

Some Key Takeaways from SAS OUE's April 2, 2021 panel *Voices of Diversity: Returning to Campus and Life After RU*

On April 2, the final panel in the first year of 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 – four 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 – developed the panel topics for the year and selected panelists based on the essays of de-identified applicants.

One theme that has come through loud and clear at every single panel this year is how important it is for all of us – faculty, staff, and students – to see each other as “*actual human beings*” and “*just people*” who are all facing a diverse range of challenges.

We are extremely grateful to the volunteer panelists for sharing their stories and perspectives with us in these panels, and to the Student Advisory Board for all of the time, dedication, and effort they have put into making the inaugural year of the *Voices of Diversity* series so successful and meaningful. They have all demonstrated enormous courage. Thank you also to Eliza Blau, Pauline Carpenter, Nicole Gangino, and David Goldman for their hard work on the *Voices of Diversity* initiative this year, and especially to Jenevieve DeLosSantos for serving as the advisor to the Student Advisory Board members, recruiting moderators, and meeting with all of the panelist ahead of time. Finally, many thanks to Courtney Stanzione, Assistant Dean and Director of the Senior Office in the SAS Office of Advising and Academic Services, for moderating the panel on April 2.

Although it is not possible to include all of the important and varied perspectives and messages the students shared, below we have summarized a few common themes that emerged during the panel.

Please plan to join us next academic year for the second year of *Voices of Diversity* student panels.

Returning to Campus and Life After RU

Several common themes emerged during the panel:

Pandemic-related physical health and safety

“Faculty, please know that there are some young people who ARE concerned about COVID. Don’t just assume that we don’t have concerns about spreading it and whether we as individuals would be able to fight it off even if we’re young and the media says we’ll be fine.”

- All of the panelists praised Rutgers for taking early and decisive action in deciding to hold classes remotely and to require vaccinations.

“Rutgers has been a trailblazer.... I have friends at other schools who were on campus for two weeks and then COVID exploded and they had to return home. Thank you to Rutgers.”

- Panelists expressed concerns about vaccine availability and acceptance.
"I'm worried because of the response on twitter and elsewhere; so many people are angry about the vaccination policy.... I was disappointed to see this."
- Students are concerned about international students' access to American vaccines, and whether it is safe for them to get two kinds of vaccines if available.
- All panelists expressed concern and frustration about many peers not adhering to public health guidelines, particularly mask-wearing (e.g., packed bars and parties on Easton Ave.).
- Students are concerned about whether/how mask mandates will be enforced on campus.
"I wear a mask around friends and people feel like 'why don't you trust me?' We need to make students not feel uncomfortable about wearing masks! Record classes for students who don't feel comfortable coming to class... I still want to be safe. I see my family and my grandparents and I want to be careful... I do take this seriously... Please create that space [to be safe] and don't make people feel bad about it."
 - Students want to make sure mask mandates will be enforced in the fall and they support all faculty and staff efforts to enforce the requirement.
 - Students experience peer pressure to not wear masks and worry it will grow worse.
 - Panelists worry that the mandatory vaccine policy will make a mask requirement harder to enforce. *"Students will say, 'If I'm vaccinated, why do I have to wear a mask?'"*
- Students are concerned about health and safety on campus and in campus housing. They are also concerned about bringing the virus back home to their families, especially if the campus were to have to close again.
- Students are anxious and uncertain about policies and procedures for the fall, but they also recognize that the pandemic is unpredictable and everyone is waiting for answers.
"If my roommate gets COVID, what happens? Do I quarantine? Can I still attend class? ... It's hard because we're all waiting to get answers."

Mental and socioemotional health

- "How will students be supported beyond emails saying 'Go to CAPS, here's an email address?'"*
- Students have concerns about their own and their fellow students' mental health, especially due to high levels of anxiety and stress and multiple competing responsibilities.
 - First- and second-year students will be on campus experiencing the usual "first-year" anxiety and stress while also experiencing all the current pandemic- and protest-related stressors. And there will be senior transfer students who have never been on campus before. This may make it even more difficult and important to identify and address students' mental health needs.
 - Faculty can ask their students what would help them and be a bridge to resources.
"I would have dropped classes if my instructor hadn't reached out to ask if I was okay... He made space for me to reach out."
 - Students are concerned about being able to (re)establish social connections.
"Pre-COVID, I was extroverted, I loved going to school, loved my teachers.... Now, because of the pandemic, I'm finding it more difficult to reach out and connect with people... It's like my social battery has been set back... Maybe I lost part of myself during the pandemic."

