier just to play a recording, but, as Highben described it, “music is a living, breathing art, and there is something about live performance that is more vibrant and fulfilling than even the greatest recordings.” And this
particular tradition is in part about community, individuals bound together by Handel's music.

The "orchestral forces" gathered in the chapel—set to perform live "the sinfonias, arias, and recitatives" of Part One of The Messiah—would be far fewer than usual, and the necessary physical separation would make it challenging for them to hear each other. Virtual choruses would be created from recordings from the previous year's concerts. Scrolling images of the vocal score would pop up on the viewer's screen, and the audience would be invited to sing along, as usual, though now from home. (More than 6,800 "tickets"—links to the chapel's webcast—had been distributed.) "Our AV crew," Highben noted, "has their work cut out for them."

The message of The Messiah is a message of hope, he added. Hope that is needed right now, hope that "speaks across the centuries, yet still speaks in the present tense."
How had the pandemic changed expectations for college-bound students? Frank Bruni had this to say in his New York Times column: “Getting into the college of your dreams is a boutique concern. But for many teenagers who have organized their school years around that goal, it’s everything. And it’s going to be different this admission season. It may well be different forevermore.”

Bruni, who had long complained about (and had written a book about) “college admission mania,” speculated that at least in the short term, high school students’ thinking about colleges would be “less emotional and more practical.” Those students would come to realize that an excellent education can be obtained at colleges that were less expensive and closer to home—and presumably were at a lower rung on the prestige ladder. “Colleges had previously presented themselves to students as nurturing homes away from home, then had to send those students packing when the virus spread. Colleges were endless parties, then the partying stopped. They touted the intimacies of classroom instruction, then had to defend the tuition-worthy effectiveness of remote learning. How can students not feel some skepticism in the wake of all that?”
An interesting set of speculations to pursue. Also interesting to note, Duke announced later that it was hiring Bruni away from the *Times*. Starting in the fall of 2021, he would be the Eugene C. Patterson Professor in the Sanford School of Public Policy.

**BUILDING THE NEWEST COHORT**

In the summer of 2020, as he was gearing up for what would be a new version of the familiar fall recruiting season, Duke's dean of Undergraduate Admissions, Christoph Guttentag, told me the selection process would be even more complicated than usual. High schoolers across the country were being taught and evaluated in very different ways: Their "normal" semesters had ended abruptly the previous spring; and some high school seniors would be learning online, some would be back in classrooms, and many would veer between the two circumstances. Some would be evaluated in their classes with a simple pass or fail, rather than through the traditional letter grades. The usual extracurricular opportunities were casualties of the pandemic. Likewise the summer opportunities for personal or intellectual growth at home or in some interesting part of the world. And like a lot of colleges and universities, Duke had announced that, at least for this admissions cycle, it would be test-optional—a nod to the complexities of preparing for a standardized test or even finding a testing location.

The recruiting routine, too, would not be the familiar routine. The in-person information sessions, tours, and open houses went away. So did the standard visits by admissions officers to high schools. Still, Undergraduate Admissions aimed to shape some lively, screen-oriented substitutes. And by the end of the admissions cycle, Guttentag was talking about virtual recruitment as an interesting equalizer for prospective students: It was simply easier for students without a lot of financial resources to “visit” the campus and to access Duke-specific information virtually.

Wondering what it might be like for one of those virtual visitors, I checked out a virtual Fall Forum. I ended up joining more than fifteen hundred high school seniors who were looking to several days of sampling virtual classes, learning about everything from how to apply for financial aid to how to navigate Duke's dizzying array of international offerings, and finding an exercise break through, say, an online Duke Recreation Pilates session. As they plugged into the program, an interactive activity kicked in, and those aspiring Dukies were tested on Duke trivia: How old Duke
will be in 2024 (one hundred years old); how to spell the name of the men’s basketball coach (Krzyzewski, or “K,” as some suggested in the chat space).

From there, various administrators delivered some version of welcoming remarks. Their delivery was in front of an empty auditorium. Among them was Guttentag, who made the Duke-familiar case for a place that is “not afraid of trying something new,” that embraces “a spirit of restlessness and experimentation,” and that draws students who are at once ambitious and supportive of each other. One of his admissions colleagues ended the opening segment by inviting the participants to turn on their video screens, get into the act, and show off their best dance moves to “Every Time We Touch.” She acknowledged the strangeness of the theme at a time when human contact was seriously limited. “Every time we touch we get this feeling” just wasn’t happening; “I still feel your touch in my dreams”—maybe so, in the world of the past and the future.

Beyond that one-time event, the unusual—though logical—feature of admissions events “on the road” was that, well, they weren’t on the road. Duke people, including admissions people, officially were not traveling. Instead, Guttentag invited me to take in an “Apply to Duke” session, led by Susan Semonite in Undergraduate Admissions. It drew more than two hundred viewers, largely high school seniors; beyond the United States, they plugged in from Bangladesh, China, Egypt, Greece, India, Jamaica, Kazakhstan, Malaysia, Turkey, the United Arab Emirates, the United Kingdom, and elsewhere. “I wish you were all visiting us in person,” Semonite assured them. Just 15 percent, in a real-time, online poll, reported having visited the campus—the campus being a huge selling point in normal times. Throughout the hour, she and her team answered a flurry of questions revealing a mix of enthusiasm and anxiety: What’s the typical course load? Can students double major? Can you give us the profile of the latest applicant group? How do admissions officers evaluate applicants? How does the advising system work? How is first-year housing decided? How strong is the entrepreneurial culture? What’s Duke’s alumni network like? What are some of Duke’s fun traditions?

Showing images of students clustered together and bedecked in Duke sweatshirts, jackets, and T-shirts—images from the prepandemic years—Semonite mentioned that in this particular year, Duke pride had found expression in Duke-branded face masks. She pushed the point that Duke played close attention to whether applicants pursued the learning opportunities available to them. In the context of this disruptive time for high schoolers, she
talked about the importance of teacher and counselor recommendations. Then came some important statistics, first around financing a Duke education: the total cost of attendance is $78,828; 67 percent graduate debt free; 50 percent receive financial assistance as students. She stressed that Duke has no academic-score cutoffs in considering applicants. But she delivered a dose of realism: Last year’s applicant pool numbered 35,486, pointing to a super-competitive admissions cycle. As it turned out, for the coming year, it would be super-super-competitive.

As I looked through the admissions website, I ran across an intriguing job title: COVID-19 planning and response coordinator. The individual filling that role was Thea Dowrich, then a Duke senior. When I talked with her, she mentioned the importance of the student-led tour for her decision to apply to Duke; at the time, she was dropping by the campus from Japan, where she was a junior in high school. She would rise through the student ranks as an admissions tour guide. In this new role, she would help shape a virtual replacement for her fondly remembered first encounter with the campus. Three times a week at noon, fifty or sixty Duke hopefuls would visit virtually with her team of students. The not-exactly-on-campus tours would feature a series of campus beauty shots. Each image would be a springboard to outline some feature of campus life: student wellness, clubs and activities, study abroad, student advising, research opportunities, the arts, dining, sports.

It all worked well enough, in her view. But she told me she missed the spontaneous encounters that add authenticity to a real campus tour—the random sighting of a former roommate that might prompt a discussion about making friends in college, the look inside a library that would stir a conversation about favorite places to study.

A prospective applicant might have found some of that yearned-for authenticity off the website. It featured a couple of first-year students (actually former first-years; they had turned older since the posting) sketching out their “typical” Duke days: Leaving the dorm by 9:20 in the morning for “a made-to-order omelet, hash browns, yogurt with granola and fruit, a pastry or two, and some apple juice.” After an Italian class, making plans to have lunch with the professor—a subsidized eating activity at Duke. Attending a meeting of a robotics club. Taking in a “Policy Choice as Values Conflict” class that included a student presentation on cyberwarfare. Taking in a math class that discussed how derivatives might be applied to manufacturing cars more cost-effectively. Building in studying time at the library for some review of organic chemistry, along with a caramel macchiato and pumpkin...
bread in the library café. Enduring a late-night student government meeting. And finally, as one put it, devoting postmidnight hours to “hanging out with friends” and “laughing about absolutely anything and everything.”

THE RESULTS ARE IN

Despite all the necessary pivoting, a banner year in admissions was shaping up. According to Guttentag, it was “a little bit of a surprise,” but one shared, more or less, by its peer universities. Duke announced in December 2020 that it had attracted a record number of early decision applicants—5,036, up 16 percent from the previous year, and the greatest number in the university’s history. By January, the regular-admit deadline, Duke had collected almost fifty thousand applications, up 25 percent from the previous year and the largest one-year increase in the university’s history.

(The experience with Undergraduate Admissions was reflected in the graduate and professional schools. Law schools nationwide saw a 30 percent increase in applications; applications to Duke Law increased by 46 percent over the previous year. Duke Law also had a much higher yield—a term in the admissions world referring to accepted applicants who actually enroll—than normal. The result was a big 1L class. To deal with those numbers, the school hired additional first-year teachers and career counselors. Why the surge? No one at Duke had a definitive answer. Theories ranged from the perception that law would be an avenue into a social-justice career, to the fact that one impact of the pandemic was to make the typically intimidating LSAT online and shorter.)

For their essays, applicants were asked to say something about their COVID-19 circumstances. One future Duke enrollee reflected on how the coronavirus hit home: “Seeing my dad kneeling before a microscopic enemy I couldn’t fight made me realize what really needed my attention…. It was undoubtedly the hardest and most isolating period of my life.” Similarly: “My mother is everything to me. She’s also everything to Anchorage, where half of Alaska’s population resides. She’s one of Anchorage’s lead ER physicians. I’d heard news programs broadcasting COVID statistics. I’d seen newspaper headlines citing new cases. My mother’s stories impacted me more. She returned exhausted from shifts…. I’d learn how many she intubated. Worse, I’d hear how many she watched die. But I’d witness her satisfaction in how many she saved. I sensed the responsibility she shouldered.” And from a much different geography, a similar fixation on lives upended—and on lives ended: “I was living in the epicenter of the pandemic, just twelve miles from
New York City. We were at a breaking point, with hospitals overwhelmed, a US Navy hospital ship anchored on the Hudson River, and refrigerator trucks converted into makeshift morgues for COVID-19 victims. My family is close-knit, but the pandemic amplified tensions and our anxieties.

As the so-called candidate reply date—the date by which accepted students, no longer anxious about their Duke chances, would have to notify Duke if they intended to enroll—was approaching, I reconnected with Guttentag. It was a somewhat surreal connection: I was Zooming, as usual in the pandemic context. He was clearly in his office. While the admissions building was being renovated, he had been relocated just a short hop down a hallway from my office. If this were normal times for both of us, it would have been the easiest thing in the world to wander over and start the conversation. The thought of having to Zoomify it would have seemed absurd.

The first thing he told me is that he would resist the notion that the applicant pool was transformed in how it looked in this cycle. "I don't think I'd go that far. That suggests a sea change. I think the applicant pool was a little different, it had some different texture to it, it was certainly more diverse, it was certainly larger, there were certainly students in it who wouldn't have applied before. But when we were reading applications, we weren't saying, these are different kinds of applicants." With that said, Guttentag acknowledged that this would be a class set to begin college with a different kind of background—challenged in their ability to master subject areas as they finished off high school, frustrated by the long absence of peer connections so basic to their social development.

The selection process often comes down to small differences, Guttentag said, and in that sense, this year wasn't an outlier. The qualities he and his staff always looked for—inclintect, impact, persistence, kindness, interesting talents—they continued to look for. Sometimes they had to ferret out those qualities in new ways: "The students who would have stood out in the past found a way to stand out this year as well. They weren't as involved in as many activities, they didn't have as many opportunities to make an impact in their communities, and some of them were profoundly affected by COVID. But the students who have imagination continued to show imagination. The students who are intellectually strong continued to be intellectually strong. The students who asked interesting questions in class continued to ask interesting questions in class."

As for the size of the applicant pool: "Obviously, a test-optional environment made a difference. There were students who, in the past, would have had standardized test scores that they thought made them less competitive.
in our pool. Some of those students came from families and communities with a lot of resources. Some came from families and communities without those resources. Whatever the category, this time around, those students said, ‘Why not give Duke a shot?’” Students had observed what happened with early decision and early action back in December. “A lot of highly selective colleges saw a meaningful increase in applicants, like we did.” They figured, then, that in such a competitive year, it would be important to hedge their bets—meaning it seemed to make sense to apply to lots and lots of colleges.

Those early decision and early action numbers signaled that there might be similarly big numbers for regular admissions. And there was a carryover effect from the previous admissions cycle. A lot of students had decided to take a gap year, rather than beginning their time in college as remote learners. If you were looking to joining the Class of 2025 pretty much anywhere, you recognized that there would be fewer spaces for newly accepted students. “Applicants were feeling the ground shift under their feet a little bit. They were less certain about what would happen with admissions decisions in the spring. So instead of applying to eight or nine or ten colleges, they applied to fifteen.”

Guttentag also mentioned the flight-to-quality or flight-to-value effect. He shared a chart that showed a huge upward swing in applications to Duke between 2007 and 2011—an increase of more than eleven thousand over those four years. That stretch coincided with the Great Recession. “At the time, that surprised me. I actually thought that because there were so many people in such financial difficulty, applications might level off or even decline a little. But the exact opposite happened.” Part of the reason then was Duke’s very public commitment to a robust financial-aid program. Part of the reason, too, then and now, might have been that “colleges with high visibility and strong reputations benefit when times are uncertain. I think that’s what we saw. People felt they knew us, even if they didn’t have a chance to visit.”

Another plus for Duke in drawing applicants was the perception that, as those prospective students checked things out in the fall of 2020, Duke was handling COVID well: “My colleagues mentioned it, I mentioned it when I was doing recruiting in my region—all of it virtual, of course. Before I would meet with students or parents, I would pull up the weekly COVID report and talk about the small number of cases on campus. We had first-year students on campus, we had sophomores on campus, we never switched to entirely remote learning and living. It was good news, and people were anxious for good news, especially when the vaccines hadn’t yet been made available. People were anxious to imagine the normal.”
As the size of the pool became apparent, Guttentag had to make some adjustments to the work of his staff. Some experienced staff members who, for example, had responsibilities that had shrunk during the pandemic were reassigned as application readers. (Every application, he assured me, was read, as always, from beginning to end.) And the usual notification date, March 23 or so, was stretched out to April 5, 2021—an added interlude that awarded more time to read and process those applications.

On that revised date, April 5, regular-decision applicants to the Class of 2025 learned their fate at a specific time: seven o’clock in the evening. Aspiring Dukies would be suddenly positioned on one or the other end of the emotional spectrum—either unalloyed joy or, much more likely, disappointment. The application surge meant that Duke would admit 4.3 percent of regular-decision applicants. That was lower than 6 percent for the Class of 2024, and 5.7 percent for the Class of 2023.

I decided to sample the evening through the Duke strand of College Confidential, a website geared to making admissions-anxious high schoolers feel that they were in good company. I started with some of the older posts, which, naturally, pointed to a level of anxiety that would just be elevated over time. One example: “I just found out that one of my teacher’s [sic] who wrote me a recommendation letter wrote a name other than mine by mistake, it happened only once. The rest of the recommendation has my name. Will that affect my chances of getting in?” That would seem like a small slipup during a school year when a lot of teachers came to know their students largely through screen time. Then there were the students boldly advertising their credentials and suggesting—implicitly or not so implicitly—that Duke couldn’t conceivably make the mistake of rejecting them: “I got a 1460 on the SAT, 800 on SAT Math-2, and 780 on SAT-Physics. I got almost perfect grades at school.”

As the decision hour approached on that fateful April evening, the tone of the online conversation became sharper—sometimes resigned, sometimes desperate. “Duke, if you’re listening, let me in,” went one plea. Others announced in their posts, “Did not sleep at all,” or “Pls I’m going to pass out.” “Does anyone from ED [early decision] round or previous years know if Duke releases a few minutes before 7:00 or exactly at 7:00?” someone wondered, with eyes obviously fixed on the countdown clock. And preparing for what might have seemed inevitable, another simply said, with a small parade of exclamation points: “Rejection here we come!!! Bracing for it!!!” As the hour came and went, I found myself wading through a bad-news stream: “Rejected.” “Rejected. Oh well.” “Rejected. Expected it.” “Did anyone here get
accepted? This is crazy.” “Holy crap! 50,000 applications for 1,200 spots?!?! Makes me feel better about the rejection.” “That was one of the nicest rejection letters I’ve ever gotten.”

There was, too, the occasional ripple of good news. “Accepted,” accompanied by a smiley face (or by some number of expressive exclamation points). “OMG, I got in.” “Accepted! Thank you, Duke.”

EXITS AND ENTRANCES

Having invested some time in experiencing the intake of students, I wanted to do some exploring of outcomes, through the work of Duke’s Career Center. The center was under new management. Greg Victory had come in as its director over the summer of 2020, a hire that had the effect of inspiring silly headlines in campus publications, generally some version of “A Victory for Duke.” He reminded me that, according to a recent survey, some 86 percent of college-bound students weigh career prospects in making their college choice. So his work, whether or not it was caught up in a pandemic, would play into the all-important perception of the value of a Duke education.

As an expert on careers, Victory found it remarkable that his was among the first positions at Duke around which the hiring process was done almost exclusively online. He, along with the other finalists for the position, had been flown into Raleigh-Durham International Airport; he had met with the fifteen-member search committee at an airport hotel. The second round in the interviewing routine was set for the spring—right when Duke essentially shut down the campus as the pandemic became a worrisome factor. So that plan changed suddenly. The next set of interviews instead ended up in virtual space. He had visited Durham, briefly, some fifteen years ago. But, he told me, “I took the job never having set foot on Duke’s campus.”

All through the following fall, he was meeting new colleagues virtually. He joked that one of those colleagues, when finally seeing him in person, noted how remarkable it was that Victory, a familiar face (but only a face) on the computer screen, actually had legs.

Victory encouraged me to sample one of the Career Center’s programs—held virtually, of course. This one featured five alumni working in the life sciences, with jobs ranging from data analytics for a startup to a “hybrid” of lab science and clinical work. Asked by the student moderator if any of them had contemplated a change in career path, one observed, “If you’ve gone through a medical residency and not questioned your path, then I commend you.” They all acknowledged pivoting in their career—at least
once, and as many as four times. Most said they had managed to strike a good balance between their work and home lives; one noted that the pandemic had provided the single benefit of limiting her work-related travel. Asked to succinctly define the mind-set that they bring every day to their work, they veered between the practical to the attitudinal: project management, communication, time management, humility. And what qualities were important to success, postgraduation? The two that stood out were effective networking, with an emphasis on effective; and the always-applicable persistence. Some career opportunities had stood out in this pandemic time, they told their student audience, with telehealth being one example.

They suggested that the students, as they consider potential employers, seek out alumni as advocates and advice givers. And they pressed the need to be globally aware and to keep up with current events through sources like the New York Times and the Wall Street Journal.

We could try to look at 2020–2021 “in terms of silver linings,” Victory told me. “And there are some things we learned from the remote nature of our work.” One was that individual advising sessions for students could work over Zoom; at Duke, the Career Center doesn’t inhabit a particularly central location, and just making the trip can be a hassle for hyperscheduled students. Likewise, the standard workshops and programs—setting professional goals, writing effective cover letters, networking basics, interviewing strategies—had been, for decades, offered in person. In that format, they might draw forty students. But recorded over Zoom, they might draw four hundred students, any of whom could watch as their schedules allow. They might even be a piece of what faculty members include in their online course materials, so that career planning becomes embedded in the curriculum. And the life sciences program revealed another scheduling reality: It’s a lot easier to gather alumni volunteers in front of their computers, at some set time, than to ask them to carve out the time to fly to Durham for advice-giving sessions.

As for the other side of the career-planning dynamic, Victory told me that he imagines shifts in the way employers engage with students. In the past, a representative might come to campus, and, with a dozen students showing up, spend an hour talking about the company. That sort of encounter, along with the usual first-round interviews between potential employer and student, might shift to virtual space. There might continue to be the occasional campus-based career fair; traditionally they produced a lot of buzz and they drew a good attendance among students and employers alike. The more common scenario, in Victory’s view, will be smaller, industry-specific
events conducted virtually. When I talked with him, he was looking to an event that would showcase nonprofits and government agencies.

The campus renews itself by adding a new cohort of students and by sending an older cohort out into the world. Also by renewing its intellectual capital. Across all schools and divisions of the university, eighty-seven faculty members were recruited during 2020–2021 for the next academic year. The biggest clusters, within arts and sciences, would join Computer Science (five) and Statistical Science (four). Just before she would start to teach her first Duke class, I met with one of the newest faculty recruits, Sophia Enriquez, assistant professor of music. In fact, I was the first visitor to her office, which, at the time, was awaiting a university-issued computer. It did have a piano (apparently a standard fixture in the music building), a series of posters waiting to be hung (souvenirs from several music festivals, along with a self-portrait of Mexican artist Frida Kahlo), books waiting to be put in some kind of order (Writing Appalachia seemed especially relevant), and knickknacks like a traditional Andean pan flute.

