

**April 2021:** Although our campus is closed to visitors, you don't have to travel to 🌈 Cambridge to get a feel for MIT. Sign up today for an 🧑 online session or student-led tour.

---

## coronavirus, one year later by Paolo A. '21

recounting the craziest ten days of my life



---

March 6, 2021 in Challenges, Events, MIT Life

**content warning:** *this post is about covid-19, and the stress and uncertainty that i felt while leaving campus last spring. it's about painful memories and the sense of loss that i (and others) felt during that time.*

*as with any piece of writing, there is no obligation to read further if you're not interested. but for this post in particular, i think it's important to explicitly remind you that it's ok to not read this. covid is still ongoing and you might just not want to think about things any more than you have to. and if that is you, you are incredibly valid for choosing to not read this post.*

*take care all <3  
paolo (3/6/2021)*

### april 2020

Over the past few weeks, coronavirus went from not being relevant to me to the only thing that I talked about with people, the only thing that I could think about.

I started this write-up as I flew back home from MIT on Saturday, 3/14/2020, after getting kicked off of campus, as a way to remember all of the things that had happened. Brain dumping every little thing I could remember feeling.

It's now April, one month since getting kicked off, I've tried to turn it from the jumbled mess of thoughts it was to a narrative, trying to tell the story of what it was like to feel everything that happened. My story is not unique, nor is it even the worst story that's happening. Hundreds of thousands of college students are being sent home from colleges across the country, back home, with stories just like mine. But I'm writing this anyway, if only for the feeling of letting it all out onto a page (or two or three). <sup>01</sup>

Despite the fact that it was only a month ago, it's hard for me to go back and think about all that happened, to try and remember everything about that crazy, apocalyptic week and a half. To relive all the pain that happened. (That's why the beginning days are much longer than the others.) Of course, things continue to get worse. States and schools shut down across the country. Federal "stay-at-home" restrictions. Uncertainty about when anything will return to even half-normal. Will my internship still exist? <sup>02</sup> Fall semester?

I wonder how we'll all look back on this period in time. How the pain, the anger, the fear will be remembered. How I'll look back on it all. Who even knows how long this will go on? How many people will catch coronavirus, how much we are all going to lose in the coming months. Who even knows when we'll go back to normal again?

But those are questions that I don't know. What I do know is my own experiences. And that is what I've written about here.

*Hi, readers: as you have probably figured out by now, the words above weren't exactly written recently. In the span of 9 days in March 2020, we went from a normal college existence to leaving campus because of a global pandemic. COVID-19 has had an incredible impact on all of our lives; but I think it's difficult to remember what it was like during the days when coronavirus became central to our existences.*

*On my way home from MIT on Pi Day, I started writing up this post in an attempt to express all of my feelings; while I wrote up a bit more in April, it's remained untouched for nearly eleven months. I've done enough editing to make sure that the text is readable, but I've decided to post it in its unfinished state with occasional commentary from present-day me. <sup>93</sup> Some of my recounting, particularly in the last few days, is unfinished. Part of it is an issue of remembering everything in those hectic few days, but the bigger reason is that reliving these experiences is incredibly difficult. Even editing this post with my present commentary has been difficult, and it's much more unpolished than I usually want my writing to be.*

*COVID-19 and this pandemic have been very painful for me and for many others around the world. But even so, I wanted to post this so that we could remember what it all was like in those few days when coronavirus suddenly became a word we all used. A way to remember that feeling of uncertainty about everything, that feeling of loss in those early days.*

*In writing this post, I don't want to imply that the loss of college experience and the heartbreak of event cancellations is in any way comparable to other ways that people have felt loss over the past year, especially considering the number of cases and deaths that the world has seen. I just want to share this sliver of my experiences from the weeks when COVID-19 became real to me.*

## **wednesday, march 4, 2020**

On Wednesday, coronavirus began to enter my mind for the first time. I go to an economics department event, where I walk around and chat with undergrads and dozens of professors in the department. I have good conversations with most of the professors there, which is a really nice feeling – being on a first-name basis with some of the best people in the field. I talk with professors and grad students about their areas of interest, potential to research with them, applications to graduate school, and more. I talk with two professors who mention that MIT's president has asked them to make contingency plans for their large lecture-style classes. What would happen if students can't come to campus, or even in the (incredibly unlikely scenario) that professors themselves can't come to campus to work but still have to deliver lectures. One professor says that there's meetings about this every day at lunch, and that seems like overkill to me. I pick up a free umbrella and hat, both with the MIT Economics logo on them.

I help run giant educational programs on campus through the [Educational Studies Program](https://esp.mit.edu/) (<https://esp.mit.edu/>). We had one of our biggest programs of the year, Spark, was coming up in 10 days – starting on Pi Day (3/14) this year, a fun math coincidence. Spark is a giant educational

program where nearly 1300 middle school students from all around the country take classes taught by MIT students about *anything*, with classes (<http://esp.mit.edu/random>) like Extreme Origami, The Theory of Dating: Let's Take a {Random} Walk, Train science, and Hacking Flavor. Another one of our programs, HSSP, which runs every Saturday for 6 weeks, had just run its first week – ESP was in its “busy point” for the year.

Preparations were months in the making at this point, and we were in the final rush of things left to do. Put students in classes. Order large amounts of food. Print a bajillion schedules and flyers. I'm one of the past chairs of ESP, so I take more of a “backseat” role and help a variety of different tasks, like proofreading sensitive emails and being a sounding board for new ideas. I wasn't responsible for too much in particular, but was helping to create a “31.4 Things to Do at Spark” and a collective mural to help create a sense of community at our programs.

Some other members of our club were planning a trip to Costco to buy needed items for our programs; food supplies for liquid nitrogen ice cream, Clorox wipes for cleaning, and more. Someone mentioned how Costco had completely run out of tofu when a friend had gone shopping – people seemed to be making runs on grocery stores to stock up. It seemed funny, but we realized it probably meant that we'd be unable to buy any cleaning items for our programs.

