

**Some Key Takeaways from SAS OUE's November 5, 2021 panel**  
***Voices of Diversity: Returning to Rutgers***

On November 5, the SAS Office of Undergraduate Education hosted the first of this year's four *Voices of Diversity* student panels. The program was initiated last year with support from a RU-NB Diversity, Inclusion, and Community Engagement grant, and is designed to provide students with a platform to share with faculty their perspectives as students with diverse and intersectional identities. The Student Advisory Board -- a team of 17 undergraduate students that represent the breadth and richness of the SAS community, including a range of majors and class years -- develops the panel topics for the year, selects panelists based on the essays of de-identified applicants, and composes the questions for the panels.

We are enormously indebted to the Student Advisory Board and the volunteer panelists for the considerable time, energy, and mental and emotional labor that went into designing, preparing for, and participating in *Voices of Diversity*. Thank you to the entire SAS-OUE Teaching & Learning team for their work on this initiative, and especially to Jenevieve DeLosSantos for organizing this panel and serving as an advisor to the Student Advisory Board members. We are also extremely grateful to Michelle Shostack, Assistant Dean and Director of the SAS Educational Opportunity Fund (EOF) program, for moderating this panel.

The students shared many varied experiences and perspectives during the panel. Unfortunately, it is not possible to include all of the helpful and insightful contributions by the panelists in a brief document. Below, however, we have summarized a few common themes that emerged from the students' comments.

Please plan to join us for our second panel this year on Friday, December 3rd from 10:00AM -11:30 am. The topic for this panel will be "Non-Traditional Students at Rutgers."

## *Voices of Diversity: Returning to Rutgers*

**Several common themes emerged during the panel:**

**Many students (even those who are not “first-years”) are experiencing campus for the first time. And even for those who are not, it is a big adjustment to come back.**

*"I retook the moments that I lost. I'm making up for what I lost during covid."*

- Positives about coming (back) to campus:
  - Far more social contact, which is generally good for students' mental health and helps them maintain engagement with their studies.
  - Being involved in on-campus programs, clubs, and activities is very beneficial. Programs like the Educational Opportunity Fund (EOF) have and continue to be hugely important for student well-being and success.
  - Students appreciate that there is more flexibility now in modes of instruction; they have options in terms of face-to-face or online classes.
    - Zoom is easy and beneficial because you don't have to drive and park. But having the option to go in-person is also appreciated and seeing other students and instructors in-person is energizing.
  - Some faculty are being flexible (with deadlines, etc.) and understand the difficulty of this transition period.
  - Students missed interacting and talking with each other during in-person discussion-based classes and are happy to be able to do so now.
- Negatives about coming (back) to campus:
  - It takes time to adapt and there is no “normal” anymore
  - Rutgers is enormous; it is easy to feel lost and hard to find opportunities to make new social connections
  - Although flexibility is appreciated, it is sometimes difficult to combine online and face-to-face courses, especially face-to-face and synchronous online courses. For commuters in particular, it is logistically difficult to find spaces to take online synchronous courses on campus.
  - Some classes have become a lot harder: students are expected to be present in-person, on canvas, and on zoom. It's difficult to be spread in so many directions and hard to maintain focus.
  - Students sometimes feel like they have to fend for themselves; it is hard to learn how to navigate complex bureaucracies and systems, like accommodations and the buses.
  - It is difficult to transition from the convenience of having all classes on Zoom to having to commute and travel between classes; bus system delays sometimes make students late for class.
  - Not all professors are being flexible; treating all students equally is not necessarily fair, given that they are in very different circumstances (“not all students are on the same playing field”).
  - Despite visible efforts to ensure safety and sanitation, there is some frustration with University policies and policy enforcement, such as inconsistent social distancing (which is impossible on buses) and mask-wearing.
  - Difficulties with navigating and accessing support services

## **Students greatly appreciate opportunities to connect with faculty**

- Students expressed deep appreciation for their professors reaching out to them, individually or even just through class-wide canvas announcements.
- Faculty may not realize it, but feeling connected to their professors can have a huge positive impact on students.
- Specific suggestions for how to connect with students included:
  - Regularly checking in with students about how they are doing
  - Responding to questions and emails in a timely manner
  - Talking informally with students after class
  - Conducting mid-semester surveys
- Students recognize that faculty are also dealing with personal and professional challenges with sometimes limited resources (TAs, etc.) and greatly appreciate the time and considerable effort that many put into designing their courses and supporting their students.

## **Other ways faculty can help and support students during this transition period**

- Be flexible and have contingency plans for situations like when a student is ill. Note that flexibility does not necessarily lead to reduced rigor in the course.
- Be organized. For example, publishing the syllabus and Canvas course at the beginning of the semester is very helpful in allowing students to plan.
- Consider strategies like recording lectures, which may be appropriate in some courses.
  - Recording lectures can be helpful for students, especially in STEM courses. But there are some classes that lend themselves less well to being recorded. Recording discussion-based courses, for example, might raise privacy issues and unintentionally discourage students from fully participating in the discussions.
  - Could also take notes and create summaries of discussions to share with students, rather than recording the discussions.
- When students share information about their identities (whether it be preferred pronouns, sexuality, race/ethnicity, or other identities), make them feel heard and safe, and respect how they prefer to be identified in your interactions.
- Be accommodating for students, especially those with disabilities and letters of accommodation. Recognize that some students are having difficulty during this transition period with accessing necessary services and documentation. Don't assume students who aren't turning in work on time are cheating.

\*\*\*\*\*

## **What our faculty say they learned and will implement in their teaching to increase equity (based on post-panel survey):**

- Reach out to students more.
- To remind students and offer a space for discussion/ check-in, not related to course material.
- More direct questions to the students about how they're feeling might be more useful than intrusive.
- I think I'd like to try out the PIES idea, providing a brief forum during class for everyone to say how they're doing Physically, Intellectually, Emotionally, and Spiritually, which one of the students described where the professor also revealed their struggles in the course of the discussion.

- PIES! Great strategy. Also, the information about the specific time zone challenges faced by international students was an important reminder about why flexibility matters.
- Create more space for students to share. Distinguish emotional, physical, and intellectual well-being (I would not feel comfortable asking about spirituality).
- I'll have some time with students to chat and give some time to express themselves not related to the course.
- The importance of advertising office hours in an appropriate way and being open with students.
- Be human and don't pretend the outside worlds ends at your classroom door (or Zoom screen).
- Find ways for students (timid or talkative) to express themselves.
- I'm actually making a change in my class today partly influenced by hearing from this panel. I'm scrapping a 20 minute "utilize" activity in breakout rooms and adding 5 minutes to the whole class intro discussion time and then will have a 15 minute whole-class discussion (I have a very small class, so this is doable) based on whatever topics the students want to discuss.
- Understanding that everyone's circumstances are different; always provide flexibility.
- Students rightly want their professors to understand the challenges they face in the online classroom environment and pandemic, but I was curious to know if they understood the challenges their professors are facing, so I asked (anonymously) in the Q&A and was surprised to hear how students were very OPEN to hearing about their professors' struggles. I thought they might feel it was unprofessional for a professor to open up about personal feelings in class.
- Students benefit from hearing messages of support from us (professors).
- Students like a more personal approach from instructors.