



I've Struggled With "Imposter-Syndrome" in a Post-COVID College World. Let's Talk About How We Can Reclaim the Word.

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I still have a vivid recollection of my first day of sophomore year. As I walked to class, the brisk summer breeze, a welcomed feeling on my sunburnt arms, hoards of students equipped with backpacks, reusable water bottles, and well-used masks flocked around me, all eager to attend what was perhaps their first in-person class in nearly two years. Looking around me, I realized that the school I had experienced the previous year seemed to be transformed into an entirely new one: a place with a bustling, lively community and (dare I say) content faces.

Though experiencing what I assumed to be a semi-normal college day for the first time was indeed relieving, I remember feeling a strange sense of suffocation at the time as buildings became packed with students, lines at campus cafes stretched out the door, and classrooms, no longer requiring social distancing, filled with anxious chatter. Eventually, however, this feeling faded as I became accustomed to seeing people on campus; I started to enjoy the presence of others in large lecture halls and smiled at people (as best I could underneath my mask) as we crossed paths. However, as the first weeks of school began to pass, it was quickly replaced by an equally as alarming one: imposter syndrome.

Imposter syndrome is something I had heard a lot about—and had been considerably warned of—before I entered college. In the simplest terms, this concept refers to feeling out of place—or as if one doesn't belong—in a certain setting. An [article](#) in *Harvard Business Review* more accurately defines this idea: "a collection of feelings of inadequacy that persist despite evident success." This phenomenon can manifest itself in different ways; people experience it in the workplace, in the classroom, on the field, in their homes, on social media, and in a myriad of other situations or circumstances. However, one facet of this idea that seems to be consistent is the fact that imposter syndrome is most experienced by women. A 2020 study conducted by KPMG, a big four accounting firm, revealed that 75% of female executives have experienced imposter syndrome. And, among college students, 20% claimed to have encountered this phenomenon.

Personally, I was surprised that, upon entering a school known for its rigorous academics and for housing some students who seem, on the outset, to be certifiably geniuses, that I didn't fall victim to imposter syndrome during my freshman year. Maybe this can be attributed to the limited social contact—both academically and personally—I had when COVID was at its worst. Or maybe it was because I was still trying my best to get my bearings as an out-of-state college student, wide-eyed and newly independent of parental control. Whatever it was, I seemed to escape the feeling of alienation that I had expected to deal with in college. Then came sophomore year.

My experience with imposter syndrome, perhaps unsurprisingly, was first realized in the classrooms of my sophomore year. In college, I'm a communication major, a field of study for which I primarily learn about the varying ways in which people respond to climate change

communication and information. Though enjoying my major for the most part, I started to become wary of how others perceived me, especially in a place where academics are so highly valued.

I began to hear many people—most prominently men—call my field a "fake major," or one that "dumb people take to get easy As." I had people tell me that I "better hope to find a rich husband," especially one that studied something "smart" like engineering or medicine. And, having been in college for over a year, I started to receive disheartening, probing questions like, "How are you going to make money with your degree?," "Don't you think you're better off learning about something else?," and "You're thinking about your future, right?" To me, it felt like people were calling me incompetent...and I believed them. Needless to say, the ramifications of imposter syndrome were certainly seeping in—and I wasn't quite sure how to handle them.

I've heard and read numerous stories about women who face imposter syndrome in STEM-related fields, which is an experience that needs to be talked about more regularly, particularly because these subjects are still extremely male-dominated. That said, I've hardly been exposed to any discussion about women who've experienced this phenomenon in humanities-based majors or industries. Thus, as I trudged through my sophomore year fall, I wondered if I was the first. However, after talking to peers in my major, I quickly learned that I was not alone in feeling this way.

As I started to explain what was happening to my classmates, I learned that my experiences were not uncommon. In fact, my friends—most of whom are women—had been faced with an onslaught of questions that were nearly word-for-word the ones I had been faced with. Crude commentary about the easiness of our major was also seemingly a universal experience. At one point, one of my peers even tiredly exclaimed, "I'm tired of feeling stupid." Thus, as we began to discuss our feelings of intensified imposter syndrome as humanities majors more in-depth, we were faced with the following question: Why?

When women were first accepted into universities to receive a higher education, their academic endeavors were severely limited. Subjects like teaching, social sciences, and even communications (my field) were historically studied by women—and often not by choice, but because of societal convention. Hence, the push for women in STEM was a necessary one; in the mid-1900s, women who went to school to become doctors, scientists, and mathematicians were true pioneers, paving the way for (at least some) equality in the workplace, and lighting the path for other young women who wanted to follow suit. These women—and those who continue to study STEM subjects—are oft hailed heroines, breakers of glass ceilings. And they certainly deserve these titles. But women in other fields—even those that were originally created solely for the first women in a college—deserve to be uplifted, too.

After all, some of our greatest works of art came from women enamored by the humanities. Frida Khalo, Emily Dickinson, Jane Austen, Toni Morrison, Margaret Atwood, Amanda Gorman—all of these women who've immersed themselves in the humanities have become trailblazers in their own right, and will be celebrated for centuries.

Now approaching the end of the first semester of my sophomore year, I and many of my peers have learned that we can take back the control and power that imposter syndrome had on us at the beginning of the school year. Here are three ways that all of us, especially women in humanities majors, can reclaim the meaning of this term.

1. CELEBRATE THE ACCOMPLISHMENTS OF YOUR FEMALE PEERS.

This task seems like a simple one: everyone deserves to be uplifted for their successes, regardless of what they may be or what field they may be associated with. The bottom line is that every field of study presents people with unique challenges that are different from other subjects. Learning to respect this — and to support people in their endeavors, even if they are different from our own — can help us eliminate imposter syndrome and celebrate the achievements of our peers. And, as women, this concept is particularly pertinent; women should support women, particularly because so much of the world does not.

2. CELEBRATE YOURSELF, TOO.

If you're anything like me, this one may be a bit trickier for you — but it's as, if not more, important as the last point. This second task is a friendly reminder to go easy on yourself. Life is hard. School is hard. You're doing great ... trust me. Here's a little trick that has helped me appreciate and respect myself more this school year: before you go to bed, write a list of five things you're proud of. This can be anything from having the strength to get out of bed that morning to receive a good grade on a big assignment. By celebrating yourself, you're removing the grip that imposter syndrome has on you — and you're recognizing your own worth in the process.

3. DO WHAT YOU WANT!

Once again, this task is easier said than done. No matter what we may want to do, it can be difficult to ignore others' perceptions of us. Still, try your best to study what you like; after all, you're the one who's going to be working in a similar field after college — it's

your happiness at stake! Personally, I'm still working on this one; it can be difficult to escape a mindset of competition on a college campus. Nevertheless, something tangible that has helped me on this front is to make "mood boards" for careers that interest me. I also look back on past work of mine to reflect on where I started with certain skills. Reminding myself of what I'm working towards and of why I loved it in the first place has helped ground me and has allowed me to appreciate what I study more.

So, as we continue through the rest of the semester and the remainder of the school year, let me offer a toast (I'm currently raising my \$6 coffee I bought from my university's café): Cheers to fewer imposter-syndrome filled days...you're doing perfectly fine, wherever you may be and whatever you may be studying. Cheers to you.

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