A few days prior (I don't remember exactly when), big hand-sanitizing stations had started popping up around campus. The thought occurred to me that our event, bringing together thousands of children (and their parents) from around the country, could potentially be a bad place for the spread of germs. I talk to the current chairs of ESP as well as the directors of Spark, and send an email to MIT's COVID-19 “help” group, asking if it was possible for us to have these stations put around campus, especially where we were serving food. (This also would help us with getting hand sanitizer for everyone, since Amazon was way overcharging – \$50 for a gallon.)

Our meeting ends. I head home. I do work for a bit then head off to sleep.

*When I look back and read this, it surprises me how things felt like an over-reaction in the moment, but looking back on it they were probably under-reactions. The daily meetings about COVID I hear turned into multiple meetings per day to monitor the situation. Costco, as well as the rest of the country of course, ended up having shortages of everything for a long while. I remember trying to find disinfecting spray at Target at the beginning of this school year and finding empty shelves. The hand sanitizing stations were also incredible, given the shortages around that time. I cannot fathom how MIT got their hands on so much of it.*

*Knowing the way that COVID progressed over the next few weeks, I find it incredible that we were going about our daily lives without any masks or face coverings or social distancing policies. Incredible that we were still planning to run an event where thousands of students from around the country would come to take classes, crammed into every classroom available at MIT.*

## **thursday, march 6, 2020**

I wake up and read an email saying that over 300 of those sanitizing stations had been put up around campus. My girlfriend sends me a photo of a hand sanitizing station set up in her dorm. We laugh.

I go to my recitation for 18.200 (Discrete Mathematics), where we try to prove Cayley's formula for counting trees ([https://www.wikiwand.com/en/Cayley%27s\\_formula](https://www.wikiwand.com/en/Cayley%27s_formula)). It didn't go very well. My

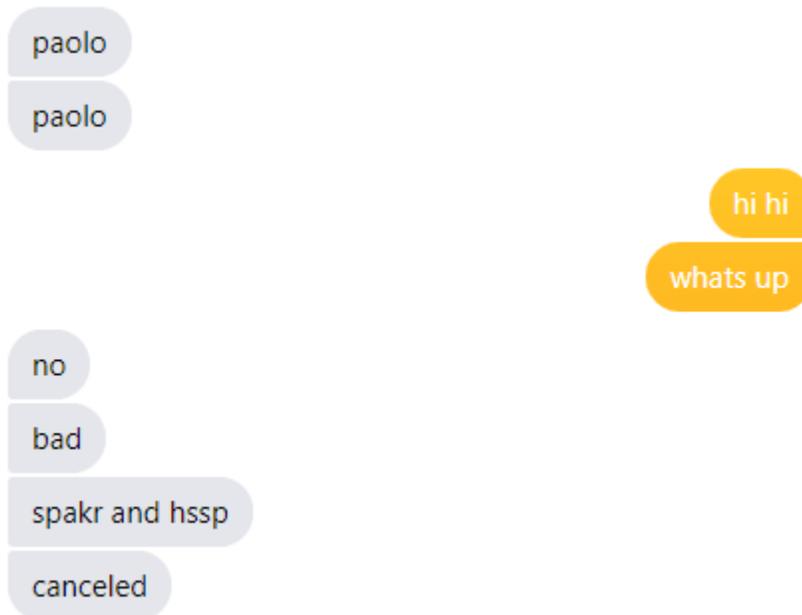
recitation instructor overestimated the difficulty of finding the inductive step, and so we spend most of the class in small groups staring at a blackboard and talking about how we didn't know what to do.

I sit in the ESP office for a while between classes. We get a delivery of a hundred star-plushies as giveaways for our volunteers. I leave the package closed so that the people who ordered it can see them first. I make documentation for how to use our (physical) phones, since the software changed last summer and we ran into issues at our last program where our phones were accidentally forwarded to a random number in Las Vegas. We also get a delivery of t-shirts that we're going to give out to students and teachers at HSSP. A few hundred prints of sloth shirts designed by members of ESP.

I also have Intro to Acting in the afternoon, where we do physical improvisation, tell stories, and pretend to be an animal. Good, relaxing fun. That class is a way for me to just spent 2 hours not thinking about anything else.

After class, around 5 PM, I walk over to one of the piano rooms on the 4th floor of the Student Center, just down the hall from the ESP office, to try and play some songs and relax before the week ahead. With Spark so soon, a few assignments and tests ahead of me, I was feeling very busy. And I hadn't quite gotten the chance to relax fully, with my last few weekends being taken up by running Science Bowl and volunteering at Ocean Science Bowl. So, I headed to a room where I could just go and sit and be with music for a little break.

Then I get a text.



the message that began the wildest week of my life

I check my email. Someone forwarded a section of an [email sent from MIT's president](https://news.mit.edu/2020/letter-regarding-coronavirus-disease-0305) (<https://news.mit.edu/2020/letter-regarding-coronavirus-disease-0305>), talking about different changes happening to campus because of the coronavirus outbreak. But there's only one part that matters to me.

## MIT EVENTS

**Effective immediately, if you are planning any in-person MIT event with more than 150 attendees that will take place between now and Friday, May 15, on campus or off campus, you must postpone, cancel or “virtualize” it.**

guess what events have more than 150 attendees

---

I run down the hall to our office.

I start talking to people who are sitting there about what the hell we do. How real this email is. What it means for our programs. HSSP had just started and was set to happen every Saturday for the next six weeks. Spark, of course, was set to happen next week on Pi Day. But now, they're just not happening.

Canceled.

Months of preparation and hard work. Not getting to see the smiling faces of 1300 kids. Disappointing thousands of people who have already booked flights and hotels. Disappointing the hundreds of teachers of our programs. The literal heartbreak that our directors must feel to work so hard for something, then to have it ripped from them.

Of course, we're not the only people that are hurting. CPW is canceled too. Every large event. I hear that this came as a shock to *everyone* on campus. A shock to those in the administration that oversee all student groups. No one was ready for this.

I don't get the email until a few hours later. Something about MIT's rollout of sending emails.

Sometime in between all this, we get the first news of the Biogen cases (<https://www.boston.com/news/health/2020/03/05/biogen-coronavirus-cases>). Three people infected, stemming from a company whose headquarters are right next to campus.

