‘We’re Here Now’

One year in, the pandemic has upended higher education. A day in these lives shows how.

Jeff Ayisire
Jeff Ayisire woke before sunrise on March 1 with tears in his eyes. He’d had a dream.

In the dream, his younger sister was telling him he needed to stay healthy, to watch his weight. If he were to come down with Covid-19, obesity could make it harder to beat the virus.

Ayisire knew it was true. Stressed and depressed, he’d put on more than 50 pounds in recent months, ever since his sister came back from college partway through the fall semester. But lying on the floor, where he had slept, he felt strengthened and comforted by her words. He was ready to face the day.

The past year has been made of such moments — grappling with a once-unthinkable new normal. One year ago today, the University of Washington took the then-extreme step of moving instruction online and ultimately canceling the rest of the in-person term. That decision ushered in a new reality for colleges. Businesses, schools, and other institutions across the country soon followed.

Since then, the pandemic has left more than 500,000 Americans dead and put millions of people out of work. It has also upended the most minute parts of everyday life.

To document how profoundly Covid-19 has altered work and life in higher education, The Chronicle observed more than a dozen people in the space of a single day — Monday, March 1. For many of them, pandemic life no longer feels new. But their daily lives have transformed. They’re filled with unexpected challenges, energizing moments of connection, and devastating loss.

On this Monday morning Ayisire has little time to linger. He and his family have a long day ahead. They are moving out of their home in Arlington, Tex., and today is the final day to get
their things into their new place. They owe their old landlord the keys by the next morning.

He skips breakfast and drives to the old house. He sees his mom’s room, where his sister would sometimes sleep when she visited. He takes in the memories. And then he begins loading the car.

At 8:30 a.m., Noël M. Voltz gets a text message from her department chair. He wants her to reach out to a prospective graduate-student recruit to Case Western Reserve University, where Voltz is an assistant professor. Ten minutes later, she trips over a pot that her 21-month-old son, Cairo, dropped on the floor.

“It’s a totally normal morning,” she says. Then she laughs.

Last May, Voltz moved halfway across the country with Cairo to start a new job at Case. She moved into a house that she’d never seen — bought while she was still a professor at the University of Utah — and started working from home.

Though she met some of her history-department colleagues during her interview before the pandemic, she’s never worked with them in-person, never been to her office, and set foot on campus only once, to pick up her I.D.

After teaching the fall semester and a three-week January term online, Voltz has time off from classes to work on something that hasn’t been changed by the pandemic: her unfinished manuscript.

To maintain her focus, Voltz found an at-home daycare near her new house. She reasoned that the risk would be low because it’s small.

It’s not a perfect solution. On Friday, February 26, Voltz had about five hours of meetings scheduled. That morning, she got a text saying the daycare would be closed for the day.
because one of the kids needed to be tested for Covid. Voltz is a single mom. She had no choice but to go ahead with her meetings and laugh it off when her son shoved crackers into her mouth on camera.

But on Monday morning, the daycare is open and Voltz is getting Cairo ready so she can work on her manuscript. That means tripping over pots and stepping around strawberries and pancakes that he’s thrown on the floor while she prepares his lunch and gets shoes and socks on his feet.

At 9 a.m., Voltz and Cairo are ready to go when she realizes their coats are still in the car and it is parked in a detached garage.
No matter. The weather is already changing, she says. “It feels about, maybe 45, 50,” she says as she walks to the car. She looks at her phone. It is 23 degrees.

Cheryl Bickley juggles a different set of responsibilities. It’s been nearly a year since she was furloughed from Lynn University in Boca Raton, Fla., where she researched potential donors for the development office. She was laid off in July.

On Monday morning she’s simultaneously filling out forms to find a new mental-health therapist for her daughter, Carleigh, and waiting on Florida’s Department of Economic Opportunity website, ready to claim her biweekly unemployment benefit.

Her morning will soon get even busier. She’ll need to wake Carleigh and make breakfast. Make sure that Carleigh, who is on the autism spectrum, is logged on for sixth grade over Zoom. Let in the behavioral therapist, who teaches Carleigh ways to calm herself when she gets frustrated.

