

Some Key Takeaways from SAS OUE's November 13, 2020 panel *Voices of Diversity: Learning Through COVID*

On November 13, the first panel in our series *Voices of Diversity: Rutgers Student Stories* was hosted by the SAS Office of Undergraduate Education and generously supported by a Diversity Innovation Grant from the RU-NB Division of Diversity, Inclusion, and Community Engagement (DICE).

This series of panels – 4 planned for this year – is designed to provide a unique opportunity for faculty and instructors to directly listen to and learn from the varied personal experiences of multiple individuals in our incredibly diverse, intersectional, Rutgers student body. Our Student Advisory Board -- a team of 13 undergraduate students that represent the breadth and richness of our SAS community, including a range of majors and class years – is developing the panel topics for the year and is selecting panelists based on the essays of de-identified applicants.

As was clear from the individual and personal stories that our students are juggling multiple priorities during this crisis. We are enormously indebted to the Student Advisory Board and the volunteer panelists for adding to those priorities the work of designing, preparing for, and participating in *Voices of Diversity*. Thank you to Eliza Blau, Jenevieve DeLosSantos, Nicole Gangino, and David Goldman in SAS OUE for their work on this initiative and to Jakora Holman, Director of the Paul Robeson Cultural Center, who moderated the November 13 panel.

We have summarized below, in broad categories, some of the key take-aways from the student panelists' stories. Even in this document, which is not as concise as we had hoped, we have likely missed some of the students' many helpful and meaningful contributions.

The Student Advisory Panel has selected the topic "Women in STEM" for our next *Voices of Diversity* panel on Wednesday, December 2nd from 11:00am -12:30 pm via Zoom. [To register, please click here.](#)

Voices of Diversity: Learning Through COVID

Mental and emotional health and well-being, financial stresses

"Be reasonable and considerate and hear us when we tell you we're not doing well."

- Students feel isolated and lonely.
 - This is especially true for first year students, but all of the students commented on this. Having consistent membership in breakout rooms or other smaller groups within a class lets them build relationships.
 - Open office hours where students can gather to chat about anything are also very helpful.
- Motivation is a constant struggle, especially in asynchronous courses.
- For some students, home is not a safe/happy place, and physically being at school would be an escape.
- Many students are dealing with financial losses, illness and grief, family stressors, and mental illness, among other concerns.
- Funding resources (RUSA emergency funding, CARES Act funding have been very important)

Workload and Class Assignments

"I feel like I wake up to do school work to meet deadlines rather than to learn."

- Students are frustrated with the number of assignments, often seen as "busy work."
 - They don't understand why they are being asked to complete so many assignments each week or every other week and how it contributes to their learning.
- Deadlines are helpful when instructors are flexible and give students sufficient notice.
- Giving windows for assignments and quizzes is helpful.
- It's difficult for students to develop/continue study routines and students miss having quiet on-campus places to study.
- For many students, being at home means that they have a lot more responsibilities to juggle.
- The Learning Centers, the Writing Centers and the SAS-Honors Program tutoring have been extremely helpful for students.
- Students really appreciate synchronous sessions being recorded, with captions, so that they can review the material again. This is especially important in an environment where they are having difficulty forming study groups.

Course Format

"Simply doing what you'd do in an in-person classroom does not work."

- It is critical for faculty to adapt their class format and teaching style to the remote environment.
- Each course seems to organize material and assignments in Sakai or Canvas differently and this is very confusing and overwhelming to students.
 - *[Note from SAS OUE: Best practices for organizing your course in Canvas can be found [here](#) and in Sakai the "Lessons" tool can be used like the "Modules" tool in Canvas to organize everything by class meeting or week.]*
- Students miss the more interactive feel of in-person courses, even in large lectures.
- Large remote courses "get crazy." Students appreciate opportunities to interact in smaller groups.
- Examples of good practices include allowing students to choose whether to attend a synchronous lecture "live" or to watch a captioned recording later. This effectively makes the class smaller for the synchronous sections.
- Breakout rooms can be helpful, especially when students are consistently assigned to the same breakout rooms and become more comfortable with each other over time.
- Students strongly recommend recording, and captioning, synchronous lectures. There are many reasons why students may not be able to attend synchronous courses, and having the recording alleviates considerable stress and anxiety about missing the class material.
 - The students did not express concerns about themselves being recorded and they suggested options that would allow only the instructor to be viewed in the recording.
- The flexibility of asynchronous courses when paired with opportunities for live interaction (like office hours) works well for students.
 - Many students are reporting frustration and stress from a lack of interaction with the instructor (or fellow students) in asynchronous classes. (See next section below.)
- Having the instructor's face visible during their (recorded and live) lectures makes a big difference.
- Video announcements are helpful for students.
- Regularly timed announcements are also helpful – for example, noon every Monday.