I start talking to the chairs and directors that have come to the office. I give as many hugs as I can. I don't know what I can do to be helpful. I decide to start helping draft an email to all of the students, parents, and teachers, telling them that their programs have been canceled.

I go back to my dorm while the directors and chairs talk about the logistics of canceling programs. Of undoing the thousands of hours of work that went into it. I help edit emails again. I call my parents to cancel my spring break trip back home; if this is happening and MIT shuts down and I still need to be here, I don't want to get stuck back home. I head back to our office to talk with people, and give more hugs to the directors I see.

ESP is a very old organization – we've been running programs for 60 years. To my knowledge, this is the first time we've had to completely cancel a program. Ever.

I've directed one of these programs before. Hundreds of hours of my own work and headspace went into it. That's not to mention the thousands of other hours that the rest of our admin team puts into it. We joke that the programs are like our babies from all the time that we put into them. That joke only reinforces the actual sense of grief that we all felt canceling our programs.

I can't help but feel even worse for the directors. The pain to see something that you worked so hard for, and see it all disappear with just a few words. President Reif's email says nothing about how hard

it must be to cancel our events. Of the heartbreak, the loss that we all feel.

I can't imagine how hard it is for the directors. How much it hurts. How much *everyone* hurts.

What do you even say?

*Being in the ESP office that night was one of the saddest experiences that I've ever had. In hindsight, I understand that running this kind of program in-person would have been completely irresponsible and that canceling these events was the only correct decision that the administration could have done — but it doesn't diminish the hurt in the moment. The emails that we send out to teachers and parents include the line "We understand that this is incredibly disappointing, and it breaks our hearts to cancel the program." Reading that again makes the heartbreak feel fresh again. I cannot describe to you the joy that these programs bring to our hearts (<https://mitadmissions.org/blogs/entry/two-thousand-high-schoolers/>), watching campus come to life when thousands of excited students come to learn cool new topics and hundreds of teachers just want to share their passions. And with a single email, all of that potential for joy was just gone.*

*I also want to call to attention the way that ESP was there for each other in those days. ESP maintains an internal list of values, one of which is "Be an ESPfamily"; in those few days when our world got upended, that sense of community felt so, so strong.*

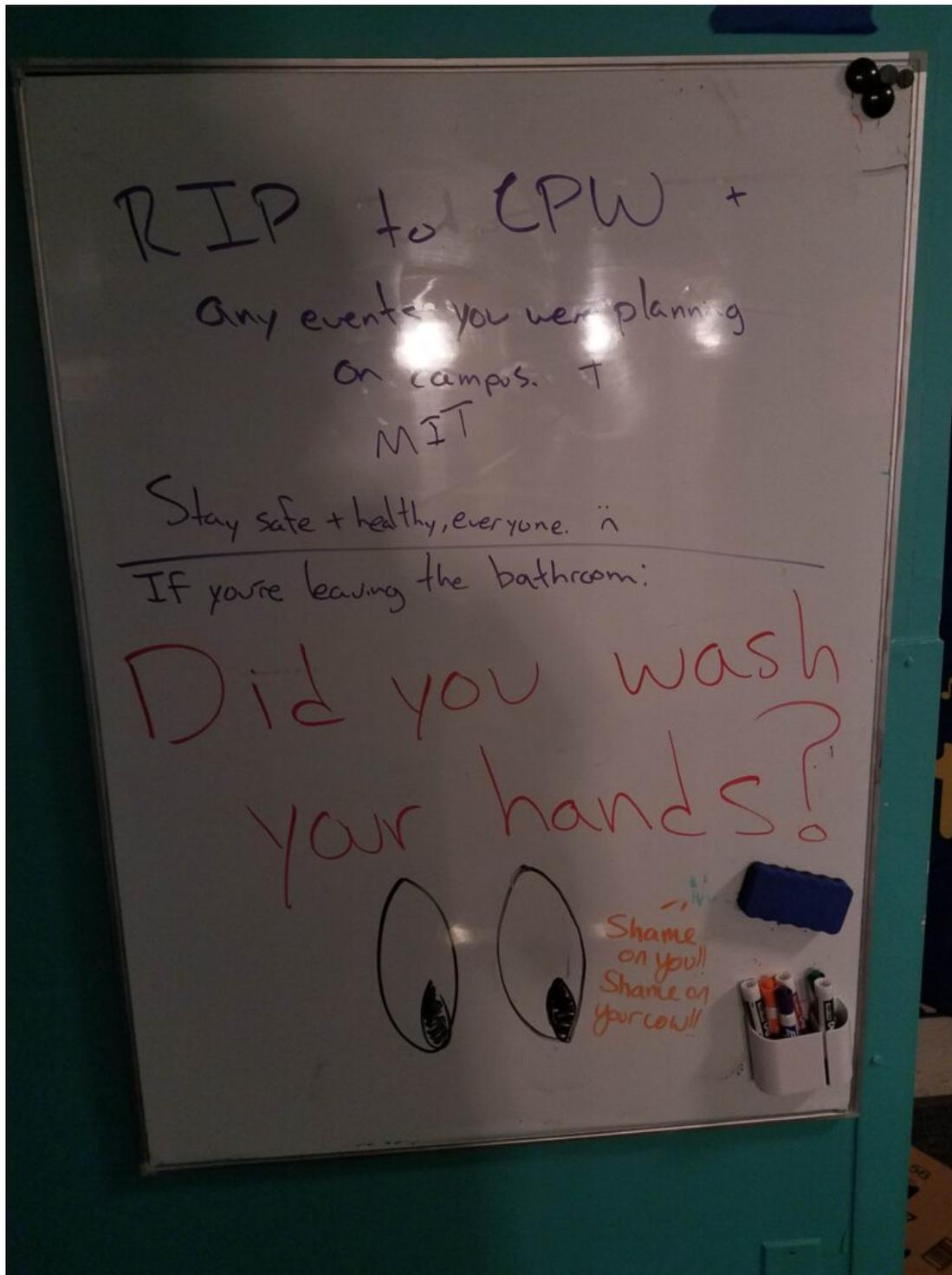
*That night, we talked about the potential for virtualizing, for doing anything at all to continue our programs as planned. We're lucky that we didn't pursue those plans very much, given all that happened over the next week.*

## friday, march 6, 2020

We send out emails to HSSP and Spark [teachers](https://esp.mit.edu/teach/Spark/covid19.html) (<https://esp.mit.edu/teach/Spark/covid19.html>) and [students](https://esp.mit.edu/learn/Spark/covid19.html) (and their parents) (<https://esp.mit.edu/learn/Spark/covid19.html>) in the morning. It hurts me to read them and edit them, but I do it anyways because I care about getting these emails as perfect as possible when we're telling people such tragic news.

