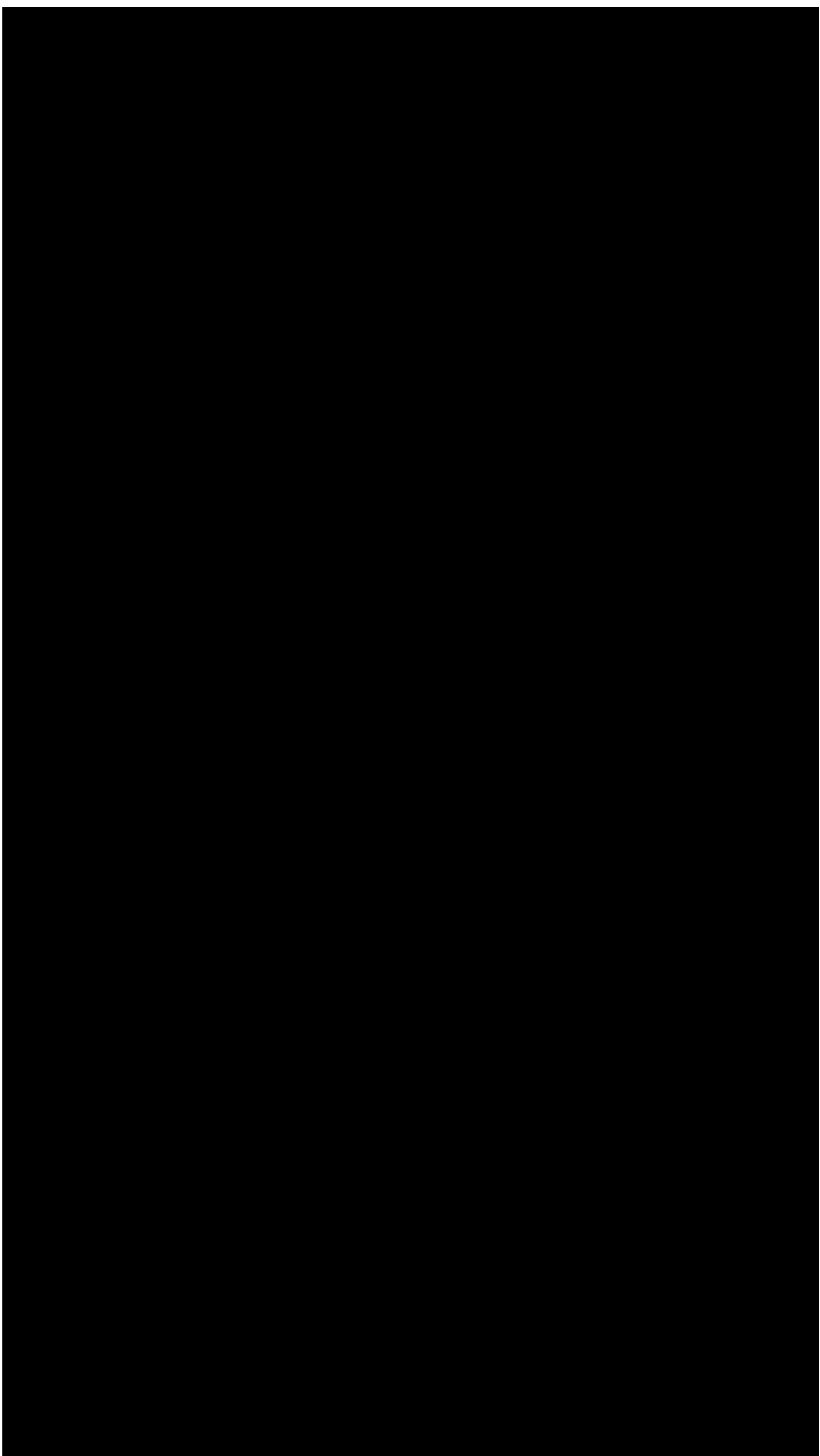

and “overwhelmed.”

While a self-selected group, the respondents, several of whom agreed to be interviewed, represent a range of institutions: community colleges, large public universities, small private colleges, and some highly selective institutions. They described common challenges: Far fewer students show up to class. Those who do avoid speaking when possible. Many skip the readings or the homework. They have trouble remembering what they learned and struggle on tests.

The professors also described how they have tried to reach and teach students, what they think is at the root of the problem, and what’s needed to fix it. Some believe it may be necessary to change the structure of college itself.

Not that anyone has easy answers, starting with the question of what’s at the root of the problem. Do students actually want to be in college   Had they gotten so used to online teaching that simply leaving their dorm rooms

the most.

Freshmen and sophomores, wrote Ashley Shannon, chair of the English department at Grand Valley State University, in Michigan, are “by and large tragically underprepared to meet the challenges of university life — both academically and in terms of ‘adulting,’” such as understanding the consequences of missing a lot of class. “It’s not all their fault, by a long shot! I feel for them. But it’s a problem, and it’s going to have a significant ripple effect.”

“Students seem to have lost their sense of connection with the university and university community, and their sense of purpose in attending,” said Stephanie Masson, who teaches English at Northwestern State University, in Louisiana. After two or more years of masking, they feel as if it’s not OK to get close and talk to someone. “It’s almost like they just prefer to sit in their little cone of silence.”

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Many faculty members thought this academic year, with more people vaccinated, classes meeting in person, and campus clubs and events back in full swing, would be better than last. Yes, Covid remained a significant risk, but those changes were all for the better.

