



Rebuilding Normal at Govs

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There's a phrase that I have heard used repeatedly over the last couple of weeks. Perhaps you have heard it too. In fact, I've used it myself more than once. "It's good to be back to normal." But I've been thinking a lot about what we mean when we say that—back to normal. In part, I think we mean "back to the way things were before COVID." We mean that we are tired of wearing masks all the time, and contact tracing, and having our noses swabbed on a regular basis. And like many of you, I share a sense of relief in not having those things be a required part of our daily experience of Govs. But I think this longing for a return to something more normal is more fundamental than the shedding of these relatively minor inconveniences. What made COVID truly disruptive, I think, was the fear that it instilled. In those early months of the pandemic we didn't know how to keep ourselves safe and healthy. We lost significant control over our daily lives. Schools went virtual. Restaurants closed down. A trip to the grocery store became a multi-hour affair as we sanitized groceries and washed produce when we got home. We were encouraged to limit our interactions with others and our assumptions about what we could count on were upended. Nothing seemed predictable or familiar anymore. Our sense of what constituted normalcy was assaulted.

Of course, things gradually improved as time wore on, and by the time we got to graduation last spring, we had dropped all of the requirements and restrictions that most visibly represented the impact of COVID on our daily lives. But even with last year's progress, there remained a sense that the experience of Govs had been disrupted in some fundamental way. As we have returned this fall, there has been a pronounced sense of optimism that, with the removal of these inconveniences, we could get back to the Govs we had been missing. The challenge, of course, is that most members of the Govs community have never been through a fully COVID-free year. Seniors, if you were here as ninth graders, you had a typical start to your time at Govs—that is until we told you to take your books with you when you went home for March break and didn't allow you to return until 6 months later. We can hardly define that as a normal year. Some of you went an entire year as Govs students without ever stepping foot on our campus. The rest of you are either entirely new to Govs this year or have spent a year or two on campus at a time when

the disruptions of COVID were acutely felt. And it's not just our students who have no frame of reference for what a pre-COVID Gobs experience is like. Over 20 percent of our faculty are new since the fall of 2019 and have never experienced a full year on campus without COVID. With this many people being new to the Gobs community, how would we recognize "normal" if we saw it? In this context, what do we mean when we say we want Gobs to be normal again?

The answer, I suspect, is much deeper than an absence of masks and a life (largely) free from nasal swabs. What we are craving is a sense of community where we are not isolated from each other, where the rituals and traditions of our lives are familiar and predictable again. But *that* Gobs—a Gobs marked by the joy of being together, by senior rituals like senior-faculty dinners, or by watching our colleagues' children grow up over evenings spent with families in the dining hall—*that* Gobs was not frozen in time and will not magically reappear by the removal of social distancing and masks. *That* Gobs needs to be rebuilt and restored through the commitments we make to each other, and by the ways that we engage with each other. If we want to return to something more like a pre-COVID norm, we have to engineer it ourselves, and build the Gobs we want to experience.

When I first arrived in Byfield in the fall of 1982 as a new 15-year-old sophomore boarder, the Gobs campus was a very different place than it is today. The dining hall is now about fifty percent larger than it was when I was here. There was no field house then, no turf field, and no Pescosolido Library. Back then, the French Student Center consisted roughly of the space between bookstore and grill, and there were very few AP courses in the curriculum. But what's normal at Gobs isn't defined by buildings or courses. Those things will evolve over time, yet there's something about the essence of our community has remained unchanged. Like you, when I was a student, I had friends on whom I knew I could count whenever I needed them. I had teachers who I knew were there for me, and who encouraged me to try new things—even when doing those things took me far outside my comfort zone. I was challenged academically in ways that helped me to build both confidence and resilience. And I had fun living and learning in a community that felt like a family to me. Those are the kinds of things that remain essential at Gobs, and that define what is normal for us.

So a return to normal is not simply a reversion to a reality that remained frozen in time before COVID hit. It is a re-interpretation of who we are as a community, what matters to us, and how we can nurture those enduring qualities that I believe we are longing for when we proclaim, perhaps overly optimistically, and even a bit naively, that we have moved beyond COVID. Of course we have not moved beyond it. COVID is still with us and will likely be so forever. What we are declaring, I think, is that it no longer has the power over us that it once did. We are acknowledging that even though COVID is still with us, we can restore some semblance of predictability to our lives, that we can have a sense of control over our lives, and that we can take comfort in rituals and routines that are familiar.

During one of our faculty meetings at the end of August, we invited some veteran faculty members to reflect on what they were excited about in the coming year. The remarks they shared were poignant, touching, funny, and inspiring. We then asked faculty members in the audience to log into a Google doc that was being projected on the screen and complete the sentence, At Gobs we... The responses that were shared speak powerfully to the enduring qualities that I mentioned. Here are some of those replies.

At Gobs We...

Take care of each other
Are supported and encouraged to try new things
Laugh
Learn from our mistakes
Are welcoming and friendly to all
Hold the door for each other
Put our students first
Embrace each other and all of our amazing quirks!
Do what needs to be done instead of talk about what needs to be done
Check in with each other, encourage each other
Do what's right, do what's best
Acknowledge and appreciate the behind the scenes efforts to keep Govs moving
Say hello on the walkways—despite our own mood
Have amazing conversations over incredible food
Try to improve what we do every year
Constantly reinvent ourselves
Help students realize their potential
Step up for each other
Find joy in every day

This is what's normal at Govs. Is it nice to be rid of required masking much of the time, and to only have to take COVID tests on an as-needed basis? Of course it is. But being back to normal is about much more than that. It means caring for and supporting each other. It means trying new things, making mistakes, and then learning and growing as a result. It means being kind to each other as we go through our days, and finding opportunities to laugh and laugh often. That's the normal I'm looking forward to being back to. Normal at Govs is defined by the qualities that connect us to each other and guide us in our lives together in this place that we all come to call home. And that sense of connectedness, generosity, and optimism have been palpable on campus as we begin a new school year. It's good to be back to normal.