I have a recitation in the morning that I force myself to go to. I can't bring myself to pay attention because I'm trying to respond to the dozens of immediate replies about refunds, what we're going to do with the boxes of t-shirts that just arrived, the potential for online classes, and non-refundable tickets and hotels. There's also a good number of people who reply thanking us for all of our hard work, knowing that we too must be disappointed to not run this program. These kind emails from parents and students and teachers warm my heart. The best one of them all is from a student who just wanted to know their lottery results, but *only* because they wanted to see if they "gamed" the system to get into a cooking class. We send a few emails back and forth – yes, you did get into a cooking class like you wanted, but turns out your strategy led you to only get into a few classes, and here's a few articles on strategy-proof-ness and matching markets. These emails from this kid who was so excited just to see if his experiment worked reminded me of why I love being in ESP – the amazing kids that get such joy out of our programs.

That night, right before I go to sleep, I realize that we might be still getting some students and teachers who didn't get the email that HSSP is canceled. I shoot off an email to directors and get confirmation that I'm allowed to sit with them in the HSSP office to talk to anyone that happens to stop by.



the whiteboard outside my room from this time; for context, i lived directly across the hall from the bathroom

## saturday, march 7, 2020

I meet up with people in the ESP office around noon. We make some signs to tell people about the cancellation and put them up around campus. Five students and parents stop by that hadn't heard the news. Every time, it's so hard to tell people that it's canceled. One of them asks for their t-shirt they ordered, and we're happy to give it to them. What else are we going to do with 200 t-shirts just sitting in our office?

I spend time working on a homework problem for 18.200 – it's quite annoying to do the math, and I mess up solving the generating function a *lot* of times before I get it right.

Afterward, ESP has an emergency meeting to talk about what canceling our programs means. We spend the first half of the discussion talking about our feelings, the collective heartbreak that we all have had. The second half is spent talking about moving forward – what do we do with students that wanted to attend our program, or even with the rest of the semester. We shed tears. We share hugs. We eat ice cream, because what else are you supposed to do?

I leave the meeting to go try and pset with someone. It's hard to focus. The conversation keeps drifting back to canceled events like CPW. We give up after a few hours and just go eat dinner.

## **sunday, march 8, 2020**

I go on a date with my girlfriend. We'd planned this a few days prior before the world turned upside down. It was Restaurant Week (<http://www.restaurantweekboston.com/>) in Boston, and we wanted to try out a fancy restaurant. It was not exactly the best meal I've ever had, and their vegetarian options were also not great. (My girlfriend is vegetarian. Oops.)

I play an intramural basketball game with people from ESP. It wasn't the best intramural game that I've ever played; we lost big. Very, very, big. I remember being very tired afterward and sad about losing, but I just wanted to distract myself from all that had happened recently.

*Something that I think about as I edit this post: the things that we did right before lockdowns started were so wild. I cannot fathom going to a restaurant right now, or going inside of a gym and playing basketball, boxing people out or posting them up. How risky those activities were without us even being aware.*

MIT has a mailing list for people who help run educational programs at MIT, where “brown bag” lunches are organized sometimes. Someone sends out an email to organize one for this upcoming Tuesday. ESP, of course, wasn't the only one affected by President Reif's announcement; dozens of other programs were working through the forced virtualization or cancellation of their programs. I start an email thread with ESP to see who's interested in going.

## **monday, march 9, 2020**

On Monday, the craziness ends. Things feel normal. Good, even. <sup>04</sup>

My first class of the day is a graduate class that I share with a former chair of ESP from before my time. After class, we chat about all of the craziness that's happened and how ESP has dealt with it all. Despite having finished undergrad years ago, she still keeps updated on the email threads.

I spent half an hour on homework before realizing that it's just a gorgeous day outside. My girlfriend and I get lunch on Killian Court, and everything just feels so calm and peaceful. The sun is shining, it's warm outside. The warmth has brought everyone out. People are throwing frisbees, playing music, and just sitting and enjoying the sun. It feels like spring. It feels like I go to a *real* college, one of those that you see in movies where people will just hang out on the quad and bad weather just never happens. Things finally start to feel better after the heartbreak and stress that coronavirus had caused over the past few days.

Coronavirus isn't done though. We get an email that cancels all classes larger than 150 on campus, turning them into virtual lectures. I pass an economics professor I know who teaches one of these classes – we talk about how crazy the past few days have been and how we're holding up. An email goes out to all business majors on campus that someone who attended a conference in the Sloan buildings was diagnosed with coronavirus. The email doesn't go out to me, despite the fact that the economics department shares the same buildings, which does nothing to help fear and rumor-spreading. In a groupchat I'm in, someone forwards hearsay that we'll be going completely online by the end of the week. At this point, I've heard so many different things that I don't even know what to believe anymore.

I go over to my next class, where economics majors are working on independent research projects. People present their research proposals for the semester, with topics on everything from homelessness to labor unions to the media. One of my friends is planning a project on coronavirus and its impacts on supply chains in the US Economy – we all laugh when we see the title slide. Too soon.

After class, I chat with my professor about changing my research topic for my presentation on Wednesday. We sit on a bench for 20 minutes and he gives me the OK for changing my topic. I go in for the handshake, see him pause, then he asks for an elbow bump. For some reason, this small moment just sticks out in my mind as one of the realizations that this pandemic was something to truly worry about.

