

The best 4: College students and faculty reflect on making the most in the lost years of COVID

Isabella Garcia's decision to drop out of Syracuse University, travel to Rome, Italy, enroll in John Cabot University in the first year they offered a psychology major track and remain abroad in Italy after graduation was a no-brainer. Or, at least that's how Garcia, who recently graduated, tells the story of her fateful decision materialized at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic put her life on the proper trajectory.

"I always had my doubts while at Syracuse. Like, I mean, I loved it, but it's obviously an expensive school. And Europe was always just in the back of my head," Garcia said. "And yeah, basically COVID pushed me to do everything."

After two years of a global pandemic marked by immeasurable lost opportunities and a loss of life, the class of 2022 continues to don caps and gowns for graduation. The proverbial best four years of their life took an unforeseen nosedive. Some students left in March 2020 as impressionable sophomores, and the next time they returned, they were supposed to know how to be model seniors. But across the nation, students like Garcia also used the time in isolation to reevaluate their educational path and embrace their true passions.

In a similar vein to Garcia's own bold decision, SU graduate Angelique Bey took stock of her life path in March 2020. At that time, the then-sophomore was in Chile, slogging through pre-med courses in Spanish. Her 4.0 GPA in biology was doing nothing to invigorate her. So,

against her advisor's urging, Bey switched into the television, radio and film major in S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications.

"I always had a passion for film growing up but like I said, I was really timid and whatnot. I never really listened to that voice," Bey said. "But those interests never really went away."

Bey went on to travel to Cartagena, Colombia during summer 2021 for a self-made documentary about the Afro-Latina experience. As an Afro-Caribbean woman from Tortola, British Virgin Islands, this story was also a project of personal discovery.

Only a few months earlier, Bey lay bedridden in an emergency room. Unlike plenty of her fellow Syracuse University students who had talked of having no symptoms when they contracted COVID-19, the coronavirus zeroed in on Bey's lungs and heart. But, as she lay there, her mind wandered beyond the hospital walls: She needed to make it to Colombia. She needed to prove to herself and her family of engineers, doctors and lawyers that her first independent decision to pursue documentary work was a worthwhile risk.

Once she finally arrived in Colombia, with very few other students to meet, Bey challenged herself to integrate into the community, exploring the local connection to the African Diaspora.

"Growing up here in America, we don't really learn that much about South America," Bey said. "And on top of that, we don't learn anything about these Black populations that are everywhere within South America. It was something I wanted to do."

Meanwhile, at the Yale School of Public Health, aspiring student epidemiologists — who are normally overlooked in favor of the medical students — entered the limelight like never before, said Dr. Sten Vermund, the dean of Yale’s public health school. Effectively overnight, students took the initiative to pen blogs for the public to understand the ever-evolving pandemic, volunteer at testing sites and work with arts programs to see how they could return safely in front of audiences.

“I think for public health students, the experience was actually, in a paradoxical way, invigorating, and a reminder of the relevance of public health and public health expertise,” Vermund said, just hours after he addressed the class of 2022 at their graduation. “And each of our students became a local expert, you know, somebody that family and friends could call on.”

Vermund said that the school was fully online for the spring 2020 term and hybrid into the fall semester, allowing international students that had been sent home by the government to still participate. Fortunately, some courses like Vermund’s “Frontiers in Global Health” could function in an online capacity. But for field-based courses, some students who opted to stay home missed out on the experience to interview patients or collect mosquito samples.

To that end, Vermund remains keenly aware of the public health students that had to make difficult decisions to halt their education indefinitely. For context, Vermund recalled that about 50 students contacted him to say either the family business went under or that they would have to

take another job to put siblings through college. At the other end, nearly 20% of incoming freshmen deferred a year, though only a fraction of them matriculated, he said.

Even as Garcia, Bey and Vermund reflected on how they made the most of the past two years, each spoke about the hardships faced. Although she understands her privileged position, Garcia was a bona fide “guinea pig” for John Cabot’s psychology program, meaning that she waded through a disorganized curriculum. Bey said she still uses an asthma pump, per her pulmonologist’s recommendation. As for Vermund, he believes that America is only just escaping the academia crisis COVID-19 caused. His mind returns to the Ph.D. candidates that could simply go no further.

“I think students will have their experiences etched in their memories for many years to come,” Vermund said. “And many of them acquired skill sets that they would not have acquired, if there hadn’t been that real world challenge. So I think it’s a bit of a balance, the disruption versus the experience.”