

Higher Education During COVID-19: Perceptions of Remote Learners

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What was it like to be a remote college student, learning online after campuses abruptly closed in early 2020 due to the COVID-19 outbreak? A survey conducted in the fall of 2020 asked 500 U. S. college students to share their perceived challenges and concerns, enrollment expectations after campuses reopen, and thoughts about the impact of the experience on their future. Overall findings include challenges and concerns related to maintaining academic progress while balancing pandemic-related demands in other areas of life, such as work and family. Anticipated impacts were varied, including effects on academic and career outcomes, as well as personal health. The implications and recommendations presented call for enhanced student support initiatives and development of a wider range of learning options to meet the needs and expectations of remote and post-pandemic learners in higher education.

Keywords: COVID-19, Higher Education, Remote Learning, Student Experience, Student Support

Introduction

The college experience dramatically changed in 2020. Enrolled primarily in classes held face-to-face, in physical classrooms, most students made a quick shift to virtual learning environments when their U. S. college campuses closed in reaction to the COVID-19 outbreak. Health and safety precautions at that time included physical distancing, use of masks, and increased sanitation practices designed to reduce infection, which made in-person meetings untenable. The students affected by campus closures experienced remote learning that resulted in a variety of perceived challenges and advantages, some of which may have long-term implications on higher education.

Emergency Remote Teaching

As colleges moved their campus-based classes online, there was a call from many learning professionals working in instructional design and educational technology-related roles to clarify the terminology used to describe these classes. The term *emergency remote teaching* evolved to describe courses that had been rapidly produced to be offered online under emergency conditions. This contrasts with online courses that are developed through a purposeful process often based on established quality standards for distance learning (Hodges, Moore, Lockee, Trust, & Bond, 2020).

Frameworks are emerging to guide the actions of educators and administrators during times of crisis and unexpected change that require rapid adjustment and decision-making. The proposed Novel Remote Learning Framework (NRLF) brings together multiple strategies and techniques “to enable flexible learning, independent learning, and the building of communities of inquiry” (Almutairi, Ali, & Ghuloum, 2021, p. 129). The NRLF’s components include social context (e.g., student-student and student-teacher interaction, social presence), self-directed learning (e.g., student-content interaction, cognitive presence), structured learning (e.g., scaffolding, feedback), and community of inquiry (e.g., teacher presence, collaborative approach), as executed through the features and functions of a learning management system (Almutairi, et al., 2021).

The Emergency Remote Teaching Environment (ERTE) framework was recently developed to address remote teaching and learning in K-12 settings (Whittle, Tiwari, Yan, & Williams, 2020). This approach includes choices about how communication takes place at a distance (e.g., asynchronous vs. synchronous) and how they impact the selection of instructional strategies (e.g., discussion, collaborative writing). Both NRLF and ERTE emphasize the importance of the social roles of both teachers and students, as well as expectations for their resilience and adaptability during times of emergency remote teaching and learning (Almutairi, et al., 2021; Whittle, et al., 2020).

Student and Institutional Perceptions

Student perceptions of the remote learning experience are often mixed. While challenges did exist in 2020, especially at the onset of the switch to remote learning, many students identified advantages to their new distance learning context. A 2021 survey of undergraduate students enrolled at 30 colleges in the U. S. revealed not only challenges related to home distractions, social isolation, and communicating with peers, but also advantages related to having flexible schedules while saving time and money (McCoy, 2021). Remote learners have also reported challenges related to managing their time and participating in collaborative class activities (Ghazi-Saidi, Criffield, Kraci, McKelvey, Obasi & Vu, 2020.) Overall, remote students also seem acutely aware of the need for campus closures and the need to adapt identifying health concerns and reduced anxiety about the coronavirus as overall advantages of their remote learning experience (Ghazi-Saidi et al., 2020; McCoy, 2021; Sykes, 2021).

As colleges across the country return to normal campus operations post-pandemic, stakeholders will bring their experiences of remote teaching and learning with them. These experiences will likely impact their work moving into the next year and potentially have long-term effects. One potential result is “resilience on both sides; the students and the instructors” (Ghazi-Saidi et al., 2020, p. 380). As students and faculty alike were able to adapt to their remote courses there were opportunities to see their educational experiences through a new lens. This perspective resulted in changes related to, for example, how students and instructors interact online and options for adjusted assessments (Ho, Cheong, & Weldon, 2021). These modifications, however temporary or permanent they may become, will likely change “the attitudes and expectations many U. S. students have about the ways they wish to learn in college as well as their perceptions about the value of earning college degrees” (McCoy, 2021, p. 23).

