



Student Remote Learning Challenges During the Pandemic

A MIXED METHODS REPORT

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Executive Summary

In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic pushed college education systems to rapidly transition to remote learning. This mixed-methods report examines college students' self-reported impacts of remote learning during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The data were collected via an online survey from 1,956 undergraduate and graduate students during summer 2020. The results indicate that **DePaul students struggled to adapt to remote learning** and **many did not feel supported by the university**.

It is crucial for universities to reflect on the remote learning experiences of college students during the pandemic to understand how to create a supportive remote learning environment for current and future students (Zhu & Liu, 2020).

We recommend universities do the following:



Invest in Instructors' and Faculty's Capacity for Online Learning



Ensure Student Accessibility to Online Learning



Creatively Provide "On-Campus" Resources to Remote Students

Purpose of Report

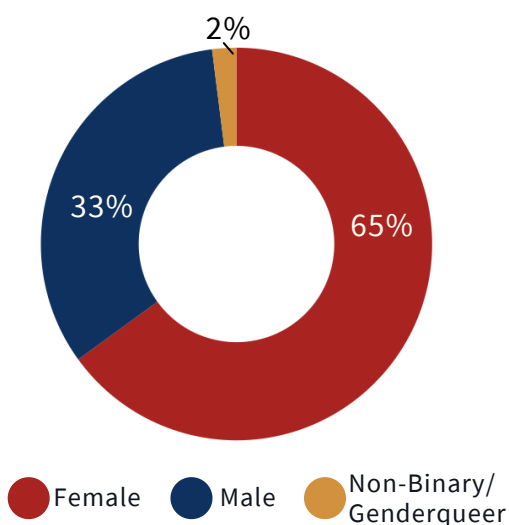
With this report, we aim to understand the challenges of remote learning during the pandemic from college students' perspective, using a mixed-methods approach.



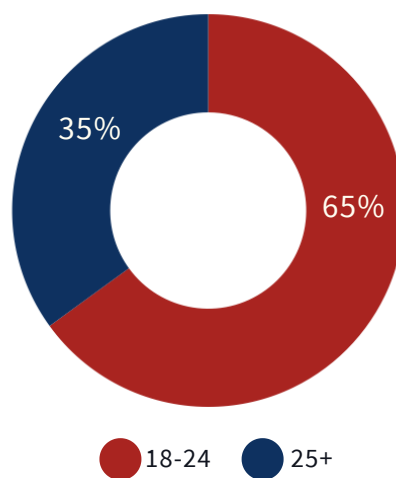
Participant Demographics

A total of 1,956 undergraduate and graduate students completed an online survey during the summer of 2020.

