

**UNDERSTANDING UNDERGRADUATE STUDENT EXPERIENCES  
AND PRIORITIES FOR RETURNING TO CAMPUS DURING THE  
COVID-19 PANDEMIC AT THE UNIVERSITY OF DELAWARE**

by

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A thesis submitted to the Faculty of the University of Delaware in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Honors Bachelor of Arts in Interpersonal Communication with Distinction


Spring 2022


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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The thesis you are about to read was a massive effort that entailed months of dedication, passion, focus, and most of all, unwavering support of a handful of incredibly special individuals for whom I am so grateful and without whom the successful completion of this project would not have been possible.

My foremost thanks goes to Dr. Allison Karpyn, who took a chance on me as a beginner in research and trusted me to justly capture the stories of undergraduate students through this report. The hours of early mornings and late nights spent molding me to be a better researcher, writer, and thinker are so appreciated and cherished as a learning opportunity that I will never forget. Working with her has been a privilege and a gift, and has left me with so many new skills that I will carry throughout the rest of my career.

Second, to my second and third faculty readers, Dr. Amy Bleakley and Dr. Lindsay Hoffman: thank you so much for being open to serving on my thesis committee and supporting me throughout this process. Faculty are such an important part of students' lives at college, and your encouragement truly motivated me to put in the utmost care and effort towards the completion of this project.

Third, I would like to thank a handful of professors who have played a massive role in shaping my college experience at the University of Delaware: Dr. Steven

Mortenson, Dr. Scott Caplan, Dr. Stephanie Raible, and Professor Steve Tague, among others. Thank you so much for fostering classroom environments of which I was always excited and honored to be a part, and for allowing me to be myself and discover curiosities that ultimately led me down the path I now pursue.

Fourth, I have the deepest gratitude for all of the exceptional and caring faculty of the University of Delaware Honors College. Honors is such a core facet of my identity at UD, and I would not be the person I am today without the opportunities and the community that the Honors College creates for its students. I will forever attribute such a large part of my success throughout my undergraduate years to the guidance and support of this kind and generous group of people. Special thanks are extended specifically to Mrs. Sarah Dobe-Hund, Dr. Christine Schultz, Mrs. Jama Allegretto Lynch, Mr. Ray Peters, and Dean Michael Chajes, for believing in my potential before I knew how to do it myself.

Fifth, to my dearest friends—there are too many people in my life to list here who have been my boots on the ground throughout my undergraduate journey, constantly lifting me up and helping me to see reason whenever I doubted myself. You all know who you are; just know that whenever I think of how far I have come, I make sure to remember why as well.

Last but not least, I acknowledge the three most important people in my life—my mother, father, and younger sister. Chasing after dreams can be overwhelming, and at times, an all-encompassing journey. No matter what was going on in my life, or what new joy I had decided to run after, you were there to remind me that whatever

happened, I would always have a home to come back to. Everything I do and everything I am is because of the three of you. Thank you.

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## **ABSTRACT**

The COVID-19 pandemic had numerous implications for institutions of higher education regarding the development of campus regulations, the transition to virtual and hybrid working and learning modalities, and the experience of undergraduate college students. In order to understand the impact on students at the University of Delaware, the present study was undertaken: 1) to conduct a review of past literature that examined impacts of the pandemic at universities comparable in size to the University of Delaware, 2) to perform a data analysis of the qualitative responses garnered through the Student Return to Campus Survey administered by the Center for Research in Education and Social Policy (CRESP) in Spring 2020, and 3) to identify common themes of student experiences and priorities during the pandemic years to inform future recommendations for health crisis management at the University of Delaware. The study utilized secondary data analysis from an online survey of 2,941 Freshman, Sophomore, and Junior students from the 2020-2021 academic year completing the Student Return to Campus Survey. The data analysis revealed a set of common outstanding themes, which were categorized into the following: Overall Feelings About the Pandemic at UD; Quality and Accessibility of Education in a Virtual Learning Environment; Quality of Student Life; Mental Health; Thoughts and Attitudes About Vaccination Policies, Masking, Testing, and COVID Guidelines at the University; Return to Campus; Notes and Recommendations to Administration. These major topics branched into further, more specific topics that touch on particular aspects of the main categories that were expressed through the qualitative data.

Findings demonstrate that students' perspectives and experiences were influenced by a number of factors that all should be considered in future instances of crisis management.

## **Chapter 1**

### **INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT**

On January 31<sup>st</sup>, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) officially declared the novel coronavirus outbreak, later officiated as COVID-19, as a Public Health Emergency of International Concern (CDC, n.d.). On March 11<sup>th</sup>, the WHO declared COVID-19 a pandemic, and within days, public school systems and institutions of higher education began to declare emergency closures and shut down with the intent to bring infection spread under control. By March 15<sup>th</sup>, 2020, the University of Delaware had officially suspended in-person classes, non-essential research, and University-sponsored travel, as well as vacated residence halls to prepare to transition to a fully remote teaching, working, and learning environment until further notice (University of Delaware, 2020). As was the case across the nation and the world, the sudden school closure had unique consequences for student populations and their families.