Concerns about the well-being and safety of Asian and international students

“Will I be safe at RU once we go back to campus? Rutgers is a welcoming and diverse community, but I’m nervous. How will people look at and treat us when we go back just because we’re Asian? I’m pretty sure all international students are experiencing the same... we’re the same as others.... We’re not the only group to experience it... Even if we don’t do anything, you never know what will happen to us... It would be helpful for professors and the community to reach out to us to let us know that they support us and are also against anti-Asian hate crimes... You’re needed.”

- Students expressed serious concerns about attitudes toward Asian students (both international and not), and whether they will be physically and socioemotionally safe on campus in the fall, given the recent surge in anti-Asian violence and brutality. *“Statements of support [in course syllabi and elsewhere] are great, but without follow-up, they don’t mean anything.”*
- International students often feel left out/overlooked, and feel that faculty could do more to recognize that issues like 12-hour time differences have a large impact on students. *“International students are also part of the student body and community, and we deserve the same rights and ability to learn at the proper time...”*
- Some international students are concerned about not being able to renew their visas. Those that started last fall are worried that they will not be able to get a visa in time to arrive for this fall semester since many embassies are closed or operating at reduced capacity.

Concerns about being unfamiliar with the campus/what campus will be like in the fall

“As a sophomore [next year], I feel like there are all these things I should know... like the buses, etc.... but I don’t.”

- Rising sophomores and transfer students are concerned about not having been on campus before and feel like they “should” know their way around but don’t. *Transfer student: “I’m coming to campus for the first time like as a freshman, but I’ll be a senior.”*
- Questions about how the university will be operating in the fall are leading to some anxiety and stress for students. They are unsure about things like where they will live, whether classes will be online or in-person, and what the fall semester will look like in general.

Limited employment opportunities and financial insecurity in COVID era

“As a graduating senior, my biggest concern is what comes after graduation. There are not many jobs available, and the ones that are aren’t necessarily what we’d planned on doing post-graduation... Graduation is a goal because of what it can do for you—it’s supposed to give you stability and security, financially.... But it’s hard to stay motivated for classes and to show up to organizations, internships, multiple jobs... without the gratifying end goal, it’s hard to maintain motivation... It seems like the rewards aren’t going to be there.”

- It is difficult to graduate and find the jobs students had hoped for in this economic environment. This uncertainty sometimes leads to a lack of purpose and motivation.
- Financial insecurity and concerns are an issue not just for graduating students, but also for current students who worry about things like affording housing, transportation, and juggling multiple jobs to make ends meet.

Benefits from remote learning/things students would like to see continue in the fall

"I've interacted with more of my professors in the past year and a half than in all of my time at Rutgers [as a graduating senior]."

- Increased access to and connection with professors
 - Students greatly appreciate when faculty see and treat them as human beings and are sensitive to the challenges they are facing in this environment.
 - All of the panelists expressed that they appreciate when professors open up and share their own experiences and challenges with their students. *"When professors share what they're going through, it humanizes them and puts things into perspective; I and other students enjoy it. It opens a space to feel like class isn't just what we're learning."*
 - Some programs and faculty have been very responsive to student feedback through midterm SIRS and other mechanisms and have tweaked courses accordingly.
 - Several students mentioned how appreciated and valuable it is when instructors take the time to have conversations about what's happening in the world (e.g., recent anti-Asian hate crimes, presidential election, etc.).
 - Virtual office hours are often seen as better than in-person office hours for facilitating meaningful conversation and connection. *"During remote learning, professors have made more time to be available. You can just come by [virtually] for office hours. In person, they'd stay after class, but it's more clear in the virtual environment that you are welcome to come just talk with them."*
 - Although many faculty members have been very responsive and understanding, some have been especially difficult to contact in the virtual environment. Panelists stressed that [especially when teaching asynchronous courses] it is essential to respond to student emails.
- Benefits of having lectures recorded and available online
 - In-person classes (particularly large lectures) are sometimes very loud because of students talking, and it is often difficult to hear the professor.
 - Recorded lectures have better sound quality and are easier to hear, which is especially helpful for students whose first language is not English.
 - Being able to re-watch lectures is helpful for studying purposes.
- Faculty and programs have been sources of useful information about professional networking opportunities and career-related resources.
 - In some cases, virtual setting has allowed for and facilitated professional connections that wouldn't have otherwise been possible (e.g., meeting with professionals in Washington DC).

What students are most looking forward to in the fall semester

"I would really like to meet the professors that have helped me come to where I am today."

- Meeting their professors in real life.
- Reconnecting with people. Students miss little things like short interactions with other students between classes, and it will be good to have those again.
- On-campus programming, although students are also concerned about making sure that large-scale events are safe.

"I really do love Rutgers! I am really excited to have the college experience in-person!"