

College students in New York City speak on the impact of the pandemic

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In the epicenter of the COVID-19 pandemic in the United States, New York City college students are currently confronting a multitude of dire issues affecting their education, employment, living conditions and ultimately, their future. Their conditions are part of a larger crisis facing all workers and youth.

The closure of college campuses around the country last month due to social distancing protocols upended students' lives, including those of international students. In cases where dorms were shut, students had just days to find new accommodations. This was exacerbated in New York City, where housing costs are some of the highest in the United States.

Many students in the New York metropolitan area, in what has been a global phenomenon for workers, also lost their incomes when on- and off-campus jobs were terminated. Thousands now struggle to pay tuition in addition to confronting high costs of living.

As university systems now attempt to transition to online learning, students and faculty must navigate curricula without access to essential campus facilities, such as libraries. On top of this, students are working under the psychological pressure of extreme uncertainty as well as the health dangers of the pandemic itself.

The *World Socialist Web Site* recently spoke with several undergraduates in New York City about the conditions they now face.

Anmarie, a senior studying pre-law at The City University of New York's (CUNY) Macaulay Honors College at Baruch College, was the recipient of an overseas fellowship and had accepted a job offer in the United Kingdom for this summer, but both have been suspended due to the COVID-19 outbreak. "Unfortunately, cancelled opportunities have become the norm for most college students," she said.

Anmarie explained the stress of transitioning to online learning: "Uncertainty about the future and about the fate of elderly relatives has made it extremely difficult to focus on coursework. Professors have been forced to increase

students' workloads in order to make up for the time lost as a result of recalibration periods. In addition, some classes," such as her experiment-based biology labs, "are virtually impossible to teach in an online platform."

She expressed her disappointment with the too-little-too-late response by the government and criticized the recently passed stimulus package for cutting most college students out of a much-needed stimulus check. "Due to campus-wide shutdowns, nonessential CUNY students that were employed by schools lost their jobs and are not receiving aid."

Anmarie underlined the emotional impact of being a graduating senior. "The COVID-19 outbreak has been exceptionally heartbreaking for college seniors, who are dealing with the stress of relocating back home, cancelled or postponed commencement activities, and the uncertainty of the job market as a result of the pandemic. We are stressed, confused and scared about what the future brings."

Ellie, a senior studying health science at CUNY's Borough of Manhattan Community College (BMCC), is an international student from Iran. She stated that distance learning has been an issue for many students, especially for nursing classes. "Their clinicals have been cancelled so they're basically learning nothing this semester and they don't know how they're going to catch up. How are they going to be prepared for when they start working?"

Being an international student at CUNY, Ellie said she pays twice as much for out-of-state tuition. She signed a petition currently circulating demanding that all out-of-state CUNY tuition costs become equal to in-state tuition amounts. "This would help me be able to remain past this pandemic and continue with my life."

Ellie spoke about other complications facing international students. "A lot of international students cannot go back to their countries [if they want to continue studying in the US]. You have to get a visa again, and with the borders being closed, you don't know if you'll ever be allowed to come back if you leave—especially for me, being from Iran," she said, noting the US travel ban against Iran in place before the pandemic. "I'm stuck, I'm truly stuck."

Ellie wasn't employed before the pandemic and stated that student visas don't permit students to work unless it's a campus job that's twenty hours a week or less. "Even those that had a job on campus probably lost it because campus is closed. So you don't have any type of income coming in."

Ellie, who is graduating this year and wants to continue her education to become a nurse, spoke about the necessity of Optional Practical Training (OPT), a US immigration policy that permits graduates with student visas to remain in the US for one year if they secure work in their field of study in order to afford continuing education. "I was really counting on OPT," she said, "because I wanted to earn some money and go back to school. With everything closed, I don't know how it's going to work. If I cannot find a job in a timely manner, my visa expires, and I have to go back to my country. This is my biggest concern right now."

Yu, a junior studying nursing at CUNY's Hunter College, said that Hunter gave students only three days' notice to pack up and move completely out of campus dorms. She spoke of the health risk posed with so many students packing up all at once in confined dormitories due to the strict time constraints placed on them by the administration.

Yu also mentioned how this abrupt decision by the college created housing insecurity for students. "When I went in to move my belongings, I knew people who were living there as their only home."

Yu was a medical assistant at a pediatric clinic but was unable to continue working because of the pandemic. She doesn't qualify for unemployment benefits because she was a part-time worker and is not eligible for a stimulus check because she is a dependent. She is currently living with her parents and has applied for Hunter's emergency funding because, "I still have bills to pay and have no source of income for the foreseeable future."

It is hard for Yu to focus on academics at home and transition to online classes. "I'm pursuing a degree that involves a very rigorous course load and online learning," which she says is a less effective way for her to learn. "It has made things so difficult for me."

About the pandemic, Yu said that "we should've seen how this was escalating in China and started planning for the worst because it was inevitable that it would travel. Proposing that workers go back to work in a few weeks is a joke, and only emphasizes the government's disregard for their citizen's health."

Lylia, a junior studying journalism at CUNY's Baruch College, is an international student from France. "I think Baruch was too slow to take action," she said. "The whole CUNY system has responded to the crisis later than the rest of the major colleges in the city, putting at risk thousands of students."

"The CUNY shutdown happened in the middle of midterms period, which is a very busy time for students. Going online at that time has been even more stressful since many of us had to take exams that will play a big part in our final grade."

Lylia pays \$18,600 a year for out-of-state tuition. She also signed the petition demanding lower tuition for international students. "I don't think online classes are worth this amount of money," she said. "The tuition we pay is twice as much as in-state students and right now for those of us who don't have any income, refunding our tuition for the semester might help many of us not to drown financially."

Karen is a senior studying product design at Parsons, the art and design school at The New School. She said that the Parsons administration has been "acting as if nothing has changed except for the fact that we no longer meet in person. They're saying, 'We must push through and persevere as a community,' when there seems to be no real action taken by our school to address real problems of housing insecurity, unemployment, and physical and mental health." She added, "our [The New School's] president makes a million dollars a year."

Karen stated that Parsons isn't issuing refunds for students living off-campus, even though art and design students specifically rely on studio spaces and facilities. "It's ridiculous." She pointed out that access to these resources is a primary reason for going to art school and justifying expensive tuition. "A student can easily spend hundreds of hours a semester in the studio."

Karen's conclusion is that, "the school is trying to keep the community rather divided." She supported a recent student academic strike, which is trying to "initiate a conversation which is currently nonexistent" about the needs of students.

"If we stand together," Karen said, "our voice is much louder and stronger." Referring to the future, after social distancing measures are lifted, Karen said, "I do believe there is going to be a lot of strikes, a lot of rallies and a lot of protests about the current system and structure of society."



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