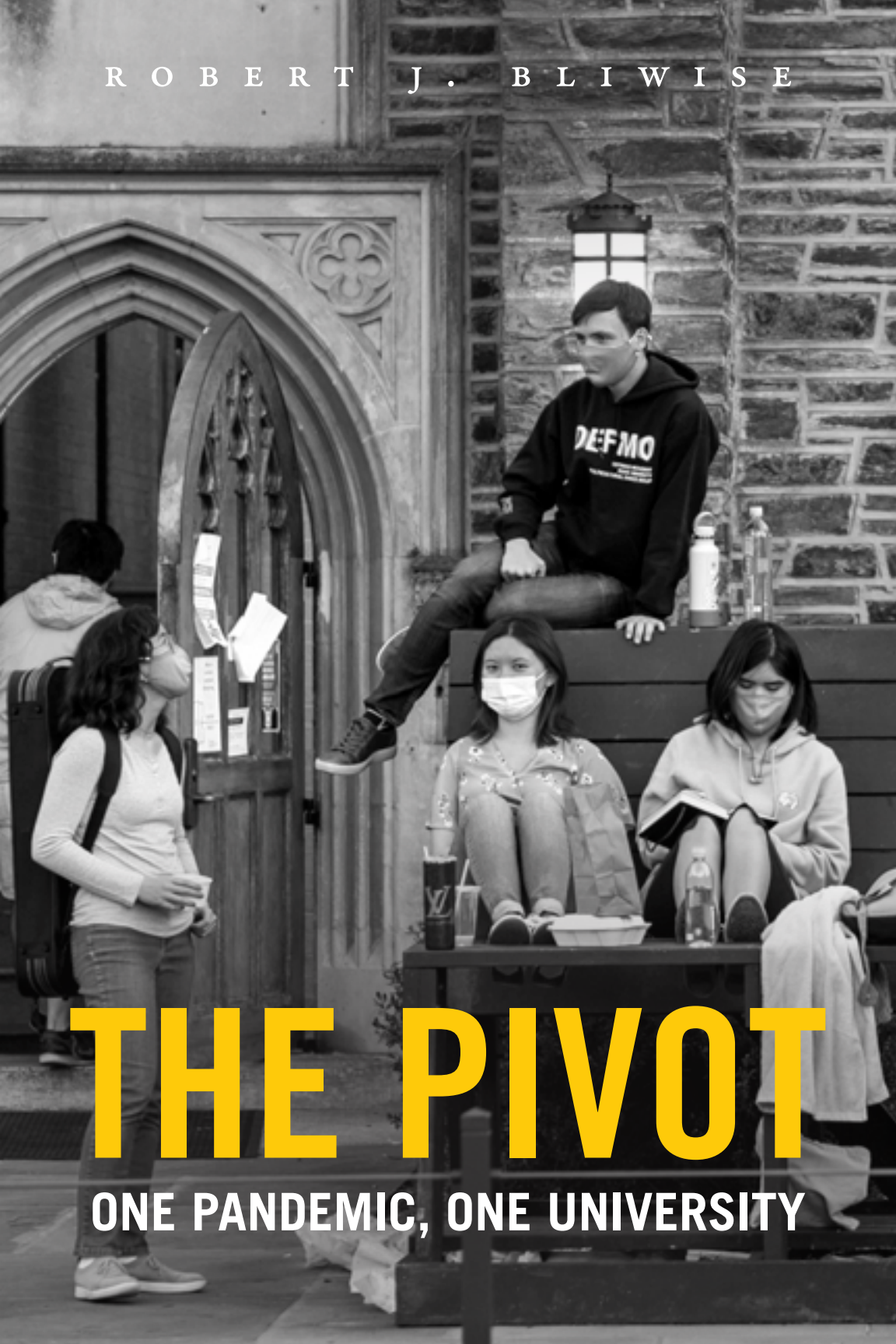
ROBERT J. BLIWISE



THE PIVOT

ONE PANDEMIC, ONE UNIVERSITY

THE PIVOT

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DUKE
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PRESS

PIVOT

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ROBERT J. BLIWISE

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Cover art: First-year students study and socialize together during a warm February evening on the Abele Quad, February 24, 2021. Photograph by Jared Lazarus.
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To the teachers and scholars who have welcomed me into their world of ideas. To the colleagues who have strengthened my attachment to storytelling. And to the students—smart, engaged, and ambitious—who have reminded me of the essential work of a learning community.

