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The Silent Classroom

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In scattered seats of no particular order, about two dozen students sit in stark silence. The class is about to begin, notebooks are open and ready, and the professor turns to ask, *so how are we today?* Yet they are met with nothing but blank stares, and maybe a minimal nod of acknowledgement from a few people.



In colleges across the country, where in person teaching has returned, an uncomfortable silence has replaced what many remember as loud, energy-filled, excited classrooms.

The New Classroom

The classroom, post-pandemic, now stands, as described by current university students, as “hesitant” and “hollow.” The newfound distance between the student, their classmates, and the professor, can’t be ignored. While exhaustion could be to blame, as it is the end of the semester, the issue stretches beyond.

Getting students to actively participate in discussions has become increasingly difficult. In a survey, 45% of university students disagreed with the statement: “It is easy for my professor to get their students to be involved in class.” After almost two years of virtual learning, it seems that the desire for students to participate has dwindled significantly. “The two in-person classes I

have are ghost towns.” says CJ Hamblin, a freshman in psychology and music at Stony Brook University, “It’s a struggle to get anyone to answer, and so few people show up.”

Hamblin started their time at Stony Brook with high hopes but has been met with empty

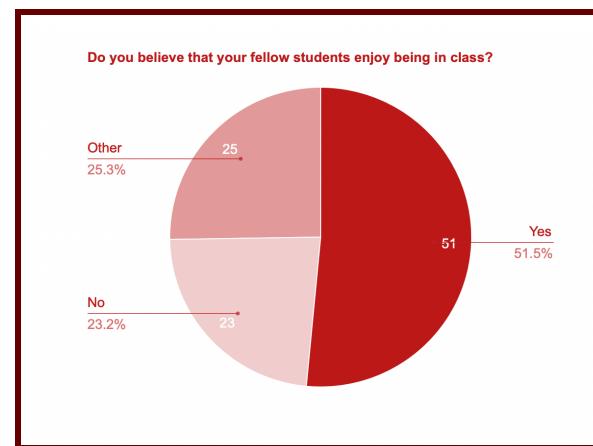
classrooms and what they call a “hit or miss” education. They regularly participate with campus groups including the Stony Brook High C’s - an auditioned acapella group on campus. They perform consistently around campus and are an active part of the SBU community.

However, during classes, there isn’t the same energy about getting involved. Students seem less likely to want to answer questions, engage in discussion or even acknowledge each other. To Hamblin, “Teachers are pretty open about how the lack of engagement has made teaching much harder and much less rewarding.” While the professors seem to be open about their frustration, students aren’t as vocal. Despite the experience of similar emotions, 87% believe that their professors still enjoy teaching post-pandemic, but only 51% believe that students enjoy being in class.

Just by their lack of participation, it makes it feel like they don’t want to be there.

-Matthew Mitchel, Class of 23’ Metropolitan State University of Denver

If participation is the key factor, what is holding students back? Maybe students have found a cheat code out of participating. In a digital space, when a question went unanswered by



muted participants, teachers didn't have much option other than to continue the lecture, which has transferred into in-person atmospheres as well. However, this makes students seem far more apathetic than they are. Samantha Ortiz, a freshman at Fordham University, is studying journalism and believes there is a different reason why students are opting for silence over participation. She mentioned the fear involved with participating in class, and how much harder it is now.

The process of participating in a virtual class was overwhelming for many. Unmuting, turning on the camera, and ultimately interrupting the professor only to be met with technical difficulties, and the possibility of being wrong added new pressure and vulnerability to education. Ortiz notes that, "It takes a lot for the professor to get something out of us but we are a small group that's scared to be wrong." She attaches the fear of being wrong directly to the rise in social anxiety in university students. "Social anxiety is a real thing and that is something people have dealt with because of the pandemic", she said. While the responses of students coming back vary between people, overall Ortiz has noticed that even the students that once came to class every day ready to participate and bring new ideas to the table are more reserved than ever before.