Before our meeting, I read Enriquez’s article in the *Journal of Popular Music Studies*, a spinoff from her dissertation, “Penned Against the Wall: Migration Narratives, Cultural Resonances, and Latinx Experiences in Appalachian Music.” She wrestled with a series of questions: “What perspectives are revealed when narratives of whiteness are challenged by the visibility and voices of Latinx immigrants? What do those voices tell us about experiences of immigration in the midst of the US-Mexico border humanitarian crisis? And finally, what does it mean that the very region with which social rhetoric that demonizes and dehumanizes Latinx people is so often associated is also the region that Latinxs are claiming through music?” Even though cultural representations of Appalachia “often default to whiteness as a dominant marker of regional identity,” she wrote, such a default understanding is too restrictive. One musical tradition bleeds into another musical tradition, and a presumably monolithic culture becomes more complicated.

Her research was informed by Enriquez’s own experiences. Early in the twentieth century, her family migrated from Mexico to the Mississippi Delta and then to southern Ohio. As an undergraduate at the University of West Virginia, she discovered a course on bluegrass music, and an interest was sparked. For the dissertation, at Ohio State, she followed Che Apalache, a bluegrass band from Buenos Aires, Argentina, and the Charlottesville-based band the Lua Project. She was also committed to her field of ethnomusicology as a singer; her repertoire included bluegrass, mariachi, and canción ranchera. She had performed as part of the Good Time Girls, which called
“a female folk trio that writes original music inspired by intersectional experiences.”

With COVID-19 still in the air, Enriquez didn’t visit the campus until a month or so after she was hired. On that one visit, two of Duke’s iconic spaces weren’t accessible, the chapel and the gardens. Earlier she had received a fellowship through the library at the nearby University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill; the fellowship was meant to support her dissertation research. Like so much else in the time of the pandemic, it didn’t happen.

Typically, candidates for professorial spots would audition by leading a class and by presenting their research. Enriquez went through that routine, but over Zoom. She had the advantage, she said, of being experienced in running Zoom classes (on the subject of world music) at Ohio State. For the teaching demonstration, she was the guest presenter in the spring semester version of Andrew Waggoner’s jazz course—one of the courses I followed the past fall. She served up archival materials from the Library of Congress and Tulane’s library to document the food, music, and other cultural expressions in New Orleans, traveling back to the turn of the twentieth century. She made the class as interactive as possible in that format, prompting students, through a version of online polling, to share their feelings as they were being shown historical images of the city.

When she and I talked, Enriquez was putting the final touches on her inaugural Duke course, which would survey Latinx music cultures. The course was geared to students with a broad cultural interest and not necessarily technical musical knowledge. She was anticipating lots of listening to music, lots of talking about music. “There will be some dancing, I hope. I think we’re going to have fun.”
THE CAMPUS AS A SPACE WHERE SOCIETAL ISSUES PLAY OUT

The seemingly out-of-control pandemic coincided with a violently contested national election, a widespread movement for racial reckoning, a raging debate on the limits of free speech, and a series of weather events signaling eventual climate disaster. All of that seemed to point to failure across a wide spectrum: a breakdown of the social order, of scientific fixes, of the democratic experiment.

Could it all somehow, sometime, be made whole again? At the end of the fall 2020 semester, one of the professors whose course I had been Zooming into, Omid Safi, offered a necessary and hopeful perspective in the New York Times. Safi and his family celebrate—through a candle-lit meal of Mediterranean treats and the reciting of poetry—the Iranian tradition of Yalda, which grew from ancient Persia. “It is precisely at the point that the night is longest and darkest that you’ve actually turned a corner,” he said. There is meaning to be found in a single flower, just as there is in a grander feast. “Look for the smallest bit of beauty around you. That very much resonates today, at a time where it seems like the mega-systems are all broken or falling apart, to return your gaze to the small.”
In such a dark time, the fall semester of 2020, on a scaled-back and generally quiet campus, the intensity of the political moment wasn’t always easy to spot. But it was present. The Chronicle dutifully covered a few virtual discussions with faculty experts, and it reported that students much more often than not said they would be voting early rather than on Election Day. They were split on whether they would be registering to vote in Durham or in their original home district. Evidently there were other splits. During the semester, the College Republicans disbanded as an organization. Leaders of the group attributed the move to an ideological disagreement between fiscal conservatives and the recently ascendant social conservatives. According to the Chronicle, when asked to name the issues that would be driving them to vote, most students responded, “Everything!” A theme almost as sweeping as that one, saving American democracy, also made it on the list.

When the election was finally decided, the campus was not conspicuously abuzz, so a student reporter ventured into a much more energized Durham: “It was a moment of catharsis for Durham residents, an impulsive outpouring of hope and joy and relief…. They jumped up and down and sang and chanted and banged on pots and pans and a tambourine. They wore Black Lives Matter shirts and Pride flags and cardboard masks with President-elect Joe Biden’s face.”

My main information sources on students and voting were Jessica Sullivan and Abigail Phillips, both of whom volunteered with the nonpartisan group Duke Votes. (Sullivan was chair of Duke Votes; Phillips also led communications for Duke Democrats.) True to its name, Duke Votes worked to register, educate, and mobilize the Duke community to vote. That involved putting up signs all over the dorms and joining with resident advisers on voter-registration drives and on transporting their residents to vote; distributing voting information around apartment buildings in Durham, where, with a “de-densified” campus, many students had relocated; arranging for virtual-classroom visits, particularly in courses geared to first-year students, to pump up voting; setting up information tents, helpfully equipped with hand-sanitation stations, at intra-campus bus stops and outside a dining hall for first-years; and encouraging the members of student organizations, from fraternities to a capella groups, to attend voter-information sessions and commit to 100 percent voting participation. According to Sullivan, even with the pandemic-related restrictions, the group managed to register 858 people, many more than during past political seasons.
“I think students were very energized around the election,” Phillips told me. “Even the less political people I know were excited to go vote, and many participated in some activism throughout the semester.” At least some degree of passion carried over to Phillips’s classes. Two were canceled on the day of or the day after the election; the other two dedicated the class period to discussing the election. All of her professors encouraged voting, and her statistics professor employed issues around polling for a class exercise: How might likely voters be distinguished from registered voters, and how should polling models accommodate the so-called shy Trump voter?

In her work for Duke Democrats, Phillips, a double major in political science and religious studies, sent out a weekly e-newsletter calling attention to virtual events: a discussion of immigration, identity, and the election; a look at today’s civic and political engagement in the context of the centennial of women’s suffrage; virtual watch parties tied to the presidential debates. Toward the end of the election cycle, she combined a written appreciation for a hard semester and a final appeal for a little more work: “Gentle reminder that there are eight hellish, godsforsaken days left. I know you all know this but … go vote, and tell your friends to do so too!”

Meanwhile, the campus chapter of SwingNC organized phone banks and text banks (a new expression for me) every week, aiming to boost Democratic candidates across the state. In North Carolina, a purple-ish state, that turned out to be a tough assignment. There was also a Duke Students for Biden chapter.

With all those efforts, Phillips acknowledged that knocking on the doors of individual students and making the case in person just wasn’t happening. The classic forms of politicking were not pandemic sensitive. “Door knocking is one of the most effective organizing techniques and has been used on campus before. I know Duke Students for [Elizabeth] Warren did this on weekend mornings during the primary last fall. So this was frustrating. It could also be more difficult to get people to come to events because of Zoom fatigue. On the other hand, events being virtual also made them more accessible.” In her view, the biggest motivating issue for students was climate change, “with racial justice, the handling of the pandemic, healthcare, immigration law, and the Supreme Court—especially after the death of [Justice] Ruth Bader Ginsburg—also being very important.” When I asked her about the level of pro-Biden passion, she said, “Of those favoring Democrats, I think most students were significantly more anti-Trump than pro-Biden, and they probably favored a more progressive candidate in the primaries.”
Activist politics found expression in a team of Duke students that, just as the election was heating up, was rolling out an interactive website concerned with a warming planet, called You Change Earth. The idea was to end “climate defeatism” and empower people to fight climate change through “personalized action plans.” Those action plans would be tailored to individuals based on their responses to a set of questions about their lifestyle and living situation—whether they rented or owned their home, for example, or where they found themselves in their career trajectory. Visitors to the website would select strategies tied to their circumstances. By devoting myself to a diet that meant consuming less meat and dairy, or by powering my home through solar power or other forms of green energy, I’d be reducing tons of carbon dioxide emissions every year. The site also pressed less quantifiable actions on its users, many of them directed to influencing society-wide behavior: joining environmental organizations that advocate for a greener planet, leaning on political leaders to show environmental awareness, using their positions of corporate influence to make environmental practices integral to business strategy.

Writing in Medium, one of the founders, Kiran Wijesekera—whose parents worked for UNICEF and who described himself as “a part Sri Lankan, part British, part American student”—testified to his personal stake in the climate crisis: “In my home country of Sri Lanka, around half of the island’s population (including most of my family there) lives in low-lying coastal regions threatened by sea-level rise. In New York, where I spent most of my adolescent life, the park across from my apartment where we would walk our dog each day is being torn up to allow for the construction of a $1.5 billion coastal resiliency project to deal with sea-level rise and increased incidence of extreme weather events. These threats have been chilling to see in real time.”

Wijesekera told me that his own project benefited, in its beginning phase, from the quickly developing habit of working remotely. The student team was dispersed across the globe, in New York, New Zealand, India, England, California. There was the challenge of coordinating across six or seven time zones. But there was also the recognition that the absence of a shared location wouldn’t impede the ultimate effort. What kept them going, he stressed, was that climate change had emerged as the overarching issue for their generation. It’s the ultimate “intersectional” issue, as he put it, with implications for global violence, forced migration, and racial justice. He and his startup team members were looking to “take that recognition” about the sweeping importance of climate change and “turn it into action.”
More than a year after the election, in the spring of 2022, the Duke Climate Coalition, a student group concerned about the campus and its environmental impact, managed at least a symbolic action. The group successfully pushed the student government to run a referendum vote, on the question of whether the university’s endowment should divest itself of holdings in fossil-fuel companies. The student leader of the effort, Brennan McDonald, shaped a campaign that reflected the current age of careful activism: a research-based document that had been revised over several years; collaboration with other campus groups sharing an environmental focus; social-media postings, along with the distributing of information sheets and stickers; engagement with the university’s Advisory Committee on Investment Responsibility (ACIR); mentions of Duke’s ambitions to be a leader in the arena of climate change; mentions of peer examples worth emulating, notably a successful divestment effort at Harvard. Plus, references to economic logic: As the world shifts in its energy thinking, investments in fossil-fuel companies will turn out to be risky, while clean-energy investments will offer the higher payout. (When we met, McDonald talked about an effort—linking student activists across the country—to have state attorneys general treat divestment as a fiduciary responsibility for boards of trustees.)

The undergraduate vote was 2,456 to 203 in favor of the resolution. There wasn’t any indication, though, that ACIR or Duke’s board of trustees would shift in their stance, reiterated over many years, that divestment would be a feel-good gesture without much significance.

Growing up in the Bay Area of California, McDonald had felt the impact of climate change through droughts and wildfires. His climate activism, he told me, dated back to his days in high school, when he lobbied his school district to make the switch to renewable energy and worked with an environmental organization to promote sustainability.

If climate change was, for some on campus, the ultimate spur to political engagement, the postelection Capitol insurrection—January 6, 2021—was the ultimate signal of political breakdown. Duke’s president, in a written statement, called the action by Trump loyalists “the direct result of a campaign to sow mistrust in our democracy and to overturn an election that was by all reasonable accounts conducted freely and fairly.” In the Chronicle, Dan King pretty much captured the feeling among his fellow students in referring to Trump as “the worst president in history.”

With the anniversary a year later, Duke historian Nancy MacLean told Inside Higher Ed that she was “stunned and saddened, frankly, at how relatively little attention higher education has paid to the events of January 6
between the week after the attack, when there were many grave public statements, and now.” MacLean, one of Duke’s pandemic-time public intellectuals, was a prolific commentator. There was a panel organized by an association of historians, a National Humanities Center talk, a few appearances on MSNBC’s The ReidOut, and a program on political violence that, thanks to Zoom’s indifference to geography, was beamed to my computer screen from the American Academy in Rome. She sketched a troubling convergence: individuals who, primed over several decades by the right-wing rage machine, saw their status declining in a changing society, along with a donor class committed less to democracy than to loosened regulations and lower tax bills.

One year on, the political violence that arose from that toxic mix may not have been widely acknowledged on campus. But it was definitively memorialized by the American Dialect Society, which again promoted its Zoomified annual meeting to a Duke audience. Insurrection was its 2021 Word of the Year.

**RECKONING WITH RACE**

Part of the election backdrop was the movement for a racial reckoning, sparked by episode after episode of the killings of Blacks at the hands of police. The relentlessness of the accounts, beginning with George Floyd—who died after being handcuffed and pinned under a Minneapolis police officer’s knee—began an extended conversation about racism. At Duke, some of that conversation looked at American history and American society broadly. Some was centered on the currents of the campus. During the summer of 2020, the university put on a (virtual) discussion, “Living While Black.” About six thousand people from within Duke registered for the daylong program. The approach was both scholarly and personal.

The most compelling stories, for me, came from students who talked about feeling less than fully accepted as contributors to a learning and residential community. Those of us who tuned in also heard from high-profile Black administrators; they had achieved conspicuous success in their campus positions, but not without struggles around their identity.

One talked about having to confront arguments about the supposed genetic superiority of Black athletes; being belligerently questioned in a research building about which lab he worked in while, in fact, he was running his own lab; and enduring his share of harassment from police. Another pointed out that she was the first Black to be named a dean among Duke’s ten schools—just in 2012. “That should tell you something about where
Duke was,” she said. “That’s not something we should brag about.” And a third reflected on the time when, as a grad student, the chemistry lab where she worked was visited by a prominent polymer chemist. As she stood to give a talk about her research, the visitor expressed amazement that she was Black; she hadn’t matched his image of a scientist in the making. From that day, she resolved to become a teacher of chemistry. She always would be enamored of the idea of making molecules. But over time she became equally drawn to the transformative work of teaching others to see their promise. If as a university “we think we’re great and we’re not diverse,” she said, “we’re just fooling ourselves.”

In October 2020, Duke’s president, Vincent E. Price, offered an update on Duke’s antiracism efforts: “While our nation has been engaged with these dual pandemics—ongoing systemic racism and COVID-19—our university community has faced challenging questions of our own,” he wrote. “For instance, how can we appreciate Duke’s history of innovation, service, and leadership while acknowledging the entwinement of that history with slavery, segregation, and white supremacy? How can we celebrate the progress we’ve made toward inclusion over the past century while recognizing that the work remains far from complete and did not come soon enough for countless applicants, students, faculty, and staff who were discriminated against in ways both overt and insidious? How can we find a way forward—together, as a community—within a wider social and political context that stokes division and discord?”

And perhaps “most pressingly,” he asked, “how can we undertake meaningful action now and also ensure that this is only a starting point for a sustained effort to fully embrace equity?”

Among other steps, Price pointed to: an expanded initiative to promote “inclusive and equitable hiring,” including “funding for hiring diverse faculty” (in the spring of 2022, he reported that hiring over the past two years had brought “unprecedented diversity to our ranks,” with 15 percent of regular-rank hires being Black and 10 percent Latinx over that period); reviews of policies and guidelines on promotion and tenure, “to ensure that they are equitable and attentive to the biases that disadvantage underrepresented faculty and research on underrepresented communities”; a renewed emphasis on recruiting a diverse student body, including first-generation students and those from low-income backgrounds; new professional development opportunities for staff, “with a focus on reaching historically underserved populations”; ongoing tracking of promotions and new hires and pay-equity analyses; antiracism and equity training for senior university leadership;
heightened attention to the needs of the Durham and regional communities, from financial support for a digital-equity campaign, to a commitment to broaden connections between Durham students and Duke students.

I did my part in helping with one part of the Price project: responding to a comprehensive survey of the campus climate. The survey asked for my feelings about an array of assumptions: my cultural practices were respected while working at Duke; I could express my views without fear of negative consequences; division leaders were modeling open and honest conversations about diversity and inclusion; the hiring process seemed fair and transparent; the climate for women was at least as good as that for men; the climate for underrepresented minorities was at least as good as that for members of majority groups; the climate for people who identify as LGBT+ was at least as good as that for people who identify as heterosexual and cisgender.

With the first announcement of the results some months later, it was clear that for the almost thirteen thousand student, faculty, and staff respondents, individual identities had helped shape perceptions of Duke. More than half of Black, Latinx, Asian, female, and LGBT+ community members reported experiencing microaggressions in the past year. When it came to opportunities for advancement, Black and Latinx respondents were less satisfied than their white counterparts.

Around the same time that I was filling out the survey, I was reading up on another early expression of that antiracism campaign. That was the first wave of university funding for scholarly work on slavery and the history of the South, social and racial equity, and the persistent phenomenon of racism. Among the projects: “Assessing the Unintended Consequences of the Private Diagnostic Clinic at Duke University (1930–1970)”; “Clean Energy for All? Creating a North Carolina Policy Roadmap to a Just and Clean Energy Transition”; “How Politics, Poverty, and Social Policy Implementation Shape Racial Inequality in the Rural South”; “Plantation Afterlives, Plantation Futures”; “Race, Social Movements, and Political Participation in the New South.” The Duke scholars involved came from, among other academic departments, History, English, Political Science, African and African American Studies, Public Policy, Documentary Studies, Biology, Environmental Sciences, and Religious Studies.

Price’s message also included a reference to engaging with alumni, the university’s largest constituency. Some of the first conversations were organized by the African and African American Studies Department, along with Duke Black Alumni and the alumni association. In the lead-off to the series,
Mark Anthony Neal, chair of AAAS, and Adrienne Lentz-Smith, a history professor, wrestled with how the cultural moment might be interpreted, and whether it really signaled a shift. Lentz-Smith talked about feeling skeptical, cynical, and tired—but also ready to embrace the role of a professor sharing ideas and insights “outside the formal space of the academy.” For Neal, “This is the first time in my life where I don’t have a clear sense of what comes next.” Confederate symbols were being banished from statues and race cars and food products. But it’s easier to deal with the past than the present; the hard work had barely begun of dismantling the legacy of hundreds of years of anti-Black sentiment, anti-Black violence, and white supremacy.

Such a dismantling project presumably would start from facing up to the legacy, and lots of Duke units came forward with some form of recognition, contrition, and commitment. One statement sprang from the Sarah P. Duke Gardens. Like many public gardens across the nation, it “does not sufficiently reflect the community where it is located or the vital contributions by Black community members and other people of color.” The same issue was reflected in “the makeup of our staff, volunteers, and board of advisers, as well as in the voices and expertise we share through our public programs and interpretation.” Among other things, the gardens leadership pledged to change staff-recruitment practices to attract more diverse candidates, build a volunteer team that would better reflect the local community, and participate in staff-wide antibias and diversity training.

Then there was Duke Chapel; this was the place where, at semester’s end, The Messiah would be beamed out as a musical symbol of hope in tumultuous times, and now also the place that linked antiracism with the “all-inclusive” love of God: “Duke Chapel stands for justice, community, hope, creativity, and compassion, by which we love our neighbors. We lament alongside our Black and brown siblings who are beset by racial oppression and violence at this time. We mourn with you, and we mourn our complicity in systemic racism.”

The previous summer, not long into the pandemic, in a grassy area by Duke’s medical clinics, I had watched a swelling sea of white-coated Duke healthcare workers, with identifying badges pointing to everything from an ophthalmology practice to a neuroscience lab, and with signs reading “Black Lives Matter” and “Let’s Make It a Movement, Not Just a Moment.” This was a show of solidarity labeled “White Coats for Black Lives.”

A more attention-grabbing event came with the fall 2020 semester, through the social activism of Duke’s storied men’s basketball team. Hundreds of spectators looked on as basketball players gathered outside Cameron
Indoor Stadium, that very special spot where fervent student fans normally camp out for the privilege of attending a game. The players were wearing “Black Lives Matter” T-shirts. Nolan Smith, the team’s director of operations, who organized the protest, told the crowd: “I can’t change the world. But goddammit, I can change Duke while I’m here.” A first-year player, Henry Coleman III, choked up as he worked through remarks that, he said, flowed from his own pain and anger. Referring to “hearts and souls crushed” by systemic racism, he said, “This country has had its knee on the necks of African Americans for too long.”

The newly hired women’s basketball coach, Kara Lawson, spoke from her own perspective as a Black person: “Every day when you wake up, you feel anxious” that a simple drive to school or work, or hanging out with friends at a park, “could be your last moment on Earth.” Earlier, Mike Krzyzewski, the men’s head coach, had put out a short video via Twitter: “Black Lives Matter. Say it. Can’t you say it? We should be saying it every day. It’s not political. This is not a political statement. It’s a human-rights statement. It’s a fairness statement.” That would become the most viewed video ever on the official Duke men’s basketball Twitter account. Krzyzewski had also issued a statement about racial injustice: “No matter how much I love my current and former players and their families, I cannot feel the depth of what they
are feeling right now. I have never experienced what it is like to be a Black man in America…. And to understand, we must listen. Listen and not judge. We need to stand up for what is right, and we must no longer tolerate racism and social injustice in our country.”

