

A College Senior in the Time of Coronavirus

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Looking back through the photos on my camera roll, I can't help but think about just how much has changed in the course of the past couple of months. Seeing pictures of myself walking around campus, hanging out with friends, attending concerts; it's funny to think that I had absolutely no idea what a COVID-19 or Coronavirus was just a few months back. Recently, I've found myself looking at these photographs more and more frequently, as I sit in my apartment in self-isolation. The nostalgia is terrible, but it is nothing compared to the hunch I have that this is all going to get much worse before it gets better.

When President Trump boasted to the American public that he had a hunch the Coronavirus was being blown out of proportion in early March, I was on spring break, visiting a friend in Austin, Texas. At the time, no one really knew how serious the spread of the virus was in the US—largely due to the severe lack of testing kits in the country. When Trump made this statement, there was a significant argument circulating around media sources over the severity of the outbreak. One side largely argued this whole thing was being overblown—that it was nothing more than the flu. The other side used data from Italy, China, and the observed death rate of the virus to argue the US needed to promptly take significant preventative measures. The players in this argument fell largely along party lines, as it seemed political motivations (it is an election year) skewed what should have been objective, investigative, and informative reporting. Information, regardless of its validity, is power.

Personally, I've always been of the opinion that it's better to be safe than sorry. After hearing both sides to the argument, I fell more in tune with the latter, figuring we might as well take precaution given how little we knew—and still know—about the virus. I remember calling my parents, telling them to be careful and avoid large gatherings just to be safe. I told them if Vanderbilt decided to continue having in-person classes, it may be a while before I see them again. This was not because there were still 2 months left in my last semester, but rather because I had a feeling this situation was going to get out of hand.

Over spring break, around 50 juniors at Vanderbilt University traveled to Barcelona, Spain. I actually went to the city last year, and was thoroughly excited for them. Still, I was wary about the fact that people from my school were traveling to a European country in such close proximity to Italy. It seemed it was only a matter of time before more and more cases popped up around Europe given Italy's trajectory. It was.

With 4 days left before classes started again, I hoped that the University would make the right decision and tell the students to simply stay home as opposed to returning to campus. I spoke with my friends and family, and it seemed everyone was in agreement that this was the best course of action, at least until everything calmed down. That night, hours later, we all received an email from our Chancellor.

Despite the fact many students would be coming back to campus from various European countries—ones that already had significant cases—we were told in-person classes would resume Monday, March 9th. In the pit of my stomach, I knew that someone was going to come

back with it, someone had to have been exposed. With roughly 6,000 undergraduate students returning from various trips, it seemed like a sure bet that someone would come back with the virus.

I was worried. I was worried for myself, for my friends, for my family, for my teachers, and for the countless elderly individuals I'm sure our students would come in contact with. It didn't matter though. I had to go back. I had three classes that Monday, and I was told by my university that it was safe to return. It wasn't.

At this time, a few universities had already told their students not to come back from spring break, and that they would likely be moving to online classes for a specified period of time. Given the rhetoric of President Trump, and various individuals in the media calling this whole thing a product of mass hysteria, I believe Vanderbilt was reluctant to make such a challenging decision. Vanderbilt did not want to take extreme measures without a significant number of other schools taking similar action. They didn't want to risk their reputation as one of the top 15 schools in the country by coming out of this looking like fools for giving in to the "mass hysteria." They didn't want to lead other universities in taking a preventative stance. Rather, they wanted to follow—to wait and see. They were confused and they made the wrong decision. This decision exposed not just every Vanderbilt student, faculty, and staff member, but the entire Nashville community, and the hometown communities of every Vanderbilt student who has subsequently been sent home. This decision cost lives.

After going to class on Monday, March 9th, the school sent out an email that one of the Vanderbilt juniors who visited Barcelona had contracted COVID-19. All students were told that classes were to be cancelled for the week before moving to online courses on March 16th. The student who originally contracted the illness never went back to campus, but said he was with roughly 50 other Vanderbilt students on his trip, all of whom were exposed, all of whom were back on campus. With classes cancelled for the immediate future, many students—incomprehensibly—decided it was the perfect time to have parties with all of their friends. Freshman, sophomores, juniors, and especially seniors gathered at off-campus houses to throw large parties. The juniors who were exposed in Barcelona—who didn't have many symptoms, couldn't get tested, and were cleared by medical personnel—decided to attend as well.