Prior studies of the impact of COVID-19 on college students reveal several important themes which are echoed in this research. These include challenges in adjusting to online learning approaches and maintaining content learning at a similar pace online, as had occurred in person. Related to this, many studies consider the impact of online learning, quarantine and the health fears associated with COVID on student mental health. A COVID-19 impact study conducted at the Arizona State

University, for example, revealed that students experienced delayed graduation, job losses, economic disparities, and severe health effects (Aucejo, 2020). In another example, the American College Health Association, in partnership with The Healthy Minds Network, explored students' experiences, attitudes, concerns, and perceived support of universities during the pandemic across 14 colleges and universities. Researchers found that mental health in college students was negatively impacted, and major associated factors included financial stress, race-based discrimination, and access to healthcare, which in turn affected their academic performance (Martinez & Nguyen, 2020). These study findings beg the question of whether these results were consistent everywhere in the United States, as well as what other implications the pandemic years had on schools of higher education, particularly through the lens of students themselves.

The purpose of this study is to identify unique and comparable experiences and perspectives from the COVID-19 pandemic and examine experiences among the undergraduate student population at the University of Delaware with the intent to document impacts, inform the university administration of those impacts, initiate dialogue, and suggest recommendations based on lessons learned.

## **Chapter 2**

### **REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

COVID-19 brought about the development of an entirely new culture that most individuals who lived through the pandemic year came to know as the “new normal”. Adapting to this new way of life had implications for the way we interacted with our families, our friends, our peers in our classrooms, our daily routines, and the way we learned, among countless other factors. While it is a challenge to encapsulate all facets of the impact that the pandemic had on a global scale, outlined here is a review of the background literature pertaining to learning modalities, student stressors, returning to campus, educational inequities, and how other Universities enforced health mandates. The purpose of this is to gain a baseline understanding of what information is already out there prior to moving into a data analysis of how these same topics areas played out at the University of Delaware according to the Student Return to Campus Undergraduate Survey results.

#### **2.1 Significance and Importance of On-Campus, In-Person Learning**

With regards to the effectiveness of learning, the pandemic brought about a myriad of different teaching modalities outside of what we knew to be familiar, which was complete in-person learning that included face-to-face interaction between the professors and their students. While online learning used to be a teaching modality used only when necessary, out of necessity throughout COVID-19, there was a drastic

increase in the use of hybrid and fully virtual teaching between the years 2020 and 2021. That being said, there is much to be said about the positive and negative aspects of online learning. Especially with regards to students in higher education, something that the pandemic seemed to reveal was the major advantages of on-campus, in-person learning.

According to an article released by KIPP Texas Public Schools, learning contributes significantly to the development of relationships, self-awareness, and empathy when it occurs in-person because the connections that form are largely organic and progress naturally as opposed to the anonymity of peers and the instructor that is often a major aspect of online learning (KIPP Texas Public Schools, 2021). Learning in the classroom also fosters critical thinking by leading to greater opportunities for collaborative work with peers, as well as personal engagement with the teacher when asking questions or solving problems (KIPP Texas Public Schools, 2021). Another consideration to have is that attending school in-person fosters an environment for physical activity and emotional interaction outside of solely the coursework, which has numerous positive implications for the development and sustenance of mental health; support for these areas is not easily able to be achieved in a virtual learning environment (Korioth, 2021). Virtual learning is also not a very inclusive approach to education when thinking about differences in students' learning styles, from visual to auditory, from reading and writing to hands-on experiences. With online learning utilize mostly auditory and visual techniques to convey information, it can be difficult for students who do not learn that way to engage with

course material, as well as for professors to personalize their teaching methods based on students' distinct learning abilities (KIPP Texas Public Schools, 2021).

Another lens to look at is the reasons why some students may choose an online learning experience despite all of the benefits of in-person learning. For one, teaching and learning through virtual platforms can be much more accessible as well as cost-effective. A survey conducted on 744 arts students at an Australian university investigated the various factors that influenced student decisions of whether to learn online or in-person. Researchers found that socioeconomic factors, demographics, flexibility of engagement, perceptions of academic outcomes, availability of support services, social environment, and marketing of the school were all significant influences on whether students chose to attend school in-person or from a distance (Bailey, 2017). In particular, the convenience of being able to learn online seemed to sway the students who reported a preference to stay at home and the belief that attending school in-person would lead to better educational outcomes seemed to most influence those who chose an in-person learning experience (Bailey, 2017). What the Australian study and the aforementioned KIPP article tell us is that developing students have a wide range of learning needs and styles, and there is a gap in academia that needs to be filled with regards to individualizing education in order to address and play to students' academic strengths.

Some of the biggest challenges that came out of the transition from in-person to virtual learning were changes, and mostly an overall decline, in the mental health, behavioral, and social skills of students at every level (Henderson, 2021). Virtual



teaching modalities, no matter how much of an effort was made to make content exposure enriching and just as effective as interpersonal learning, did not quite hit the mark when it came to engaging students and ensuring that they grasped the material being taught in classes. The online format of education also seemed to encourage students to not take attendance seriously, forego participation in their classes, and break student integrity protocols (for instance, cheating on exams) in order to uphold grades with minimal effort (Henderson, 2021).

Virtual learning, specifically the use of technology in higher education, has been increasing with each year, with an additional boost that occurred during COVID-19. In fact, in the United States, the rate of online course enrollment is ten times the amount of traditional on-campus enrollment (Shea, 2009). Hybridizing education through a combination of in-person and online instruction is also becoming more and more popular, as technology is being relied upon to enhance current learning modalities. That being said, while technology is an unavoidable tool that is inevitably incorporated into our daily lives and tasks, teachers agree that active engagement in course material and interpersonal dialogue about the concepts taught in the classroom remain as the most “powerful catalysts for learning” rather than technological methods (Fruyer, 1999). The right technology can certainly be utilized to advance student success, as some research has shown that social media use may play a mediating role in academic performance (Su, 2021), but it is not enough to replace the amount of information that can be gained and retained through classroom and teacher-to-student interaction.