I head back to Killian Court and find some friends throwing around a frisbee. I stick around with them, trying to catch ones that are too far high for my height and trying to curve frisbees around trees that shouldn't be curved around. As we get tired, I start talking to some people about what they're worried about: immunocompromised friends, old parents, virtual classes. No one knows what's going on anymore.

Coronavirus hasn't touched everything in my life yet, though. I help coordinate a regional science bowl competition, and I get an email from the national coordinator which says that the national competition is still on track for the end of April. It's a small solace with all craziness that's happened so far. They say that any plans to cancel won't happen until April 6th, nearly a full month away.<sup>05</sup>

That night, in between the psets and the stress, I decide to start writing a letter to the Committee on the Undergraduate Program<sup>06</sup> about my opinions on the proposed changes to the grading policy the next semester. One of my ESP friends is on the committee and encouraged me to send my thoughts to the head of the Committee, a professor in the literature department. Trying to organize and say my thoughts is a nice way for me to just get my mind off of everything that's happening. I eventually head off to sleep around 1 am, just trying to put thoughts on a page rather than being lost in my own head worrying about coronavirus.

Monday felt *normal*. Despite all that had happened in the past few days, things felt good. Being able to sit outside and chat with friends, even if was about the scary things that were worrying us, felt *good*. Things would be tough, and it'd be a weird semester, but we'd get through it. I'd get to spend spring break hanging out on campus with my friends. My projects for classes were finally starting to come together. ESP had a direction for the rest of the semester. For the first time in nearly a week, things felt *alright enough*.

*It's been a year since, but that Monday was the last day that I think I actually felt like a college student. In the many months since, I've been taking classes entirely virtually, mostly by myself, with occasional Zoom calls to pset with someone. Sure, being in an apartment where everyone's my friend and also a*

*senior and working hard helps my productivity loads. But college is not just about productivity — it's about the people, the atmosphere, the life that you get by being around everyone else. That Monday, with the sun, having lunch on Killian, sitting and talking with friends, even if it was about coronavirus, will live rent-free in my head until we can have those days back.*

## tuesday, march 10, 2020

I wake up without an alarm, as I usually do on Tuesdays. My first class isn't until 3 pm. My phone tells me that it's 10:45, and checking my messages, I quite quickly realize that all hell has broken loose.

Messages from my girlfriend asking me if I'd heard the rumors. A dozen groupchats with hundreds of messages. While others have talked about (<https://mitadmissions.org/blogs/entry/whats-happening-on-campus/>) what happened that day, the quick summary: all of my groupchats were exploding with a rumor that no classes would run next week (3/16). The week after that (3/23) was spring break, but afterwards (3/30), all classes would be online. We were all being sent home. We had to leave by next Tuesday.

I shower and run over to see people that I know to just talk about what is happening. What this means. People are scared about everything. Scared about trying to pack up their lives with a week's notice. Scared about going back home to China or Seattle, the epicenter at the time. Scared about going home to immunocompromised parents. Scared about seniors' last semester on campus being gone. Scared about trying to earn money to pay the semesters' tuition when your on-campus job gets canceled. Scared about paying for a ticket to get back home. Scared about paying to move out, even. We're also not the only ones going through this — students at Harvard were told to leave by Sunday, March 15, in just 5 days; I text my friends there to see if they're doing OK.

Perhaps what makes it scariest is that from the moment that I woke up, I've just been tossed around by rumors and hearsay. At this point, I haven't even gotten *confirmation* that this is happening, let alone details or move-out times. I get confirmation from friends who've heard things from all sorts of sources, but still no email from the administration. That, supposedly, is coming at 1 pm.

I sit around in a kitchen and eat some eggs. I give people around me hugs. 1 pm rolls around, and though we're all huddling around and refreshing our inboxes, no email comes. Nor does it come at 1:30. Or 2. The people I'm surrounded by are nervous, anxious to hear any official word about what will happen with their semester. I decide that I might as well head to my 3 pm class, Intro to Acting, just to give myself some space to clear my mind.

I start walking to class with some friends. Gray clouds cover the sky – fitting. My way to class takes me by Killian Court, where I find hundreds of people dartying (day-partying) and shouting and mourning the loss of their spring semester.<sup>02</sup> For the seniors, their last semester on campus. I find some friends, and we talk about everything just feels apocalyptic. Literally. Where everything that we took for granted is suddenly gone.

I eventually get to Intro to Acting. President Reif's email comes out as class ends: at 5 PM, 4 hours after we all expected it.

ESP has its usual meetings on Tuesday nights. After our hour-long discussion on Saturday about what we'd do for the rest of the semester, everything now needs to be re-planned given this news. All of those ideas and plans for the spring semester, and suddenly we need to figure out how we'll move out and everything.

I head to the office a few hours before this meeting to talk and commiserate with each other about everything. How shocked we are. How unsure we feel about everything. There's a few minutes where we just sit there in silence.

A group of us heads to Roxy's to grab some feel-good grilled cheese. I get an email about packing boxes from Next House Exec – I haven't even started *thinking* about how to deal with packing all of my stuff. Or even where I'd store it all. How many boxes do I even need? I skip picking up boxes for this Roxy's trip.

ESP meeting that night was the eeriest meeting I've been to. You just sit there and have no idea what to say.

At night, I went over to Shannen's to talk about everything. Then to 1E in EC. I meet Jake W. '21 and listen to him play songs on his guitar and it is good. We sing along. It is there that I learn the song Streets of London (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DiWomXklfv8>) by Ralph McTell, a song that sits on my playlist from that semester as a memory of the good during this absolutely awful week.

I let my parents know about the rumors sometime Tuesday so they're aware. Forward them the real thing when I get it. Book a flight back home for next Tuesday, the latest day I can. Need to pack. Need goodbyes. Too much unresolved.

Plan for a date on Friday to say goodbye to my girlfriend. Plan to hang out with my freshman year friend group Saturday. Haven't even gotten a chance to see the apartment that I had already signed for next year, so need to find a time to do that.<sup>08</sup> What should I pack for moving there in the fall, and what should I give away?

How do I pack? Where does it all go? What about flights? International students?

I had it lucky. People live in china. Seattle. Etc. there's a form for people needing exemptions from moving out. Over the next few days, I hear that this system was not implemented very well (<https://www.thedailybeast.com/warzone-mit-students-enraged-by-coronavirus-banishment>).