All of Duke’s student athletes and Duke Athletics staff received a Black Lives Matter shirt with the Duke logo on it. Beyond that, the various varsity teams responded, at least symbolically, to the social-justice messages. Football players wore black “Ds” and had the Black Lives Matter fist on their helmets all season. For the game against Miami, they replaced the nameplates on their jerseys with one of three phrases: “Say Their Name,” “Equality,” or “Black Lives Matter.” Baseball players wore a social-justice patch released by the NCAA on their black jerseys, and a United as One sticker on their helmets. Rowing added “Unity” on their uniforms. Women’s soccer and volleyball wore BLM warm-up shirts. And so on.

For me, the most searing look at race came in a virtual panel organized by the university’s Trent Center for Bioethics, Humanities, and History of Medicine. The panel was put together to reflect on the historical legacy of the 1979 Greensboro Massacre. (Greensboro is about sixty miles west of Durham.) During a march organized by the Communist Workers Party, largely in support of Black textile-industry workers, five marchers were killed and others injured by members of the Ku Klux Klan and the American Nazi Party. The Greensboro police department had been tipped off, but they failed to prevent the violence. Three of the victims killed had attended Duke. So had all three of the panelists. Paul Bermanzohn, now a psychiatrist, was critically wounded at the time. Marty Nathan, a physician whose husband, Michael Nathan, was among those killed, had headed the Greensboro Justice Fund, which promotes racial justice and economic empowerment. Joyce Hobson Johnson, codirector of the Beloved Community Center of Greensboro, helped lead the truth and reconciliation process in Greensboro—a “people-based effort toward the truth,” as she called it.

Starting off the panel, Bermanzohn noted that Duke in the 1970s was hardly “a home of progressive thought and action.” Duke was “such a bad place,” he said, that it provided the incentive to “cut our political teeth.” The Duke-based activists who took to the streets of Greensboro had been radicalized by Duke; they had been struggling with the university on issues like race and class inequalities, and around efforts to unionize on behalf of low-paid workers. Patients of color at Duke, Bermanzohn said, were routinely called “clinical material,” a “racist and dehumanizing phrase” that echoed the notorious Tuskegee syphilis study. Waiting rooms for the favored, white patients
in Duke clinics had the atmosphere of fancy parlors. Blacks were directed
to waiting rooms that resembled a passenger area in a seedy bus station.

Bermanzohn appeared not to have lost his activist orientation. “It’s an
exciting time to be an activist,” he told those watching. “It is a really great
time to get into a fight.”

Johnson and Nathan had also honed their radical edge on campus.
Having watched a long struggle—more than forty years—until the city
of Greensboro officially apologized for its actions, Johnson came across
as resolute in her social-justice agenda. “Persist. It can be done. It must be
done,” as she put it. “I came to Duke understanding I had to do more than
just excel personally. I had to change the socioeconomic constructs of our
society.” She told the audience, “Our story, if you live in these United States,
is your story.” Nathan talked about her student days as “a working-class kid
at an elite institution, at a time when female doctors were really scarce.”
She and her eventual husband, Michael, who was chief pediatrician at a
community health center, “loved medicine and hated war and injustice.”
Following the violence in Greensboro, Nathan would interrupt a family
practitioner career to organize low-wage workers into unions. She looked
back on Greensboro as a sad slice of history that still resonates: “Histori-
cally, police have worked to keep order against those who threaten the social
structure, the same structure that kept Duke Hospital and textile workers
without bargaining power for a living wage.” For all of her regard for the
practice of medicine, she said it was important to acknowledge the limits
of caring through medicine alone. “To really care for our society, we must
become politically engaged in all the things around us…. Choose the ones
that hit you in the gut and grab hold of them.”

All of the speakers spoke forcefully of the need for Duke to confront its
own past. In Nathan’s words: “You can’t deal with racism and oppression
unless you know your history. If Duke wants to do that, wouldn’t that be
great!”

In the nonvirtual space, another remarkable moment came outside Duke
Chapel. It was near the end of the spring semester, in late April 2021—the
day after the trial of former Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin had
ended in a series of convictions for the killing of George Floyd. The chapel
itself is a symbol of Duke’s own complicated racial past. The chief designer
of West Campus, the chapel included, was Julian Abele, an African Ameri-
can architect brought into the Philadelphia-based Horace Trumbauer firm.
Particularly in the context of the segregated South, Abele’s architectural
impact was remarkable. It’s not clear whether he ever visited the campus.
I joined the crowd as they gathered at noontime. Through their face masks, I recognized a bunch of administrators who had been just a Zoom presence the whole academic year; some of the students assembled had Black Lives Matter imprinted on masks, T-shirts, or tote bags. From a podium set up near the chapel doors, several of the university’s African American leaders talked about the promising implications of the verdict. They also highlighted a long history of broken promises and dashed hopes. In many similar cases, justice has been crushed, making hope a “toxic, empty” word, said Quinton Smith, director of Duke’s Mary Lou Williams Center for Black Culture. The judicial verdict, he said, would not help close the racial wealth gap in America, or advance educational opportunity, or address housing discrimination, or fix the criminal justice system. Dean of Students John Blackshear said he had wanted to avoid the trauma of tuning into the trial. Still, his thoughts kept returning to “Strange Fruit.” The song, about the lynching of Black Americans during the Jim Crow era, was famously and hauntingly performed by Billie Holiday. “I thought about the strange fruit,” he said, “when the life that had infinite possibility was squeezed from the neck of George Floyd.” He added, “We are not strange fruit.”

“We continue to ask America to have a heart, to love us as much as we have loved this country,” Mark Anthony Neal, from African and African American Studies, told the crowd. Then Valerie Ashby, dean of arts and sciences: “I saw the verdict as a ray of light in a sea of darkness.” She went on to refer to a legacy of “injustice, discrimination, and just pure hate” that had been ever present in her living reality. “But I just say to all those students, particularly, who are out there, my people come from the Middle Passage. And I am never too tired or too weary to wake up every day and fight this fight for you.”

Finally, Gary Bennett, the vice provost for undergraduate education, appealed to members of the community to “use this moment as an opportunity to connect with one another.” There was something profound in imagining, as a sort of connecting tissue of the campus, a shared vision of social justice. And there was something poignant in listening to that summons here and now—at the close of an academic year that had presented such challenges around connection. “We don’t do this enough,” Bennett said.

After the speeches, the chapel bells rang for nine minutes and twenty-nine seconds. For nine minutes and twenty-nine seconds, Chauvin had kept his knee across Floyd’s neck, preventing him from breathing and leading to his death. Like the rest of the crowd, I stood silently, just taking in the mournful tolling. It felt like a very, very long time.
Antiracism, to be a real thing, would have to be a feature of the curriculum, and the 2020–2021 academic year marked the start of widespread curricular scrutiny. Duke’s Sanford School of Public Policy, for example, set committees in motion to ensure that “no student graduates from our degree programs without understanding the universality of structural inequality and systemic racism.” Public policy professor (and Duke grad) Charles Clotfelter, who started teaching at Duke in 1979, added a set of topics to his “Economics of the Public Sector” course. They included “Inequality and the Distribution Function of Government,” “Government’s Role in Structural Inequality and Racism,” and “Poverty, Discrimination, and Ideas of Equity.” His students would be reading opinion pieces like John Lewis’s “Together, You Can Redeem the Soul of Our Nation” and sampling moments out of history, like Lyndon Johnson’s 1964 State of the Union Address, relevant to racial progress.

Meanwhile, the medical school began a process meant to train a healthcare and biomedical workforce that is “intentionally antiracist within a broader context of social justice.” It also promised to “advance knowledge related to the impact of racism and racial inequities on health and biomedical science,” through teaching, research, and clinical care, and to use its expertise to “develop and deploy solutions” locally and beyond.

Race was a presence not just in curricular planning, but also in the curriculum in place, including the courses I followed through the fall of 2020. One was “Introduction to Jazz.” It was taught by instructor of music Andrew Waggoner, who grew up “bathed in jazz,” in New Orleans. His high school was NOCCA, the New Orleans Center for Creative Arts. There he played in small jazz groups with pianists Henry Butler and Ellis Marsalis, the patriarch of the musical Marsalis family. His course, as the syllabus revealed, would place “jazz styles and practitioners in their cultural contexts,” even as it would lay bare “jazz’s relationship to and transcendence of American racism and apartheid.” (Waggoner’s email footer carried the title Composer & Violinist. It also included this quote by Ta-Nehisi Coates: “If putting your knee on somebody’s neck and torturing them to death for eight minutes is not against the law, then there is no law.”) Among the themes noted on the syllabus: “Minstrel Shows and the Original Sin of Pop Music: Embodying the Other as a Means of Theft and Destruction”; “Racism in Recording: The Original Dixieland Jazz Band”; “Jazz, Race, and the Concert Hall: Gershwin, Whiteman, and ‘Rhapsody in Blue.’”
Some of the course-related readings built on those themes. One was an essay called "Debating with Beethoven: Understanding the Fear of Early Jazz." (It was excerpted from a book from 1992, *America's Musical Pulse: Popular Music in Twentieth-Century Society*, edited by Kenneth J. Bindas.) The writer, Kathy J. Ogren, focused on the 1920s, when jazz was gaining a foothold in American life. She noted that the jazz phenomenon coincided with social, economic, and political debates about race. The Harlem Renaissance, which promoted an artistic and literary flourishing, was one touch point. "In retrospect, one cannot separate the hostility or fear of jazz," she wrote, from perceptions about the changes brought about by Black migration and increased political activism.

"The issue of race is central to the course, a river that runs throughout, sometimes subterranean but always powerful and always propelling the narrative," Waggoner said in a conversation with me, outside the Zoomified class meetings. "It's both painfully simple and hugely complex, and somehow one has to be prepared to treat it on both of those levels at once." Jazz is a musical tradition that has arisen on American soil, created and refined by African Americans at the turn of the twentieth century. "Everything about the music, from its rhythmic and harmonic makeup to its performance rituals to its shifting position in both African American culture and American culture writ large, is conditioned by its emergence in the context of Reconstruction, white supremacist terror, and the rise of Jim Crow."

In class, Waggoner amplified that point through a series of twentieth-century minstrel images. "Just be warned," he said, "the images are extremely offensive. It may be difficult to believe, from our vantage point, that this stuff was ever considered to be good, harmless, mainstream fun." Zeroing-in on sheet-music images for the duet "Come on to Nashville, Tennessee," he asked the students to notice that "the white figures are all drawn with a high degree of verisimilitude, but the happy slave running to greet the returning couple is crude, animal like, entirely devoid of humanity. This was obviously a conscious choice on the part of the illustrator." We're not so far past it, and shouldn't be lulled into thinking that so much has changed, he said. He then brought up recent cultural history: "I wasn't kidding when I said that the Cream of Wheat man had been retired just weeks ago. And until a year ago, you still had Aunt Jemima smiling at you for your pancake mix box—yet another good reason to make your pancakes from scratch."

Closely tied as it is with African American culture, jazz can be seen as "the most powerful offspring of the forced marriage of African and European traditions and musical materials," Waggoner told me. So the story of
jazz forces us to reckon with both the stain of that history and the power of art to transcend it. “Both are essential, both must be held in the mind at once in coming into a relationship with the music. As the music evolves, the people who make it become increasingly aware of their position as artists working at the extreme limits of instrumental and imaginative virtuosity within a society that can’t get enough of their music while, at the same time, denying the value of that music when compared with the touchstones of the white, European tradition.”

Waggoner talked in the course about artists like Louis Armstrong, collaborators Duke Ellington and Billy Strayhorn, Charlie Parker, and countless others who, as he explained, were caught in a double-bind. They were all praised for having “risen above” the most pernicious stereotypes of “Negro” behavior. But then they were held to account for attempting to bring their work into the same sphere as Western classical music—“denounced as both naïve and uppity,” in his words. Not surprisingly, many artists develop “a kind of double consciousness around jazz as an expression of race.” At times, they make it explicit and assertive—as with Billie Holiday’s “Strange Fruit” and John Coltrane’s “Alabama.” Other times, they pursue “a vision of music as the singular path to a kind of transcendence that is to be understood only in terms of the music itself.” Listeners will pick up hints of that vision in bebop performances, in some of Herbie Hancock’s albums, and in current-day performers like Cassandra Wilson—all represented in Waggoner’s playlist for the course.

“There is controversy within the jazz community about how and when matters of race are addressed,” Waggoner observed. “This is not surprising. It is as it should be.”

Race was central to another course on my menu, this one listed across four Duke departments: African and African American Studies, Asian and Middle Eastern Studies, Public Policy, and Religion. Omid Safi normally taught the course under the title “Martin Luther King and the Prophetic Tradition,” and had offered it the previous spring semester. He repackaged it for the fall of 2020 as “Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, and Black Liberation.”

Safi is a frequent podcaster; I had listened to one of his powerful podcasts from the spring of 2019. It offered his keynote address—really a sermon with a call to action—at the National Civil Rights Museum at the Lorraine Hotel. Channeling King, Safi said the American story has always been a mixture of a dream and a nightmare. “We are in Memphis today to ask, what does love have to say to a broken world like this? If you love the folk, you tell them the truth. So let us share some truths. The truth of the matter is Dr. King,
whom we all love, weeps in his grave to see what has become of his beloved America.” Safi echoed King’s lament that many people “claim to be religious but don’t have a word to say about the suffering in our midst”; that “if you claim to love God, start by showing love to God’s children.” He reminded his audience, “We know why Martin was in Memphis—because he was moved to respond to suffering.” Commit yourself, he went on, to be “maladjusted” to injustice, indifference, cruelty, and racism, and to “channel that maladjustment to love, bringing light to a world that is deeply in need of it.” Love, along with the embrace of justice for the marginalized in society, is rooted in the belief that we’re all in this together. “We might have come in different ships, but we’re all in the same boat now”—a message that would seem especially fitting for this pandemic time.

Clearly Safi was invested—personally as well as intellectually—in the task of redeeming the soul of America. Introducing the course to his students, he said it was not a historical survey, but rather “a conversation with the legacies of Martin and Malcolm and the civil-rights tradition.” The course was not designed “to be a look back at a distant Martin and Malcolm stuck and frozen in the 1950s and 1960s,” he added. “I come to the material as someone who is deeply indebted, admiring, and touched by the legacies of Martin and Malcolm. Given what’s going on in our country, indeed around the world, I can’t imagine anything more urgent and more relevant.”

When I dropped in, virtually, I was surprised to see that Safi spent a lot of time on the Essential Writings of Abraham Joshua Heschel (assembled and edited by Heschel’s daughter, Susannah), who was one of the foremost Jewish theologians of the twentieth century. Heschel had met Martin Luther King Jr. in 1963, and an extraordinary friendship blossomed; both considered religion and social justice as intertwined. According to his daughter, Heschel saw religion as evoking an obligation to afflict the comfortable and not just comfort the afflicted. Such a concept was closely aligned with King’s thinking. When Heschel pondered the question, “Who is a Jew?” part of his answer referred to “a person whose integrity decays when unmoved by the knowledge of wrong done to other people.” Just ten days before King was murdered, Heschel introduced the civil rights leader at a rabbinical conference. He asked: “Where does God dwell in America today? Is He at home with those who are complacent, indifferent to other people’s agony, devoid of mercy? Is He not rather with the poor and the contrite in the slums?” To Heschel, King’s legacy was comparable to that of the prophets of Israel; King’s presence was a sign that “God has not forsaken the United States of America.”
As the course proceeded, Safi explored the various dimensions of a social-justice commitment—a vision very much out of Heschel. There was, prominently, the Lincoln Memorial “I Have a Dream” address in 1963. It was the culmination of a march on Washington largely driven by issues of economic inequities. It is typically reduced, Safi said, to the comforting notion that someday, all Americans will “not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character.” Embedded in that same address, though, was attention to “a shameful condition”: The Declaration of Independence and the Constitution had implied a “promissory note” to be extended to every American, but the nation had defaulted on that guarantee for its “citizens of color.” There was the Riverside Church address in New York City in 1967, where King, in decrying US involvement in Vietnam, explicitly embraced an expansive vision of civil rights leadership. He made what Safi called “the radical moral demand” of insisting, in King’s words, that compassion and nonviolence implied the need “to see the enemy’s point of view, to hear his questions, to know his assessment of ourselves.”

And there was “I See the Promised Land,” King’s last sermon, delivered at Memphis the following year, in which King went global with his freedom-and-justice message. “Something is happening in our world,” he said. From Jackson, Mississippi, to Nairobi, Kenya; from New York to Johannesburg, “the cry is always the same: ‘We want to be free.’”

A semester-long theme, for Safi, was how the past weighs down the present. His standard start of every class was to ask the students, in their Zoom boxes, to bring up something in the news that fit the concerns of the course. Early in the semester, a student offered the 1619 Project of the New York Times and the critique that it might represent the teaching of “un-American values” to schoolchildren. Geography takes on its own relevance, and Safi touched on some civil rights milestones that played out in familiar ground. Like the milestone of four African American college students who, in 1960, sat down at a “whites only” lunch counter and politely asked to be served. That was in Greensboro, the site of the violent Klan encounter almost two decades later. At one point Safi showed a photo of James Baldwin posing outside an ice cream parlor in Durham; the author of The Fire Next Time was standing by a door marked “Colored Entrance Only.”

One impulse behind Safi’s assigning The Autobiography of Malcolm X, from that very different figure in the civil rights movement, was to illustrate how a single life story was really part of the ever-unfolding American story. The “Negro problem”—the wrenchingly personal problem, right at the beginning of the book, of Ku Klux Klan riders descending on the family home
when Malcolm’s mother was pregnant with him—was, in fact, the white person’s problem. The account of his life “might prove to be a testimony of some social value,” Malcolm wrote. In writing his life story, he was pondering, among other themes, “how in the society to which I was exposed as a [Black] youth here in America, for me to wind up in a prison was just about inevitable. It happens to so many thousands of [Black] youth.” Then and now.

A student in “Martin and Malcolm,” Cornelia Fraser, lingered over a video of King’s final Sunday sermon, in March 1968, from the Canterbury Pulpit; it had been assigned for the class. She was struck particularly by King’s warning about “sleeping through a revolution.” We were now at another point where the choices were between moral decay and a moral revolution; as she saw it, the message from King seems to have “time traveled” to today’s Black Lives Matter activists.

In her final paper for the course, she wrote about an heir to the King legacy, the Reverend William Barber, a leader in the Poor People’s Campaign, which describes itself as “a national call for moral revival.” Barber earned his Master’s of Divinity from Duke Divinity School; at a Duke Chapel event a few years ago, he and Senator Bernie Sanders of Vermont had spoken about “The Enduring Challenge of a Moral Economy.” That was some fifty years after King had preached against racism, poverty, and militarism—all interrelated, and all matters of faith for King, noted Dean of the Chapel Luke Powery as the program started. (I was at the event and, I learned, Fraser was as well.) Fraser, in her paper, reflected on Barber’s stated goal of using activism to “save the soul of America.” That was a manifestation of the ageless religious quest to find the promised land—a quest that echoed in King and, from a different faith tradition, Heschel.

History was spilling into current events, particularly a process of racial reckoning—in the virtual classrooms I was visiting, that was a recurring theme. Sometimes the same historical figures popped up in several courses.

One example was Langston Hughes. Tom Ferraro, in his English seminar, included a section on the poetry of Hughes. Among the poems was “Let America Be America Again,” from 1938. (In Trumpian America, the title struck an unsettling, or maybe an ironic note.) Martin Luther King Jr., in a reading for the course taught by Safi, employed the same poem around the country’s ongoing refusal to confront racism. In his Riverside Church speech, a year before his death, King talked about “that Black bard of Harlem,” and he continued with these lines from the poem: “O, yes, / I say it plain, / America never was America to me, / And yet I swear this oath— / America will be!” Will America ever rally the determination to overcome its own history?
King, the answer resided in righteous determination and individual action: “So it is that those of us who are yet determined that America will be are led down the path of protest and dissent, working for the health of our land.”

As Ferraro observed in class: “Everyone can find a line that disturbs them. This spookily resonates with our own moment. The resonance is both confirming and disconcerting.”

Among the books in the Ferraro seminar was Nella Larsen’s Passing, from 1929. (A movie version came out in 2021; in a piece in the New York Times Magazine, Alexander Kleeman, a professor at the New School, said the movie had “cracked open a public conversation about colorism, privilege, and secrets.”) Set in the period of the 1920s Harlem Renaissance, it grapples with themes that seemed freshly relevant: identities as they’re perceived and as they’re felt; the trade-offs involved in the pursuit of status; the factors that, in a race-conscious society, draw people to each other and drive them away from each other.

One of the two main characters it follows is Clare Kendry, light skinned, a “deserter” from her Black roots and from her fracturing family. At age eighteen, she married a white man who continues to casually put down Blacks and who has no idea—at least on the surface—of her heritage. Clare’s form of “passing” entwines race and class: “She sat with an air of indifferent assurance, as if arranged for, desired. About her clung that dim suggestion of polite insolence with which a few women are born and which some acquire with the coming of age or importance.” The other main character, Irene Redfield, treats the phenomenon of passing as a curiosity: “She wished to find out about this hazardous business of ‘passing,’ this breaking away from all that was familiar and friendly to take one’s chance in another environment, not entirely strange, perhaps, but certainly not entirely friendly.” Childhood friends, they meet serendipitously as adults on the rooftop of a Chicago hotel, where they had both sought escape from “a brutal staring sun”—and rekindle a relationship that plays out with brutal consequences.