When I told my friends that I was worried to go to these large gatherings, some called me a "tweak" for being scared of a virus that is really "just like the flu." But to be honest, I wasn't very scared of the virus. I had heard conflicting news reports, boastful and arrogant speeches from the President, and explanations from my friends for why the virus was a joke. I also wasn't scared of getting the virus because, like my friends, I was told it was relatively easy to recover from for people in my age group. What I was scared of though, was the possibility that my parents or grandparents could contract it. Or that my professors, or the Vanderbilt staff members could. In fact, I was worried for any of the older individuals we had come in contact with since the previous Monday, and all that we would come in contact with in the following weeks. I was scared for them because they were—and still are—the most at risk.

On Thursday, March 12th, Vanderbilt on-campus students were notified that they needed to pack up and leave by Sunday, March 15th. This was another critically errant decision. In-person classes were cancelled for the semester, and students began traveling to their hometowns.

Thankfully I live off-campus, in an apartment building across the street from my classes. I decided to stay here indefinitely, rather than travel home, risking the health of others, including my family. My plan was to stay for at least two weeks, just in case someone on campus ended up testing positive.

We found out that Saturday that a Vanderbilt senior had tested positive for COVID-19. With many Vanderbilt students already home, I worried about the safety of their families, especially considering they could have been exposed. The individual was at those large parties, so who knows how many have been subsequently impacted.

After hearing this news, many of my friends and I decided to start self-isolation periods. We've been doing so for the past couple of days. Since then, I've found out that my friend who lives in the room across from me has tested positive. My best friend's roommate has tested positive. All in all, about 40 of my friends here at Vandy have tested positive, and there are hundreds more awaiting test results. About half of those have already traveled home—putting countless others at risk. Of all my friends who have received their results back, only two have tested negative. It seems every 30 minutes or so I hear about another friend who has the virus—it is a terrible reality.

Today, my roommate woke up with a fever, and I have developed a cough. Due to our high levels of exposure, and current symptoms, we've both decided to get tested. In the midst of all of this madness and anxiety, I will be navigating one of the most challenging curriculums in the country on an educational platform I've never used before. You'd think that 7 ¾ semesters of solid academic achievement would be enough to allow us seniors passing grades in our classes, but apparently not. Despite losing the last 2 months of our final semester of college, despite losing the opportunity to say goodbye to a great many of our peers, despite likely losing our opportunity to walk at commencement, and despite dealing with the anxiety of friends getting the illness, we must continue to be actively engaged in school. We also likely have more to lose.

The US is currently on the same track as Italy with regards to the outbreak. President Trump was unable to properly prepare the US, and we are currently experiencing absurd testing shortages. The delay in testing in the US is despicable (we had 165 tests available in all of Tennessee when we got back from break), and was either an attempt to make our numbers look better, or was an absurdly embarrassing failure in preparation given how many months we've had since the outbreak in Wuhan. The lack of test kits in the US and all of the contradictory information being spread on the virus is the reason those individuals who went to Barcelona were not tested. With the President and various media sources trying to brush off the reality of the virus, many Americans, institutions, and schools—mine included—were left not knowing how to combat the potential—and now very real—outbreak. Because of this rhetoric, because of the decisions by institutions and universities not to err on the side of caution, people are going to lose their lives.

The dangers of government officials downplaying a serious problem simply for political or economic gain should be highlighted. That is not your job. Your job is to protect US citizens—it's about time our elected officials start doing their jobs.

Universities and institutions, you're here to provide benefit to society, not endanger the lives of your students, employees, or others who will later be exposed.

Students, we're adults now. It's time to grow up. We all had a responsibility to avoid large gatherings simply out of precaution—even if our government and school had not yet told us to. We all failed. We all failed miserably.

I'm angry, I'm sad, I'm confused. We need to do better in the future; we need to do a lot better. This is going to get worse before it gets better, and the saddest thing is that our faulty decisions, our spreading of misinformation due to selfish motivations, our careless and thoughtless actions are going to cost lives. All I can do now is hope and pray.

I hope and pray that I somehow test negative for this virus. I hope and pray for the families of my friends who have all gone home. I hope and pray for the elderly individuals—those most at risk—who I, or my friends, may have come in contact with. I hope and pray for my professors, my community, my country, my world. Most of all, I hope and pray that in the future, we can use this experience as a teaching lesson—in history books, documentaries, stories—so that the next generation can prepare and act better and with more dignity than we have. I hope and pray they take our stories seriously.