Comparing online students and online learning with remote students and remote learning is problematic and may lead to inaccurate assumptions and decisions about learners engaged in these different educational experiences. Exploring students’ perceptions of their recent remote learning experience can inform a wide variety of programs and processes at higher education institutions seeking to better support student success during emergency and non-emergency operations.

Methodology

The findings reported here are derived from an annual survey initiative in its fifth year of data collection in 2020, which includes online and remote students, as well as school administrator participants (Venable, 2021). The goals of the initiative include long-term tracking of learner demographics, program marketing and recruiting trends, course design considerations, and the student learning experience. This article, however, provides a closer look at data collected from remote students only, providing more detail about this specific perspective.

This study sought to capture a snapshot of the remote college student experience in the U. S. during the fall semester of 2020. At the time of the study, most campuses had been closed for approximately eight months with classes continued in remote format. The following questions guided this work:

- What challenges and concerns did remote college students have when their campuses closed?
- Will remote learners consider enrolling in online classes after campuses re-open?
- How do remote students think the COVID-19-related changes to their college experience might impact their future?

Definitions

Participants self-identified as remote students and responded to questions about themselves and their courses based on the definitions listed below. These definitions were developed by the research team, which included members with expertise in instructional design and online teaching, and presented to participants as part of the survey instrument.

- *Remote Student:* A student who enrolled in an on-campus program but is taking all or some classes online because they are not offered in person due to COVID-19 restrictions to campus attendance.
- *Remote Courses and Programs:* courses and programs designed to be delivered in person but were moved to virtual learning environments when campuses closed due to COVID-19 restrictions.
- *Online Student:* A student who chose/chooses an online program over on-campus program, enrolling in a program that was designed for online delivery.

- *Online Courses and Programs:* courses and programs designed to be delivered online and take place predominantly online with no required face-to-face sessions, but may incorporate on-site activities, such as residencies, fieldwork, and practicum requirements.

Data Collection

This descriptive research project sought to describe the perceptions of remote learners enrolled in higher education during the coronavirus pandemic. An online survey was conducted in October 2020 reaching 500 remote students in the U.S. to collect their insights in terms of challenges and concerns related to campus closures, the impact of remote learning on their perceptions of online classes, and perceived impact on their lives and academic and career plans.

The survey was developed by the research team with GLG Research, a partner organization dedicated to global survey and market research efforts that was contracted for this project. The survey, hosted on the Decipher platform, is one that is used in a descriptive study initiative that began in 2017 to track trends in the characteristics, attitudes, and perspectives of online students and is reviewed and modified annually [Venable, 2021]. The instrument included a screening section designed to verify each respondent's qualifications as a remote learner. Quantitative survey items included multiple choice, single selection and multiple selection, and Likert scale formats.

The survey was fielded by Lucid LLC, in partnership with GLG Research, using a quota sampling approach to provide a sample that represented the four continental U.S. geographical regions (i.e., midwest, northeast, south, and west). Additional quotas were implemented to ensure the sample included gender identity and racial diversity. Respondents received an honorarium for their participation in the online survey. All participant data was self-reported. GLG Research reviewed the data for signs of poor survey behavior, such as straight lining. Descriptive statistics are reported and were obtained directly from the online survey platform.

Participant Demographics

A majority of participants was enrolled full-time (80%) and 61% were pursuing an undergraduate degree (i.e., associate or bachelor's) at the time of the study. The top three academic majors pursued by participants were in the categories of business, management, marketing, and related services (16%); computer and information sciences and support services (14%); and health professions and related programs (13%). Data was not collected about the type of college or university at which they were enrolled (i.e., public, private, or for profit).

Fifty-six percent of the study participants identified as female, 43% identified as male, and 1% identified as gender non-conforming. A majority (54%) were white or Caucasian, while 21% were African American or Black; 15% Hispanic or Latino/a; 7% Asian, Pacific Islander, or Asian Indian; 2% Native American or American Indian 2%; and 1% identifying as "other." The largest percentage of participants were in the age range typically considered to be traditional college students (i.e., 18-24 years old).

Table 1.
Age of Participants

Age Group	n=500
18-24	38%
25-34	32%
35-44	18%
45-54	8%
55 and older	4%

Limitations

Generalizability of the findings of this report may be limited to student populations with characteristics similar to those of the study participants. Higher education professionals working with dissimilar students may benefit from an awareness of broader trends and recommendations to explore the potential impact of remote learning during the pandemic on students enrolled in their courses and programs.

Remote Student Perceptions

Students enrolled in traditional campus settings in 2020 faced many potential challenges as they followed their institutions' shift to remote learning in reaction to COVID-19 restrictions. This study sought to identify some of the specific challenges and concerns these students encountered during the coronavirus pandemic, as well as insights into their remote learning experience and thoughts about the future impact of the changes.