Via the course’s online discussion board, students offered variations on this question: “During the time period of this novel, is it better to pass and benefit from white privilege, or to live in the Black community despite the systemic racism and violence Black people face?” For his part, Ferraro served up several prompts for class conversation and student write-ups: “Analyze the functioning of propriety at key instances of the novel.” “In Passing, who is looking at what (at whom?), what do they see and not see, and why does the looking, one’s look and the hidden really matter?” And he provided the compact view of an unnamed critic to be embraced or disagreed with. (The
critic was Ferraro himself, writing in *The Cambridge Companion to American Literature of the 1930s*. “Passing is about the itch to mix, the sexiness of racial risk, and the dangers of raced sex among the lighter-skinned middle classes, who are its product as well as its producer.”

**UNSETTLING EPISODES**

In the midst of so much discussion in the contexts of the campus and the curriculum, *Duke Magazine*, which I was editing, produced its own controversy around what it means to represent a university committed to antiracism. Several published letters responded to my story, in a previous issue, about the Kerner Commission. The story highlighted the work on the commission of John Koskinen, a Duke alumnus who would go on to build a distinguished record in government service (most recently as commissioner of the Internal Revenue Service). The groundbreaking report he contributed to, fifty years ago, was formed to explore the origins of urban rioting. It ended up exploring the basis of American-style systemic racism—much to the consternation of President Lyndon B. Johnson, who had set the commission in motion—often expressed through police violence.

One of the published letters in particular stirred passionate objections. The correspondent, from the Class of 1961, acknowledged that he had benefited personally from “white privilege.” But racism is not “totally responsible for the plight of minority victims,” he went on. “Some of it falls on the victims themselves,” notably their choices around lifestyle and values. And movements like Black Lives Matter overlooked those “who abuse benefits or whose protests result in looting, vandalism, or injuries,” he argued.

A typical response characterized such comments as “a painful reminder of the many racist statements directed at or around me during my time as a student. I sincerely hope the magazine will write a response that condemns and refutes the tired racist tropes....” From another correspondent, in the same spirit: “I understand that publications have a responsibility to publish opposing information and dissent. However, the ‘views’... are not based in fact or knowledge. They’re simply the prejudiced and self-satisfied thoughts of a person who would proudly boast his ignorance as a badge of honor.”

As a magazine staff, we had steeled ourselves for a flurry of offended responses to another published piece: a hard-hitting, and deeply personal, essay, spread over six pages, by a recent graduate, Michael Ivory Jr. As a student, he had been an activist around race and social-justice issues. In the essay, he revisited a protest held over Alumni Reunions Weekend and motivated, as
he put it, by the need to push back on the belief that Duke’s antiracist work was done. He was among the protesters. In his own student experience, Duke kept providing reminders, he wrote, of how deeply racism could work itself into the character of the campus. That led him to conceive of the need for Duke to break from the traditional protections of white identity: “The antiracist struggle is just as much a struggle to give up as it is to gain. Duke must be willing to face the ‘danger’ of its form and function being shifted and transformed. As I see it, ‘stepping out of the way’ means Duke cannot center its own interests in the conversations and subsequent solutions. If the problem-solving efforts reproduce the same power dynamics that yielded the issue, then it is not a challenge to racism, but an attempt to placate.”

We told our concerned correspondents that in deciding to publish the disputed letter, we were trying to align ourselves with Michael Ivory’s call for honesty, in the same issue, as an antiracism strategy. We also identified with a point made by Ibram X. Kendi in his book, How to Be an Antiracist, and reiterated by him in the aftermath of the assault on the Capitol. Reflecting on the MAGA mob invasion, he wrote in the Atlantic: “All of what we saw at the US Capitol is part of America. But what’s also part of America is denying all of what is part of America. Actually, this denial is the essential part of America. Denial is the heartbeat of America.” And here’s what Mark Anthony Neal, chair of African and African American Studies at Duke, had to say (on Twitter) about the episode: “Better that they run it, to own what some alums think, than to bury it, and pretend this is not part of the institution’s legacy.”

Still, the episode was a reminder not just of the contours of racism, but also of the complexities of free speech. It also sparked an ongoing conversation—a conversation that weaved together personal trajectories and professional ambitions—with a first-year graduate student at Duke’s Sanford School of Public Policy. The student, Matthew Curtis, had crafted one of the many responses to the original letter. He had also attracted a bunch of cosigners among his peers. “It is certainly true that the Duke alumni community encompasses a vast ideological spectrum,” he wrote. “However, that does not mean we should platform arguments that rely on racist caricatures.” His questioning allowed for no feel-good, formulaic answers: “What does it mean to say that Duke is committed to [diversity, equity, and inclusion] on public-facing webpages when these are the alumni accounts highlighted within the Duke community? How does that reflect on Duke’s support for Black students, on the type of alumni community that they will join upon graduation?”
I got in touch with him, and Curtis shared some of the writing he had done in his public policy courses. He had also done analyses for a couple of ad hoc research teams advising Durham officials. One of his papers looked at communities of color and vaccine skepticism—a huge subject in the time of the pandemic. He reviewed the familiar history of the Tuskegee syphilis experiment. But he shifted to broader considerations of healthcare providers and their legacy for minority communities. He referred to “centuries of subpar, discriminatory treatment by doctors and nurses.” Black patients “still believe that many non-Black doctors fail to demonstrate the empathy, cultural sensitivity, and understanding of pain that they show whites,” he wrote. “Moreover, they fear that both healthcare providers and researchers target vulnerable people, then hide information about medical care and treatments from them.”

Curtis and I didn’t connect in person until the summer of 2021. Over Vietnamese coffee in an off-campus café long popular with Duke students, we talked about the start of his (remote) summer internship, with the Government Accountability Office. He was assigned to work on another potential calamity: a possible earthquake and tsunami hitting the West Coast. He was preparing to head out for a fact-finding trip to Seattle. Though his internship had a pretty sobering theme, the fact that it carried at least some travel component, some opportunity to research on site, was a sign that postpandemic normality was not out of reach.

Predictably enough, the academic year kept bringing reminders of the fraught place of race on campus. In late March 2021, officials said they would investigate a provocative display as a potential violation of Duke’s “Community Standard” and its “Policy on Prohibited Discrimination and Harassment.” A flyer, in a dorm for first-year students, had shown what appeared to be George Floyd’s toxicology report, along with a photo of Floyd; it was hung on a Black History Month–themed bulletin board, just days before the trial of Derek Chauvin, the former police officer accused in Floyd’s death. According to the Chronicle, individual items on the toxicology report were underlined with a pink pen. Scribbled notes—“Mix of drugs presents in difficulty breathing!” “Overdose? Good man? Use of false currency is felony!”—implied, the student newspaper said, that Floyd was responsible for his own death.

The story, again, drew lots of media attention, all the way to the Australian News Review—another reminder that campuses are eternally interesting to the public, because they are eternally wrestling with the most vexing issues
in society. CNN quoted a student who lived in the dorm as lamenting that he was “honestly terrified” when he spotted the display. “That happened right down the hall from where I sleep, from where I’m supposed to be safe.”

At almost exactly the same time of that reported incident, another constituency was raising its own concerns about safety and identity. Seven Asian student groups responded collectively to a spike in anti-Asian violence nationally—notably the fatal shootings in Georgia of eight people, six of them women of Asian descent. They released a list of demands addressed to Duke administrators, including: “institutionalizing,” through a formal academic department, Asian American and diaspora studies, along with ethnic studies more broadly (all in the interest of ensuring that “the histories and realities of people of color both in the United States and in the wider world are treated as critical sources of knowledge”); providing cultural centers for student of color with appropriate mental-health resources and support staff (according to the letter, the existing cultural centers were under-resourced); handling Asian ethnic-group data differently (rather than using the single-identity category “Asian, Asian American, Pacific Islander”); establishing a sharper hate-and-bias policy (including “clear and concrete consequences” for violating the standards).

Other responses to anti-Asian violence repeated a familiar pattern, if one that seemed fitting in an academic setting. There was a collective expression of concern and support. It came from various campus leaders, including those in charge of cultural and identity centers: “This current trend shows how racism and xenophobia have been used to justify racist sentiments and actions against people of Asian descent. Such aggressions are not new and are embedded in a long history of racial violence targeting Asians, Asian Americans, and other vulnerable minorities in the United States.”

And there were the expert presentations. I took in one titled “Who Speaks? Whose Stories? Legibility and Inclusion in Media Narratives of Asian America.” Eileen Cheng-yin Chow, a Duke lecturing fellow of Asian and Middle Eastern studies, who comes from a family of journalists, led the conversation. She began by tracing the “otherizing” of traditionally marginal groups during times of stress. From there she talked about the media’s role in perpetuating stereotypes, from the manipulatively seductive Asian woman to the high-achieving tech entrepreneur. And she offered an argument for journalism to value actual, lived experience over “both-sidesism,” or a gray, neutral tone. In doing that, she surprised me by bringing me back to a Duke course, in classical rhetoric, that I had audited many years ago. Why not, she
suggested, advance a journalistic imperative to move beyond *kronos*—the familiar tick-tock, or sequential retelling of events—to *kairos*, signaling an opportune moment to take action?

Advertised as a pop-up event, it encapsulated the richness of today's university: A dose of American history with resonance in the present moment. A critique of complacent and complicit cultural institutions. A reference right out of a classical studies curriculum. An appeal to broad-based activism. (And it was followed, in the next academic year, by faculty approval of a minor in Asian American and diaspora studies.)

**FREE SPEECH OR HATE SPEECH?**

Certainly for conservative commentators, elite higher education was easily caricatured as not just steeped in social-justice concerns, but also as driven by identity politics. Every morning through every pandemic-time academic year, I'd find in my inbox a right-leaning newsletter that, indeed, would offer "three stories you need to start your day." The headlines might alert me to a university researcher somewhere who was running "antiracist" day care, or a professor playing a role in the national Cops Off Campus Coalition, or a student government organization handing out a critical race theory manifesto, or the supposed unveiling of "trigger warnings" in history and classics classes, or a syllabus raising the question of whether the academy should stop teaching Shakespeare.

A (spring 2022) sequence of events, as they unfolded at Duke, showed the academy to be awash with acronyms and acrimony. Students Supporting Israel (SSI), a national organization with a title that pretty much speaks to its purpose, sought—and initially achieved—official recognition of its Duke chapter by Duke Student Government (DSG). Then the DSG president vetoed the resolution of approval, and the veto would be upheld. In a social-media battle, SSI had called out a student for complaining that "My school promotes settler colonialism"; the response from the SSI side was to find fault with that particular application of "settler colonialism" and to note that "these types of narratives are what we strive to combat and condemn." Making the case for her veto, the DSG president said SSI had violated its own commitment to be "welcoming and inclusive to all Duke students." But the decision drew criticism from, among others, the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE), which says it exists to defend such rights as freedom of speech on college campuses. FIRE's finding was that the SSI post might be considered inappropriate or uncivil, but that it was
protected by Duke’s guarantee to students of expressive rights. Eventually the 
student government recognized, for a second time (with no veto attempted), 
Students Supporting Israel; DSG also approved a resolution condemning 
antisemitism.

The controversy carried on: The student government president, in a 
*Chronicle* column, revealed how her veto had made her a subject of online 
harassment: “Email after email, DM [direct message] after DM. Racist cow. 
Antisemitic, Hitler-loving bitch. Dirty communist. Virus-spreading whore.” She 
began to wonder, she wrote, whether her future employer would respond to 
e-mails demanding that her job offer be rescinded, whether her home address 
had been uncovered, whether “for the rest of my life, this would be something 
that I would never escape from, that people would look at me differently.”

And it didn’t end there. The president of Students Supporting Israel took 
to the opinion pages of the *Chronicle* to decry an upcoming event, “Narrating 
Resistance and Agency: Shifting the Discourse on Palestine.” The student 
government had approved funding for the guest speakers. One of them, 
Mohammed El-Kurd, a prominent Palestinian activist, journalist, and poet, 
had made “numerous derogatory and threatening tweets bashing Israelis and 
Jewish people.” He came across, according to the opinion column, as “an 
outspoken anti-Semite and a dangerous voice to my community.”

When I went to “Narrating Resistance and Agency,” I found a half-dozen 
or so students just outside the campus theater where it was being held. They 
were politely handing out information sheets declaring that “While free 
speech and civil discourse is a wonderful thing, hateful rhetoric filled with 
glaring anti-Semitism is not.” Tweets printed out from El-Kurd included 
statements like, “There is no morally defensible argument for supporting 
Zionism,” and references to “state-settler collusion emboldening an unquench-
able thirst for Palestinian blood and land.” Inside, a student introducing the 
program appealed to the audience to provide a “safe, respectful, teachable 
space.” El-Kurd said he had a hard time understanding how anyone could 
feel endangered by his words, and he went on to talk about what he saw 
as Israeli state violence and the dehumanizing of Palestinians. He wasn’t 
interrupted in his presentation.

One message in all that back-and-forth: What appears current and urgent 
to the campus population actually can be part of a continuum in the campus 
narrative. Early in the Duke presidency of Richard H. Brodhead, in the 
fall of 2004, the university went ahead with a “Palestine Solidarity Move-
ment Conference.” Word of that conference had provoked the same angry 
sentiments. At the time, Brodhead said in a statement: “When universities
get in the business of suppressing speech, however vile, it lends credence to the notion that it is a legitimate function of the university to suppress speech. A notion is thereby validated that then can be activated on another occasion — perhaps to suppress our own dissent or unpopular expression. The day we start making it easy to shut down others’ opinions is the day we license a curtailment of freedom from which we could each suffer in our turn.” Duke's hosting a speaker or conference “does not imply endorsement of the views expressed,” he added. “The deepest principle involved is not even the principle of free speech. It's the principle of education through dialogue.”

Pandemic-time Duke saw other free-speech flare-ups. In the fall of 2020, Duke Law students — reportedly half the student body at the law school — signed an open letter to the dean. They were demanding the removal of Helen Alvaré, a professor at George Mason University School of Law, from a “Putting Children at the Front Door of Family Law” conference at Duke.

The conference, meant to examine “the state’s role advocating for children in the familial structure,” was being hosted by the Duke chapter of the conservative Federalist Society. (Pandemic-time events at other law schools, specifically those with a Federalist Society label attached, similarly would be perceived as provocative. At Yale Law School, one program was met with repeated disruptions; at the University of California Hastings College of the Law, “the speaker was unable to eke out more than a few words before students shouted him down, chanting, clapping, and banging on desks in protest,” Inside Higher Ed reported.) According to the open letter, the speaker in question “entertains conversations of conversion therapy for LGBTQ+ persons,” and also “views same-sex couples as less capable of raising children.” Duke, the letter declared, “is signaling at least a willingness to engage in these discussions and at worst, a tacit endorsement of these opinions. By not condemning injustice, you condone it.” It went on: “As many of us were applying to law schools, we weighed heavily the environment in which we would be living. . . . For us who see through a social-justice lens, we explicitly considered what Duke offered to empower our value-driven passions. We were told that at Duke our diversity was not just tolerated, but celebrated.” As aspiring lawyers, “we sometimes forget that not everything is up for discussion,” the letter concluded. “On some issues, there are not very fine people on both sides.”

Post-event, officers of Duke’s Federalist Society weren’t inclined to offer much of a response to the pushback. “The Federalist Society takes no public-policy positions and does not participate in activism of any kind,” I was told.
"We do not seek to speak for our members, and neither do our speakers." I was, though, referred to their statement of purpose, which read in part, "Our members hold a diverse array of viewpoints, and we consider productive dialogue as our most important chapter goal."

Then, in the spring semester that followed, another open letter. This one was signed by a local environmental coalition called the Sunrise Movement, along with several Duke faculty members. They targeted an upcoming talk by Bjørn Lomborg, an "academically dishonest guest lecturer," from the Copenhagen Consensus Center, labeling him "a professional climate denier whose career has been funded by other climate deniers."

As the letter interpreted his record, while Lomborg publicly accepted the reality of climate change, "his signature book and entire career have been devoted to denying its severity and touting false and dangerous claims that current calls for climate action are not necessary." Of course, the letter acknowledged, he "has the right to reach his own conclusions from the scientific data at our disposal and is free to share these conclusions via whatever platform he is given." But, it is "unacceptable for Duke to provide him such a platform," as the letter's signatories saw it. "The world is at a crossroads on the climate crisis: Will we choose division, pseudoscience, and the profits of those who have a vested interest in the destruction of our planet? Or, will we stand for scientific integrity, reason, and human rights, and with them, just solutions to address the massive crisis we are facing and build a better world in the process?" 

Both (virtual) events proceeded with their speaker lineups. The climate-related complaint, though, did draw a response, published in the Chronicle, from Bruce Caldwell, director of Duke's Center for the History of Political Economy, the campus organization that sponsored the Lomborg talk. The original letter "chastised the center" for giving its speaker a "platform" to share his views, he noted. "Such censorship would deny speakers with whom the letter writers disagree the ability to express their views, and would set themselves up as arbiters of truth. Although such attitudes are increasingly expressed on university campuses, they should be anathema to anyone who values an open society. They have no place in a university dedicated to free inquiry, free and open discussion and debate, and the opportunity to confront views that one opposes with arguments." Caldwell's letter was published after the speech was delivered; he said the speaker began the talk by stating that climate change is real and is human made. "The lecture addressed, among other things, best strategies for dealing with climate change. Whether his
own analysis and his own proposed strategy are right or wrong is ... some-
thing that honest people should want to discuss and debate without prior
restraint."

Controversy didn’t just follow campus speakers; it even extended to at
least one publication anchored on campus (in addition to my own Duke
Magazine, with its controversial published letter). The Chronicle of Higher
Education, in the spring of 2022, wrote about a previously unexplored epi-
sode in Duke Law. That past summer, student editors were joining with
the law faculty to produce an issue of Law and Contemporary Problems, a
journal published by the school. Its theme would be “Sex in Law.” The essay
in question—“The Importance of Referring to Human Sex in Language”—
was by Kathleen Stock, at the time a philosophy professor at the University
of Sussex in England. “On examination,” she wrote, “neither the strategies of
sex-denial nor sex-avoidance have provided us with justification for chang-
ing the traditional understandings of ‘woman,’ ‘man,’ ‘girl,’ and ‘boy.’ State-
ments such as ‘trans women are women’ and ‘trans men are men’ are best
understood neither as either literally true statements, nor as in service to
desirable re-engineering of the traditional categories.” She added, “Though
it is normally polite and desirable to observe the preferred descriptors and
pronouns of trans people in interpersonal contexts, there are times when
literal and accurate reference to actual sex is important.”

Before publication, eight student editors resigned from the journal. The
remaining student editors, in protest, elected not to work on the issue. They
voiced their objections in a note appended to the masthead. In that space,
they referred to their request (which wasn’t honored) that Stock adhere to
“a style guide on uniform language”—a guide they considered “necessary
to avoid harm to the transgender community.” One student editor told
the Chronicle of Higher Education that the essay was bound to be “a direct
attack on transgender people and their identities.” Duke OutLaw, the law
school’s LGBT+ student group, tweeted that “the article is hardly a meaning-
ful contribution to academic discourse”; the tweet criticized the law school
for providing the platform.

The intellectual climate on campus—and particularly its relationship to
Duke’s announced antiracism steps—sparked some conservative-minded
backlash from within the faculty. John Staddon, an emeritus professor of
psychology and biology, laid out a point-by-point rebuttal to the presidential
pronouncements around race. It got some attention, including in the Wall
Street Journal. He took on, for example, the statement that, “Here at Duke,
we aspire to be agents of progress in advancing racial equity and justice.”
Staddon wrote: “No one is against progress, equity, or justice, but views differ on just what they constitute…. Many feel these goals, admirable as they sound, are tangential to our stated purpose: Eruditio et Religio, or, Matthew Arnold’s study of ‘the best that has been thought and said,’ or, more prosaically, ‘teaching and research.’ At the very least, they need to be defended explicitly.” The focus on antiracism, he went on, “will lead many to doubt whether your objectives are consistent with the traditional goals of Duke or, indeed, of an elite university.”

Staddon had company in his complaints. As the university was heading into the summer of 2022, Duke’s Chronicle reported on an email chain within the Department of Molecular Genetics and Microbiology. A mandatory training session was being set up to help department members be “fair and welcoming” toward individuals of diverse backgrounds. But one professor didn’t welcome the mandate; he declared he would “refuse to engage in left-wing Maoist political propaganda workshops.”

I discovered a course that, in at least some ways, addressed Staddon’s concern that campuses had become anti-intellectual and indoctrination-happy. “How to Think in an Age of Political Polarization” was taught by John Rose. His title is associate director of Duke’s Civil Discourse Project, which works to explore “the pressing questions of meaning, value, and spirit that confront us as human beings and citizens.” A few of the fifty or so students would occasionally take in the course online. Most showed up for the in-person experience; they were face masked, spread out in social-distancing fashion, and inhabiting space dominated, on either side, by a periodic table of elements, artifacts of the building’s former status as home of the chemistry department.

