

# THE DECREE

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December 18, 2020

NORTH CAROLINA WESLEYAN COLLEGE, ROCKY MOUNT, NORTH CAROLINA 27804

## Senior Appreciates His Mother's Sacrifices during Pandemic

On Wednesday, March 11, I was preparing to watch my favorite NBA team, the Oklahoma City Thunder, play against the Utah Jazz on TV. Then, just before tip-off, both teams went back to the locker room. Never had I seen a game abruptly stopped like this. After about 30 minutes, news broke that a Jazz player had tested positive for the coronavirus. That player turned out to be all-star center Rudy Gobert, who two days earlier, made a mockery of the virus during a press conference by rubbing his hands on a table and microphones.

Like most of the country during this time, Gobert was not taking the coronavirus seriously. After news broke, not only did the NBA go into a panic, but so did the entire nation. The NBA postponed its season, and American cities went into lockdown. Due to the pandemic, the world changed so suddenly.

The pandemic dramatically changed the lives of millions of college students across the country. Having just turned 21 on March 5, I had planned to finish my spring semester at Wesleyan with the best grades ever. I then planned to have the summer of a lifetime. But then Covid arrived in America and, with the postponement of classes back in mid-March, came an attitude that was hard for me to shake.

Procrastination, laziness, and overall apathy ruled my life for the next couple of months. With the world in such turmoil, why should I worry about school? After a couple weeks of getting accustomed to my home back in Virginia, online classes started. Soon I missed assignments and deadlines because I simply stopped caring about school. Professors had to constantly remind me to turn in work. My procrastination and apathy were so bad that a month after the semester ended, I got an email from a professor asking me to turn in a paper. I ended up passing my classes because even my professors knew how rough times were among students and educators alike. I made excuse after excuse until eventually, I sucked it up and finished as best I could.

I went on to “quarantine” the entire summer. Because of my mother’s hectic work schedule, I was in charge of my sisters,

Imani, 7, and India, 18, who has a weakened immune system due to organ transplants. Unable to leave home much, I spent hours in a tiny room, decorated in unicorns and Strawberry Shortcake, that once belonged to Imani. I slowly slipped into a depression that plagued me for months. I missed hanging out with my friends, going to the beach, and just enjoying myself outside of the house. I missed my summer job and my coworkers at Food Lion, where I had worked during every Wesleyan break since freshman year.

It is no easy feat to take care of a 7-year-old for an entire summer. Like any 7-year-old, Imani was often difficult. I had to act as her teacher and make sure she did her homework. I realized that instructing a kid in elementary school is hard. I recall helping her with her math homework and trying not to get frustrated that she was unable to understand a problem. I had to show her why 10 plus 10 equals 20, not just that it does. I saw this also with rounding, as she didn’t understand why 18 rounds up to 20 and not ten.

“There’s only two numbers between 18 and 20, Imani, that’s why you round up.”

“Ohhhh” she said, seeming to finally understand.

I eventually realized it’s more about the process than the outcome. I had to slow down the lessons and even though we might spend 20 minutes on one problem, I felt immediate satisfaction when she began to understand.

My sister India was helpful throughout the summer. We acted as a team, splitting chores like washing dishes, walking the dog, cooking, and helping my sister with homework. India has dealt with kidney and liver failure her whole life. She never had the chance to live normally, even after her transplants in high school. India has numerous meds that she must take every day to keep her new organs functioning. In turn, the meds weaken her immune system, making even the common cold precarious.

I always admired India’s strength and persistence through the toughest situations. She has always been the Robin to my Batman, and at times she was the one leading the missions. I am no chef, so



Senior Isaiah Johnson and his mother, Melody. Photo courtesy of I. Johnson

having India to help with meal preparation was great. She is a much better cook than I am as I would only make simple items like hamburger helper, baked subs, and cheeseburgers. India would make the much more exquisite foods like spaghetti, baked chicken, and the desserts. I also learned how picky a 7-year-old can be. There were some nights when I made dinner and Imani just flat-out refused to eat it because she wanted something else, often a grilled cheese.