*Re: "not implemented very well": Present-me recognizes the difficulty in implementing a policy in a matter of hours and implementing it well: who can expect a perfect system to be created in such a short time frame. At the same time, reading the linked article, present-me still wishes that the initial handling of exemptions had been more generous to students, and I'm glad MIT was able to correct some of the decisions that it made by letting students appeal their decision over the next few days.*

Scared about being home for the rest of the semester. Virtual classes? Seeing friends? Can't imagine trying to be a student being at home, not surrounded by other people who are working all the time. Surrounded by all of MIT.

I see a petition for alternate grading<sup>09</sup> for the semester given all that's going on. I sign it.

When I first started writing this up, I couldn't find the words to sum up the "world is ending" feeling that came along Tuesday and the days following.

It's hard for me to even describe the anxiety and stress over not knowing what was happening at any moment of the day. The hearsay, the uncertainty, the waiting. And how much of a toll this took on all of us.

*Tuesday felt like the world was literally ending and feeling powerless to do anything about it, this looming feeling of doom and uncertainty. All that you could do was sit back and be thrown about by rumors that spread around campus like wildfire, all while refreshing your emails for the tiniest bit of information. I distinctly remember the fear that we all felt that afternoon, huddling around the kitchen, with people doing everything from grieving their senior year to stress-finding a new place to live in a week to just sitting, numb, not knowing what to say. That day was a constant barrage of emotions from the moment that I woke up to the moment I went to sleep, and those feelings did not stop until I left campus.*

*I still don't feel like I've captured the feeling of sheer utter chaos and stress and panic and hysteria that gripped my life on Tuesday. I don't think I'll ever find the words to do so.*

## wednesday, march 11, 2020

Skip classes because they don't matter anymore at this point.

Sit around and vaguely begin packing. Throw clothes into suitcases. Take the last pictures of my dorm room that I can, because have to start taking it all down. I never got to finish my door mural [about Vienna](https://mitadmissions.org/blogs/entry/on-success-meaning-and-time/#meaning) (<https://mitadmissions.org/blogs/entry/on-success-meaning-and-time/#meaning>):(



Wednesday try to play the piano before ESP's meeting. It's hard. I can't. The songs I was playing just fine last week I now just can't seem to focus on. Every time I try to get into the music I keep thinking about all that's been happening.

ESP meets to talk about how we'll virtualize our operations, and revises all of the plans that we made on Saturday, just 4 days ago. But it seems like forever. I also make plans with some ESP people on Saturday to sit on the steps of DuPont Gymnasium, in case some people didn't get our memo about Spark being canceled. So that we can talk to people and say how much we wished we could run it.

An old ESP alum who graduated my freshman year comes to our meeting. We tell each other that we should hang out with each other. Then promptly forgot about it with all the craziness that has been happening and all that is still to come.

Next house says they'll let us store 2 boxes in the dorm; I pick up my dorm-allocated pair of cardboard boxes. But where will I store the rest? One of my friends offers me her two boxes, since she was making plans to stay in the area. So I label two more boxes with her name. But I think I have more than 4 boxes worth of stuff. So need to figure out that. Some people were getting PODS storage, some UHAUL. That was a problem for a later time, once I had more things shoved into boxes. But for now, just slowly disassembling my life.

## thursday, march 12, 2020

Packing. Or trying to. So hard to focus. I spend most of the day not really being able to do anything. The day is mostly a blur; my google timeline shows one trip to the student center and then back.

At some point over the past few days, the dining hall stops letting students “self-serve”, and only lets staff handle the food. (This includes replacing the self-serve ice cream with popsicles and the like.)

That evening I sit around and joke with friends. We eat wings and hang out. It’s a good time.

*I just chatted with my roommate who saw me drafting this blog post about our memories from that week. He has much more favorable memories than I do, describing it as “a compressed end to senior year”, where the seniors just tried to have all of the experiences that they wanted to have in their last week on campus. He talked about getting dinner with a different person every meal, and while the uncertainty and rush of leaving made it all feel like “the world was ending”, he also talked about random funny memories or talking to seniors asking for their advice. A week with “raw” emotion, yes, and decent amounts of it negative, but still filled with incredible memories.*

*I began writing this on my plane ride back home, where of course I was biased by the negative emotions of being forced to leave; not wanting to do a semester of college stuck at home, not wanting to leave my friends and communities on campus. But if I look back at that week with the same lens that my friend does, of course there are good moments. Hanging out with friends like this, the camaraderie and community in ESP, the sunny days, playing frisbee, singing songs together. There was good in that week — you just have to look in the right places.*

*But for now, back to Paolo from a year ago, who was very much not focusing on that.*

At about 11 PM, we get interrupted by an emergency message from MIT, a message that really, really, really suggests that we move out by Sunday. And also that we can get \$500 of travel fees, and that MIT is paying us to store our boxes with a moving company. I read it and don’t think that much of it, but just think it’s something nice MIT is doing.

Then I text people, think for a bit, and I realize it might mean more. What is making MIT want to kick us out sooner? There are 4K undergrads at MIT, which means that they’re spending \$2 million on getting us all home 2 days sooner. And what could possibly bring the administration to send out an emergency text saying “please move out faster” message to everyone at MIT at 11PM on a Thursday? I hear rumors that Boston might be shutting down the airport, and we’d all be stuck here, which is why they’re trying to kick us out sooner.

*To be abundantly clear: this did not happen. Logan Airport did not ever close. As far as I know, no airport within the US closed completely, and there were never any regional lockdowns that restricted travel completely; only mandates from out-of-state travelers to quarantine for 2 weeks.*

*At this point, I think it’s useful to talk about the nature of rumors, and how much they truly contributed to the sense of stress that I felt during this week. As I mentioned on Tuesday, we all heard about being kicked off of campus through rumors; while of course, I kept my eye on my groupchats to hear every new speck of information, sometimes that endless desire to know more didn’t actually help.<sup>10</sup> The gap between the rumors I heard and what the MIT administration / local news said kept growing, and constantly questioning what to believe was not great for my mental state those few days.*

I stay up trying to figure it out. Call my parents. Change my flights so that I leave on Saturday afternoon (moving them up from Tuesday), a flight that would happen in just 36 hours. Stress pack because I can’t fall asleep. Do an assignment I have to do for 14.33 that I forgot about, because yeah, school is still happening. Go to sleep at 3 AM.