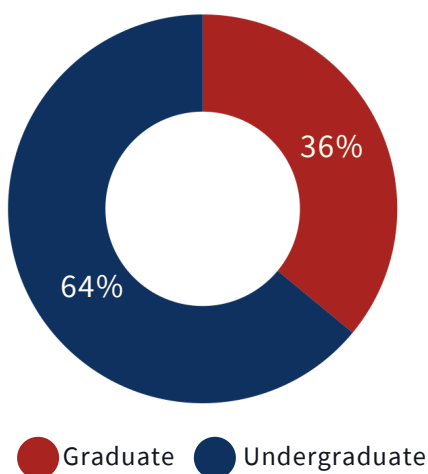
Gender Identity



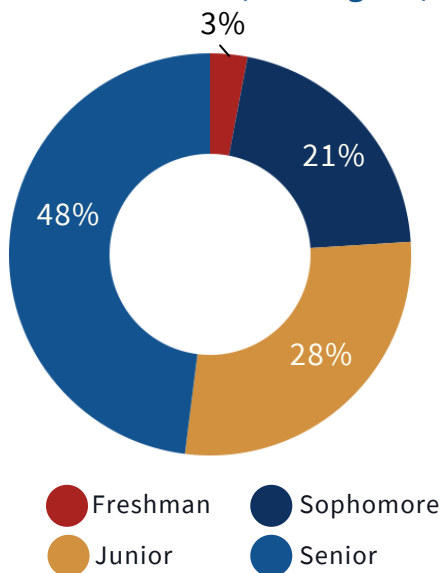
Age



Degree Pursuing

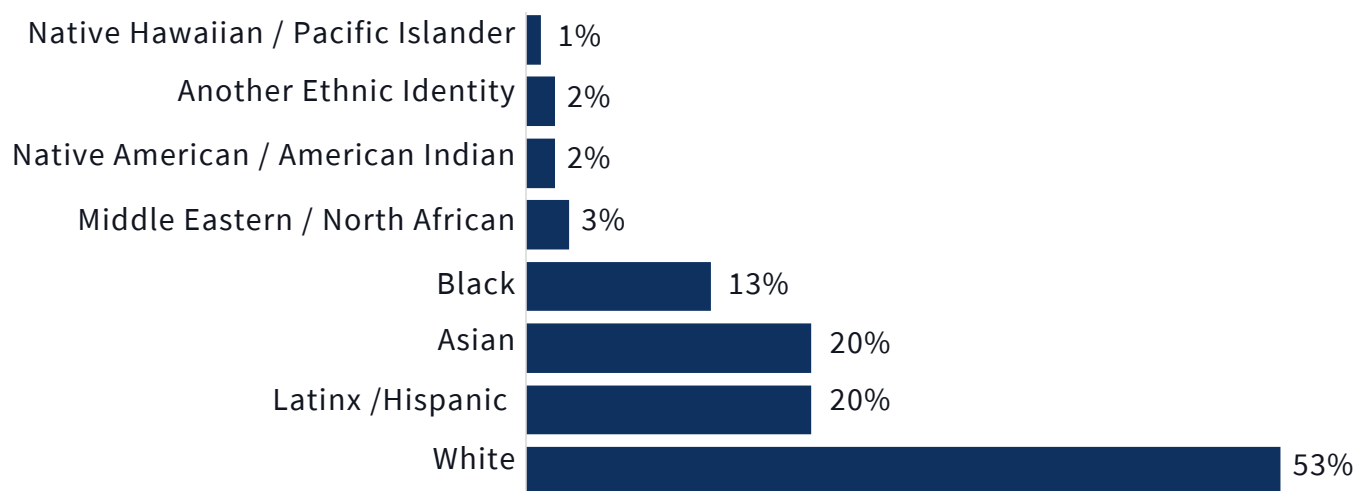


Year in School (Undergrad)



Participant Demographics

Race/Ethnicity



13% are part-time students

9% are international students

35% are first-generation college students

Quantitative Findings

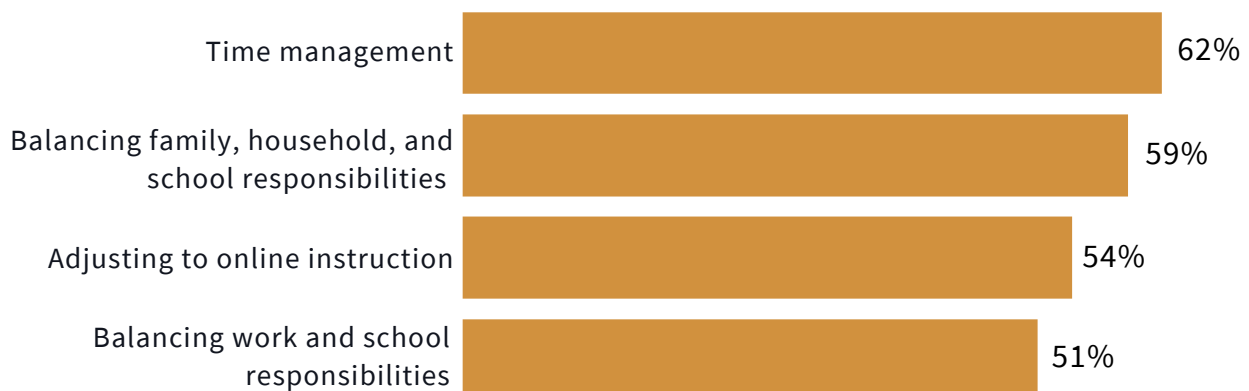
SUPPORT

Overall, a slight majority of students (51%) agreed that **DePaul's COVID-19 response was supportive of students.**



DIFFICULTY

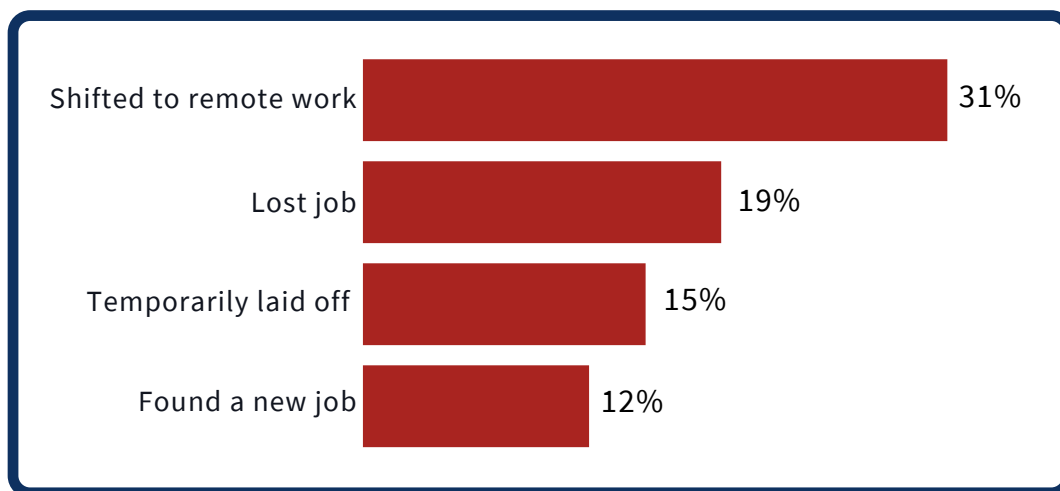
During the Spring quarter of 2020, **students had difficulty with a variety of remote learning activities.** The majority of students had difficulty with the following categories: time management (62%), balancing family, household, and school responsibilities (59%), adjusting to online instruction (54%), and balancing work and school responsibilities (51%).