### The Nurse

In recent years, my mother, Melody, has had to balance a lot of demands. Raising three children, she had worked as a house cleaner and, when money was tight, she did hair.

Nothing ever came easy, but I never heard her complain. Then she decided to make a change and enrolled in a nursing program at Tidewater Community College. Soon she found herself working full time, attending classes and raising two kids, with a third in college. Often she would get only four hours of sleep a night. As a college student, I know how hard managing school and work can be. But my mother excelled in her coursework, finishing in the top five in her class, and opening numerous opportunities for herself.

She graduated in fall 2019 and began working full-time as a nurse, four months before the pandemic hit. During the past few months, she has often worked 12-15 hours a day. Despite the danger, every day she risked her life to make sure our family could stay afloat, but, at first, I was too blind to see that. I had to make “sacrifices” that I should have been more willing to make.

Day after day, I watched my mother work countless hours, getting minimal sleep. She would often complete an 8 a.m. to 11 p.m. shift and get home around midnight. Sometimes she worked overnight. Sometimes she worked a second shift at a different hospital. Because of her crazy schedule, my mom leaned on me to make sure my sisters ate, went to sleep in a timely manner, and stayed out of trouble.

Some days I watched my mother come into the house and collapse from outright

exhaustion. She would often grimace, as her back was killing her. At those times, I wished there were something more I could do to help her. My mother confided in me, trusted me, relied on me to not only take care of daily affairs around the house, but to motivate her to keep going.

“You should take a day off, Mom,” I would say.

“I have bills and goals, son, I have to work. It’s too much money to be made,” she said as she plopped down on the couch, still in her purple scrubs.

I knew my mother’s goal and why she put so much time into her new career—she wanted to move. We had lived in Norfolk, Virginia all 21 years of my life. For my youngest sibling, my mother wanted a new life and she knew that serving as a nurse during a pandemic enabled her to do that. Norfolk is a dangerous city, and I have lost many friends over the years to gun violence. Moving to a new area like Hampton allowed my family to not only go somewhere new but also escape the dangers of Norfolk.

In July, she accomplished her goal. After 21 years, we moved to Hampton.

My mother continues to work hard. It’s been inspiring to me to see the strength my mother has shown during this time. She has done the unthinkable. I learned many lessons during this pandemic, but the main one has been the importance of sacrifice. Many times, I have gotten caught up with my own personal issues and have forgotten the bigger picture, family.

## NC Wesleyan Finishes 15 Weeks of In-Person Classes, Records Fall Total of 70 Covid Cases

NC Wesleyan is still on pace to break even following a fall semester that saw it complete 15 weeks of uninterrupted classes despite 70 confirmed cases of Covid-19 among the campus community.

Due to the pandemic, the college made an early decision to offer courses in a combination of formats—face-to-face, online and hybrid, which allowed physical distancing in the classrooms and other instructional areas.

It’s significant that Wesleyan made it through the entire semester, while many state universities were forced to move all instruction online earlier in the fall.

In late November, the Decree interviewed Wesleyan President Evan Duff, Vice President of Administration Suzanne Brackett, Provost Molly Wyatt and Dean of Admissions Michael Drew for an update on the college’s response to the pandemic and its current fiscal status.

**Q. Decree:** Back in early August, would you have predicted that the college would hold face-to-face classes through week 15?

**A. Duff:** That was always our hope. I feel the VIRT team planned well and we were prepared. I felt better about the possibility after about week four of the semester.

**Q. Decree:** How would you assess the college’s response to the pandemic during the semester?

**A. Duff:** I thought it was exceptional. We implemented a well-developed plan based on best practices with some additional creative ideas from VIRT, faculty, and staff. We required testing for students before the semester, placed air purifiers in most areas around the college, instituted a staggered class schedule, and established an outdoor workout facility for students. All were unique ideas that helped to keep our Wesleyan community safe.

