

The path we think we are

Lessons learned through COVID: a student's perspective

I took my first step out of Cauthorn Hall into the crisp, cool morning. My boots dampened by the morning dew, my brain buzzing with curiosity surrounding the unknown adventures the next four years at Oregon State would bring. Like most college freshmen, I had no idea how this new chapter in life would progress. But I never could have imagined the chaos to come.

A few months into my second year, the relatively predictable path of college life took a hard and exciting turn. My life changed on November 2, 2019. Legs shaking, my sweaty hands clasping the hand of the candidate next to me, I waited to hear who had been elected to the 2019-2020 National Future Farmers of America (FFA) Officer team. Seconds felt like years. Months of practice and the week-long interview process all came down to this moment.

The first four positions were announced. I listened intently for my name each time. Soon, there were only two positions left. My mind began to wander. The longer I waited to hear a name that wasn't being called the less likely it felt like I would be. I felt certain that I had likely not been elected. And then...the music started up and a voice boomed through the speakers:

"Slated as the 2019-2020 National Secretary...from Oregon...KOURTNEY LEHMAN!"

Shocked, my feet felt anchored to the floor. When my mind and body finally came to their senses, I bolted to the stage. Little did I know, these were the first steps of an unforgettable journey.

The next year would be spent traveling across the nation and world meeting with students, legislators, industry leaders, educators and more to discuss the sweet spot where education and agriculture combine to create the next generation of leaders. Taking a year out of my undergraduate studies for 365 days of never-ending adventure, growth and travel was like a dream come true. My bucket list of visiting all fifty states finally felt within my grasp. Even better, each visit was equipped with the itinerary of a lifetime to explore communities of all kinds and gain a deeper understanding of the agriculture industry.

And then, March of 2020 hit.

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on



Pivoting through disappointment

Like an unwanted houseguest, COVID-19 appeared with the promise of a “two-week stay. A month, tops.” Man, did it overstay its welcome. Next thing I knew, instead of hopping on a plane every few days for a new adventure I was sitting in my bedroom watching tutorials on how to operate Zoom. Talk about a letdown. I’d like to say I immediately responded with optimism and gladly accepted the challenge. I didn’t.

Instead, I lived in a constant world of denial telling myself each week would be the week we would finally go back to normal. Pair this with my emotional-consumption of home-made baked goods, and that basically describes my March of 2020.

By the time April rolled around, I came to terms with the idea that COVID-19 was here to stay and knew I needed to make some changes. I was still serving in the position of a lifetime and had spent the last month wasting the opportunity to lean into a new way of fulfilling that responsibility.

the number of students I could connect with in a day. On Zoom I could plop into any community within a matter of seconds.

Adaptability is now a first response for me. Failing zoom links, unreliable Wi-Fi, and constantly changing regulations have left me feeling prepared to take on whatever life presents. Be that a pandemic, or zombie apocalypse. I’ve learned to shift my focus from the glamor of my whereabouts to the quality of the people I’m working with. Even more, as a team, the FFA officers learned that while our methods for the year had changed, our mission to prepare the next generation of leaders had not. Honestly, the list of insights could go on and on.



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dents across the nation. The trend continued for the rest of the year. Our team shifted our experiences entirely online and began connecting with our audiences through Zoom, social media and any other outlet we could find. We even brought our year to a close by hosting one of the biggest youth virtual conventions broadcasted on national television.

By embracing the opportunity of a virtual convention, we broke the record for attendance and had the highest number of participants in FFA’s history. Don’t get me wrong, I would have given anything to have had a COVID-free year. Not only for the ability to have an in-person experience, but for all the obvious reasons of the millions of lives impacted by this disease. But I am also reminded of a saying that hits home now: “life’s best lessons are learned at the worst times.”

First, I consider myself a pretty decent baker now. Second, I’ve had the opportunity to exercise my creativity in new ways to reinvent how to do new things. While traveling would have been wonderful, it actually limits

With this newfound perspective, I wrapped up my year as a national officer and returned to Corvallis anxious to get back to my “normal” college life. COVID had other plans.

Making the most of missing out

Taking all of my classes online was a challenge. Despite the perspective gained from the previous year, attending COVID university was overwhelming at times. The lack of participation from fellow students in breakout rooms, the limited access to professors, the loss of a sense of community, the computer fatigue, and on and on. It all wore down on me both physically and mentally, and I surely wasn’t the only student feeling this way.

For Lucia Ho, current senior majoring in Food Science Technology with a Chemistry minor, junior year slipped by without the opportunity to be on campus meeting other people. In her experience, the added hours of sleep



from less early morning classes was great, but by no means a fair exchange for the difficulty of absorbing classroom content without the hands-on lab experiences.

“Starting from the middle of Fall 2020, I started to lose focus on what the professors were teaching,” she said. She felt like it caused her to forget most of what was learned for the year.

Carson Nolan, an Environmental Economics and Policy major, experienced the entirety of his first year as a college student behind a computer screen. Much like Lucia, Carson felt he learned far less during the pandemic than

he could have if in person. Despite the efforts of educators to adapt material for remote delivery, like so many others, Nolan felt the full weight of the missing hands-on aspects of the classroom setting. As if that weren’t enough for the freshman, Carson states the pandemic made him feel “forced to slow down, look around, and reevaluate.” The reflection was “appreciated, but also a little scary.”

I think a lot of us can relate to this. Feeling the loneliness surround us as we question whether the path we laid out for ourselves is truly the path we want to be on. Bryan Sherlock, a veteran of the U.S. Navy and student in the Fermentation Science program, started at OSU

in the spring of 2020 expecting a traditional on campus experience, but was instead met with the realities of a completely online learning environment. The shift left Bryan struggling to maintain drive to sit in front of the computer every day feeling plagued by the “Zoom and digital burnout wall.”

These student stories are only a few examples of the countless experiences brought on through the pandemic. To say the last year has been difficult for students would be an understatement. But, despite the awful aspects of the experience, some of the residue left behind by our unwanted visitor has been positive.

Lucia used the loneliness brought through the pandemic as self-realization of her need for social interaction encouraging her to reach out to students online and engage with people within the community.

For Nolan, the pandemic altered his academic pathway and brought him to Oregon State University, where he hadn’t originally planned to attend. Here, he became an Ambassador for the College of Agricultural Sciences, joined a fraternity and has picked up many new hobbies.

Bryan found new means of connection through Discord, an instant messaging and digital distribution platform, during online courses, and has even enhanced the platform for his peers by creating a Discord for the Food Science Technology students. Increasing the entire programs capability for learning through collaboration.

The future is bright

So, what does this mean for the future of OSU’s College of Agricultural Sciences? Well, in my opinion, the future is brighter than ever. Our students have not only shown their tenacity in times of trials, but even more so their dedication to their education.

COVID gave us all a worthwhile excuse to give up, or at the very least to lower our expectations. But, in spite of that, so many of my fellow students used the challenges they faced as means of growth for not only themselves, but it also ignited ways for them to give back to their peers and their community. The bond of going through this experience together will forever unite this generation of students. The lessons learned from the residue of COVID will live on well after the houseguest (finally) leaves. No matter what the future brings, we will adapt, and we will grow.

And the baked goods promise to be amazing. 



Top: Lucia Ho, majoring in Food Science Technology with a Chemistry minor.

Above: Bryan Sherlock, a veteran of the U.S. Navy, and a student in the Fermentation Science program.

Left: Carson Nolan, Environmental Economics and Policy major.