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INTRODUCTION

THE COURSE OF A PANDEMIC

ONE PANDEMIC DAY, when I found myself at home laboring over a laptop—as with pretty much every pandemic day—I searched the Duke University website with the term *pandemic*. What came up quickly was an opinion piece written by Gavin Yamey, a professor of global health and public policy at Duke. "We cannot make the world safe from pandemic diseases by looking away after an emergency fades, nor by hoping that infectious diseases stay within the borders of far-away nations," he wrote. "It is time for us to end the cycles of panic and neglect and invest reasonably and rationally in outbreak preparedness every day and everywhere."

That was a commentary from 2018. Now it could be read as a warning unheeded—as the Duke campus, and the world beyond the Duke campus, would come to understand two years later.

WINTER WARNINGS

Mid-January 2020 was weirdly warm and weirdly wet; temperatures were shooting up as much as thirty degrees above normal. There were even thunderstorms, not among the wintry phenomena expected in Durham, North Carolina. Was the world askew? But on Duke's campus, everything felt

right; everyone was gliding into the second semester of the academic year. Nothing out of the ordinary in the usual excitement, the usual activities, the usual pressures.

Then, on January 21, an update from the administration: "Duke officials continue to closely monitor an outbreak of a novel coronavirus that emerged in Wuhan, China, last month and has begun to spread to other countries." Duke Kunshan University is the university's biggest footprint in China. As a partnership between Duke and Wuhan University, it has the mission, according to its website, of "building a world-class liberal arts university." Partnership means lots of back-and-forth, a reality that underpinned an accompanying advisory: "Anyone who has recently returned from China and is sick with fever, cough, or difficulty breathing should seek medical care right away and call ahead to the doctor's office to inform them of recent travels and symptoms."

Over the next several days, the messages kept coming, with an increasing sense of urgency. One case in the United States had been registered, then fifty-three cases; Chinese authorities had enacted a travel ban for the area around Wuhan, the epicenter for the outbreak. Duke officials were monitoring the spread of the virus to a number of countries, including Italy, South Korea, and Japan, and were "assessing the impact on current and future programs in those areas." In the event of "sustained transmission," likely precautions in affected parts of the United States would include "staying home when ill and practicing respiratory and hand hygiene."

Duke's president, Vincent E. Price, announced that a campus task force had been meeting for a while and would be overseeing Duke's COVID-19 response. Duke physicians were "in regular contact with federal, state, and local public-health officials and are deeply engaged in planning for a potential clinical response should there be an outbreak in this region."

By early March, with the approaching spring break, the advice to students, faculty, and staff was that they should "reconsider any nonessential personal international travel, particularly to areas that are experiencing outbreaks of COVID-19. In addition to the possibility of illness, you may face unexpected travel restrictions that make it difficult or impossible to return to campus." If they had traveled from or through an area of high contagion, students might have to self-quarantine on campus.

Noting that COVID-19 seemed especially dangerous for older adults, the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute at Duke suspended classes. That gesture, it turned out, signaled a bigger shift in the educational work of the university.

On March 10, Price sent out another update. On-campus classes would be suspended, and Duke would make the transition to remote instruction; to help with the transition, spring break would be extended, even as students were being discouraged from returning to campus. "Students who do remain in campus housing or in the Durham area should be aware that access to many facilities and services—including dining, recreation, and libraries—will be limited. In addition, student activities and gatherings will be curtailed." There were other suspensions, other limitations: No nonessential university-funded travel, both domestic and international. No in-person events for more than fifty people, whether taking place on campus or off campus. Then, in a separate posting, word from the centerpiece of the campus: "In the interest of public health, Duke Chapel is closed to visitors until further notice.... The chapel staff will continue to pray regularly for Duke, Durham, and the world, and offer online resources for prayer and worship, as well as broadcasts of recorded services." Lights would remain on inside the chapel, "as a symbol of communal hope." Other attractions went dark for visitors: the Sarah P. Duke Gardens, the Duke Lemur Center, the Nasher Museum of Art, the Duke Athletics Hall of Fame. All buildings would go into a controlled-access status, meaning they would require a Duke ID, the DukeCard, for entry.