## **2.2 Student Concerns with Returning to Campus**

Over the summer of 2020, once buildings and institutions across the country and the world had been in complete lockdown for several months, schools and universities had to begin planning for what a reopening would look like for their respective campuses and students. With that came a plethora of concerns for what that return to campus would mean, for students, faculty, and families alike. Pertaining to students in particular, worries about campus return varied widely, from vaccination statistics to classroom instruction and infrastructure.

A 2019 study involving nursing students that asked about what concerns and emotions participants were feeling surrounding the pandemic revealed stress and anxiety as the most prevalent theme, fear as the second most prevalent. Anger and isolation were other emotions that were also reported by these students. Specifically, these students were worried about the safety of themselves and their families, especially with the nature of their working conditions being in an environment that revolved around patient care (Haughey, 2021). This goes to show that individuals who were actively involved in occupations that required them to be around and interact with a lot of people during the pandemic were at a higher risk of spreading the virus to themselves and those close to them; at the very least, there was anxiety around that happening. Moreover, anticipation around the spread of COVID made some students worried about some students disregarding health mandates and not caring if they

contracted the virus (McLaughlin, 2021). Thus, other people's view, beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors about the pandemic outside of what they feel on their own.

A cross-sectional survey conducted among clinical students across six medical schools in the United States from April to May of 2020 also asked students about pandemic-related stressors. 84% of respondents reported that they felt an increase in stress due to the pandemic; other symptoms experienced by students were severe anxiety and PTSD-risk symptoms (Lee, 2021). Major influences of the development of this stress and anxiety included inadequacies with COVID testing, spread of the virus by undiagnosed or asymptomatic individuals, racial biases, pandemic-related disparities such as access to food and resources, exposure to violence, and lost learning opportunities due to changes in learning structures and modalities (Lee, 2021). Additional important findings from this study were that African American and Asian students, as well as other minority students, had greater risks of anxiety compared with white students; alongside this, female students seemed to be more affected by pandemic fallout and were more likely to report anxiety and PTSD symptoms. One suggestion that researchers had was to initiate targeted outreach and support for female and underrepresented students.

These issues were not just exclusive to the experience of students in the United States. An international research study that surveyed around 2,500 students in Istanbul aimed to identify psychosocial concerns and challenges during the year of outbreaks. Most of the students suffered from financial difficulties due to the pandemic, as well as anxiety around all of the potential negative outcomes of COVID-19, which were

closely related to their knowledge about COVID, how well they were adhering to safety mandates, how much they agreed with how their government put policies in place, and possible failure of medical facilities to be able to provide sufficient care and supplies with the rising number of cases (Yorguner, 2021). Something else that stood out from this study was the perceived stigma around contracting the virus and how people with the virus may have been treated and alienated from society. Out of the total sample, 826 students reported having experience symptoms of the coronavirus, including coughing, sneezing, and a runny nose. Regardless of whether those individuals actually tested positive or not, about 20% of them admitted to trying to hide the symptoms from other people multiple times (Yorguner, 2021). Awareness of these details points out pathways to negative social impacts and could aid in developing methods to address them.

Another unique concern when it came to student health was the concern of those who worked with or around children on a daily basis. For instance, an article published in 2020 discussed the custodial staff at Loyalist College in Belleville, Ontario, and how they raised their views about their own working conditions and how it played a role in students' safe return to campus. According to the author, janitors at this institution were made to work full days and overtime in order to prepare for the campus reopening, but safe and healthy working conditions were not guaranteed (Loyalist College, 2020). In addition, while the custodians are committed to keeping the school safe for students, what they cannot ensure is completely avoiding contracting the illness; with longer working days frequent contact with other

employees, there was a heightened chance to spread the virus. However, despite their hard work, employees have had to constantly fight for sick days, fair wages, and job security. Not being able to achieve adequate pay for their time led to financial insecurities, which places a lot of pressure to keep returning to work even if sick, which jeopardizes the whole school population (Loyalist College, 2020). So, it seems that understaffing, longer hours, and budget cuts led to a vicious cycle that increased the risk of COVID spread and became yet another consideration for student health and safety.

### **2.3 External Student Stressors**

The impacts of the pandemic had numerous implications for students, including but not limited to declines in academic performance, concerns for health, lack of motivation, and declines in mental health (explored in a different section). Both in the United States and across the world, students had to cope with a myriad of external factors that contributed to their stress that they may or may not have ever encountered before. A study conducted at the University of Naples in Italy in reference to the period of pandemic lockdown aimed to evaluate sources of student stress. Researchers disseminated a survey tool called the COVID-19 Student Stress Questionnaire (CSSQ) in order to gather data on university students' stress-related responses to relationships and academic life, social isolation and intimacy, and fear of contagion. The study revealed that stress related to these factors were related to

significant negative effects on the perceived psychophysical health among the students who were surveyed (Zurlo, 2020).