Quantitative Findings

JOB CHANGES

Many experienced job changes during the pandemic, including college students. **Students in our sample experienced the following job changes:**



ENROLLMENT

The pandemic came with many challenges to students that could impact their decision to stay enrolled at the university. However, **a large majority of students reported planning on returning to DePaul for the following Autumn quarter 2020.**

96%

of students planned to re-enroll
for Autumn 2020



Qualitative Findings

We selected a representative, random subsample (10% of responses) of the larger dataset to conduct qualitative analysis.* Participants shared their experiences transitioning to remote education.†

Data were organized into six themes, including the following:



**Adjusting to
Remote Learning**



**Academic Progress
& Performance**



**Experiences with
Courses**



**Course Grading
Accommodations**



**Interactions with
Professors**



Academic Resources

**Two researchers independently coded the subsample of responses, iteratively creating a codebook and themes. The researchers reviewed their codes and themes together and discussed discrepancies to achieve consensus.*

†The questions included in the qualitative analysis are as follows: (1) Considering all the changes due to COVID-19 (shelter in place, DePaul shifting to remote learning, and any other changes in your life), how have these circumstances affected you holistically (academically, financially, socially, mentally, spiritually, physically, family life, etc.)? (2) Considering all the changes due to COVID-19 (shelter in place, DePaul shifting to remote learning, and any other changes in your life), how have these circumstances affected your academic progress or performance? In what way? (3) What's been the biggest challenge in moving to an all-online setting for your classes?



Adjusting to remote learning

In general, **students struggled with the adjustment to remote learning**. Participants reported difficulty self-managing online courses, that it was harder to focus, and they lacked motivation to complete their work. Also, students self-reported increased feelings of stress, anxiety, or depressive symptoms and difficulty balancing and separating school from their other responsibilities at home and work. Additionally, participants described having inadequate at-home work environments with not enough quiet space to do their work or adequate equipment such as strong internet or a fully functioning laptop. Finally, participants reported feeling a loss of the college experience; they missed their in-person classes, interacting with professors and fellow students, and felt that it was harder to reach out to others as a result.

Some students, however, **managed the adjustment to remote learning well**. These participants reported an increase in time and flexibility with their schedules, feeling that it was easier to focus, and that they had fewer distractions. Many students who did well with the adjustment did so because they already had experienced online courses or were enrolled in an online program.

"The spring quarter was very stressful for me. It was very difficult to concentrate, study, maintain my family, and assignments."

"Yes there is overall more stress. More responsibility of the student to self-teach and ensure there are never any technical issues. Also less of a community with student peers supporting each other."

"I think switching to remote learning was the highlight of it because of the increased flexibility. I feel like my performance has increased and time efficiency because now I don't have to waste time commuting and can refocus on topics that matter most."



Academic Progress & Performance

Students described a variety of impacts remote learning and the pandemic had on their academic progress and performance. Many students reported their **academic progress and performance was negatively impacted** (such as receiving worse grades, withdrawing from courses, or delaying graduation) due to a lack of access to academic resources, increased stress, and decreased time flexibility in their home and work life. Additionally, participants expressed having trouble finding or completing career-related opportunities, such as jobs, internships, or certification exams.

Some participants reported that remote learning and the pandemic did not affect their academic progress or performance but did require more effort and resilience. Similarly, some participants stated **they received good grades but felt as if they did not learn from their online courses**. Lastly, some students experienced a positive impact on their academic progress and performance, citing the increase in time flexibility and more accessible summer courses.

"My grades dropped a bit and my performance hasn't been nearly as good. I also don't feel like I'm retaining much of the information from the online courses."

"While my grades stayed the same, I feel like I learned substantially less."



Experiences with Courses

Participants described their **experiences with courses as difficult and of poor quality**. Students reported that some professors were not engaging in the online format or simply were unprepared for remote teaching and the necessary technology use. Additionally, participants described their courses as being poor quality and not structured well. For example, students reported not learning as much in their online classes, that the instruction was not interactive, and that they needed to self-teach the material from class. Additionally, participants reported an increase in workload that was mainly “busy work”, instructors only providing materials that were readily available online for free, and that the standards expected of students had decreased. Experience-based courses were described as being difficult to take online, such as science labs, language, nursing, and arts courses.