Early in the semester I visited, Rose took the pulse of the class through an online survey. The results hardly contributed to the picture of a student body that saw every issue from a left-leaning perspective. At the same time, the survey didn’t offer much solace to those who wondered if some campus conversation was likely to be stymied. It did, in fact, point to a reluctance on the part of students to engage in sharp debate. Half identified themselves as liberal, with the rest about evenly split between centrist and conservative. Almost 70 percent agreed that there were “politically sensitive issues that you feel too uncomfortable raising around other students.” The familiar elements of a cultural divide came up: gun control, wealth distribution, universal healthcare, immigration, pandemic-related limits on personal freedoms, acceptable pronouns, race and gender, the Israel-Palestinian conflict. One student reported avoiding those hot buttons, even with close
friends: “I find that people get defensive the moment you bring up a small point of contention.”

Another student in the polarization course, Adam Snowden, told me he wasn’t surprised by those findings. He mentioned the harsh reaction when he expressed one unorthodox opinion: that it was an exaggeration to attribute every death at the hands of police officers to police bias. A friend, according to Snowden, dared him to post his point of view on social media and watch the piled-on criticism that was sure to come. And then the friend essentially cut him off. Snowden’s academic work at Duke focused on computational biology. He was attracted as well to courses in ethics and philosophy—all of which, he said, put him on the journey to asking big questions, in the spirit of truth seeking. What he found in a lot of his peer conversations, though, was more akin to reflexive ideology, without much thinking attached to it.

Snowden sent me his writing for the course. One of his essays looked at what it meant to be renaming campus buildings, at Duke and elsewhere—buildings originally named for figures judged, in the current environment, to have behaved disgracefully. He was wary of the trend, and he highlighted the decision at Princeton to drop Woodrow Wilson’s name from its public-policy school. His argument was that such decisions should hinge on what the original naming honored—presumably not the individual’s entire record in life, but rather some specific aspect of that trajectory. If the honor was meant, say, to commemorate the racist legacy of a Confederate general, the choice to rename would be easy. But what if the honor expressed something that was positive and meaningful in the original place-and-time context? “While Woodrow Wilson was indeed racist, the building was given his name to show gratitude for his tenure as the university president and massive contributions to the school.... Considering the intended message of gratitude, it seems puzzling how there is inherent offense in merely the Wilson name.”

While Woodrow Wilson didn’t pop up on the syllabus, Rose pumped his students with plenty of readings. One was William Deresiewicz’s article on “Political Correctness: Power, Class, and the New Campus Religion.” It launched a discussion on whether a reader boycott was called for, given a fresh controversy: seemingly dismissive comments on transgender rights from J.K. Rowling, who had earned fame, as if by sheer wizardry, through her Harry Potter series. Rose also weaved in some classic texts—John Stewart Mill’s On Liberty, Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics. And he included some Duke-centered commentaries, like the demands of Duke’s Black Coalition Against Policing, along with arguments for traditional policing.
I watched the class consider a section on race and racism. Students were marking the eighty-degree temperatures in their shorts and T-shirts; Rose was in his trademark Oxford blue shirt, paisley tie, and Duke-issued blue face mask. The reading list for the day included a representation of political polarization. From one point of view, there was “The Inauthenticity Behind Black Lives Matter,” an argument from Shelby Steele, senior fellow at Stanford’s Hoover Institution, that the term “systemic racism” served to support a victim-focused racial identity. And, from the opposing end of the spectrum, a conference presentation by Keith Lawrence of the Aspen Institute and Terry Keleher of the Applied Research Center at UC Berkeley. Among other things, the authors provided a definition of structural racism as an in-built element of the United States, something that “lies underneath, all around, and across society.”

The earlier survey results notwithstanding, the students did disagree with one another, though agreeably enough. Several found the very idea of ethnic labels—say, Asian American—objectionable. One said such labeling might enforce conformity, or it might compel someone to act in some stereotype-defying way. Another began his comments stating, “I don’t want to offend anyone, obviously.” From there he said that he could climb a mountain, shout out to the multitude that “I’m privileged,” and accomplish little beyond deepening his own guilt, while contributing nothing to the social good. Others more or less agreed, remarking that social policy targeted to specific groups might diminish the power of individual agency. Still others asserted that the trampling of civil rights continues, and that the only prescription is to seize the opportunity for moral reckoning and dismantle white privilege.

“Who says you can’t talk about racial inequality at Duke University?” offered Rose, as the class broke up. (Students hung out after class, in small clusters, to keep talking.) The next week’s theme, he added, was abortion rights. It was bound to be somewhat less controversial, he said a bit wryly. The fault lines in society around issue after issue were becoming more and more pronounced. “This is the moment we’re in.”

How fraught a moment? One of Rose’s faculty colleagues talked with me about the emotional toll in tracking US-style political dysfunction. Climate-change skepticism. Gun-safety resistance. Election-outcome denial. He couldn’t tune out the political culture and sustain his research standing. He couldn’t remain plugged in without despairing of the nation’s future. So he retired.
THE DUKE HEALTH SYSTEM has more than 22,000 employees just in the category of clinical staff; that number explains why Duke is the largest employer in Durham County and the second-largest private employer in North Carolina. To look at the impact of the pandemic at Duke means, in no small way, paying attention to that very big component of the university.

STOCKING UP

To start that scrutiny, I drove just beyond a strip mall, crossed some railroad tracks, turned into a service road, and landed in front of a building that could be the dictionary definition of "nondescript." This was the LaSalle Street warehouse; over the years, the building has been through several incarnations, including serving as a call center. I was met by Mary Crawford, Duke's senior director of procurement and supply chain, who came across as friendly, genuinely proud of the work of her team in addressing the pandemic, and, of course, carefully face masked. She was dressed in comfortable high boots and a fleece vest. Her warehouse workplace took lots and lots of steps to navigate, and it would let in all kinds of weather when the loading-dock doors were flung open.
Early in the pandemic, in the spring of 2020, she told me, the warehouse was seeing some ten deliveries every day. We met during a bit of a lull, but one of her colleagues printed out a photo from his phone of three trucks lined up by the loading dock. Sometimes Crawford and colleagues would get midnight calls about impending deliveries. Sometimes they would come to work at seven o’clock in the morning and see drivers dispersed in the parking lot, sleeping in their rigs after a long haul. There were tractor trailers and semitrailers and familiar delivery services, like FedEx and UPS. There were also inexperienced drivers, several of them clearly challenged as they reversed their vehicles toward the loading dock; they had been hurriedly recruited by shipping companies desperate to be moving out medical supplies. “For any given week, we would be holding our breath,” Crawford said. “Would we have enough PPE? With trucks coming in and out all the time, we would get these boxes on huge skids, and then we would have to unwrap all the tape and plastic on the outside to get a look inside. We had to see if we were getting what we were expecting. It was all so surreal. It felt like a middle-of-the-night drug deal—sticking a knife through the box to see if the product was the real thing.”

We went walking, pretty much through all 24,000 square feet of the warehouse, with its more than thirteen hundred unique items arrayed along heavy-duty metal racks. Now and again we were squeezing along narrow aisles, ducking under support beams, and admiring a temporarily idle forklift. Duke had grabbed the warehouse in a six-month lease, Crawford said; within a few weeks, the lease had been renegotiated for three years.

The walk took us by boxes of masks and disposable examination gloves. Crawford pointed out that we were in the midst of millions and millions of the masks—on this particular day, 24,484,361 “looped masks” between this and a second warehouse—which constantly were being given out to patients, anyone who walked into the hospital to visit those patients, and anyone working or studying on campus. We passed by securely fitting bouffant caps. Wipes and disinfectants. Sterile sleeves. Safety goggles. Lab coats. Coveralls. Shoe covers. Hand soap. Syringes with different needle widths. Plastic gowns engineered by Duke’s own Engineering and Operations group. COVID-19 face shields—fifty per box, individually bagged, marked for “nonsurgical mitigation only.” Crawford told me, “When we can get something, we get a lot of it.” As a logistics expert, she naturally had a system in place. I paused at a box labeled 356082; that was the inventory control number. Underneath was the number 101561—the code for the manufacturer. Then a descriptive label: sanitizer foam.
Our most interesting stop was along a stack of so-called PAPRs, or powered air-purifying respirators. PAPR kits are packed with everything from hoods and face shields, to breathing tubes that provide a supply of filtered air, to batteries and battery chargers. Basically resembling spacesuits, and meant to serve as the ultimate protection against aerosolized particles, this batch of PAPRs was developed through a partnership with Ford and 3M. With the pandemic, Ford was repurposing parts like vehicle ventilator fans and power-tool batteries. (According to a statement from Ford, in designing the PAPR hoods, the company’s engineers adapted techniques from installing seat trims.) The markings on the boxes read “Built to lend a hand,” a nod to the Ford slogan, “Built to last.” Duke placed one of the first and largest orders in the United States—initially a thousand, to cover frontline workers.

For some more behind-the-scenes context, I reached out to Crawford’s former boss, Jane Pleasants, who, before retiring, was Duke’s vice president for supply chain management. Early on, she told me, she had started getting concerned about disruptions in the global supply chain. “I was starting to see small issues pop up in our distribution channels. The aha moment for me was when I was looking at New York and seeing people doing whatever they could to get PPE—images of healthcare workers garbed in trash bags. The
reality of that moment hit me like a ton of bricks.” That moment of foreboding soon translated into harsh reality. “None of our vendors—literally none of our vendors—could supply us. We had to define new sources for every traditional source of PPE. We had to go to places where we never bought before.” For years and years, Duke had contracted with 3M for face masks. “But we learned that the only place where 3M was making masks was a manufacturing plant in Thailand, and suddenly the plant shut down. We learned that on a Monday, and a shipment of masks was due that Wednesday.”

As she scrambled to find PPE, Pleasants turned to some local resources in confronting a global challenge. To equip some two thousand hand-sanitizer dispensers, Duke needed a liquid brew containing at least 70 percent alcohol, so the university reached out to a local brewery. And Engineering and Operations produced some five thousand protective face shields, which, along with face masks, would provide crucial protection for caregivers tending to coronavirus patients. But other needs necessitated broader connections. Faculty members with commercial ties to China, for example, made it possible for Duke to connect with two China-based manufacturers, which together ended up shipping enough masks to cover the campus. (For a time, Pleasants said, China was prohibiting exports of medical products.)

A different kind of solution kicked in for N95 respirators. These are the masks that fit tightly around the face and do a much better job than, say, surgical masks at filtering out viruses. One approach to stocking up on N95s would have been to seek out various suppliers. But different brands from different sources would make it tough to set uniform standards. A Duke study had shown, though, that exposing contaminated N95s to vaporized hydrogen peroxide would eliminate the COVID-19 virus from the material and preserve the integrity of the masks’ fit for up to four uses. (For some time, it had been clear that hydrogen peroxide was handy for decontaminating a whole room in a biocontainment facility. Before Duke tested out the idea, it had been less clear that PPE could stand up to a similar treatment.) So why not try to grab some machines that did that work of decontamination? Pleasants called a supplier late on a Friday. She was told that the warehouse was closed, and anyway, the supplier had just three left. “I said, we’ll take them.” Given the demand, “If we had waited one more weekday, we probably would not have gotten them.”

“None of this was the normal kind of ordering, where you would order just as much as you need,” Pleasants pointed out. “This was so unlike the way we normally do procurement. Every principle around procurement”—competitive bidding, strict contract arrangements, the reliance on vendors
with established track records, an elaborate approval process—"was pretty much out the window." Given the demand and supply issues for PPE, "We would have to take it when we could get it." And in some cases, "taking it" meant whatever had to be paid for it. In normal times, the basic masks would cost about ten cents each; Duke would pay about twenty or twenty-five cents each, while on the open market, they were going for a dollar or more. Disposable nitrile gloves that were once seven dollars a box shot up to something like twenty-five or thirty dollars a box.

It wasn't just PPE that presented new pressures, logistical and financial alike. In the spring of 2020 and for some months beyond, the campus was largely shut down. And Duke had no centralized receiving area—"everything had always been delivered through some door of every building," according to Pleasants. So the university had to acquire warehouse space in a hurry, at LaSalle Street and two other locations, not just to store supplies, but also to provide a delivery site. "That was for every single thing: books, supplies, lab equipment, reagents. We had to bring freezers into a warehouse to keep products that had to remain cold. Everything the university ordered in research and administration was caught in a distribution nightmare."

Just across from where I live is a brick house with two features that popped up early in the pandemic: on the front lawn, huge inflatables of Santa Claus and the accompanying reindeer; in the front windows, huge letters that spelled out "Thank You." That thank you was a gesture toward frontline workers, including a neighbor, Daphne Jones, who is, well, the most neighborly of neighbors. She was the chief organizer of a "safe but fun Halloween block party"; used a neighborhood email list to "let me know if you need anything from Costco—the hospital is getting very busy with COVID, and I'll be fully decontaminated for the trip"; and celebrated "a huge shipment of toilet paper expected to arrive today (huzzah!), so let me know if anyone is low, and I'm happy to share the wealth."

In her professional life, she was a physician in a COVID ward at Duke Regional Hospital, which is part of Duke Health. (She would later join the Duke-affiliated Durham Veterans Administration Medical Center; she remains a medical instructor on the Duke faculty.) She sent me updates like this: "Across the three Duke hospitals, we're at about two hundred patients admitted with COVID and expecting a 9 percent increase daily for the next
two weeks, based on epidemiological projections. That being said, we know the virus intimately now and thus a lot of the panic and uncertainty has dissolved, which helps a lot. We also have the reassurance that (so far) we have plenty of PPE and we know that it works. I’ve personally walked into the rooms of coughing COVID-positive patients and managed to get out unscathed for the last ten months.”

Later in the pandemic: “The newest development is that as of this week, most of us are fully vaccinated. I didn’t realize how much of a relief it would actually be. We all still wear full PPE and masks while at work, but I find my personal anxiety of being with COVID patients has relaxed just a bit. Now we deal with the frustration of people not wanting to be vaccinated, mostly in the community, but surprisingly even hospital workers are refusing to be ‘guinea pigs.’” She would veer between fear and anger, the latter emotion “equally unsettling for me” and focused on those “not following rules or making sacrifices to keep the community and healthcare workers safe. It’s tiring trying to explain how scary and deadly the virus is to people who just aren’t willing to listen, yet expect us all to show up every day, keep our kids home, and isolate ourselves from family. But honestly all I want right now is to get this vaccine out to the community and start to feel like we are on the other end of the curve to recovery.” She was tired of hearing about “new variants,” the thought of which would stir those pandemic-related anxieties.

Tom Owens identified with such anxieties. I asked Owens, who is president of Duke Hospital, if at any point he found himself scared for what might unfold in the course of the COVID-19 crisis. “Yes,” he quickly answered. Like others I was talking with, he had closely followed the chaotic scene in New York in January 2020—hospitals stretched beyond the breaking point. “I have New York roots. I have family and friends there. And I was getting calls from colleagues describing what they were experiencing. It was like nothing we had ever seen in the United States. It was terrifying: The level of fear. The lack of access to care. Healthcare rationing. Not having enough information about modes of transmission, about rates of infection, about the impact of protective barriers. Not having effective treatments.”

Owens felt pressure from Duke staff who wanted to redeploy to New York. “Dozens and dozens of people asked if they could take a leave and work in New York for a month. We were worried that we would be next to feel the wave. And what if we didn’t have the team we needed in place?” Duke, then, ended up not sending a medical mission. Almost a year later, when I talked with Owens, he recalled it as a decision he struggled with.
Still, he told me: “What New York needed was not just more doctors and nurses. If we had sent healthcare providers up there, would it have made a difference? It might have. But it would not have been a game changer.”

As New York was still reeling, Duke found itself with two patients hospitalized with COVID-like symptoms; both had passed through Wuhan, the source of the virus. The medical team had to wait several days for test results to come back from the CDC. The tests turned out to be negative. Still, the arrival of the patients put the health system on alert.

Owens told me that at that point, “We were thinking that early organizational action gave us the potential not necessarily to prevent disaster, but to be as prepared as humanly possible.” The simple fact that the system was conspicuously preparing for the worst, and not just “passively sitting around and worrying,” provided a confidence boost. So did its early participation in three randomized clinical trials—one through the National Institutes of Health and two industry sponsored—to evaluate remdesivir, one of the most promising drugs for treating COVID-19 patients with moderate to severe illness. By March 2020, a few months into the pandemic, the whole health system had reorganized to deal with an expected onslaught. A Duke Health COVID-19 Incident Command structure—essentially an emergency management structure—would provide centralized leadership and monitoring; Owens had the role of co-incident commander.

One of Owens’s colleagues had the timely title of director of emergency preparedness and business continuity for Duke Health. That was Jason Zivica, who told me that he has always thrived in emergency situations. In his pre-Duke days, he worked as a paramedic and firefighter. “I seem to have a talent for staying cool under pressure, for controlling a scene, and, in that environment, for thinking through the results of my decisions.” In 2011, when Hurricane Irene slammed into coastal North Carolina, he ran a shelter for two weeks as the storm struck and recovery started.

Pandemic planning has been part of his portfolio, he told me; dealing with H1N1, a novel influenza strain in 2009, provided some lessons for the health system. “We’ve always planned for it. But nothing prepares you for this. This was beyond all anticipation.” The toughest things to anticipate, he added, were the seemingly “little” things. “When you add them up, it becomes extraordinarily challenging to operationalize.” There was all the coordinating with the supply chain administrators for PPE delivery. Also the question of how to accommodate healthcare staff who were looking to a lunch break, for example, even as the hospital café wasn’t set up for social distancing.
Or how to ensure that a building’s airflow didn’t promote viral transmission. How to create hospital units that would accommodate patient-isolation protocols, along with protocols at the hospital entrance for screening visitors. How to involve families of patients, often forced to be communicating at a distance, around critical medical issues.

“We learned that even the best-laid plans are always subject to change,” Zivica said. “With every event you plan for, you’ve got to be able to adapt and to bring your team with you. It’s been a time of highs and lows, and definitely at times you get tired. But it’s a good tired. You know you’re doing the right thing for your community.”

From his perspective as a hospital executive, Owens found the planning, the implementing, and the adapting satisfying. “Certainly during COVID, everywhere we turned, when we’ve needed to innovate, when we’ve needed to implement, when we’ve needed to support, when we’ve needed to step in, people have done it. When we’ve had to do it better or faster or manage a difficult change, people have done it. Sure, we’ve seen anxiety, frustration, and stress. But most of that was turned into some energetic response to make it better.” The working routine for hospital leaders underwent a huge shift, he said. “We moved out of our typical meeting structure and our relatively slow pace of decision making to rapid decision making. The core group of sixty or seventy people started working really long hours, with twelve-hour days, every day of the week. But it brought us together. And we could see the effect of decisions right away.”

Right away, too, Duke Health started collaborating with other regional health systems. They agreed on guidelines related to elective surgery—feeding off “triage recommendations” from the American College of Surgeons, some of which incorporated the expertise of Allan Kirk, chair of the Department of Surgery at Duke. That was a tricky balancing act. It made sense to postpone procedures in the interest of keeping the PPE stockpile as robust as possible, for example, and to avoid needlessly exposing staff to the virus. But some operations remained in the “essential” category, such as those for acute symptoms and most types of cancers. At the same time, as hospitals were getting more and more COVID patients, acute-care surgeons might have to be pulled off their normal work to help handle the influx.

(There was a pandemic effect on the habits of patients, too. Wary of visiting clinics, many would put off their regular health checkups. That could complicate the chances for an early diagnosis of a serious condition. It could certainly create issues around scheduling. In March 2022, when I tried
to schedule an exam at a Duke eye clinic, the earliest appointment offered was for the following November, more than eight months later: a backlog, I was told, attributable to a surge in patient demand.

At those hospitals, Duke and its peers all put in place visitor restrictions, a step that had its own fraught implications. As Owens explained: “Particularly when the community-spread rate gets above a certain threshold, it is simply not safe to let visitors into a hospital environment. Limiting visitor numbers is part of protecting our team and our patients. And early on, there were lots of questions around PPE. Would masking work during a visit? Would tight-fitting N95 masks be necessary? Would everyone stay masked? What about children who might be too fidgety to keep a mask on? What about adults who might be too confused or too compromised, with their own heart or respiratory issues, to keep a mask on? And our patient rooms are mostly single rooms. There’s just not enough space to keep folks safe with social distancing.”

The restrictions on visitors were “really hard, really devastating,” Owens said. To avoid putting families at risk of being infected with the virus, the hospital would arrange time with critically ill patients over Face Time or Zoom or through glass barriers. “We would become the person in the room with the patient, so the patient did not die alone. We would not let people die alone—it’s a deep tradition in healthcare. Face Time or Zoom can be a great way to connect when family members can’t be present. But there is just no substitute for the touch of a loved one. The biggest toll is on patients and family members. It’s a huge toll on our team as well—seeing so many people who are very sick and dying. If you walked through our intensive-care unit, you could hear the pain in our caregivers’ voices.”