Other studies that took place globally validate these results. Dental students at the University of Malta took a 13-question survey that consisted of both open- and closed-ended questions to gather information about the influence of COVID-19 on student reported outcomes. The results showed reports of higher anxiety about themselves or a family member contracting COVID, difficulty of exams given learning challenges that came out of the pandemic, and concerns with the loss of manual dexterity skills. Qualitative responses pointed towards stress pertaining to changes in testing formats and the lack of timely communication about matters regarding the virus (Agius, 2020). Additionally, a study with students in Indonesia revealed similar themes. Out of the 1,131 students surveyed, 70% were stressed about learning tasks, 58% about being bored at home, and 40% about being unable to meet loved ones (Mubin, 2020). Many students also mentioned stress related to the unavailability of adequate tools to carry out assignments for lab courses as well.

Alongside what the numerous factors that contributed to stress were within various university student populations were, an important consideration when thinking about student stressors are the avenues that students utilized to cope with those stressors, or whether they found resources to cope with the stress at all. In a 2020 Polish study, a sample of 577 students across 17 universities were anonymously surveyed through the Mini-COPE questionnaire, which was meant to reveal how students dealt with the radical changes to daily function that came with the transition

to online learning (Babicka-Wirkus, 2020). Researchers learned that many Polish students used acceptance, planning ahead, and seeking emotional support as coping strategies for stress. However, the results also reflected that the type of coping strategies used and whether they were healthy or not were dependent on factors such as age, gender, and place of residence (Babicka-Wirkus, 2020). Data also showed that the younger the students were, the lower coping skills they had. Given these points, it seems as though younger students were likely to involve themselves with coping strategies that were more harmful long-term. A possible resolution to this issue could be the implementation of support programs that address psychological and organization needs of students as that transfer between different learning modalities (Babicka-Wirkus, 2020).

As a final note, there are students who are more successful than others when it comes to stress management and coping strategies. One way in which this difference in results was explained was through measuring the level of grit and gratitude in students and observing whether either had an impact on students' ability to "expand their relationships and social capital, make formative life decisions, and overcome stress to achieve life goals" (Bono, 2020). A longitudinal study following freshmen students at an urban university from before school closures up until the end of the semester examined how their stress levels influenced that academic, psychological, and financial well-being (Bono, 2020). This was then compared to their resilience to the effects of the pandemic as measured through the GRIT scale, which rated each students' ability to be adaptable to a changing academic environment and

persevere against adversities towards their long-term goals, as well as the Gratitude Questionnaire, which evaluated students' tendency towards appreciation of other people and their personal circumstances. The findings indicated that the students who reported lower parent education levels also reported greater perceived stress, more financial and academic impacts, and less resilience to stressful life events than those who reported higher parent education levels. On the other hand, higher grit scores were indicators of lower negative psychological impacts and greater resilience, while higher gratitude scores were predictors of less drastic changes in academic functioning (Bono, 2020). These results express that promoting grit and gratitude within education can inherently help students to maintain their wellbeing all-around when faced with hardship, both relating to and outside of the pandemic.

#### **2.4 Mental Health and the Pandemic**

Globalization has made way for infectious diseases to have a wider spread once an outbreak occurs, which can lead to collateral public health challenges that make containment more complex (Ornell, 2020). One of these challenges is the dire consequences on the affected population's psychological health, which have implications for the disease's spread and the incidence of emotional disorders experienced by members of the population, especially since quarantine and lockdown are very new concepts being experienced for the first time by many (Cullen, 2020; Pfefferbaum, 2020). With regards to COVID-19 specifically, infection spread



impacted a variety of lifestyle factors in the population, including work routines, family commitments, and closings of schools, companies, and public facilities, all of which contributed to feelings of isolation and abandonment (Ornell, 2020). Moreover, misinformation about the virus, geographic reach, number of cases, mortality rate, insufficient control measures, and the lack of effective therapies, all contributed to increased “insecurity and fear” in the population (Ornell, 2020). Research shows that fear can increase levels of stress and anxiety across healthy people and those with pre-existing conditions; in both types of individuals, this can decrease immunity and exacerbate those pre-existing conditions (Ornell, 2020). It can also lead to harmful social unrest and aggressive personal interactions as a result of polarization from political views and communication of false information (Ornell, 2020).

The economic costs of treating and improving mental health disorders is high, which poses a financial barrier to access and provision of mental health services (Ornell, 2020). Trauma and drastic life changes that are endured without access to support, resources, and professional help can heighten the negative experience, leaving lasting impressions on people. Ornell’s report stated that “intense emotional and behavioral reactions, such as fear, boredom, loneliness, anxiety...can evolve into disorders” such as depression, panic disorders, PTSD, psychosis, and paranoia, even leading to suicide in some cases (Ornell, 2020). Furthermore, vulnerable populations, such as those who are immunocompromised, living with pre-existing conditions, receiving care in facilities, recovering from substance abuse issues, older adults, and families of infected patients are at higher risk of developing emotional distress and

mental health issues during a pandemic because of the added burden of social rejection and discrimination (Ornell, 2020; Pfefferbaum, 2020). Healthcare providers face a unique set of challenges during pandemics: in particular, they encounter a greater risk of exposure, a greater risk of transmission, supply shortages, and longer work hours, among others, which can all contribute to more workplace pressure and prolonged stress and anxiety. (Pfefferbaum, 2020).