An announcement of "workplace adjustments" followed. Duke would "strongly encourage managers to allow staff to work remotely on a temporary basis if possible." With the "daunting" challenge of delivering courses remotely, a team of learning specialists would be providing advice to faculty on everything from how to hold class meetings online to how to communicate with students beyond class time.

A SILENT SPRING AT DUKE

For students, technical advice was hardly the prime need. A March 17 note to undergrads acknowledged that "this is a moment that has been characterized by widespread anxiety, uncertainty, [and] social and geographic disruption." Through the end of the semester, the university would shift all courses to a Satisfactory/Unsatisfactory grading standard, though students fixated on a traditional letter grade would have that option. (A similar policy was later announced for graduate and professional students.) "Duke will include a designation on undergraduate students' transcripts, indicating the extraordinary circumstances encountered in the present semester."

Even the planned pomp and circumstance would feel the impact. Members of the Class of '20 would not have their scheduled graduation ceremony. As the president put it, "I share your disappointment—and sadness—that our campus will remain quiet this spring, without the joyful celebration that marks the passage of another year."

Part of the quiet on campus was attributable to what was contained in another March announcement: the suspending of all sports activities, including games and practices. Duke's conference, the Atlantic Coast Conference (ACC), said in turn that it would "cancel all athletic-related activities, including all competition and practice, through the end of the 2019–2020 academic year."

The Duke message-making mirrored the unfolding higher-ed saga as it played out everywhere. That became clear with the work of a colleague (and a Duke grad), Jeff Harris. In less eventful times, Harris headed the Duke in DC office. Now he was faithfully compiling and sending out a regular survey of pandemic developments, highlighting developments in higher education. Duke played it smart in many ways, and it's unusually well resourced. But it was hardly alone in its trajectory, in its shifting to meet the circumstances.

In the early days, I, along with deans, campus communicators, and others, would be hearing from Harris twice a day. By the end of the spring semester of 2021, he had provided more than four hundred updates.

As the pandemic became a thing, we learned that the president of Catholic University had tested positive for COVID-19. At Dartmouth, the same result had come for one undergrad and one grad student, both living off campus. MIT was cutting back in facilities-related areas, including custodial, mail, construction, repair, maintenance, and transportation services. As a sign of the weird endpoint of the spring semester, Emory, like Duke, was allowing students to request Satisfactory/Unsatisfactory grading in place of letter grades. Harvard was postponing commencement. Princeton was launching a "virtual activities calendar," a recognition that nonvirtual activities were largely gone. Brown was imposing a hiring freeze for the current and following fiscal years. Ohio Wesleyan was canceling its planned 3 percent tuition hike; likewise, the University of Chicago was freezing its prices. The University of Akron was cutting nearly a hundred faculty positions. Yale was waiving campus parking fees for at least a month. Dartmouth was mandating that all on-campus employees be screened daily for COVID-19 symptoms and was directing all events drawing ten or more people to be canceled, postponed, livestreamed, confined to virtual space, or otherwise modified.

North Carolina State was requiring face masks of students, faculty, and staff with the start of the fall semester. Looking to the fall, Harvard and the University of Southern California were advising new international students to stay at home, since they wouldn't be allowed to enter the United States to participate in remote instruction. At Kansas State, the Wildcats were suspending all organized team activities after fourteen student athletes had tested positive. Stanford was extending the faculty "tenure clock" as an acknowledgment of the new constraints around conducting research; was closing its volleyball, basketball, and tennis courts, while prohibiting picnics and barbecues; and, in one iteration of an ever-expanding travel policy, was subjecting travelers to or through the state of New York to a fourteen-day self-isolation period. The University of Alabama was reporting more than 500 COVID-19 cases; Ohio State was reporting 228 student suspensions over pandemic-related transgressions; and Cornell students were petitioning to have a freshman TikTok star expelled for flouting coronavirus rules.

More and more colleges and universities were moving their admissions acceptance date to a later time, while most already had gone test optional. More and more were announcing that remote education would be the fall semester standard.

In April, Duke's academic year, such as it was, was winding down—even as students were being enticed to enroll in a summer session with a new and expanded list of online courses, including "Macroeconomics of COVID-19," "Epidemics in the Age of Interdependence," and "Disease through the Ages." The rules for working on campus were tightening up. Before reporting to work, "all individuals should take their temperature and assess any potential symptoms," now expanded to include "fever, cough, shortness of breath, runny nose/sinus congestion, sore throat, muscle aches, and headaches." Based on new recommendations from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), "all individuals should wear a mask or cloth face covering in public." And they should "continue to practice social-distancing measures of maintaining at least six feet from others to prevent the transmission of the virus. Do not gather in groups and avoid crowded places and gatherings of five or more people." Respect, too, the hand-hygiene routine—washing those hands with soap and water for at least twenty seconds.

