

# University campuses need people in them<sup>†</sup>

David R Smith\*

In the novel *Fool's Fate*, Robin Hobb writes: "Home is people. Not a place. If you go back there after the people are gone, then all you can see is what is not there anymore." I feel the same about university campuses.

In late August 2020, after months of working from home, I returned to the campus of Western University where I am an associate professor of biology. It was supposed to be a short visit, in and out to grab some notebooks and an external monitor. But when I unlocked the office door and sat in that old wooden desk chair amongst the calm clutter of my workspace, I did not get up for a good two hours. I was comforted by the familiarity of my bookshelves, photographs, and professorial memorabilia, including a large bust of Darwin and a giant whale's tooth. How I missed this place. And apart from two dead plants and a generous layer of dust, everything was as it should be.

Outside my office was a different story. The water fountains were covered up with caution tape. Bright purple floor markings indicated the correct side of the hallway to walk down. Main offices, libraries, and canteens were closed. Large signs on all major doorways reiterated the social distancing policies. And apart from the odd security officer or grounds person, the campus was eerily empty. Nevertheless, I decided that for as long as the university remained open, I would keep coming to my office for a few hours a day, mainly to read and write without the cacophonous company of a toddler, but also to bring back some semblance of normalcy to my work life.

The plan started off well. Each morning I would pack a large lunch, walk to campus and enjoy a few uninterrupted hours of academic productivity. But the stillness and

emptiness of the university began to weigh on me. I could swear the fluorescent lights in my office were buzzing more loudly than before. Was the central air system always this rickety? After an hour of writing, I would take a quick walk around the department to clear my mind and see if anyone else was in. On my fifth day, I finally found someone: Vera's office door was propped open! I quickly checked that my mask was on correctly and poked my head around. Small talk—glorious small talk—ensued for at least fifteen minutes. I had forgotten how nice it was to chat with a colleague in person. I went back to my office refreshed and put in another hour of good work. The next day, the building was deserted again. Not a sliver of light beneath Vera's or any other door.

I hoped that maybe once classes resumed in mid-September, some vitality would return to campus. But, of course, nearly all of the classes were online and students and staff stayed home. Sometimes on my departmental wanderings, I would go into one of the large lecture halls and just stand at the podium. Once I even plugged my laptop into the AV system and practiced a presentation that I was preparing for an upcoming Zoom talk. As strange as it sounds, speaking to hundreds of lifeless seats in that old, stuffy hall felt more natural than talking to a grid of black boxes with nametags on my computer screen.

As the weeks wore on and my visits to campus continued, a deep melancholy slowly took hold of me. I would spend hours on seemingly simple tasks, like tidying my office or answering emails. Harder tasks, such as writing a paper or developing a new lecture, felt insurmountable. I started leaving everything to the last minute or missing deadlines completely, which is unlike me. It

felt as if my mood was somehow mirroring that of the vacant classrooms and buildings surrounding me. They, too, were paying the price of the pandemic.

I have spent most of my life on college campuses. My father was a chemistry professor and often took me to work with him when I was a small child. My first daycare was at a university. As an adolescent and teenager, I would go to the local college most days for after-school clubs. I learnt to swim at a university pool, became a senior boys 1500 m running champion on a university track, and discovered my love of mountain biking and cross-country skiing on university trails. I met my closest friends in university residences. And my passion for science and writing was fostered in university classrooms. I love universities. I love what they represent: places of learning, scholarship, and development. I love the palpable emotions that they emit, from the endless possibilities of the first week of classes to the anxieties and sense of completion during final examinations. Most of all, I love the people that make up universities, their eclectic mix of personalities, backgrounds, ages, and beliefs. This might sound strange, but when I go on vacation, I visit universities elsewhere. I will spend an entire afternoon roaming around a campus, reading in the library, or sitting on a bench watching people come and go. This may be why I am so sad that my current institute sits unoccupied, at least in the physical sense. Ironically, enrollment is up. My department has more new undergraduate students than it has had in years.

The other day on my walk home from work I ran into a colleague. He described to me how he has been working hard to get the upcoming introductory genetics course online, especially given the increase

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in students (there are more than 1200 currently enrolled in the course). I said, “You must be looking forward to the end of this crisis when we can start teaching in-person again.” His response has had a lasting effect on me. “I’m not so sure things will go back to the way they were,” he said. “A lot of students are enjoying online learning—or are at least finding it convenient and cost-effective. Many are saving money by living at home and by not having to bus into campus every day and buy overpriced food. They like being able to watch the recorded lectures on their own schedule and at their own speed. Even after the current crisis ends, I think there will be a strong push for continued online learning.” “You might be right,” I said, “but I sure hope not.”

When we parted ways, I felt even more downtrodden. I reminded myself that I was lucky to have a great job and that I needed to be adaptable. If the future is online learning, so be it. I can become a connoisseur of Camtasia. I can learn to be creative and engaging over Zoom. I can master those microphone and camera settings. But I could not help thinking this is not what I signed up for. When the pandemic is over, I do not want to exist in a cyber campus with online students and online colleagues. I do not want my home to be a lecture hall. I want brick and mortar and real bums in real seats. I want to stand in line for 20 minutes outside the student union building for lukewarm coffee. I want to waste precious time walking to meetings and making small talk in the

corridors. I want the thing that I fell in love with. Until COVID-19 is defeated, we need to stay vigilant. But when the war is won, will university campuses return to being physical gathering points for learning, engagement and community building or virtual concepts in an online learning space? Whatever the answer, I know that if you are looking for Associate Professor David R. Smith, you will find him holding out in the Biological and Geological Sciences Building, room 3028. The hand-written sign on the door will say, “Going down with the ship.”

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