But recent survey data from the Center for Collegiate Mental Health, a network of nearly 700 college and university counseling centers, jibes with what faculty members told *The Chronicle.*

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An increase in social anxiety could explain some of the behaviors that professors are seeing among their students, such as skipping class, said Brett E. Scofield, executive director of the center. For some students, avoidance mechanisms are their ways of coping with stress. “All those behaviors,” he said, “are very consistent with what students are reporting

Croyle, dean of the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, believes that the continual pivots in instruction have led students to develop habits that may no longer work now that they are back in classrooms. That feeling of ineffectualness has led to a more existential anxiety — specifically, a loss of confidence in themselves and their futures. A psychologist by training, Croyle is quick to say that those are her working theories, not hard facts. But she thinks that being a young adult today is challenging in ways that people of other ages may not understand.

“Going to college and making that investment in your future, it’s an act of hope that you can do something that is exciting and interesting to you, that you can find a career you want to engage with that will make a difference, that you can change the direction of your life with this act,” she said. But students’ hope in the future right now is low, and that kernel of enthusiasm is hard to sustain. “Our faculty are right there to hold their hand, to see what potential they have to make a difference in the world. It’s a long game; it’s not a short one. In the short run, it’s a really devastating and difficult time.”

Camryn Lloyd is a first-year student at Northwestern State and one of Masson’s students. She said she had been spared some of the worst of Covid’s college disruptions because she took a year off after high school to join the National Guard, which kept her connected with others. But she, too, finds herself thinking of the pandemic’s impact on her life — she lost an uncle — and the lives of her classmates, many of whom seem quiet and withdrawn in class. “I feel like with this generation you can’t get too happy,” she said. “There’.1(5ng) -,ji (o) 11w-1 (l) -,ji (-36( ) -36) - -2 (s).012 6 2 (u) o0e2 Tm

"but are expected (and do genuinely try) to be accommodating and empathetic with their struggles. It's hard to find the line between being supportive of struggling students and just giving up entirely on academic rigor."

> *The e a l g g We d k ha d We e a a e f h ck*

Those who teach at colleges with a high percentage of students who are lower-income, come from communities hit hard by Covid, or have work and family responsibilities say the cumulative toll of the pandemic has led to emotional overload and physical exhaustion.

"There is rarely a single issue," wrote one faculty member. "In most cases, it is something closer to a catastrophic cascade failure. The most common components that play into this are: lack of basic needs, an economic or job-related problem, lack of child care, mental-health issues, cost of health care, and caring for a sick family member."

Keri Brandt Off is chair of the sociology department at Fort Lewis College, in Colorado, which enrolls many Native American and Alaska Native students. This past year she has noticed an increased sense of "weightedness" among her students. They show up looking exhausted and often escape into their cellphones. "They're here, but they're not here," she said. That's not surprising, given how hard the pandemic hit Native communities. "I have students who lost many, many family members."

Some faculty members who responded to *The Chronicle* believe that students' study skills atrophied in the shift to remote learning, especially in high school. Workloads were often lighter. Deadlines became fluid.

Discussion happened asynchronously or not at all. Students entered college, they believe, expecting more of the same.

"There has been a lot of concern that the use of Zoom, particularly recording and posting things later, has led students to develop the mistaken idea that they don't need to pay attention or be engaged at the time of class because they can just go back and review the recording later," wrote one faculty member who teaches a large introductory-biology course. "The problem is, they don't do that." In a class of 120, only one or two watch the recorded videos, the instructor said, and only 20 to 30 attend class.

Yet faculty members also pointed out that some of the trends they are seeing this year, including shorter attention spans and growing mental-health problems, predate the pandemic. The strains of the past two years simply accelerated those longer-term trends.

Mary Beth Leibham teaches child development and educational psychology at the University of Wisconsin at Eau Claire. She began noticing decreased engagement in her classes five or six years ago. Students say they feel overwhelmed, tired, and lost, she wrote. Leibham worries about the pressure students put on themselves "to have it all figured out."

For many students, she said, success means getting straight A's, always going above and beyond, and "good enough" is not really good enough. "This breaks my heart," she wrote. "My students are so much more than their GPAs and sports accomplishments. I tell them this every chance I get, but I fear they don't believe me."

Faculty members said they were responding to these challenges in a variety of ways. In addition to reaching out more frequently to struggling students,

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Driska, an associate professor in the department of kinesiology at Michigan State University,
who teaches an online graduate course in exercise and sports science. Yet colleges seem hesitant to challenge students right now out of a fear that they might break. "It's almost like we need to come together, as faculty and students. How do we hit the reset button What does education need to look like "

Two ideas come up most frequently in the discussions professors say they are having with one another, and in their observations of their own teaching: increasing experiential learning and redesigning courses to connect more closely to students' lived experiences and prospective careers.

Experiential learning, in which students learn by doing, addresses many of the shortcomings of traditional higher education, its proponents say. It

professors build more hands-on learning into their courses Are their classes and course sequences designed to help students build careers or just turn out future Ph.D.s like themselves

"How can we change the model that we have in higher education," she said, "from coverage of disciplines to experiential learning, which is really connected to the careers that most of our students are going to have " The answer, she believes, can help York and other colleges engage students more effectively.

Mallory Bower, SUNY-Oswego's coordinator of first-year experiential courses and engaged learning, has also been thinking about the future of learning. While today's students are prone to anxiety, she noted, they are also adept at exploring and learning through the internet. "Students can feel like, If I can find this on YouTube, then why am I here " she said. "They are looking for a return on investment, and I don't blame them at all."

Bower incorporates experiential learning in all of her courses, which cover a range of topics, including strategic communications and career preparation.

everything. But we can do little things."

Creating that sense of connection, to help students see the larger purpose and value of higher education, may be what helps them regain their footing.