*One other quick note — how quickly the priorities change. On Tuesday 3/10, I booked the latest possible flight to leave to give me as much time as possible to say my goodbyes, to pack up everything that I had. That email on Thursday night, combined with its timing and the rumors, just made me (and many, many others) feel like I wanted to get out as quickly as I could.*

## **friday, march 13, 2020**

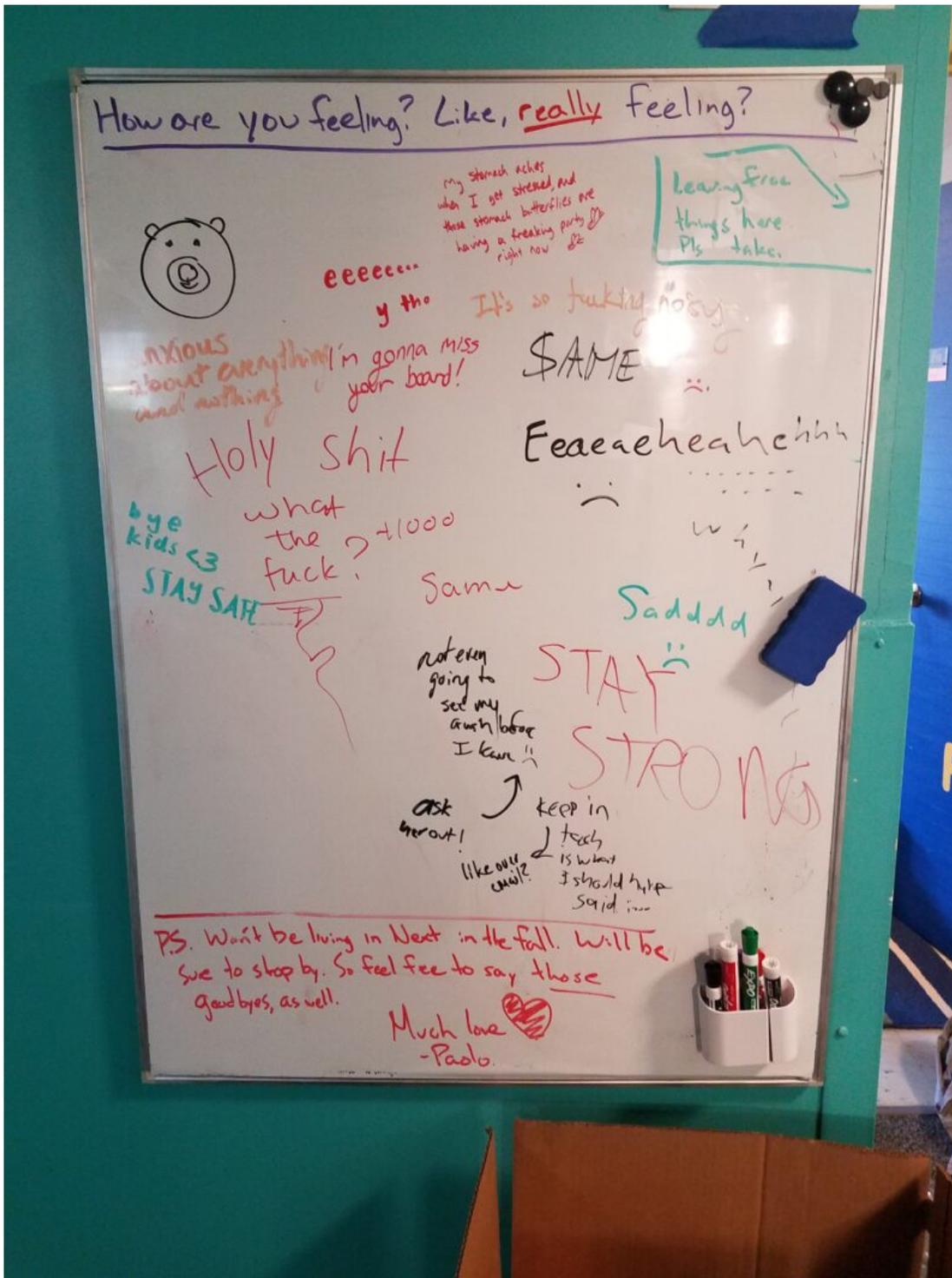
My girlfriend and I were going to go on a date on Friday. But in light of last night's announcement, instead, we just help each other pack each other's rooms. She also moved up her flight and was just trying to get home as quickly as she can.

There's a particular moment I remember where we were talking about the worst things that could happen, and me just being scared about bringing COVID home. I hear rumors about a student at MIT who had been in contact with someone who had been in contact with someone who caught COVID. The uncertainty is awful, because at this point, there is basically no infrastructure for testing for COVID at MIT. (Or anywhere else, for that matter.)

I'm not a person who tends to cry very often. Have probably only cried 2 or 3 times at college. But in the span of the past few days, I don't even know many times I have.

Remember how I was originally going to try to pack things into 4 boxes? I end up packing my things into 15 boxes<sup>11</sup> from MIT and the moving company. I have no idea what I would have done with my original plan of just 4 boxes.

My girlfriend and I buy 2 pints of ice cream with my leftover TechCash — I'm not going to be using it at all for the rest of the semester, so why not. We order burritos for dinner. Keep packing. I say my first goodbyes to people that are leaving very early in the morning.



the last picture i took of my dorm room whiteboard before taking it down for good

## saturday, march 14, 2020

Wake up, do a little bit more packing with girlfriend in east campus. Help tape up some boxes. I spend some time burning some papers with personal information on a grill because we didn't have a shredder. It was a bit cathartic. My jacket still smells like smoke right now.