Shortly after those reminders were posted, Durham and North Carolina imposed a "stay-at-home" order. With that policy in place, only "essential" staff and faculty would be reporting to campus "to support critical on-site

research, safety and security operations, facilities, student-support services, and patient care."

Price again, this time in a note to faculty and staff on "Securing Our Financial Future": "While it is too soon to determine with precision the magnitude of disruption to our finances, it is clear that the impacts will be both severe and prolonged. All of our formerly reliable sources of revenue—tuition, research grants, clinical revenue, private philanthropy, and income from our investments and endowment—will almost certainly be significantly and adversely affected, even as we face increased expenses in our education, research, and patient-care services."

Every area of the campus would have to "pause" new expenditures, including contracts, service, or consulting agreements; computer, office, and lab equipment; renovations; furniture; travel and entertainment; meetings and conferences. Staff hiring would be similarly paused. For the fiscal year beginning in July, there would be no salary increases for employees making more than $50,000 a year; lower-paid employees would receive a one-time $1,000 payment. Something else that wouldn't be happening on a campus that was in a perpetual process of building and renovating: construction projects, except those related to safety, repairs, infrastructure, virus research, and a small number of obligations to new faculty.

A RESTRAINED RESTARTING

With the summer, Duke was, naturally, beginning to shape the 2020 fall semester. As an example of an essential service, the campus bus system was planning to follow a protocol "ranging from a three-step disinfectant process to requiring physical distancing aboard all twenty-five buses."

Duke as a whole would ride into the fall semester with a multipronged plan. One of its components would be the Duke Compact, a statement of mutual commitment to community health and behavioral standards that every student and faculty and staff member would be required to agree to before the start of the semester. Fall classes would begin on August 17, with exams ending before Thanksgiving. There would be no fall break.

Those classes would be configured in one of four formats: face-to-face, now relatively rare, in newly configured classrooms and other spaces on campus; online (live with a regular meeting time); hybrid (face-to-face with significant online components); and online asynchronous, in which lectures would be recorded for viewing at any time but discussion and lab work would move online.

Portal to a new normal. Photo: Jared Lazarus/Duke University.

At the end of June, Price reported a big shift in the planning: "It is sadly clear that the persistence and spread of COVID-19 are trending in the wrong direction nationally, in North Carolina, and in Durham." Such circumstances explained "the very difficult decision to decrease the on-campus residential population by about 30 percent." That population would be primarily first-years and sophomores. According to a later statement, "Since first-year students are starting their college careers and have many similar needs for support, advising, and academic engagement, we decided it was important to begin their time at Duke in the most cohesive way possible." Since sophomores "share many of these same characteristics," they were included in the cohort. A lot of juniors and seniors, no longer officially included in the on-campus residential population, would settle in off-campus apartments.

Students would be tested for COVID-19 before showing up for classes or moving into residence halls. The university would also be implementing "regular pooled community testing" to identify and address any potential outbreaks among students or anyone who had frequent contact with students. Students, along with every faculty and staff member on campus, would complete daily symptom monitoring. Face masked and socially distanced, they would still find life on campus limited: no in-person performances, concerts, lectures, conferences, or symposia.

With the start of undergraduate classes, 5,765 tests had been administered, producing 11 positive results. The university was updating its "COVID testing tracker" every Monday; from all that tracking, students were being assured that "overall, undergraduate compliance with wearing face coverings and several of the other Duke Compact expectations has been very high." But restraining socializing habits was no easy thing: "It has been more challenging for students to maintain a social distance of six feet and to gather in groups of less than ten people. . . . We recommend eating and hanging out outside on the lawns and plazas, where you will have better opportunities to engage with friends while staying apart."