Challenges and Concerns

When asked about the roadblocks they encountered in trying to complete their academic program, participants identified *maintaining a desired GPA* (19%). This was followed by *staying on track with classes so I can graduate on time* (17%) and *paying for higher education while minimizing debt* (16%) as the top challenges encountered.

Table 2.
Roadblocks to Completing Online/Remote Program

Challenges to Program Completion	n=500
Maintaining a desired GPA	19%
Staying on track with classes so I can graduate in the planned time frame	17%
Paying for higher education while minimizing student debt	16%
Unexpected circumstances or events in my personal life	15%
Scheduling on-campus visits to support my program (testing, orientation, etc.)	9%
Access to the required technology or internet connectivity	9%
Not having enough transfer credits count toward degree requirements	7%
Maintaining a minimum GPA	7%
Other	1%

In addition to the challenges faced by remote students, this study sought to identify the primary concerns or worries of these learners during this time. The largest percentage reported *balancing education with work, family, and household obligations* (23%) as the biggest concern. Twenty percent identified concerns related to *adapting to an online or remote learning environment*. While the difficulty of work-life balance may not be a new challenge for these students, it may have been amplified in a year that saw widespread disruption in work and family routines as well as in educational plans.

Table 3.
Biggest Concerns about the Online/Remote Learning Experience

Concerns about the Learning Experience	n=500
Balancing education with work, family, and household obligations	23%
Adapting to an online or remote learning environment	20%
Quality of instruction and academic support	15%
Being part of a learning community and/or interaction with professors and classmates	14%
Accessing support services provided by my college or university	10%
Challenge of using technology and software to access and participate in my classes	9%
Perception of online education/courses by employers	8%
No concerns	1%
Other	<1%

Only 9% of the remote student participants indicated that the *challenge of using technology and software to access and participate in classes* was a primary concern. While the lack of concern about access to technology may seem surprising, it is likely that some of these remote students experienced online education prior to the pandemic. According to a 2017 report on distance education enrollment, “in higher education, 29.7% of all students [were] taking at least one distance course” (Allen & Seaman, 2017, p.4). In that report, *distance education course* was defined as “a course in which the instructional content is delivered exclusively via distance education,” which “[uses] one or more technologies to deliver instruction to students who are separated from the instructor” (Allen & Seaman, 2017, p. 6).

Future Enrollment Plans

The changes to remote students’ learning environments during the pandemic may have intensified challenges and concerns, however, when asked about their plans for online enrollment in the future the responses were encouraging. Overall, 57% of participants expressed an interest in returning to campus-based classes. In comparison, almost half (49%) said they were *likely* or *very likely* to enroll in online courses when their schools return to normal campus operations. These students may be more open than ever to enrollment options that allow for a combination of online and in-person experiences.

Table 4.
Anticipated Enrollment After Campuses Return to Normal Operations

Future Enrollment Plans	Not at All Likely	Not Likely	Neutral	Likely	Very Likely
Enroll in fully online classes or an online program	17% (n=87)	12% (n=60)	22% (n=108)	26% (n=128)	23% (n=117)
Enroll in remote learning courses	12% (n=62)	14% (n=69)	26% (n=128)	24% (n=120)	24% (n=121)
Enroll in in-person classes in physical classrooms	7% (n=33)	12% (n=61)	24% (n=122)	24% (n=120)	33% (n=164)

When asked if they would recommend online and/or remote learning to others, the response from remote student participants was overwhelmingly positive – 83% said they would recommend it, while only 17% said they would not. This may indicate some level of student satisfaction with their college experiences, based on an awareness that they took place during a time when remote learning was part of a specific emergency response and not necessarily indicative of online learning in general.

Potential Long-Term Impact

As campuses switched from on-campus to remote learning environments, many students felt the impact in multiple areas of their lives. Academic-related challenges and concerns were perhaps anticipated, but the potential impacts identified by students participating in this study were broader, including their mental health and concerns about future employment. These and other areas of impact may continue to affect remote students well after the time when their campuses return to in-person operations.

More than one-quarter (28%) of remote student participants were concerned about their graduation date being delayed. As campuses closed, it was reported that some students took gap years or leaves of absence while others took fewer courses while classes were offered remotely (Rodriguez, 2021). One-quarter of the survey participants (25%) said it would be harder to find a job, which could be a reflection on the employment and economic slowdown experienced in 2020, also associated with the pandemic (Bauer, Broady, Edelberg & O'Donnell, 2020).