We walk over to Next and we load up my suitcases into an uber. I walk out and see a handful of people and say goodbye to them, tell them to stay safe. I say goodbye to my girlfriend; who knows when I'll

see her again. Or anyone else. Head to airport. I see some MIT friends there. We hug. Last hugs I get from someone in a very very long time? And now we're here. I'm on the plane. Wow.

It was all just so sudden. And now I'm on this plane. And now I'm gone.

*Past-me uses the word sudden here, and I think that's an apt description of how my experiences over those last few days feel. How it all feels like a hurried wrap-up of a sitcom<sup>12</sup> where they just want to get it over with, forcing us to conclude and say our goodbyes even through we weren't ready to do that yet. When I think about those last few days I can't pick apart what happened on one day vs. another. Multiple days were filled with nothing but packing, but the details all gloss together.*

*I think that part of it is that I never sat down to process everything that was happening in those last few days. I got home, took a long shower to disinfect, and went to sleep. While I did spend a little bit of time trying to write this post, the fact that I didn't finish it suggests that I didn't want to think about the hurt, the painful experiences of the week that we got kicked off. I have no sense of closure from those past few days, and I don't think I'll ever understand the full picture of what was happening.*

*I also don't have a sense of closure at the personal, individual level. I never got to say goodbye to all of the people that I know; and who knows when I'll get to see them again, if ever (looking at you, seniors and 2020s). I didn't get to say my last goodbyes to campus — I have yet to step inside an MIT dorm or classroom since leaving, and I will not be able to until after I graduate. I'll never get that sense of finality of realizing that my time at (the physical) MIT was drawing to a close, that the time I could spend hanging out with people was coming to an end. But c'est la vie.*

### **misc. notes to include somewhere:**

- Friends worrying about canceling spring break trips after the announcement on Tuesday (spring break started on 3/14). But the Thursday email made everyone forget about that and made people just want to get out as quick as they could. Get back home.
- Do I self-quarantine? How do I plan for going home, especially when I don't know how long I would stay? Still don't know if my summer internship will be in person in not
- Seniors. Wow. Goodbye. I don't know how many seniors that I know that I didn't get the chance to say goodbye to.
- Every conversation that I had seemed to revolve around coronavirus
- When Spark got canceled, it was such a loss. Emergency meetings. All of the hugs. Now it's the least of everyone's worries. Woke up today to leave and it was Spark and it would have been such a perfect day for spark.<sup>13</sup> But no, instead campus was wild and everyone was just moving out as quick as they could
- The darty felt dystopian. Like the world was ending. Then walking past Killian 2 days later and everything just felt completely silent and awful and sad and gray. Eerie how it felt like the life left campus.
- Monday was normal. I sat on the grass with my girlfriend and we had lunch together. It was a beautiful day. It felt like a real college. In 24 hours everything turned upside down
- I haven't slept the correct amount in so long. Got on the plane and just passed out

- I've talked to a lot of people about thoughts they've had
  - One friend "Thursday [3/6] coronavirus was not on my mind"
  - "Exponential growth" – now we really understand what that means because we have lived it
  - "The past few days have been a long month"
  - Goodbyes are so hard.
  - even worse, missed goodbyes

## **saturday, march 6, 2021**

*There are millions of words to say about this pandemic: the loss people have felt because of family members or friends taken away by a deadly virus, the loss of losing some of your most formative years at college, the loss of graduation for the class of 2020, the loss of my own senior year. This post is a drop in the bucket compared to the effects that coronavirus has had on the world.*

*I can't bring myself to write about those things. COVID-19 still hurts too much for me. We're still in the middle of this pandemic, still wearing masks and social distancing. I've grown used to this "new normal" in March 2021, but I can't even bring myself to think that much about the week we all got kicked off of campus.*

*Even though it was a year ago, much of the hurt still feels so fresh. A recent article in the Boston Globe said "[It's March again . . . or was it always March?](https://www.bostonglobe.com/2021/03/01/metro/its-march-again-or-was-it-always-march-pandemic-closes-grim-one-year-anniversary-people-feel-stuck-time/)"; it really does feel like no time has passed since then. The last year has been the same day over and over again, and I feel like I've been stagnating in life waiting for this pandemic to end.*

*Despite those feelings, time does go on. I graduate college soon, and it seems like getting a vaccine is just a few months away. I hope that soon we'll get herd immunity and a return to normalcy. I hope that soon, this too shall pass.*

*But for this one (very long) post, I wanted to take a bit to remember the week that felt like an eternity. The craziest, most emotional week of my life.*

#coronavirus #COVID19 #stay safe and healthy <3

---

01 this post is currently sitting at over 8000 words so. much more than 3 pages. ↑

02 my internship takes until may to decide that it's virtualizing ↑

03 footnotes and words in italics are commentary from present-day me; all else was written in march / april 2020. ↑

- 04 hah. if only. ↑
- 05 it get canceled a week later. ↑
- 06 am now on it with rona! perhaps a future blog post... ↑
- 07 Again, see Shuli's post, which includes the iconic photo from the darty that eventually got to the Washington Post ↑
- 08 note that this apartment is never mentioned again in this post; with all the craziness that week, taking a look at my apartment just slips my mind. i end up not seeing my apartment for the first time until we move in in september. ↑
- 09 mit decides that no letter grades will be assigned that semester, only pass / no record for everyone ↑
- 10 advice i need to tell myself as i keep checking if decisions have come in yet for grad school, rip ↑
- 11 the 15 includes a whiteboard and a chair and two rugs and etc. but still a lot of boxes ↑
- 12 special shout out to my friend ming li who used the phrase 'end of a sitcom' to describe it all ↑
- 13 also, remember earlier how I made plans on wednesday 3/11 to stand on the steps of dupont to talk to students who didn't get the memo that Spark was canceled? guess what didn't happen saturday morning. another thing forgotten in the haze after the thursday night emergency announcement, the rush to leave as soon as i could ↑

---

## Share this post

## About Paolo A. '21

---

hiya! i'm paolo, hailing from reno, nevada. i don't really know how to describe myself, so here are three different attempts, because three is the largest number i can count to. the standard: i am a '21 in 14-2 (mathematical economics) at mit, and i like thinking about anything related to people ...

Keep Reading →