Finding the behavioral therapist in May was a big win. Bickley had long wanted this kind of therapy for her daughter, but as a single mom working 11-hour days, she didn’t have time to find someone. The furlough gave her time. The therapist was 100 percent covered by Bickley’s health plan through the university — until she was laid off. Then she had to choose: Give up the therapist, or start shouldering the full price of her health coverage with no paycheck coming in?

“I finally had the opportunity for her to get this therapy and I didn’t want to lose it,” Bickley says. “What we’re living off of right now is my retirement.”

Deanna Schwartz steps out of Northeastern University’s isolation dorm moments after the campus bells strike 9 a.m. She balances her backpack, two tote bags, a wheeled suitcase with a flower pattern, and a stuffed black trash bag. The sky is grey, and a light drizzle dots the brick sidewalk. A glass door shuts behind her.
At last.

It was a long five days. But now, on Monday morning, it’s time to leave her bare room and walk the few blocks to her dorm room, with its fuzzy pink rug and map of Baltimore, her home city, on the wall.

Schwartz is leaving quarantine with more than she’d brought in. On Saturday, she learned her isolation would last one day longer than expected, and she had a panic attack. A staff member brought her an extra pillow from her dorm, for comfort. Then there is all the food that Northeastern provided that she didn’t eat — cartons of milk, bottles of tea, cereal — some of which she will donate.

Now she’s lugging it all back, dragging the black trash bag behind her. The plastic starts to tear. As she walks, the rips widen.
Deanna Schwartz returns to her dorm room after five days in isolation housing.

Schwartz gets to an elevator and walks inside. She’s finally home. She looks down to see the torn black plastic trash bag, her pillow showing through. Dirt from the sidewalk had smeared the white fabric. “I’m gonna cry.”

Similar scenes of misery and frustration have colored campuses for the last year. At many institutions, isolation housing was a routine part of student life. Colleges shed 650,000 jobs in the steepest decline in recorded history. And countless students, faculty, and staff members had more to do and less help with responsibilities at home.

“We’ve had a tough year,” José D. Padilla says at a prayer service marking his first day as president of Valparaiso University, a private Lutheran campus.

In the landmark chapel, before its soaring stained-glass windows, he ticks off the challenges. He is moving slowly down the stairs, toward the masked people gathered in person and the empty seats between them.

Before the service, he wondered aloud if he could live up to the moment, of what is expected from a new president. There’s a difference between confidence and hubris, he said. In the prayer service, he highlights many people on campus — the students, staff, and faculty with long connections to Valpo — as leaders alongside him.

You are the angels, he tells his new university, who hold a torch to drive out darkness.

“You, you,” he says, pointing at two people in the capacity-limited chapel. And then, he points to the camera, where more streamed the service from afar.
José Padilla, president of Valparaiso U., speaks at the Chapel of the Resurrection.

Laura Iocin is looking into her computer’s camera lens, her portal into the lives of the City College of New York students that she counsels.

It’s quiet in the upstairs office in her house in Westchester County. About 50 miles south of there, the counseling center that Iocin leads is empty. But the work has continued at an unrelenting pace. When the pandemic shuttered New York and filled its hospitals last March, City College’s students were left vulnerable. The college went remote and the counseling center gave sessions by phone.

“They definitely need us right now,” Iocin says of her students. They work, some have children or care for elderly family members. “We’re seeing a lot of depression, a lot of anxiety.”
Iocin was thinking about caseloads. There are seven counselors now — three of whom they hired part-time with Cares Act funding — plus seven trainees who are seeking clinical experience. In a normal semester, it takes a few months for the trainees’ caseloads to fill up. But right now, one month in, there are only five openings left.

“We’re getting just a little worried about that,” she says. “We cannot turn anybody away. We have to meet with every student who reaches us.”

She has noticed something else. A lot of students are coming to therapy for the first time because they need to talk about past sexual trauma that was surfacing. The pandemic, she says, has added a layer of stress to people’s lives that intensifies other problems. Iocin sits with them over Zoom for 50 minutes. She helps them come up with solutions and sometimes just listens. Virtual counseling has its downsides; Iocin doesn’t get to read their body language as they sit in the waiting room or walk into her office — clues that tell her how they’re doing. And if they have an emergency, Iocin is miles away.

