

College and COVID-19: An unprecedented learning experience

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In the middle of the second semester of my first year of college, the unthinkable happened. It was a situation I could've never dreamt of in my wildest dreams, one that would shift the trajectory of my college career – and my life – as I knew it: a worldwide pandemic. College had dealt me a handful of surprises up until that earth-shaking March of 2020. I had made wonderful friends and gained experiences beyond what I'd ever imagined for myself. While college courses were hard and a major adjustment from high school, I felt that I was doing just fine overall. My outlook on the rest of my college journey was bursting with optimism. And then, COVID-19. Optimism was quickly replaced by fear, which was followed soon after by the transition to Zoom classes. With the start of online lectures came intense burn-out and trouble with focusing. It felt as if a rug I didn't know I was standing on had been swiftly yanked out from beneath me, sending me flying, only to inevitably crash to the ground. For me, learning during the pandemic became increasingly more difficult. But what made the whole experience bearable at its beginning was knowing that I wasn't alone in my struggle. Research has indicated that COVID-19 has not only impacted physical health but has also led to major damage to the mental health of many individuals, regardless of age. One particular study examined college students' early experiences in the face of the pandemic. In this article, researchers Madrigal and Blevins (2021) showed that the challenges most reported by students were struggles with mental health and negative emotions. In this study, negative emotions and mental health were operationally defined as severe or general feelings of anxiety, fear, sadness, depression, anger, and stress. These researchers suggested that a lack of social interaction between peers and a subsequent lack of emotional support might explain why the mental health of students has deteriorated since the start of virtual learning (Madrigal & Blevins 2021). Like the students who participated in this study, my mental well-being took a damaging blow. Being cooped up inside of my house all day while unable to spend time with my friends was difficult and only worsened the sense of isolation that I felt during the early stages of quarantine. The days began to blur, each one watered down with the same lack of sunlight and social interaction. While I have always considered myself an introvert and did sometimes enjoy getting to do college from the comfort of my bedroom, I struggled with being by myself all day more than I ever anticipated. Being alone with my thoughts day in and day out left room for worries over the health of my loved ones, especially as the holidays, usually spent in their company, passed by. These worries sometimes became overwhelming and only further distracted me from schoolwork. When this was coupled with burnout, both from school and witnessing repeated violence against my community, completing assignments began to feel like a burden. I went from someone who cared greatly about getting good grades to someone who carelessly slept the day away once classes ended. Reaching the end of the semester and the last of my final exams felt like climbing Mount Everest. Still, it ultimately felt good knowing I'd made it to the top and accomplished what had seemed impossible to me. While the majority of university students have braved and conquered the era of online courses, we are still very much in the thick of the COVID-19 pandemic. The definition of normal has shifted in meaning as we now wear masks in the classroom despite being less than 6 feet away from our classmates. To me, it feels as if we are collectively living on eggshells – a breakout of COVID-19 cases could occur at any moment, once again shifting the trajectory of our college careers. The most we can do is keep ourselves safe while trying our best to keep those around us safe as well. However, this isn't always enough, especially since not everyone is willing to abide by CDC guidelines. Overall, I find it incredible how college students have managed to survive the common stresses of academia while simultaneously dealing with immense burnout and less-than-desirable methods of learning that had to be

adopted during the pandemic. To me, it indicates that we are stronger and more capable than we ever knew. Although returning to Zoom classes is the last thing most people (including myself) want, there's a spark of hope within that leads me to believe things would turn out just fine if we ever did have to return to remote learning. Though this may not be how I imagined my college experience would go, it's possessed beauty and meaningful moments in its unique way. For this, at least, I can say I'm eternally grateful.