**Q. Decree:** From August 1 through November 30, the college reported, on its web page, that there had been 70 positive Covid cases among the Wesleyan community. This total included 64 students and six employees. How many members of the NCWC community have been hospitalized?

**A. Wyatt:** There were no Covid-related hospitalizations this fall.

**Q. Decree:** Could you provide details on possible clusters of cases.

**A. Wyatt:** There were a couple of small cluster developments around three athletic teams. We’ve seen no evidence the clustering of infections was due to the way athletic practices were structured; rather, the clusters appeared to have come from social groupings of athletes taking more risks with exposure outside of practices.

**Q. A fall commencement ceremony was held outdoors December 5. Why wasn’t this a violation of the governor’s latest rules on large gatherings?**

**A. Duff:** When fulfilling its mission, an educational institution is exempt from the mass gathering guidelines outlined in the governor’s original executive order. The original guidelines have not changed throughout the multiple iterations of executive orders since March. We feel that commencement is a major aspect of filling our instructional mission.

**Q. Decree:** Describe alterations the college made to ensure the safety and health of participants.

**A. Duff:** For safety, we moved the event outdoors to the front lawn while requiring masks at all times and participants adhered to social-distancing guidelines. This will be a closed ceremony for students only, although we will live-stream the event on our main web page.

**Q. Decree:** What’s the projection for spring enrollment? How does that number compare to this fall as well as spring 2020?

**A. Duff:** We’re at 88 percent of our goal, with many students (new and returning) who still need to register. We’ve estimated for budget purposes that we’ll enroll 916 total traditional students for the spring. In the fall we had about 1,000 students and spring enrollment is always lower than our fall enrollment. At this time, we’re trending better with the number of applications and deposits for spring compared to this same time last year.

**A. Wyatt:** Per the closest corresponding report from 2019, we had made about the same progress toward goal, 89 percent as of November 23, 2019.

**Q. Decree:** How has recruiting for fall 2021 gone? It seems like the number of on-campus visits has dwindled in recent months. How is the admis-

sions staff trying to reach prospective students?

**A. Drew:** Fall 2021 recruiting has been challenging due to the restrictions on travel, the instructional delivery of high schools (hybrid and online), and the absence of traditional college fairs. On-campus visits have declined from 1,428 in 2019 to 1,196 in 2020. But admissions counselors remain in contact with every NCWC prospect. Admissions has hosted virtual sessions with partnering high schools and participated in several virtual fairs sponsored by Carolinas Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers and the North Carolina Independent Colleges and Universities through Strive Scan. Admissions staff has developed an Instagram and YouTube accounts and revised the NCWC College Virtual Tour that can be found on ncwc.edu. Admissions staff and counselors maintain contact through email, telephone, traditional mail, as well as virtual meetings.

**Q. Decree:** What’s the latest news on the budget? Is the college still forecasting a break-even year?

**A. Brackett:** As of the end of November, we’re trending toward a break-even or a slight surplus for year-end.

**Q. Decree:** How much money has Wesleyan received from the federal government in order to deal with the pandemic? And how has the money been spent?

**A. Brackett:** The college received \$2,317,581 from the CARES Act and \$1,399,043 from the State Higher Education Emergency Relief Fund (HEERF). About half the CARES Act money was sent directly to students to help as needed during the pandemic. Another major portion been used for technology needs to help enhance and strengthen our on-line processes in various areas.

We’ve used the state HEERF funds to help many of our North Carolina students with their account balances and develop computer workstations in our residence halls. Both federal and state funds were used to purchase personal protective equipment, which includes wipes, hand sanitizer, replacement air filters, and other items, as needed. At this time, we’re

See CLASSES pg 3

## Students Express Concerns About On-line Instruction

By Will Plyler  
Senior Staff Writer

Many students find that they are not adequately prepared for their future careers after taking online classes from NCWC.

The coronavirus pandemic has caused an unprecedented spike in the number of college students across the nation who are taking classes online. In North Carolina, UNC-Chapel Hill, East Carolina, and NC State are among the universities that have already closed all in-person classes for the rest of the semester, opting to go completely online. Wesleyan has made it through the semester with a combination of online, face-to-face, and hybrid courses.