One possible way to combat the prevalence of mental health issue in the population, especially during a pandemic, is to anticipate the health problems that may occur across individual differences and allocate resources towards mental health screenings, educating people about their psychological health, and support groups for those who are predisposed to negative psychological health outcomes (Pfefferbaum, 2020). However, one of the major barriers to this kind of implementation is that there are little to no universal policies for effective mental health support protocols, especially ones that can be carried out in tandem with crisis response. There is inconsistent epidemiological data on the implications of psychological health throughout a public health event (Ornell, 2020). As a result, mental health professionals are not called upon to lead emergency planning in disaster situations such as a pandemic, which is a very necessary step towards mitigating the long-term negative effects on the psychosocial health of the affected population (Ornell, 2020). There is a need for greater research efforts toward mental health promotion that is adjacent to managing infection outbreaks worldwide (Ornell, 2020).

### **2.4.1 Pandemic Mental Health in Higher Education**

The COVID-19 pandemic, and the government-issued mandates that followed for the sake of human safety and infection control, had unique implications for the lives of college students. Regulations had profound impacts on the mood and wellness of students in higher education (Copeland, 2021). Universities across the world relocated their students from their campuses and to a remote learning environment, administering coursework from a distance. One study shows that one-third of students who were mandated to relocate during a semester reported higher levels of grief, loneliness, and generalized anxiety, and PTSD related to the pandemic than those who did not have to move (Conrad, 2021). The disruption to academia and social life brought about issues with students' mental health, accessibility to mental health services, and outreach to students in special circumstances, such as those with pre-existing conditions, financial barriers, and international backgrounds (Liu, 2020). Previous research findings suggest that university counseling centers should work to make mental health support as accessible and user-friendly as possible and consider utilizing models of care that are more flexible and able to be individualized to the student (Liu, 2020). This would work to counter the health and technological disparities that tend to escalate during a crisis, such as the disparities that disproportionately impact low-income individuals and underrepresented minorities (Liu, 2020).

## **2.5 Importance of Substantial Breaks During a School Year**

It is a commonality to have scheduled school breaks during an academic year in order to provide students a period of time to decompress before returning to the rigor of academic classes and workload. Research has shown that taking conscious short- or long-term breaks to rest can help to prevent against the build-up of anxiety, stress, and restlessness that result from working harder and longer hours for extended periods of time (Camacho, 2020). Vacations taken as a way to step back from one's usual routine can break that cycle of stress (Camacho, 2020). In 2020, a number of schools and universities across the country took the step to cancel the traditional spring break in order to address the concern of spreading COVID-19 from campuses to students' homes, or having students contract the virus while on break and bring it back to campus. However, this had numerous implications for the level of stress and burnout in students who did not have a chance to step away from their coursework to recoup.

A study conducted in 2016 on elementary school students revealed that distractions and the inability to focus on tasks increased as the duration of instruction increased from ten (10) minutes at a time to thirty (30) minutes at a time (Godwin, 2016). In other words, the longer students were asked to engage in a class session, the less stable their attention spans were. While this study looked at a more short-termed controlled classroom environment, it does reveal the impact of breaks in learning to let the brain rejuvenate. An article from Child Psychology reinforces these ideas by

stating multiple reasons why breaks are healthy for children, including preventing the risk of burnout, exploration of hobbies and activities outside of mandated work that can bolster extracurricular learning and encourage creativity, and offering the opportunity to connect with family and loved ones, which emphasizes support and belonging (ChildPsych, 2013).

Another study conducted in 2012 that used an fMRI scanner to observe neural activity during rest showed that people's brains are not fully idle when they are resting, as was previously conceived. On the contrary, resting brains are in a state known as "default mode" (DM), in which the mind wanders and focuses on details outside of the surrounding environment (Immordino-Yang, 2012). This state is important for psychosocial mental processing, memory recall and consolidation, feeling social emotions, reflecting on past experiences, and future-oriented planning (Immordino-Yang, 2012). What this study proves is that the active rest that the brain engages in while on break is important for developing cognition, which for students, can be very productive for neurodevelopment and an opportunity for learning in a way that cannot be achieved in classroom settings.

For college students specifically, spring break can be an escape from the academic rigor of the semester, especially for those in difficult majors or heavily involved in campus activities (Camacho, 2020). Particularly during the pandemic, there seemed to be a misconception of how much free time students had while learning virtually, which resulted in increased workloads and an even greater need for a holiday that did not happen at most universities. During extended periods of stress,

which students tend to experience during their academic semesters, the brain has increased and elongated exposure to the stress hormone cortisol, which can contribute to anxiety and depression down the line (Isham, 2020). In essence, what research is conveying is that the students who attended schools that did not administer a spring break due to health concerns related to the spread of COVID-19 experienced declines in mental health, creativity, and productivity, alongside a decrease in overall happiness (Isham, 2020).

## **2.6 Teacher Investment in Student Learning**

Findings from previous research show that student learning is heavily influenced by perceptions of teacher investment in their education and well-being. Previous studies that have examined teacher-student relationships have found that fostering those relationships is important for child development (Spilt, 2011). A study conducted by Allan et. Al. describes effective teaching as providing a supportive learning environment, placing high expectations on students, providing support throughout absorption of new topics and concepts, and giving clear explanations in lessons and assignments (Allan, 2009). Something that those four attributes have in common is consistent active engagement in the student learning process, which can be one definition of teacher investment.