Potential health impacts of the changed college experience were also a concern of remote learners. Fourteen percent anticipated long-term effects on their physical health. Twenty-eight percent anticipated long-term effects on their mental health. A separate survey of college students conducted in early 2021 found that those anticipating mental

health issues were also reported a reduction in interaction with classmates and professors, decreased opportunities for social engagement overall, and burnout (Dennon, 2021).

Table 5.
Impact of Institutional COVID-19-related Changes

Student Anticipated Impact	n=500
I will be more adaptable and flexible when unexpected events occur.	36%
I will have more experience and a higher comfort level working with new technologies.	29%
My graduation date will be delayed.	28%
There will be lasting effects to my mental health.	28%
It will be harder for me to find a job.	25%
I will not be able to complete an internship.	18%
I will earn less than I anticipated after graduation.	16%
My major changed or will change.	15%
There will be lasting effects to my physical health.	14%
No impact	8%
Other	<1%

Note: Participants could identify and select multiple areas of impact.

Not all perceived areas of impact were negative. More than one-third (36%) of participants said they *will be more adaptable and flexible when unexpected events occur*. And 29% shared that they *will have more experience and higher comfort level working with new technologies* due to the changes they've experienced at their institutions related to COVID-19. In some ways, what these students have experienced may have provided a lesson and practice in developing resilience, which could serve them well in the remainder of their academic programs and life after graduation.

Implications and Discussion

During stressful times, such as a global pandemic, educational goals can lose priority status with students who are managing upheaval across their many life roles. In this study students' biggest concerns, which were related to creating work-life-school balance and adapting to changes in their learning environment, provide insight into how difficult it was to be a successful college student during the pandemic, even when the commitment to education was present.

While the NRLF and ERTE frameworks may seem focused on academic aspects of emergency remote teaching and learning, their emphasis on communication and student support could be extended beyond the virtual classroom. Participants in this study identified challenges related to staying on track with their classes while maintaining a desired, not minimum, GPA. This illustrates a continued focus on education. Students in this study also shared a wide variety of needs for support ranging from coursework and time management to physical and mental health. Both frameworks also present a level of assumption that students are resilient and will be able to adapt along with their professors and institutions. The students in this study reflected not only resilience, but also an awareness of strengthening their abilities to be flexible and adaptable during their remote learning experiences in 2020.

Students who experienced remote learning first-hand during the coronavirus pandemic have a critical perspective to share about not only what it was like to become a remote learner, but also how the experience may impact their future education, careers, and beyond. Creating opportunities for these students to not only provide input, but also be part of the planning process at their institutions is important as higher education moves away from pandemic-related contingency processes and towards what some call a new normal of post-pandemic campus life. Bringing students to the table to discuss topics such as support services, emergency planning, and course development may prevent inaccurate assumptions about their needs and expectations leading to misalignment of resources, which are often limited in higher education settings. The NRLF recommendations include "taking a holistic approach in order to promote learning during an emergency" as well as a renewed focus on effective communication (Almutairi, et al., 2021, p. 130). Students can, and potentially should, be part of a holistic strategy to improve the remote learning experience.

Overall, the remote students participating in this study seem generally satisfied with their experience despite the challenges and concerns they faced. Most were willing to recommend online and remote learning to others and many indicated a desire to enroll in online classes after their campuses fully reopen. This consideration of a wider variety of course formats could include remote learning and support as a strategy – separate from completely asynchronous online and completely in-person, on campus classes – which might include more scheduled, synchronous class sessions and access to online delivery of support services. Offering more flexible enrollment options may lead to more effective connections with faculty and peers and ability to address the variety of learner needs, particularly those related to life balance.

Conclusion

This study's findings suggest that remote students faced significant challenges to completing their courses during pandemic-related campus closures. They also developed an awareness of their capability to be flexible and adaptable when reacting to unexpected changes in their school, work, and home lives. There also seems to be some degree of acceptance of remote and online course delivery. A variety of emerging needs of these learners, ranging from academic to health and wellness, is evident and requires adequate support to achieve successful student outcomes as pandemic-related changes to campus courses continue. This study reports remote students' feedback on a national level; however, each institution and program's student populations may have a unique set of needs and expectations. Integration of the student perspective is needed to dispel assumptions about students' needs and experiences and enhance institutional- and course-level decision making in preparation for future contingency scenarios.

Recommendations for future research include continued study of the 2020-2021 class of remote students as they return to on-campus learning as early as the fall semester of 2021. Their enrollment choices, continued challenges and concerns, potential changes in preferences and expectations for learning and service delivery will further inform school and program leadership. The post-pandemic student may be a changed student with expectations for flexibility, more learning options, and agency in their educational experiences. Tracking these students' progress toward graduation may also lead to opportunities for their schools to further support their success.

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