Given that, it was no surprise that turnover in the COVID units was high. “As rewarding as it is, it takes a lot out of people. After doing this for a while, they may be looking to do something different,” Owens observed. The lure of less demanding work was one factor; another was the lure of financial incentives. “The demand for people who do this kind of work has never been greater. We have team members leaving to make multiples of what they earn here.” As I would later learn from the New York Times, nurses everywhere were leaving their hospital-based staff positions to take jobs with travel-nursing agencies, which placed them, on “a temporary and highly lucrative basis, in hospitals around the country.” In New York, according to the Times reporting, travelers would earn $10,000 a week or more.

One Duke nurse who persisted through it all kept a video blog for a local TV station, WRAL. From the onset of the pandemic and for months
beyond, Ashley Wheeler, an Emergency Department nurse at Duke Regional, reflected on a series of milestones: her anticipation of upticks in patient numbers ("Most people will get better, but not everybody, and ‘not everybody’ is turning out to be a whole lot of people"); the different symptoms expressed by patients (respiratory issues, to be sure, but also other "major life-changing situations," with different organs being affected); the particular pain of witnessing patients being intubated ("It’s like watching someone drown right in front of you"); her struggle to cope with the death, from COVID, of a former colleague (there seemed to be "something indiscriminate" about who was getting sick); the updates from a friend in New Zealand, a country that had imposed an ironclad lockdown and rampant testing ("I’m jealous; we don’t have anything even approaching that"); her acceptance that this would be a long battle ("This is what we’re going to be doing for months"); the joy from receiving her own vaccination, days after the FDA granted its emergency use ("I’m smiling like I got a big prize"). At one point, Wheeler acknowledged the obvious, that on "a regular day," ER work is hard. She added, tearfully, "It’s really, really hard now."

I finally connected with Wheeler on one of her precious days off, with her two-and-a-half-year-old conspicuously in the background. It was the spring of 2022, and the pandemic seemed to be receding. Researchers from Duke and elsewhere had just published a journal article comparing the experiences of healthcare workers during the pandemic to the experiences of military veterans. Wheeler recognized a central term in the study, moral injury. It refers to the damage to one's identity when things go so wrong, when basic assumptions are so disturbed, as to violate one’s sense of self. She had to work to manage her own anger and disappointment, with her growing sense that many people were reluctant to make private sacrifices, however modest, in the interest of public health. She wondered about the image of nurses, regardless of circumstances, as “tough enough to deal with anything.”

Wheeler went through earlier phases working in high-end cuisine (with training at the Culinary Institute of America), selling cars (she hated that), and even as a nanny in Scotland (where she found herself on 9/11). But nursing was always a lure. As a high schooler, she had accompanied her mother, a nurse, through one particularly memorable shift in an emergency room; she witnessed the frenzy and the sense of excitement. Now exhaustion was a bigger factor than excitement: "Everything, on a scale of one to ten, was dialed up to eleven." Compassion fatigue had become an issue for her. Self-care had become a personal imperative. "You have to be careful, because the job will ask you to give everything," she told me. "And you can’t."
I again caught up with Wheeler near the end of her campaign for a seat on the Orange County Board of Education. We spoke on the first day of early voting; she lost in a tight race. A seventeen-year resident of Hillsborough, she had grown up in nearby Chapel Hill. Her pandemic-time experience, she told me, had a lot to do with inspiring her bid for service on the board. Plenty of appreciative expressions were directed to essential workers like nurses and teachers—two still largely female professions, she pointed out. (There was even a hospital flyover, which she found silly.) But little in the way of tangible support followed. As visible as the pandemic made them, nurses and teachers alike are “historically underpaid, underappreciated, and asked to perform miracles with insufficient support.”

Wheeler had her preteen son vaccinated the first day possible, which seemed like a bit of a miracle. She enrolled her teenage son in a vaccine trial. Neither took particularly well to class time over Zoom. “They both often checked out. It went from a kind of adventure to their feeling uninspired and resigned.”

Still, Wheeler tried to liven up their online learning with continuing geography challenges: “Tell me everything you can find out about Khartoum.” Particularly with her young daughter, having her mother nearby helped; pandemic-time day care arrangements were unreliable. The way Wheeler’s shift was generally configured—twelve-hour days, three days a week, often including school-free weekends—also helped. Many of her nursing colleagues weren’t so fortunate. Some had to adjust their work schedules and even trim their hours.

Not that Wheeler wasn’t managing a lot: She ended our conversation to clean up a debris field of trail mix and crayons spread all over the first floor of her house.

The system Wheeler was working for, Duke Health, had to be constantly planning and modeling around its own scenario of chaos—case numbers that might have kept spiraling upward. North Carolina, though, never saw a huge surge. There were smaller, manageable surges; Owens told me that around Thanksgiving 2020, it seemed possible that hospital capacity might be “challenged.” But Duke had built out its capacity, notably opening a new hospital building a year and a half ahead of schedule. Owens said he couldn’t be absolutely sure why Duke Health never felt stretched to its limits. But it probably was tied to smart statewide policies: restrictions on large gatherings and retail operations; constant messages about social distancing, hand washing, and mask wearing; and mask-wearing mandates in communities like Durham.
By the first week of December 2020, Duke Hospital would discharge its one-thousandth COVID-19 patient (across the entire Duke Health System, the count at that point was 1,923). Healthcare staff and enthusiastic observers followed the patient on his way out. They did lots of clapping and cheering and showed lots of Duke blue in the decorations they displayed: balloons, pompoms, signs reading, “You are our hero.” Owens witnessed that moment and then a few weeks later, in mid-December, the moment Faye Williams, dressed in her Duke blue scrubs and wearing her lucky pearls, became the first employee to receive the Pfizer-BioNTech COVID-19 vaccine through Duke Health. Williams had come out of retirement as a nurse to help with patient services; she was screening people at the hospital entrance, and so she was the first person Owens would run into every work day.

For Owens, vaccines were hardly a new area of interest. Early in his career, right after 9/11 and with new fears of bioterrorism, he was part of a group enrolling patients in a smallpox vaccine trial at Duke. Later he was involved in trials of combination vaccines, similar to the familiar combination vaccines that protect children against measles, mumps, and rubella. Owens told me it wasn’t certain when the COVID-19 vaccine would arrive; the timing became clearer just the night before. “With the very first vial, there was a moment of panic,” he recalled. “We drew up five doses, the amount that was supposed to be available in a vial. But there was vaccine left over. The team, including the pharmacy director, thought they had done something wrong. So we held off on vaccinating people. We reconstituted another vial, and the same thing happened—we had six doses.” After a few phone calls, they learned that the vaccine had been packaged with an extra dose in every vial. “At the end of the day, we had more doses than we thought. We had planned to vaccinate fifteen people, but we had eighteen doses of the vaccine.” That evening, more phone conversations ensued, with health officials from the state, the manufacturer, and the Food and Drug Administration. Within forty-eight hours, a new six-doses-per-vial standard had been widely circulated—a bonus of 20 percent.

Owens and his colleagues learned that, despite reports of vaccine skepticism, there was a lot of pent-up demand. Soon they were vaccinating four hundred people, then one thousand people a day. Over subsequent weeks, they built up the capacity to five thousand a day; after a couple of months, they were prepared to double that figure—if enough of the vaccines were available.
A medical center sign of the times. Photo: Jared Lazarus/Duke University.
(Over time, as fatigue grew with pandemic-related gestures of any variety, supply would outstrip demand.)

And what happened to the leftover doses from the original batch? "We were told we had to throw away the extra doses. I wouldn't let that happen. So I said, put one in me. I wouldn't let it go to waste. But I felt very guilty. I blame my mother: I have deep-seated Catholic guilt from a strict Catholic upbringing." The guilt was probably misplaced, since Owens still practiced medicine, and the practice he worked in was caring for COVID patients, so he would have been in the first wave for vaccination.

Owens's ability to get that shot in the arm, particularly, his eventual two doses of a Pfizer-BioNTech COVID-19 vaccine, had something to do with the work of Duke Health. Duke's Human Vaccine Institute was brought into clinical trials—first with Pfizer, through a trial with about 250 adults and adolescents; and later, through the COVID Prevention Network, an initiative of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, with AstraZeneca. To find out about those trials, I talked with Emmanuel (Chip) Walter. He's the chief medical officer and directs the vaccine and trials unit for the institute. When we met, over Zoom, Walter, trained as a pediatrician, was starting up a trial with children ages five to eleven. From experience with several different doses, his study and others would find that the best results in that age group came from one-third of the dose tailored for adults. In the fall of 2021, he was issuing public assurances that a kid-targeted vaccine was safe, effective, and the best protection from the disease. Those assurances came as the surge was ongoing from the Delta strain, and children were accounting for about 25 percent of reported cases of COVID.

Walter has extensive experience in infectious diseases. Early in his career, he worked on a vaccine to prevent meningitis in children. Later he worked on studies with AZT, which treats HIV infection and can also be used during childbirth to keep the mother from passing HIV to her baby.

With the fast-paced vaccine development, I wondered how volunteers were recruited for the clinical trials. Walter explained that the vaccine institute worked with a recruitment team from the Duke Office of Clinical Research; there are also national registries and media announcements. Participants came from all parts of North Carolina. They had to sign on for studies that would extend to two years, to fully assess the safety of the vaccine. They would have an initial screening at Duke and receive two doses of a vaccine or a placebo over either a three- or four-week period, and then would regularly check in by phone and through follow-up clinical visits. Particularly around the AstraZeneca trial and the study in children, his
colleagues worked to bring in Black and Latinx participants. The aim was to get broadly representative results.

Trial participants might be faithful or not so faithful to such COVID-related conventions as masking and social distancing. But Walter explained that the trials and study designs tried to control for a range of behaviors, through randomization (which, among other things, is meant to guard against confounding by external factors) and “blinding” (meaning the trial participants—and sometimes the administrators—don’t know if they are receiving the actual drug or a placebo). Trial administrators were interested in enrolling not just diverse populations but also at-risk populations—subjects who lived in “congregant settings” like apartments, or essential workers who were persisting at going to a physical workplace. Of course, with the ups and downs in infection rates, the Pfizer-BioNTech trial cohort collectively would have a different infection likelihood than the AstraZeneca cohort, which was recruited later.

The Food and Drug Administration had determined that vaccines of interest would have at least 50 percent efficacy. Walter acknowledged that the several vaccines emerging by early 2021 showed rates that, while higher than the FDA threshold, still stretched across an efficacy spectrum. But it was really “comparing apples and oranges,” because the vaccines had been tested on different populations, had been developed at different stages of the pandemic, and uniformly seemed to protect against the most serious effects of COVID-19—which is the protection you really wanted. Once the vaccines were shown to be effective and received emergency approval from the FDA, the trials were unblinded. Participants who had received placebos were informed of that, and they were given the option (which almost all went for) of getting the actual vaccine.

When, in December 2020, Walter, along with his team, got the first of two doses of the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine, he indulged in a “brag moment” and told the nurse about his role with the relevant studies. It was a good feeling. With the second dose, a few weeks later, the feeling wasn’t so good. The next day, he had a headache and some muscle ache, and he laid low. He had anticipated the side effects, and had scheduled the second dose for a weekend, so he wouldn’t be missing a work day. But he knew the good news behind that inflammatory reaction: He had a lot of antibody now circulating in his body, meaning his immune system was training itself to fight off the virus.

Fighting off the virus globally became the mission of a pandemic-time initiative with Duke roots: the COVID Global Accountability Platform
which cited its aim as providing “evidence-based tracking, insights, and recommendations that collectively hold the world to account to meet pressing needs, deliver on commitments, and accelerate the end of the pandemic.” Duke joined in that initiative with the COVID Collaborative, made up of experts in health, education, and the economy. In the spring of 2022, COVID GAP received a good bit of attention with a report noting a pivot point in the pandemic. The ability of Delta and then Omicron to spread quickly and to compromise immunity had changed the role and the definition of vaccinations. Global vaccine supplies and other countermeasures were expanding, making it more possible to contain COVID-19. At the same time, pandemic fatigue and complacency was a growing problem. Russia’s invasion of Ukraine had focused attention and resources away from the global COVID-19 response, even as the pandemic had set back progress on other health needs around the globe.

COVID-19, according to the report, “will almost certainly be circulating for years longer, with new variants emerging that create crests of infections, deaths, and economic disruptions.” Such an outlook supported a new strategy: tailoring goals and adopting targeted, “bottom-up” approaches for individual countries; making it a priority to fully vaccinate (extending to boosters) vulnerable populations, health workers, and other essential workers; ramping up the delivery of antivirals, including addressing gaps in supplies and funding that were exposed by the initial vaccination efforts; and building manufacturing capabilities in low- and middle-income countries, especially in Africa, for vaccines, therapies, and tests. The lead author, Krishna Udayakumar, director of the Duke Global Health Innovation Center, had been collecting data about vaccine purchasing, development, and distribution since November 2020. Notwithstanding the rhetoric in support of multilateral approaches, he said, inequities were “baked into” vaccination programs from the earliest days.

Closer to home, I learned about Shaquisha (Kiki) Barnes, a chaplain at Duke Regional Hospital, one of Duke Health’s three hospitals. Barnes, who grew up in Durham, had never visited the campus before enrolling at Duke as an undergraduate. At one point she looked to a career in hospital administration. When I talked with her, she described her work as “the best, hardest job you could ever have.” She found her calling when a chaplain—whom she mistook at first for an attending physician—proved to be a source of comfort as her young child was undergoing hospital treatment. “Immediately the ‘click moment’ came. I know this was the way for me to be present for people.”
Being present in the time of COVID-19 meant a whole new set of challenges. Even walking the halls of the hospital when visits were restricted felt "eerie and weird and profoundly different," she said. "What wasn't audible was still palpable. I would go into the floors and be present with patients and staff and feel the anxiety, feel the tension, feel the fear. It was compounded grief. Loss is not new to me. But COVID was such an unknown; things happened for no apparent rhyme or reason, with no particular pattern. We were told that the elderly are the ones to look out for, or those with underlying health conditions are the ones to look out for. But then you see someone seriously sick who is the same age as your child, or someone who didn't walk in with high blood pressure or diabetes. And you are continually thunderstruck at what is going on."

"There have been days when staff care has been more of an emergency than patient care," Barnes told me. "Just because I'm the chaplain doesn't mean I'm the one who has all the lofty answers for this terrible situation. I can't even get my mind around what it would mean for you to be a nurse in the ICU, a nurse who is telling you, I'm so tired of people dying every time I come here. What do you do when you get home? Some are going for runs. Some are planning a vacation. Some just go home and cry."

BURNED OUT?

Barnes's observations about staff care resonated for my physician neighbor, Daphne Jones. Her pandemic work days were usually eleven or twelve hours; fortunately, she told me, her hospital was never "completely overrun," so scheduled changes only kicked in if coworkers were sick or needed to quarantine. "The exhaustion was much more mental than physical," she recalled of one wave in the pandemic. "The number of emotional family interactions, deaths, and terrified patients was exponentially higher than it had been before. By the end of a shift, I felt like a shell, because I had given every ounce of strength and empathy to my patients and families and found none left for me or my family. I usually am an avid reader, but I found myself unable to even pick up a book to escape. The mental exhaustion was just too heavy. I would play silly games with my kids and count the seconds until I got to just lie down and go to sleep, mustering the strength to do it again the next day, until I got my stretch of days off and could remember who I was. I had to cancel my social media accounts and news apps. I couldn't handle thinking about COVID or politics in my time off."
There were times when “I felt like I couldn’t breathe for two days before a stretch of shifts started,” she went on. “I cried daily before going into work and tried to hide my fear and dread from my family, since I’m usually the happy, silly mom, and didn’t want my kids to take on my anxiety.”

Burnout is “a very hot topic in medicine,” Jones said. “Even pre-pandemic, we had countless presentations on resiliency and seeking help. COVID amplified all the existing burnout, emotional exhaustion, and mental illness that was endemic to the profession.” When she arrived for work, the fear was still there, but she found strength from connecting with her colleagues over their shared experiences— their shared trauma. “I found myself debriefing with colleagues daily, feeling so grateful that there were other people who just understood, without having to try to put your feelings into words. Our administrators hosted Zoom morale meetings, bought lunches, gave words of appreciation and encouragement. But among the front-liners, we sort of just chuckled, because the best recipe for coping seemed to be good old-fashioned venting sessions with each other. Having someone to talk to, whine to, laugh with was the biggest gift.”

The pressure on healthcare staff became part of the pandemic story. Jonathan Bae, the health system’s associate chief medical officer for patient safety and clinical quality, told me that Duke Health for more than a decade had been focused on staff well-being. “One of the things we very much believe, and it’s backed up by data science, is that well-being of team members has tremendous impacts on the quality of care. If we have team members who are burned out, patient outcomes are affected.” He added: “Our goal is to promote joy and engagement. It’s a little more aspirational than just avoiding burnout.” COVID-19 brought stressors to the surface, complicating such aspirations. There were concerns about the possible straining of hospital capacity, and concerns about the virus possibly spreading in a healthcare setting. There was the juggling act attached to having school-age children at home, as in-school learning vanished for a time, often a long time. And there was the impulse to process the ever-growing fault lines defining American politics and the racial injustices and inequities that had prompted rounds of protests.

Uncertainty, in whatever form, is a classic stressor. So a big, early step was having leaders express a commitment that there would be no furloughs or layoffs—a commitment, that is, to job security. It was also important from the start that Duke signaled an ability to find—or, as it turned out, to create—adequate supplies of PPE. Jones told me, “I had heard reports
from hospitals around the country that had run out of N95s," reports of places where healthcare staff "were wearing garbage bags" as they went into patient rooms. "Supporting emotional needs is great, and we worked in the COVID units to talk about reducing stress, about amping up relationships," Bae told me. "We had programs to encourage dialogue about dealing with COVID, dealing with kids at home, racial injustice, the political climate. But what if our people don't feel safe because they don't have PPE? What if they didn't have access to testing, access to vaccines?" Relieving those overriding uncertainties would be a smart strategy for the system, and a soothing gesture for its staff.

One of the groups under Bae is Duke's Center for Healthcare Safety and Quality. The center produced a "bite-sized" video series geared to the healthcare community at Duke and beyond. Narrated by its director, psychologist Bryan Sexton, the videos looked at a host of themes in the well-being category: burnout, resilience, sleep quality, mindfulness. One video I watched took viewers through the exercise of writing a thank-you note to someone who had done something amazing for them. Sexton told me that research has shown that a brief expression of gratitude improves happiness and lowers depression.

The happiness was rampant when, as the year 2020 faded and 2021 took over, Duke's healthcare workers lined up for vaccinations. During our Zoom conversation, Barnes, the chaplain, showed off her vaccination card. "It was surreal," she said of the experience of being vaccinated. "I was almost in tears, because I felt like in getting that shot, I was getting it for all those who have suffered from this disease before this shot was available, and who would have given anything to be sitting in that room." As an African American woman, Barnes said she understood the wariness of medical workers within the African American community. "I'm armed with my faith, but I also believe that science is a good thing, science is a gift, and we're so fortunate to be in a time when we could come up with something that has something like a 90 percent efficacy."

Barnes said her work around COVID-19 caused a lot of rethinking for her. "I challenge the whole notion of resilience. You can stretch and stretch yourself, through self-care, meditation, changes in workflow, and you can try to return to your original shape—just like a rubber band. But you can't go back. How am I different? I take more time to savor any victory. I mean, anything—if somebody surprises me and gives me a hug, if I find a good space in the parking lot. My peace matters so much more than it did before. At the same time, my tolerance level for some things has diminished greatly.
I do find myself angry at willful ignorance. I get triggered in the aisles of supermarkets. I’m not one for passive aggression. But I see people who aren’t wearing a mask, or people who aren’t wearing a mask correctly. And I just rush by them. I want to say, You have to put it over your nose! This isn’t a game, this isn’t a hoax, this isn’t political propaganda. This is a public-health issue. I want to say, You don’t want to have to see me at my job, one-on-one in the COVID unit or the ICU. I want to say, You don’t want to see a patient struggle to do the thing that we consider commonplace—to take a breath.”

“T found myself, of course, being saddened,” Barnes told me. “There have been some dark nights of the soul. And when those dark nights of the soul came, I had to regroup. Late in the summer, too many things were happening at once—a barrage of deaths from COVID, the anniversary of my father’s untimely death. I said to myself, Why are you crying? Why is your fuse so short right now? Do you need to up your maintenance? This is what I would tell my patients to do. I have to be genuine. I can’t tell patients that all these things work together—your personal life, your spiritual life, your exercise routine—and not be practicing what I preach.” Almost every night, she was spending time on the deck of her home, “just sitting there, listening.”

A week or so after our initial conversation, in February 2021, Barnes reached back to me. “You know, I reflected on your question about how my faith practice has changed since the pandemic,” she said. Her answer might be that she has learned to embrace the need for lamenting—what some of her palliative-care colleagues might refer to as mourning. “So many biblical texts have our ‘Christian heroes’ shaking their fists at the heavens, saying, ‘God, this just isn’t right! I need this situation to turn right-side up, because I’m weary and growing faint.’ Too often, religious figures and those who follow them, especially in my tradition, feel compelled to finish every sermon with what is called celebration, where Jesus is resurrected. This bleeds into our daily practice of coping with life’s trials by skipping to the celebration, never acknowledging the crucifixion.” In other words, we don’t carve out room for lamenting, “which in our world today, is universal,” she added. “Because sometimes, we just need it to stay broken for a minute. The hospital, this world, has come together in some amazing ways around our collective brokenness. So I’m leaning into lament.”

