



Telling Our Stories: Western's Response to COVID-19

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Name Anonymous
Affiliation Student

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I took a few years off school after I graduated from high school and didn't apply to Western until I was absolutely sure I wanted to be back in school. Unfortunately, I was to start my first year in the Fall of 2020, when the COVID-19 situation was bleak as ever. Though classes were online, I moved to Bellingham in search of community, hoping being close to the school would help me connect to folks my age, but it only further isolated me. I moved from an intentional community where I lived with seven of my best friends, where we were so deep in the mountains COVID-19 wasn't a threat to our physical health. So I left in September of 2020 and moved into a college house of people I found on Facebook. Though no fault of their own, my roommates were all burnt out and not in the headspace to make new connections. They had just experienced nine months of the pandemic in a dramatically different way than I did, and there was a huge disconnect of what we all needed. My old roommates and I ate every meal together and watched movies or read in the same room each evening. My new living arrangement consisted of nodding or saying hello when I passed a roommate in the hallway. I loved being in class, but classes were only a few hours of the days that felt a lot longer than 24 hours. I'd go to bed excited for class the next day and the second it was over, I'd go back to sleep to pass the time. There wasn't much else to do; I had applied to jobs with no avail and could only take so many walks per day. I made some friends using dating apps and even met my significant other during this time. But we could only see each other in limited capacities; we'd sit on the porch for hours at a time, talk on the phone, or walk around the York neighborhood searching for outdoor cats to pet. Classes weren't all bad. In retrospect, learning online felt like such a novelty that it was hard for me to recognize the humor in it. Once when a few of us had joined class but were waiting for the rest of our class to log on, I was sitting in my living room petting our cat. I was talking to him, cooing, in the intimate way people talk to animals when they assume no one is listening. "Hi baby," I said. I didn't realize I wasn't muted, and my professor responded, "Hi, Aaron." This was the same class I'd fall asleep in all the time because there wasn't a requirement to keep cameras on. Oftentimes, I'd be the last person in the Zoom meeting because I'd fallen asleep and class had ended. I'd wake up to my professor saying, "Aaron, do you have a question?" No, no questions, something must be wrong with my Zoom, sorry, sorry, see you Thursday, thanks. Beginning in-person classes this fall was a welcome respite from Zoom. I find myself filling in the blanks of what people's faces look like under masks and being surprised in a way I can't explain when they take off their mask outside the classroom. But I think most people in my classes have felt so isolated the past year that we're all aching for connection. We're not all sure how to go about it, but we're desperate to have lunch with a classmate or go to the library to study with someone. The ways in which people initiate this has been a pleasure to watch and experience. Pretty early in the quarter, I was sitting in a silent part of the library's fourth floor. I had just set my backpack down when I looked ahead of me to a boy holding his notebook up. He had written, "I LIKE YOUR OUTFIT!" I scribbled back, "THANKS! I LIKE YOUR HAT!" Nothing further came of the interaction, but I hold it dear because it was such a genuine display of warmth. Now that my first quarter of in-person classes is almost over, I can safely say I've just been fumbling along. I'm making it up as I go, both being a person in in-person classes and meeting so many new people every day.

End of contributed text from Story ID: 62 - Anonymous