Research that explored how teachers conceived effective teaching showed that education through communication, promoting interaction in the classroom, and

creating a community of learners translated to positive student performance (Carnell, 2007). Student performance and achievement can also be a byproduct of the perceptions of the students and teachers of each other's investment in building the relationship, including showing interest, expectations of success, listening, praising efforts, and caring (Muller, 2001). Additionally, a study from Australia argues that understanding the context in which the elements of teacher investment are being understood is imperative, as teaching is most effective when it is able to evolve with the time and adapt to the current state of the environment to best suit students' needs, which are compound and reliant on a number of extraneous factors (Devlin, 2009). This begs the question of what teacher investment in learning might or should look like in the context of higher education, and even further, of higher education administered across a virtual landscape. This is further exemplified in the Findings of this study, which showcase student responses that expressed that those elements of effective online teaching, such as active face-to-face engagement of the professor and flexibility of the course structure, were missing from the classroom experiences of undergraduate students at UD: "Some teachers that go completely asynchronous don't post their own lectures and never meet in person. They post random YouTube videos that do not correctly teach the information."

### **2.6.1 Teacher Investment in the Context of Online Higher Education**

Much like the way in-person learning impacts student learning, the ways that teachers invest in online platforms matter for students as well. Data collected from a study conducted with about 200 students enrolled in online school showed several aspects that were most strongly associated with effective teaching: adapting to student needs, using meaningful examples to explain concepts, motivating students to perform the best that they could, course facilitation, valuable course delivery, efficient communication, showing concern for student learning, visible involvement in student learning, establishing trusting relationships, and a structured but flexible classroom environment (Young, 2020). These elements can be viewed as one possible definition of effective teaching that is specific to the virtual context. This definition raises the question of what barriers exist that may prevent those elements of effective online teaching from taking place. Examples of these barriers include teachers being unable to provide adequate feedback over online modalities, teacher or student discomfort with using online platforms available for teaching, and considerations of how student and teacher backgrounds might influence perceptions of online learning and utilization of technology (Yang & Lin, 2020). The findings of our study echoed some of these barriers, and are exemplified by student responses such as “I feel like although this pandemic has been hard, some teachers have not changed their teaching styles to accommodate to the students as they’ve had to accommodate to remote learning” and “I am pleased by certain professor's understanding and lenience, but others have shown no sympathy, understanding, or desire to help their students succeed.”



### **2.6.2 Influences On and Impacts Of Teacher Well-Being on Teacher Investment**

A final major aspect of teacher investment is the teachers themselves, and how their well-being, as well as the factors that influence their well-being, can impact their experience of and perspectives about educating, which in turn have an effect on their students. Studies in interpersonal relationships have suggested that teachers need to relate to their students because the daily interactions that they have with their students inform emotional connection and fostering of trust down the line (Spilt, 2011). Teacher well-being can be shaped by a teacher's professional and personal identities and their responses to interpersonal and environmental stressors, both of which are in turn underpinned by the quality of the teacher-student relationship (Spilt, 2011). For instance, student misbehavior can negatively impact a teacher's perception of the relationship with their students, as well as their performance as a teacher, regardless of what underlying reasons may exist for the misbehavior (Spilt, 2011). Hence, to avoid continuing the vicious cycle of student behavior leading to misconceptions of the teacher-student relationship, that in turn have negative implications for teacher well-being, which can impact teacher investment in learning, teacher support by administrative bodies and education systems, as well as open dialogue among students and teachers, is just as important a factor of effective online teaching as teacher behavior and provision of support.

### **2.7 Impact of Extended Screen Time in Young Adults**

There is numerous research that points to the dangers of extended usage of electronic devices across a wide age range and across the world. Specifically for adolescents, the expanding amount of technological innovations and advancements with each passing generation fosters a living and learning environment that is surrounding by computerization, which can have negative implications for their physical and mental health over time. Longitudinal data from National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health reported that reducing screen time in adolescents as they transition to adulthood can have positive results in terms of reducing the incidence of obesity, especially in females (Boone, 2007). This can be explained by physical activity being a preventative method against obesity that is connected to a sedentary lifestyle, as well as the common co-occurrence of screen time and the lack of physical activity.

During the pandemic year, grade school children to young adults in universities across the world attended classes and learned from their bedrooms; this was especially so for students who may not have had access to a separate office space or study area to work in. The impacts of this are not recorded, but would be revealing given the patterns of sedentary time observed in children as a result of electronic media in the bedroom, including personal laptops, game devices, and televisions (Atkin, 2013). On the other hand, we can look at how effective interventions towards screen time reduction have been. According to a review of multiple randomized controlled trial (RCT) studies regarding the impact of reducing screen time on body

mass index (BMI), analysis of the data revealed that, given enough time, screen time interventions might be effective in preventing weight gain (Wu, 2016).

In addition, evidence shows that engagement with online platforms, such as social media and the Internet, regardless of short-term or long-term usage, encourages increases in divided attention and multitasking, which can reduce a person's brain function, cognitive development, and capacity to pay attention (Dubicka, 2019). Moreover, a 2021 study showed evidence for relationships between chronic sensory stimulation from excessive screen usage to emotional disorders, substance use disorders, early onset dementia, and risk of decline in neurodevelopment, learning, and memory in young adults (Neophytou, 2019).

These negative effects are likely the result of a combination of multiple factors concerning screen use, including but not limited to the effect of screen light on vision, the impacts of a sedentary lifestyle that is correlated with device use, and the emotional issues and attitudes that may stem from the consumption of media content and perspectives spanning across numerous platforms. This is why, across many studies, it is a challenge to form a direct connection between screen use and any one of the aforementioned repercussions. That being said, the correlations that do exist are telling of the impacts that can and do exist and the implications they can have, especially at the adolescent age. The largest gap with this area of research, especially as it pertains to young adults is the prevalence of inconclusive results and the inconsistency of the findings across studies.