Despite what it may look like, students care about their education but are dealing with increased anxiety in social situations. To students, classes this semester have felt "overwhelming" and "awkward" yet they still are relieved to be back. Christopher Johnson, another Fordham student, thinks that people value their education more now. He's studying film and English, and feels, "like classrooms have become valued now more than ever... People do

want to be in this more engaging setting...Being able to be in person and share your thoughts with other people is more valued than being in a zoom class.” Many other students have come to the same conclusions, saying despite it all, they are happy to be back and have found a new value of being in person.

People seem to be trying their best to return to university life pre-pandemic.

- Ziggy Skye, Class of 25' University of Hawaii at Manoa

In the eyes of the Administration

While students are struggling to engage the way they used to, professors are feeling the impacts in the classroom. Yet Professor Maggie Grady is taking things into her own hands after twenty years of teaching at the University at Buffalo. As the program coordinator for the Center for Executive Development, as well as a learning designer with the Center for Educational Innovation, Professor Grady has become an essential advocate for the betterment of classroom environments. Specifically, she works in UB TaLCK or The Teaching and Learning Community of Knowledge which aims to connect faculty throughout the universe and provide them with new skills and approaches to their classrooms.



Maggie Grady (image by Tom Wolf)

Teachers, “had the tools but just didn’t know how to use them,” Currently, about 150 professors engage in their weekly lessons and Grady believes that it is actively changing the environment at UB. While some professors chose to go into early retirement instead of adapting to the new classroom environment, Grady said that those who stuck around were very eager to

get back to teaching and learn new approaches. As professors take risks, their students are following suit and participation has gradually increased as the semester has continued. For universities that haven't successfully transitioned back, they may find hope in UB and the efforts of Maggie Grady.

At Fordham, alum and current administrator Finley Pealy says the university is “dedicated to rebuilding and trying to reconnect the undergrads back into education in person.” In addition to her perspective on the future of Fordham, her goal is to, “help students find their place at Fordham and build their own community.” The Fordham community has changed since her time as a student, specifically after the pandemic. Her final semester was virtual so she activity felt the change, yet she doesn’t deem them all to be negative. “On some level the changes we have been through are here to say, however one of the benefits of the pandemic is that it gave us the opportunity to give space for our *individual honesty* and make time for the things and the people that we value.”

When discussing the pandemic, Pealy likes to focus on the positives and hopes students do the same. She hopes that as the school year continues, more students push themselves and participate not only in their classes but in the university community as a whole, as “There is something very valuable about in-person events.”

There is No Going Back Now

So where do we go from here? How do students and professors reconnect? “Redirect the herd,” says Josie Reid, a sophomore Sociology with a concentration in criminology and criminal justice major at Colorado State University. “When everyone else is quiet, you don’t want to be

the person that isn't quiet." It's a herd mentality in her opinion and the best way to change it is to redirect the herd. "Everyone else is so concerned with fitting in," she says, "that no one wants to take the bull by the horns and change it, and when students do try it just ends up being awkward." She is very confident in the fact that there is going to be a change coming to the classroom dynamic but the issue is that everyone learns differently. Her solution lies in teamwork between professors and students, to reconnect and regain comfort in education.

"Maybe what we need is a student and teacher engagement club to put the two back in communication, whether it's about school or their personal lives, just talking." The idea mirrors what Maggie Grady is doing at UB. Reid also offers the idea of smaller classes to cultivate a more intimate environment or office hours dedicated to getting to know one another, anything to break the wall between students and professors.

It's little things that will add up to actually make a change.

-Josie Reid, Class of 25' Colorado State University

There seems to be an overwhelming desire to reconnect in higher education, but does this necessarily mean returning to how things were before 2020? Education needs to be collaborative for it to be effective but in a state where that isn't possible, students are going to suffer. If students do not feel that they have the ability to contribute to the class, without fear, they may never regain control of their education. Professors must help cultivate safe environments where students can participate or else education has a bleak future.

Education is valuable and students believe it is worth fighting. While it's up to the individual to decide how they want to carry on, no one can bring classrooms together alone. It is necessary to work together to reconnect and mend the broken bonds in communication. The Classroom cannot return to how it was before the pandemic but it can definitely strive to become greater than ever before. But to do so all active members of higher education must stand together and share the responsibility of the classroom dynamic. With the collaborative efforts of universities, the silent classroom can be a thing of the past.