A strange start to the school year was expressed in a restrained season for sports. Home games would proceed without spectators; fans could support the football team—whose home opener, against Boston College, was set for September 19—with a "fan cutout" of a favorite individual or maybe a favorite pet. "Images placed in the seats will help replicate the game-day atmosphere in the stadium as well as provide an enhanced visual presence for the television audience." About a week before that home opener, the ACC announced "comprehensive standards for testing, hygiene, medical monitoring, and other practices that are essential for students to compete safely in team and individual sports." Duke said it would impose stricter protocols, including daily COVID-19 testing, for student athletes and coaches in sports seen to be at higher risk for infections. Those student athletes would be temporarily "sequestered" after each home or away game until they were cleared by testing and medical monitoring.

By early September, more than 37,000 COVID-19 cases, in all fifty states, had been reported at colleges and universities.

At the end of October, Duke's COVID-19-related reminders were becoming more pointed. "Don't Give Each Other COVID" was at the top of one statement. "You know the routine" for preventing transmission. Still, the virus was on the rise nationally, and many universities were seeing rapid increases in student cases. "The situation on campus is getting more serious, and more students are being affected by the virus each week." Getting through the semester, then, required a course adjustment. "What can you do at this point? Lots. Sit farther apart when you're eating with people, don't crowd couches or benches or common rooms, be okay with being the 'awkward' person who stands farther away, stay close to home even when it feels like everyone else is out."

A follow-up took a tougher tone, warning that students would be held "progressively accountable" depending on "the severity of the violations."

Some students had lost their right to remain on campus and would have to work remotely. Others faced charges that could result in their suspension or permanent expulsion—a point of information that was highlighted in bold type.

On November 6, students received a roundup of things to know as the semester was drawing to its early close—beginning with the fact that "all plans for the spring semester are subject to change on short notice based on local and national public-health conditions." There was guidance about limiting your circle of contacts; avoiding higher-risk settings; getting vaccinated for the flu; what to do if, off campus, you developed symptoms or tested positive. And: "Rest and spend time doing things that give you life. It's been a tough semester!"

About a week later, official word went out about plans for distributing vaccines "when available." Duke experts would review safety and efficacy data for any approved vaccine to ensure the science supports its broad use. Based on CDC guidelines, vaccines would be offered in a phased approach, giving priority to healthcare workers (later extended to those sixty-five years of age or older, and then to "frontline essential workers," including college and university instructors and support staff).

In the last full week of the fall semester, the COVID tracker received results from 15,532 tests administered to students, faculty, and staff. Between November 14 and 20, there were twenty-four positive results: five undergraduates, eight graduate or professional students, and eleven faculty or staff members, six of whom had been working remotely and had not been on campus. The positivity rate was 0.15 percent. Since the start of the program on August 2, Duke had completed 178,084 tests.

The spring semester return to campus in January followed much the same pattern as the fall; Duke required all students to have immediate COVID-19 testing when they arrived. The big change was in the population of the campus. There had been a plan to send the first-years and sophomores home and to replace that population with juniors and seniors. Now students living on campus in the fall would be able to remain there, and juniors and seniors were also invited back. About 20 percent of undergraduate classes would be taught in person, a slight increase from the previous semester. University officials noted that one lesson from the fall was that in-class transmission was not an issue.

March 8 brought a new tone in the messaging. Officials pointed to "a noticeable one-week increase in positive COVID tests," with forty-six undergraduate cases. That was up from the previous week's total of twenty-two.

Most infections were pegged to students socializing (unmasked) or traveling. Between March 5 and March 9, 102 undergraduates tested positive; one day's total of 32 positive undergraduate cases was the single-highest daily count within the student population since the pandemic began. Following a steady rise in positive tests, the university released a weeklong stay-in-place order on March 13. Over the week, students would have to remain in their Duke-provided housing, "except for essential activities related to food, health, or safety." In-person classes would need to switch to remote delivery.

That message sunk it, and the in-place mandate expired as planned. Next up: plans for commencement. The university's website celebrated with "Congratulations, Class of 2021!" Of course, "It's been an extraordinary year and we are excited to gather with the Duke community, in person and online, to celebrate a class like no other." The celebration would include the now-familiar safety protocols; only graduating undergraduate students were permitted to attend, "with the ceremony broadcast to family and friends around the world."

The fall of 2021: This would be the third academic year into which the pandemic would intrude, now with the rise of new variants and the resulting spike in infections almost everywhere. Duke would require all faculty and staff to be vaccinated as a condition of employment. "Those terminated for noncompliance would not be recommended for rehire with Duke in the future." There was a small protest outside Duke University Hospital, with one nurse telling reporters that "individual choice" should be respected. In the end, compliance was nearly universal; one university official, when I asked about vaccine-resistant faculty and staff, said the number was fewer than five.