Counselors are feeling the weight of a difficult year, too. They used to be in one another’s offices all the time, checking in, talking about difficult cases. Now they try to recreate that sense of camaraderie in a 30-minute Zoom call in the afternoon.

The pandemic has complicated Iocin’s life along with everyone else’s. Her young children need attention, and it hurts when they ask for it but she has to work. She hasn’t seen the rest of her family since 2018. She and her husband are from Romania and had planned to take their children back there last summer, but now they don’t know when they’ll visit.

As the morning comes to an end, Iocin looks out the window. Her office is bright and quiet and she can see the tops of trees. On her desk, two giant, glowing monitors stare back at her.

Two o’clock in the afternoon is a dividing line, a mirror in Shernette Lyons’s day. It’s one of her scheduled breaks. After that, she has to start over, disinfecting the same bathrooms and
wiping down the same elevators, doorknobs, and other “high-touch areas” on the
fifth floor and basement of Centreville Hall, an eight-story brick dorm at the
University of Maryland at College Park. The university instituted the second-
cleaning round when it opened for in-person instruction starting in fall of 2020.

Even if a bathroom appears unused, “you have to clean it again,” says Lyons, who’s been a
residential housekeeper at College Park for 11 years. If in a pandemic world many of us feel
we’re reliving the same day, Lyons enacts that day twice.

This academic year, Lyons has been frustrated to see students gathering in lounges, some of
them not wearing masks. Or sometimes several students will get on the elevator with her,
which is against the rules, she says. If that happens, she’ll get off. Last month university
officials blamed small gatherings in dorms for a surge in coronavirus cases, including in halls
where Lyons works, The Diamondback reported. The outbreaks prompted the university to
put on-campus students under a weeklong sequester-in-place order.

The union Lyons belongs to requested N95 masks for housekeepers in May but only recently
heard that workers can get one if they ask. Lyons brings her own from home.

“I don’t think it’s fair for us working with the students in the building,” she says. “We have
family who have underlying sickness.” She has high blood pressure and worries about getting
Covid-19, or bringing it home to her husband.

Hafsa Siddiqi, a media-relations manager at the university, wrote in an email that the
institution had “implemented many safety measures” for staff, including providing non-N95
masks “regularly.” (Lyons said she gets three each morning.) The university’s
communications director told The Chronicle that federal guidelines do not advise N95 masks
for non-healthcare workers.

This is the first Monday since the sequester-in-place order expired, and things are quiet. Lyons
hasn’t had any student interactions that made her nervous. Still, she says she and her coworkers are laboring in a “scared environment.”

“Even though I am scared, I still do my job,” she says. “They’re expecting us to.”

People like Lyons assume the risk of the Covid campus. In administration offices and in research labs, leaders try to manage it.

On Monday afternoon, Ana A. Weil and a group of scientists and programmers click into Zoom for a routine meeting to discuss the details of the University of Washington’s formidable Covid-19 testing apparatus.

One year ago, Weil was focused on cholera research. But the university’s decision on March 6 to shift to online learning, which other campuses followed, changed that. She started working on Covid last March when Helen Y. Chu, a colleague at UW Medicine who had quickly pivoted her lab’s focus from influenza to the coronavirus, announced in a faculty meeting that she had funding to test in Seattle nursing homes. But she needed help.

Weil raised her hand. “We tested in the parking lot,” she says. “We tested in the rain.”

Next she was asked to test fraternities and sororities, where there was an outbreak. Finally, in the fall, the university asked Chu and Weil to design a testing program for the whole university. They’re also studying the data they collect, trying to learn and share how to prevent the spread of the virus at big institutions like the University of Washington.

“This is where you end up a year later,” Weil says. “None of us were doing Covid work a year ago.”

Spring break is coming up. On the Zoom call, Weil and others wonder how they should test students after they return. If they started testing students during the last weekend of the break,
Weil says in the meeting, “we would have 7,225, divided by nine, is 802 people a day.” She does some quick math. Not everyone will sign up for a test, so they could allocate 600 tests a day for students. It’s a lot, but no one in the meeting objects.

On the other coast, the afternoon risk-assessment meeting at Benedict College moves quickly. Each department gives an update. Ceeon D. Quiett Smith, the university’s chief of staff, asks questions.