That March, almost a year to the day after the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a global pandemic, I completed my morning health-check app and trekked over to Duke Hospital. After scrolling through my iPhone to receive my daily pass for Duke—“Cleared to attend work, class, or a lab”—I made my way to a small gallery, not far from the hospital cafeteria.
There I met Maria Bennett Hock, a local artist. And I met Michelle, who identified herself as a “floater” among hospital wards. Briana, from pharmaceutical services. And James, a patient transporter. Michelle, Briana, and James were among forty-five healthcare workers whose portraits Hock had done over forty-five days. In the mix were doctors, nurses, and staffers in areas like housekeeping, engineering, and environmental services. Almost all of those shown were wearing face masks; one had moved his N95 mask from his face to the top of his head.

Hock told me that all of the portraits had been based on “selfie-styled images” provided by the subjects—nothing perfectly lit, nothing professionally staged. Her idea was to capture the daily rigors of working amid the pandemic. As she put it in a statement accompanying the exhibit: “I saw how each essential worker saw themselves. Photos taken at the end of a long day of ensuring proper care for patients. Photos taken at the end of the day when they were tired. Some are on the front lines dealing directly with patients. Others preparing meals, clearing treatment rooms, common areas, and bathrooms.”

The portrait subjects had been invited to stop by, with the opportunity to meet the artist and to bring home their likeness. Hock said it was “overwhelming” to see the full array of portraits on display; the effect was to reveal the astounding scope of a healthcare team. The project had helped give focus to her days (at least forty-five of those days), to pull her away from pandemic concerns. I wondered, was she sorry to let go of the portraits? No, she said. If these essential workers could see the essence of their work and their personalities in these images, what better gift to leave them with?

The artistic capping-off hardly signaled closure, as it turned out. As the Omicron wave hit, in early 2022, Daniel Buckland, a Duke Hospital emergency physician, was on National Public Radio’s Weekend Edition Sunday. The host, Sacha Pfeiffer, noted that the interview had to be rescheduled because Buckland was summoned to cover for a colleague. Buckland described another complication of the day. The school his kids attended, which had been scrambling to provide COVID testing for teachers, canceled classes. So he had to leave in the middle of the day to bring them home. Those personal life pressures came on top of rising COVID case numbers, once reluctant patients belatedly seeking care for other conditions, and all those colleagues getting sick. On any given day, from four hundred to seven hundred healthcare workers across the system were out with COVID. A perfect storm, in that well-worn but apt phrase. Pfeiffer said in the interview, “I almost feel like
I hear futility in your voice.” Buckland acknowledged that “I no longer have confidence” that the proverbial light at the end of the tunnel—an end to the pandemic—was approaching.

Buckland was interviewed on a Friday afternoon. That evening, a man in police custody in the Emergency Department grabbed a Durham police officer’s gun; responding to an emergency call from hospital staff, a Duke officer shot the suspect. In a coda to the segment, Pfeiffer reported that an “already stretched trauma staff” had turned to trying to save the suspect. He did not survive.

A JOLT AND A JAB

Being caught up in a story can be rewarding. Or not. In the spring of 2021, I found myself in the Duke Hospital Emergency Department following an unfortunate sequence: some intense exercise, dehydration, and a nasty fall.

It was a Tuesday evening, far removed from what I presumed were the habitually wild weekends that brought a lot of action to the ED. Still, the place was crowded, the waits were long, and—to reflect on one aspect of the tediousness of the whole experience—the food was terrible, particularly a breakfast of oatmeal that arrived ice cold. I did manage to meet lots of healthcare workers, whose occupations represented the range that Hock had so artfully captured. There was, for example, the patient transporter, who told me he had no need for a health-club membership, because his job had him walking more than nine miles every day. The technician who ran a heart-scanning instrument, talked about missing his time living in the South-west, appreciated Duke Health especially for announcing the policy—early in the pandemic—of no staff downsizing, and declared my imaged heart “picturesque.” The facial injury specialist who stitched me up and talked about how frightening it had been, also in early pandemic times, when every day put him in close touch with aerosolizing patients. The nurse who kept calling me “Sweetie” and who managed to snag a recharging cord for my almost powerless iPhone. A different nurse, who was balancing his workday and an online degree program in nursing, certification that he needed if he were to end up staying with the hospital.

Capping off my two-day stay, I was eventually wheeled into the brand-new hospital tower. So I saw for myself, with quite the insider’s view, the building that had been rushed to semi-completion in order to manage a potential rush of COVID-19 patients. A big outdoor banner thanked the
fast-paced crew of construction workers—another category of pandemic heroes. This was the first floor; the upper floors were still under construction. Occasional jackhammering provided a reminder.

The system was also becoming a major source of vaccinations. In late February 2021, Duke Health was tweeting about having given “more than 100,000 doses to our patients, community, and team members.” More tweets celebrated delivering 275 vaccines at Durham’s Mount Vernon Baptist Church, 220 at St. Joseph AME Church, and 600 at Durham’s Southern High School. Then came word that a former roller-skating rink was opening as a vaccination site, with a capacity of more than a thousand people per day.

By the time of my unfortunate incident, Duke Health was routinely vaccinating students along with faculty and staff; it had anticipated obtaining a sufficient supply of one of the vaccines to “offer all currently enrolled undergraduate and graduate/professional students in the Durham area the option to get vaccinated in the next several weeks.” Around the same time, students found a new vaccination-related incentive in the form of a message from the president: “Looking ahead, we know that widespread vaccination will be the only way to facilitate a return to normal and robust campus life. With this in mind, we plan to require all new and returning Duke students to present proof of vaccination to Student Health before they can enroll for the fall 2021 semester.”

The vaccination experience was refreshingly uneventful for me, from scheduling the appointment, to getting my two jabs, to managing to avoid side effects. I carefully tucked away my card, with its two affirming stickers: “1st dose Pfizer COVID-19” and “2nd dose Pfizer COVID-19.” I’d get a booster shot in the fall of 2021; a second boost came the following spring, on the same day the FDA provided its official endorsement. The scheduling, in fact, became easier with each jab, reflecting new efficiencies in the system or—just as likely—falling demand. On that vital if rather flimsy piece of cardboard, my vaccination site was noted as “DUH,” or Duke University Health—in my case, a campus building used for medical education, which was Duke’s first vaccination site. The Johnson & Johnson vaccine would be administered at the football stadium’s Blue Devil Tower—“one of the finest vaccination experiences that the Triangle has to offer,” in the exuberant language of the Duke website. “You won’t get a better view.”

A third site was right next to my office, in a new alumni and visitors center; a big reception hall, now reconfigured, would be open seven days a week, twelve hours a day, between January and July 2021. The team there ended up administering more than 85,000 jabs.
Among the vaccinated was a 104-year-old woman who had lived through a pandemic a century earlier. She was eager to have her picture taken as she was given the vaccine. An organ transplant patient had just flown to Duke for his annual checkup; he added a stop at the center for his dose. Then there was a severely autistic teen who was being brought in by her mother, and who was terrified of needles. Before the visit, a nurse had learned that the teen idolized Wonder Woman. The teen, when she got there, received the nurse’s gift of a Wonder Woman T-shirt.
Throughout the spring of 2021, the daily compilation of higher-ed news circulating around Duke—now appearing sporadically rather than on a daily or twice-daily schedule—had lost some of its grimness, even as it kept some of its weirdness. According to one study, among the impacts of COVID-19 was a decline in student drinking. At the University of California, San Diego, vending machines had been installed for COVID-19 testing. Students at the University of Florida were being encouraged to use a campus-crime app to report on faculty members who were supposed to be teaching face-to-face but were not.

And then there was the recognition, by university presidents, of the anniversary of the pandemic. From MIT's L. Rafael Reif, the message that it was a time to grieve and gather: "Through this long year, we have all done a great deal of work, and a great deal of worrying. Every one of us has lost many things we loved and counted on—and some have lost people they loved the most." From Yale's Peter Salovey, word that the bells at Yale's carillon would ring to mark the year-out milestone: "Like communities around the globe, we have ... grieved together, altered our lives to care for one another, and worked collaboratively to curb the pandemic." From Brown's Christian H. Paxson, the acknowledgment that "nearly everything about the way we learn, work, and live as the Brown community changed." That and the recollection of watching students, a year earlier, saying goodbye to
friends while for him and the students alike, there was no way of knowing the duration of the goodbyes.

**CRAVING CONNECTIONS**

Wrapping up 2020–2021, Duke’s testing regimen uncovered the lowest number of positive COVID cases since August 2020. Four people—one student and three faculty or staff members—tested positive, for an overall positivity rate of 0.02 percent. Still, Duke was being careful about controlling the crowd size for graduation. The ceremony, in Wallace Wade Stadium, would be open only to graduating undergraduate students and their pre-registered guests—a limit of two guests per graduate. Everyone would be required to wear a face mask and, as had become the pandemic custom, to follow social-distancing measures.

Our own *Duke Magazine* would play a role in the festivities, with a social-media campaign to gather mini-graduation speeches (fifty words or fewer) from alumni. There was the advice to be open to the unexpected: “Do what you love and everything else will fall into place.” “It’s okay to not know what you want to do yet. Take time after college to find out who you really are!” “Don’t worry if your Plan A changes to Plan B to Plan As-Yet-Undiscovered. Time and experience will shape and color your values and priorities differently as you go.” Along with reminders that others made your path to graduation possible, and in some form, you might return the favor: “Never forget who helped you get to where you are today. Friends, family, faculty—be grateful for everyone who invested in you and give back where you can.” “Duke has challenged us to see the world both as it is and as it might be. I hope we hold onto this Blue Devil double vision—because if we do, we might not only succeed for ourselves, but also leave the world a little bit better than we found it.” “Make yourself a stronger person by lifting up others when they need you.”

Finally, there was life guidance that came with an edge to it: “It’s hard for Duke people to hear, but fail. Failing does not make you a failure. Failure makes you the person who continues the lifelong pursuit of knowledge and mastery that you started at Duke. Go forth and fail!”

The ever-building circles of life, the connections begetting new connections. All of that is expressed in the familiar capped-and-gowned rite of passage. My own long-ago graduation ceremony was stuffed into a college gym, because of a forecast of rain; in the end, the day turned sunny. I remembered the weather disappointment, and, vaguely, that the speaker...
was the then-secretary of the Treasury. And I remembered that the most interesting part of the spectacle, for me and my classmates, was the conspicuous retinue of Secret Service agents (at the time, the service was folded into the Department of the Treasury), who were absorbing about as much of the address as the restless graduates were.

At the present-day ceremony, my first noteworthy sighting, near the main gate of Wallace Wade Stadium, was a cluster of protesters from the Duke Graduate Students Union, several of them waving signs or wearing message-bearing T-shirts: “Grad Workers Deserve Better.” “Seat at the Table.” “Fighting for the Future of Higher Ed.” Just before Graduation Weekend, the group had tweeted a heads-up for this “Rally for a Secure Future,” declaring that “we want to remind Duke that grad workers are still struggling with the effects of pandemic delays and lockdowns.” The crowd didn’t appear all that tuned into the message; on this day, grad-student issues were not their issues. Still, the protesters marched resolutely through that crowd. Their chanting was rousing and rhyming: “Where workers’ rights are under attack, what do we do? Stand up! Fight back!”

Inside the stadium, I worked my way through family members clutching “Congrats Grad” balloons, supermarket flowers grabbed earlier that
morning, and poster-board paddles with the faces of honored graduates—and, in at least one instance, the face of the family dog. One proud father was holding aloft a “Congratulations Manny, Class of 2021” sign; Manny, I learned from the father, would be working in New York as an investment banker. Attendants were urging the crowd to avoid lingering on the rim of the stadium and to find their seats. It was an effort to enforce the social-distancing imperative.

A huge video display dominated the south end zone; it wasn’t far from the platform set up for the dignitaries of the day. “Huge” hardly says it. According to a university news release issued a few years ago, at the time of the unveiling, “Featuring a 13HD pixel layout, the board’s viewing surface will measure 42 feet high by 75.6 feet wide for 3,175 square feet ... and display at a true 1080P high-definition resolution.” I comprehended only a fraction of that description, but just the same, I was transfixed by the fancily flashing advisories: “Masks are required at all times.” “Graduates and guests should maintain physical distance of six feet from anyone outside their group.” “Hydrate before and during the ceremony.” “Personal umbrellas can be used to provide shade. Be mindful of other guests seated near you.” (That last bit of umbrella-avoidance advice being easier to follow with the spread-out crowd.)

I found myself seated near nobody in a fairly empty media center, which is a feature of Blue Devil Tower. Somewhat less of a Gothic imitation than the tower on Duke Chapel, it was built to provide views right onto the football stadium. Other sections of it were recently adapted to provide doses of the COVID-19 vaccine. I sat alongside a pile of things that seemed to signal the circumstances: a collection of disposable three-ply face masks, a jar of Purell hand sanitizer, some one-step disinfectant cleaner, and a box of nitrite exam gloves. On the floor below me, I learned, was the entourage of the graduation speaker, John Legend, whose professional identity extends to singer, songwriter, actor, producer, and philanthropist. Earlier, a university official with the mystical power to pave the way for my presence had told me (good naturedly, if unnecessarily), “Between space limitations and public-health precautions, this is not a free-range commencement like we’re used to!”

In extending “a big, in-the-flesh congratulations” to the class, Legend started his speech by embracing the near normality: “You know, this is the first time I’ve been in front of a live audience, hearing live applause, since last February, fourteen months ago. For a needy performer, this is a very
big deal. It feels nice.” He went on to acknowledge the perilous path to this moment, “the elephant in the stadium,” in his words. “On your way to Wallace Wade, your class lost a lot. Some lost job offers. Some lost loved ones. And all of you lost a whole year of those little moments that make college so special—the in-between moments,” from talks in common rooms to spontaneous lunch dates. “I keep thinking about your senior performances. Losing those would have been tragic for me. All you band members and a cappella singers and dancers and improv aficionados, I feel your pain. You’ve lost something you can’t get back. I won’t sugarcoat that. It sucks.”

“But from what you’ve lost—from all of this vast, incalculable loss—you’ve gained something, too,” he said. Over the past year, “you were forced to pause—to see yourselves not in competition with one another, but in community with each other. Anyone getting sick was a risk to everyone. We all had to slow down. Social distance. Cover our faces. Stop filling our days with maximum productivity, and simply keep each other safe. Keep each other alive. Care for one another.” If they allow love to be their driving impulse, Legend told the newest graduates, they will have justified their elite education. “Think about what it actually means to let yourself feel and show love for your neighbors. It means being curious about their lives. Genuinely wanting the best for them. Investing in their success.”

(The following year’s graduation, for the Class of ‘22, drew not-so-loving impressions from colleagues: “Yikes!” “Ugh!” “Good grief!” They were responding to “striking similarities,” documented in the Chronicle, between the remarks of the student speaker and those of her Harvard counterpart from 2014. Similarities included the central metaphor of the campus as a “nation,” with descriptions that built out that metaphor. The student, in a statement provided by a public relations agency, said she had taken suggestions from friends and hadn’t been aware of the original source. The episode zipped through the internet, if sometimes in garbled form. One website displayed the headline “Duke President Accused of Plagiarizing Harvard Speech.” Another, conservative-leaning site observed, “Liberals today are unoriginal people, so it is to be expected that they would copy each other.” A third, which definitively calls itself Plagiarism Today, predicted similar incidents elsewhere, each causing “severe embarrassment for the school.”)

As the stadium was emptying out, I planted myself near the bronze bust of Coach Wallace Wade himself. After some hurried texting, I had arranged to meet up with the two newest graduates I had come to know best, Andrew Carlins and Wesley Pritzlaff.
How had I come to know them? Circles connecting to other circles. A few years ago, a then-student, Grant Besner, had done an independent study in writing with me. I later wrote about him for Duke Magazine; he was a student whose astoundingly wide-ranging intellectual curiosity—a curiosity that extended to wanting to connect with, and collect life stories from an array of advisers and mentors—might provide a model for other students. Besner was a friend of Carlins; they had spent time together in Israel working on a podcast. Carlins was a friend of Pritzlaff. They had met before starting as freshmen, in a Duke-sponsored community-service activity.

One of his college summers had Carlins in Ireland, focusing on the experiences of resettled Syrian refugees and drafting recommendations for integrating them into Irish communities. Back on campus, he connected with a young refugee from Rwanda as a tutor and mentor and helped lead an informal “house course” that brought together undergraduates and retirees (over Zoom) to discuss hot topics, everything from free speech to racial reckoning. He also taught Jewish ethics to a group of Durham kids, largely sixth graders—building a connection in the other generational direction.

As for Pritzlaff, he, too, was all about connecting with others—a character trait illustrated by his devotion to card magic. He performed for patients at Duke’s Cancer Center and eventually, through Duke’s Wellness Center, taught the trick to his fellow students. For him, the idea was twofold: to give them the capacity to delight others, and then to instill in them a big dose of self-confidence. He then committed himself to a career in physical therapy—the fullest expression, as he saw it, of working with others so they could get the best out of themselves. He’d go on to the PT graduate program at Duke.

One song that might have been a graduation-ceremony anthem for Carlins, Pritzlaff, and their peers was the Simon and Garfunkel standard “Bridge over Troubled Water.” The song had been bouncing around Duke, virtually, courtesy of a student a capella group called Speak of the Devil. It was performed in fragmented fashion, since singers couldn’t really come together. Audio tracks were recorded in various bedrooms and in other domestic spaces. Video tracks were shot from various backyards, and even from the occasional bridge.

The eventual performance, patched together from individual iPhones and lots of digital files, landed on YouTube, and it drew some appreciative comments there, like, “Brought tears to my eyes—your voices, your locales, our not being able to be together.” And, from a Duke professor: “It has been hard for all of us. Seeing my dear Duke students and colleagues—even
virtually—helps to sustain me.” It also became the soundtrack for the Duke Health video holiday card—itself an elaborate production, with images of medical workers and their long slog in fighting the pandemic.

Marking its fiftieth anniversary, in 2020, writer Dorian Lynskey observed that “Bridge over Troubled Water” could be understood as an anguished protest, a secular gospel song that grew from a time of chaos. As he described it in *BBC Culture*, “Bridge over Troubled Water” evolved into “a musical first-aid kit to be cracked open in times of need.” That analysis worked for the student musical director for Speak of the Devil, Adam Snowden; he was also one of the students in the past semester’s polarization course. I talked with him shortly after graduation. He was making the seven-hour drive on I-95, back from Durham to his home in Jacksonville, Florida. From there, what awaited would be a relatively laid-back summer before his start in medical school. His driving companion was a sometimes frisky puppy, a poodle–Irish setter combination. Now and again, the conversation was interrupted as the puppy connected with him in the front seat, and so the friskiness had to be addressed.

Snowden told me that for Speak of the Devil, it was important to put out a pandemic-time song, some kind of “message about providing support, about coming together, even while apart.” He brought “Bridge over Troubled Water” to the group, and they went for it. On the drive, he started it up for me: “When you’re weary / Feeling small / When tears are in your eyes / ‘I’ll dry them all / I’m on your side.”

“You know,” he said, “music is the universal form of connection.”

**A PICTURE-PERFECT CAMPUS?**

With the start of the 2021–2022 academic year, students, even though they had to be fully vaccinated, still had to show up at one of various spots around campus to be tested for COVID. At the start of the fall semester, that was twice a week; around the time of fall break, it was once a week. No students refused the vaccination mandate, I was told, and less than 1 percent were granted religious or medical exemptions. Indoor face masking remained the rule in classrooms. The rule was relaxed in individual dorm rooms.

And Duke was feeling more relaxed about its financial health, following a big hit early in the pandemic: lost fees in housing, dining, events, and other areas. In February 2022, Daniel Ennis, who had joined Duke during the pandemic as executive vice president, said: “A lot of what we feared in those early months didn’t come to pass. The crisis was navigated with less
pain than we would have expected.” One dividend—or necessary response to the employment market—was Duke’s decision to increase its minimum wage, to $17 an hour from $15 an hour. The Duke minimum wage will have increased by more than 40 percent since 2015.

Over the past fiscal year, the university’s endowment registered a 55.9 percent annual return, bringing the market value as of June 30, 2021, to a record $12.7 billion. University endowments were set to have their best year since 1986, with a median 27 percent return across all endowments. Some of the elites, like Yale, Brown, Penn, Dartmouth, and MIT, saw returns of more than 40 percent. Washington University reported 65 percent. As analyses in Forbes and elsewhere noted, such jaw-dropping returns reflected a red-hot stock market, along with huge gains from venture capital and private equity—an investment area linked with larger institutional endowments. Higher-ed experts pointed out that such returns, at Duke and elsewhere, wouldn’t translate into immediate infusions of new money. Expenditures from endowment returns typically are averaged over several years to “smooth” the effect of market fluctuations. (Financial markets started tumbling with Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, and then with soaring inflation and fears of recession—a reminder of how fluky a single year’s endowment returns might be.)