In some aspects—the now-familiar face mask imperative, frequent testing, pared-back communal dining—the campus hadn't been able to put aside the pandemic. But the new normal seemed to be approaching the old, prepandemic normal.

The promise of normal times turned out to be premature; the expected trajectory—crisis, recovery, gradual normality—shifted as students returned for the spring 2022 semester. For a time, the fast-spreading Omicron viral variant propelled a variant in the learning enterprise, as courses once more moved online. That was for two unsettling weeks. A university statement had the essence of an understatement: "This is an uncertain time for all of us. We have to make decisions with the best information we have, and that sometimes means quick and potentially disruptive changes."

My home became my pandemic workplace. That was broadly the case around the university, though some found such an arrangement challenging. A pandemic-time survey of staff and faculty highlighted concerns about setting work-life boundaries, enduring social isolation, and wrestling with technology issues. Whatever the drawbacks, people liked the work-from-home advantages of avoiding a commuting routine, enhanced productivity, and flexibility during the day. Imagining life after the pandemic had passed, 74 percent expressed a preference to work remotely three to five days per week; just 3 percent favored no remote work.

My version of home-based isolation was relieved by reading; my shelves were becoming weighed down with books, including higher-ed books, from a history of academic tenure to an assessment of the global university. Plus, a resource that, for me, has withstood the test of time, almost thirty years and counting: the Fall 1993 issue of *Daedalus*, *Journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences*. Duke's then-president, Nannerl O. Keohane, wrote about "The Mission of the Research University," which she saw as occupying "a distinctive niche in both space and time, compounded of equal parts of intensive localism and a generous sense that members of a university are citizens of the world."

The pandemic, I thought, allowed a fresh look at the campus, its identity, and its purpose: What did the pandemic reveal about the character of a campus? What is a campus, anyway? What does it do? What are the consequences when, at least in a sense, it goes away?

There's *the campus as a physical space*. To Keohane, "The campus, quadrangles, cloisters, common rooms, and libraries are closely linked with the experiences of discovering and sharing knowledge." Such physical elements "evoke intense memories for members of the university in diaspora and, despite their similarities of focus and function from one campus to another, set each university apart as unique in its own fashion." That physical space helps position *the campus as a space for learning*. Learning entails "the give-and-take, the intellectual ferment that comes from the coexistence of people of different ages, at different points along the route to intellectual sophistication, tucked into the same small space and required to interact with one another in sustained and ordered ways." And the flip side of learning: *the campus as a space for discovery*. In Keohane's words: "The higher prestige accorded to research, the availability of more trustworthy interinstitutional metrics for judging whether it is well or poorly done, the comparative rarity

of the skills required to do it well, and the undeniable fact that it is often more pleasurable to pursue one's own work at one's own pace rather than to translate it for the uninitiated, combine to give research an undisputed primacy in the self-definition of the university."

Keohane used the phrase "a company of scholars," a community bound together by a devotion to knowledge. To see the campus as a "company" is to see it as a place of caring. And in a pandemic context, the caring was at once institutionalized and individualized. That is, *the campus as a space for collective well-being*, and *the campus as a space for individual well-being*. Then: *the campus as a space for personal growth*. Students should be reminded of "the importance of service to others and the balance of work, love, and leisure in a good human life." The campus, then, should celebrate the "multiple purposes" of an education—not just as a platform for launching students into a career, but also as a platform for launching students into the fullness of life.

Keohane touched on the opportunity and the obligation "to replicate ourselves through producing new scholars." We expect a campus to be providing *a space for renewal*, to be establishing a process for bringing on new community members, and for sending out members to the world. The campus is also embedded in "a larger human culture." Far from being an enclosed space that is somehow immune to, or shut off from, society, the campus is *a space where societal issues play out*. It is a platform not just for addressing intellectual curiosity generally, but more concretely, *a space for improving the human condition*. Keohane referred to knowledge sharing as "a responsibility," and not just a side venture in the work of a campus. Such a responsibility is perhaps most obvious where, as at Duke, the pandemic focused attention on a health system coping with the sort of global crisis imagined, back in 2018, by Duke's own Gavin Yamey.