A football tryout will bring high schoolers to campus that weekend. *Yes, they have to show a negative Covid-19 test. Someone from recruitment will pick up transcripts. We need to spray down the restrooms and locker rooms, before and after.*

It’s midterms week, and staff expect high pressure on the IT department and the library. *Is there enough PPE in the academic areas?*

The meeting is nearly over when Gary E. Knight, vice president for student affairs, asks his colleagues to bow their heads. “Let us take a moment and look to the Lord and pause for a few minutes.”

He reminds his colleagues that it is March 1. Almost a year ago, they decided to close the campus and send students home. “God has carried us for a whole year.”

“Think about the persons in your family who are not here now. They’re gone.”

Several people murmured.

“But we’re here. We were here a year ago. We’re here now.

“We might fuss on a call. We might fuss at each other. But we worked it out. We’re here. We’re blessed to be here. I can’t thank God enough.”
Six students blink at Kama L. O’Connor as an afternoon introductory composition class — conducted on Zoom — comes to a close. One student has choppy internet. Another uses a digital background. A third has his camera off.

This veterans-only section is a pilot program at Coconino Community College. In O’Connor’s pre-pandemic teaching life, she taught full-time with Northern Arizona University’s writing program. But that fell apart in April. She was on a contract, and her boss told her she and her colleagues in composition would not be hired back. O’Connor called her mother, crying.

Then she got to work. O’Connor patched together a teaching load of her own, specializing in working with student veterans. This spring she mixes classes at Coconino and at NAU’s honors college.

Kama O’Connor teaches a college class as her daughter, Isabel, 12, participates in school
online.

These contingent roles carry uncertainty. What classes will come through for next semester? What about a year from now? On Monday, O’Connor brings that question to her students. After this class, would they want a veterans-only version of English 102? If they could find six more students, that would lock in the class, she tells them.

“If you have friends in a 101 class, or friends who need 102, get them on board,” she says, perched at a standing desk in her kitchen. “Give me their contact info — I can reach out to them. We can find a way to get that class, 102, in the fall.”

“Each person finds one other person,” one student says, “and we’re golden.”

They log off, and O’Connor starts her commute to NAU, where she will teach her afternoon honors-college class in person and online. She and her 12-year-old daughter climb into the car and pull away, blue skies flashing through the windows.

It’s nighttime already in Ada, Ohio, but for Trinity Wobler, time no longer has meaning. “It just doesn’t feel like time exists,” she says. “I feel bored constantly, but my day goes so fast.”
Trinity Wobler

Wobler has spent the past week of her sophomore year at Ohio Northern University quarantined in her on-campus apartment. One day might go by fast, but it feels like a whole season has passed since she went into isolation. When it started, eight inches of snow lay on the ground. Now it’s sunny and warm.

“I just want to go outside so bad,” she says.

Wobler first started feeling sick on a Tuesday night, but she was sure it was just something she ate. By Wednesday night her throat hurt, so Thursday morning she went to the health center. A nurse gave her a Covid test and told her she’d get the results in 45 minutes. They’d email if the test was negative and call if it was positive.

Wobler went back to her apartment and started frantically refreshing her email. “I have never dreaded a phone call so much in my life,” she says.

Forty-five minutes later, her phone rang. Crap, she thought.

Next came an onslaught of instructions about what to do and questions about who she’d been in contact with. Wobler began quarantine immediately. The university let her stay in her apartment and her roommate went home.

There was no time to prepare for isolation. A friend brought Wobler some groceries. She had laundry to do, but that would have to wait. “Great,” she thought, “now I’m going to have two
weeks of dirty laundry.”

Wobler has underlying conditions — asthma and postural orthostatic tachycardia syndrome. On Friday morning, when she woke up feeling pain and tightness in her chest, a nurse told her to go to the emergency room. There, she had blood drawn and chest x-rays taken. A doctor saw some signs that her heart could be damaged and had her stay the night with the hope that she could get an echocardiogram that weekend.

That didn’t work out. The next day she was released and told to come back for the echocardiogram in a week. By Monday night, Wobler’s Covid symptoms have improved. But the feeling that time has stopped for her while it keeps going for everyone else is lingering.