## **2.8 Inequities in Education and Technology**

A major aspect of living and learning that the pandemic greatly exacerbated are the large inequities that exist in education and technology. These inequities are rampant across races, abilities, and socioeconomic factors, and include disparities such as inaccessibility of course information, challenges with usage of online learning tools, or difficulty with being able to afford academic materials that may have otherwise been provided for students in school to utilize free of charge. Here, what those disparities entail and how deep their effects run is outlined.

For one, there is a large digital divide when it comes to online education. A large percentage of learners do not have the necessary equipment and access to wireless Internet that is often needed in order to actively participate in virtual classes. On top of this, many educators are not aware of this disparity, and thus, fail to individualize their lessons in order to cater to those who are not able to use the same virtual services as their classmates (Scigliano, 2021). This can have negative implications for these students' feelings of belonging and inclusion in class activities. This issue has garnered an urgent need for investigation into how these disparities built up, cultural awareness of the individual differences that exist among each respective institution's student populations, and for educators to involve themselves in specific professional development training that targets the spread of knowledge in areas of equitable learning in both grade school and higher education.

Something else that research shows is that because a large proportion of minority populations live in underdeveloped cities and neighborhoods that happen to also not be provided with equal education, job opportunities, and medical services as more privileged areas of the country, and this has dire implications pertaining to the pandemic and its impact. Communities of color experience higher rates of COVID-19 and minority children have a greater chance of being exposed to infection (Ambrose, 2020). Moreover, due to underserved environments in which many people of color live, work, attend school, and socialize, they are also more likely to already be coping with conditions such as asthma, obesity, and other chronic diseases that do not as commonly affect more socioeconomically privileged populations (Ambrose, 2020). With regards to socioeconomic differences, emergency closures of schools and other public institutions affected minority children more than any other population because along with the loss of their primary source of education, these students also faced the loss of their primary source of food security, support services, and equipment necessary to quickly adapt to new learning structures.

The pandemic was also a time of gross job loss across the United States, and millions of Americans experiences sudden unemployment and loss of job security. About 45% or African American and Hispanic children in the United States attending high-poverty schools and receiving reduced-price or free lunches, as compared to only 8% of white students falling into this category, African American and Hispanic students are more vulnerable to financial challenges and more likely to be heavily impacted by economic effects on food, housing, and education (Ambrose, 2020).

Across the world, this issue does not subside, making it clear that it is not just an American problem. COVID lockdowns affected educational institutions in 191 countries on a global scale, and out of 1.5 billion students, 40% of them did not have access to the Internet because the places that they lived in did not necessarily support individual access to computers or have service from mobile networks (Walters, 2001). While the pandemic year surely emphasized and brought a lot of attention to educational inequities, these inequities have always existed, and were only exacerbated by the shutdown of public infrastructure. This has highlighted a need for the expansion of resources to specifically serve low-income communities and students, and researchers suggest that this can be achieved by taking steps such as reducing class sizes, implementing educational summer programs, and initiating and improving early childhood education (Walters, 2001).

One final consideration concerning all levels of education is the generational differences when it comes to the establishment of and engagement with online platforms for learning (Chitiyo, 2021). Over the past several years, there have been a wide range of virtual teaching platforms that have been integrated for the purpose of learning from home, with Canvas, Blackboard, and Brightspace being just a couple of common examples. Even before distanced learning came about, these platforms began to rise in popularity to foster a connection between instructors and their students outside of school hours and for a way for schoolwork to be assigned, submitted, and graded all in one cohesive and collaborative space. That being said, with this technology being relatively new and continuing to advance with each year, faculty

members who are older in age and may not have grown up with these platforms may often find them a challenge to access, work with, and apply to their teaching styles (Fruyer, 1999). This again reiterates and reinforces that idea that in-person connection between students and their teachers can foster emotional and behavioral development in a much easier and organic way, as well as build an open dialogue through which a stronger absorption of information can take place (KIPP Texas Public Schools, 2021). Generational differences can often lead to the separation of knowledge of online tools for learning between students and instructors, especially if instructors are not willing to change their ways and adopt entirely new strategies for educational outreach. This can create massive disconnects between what a student should be learning and what they actually are, which is a huge barrier to receiving effective and efficient education.

## **2.9 How Other Universities Handled Pandemic Regulations**

The first laboratory-confirmed case of the coronavirus was reported in the United States on January 20, 2020 (CDC, n.d.). From March 15, 2020, and onwards, schools and universities across the nation began to shut down (CDC, n.d.). In order to prevent the spread of the virus, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) mandated that those who tested positive had to remain at home. On July 23, 2020, the CDC released new guidelines for school administrators, teachers, families, and caregivers for safe school re-openings for the upcoming fall. While those were the official health guidelines put into place, below is an outline of how Universities across

the country followed those recommendations. Details about the size of the school, size of the student body, and additional relevant context is explained in detail for reference and as possible explanations for variations in regulations.

### **2.9.1 Pace University**

Pace University is a private university in New York City, New York, with about 12,800 total students enrolled currently. When COVID-19 first became a major concern in the United States, the Pace University administration was most concerned for their international students and those who were studying abroad in a variety of countries across the globe. According to the Pace Director of Emergency Management and Environmental Health and Safety, Brian Anderson, the University had a COVID-19 Task Force comprised of 35 members in place to monitor the spread of the illness on campus grounds, as well as to generate a united plan as to how the college's operations would have to be modified in the coming months and year, including student health and safety, residential life, student life, dining facilities, building maintenance, departmental communication, and financial management (Cressotti, 2020).