- In a synchronous course, be careful not to go over the allotted time, and allow for students to ask questions during the lecture rather than just at the end.
- In courses involving formulas/equations, it is helpful to have the formula typed on the screen, and then edit it from there. It is especially helpful if instructors are able to use iPad pens because it's difficult to read when instructors draw/write using a computer mouse.
- Remote courses offer less opportunity for multi-lingual students to practice speaking and listening skills.
- Posting discussion questions ahead of time can be helpful in getting the ball rolling in the discussion.
- For some students who might not have participated in large in-person courses, being remote increases their ability/willingness to participate.

Empathy and interactions with faculty/instructors

"This drains the hell out of you."

- Students recognize that faculty are also under tremendous pressure and constraints, and greatly appreciate that many of their instructors are being caring, understanding, and flexible.
- They asked that instructors give their students the benefit of the doubt during these troubled times.
 - Being flexible with students that do come forward is a great kindness and is not unfair to other students when coupled with an open atmosphere that allows students to feel comfortable discussing their challenges with their instructors.
- Zoom/WebEx office hours have been very helpful, both for reviewing course material and for just talking and connecting as people
 - In some ways, remote office hours are more convenient because there's no travel involved.
 - On the other hand, more students are attending remote office hours, so students may get less individualized attention.
- Students get very stressed by just relying on email to communicate with instructors because they don't know how long it will take for them to respond and whether they will respond before the assignment is due.
 - Providing students with a clear policy on when they can expect to get a response to an email (e.g. by the end of the next business day) and sticking to it can help.
 - Particularly in asynchronous courses, students are very frustrated by not getting timely feedback on assignments and responses to email.
- Students greatly appreciate instructors giving "mental health breaks," such as intermittently using class time as a space for connecting and talking rather than presenting new material or giving a half- or full-week off from formal requirements. Giving students time to catch up is much-appreciated.
- In synchronous sessions, rather than diving right into the course material, students appreciate it when instructors take some time to check in with the students and make them feel connected and comfortable.

Interactions with peers

“Before I had a friend study group; now I have to study alone.”

- Students are very much missing opportunities to have in-person study groups and note that remote versions are not the same. It’s hard to study alone.
- For first-year students, it is especially difficult to feel connected because they have not yet had an opportunity to make friends. This makes both social interactions and academic things like study groups more difficult.
- When possible, encourage students to have their cameras on to increase engagement and feelings of connectedness.
- Online chat sites like GroupMe can be helpful, informal places for students to talk about classwork. But, concerns about cheating have caused many to be shut down. One instructor had teaching interns join the GroupMe conversations to monitor and prevent against cheating. This was effective and less intimidating than having the professor in the group.
- Clubs and other activities can be helpful in relieving stress and making students feel connected, but they are also difficult to manage on top of everything else. Meetings are often late at night and again, on screen.

Accommodations for students with disabilities

“Even students without letters of accommodation have disabilities that impact them differently now that everything is online.”

- It is a relief to some students with physical disabilities to not have to manage some of the on-campus challenges like dealing with the busses and spaces that do not have adequate accommodations.
- Accommodations:
 - The best accommodation is recording class lectures, with captions.
 - Need accurate captioning, and need additional features for accommodating hard of hearing and hard of vision students
 - Recorded lectures need to be inclusive
- Constantly starting at computer screens takes a big toll physically as well as emotionally, sometimes compounding already-difficult conditions like chronic migraines.

Technology issues and concerns

“My grade was lowered because I was having connectivity issues that I couldn’t do anything about during an online presentation. That doesn’t seem right.”

- Freshmen appreciate having iPads from the university; they allow them not to have to share a computer with others in their household.
- Students miss access to printing. Printer ink is prohibitively expensive at home.
- Some students struggle with inconsistent Wi-Fi access, which was better on campus.
- ProctorTrack put great pressure and stress on students, and students appreciate instructors creating alternatives to proctoring like changing the format of the test.