“I look outside and I see everybody walking around,” she says. “I’m like, people are still doing things?”

People are still doing things, and it’s getting to Mia Torres. She decides that the next student she sees without a mask, she will write up.

The University of Connecticut’s residential-life office had told resident assistants like Torres that this semester, they should write up residents right away for not wearing face coverings. But Torres still likes warnings, and her hall director trusts the RAs’ judgment.

Sometimes things just happen too fast for her to decide. During their 10 o’clock round, one unmasked woman walked away swiftly while Torres and the RA she’d been partnered with that night, Tyler Shoban, were warning her. “I feel a little silly calling out from 15 feet away, ‘Hey, stop walking!’” Torres says.
The desk where resident assistants work in Busby Suites at the U. of Connecticut.

Being an RA has been a difficult balancing act during Covid-19. Administrators still want to see RAs create a sense of warmth and community, or else what’s the point of opening residence halls during a pandemic? At the same time, being on the front lines of policing Covid-prevention behaviors means RAs carry a grave responsibility. “If I slack off,” Torres says, “I don’t want to be contributing to making Covid a lot worse.”

She and Shoban start their third and last round of the night at 11:30, walking through Busby Suites’ four floors. They see a study group they had warned before. This time, two members aren’t wearing their masks. Torres follows through on her resolution. “I was like, ‘Aw, man, we’re going to have to write you up,’” she says.

The students are quiet. They want to know what will happen next. Residential Life will contact them, she says, but she’s been trained not to promise any particular outcome. It’s out of her hands now.
Nearly 24 hours after he awoke from his dream, Jeff Ayisire is still moving his family’s things into their new house. He has made at least seven trips, driving by the local hospital each time.

In their old house, earlier in the day, he swept by the fireplace. This was the room where his sister, Helen Etuk, first isolated when she got sick.

Etuk planned to graduate early from the University of North Texas, which didn’t surprise Ayisire. His sister, an aspiring pediatrician, was driven, with an eye toward saving money. She wanted to be able to provide for their mother.

In the spring North Texas’s president announced the campus would try to reopen more completely for fall. Etuk was excited, Ayisire remembered. She planned to live in an apartment. Her family worried — Etuk had lupus and was immunocompromised — but he said they trusted the university. *If they’re open, they’re probably taking the precautionary measures, so no one will catch it,* Ayisire remembered thinking. Their family urged her to wear a mask and gloves, and she did.
Jeff Ayisire, center, and his family members prepare to move out of their home.

One day on campus, Etuk was on the phone with her mother, coughing severely, Ayisire said. Etuk came home. Over the following days, she grew weaker, unable to take the stairs. She couldn’t smell a diffuser filled with peppermint essential oil. At the hospital near their house, she learned she had Covid-19, and she stayed there. She hoped she would get out by Thanksgiving, then Christmas, then New Year’s.

She blamed herself for going back to college, Ayisire remembered. She apologized constantly. He tried to remind her: “It’s not your fault. It’s nobody’s fault. It’s God’s will.”

Months passed. She told Ayisire to be strong, to love God. Hearing that from his younger sister broke him. “I am supposed to be the one to protect you,” he replied. “I’m supposed to be the one to encourage you.”

She died on January 12, weeks before her 21st birthday. To Ayisire, it felt like losing a daughter.

At the funeral, a friend praised her vibrant spirit. Her family began fund raising for a scholarship in her name. In January, days after her death, North Texas urged all students, faculty, and staff to get a Covid-19 test before returning to campus. The campus made some testing mandatory for students later in the semester. Ayisire said he appreciated the step. “Lives are at stake,” he says. If colleges can’t test, “they need to leave people online. It’s going to make things worse.”

Almost immediately after Etuk’s death, her family decided to move farther from the hospital where she died. Ayisire knows moving won’t immediately make things better. It can’t. Easter
will come, and his sister will still be gone. Then Mother’s Day, then Christmas. But the distance and fresh start may ease the pain.

Ayisire leaves the old house for the last time at nearly 4 a.m. Tuesday, a full day since he woke up after dreaming of his sister. The rooms are empty, and he leaves behind the key.

*We welcome your thoughts and questions about this article. Please email the editors or submit a letter for publication.*

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