Finally, many students reported that the **tuition for these online courses was too high and did not reflect the poorer course quality** of these remote learning courses.

I don't feel many professors are versed in online teaching, so it leaves the student with the burden to take resources and teach themselves."

"I feel that the courses I take online are more administrative (read, respond, repeat) and less mentally engaging. One of the biggest drivers for me to study was the interaction with other students and professors and that is very different and less stimulating when doing remote learning."

"Academically it has been a challenge using zoom for lectures and exams. I felt that I had to teach myself for the last few months with no decrease reflected in tuition."



Course Grading Accommodations

Participants expressed appreciation for the course grading accommodations provided at the end of the academic term, including optional finals and pass/fail grading options. Having these accommodations was helpful and a relief to many students.



"I was fine until finals came around and I started panicking about them, but then they became optional which really helped my situation. I was able to keep my GPA."

"I have not been present mentally or emotionally, most likely due to fight or flight, so I took advantage of the P/F option."



Interactions with Professors

Students shared that **interacting with professors during remote learning was challenging**. Students explained they had difficulty communicating with professors; reasons for difficulty communicating included limited office hours, no immediate method of communication, and that email communication was slow. Additionally, students reported negative interactions with their professors and cited professors as being not understanding, insensitive, inflexible, and unresponsive to students' needs and challenges during the pandemic.

Some students, however, reported **positive professor interactions** and said professors were helpful, supportive, flexible, responsive, and available to remote learning adjustments, pandemic impacts, and students' needs.

"...feeling like I can't communicate with my professors for help/feedback."

"I felt stressed everyday of spring quarter and felt that very few of my professors took my concerns and problems seriously."

"It was a slight struggle toward the end, wanting that face to face assistance in some things but my professors did a great job being available."



Academic Resources

Students explained that a **big challenge to remote learning was the limited access to campus resources**, resulting in difficulty performing and learning. Some resources students cited as having difficulty accessing included science labs, the library, faculty office hours, homework help/ tutoring, study groups, and computers.



"The circumstances have negatively affected my academic performance and thus my academic progress. Without access to campus resources (in-person labs, faculty office hours, library for studying, etc) I found it difficult to perform up to my standards and had change my schedule to accommodate for the workload."

Recommendations

Even as restrictions for the pandemic are lifted and universities move away from offering solely remote learning, many universities (and students) may continue to choose online learning as an option for higher education. Universities should reflect on the remote learning experiences of college students during the pandemic to understand how to create a supportive learning environment for future remote students (Zhu & Liu, 2020). We recommend universities consider the following.



Invest in Instructors' and Faculty's Capacity for Online Learning



Ensure Student Accessibility to Online Learning



Creatively Provide "On-Campus" Resources to Remote Students



Invest in Instructors' and Faculty's Capacity for Online Learning

The findings from this study detail students' perspectives of their online learning experience, including their experiences with instructors. The challenges that students detailed in their survey responses may be mitigated by more university support for instructors. Zhu and Liu (2020) explain that universities should develop instructors' capacity for online teaching. A potential way to increase instructors' capacity for online teaching includes building a network of support and training within the university. Training for teaching online may include training related to technology, setting up online courses, feedback loop structures, and best practices for online teaching. Additionally, it is important to recognize that transferring in-person classes to online structures may benefit from rethinking course structure entirely. Online teaching may include a less teacher-centered structure (e.g., fewer lectures) and a more student-centered approach (e.g., hands on activities, group activities, discussion). Lastly, it is important to understand the difference between emergency remote learning transitions and planned online courses, following best practices accordingly (Hodges et al., 2020).



Ensure Student Accessibility to Online Learning

Universities should focus on access and equity when creating online learning structures (Heitz et al., 2020). To ensure equity in internet and laptop access, universities may provide a stipend to students to cover expenses. Alternatively, if universities do not have the capacity to provide funds to cover internet and laptop costs, universities may loan equipment to students for personal use (e.g., laptops, hot spots).



Creatively Provide "On-Campus" Resources to Remote Students

Students from the study expressed challenges related to accessing on-campus resources and how that may have impacted their education. Universities should strategically create ways to offer on-campus resources to remote students. Heitz and colleagues (2020) explain that a creative solution universities may adopt includes building virtual gathering spaces for students to connect with campus offices, staff, faculty, and other students. Additionally, accessibility to campus resources to meet basic needs (e.g., food, housing, financial, mental health) should be provided equitably to include both in-person students and remote learning students. Lastly, support offices, such as the Office for Students with Disabilities or Dean of Students Office, should be accessible and offer services to all students regardless of learning environment.

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