A small, informal survey revealed that 57 percent of NCWC students do not believe that online classes adequately prepare students for their chosen careers. Some students admitted that the struggle was on their end, while others blamed the problem on professors and class content.

Twenty percent believe their professors do not have the skills they need to teach online. Sophomore Ty Peele said that his professor seemed confused by the online format. “Knowing what to do on each assignment (was difficult) because my professor would get lessons and assignments mixed together,” the computer information systems major said.

Senior Gabriel Guzman said that online classes often have little educational value. “Some teachers won’t actually teach anything,” he said. “(They just) give a zoom call every three weeks.”

Many students find themselves more or less on their own in the online class environment. “You basically have to teach yourself,” said senior honors student Mary Catherine Davis. “Most professors don’t send out lectures. It’s all reading-based.”

Senior Natalie Larson agreed. “I learned from teaching myself,” said Larson, a sociology and organizational administration major. “There was a lot of busy work, but it didn’t help with actual learning. It was just time consuming.”

Sophomore Jordan O’Leary echoed Davis and Larson. The business administration major also cited busy work as the

most difficult aspect of online classes.

Several students found that the online class format made learning much more difficult, especially in more difficult subject material. Junior Rebecca Mitchell, a psychology major, said “Taking an online class is difficult, especially with complex subjects, because some things are very hard to ask or explain through email.”

Junior Emily Ketchum thought so, too. The exercise science major said that the hardest part about online classes was “trying to fully comprehend the material.”

Faculty members also find the online class format challenging. Dr. Jason Buel, professor of communication and cinema and media arts, said that the online instruction inhibits student comprehension. “I feel like I need to dial back the amount of content we cover,” Buel said, “to make sure students have the time they need to process and understand each new idea.”

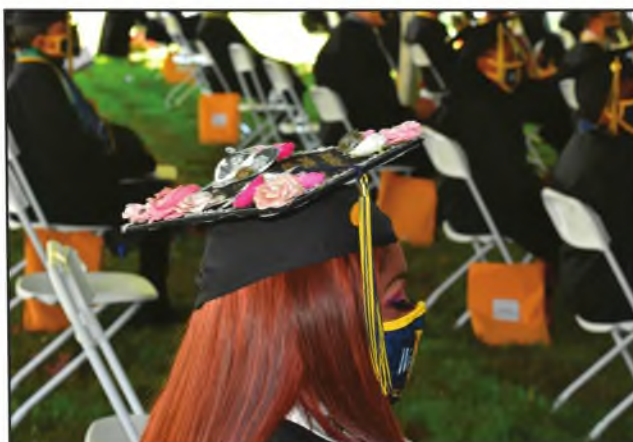
By contrast, three other faculty members, including environmental science professor Daniel Elias and English professor Julie Perino, expressed their concern that some students lacked the motivation to do the work in an online class.

“In online teaching, the student is required to take charge of their learning,” Dr. Perino said. “(I can) provide examples, documents, and feedback, but all of this is given to a void; we never really know if students engage with the materials. I email students who haven’t been participating and turning in homework, but often they never respond to me.”

Some students agree that motivation is a problem. Senior religious studies major Kevin Teague said that the hardest aspect of online classes was “staying focused.” Gill said that most students who take an online class “only do the minimum to get by.”

Ketchum said that many of her friends who have taken online classes talk about how they haven’t learned anything, but she too thought lack of motivation was to blame. “Students don’t take the time to learn or teach themselves,” she said. “A lot of students just do what they have to do to get through it. Online (classes) take a lot of discipline and some students don’t want to take charge.”

See CONCERNS pg 3



Fall 2020 graduation was moved outdoors, to the Braswell quad, due to the coronavirus. Masks were worn, social distancing was followed in the seating arrangements, and attendance was limited to graduates and some staff and faculty. Photos courtesy NC Wesleyan PR