The campus coming back. Photo: Jared Lazarus/Duke University.
By the midpoint of the fall semester, Duke was reporting minuscule numbers in another area that had become familiar: its COVID testing program. Over the course of one week of testing, there were seventeen “active cases” among students, faculty, and staff, for a positivity rate of 0.12 percent. The campus was beginning to resemble its normal self, with the full population of students back and with in-person classes. Duke allows seniors to live off-campus, but one Student Affairs official told me: “We had far more requests to live on campus than we could accommodate. And we have the largest number of students living on campus than any of my Duke colleagues can remember.” I heard this from one student, Margaret Gaw, a senior: “Overall, I have sensed a new lightness, energy, positivity that was absent from campus last year because of COVID.... At the same time, there is that anxiety of how to navigate this semi-normality, the resurfacing busyness and stress of classes and work. I have had conversations with seniors who feel lonely; it’s very strange not to recognize many people on campus. It makes some of my friends sad about all we missed out on last year. Personally, I just love being back in person for things. I love running into people and being back in the college environment, having long conversations, learning in classes, and enjoying campus.”

On that very theme, I came upon an Inside Higher Ed essay by Marcelle Christian Hayashida, associate vice chancellor of wellness, health, and counseling services at the University of California, Irvine. “Now, as we begin a new academic year, I’m asking about how to navigate the anxiety of our new workplace, one that, as it turns out, is not, and may not soon be, free from COVID-19,” he wrote. “For many of us, this will be the first time in a year and a half that our quads are full of students and our housing facilities will be at capacity. Dining halls will ring with the sounds of gregarious students, many of whom will be experiencing college for the first time and who will be eager to socialize. This may be the first time in a long while that classes haven’t been predominantly virtual, and we’ll probably experience a lot of excitement about that. This may also be the first time in a long while that many of our colleagues will be faced with the juxtaposition of that warm campus ‘welcome back’ feeling with fears of passing COVID-19 on to the unvaccinated children or elderly parents with whom they live. All of these feelings can be valid and true and can exist within the same person at the same time.”

The first in-person 2021-2022 event I took in, as pandemic-time restrictions started to loosen, was a book launch for Norman Wirzba’s The Sacred Life: Humanity’s Place in a Wounded World. Wirzba is a professor in the
divinity school, and the event took place in the school’s meeting space, impressive with its vaulted ceilings and with nearly every seat occupied for the occasion. He and his colleagues explored themes taken from the book, including one that seemed very pandemic related: Nothing and nobody grows alone, and the act of growing is an expression of togetherness. The crowd was dutifully face masked. And the reception was a departure from the standard buffet; individual portions of cheese, crackers, chicken slices, and fruit had been packed up in (presumably recyclable) clamshell containers.

Then I indulged in a somewhat less intellectual offering, The Rocky Horror Picture Show, as performed by Hoof ’n’ Horn, Duke’s student musical-performance group. This was a cold, rainy night around Halloween—the sort of night when you might worry that a flat tire would force you into the clutches of a mad scientist in his creepy castle. One of the actors told the Chronicle that she was feeling “the joy that hadn’t really been part of our lives for the past year and a half.” She added: “It’s like normal Duke again.” A year earlier, the group had put on a version of A Chorus Line—online. This live performance started with the usual advisory about effects that might rock the audience: strobe lighting, loud noises, edgy language. And—a reference that sent this crowd cheering—(partial) nudity. It proceeded with the usual “Rocky Horror” touches: Quaint props, like printed newspapers as makeshift umbrellas, wielded by audience members. Confetti hurled toward the cast. Mock insults (as scripted) also hurled toward the cast. Among the least offensive insults were “rich weirdos,” “slut,” and “come back with a neck!” As the theater evening ended, one student remarked to her friends, “That was fun!” Fun presumably was now more precious than ever.

The ultimate in Duke-derived fun would be a men’s basketball game, finally back in person in Cameron Indoor Stadium. I was there to watch the Lafayette College Leopards, from my alma mater, versus the sure-to-be-dominant Blue Devils. Proof of vaccination had to be shown at the entrance, and the exuberance inside would be filtered through face masks. Enjoying a privileged perch three rows behind the scorer’s table, I spotted Lafayette’s president, wearing her leopard-print outfit to suit the occasion.

The student fans performed in familiar fashion as one big, undulating, somewhat menacing organism, waving, stomping, and shouting out in collective voice, “Let’s go, Duke!” There were Duke blue wigs, blue-painted faces, and, in the front row of the student section, the Cookie Monster, inspired by Sesame Street and its conveniently blue character. When Cameron had to be free of fans, the Cookie Monster had been prominently pictured on the tarp spread out in the stands. A newer sight, for me, was a group
of nine students dressed in neon-colored one-piece jumpsuits. I ran into one of them after the game, and I learned that their getups were Grinch costumes, out of Dr. Seuss. Given a limited inventory, the costume provider, Party City, had told the group that if they wanted some shared outlandish look, they would have to grab the Grinch.

The Blue Devil did some body surfing. The pep band, the somersaulting cheerleaders, and the well-synchronized Dancing Devils kept up an energy level that dropped off only when Lafayette enjoyed a brief scoring run. At halftime, a nearby colleague grumbled that the score, 35–27, should have shown a thirty-point margin. With the second half, basketball normality was restored. The final score was 88–55.

At the end of the season, I was on the periphery of Cameron for Coach K’s last home game, against archrival Carolina. I was just outside the stadium, because vying for a spot inside wasn’t in my own game plan; a couple of weeks before the big day, a ticket would have meant an average of $5,392 on the secondary market. I navigated through a sea of blue-bedecked students who had assembled pregame. Many had been camped out for six weeks in one of seventy tents forming “K-Ville”—a ritual that secured their own admission to Cameron. In a concession to the pandemic, the overnight population had been downsized from ten to six per tent; during daytime hours, each tent was required to have two tenters in residence, the prepandemic standard. Residence in K-Ville had required scoring well on a multisection test: List every one of Duke’s eight National Players of the year. List every Duke player currently in the NBA. What was the date of the first-ever Duke (then Trinity College) basketball game? Who was Coach K’s high school basketball coach? What is the official capacity of Cameron Indoor Stadium?

There were six guys in blue kilts (“It’s something unusual and fun,” one of them said), another cluster of students in chef hats (that was their take on “Chef-eski,” I was told), and a “Duke Grandpa” T-shirt (curiously, the outfit of choice for someone who seemed like a twenty-year-old). Plus, a blue scarf with imprinted paw prints—on a dog. As ESPN noted, “Most of this year’s senior class had their first UNC tenting experience in 2020, breaking camp on March 5, days before the pandemic lockdown.” For all the hoops-oriented hoopla, though, Duke had a disappointing 94–81 loss to Carolina.

The teams would meet again, for their first-ever matchup in the NCAA men’s Final Four. Carolina again came out ahead. Still, when I wandered the campus the following day, the university store was “crazy busy,” one of the clerks told me. Supply-chain challenges were not in evidence; nor was a lack of fan enthusiasm. Instead, patrons were scooping up posters of the
team; Blue Devil bobbleheads; ceramic serving trays in the shape of the Cameron floor; books from the “Coach K Collection”; Cameron Crazies key chains, coffee mugs, and water bottles; and T-shirts with such uplifting reminders as “Ball In” and “Cut the Net.” Just outside I spotted Nugget, the dog devoted to spreading good feelings. Nugget and I had first become acquainted during a pandemic-time Wellness Day, as we were both sniffing out quad happenings. Sure enough, Keith Upchurch, his human companion, said that on this day, after the loss in the Final Four, Nugget was tasked with “bringing smiles to the students.”

Even as some traditions, basketball boisterously among them, were returning with 2021–2022, others were still adjusting. Every fall, the newly arrived class feels the joy as it assembles to spell out its class year in big numbers. A photo is taken by university photographers, and the occasion is captured in a keepsake that represents the last time the class is together until graduation. With the campus largely shut down a year ago, the Class of ’24 never had its photo moment.

This would be a makeup, in front of Duke Chapel, the ceremonial center of West Campus; typically, the photo spot is the first-year home, East Campus. The occasion coincided with a back-to-campus carnival, and I made my way through attractions that were spread all over the quad: A bouncy house called, ominously, the Lagoon of Doom. A food stand offering an equally ominous combination of cinnamon and sugar on a stick. A scary-looking climbing wall. A voter registration area. And, signs of the times, strategically placed hand-sanitizer stations.

Beyond the carnival scene, the now-sophomore class was being organized to spell out “2024.” Packed tightly to form the component numbers, the students were uniformly blue in their Duke-branded T-shirts. As they showed up to collect the shirts, they were assigned their numbers, and from there, they were led to the appropriate position, one giant number at a time, in front of the chapel. They heard from the president, Vincent E. Price, accompanied by his wife, Annette, and the somewhat agitated First Dogs, a golden doodle and a labradoodle. Price referred to the class as one that would stand out in history and celebrated the occasion: “delayed, not denied.” Head football coach, David Cutcliffe—definitely a take-charge guy (though he would step down that fall)—acknowledged the “unusual circumstances” that had greeted the class when they first arrived on campus, lamented the previous year’s need to play in an empty stadium, and leaned on everyone to show up for the new season. Helped along by an unofficial spirit-rouser, a student (named Jacob, according to one source) who gamely sprinted back
and forth and gestured effusively to rev up the crowd, Cutcliffe had them perform for the hovering drone: “Now it’s time to see how well you follow directions.” Shout loud enough to disturb the peace in Chapel Hill. Raise your hands. Jump on the count of three. “Great job, 2024!”

The actual photo-taking job, I learned, was no easy job. Bill Snead, who, as Duke’s digital-asset manager, was the image maker on the scene, told me that such campus operations require a couple of credentials: an FAA Remote Pilot license, and a North Carolina Department of Transportation flying certification. He was controlling the f-stops and shutter speeds, via a communication link between the airborne camera and the controller screen, as he was guiding the drone’s altitude, pitch, and roll. He also had to be sensitive to flight plans on a campus with a heliport (for hospital transport). When it was all done, the well-ordered “numbers” dissolved into randomly distributed students, and a pair of confetti cannons released their cargo all over the crowd. After a respectful amount of celebratory time, a leaf-blowing crew made it all disappear.

A few weeks later, a class that had disappeared and dispersed was back for a graduation ceremony. This was the Class of ‘20: a class that, in their senior year, never returned from spring break, a class that was deprived of moments of conversation and reflection as their Duke time drew to a close. For the quad-based ceremony, long delayed, the class speaker was Sabrina Maciariello. “If this pandemic has taught us nothing else, it’s to be thankful for the privilege of living our lives, especially as we sat inside and saw millions of people lose theirs,” she told her peers, now former students doing something in the world beyond the campus. In a profile posted on the Duke website, she enlarged on that theme. “In the wake of so much collective pain and sadness, I was overcome with the realization that my undergraduate experience had been focused on many of the wrong things. I placed so much emphasis on making the most of my Duke experience, ensuring I would have the external accolades and accomplishments to show for it. Once it was all taken away, I was overcome with regret for not valuing the smaller, magical moments of connection and laughter with equal appreciation.”

Shortly after the two delayed gatherings, I brought together two administrators whose portfolio was all about engaging with students: Gary Bennett, the vice provost for undergraduate education; and Mary Pat McMahon, the vice president for student affairs. As a scientist, Bennett had, now and again, become an expert commentator on COVID concerns. I listened to him on NPR’s Science Friday talk about approaching the vaccination-hesitant with empathy. Through the power of storytelling, you might seek them out and
share your own story of how you processed the evidence, of what brought you to the decision to get your jab.

We met in person in a conference room in the Bryan Center, Duke’s student center. The building is an odd combination of Brutalist architecture and neo-, neo-Gothic, with stonework and pinnacles: It’s a creation from the 1970s that has been somewhat softened and de-Brutalized in recent years.

As a stress ball was occasionally tossed between them, both were reluctant to embrace the “lessons learned” theme out of the pandemic. As Bennett put it, the campus hadn’t been left with any clear lesson or any breakthrough form of pedagogy. Instead, he considered the episode “revelatory” of the fact that universities can be far more nimble than many imagined them to be; that the undergraduate experience is transformative outside as well as inside the classroom (“I always knew that; I just didn’t appreciate it the way I do now”); and that administrators need to do a better job of characterizing what matters to them as the stewards of educational institutions.

Illustrating what she called first principles, McMahon talked about that pivotal moment, spring break of 2020, when students were told, essentially, not to return to campus for the rest of the semester. Caring for those at highest risk quickly rose in the hierarchy of things to be concerned about. International students who had remained on campus were allowed to stay; flying back to their home countries would have been a fraught if not impossible exercise for them. When they eventually did get home, international students, like their peers dispersed all over the United States, still clung, as best they could, to the campus. Wherever they were in the world and whatever their time zone, McMahon told me, East Coast time became their “normal” operating time.

Later, Bennett and McMahon would roll out a new, quad-based model for “residential living and learning” called QuadEx. The model was meant to be promoting community. It could also be seen as pushing back against privilege. In Bennett’s words, as candidates for admission, students already had navigated “one of the most arduous selection processes known to humankind.” Then they faced “hyper-selectivity” in aspects of their Duke lives, notably in pursing selective housing (as in vying for fraternity membership). QuadEx reimagined lots of the familiar campus features: how the campus would array its physical space, promote learning, nurture collective well-being and individual well-being, attend to personal growth outside the classroom, and renew itself as a community. First-year students would continue to live on the intimate East Campus. They would be linked, though, with one of seven West Campus quads. Each quad would have its traditions, events, and
identities, along with cocurricular programs focused on “life skills.” Sophomores would live in their predetermined quad; juniors and seniors would have other housing options, but would keep up that quad link, regardless of where they might be living. Greek organizations and other selective groups would have no claim on campus housing.

Research and planning for a residential-life overhaul began as early as 2018. Bennett, McMahon, and others held lots of meetings with students and surveyed student opinion, as well as checking out the experiences of peer schools. The pandemic, if not a cause of the change, served as an “accelerant.”

Around the time of the rollout, I read an interview, in the Chronicle of Higher Education, with Leon Botstein. Botstein had been the president of Bard College since 1975—an unprecedented stretch that gave him authority to be commenting about an unprecedented time. He offered this observation: “What the pandemic has shown, more than anything else, is the enormous value of teaching and learning—in real time and real space…. The pandemic taught us that what we took for granted is absolutely indispensable—the significance of making contact with students, of teaching well, of human community.”

Exactly. And Botstein’s take on the lessons-learned question was echoed by Nan Keohane, who, those many years ago, had memorably sketched the character of a campus in her Daedalus essay. Just weeks after that belated Class of ’20 graduation ceremony, Keohane sent me the text of her speech for a reunion weekend at Wellesley, her alma mater, where she had been president before being tapped as Duke’s president.

“Colleges and universities are among a small handful of institutions that have survived for more than a millennium in recognizable form, despite all the changes that have taken place across the years,” Keohane reminded her audience. “We should be cheered by this continuity and grateful for the lessons we can learn from the past, even as we set out on a novel and uncharted future.” Online education has its place, she suggested. Maybe for ensuring a certain knowledge base as students get ready to matriculate, or for delivering on the promise of lifelong learning for graduates. But she expressed confidence that “undergraduate and graduate education will continue to be centered around a campus with a strong physical identity and a core community of teachers, learners, researchers, and staff engaged in a common task…. Students and faculty gather to converse and argue face-to-face, stimulate and inspire each other, create an environment of discourse and dialogue essential to the very creation of knowledge. Teachers and learners
have done this since Plato opened his school and Confucius assembled his disciples, and I predict that they will continue to do so in the future."

**THINKING TIME**

Self-reflection was a pandemic accompaniment. Whenever I stepped into a supermarket, with my mask in place and my treasured Grape Nuts stuck in a broken supply chain, I had to acknowledge that things would be off-kilter for a long time, and that certain long-held enthusiasms were becoming more important: travel, reading, music, art. At work (remotely), I increasingly found the Zoomified meetings to be invasive, even as participation could seem “performative”—a new bit of vocabulary for me. Increasingly, too, I was wary of a marketing, messaging, and branding mind-set permeating the academy, complete with other terms to be learned, like the “vertical” in which, apparently, we functioned.

Not until November 2021 was our administrative area (*Duke Magazine* being just a tiny piece of it) meant to return to our physical space; a couple of months later, the Omicron variant spurred another mass exit from the office. A different office had undergone an experiment and set an example: Information Technology relocated to a former power plant in downtown Durham that was about a third the size of its former space. On most days, 61 percent of its staff were working remotely; on-site work required reserving, for short-term use, individual and collaborative spaces scattered among the building’s four floors. I’d have flexibility, too, though with mandatory time in the office for . . . Zoom calls? But I had become happily habituated to starting my working day early in the morning, then breaking away for a swim at some odd (by workplace conventions) time of day. As an introvert, I didn’t find the daily dose of the office environment to be essential. And I had developed a deep attachment to a great source of support: an impressively broken-in, if now rather worn-out, pair of sneakers. I’d have to kick off the ratty sneakers for some nonratty shoes. Would that mean—is there a metaphor in those sneakers?—that I was feeling ready to walk?

Then I read an opinion piece by Farhad Manjoo in the *New York Times*; it was provocatively (or invitingly) titled “Even with a Dream Job, You Can Be Antiwork.” Manjoo wrote: “In its sudden rearrangement of daily life, this pandemic might have prompted many people to entertain a wonderfully un-American new possibility—that our society is entirely too obsessed with work, that employment is not the only avenue through which to derive
meaning in life....” He went on to quote Kathi Weeks, a Duke professor of
gender, sexuality, and feminist studies and author of The Problem with Work
(published, as it happens, by Duke University Press): “I think what you’re
seeing with people refusing to go back is a kind of yearning for freedom.” I
later sought out the book, and I was struck by one line in her introduction.
After all, she wrote, “even the best job is a problem when it monopolizes
so much of life.”

Like so many others, I felt the frustrations of pandemic-time isolation.
I was yearning for connections. And I was recognizing that a nonworking
life would open new connections. So I was changed in a lasting way. But was
Duke changed in a lasting way? I wasn’t sure. On Duke’s campus, the pan-
demic showed that seemingly contradictory notions could be true at the
same time. For example: A university is able to pivot to meet the moment.
It does its best work, though, by sticking to a model of education that is
timeless. Or, in another example, this one offered over lunch by a history
professor: Consider the History Department’s recurring series on faculty
works in progress, now, as a pandemic practice, available to both remote
and in-person audiences. Attendance was trending higher than before. But
that attendance was largely remote. We had all been sucked into the world
that Zoom created for us, the professor told me. Something gained: the in-
dividual’s ability to build a crowded, Zoomified schedule and to meet the
demands of that schedule. Something lost: showing up in shared spaces for
shared experiences; even if it wasn’t ideally convenient, that’s what you do
in an academic community. Or that’s what you did, prepandemic.

The day I settled on a Duke exit plan, I received an email with one of
the strangest subject lines I could imagine: “Seen a chicken? Or 5?” It came
from Daphne Jones, my physician neighbor and my main conduit into the
pandemic-time pressures on the health system. Keeping chickens in their
backyard had become a Jones family thing. But it wasn’t a thing for some
of the newer chickens. “We just now went out to ensure they were safely
asleep, but we can’t find them anywhere.”

Again, a couple of truths pointing in different directions. Weren’t we all
feeling fenced in and eager to see, on our own, what the world had to offer?
But didn’t we also find meaning by flocking together? As for the chickens:
They were discovered and retrieved in the neighborhood. And I imagined
them happy. Together, in their little backyard chicken campus.
The COVID-19 pandemic presented higher education with an unprecedented challenge: How could institutions continue the basic work of teaching and research while maintaining safe environments for their faculty, staff, and students? In *The Pivot*, Robert J. Bliwise traces Duke University’s response to the pandemic to show how higher education broadly met that challenge head-on. Bliwise interviews people across the campus: from bus drivers and vaccine researchers to student activists, dining hall managers, and professors in areas from English to ecology. He explores the shift to teaching online and the reshaping of research programs; how surveillance testing and reconfiguring residence halls and dining sites helped limit the virus spread on campus; the efforts to promote student well-being and to sustain extracurricular programs; and what the surge in COVID-19 cases meant for the university health system. Bliwise also shows how broad cultural conversations surrounding the 2020 presidential election, climate change, free speech on campus, and systemic racism unfolded in this changed campus environment. Although the pandemic put remarkable pressures on the campus community, Bliwise demonstrates that it ultimately reaffirmed the importance of the campus experience in all its richness and complexity.

"Robert J. Bliwise is a first-rate journalist with a keen eye for relevant details, a wide-ranging curiosity, a penchant for thoughtful comments, and a crystal clear writing style. In *The Pivot*, he presents a huge amount of rich information on how the pandemic has affected the full gamut of university operations—from the central administration and student life to admissions, libraries, and, of course, health services."

—EDWARD B. FISKE, former Education Editor of the New York Times and author of the *Fiske Guide to Colleges*

"Robert J. Bliwise provides a fascinating perspective on a complex institution coping with a 'perfect storm.' He has used his status as a longtime Dukie and his well-honed talents as a journalist to show how administrators, faculty, and students in every corner of Duke have handled COVID-19 and other contemporary challenges."

—NANNERL O. KEOHANE, President Emerita of Duke University

ROBERT J. BLIWISE is Editor Emeritus of *Duke Magazine*, where he served as Editor for almost forty years.