On March 11, 2020, the University announced that all classes would be moved to a virtual format and students were encouraged to move out entirely for spring break in case there would be no return to campus that semester (Pace University, 2021). This proved to be an intelligent decision, as classes continued remotely for the rest of the



spring term; Pace University strived to place community health as the top priority, so only essential workers were permitted to stay on campus. One critical concern that administration expressed having was how well student would be able to adapt to and engage with the online learning infrastructure that was put in place for the purpose of the months of remote learning that would ensue; after all, this was the first time that anybody had done it before, and there was not true history to base decisions on.

As the virtual semester carried on and the school year ended, the University put together a Fall Reopening Group in order to plan for an in-person college experience for the fall. Protocols had to align with Governor Cuomo's mandates for the entire New York State for monitoring health and safety for campus populations, including contract training, providing spaces for quarantine and isolation, efficient virus testing areas, availability of healthcare services, social distancing regulations, and campus shutdown procedure in case the incidence of COVID positivity got out of hand. Today, as schools across the country have returned to in-person instruction in full, Pace University is keeping a close watch on the evolution of the COVID variants in the United States and how the virus is behaving on their campus so that administration can be prepared to modify their operations if circumstances were to necessitate such action.

### **2.9.2 Northwestern Michigan College**

Northwestern Michigan College is a public community college in Traverse City, Michigan, with about 4,000 students enrolled each year. During the pandemic year, eating on campus was limited and students were asked to physically distance themselves from others if they had to eat in a classroom space. Masks were required at all times in all classrooms and public buildings, but could be removed when in a private room with no other individuals present (Northwestern Michigan College, n.d.). There is a process in place for reporting positive cases, which involves a series of self-reporting, contact tracing conducted by NMC Health Services and the county health department, and faculty being informed of student absences (Northwestern Michigan College, n.d.). While the CampusClear app was used for students to check their daily symptoms, they are now being asked to self-monitor and stay home if they feel that they are exhibiting any symptoms.

### **2.9.3 New York University**

New York University (NYU) is a private research university situated in New York City that boasts an enrollment of around 50,000 students. At the start of the pandemic, NYU faced a sharp escalation in the number of cases within the University community. In order to combat this, administration put forth several operational adjustments, which included restrictions on social gatherings, use of campus facilities, and in-person instruction (NYU Returns, 2021). Leading up to a school reopening after emergency closures, students received clear communication as to what the return

to campus would look like. Move in was postponed to two weeks prior to the start of classes so that all students could be required to quarantine for two weeks before the semester began (Casado, 2020). According to one student's account from an article about NYU's response to the pandemic, returning to campus for classes was really important to a lot of students, and NYU made sure that everyone who returned took social distancing seriously, and that both students and staff used masks or face shields at all times during class time for the few classes that were taught in-person (Casado, 2020). Any classes that consisted of over 40 students were strictly constrained to remote administration, and for classes taught in-person, students were expected to keep to the same seating arrangement as the first day to aid with contact tracing if an outbreak did occur. In order to attend classes in person or access any academic building, students were required to get tested twice on campus over a course of 10 days, and submit two negative tests. Students lived in spaces known as quarantine suites and did not have roommates living with them. They were expected to keep to those spaces unless commuting for necessary reasons, such as for COVID testing or to attend in-person classes.

Every day, three full meals plus any packages that students received, were brought up to students' rooms individually. For a time being, students reported being highly unsatisfied with the meals being served to them with regards to the portion sizes and lack of adherence to dietary restrictions. However, the University attempted to fix this issue through issuing daily meal gift cards for students to use at any on campus dining location, making meal delivery more consistent, and providing larger

amounts of water (Casado, 2020). Later in the semester, as buildings began to open up more, a to-go option was implemented within the dining halls for students who were not comfortable eating in. Once eating in became a possibility, students were required to wear masks when not actively eating, and all meal stations that were initially self-serve were removed and replaced with service from a member of the dining staff (Casado, 2020).

With regards to student life, students and faculty involved in student activities worked to organize virtual events through the Zoom platform so as to keep a semblance of the University community intact as much as possible. Examples of events included a cabaret that included student performances, as well as a fall welcome event involving sports and music celebrities. New York University also seemed to place a priority on students' mental health, arranging for counselor outreach by phone call and email in order to check in on students and offering mental health resources and services should anyone need them. This year, NYU is requiring that everyone who plans to return for the Spring 2022 semester must already have uploaded proof of their vaccination or a valid exemption before returning to campus; proof of the booster dose to those eligible to receive one must also be uploaded. Open COVID testing is available to everyone on campus whenever they choose to get tested; regardless of this, randomized testing is also going to be administered, even to those who are fully vaccinated, so that there can be accurate monitoring of COVID-19 outbreaks across NYU's campus (NYU Returns, 2021).

#### **2.9.4 Rutgers University**

Rutgers University is a public research university with many campuses across New Jersey and an enrollment of about 37,000 students. In mid-January of 2020, the health administration at Rutgers University released a statement that they were monitoring and responding to guidelines set forth by regional and national health agencies, and if there was strong support for the closure of schools, then they would follow suit. That same March, the University put together a COVID-19 Task Force that would be responsible for establishing next strategic steps regarding safety and operations pertaining to the fallout of the pandemic; operational changes included the setup of remote learning tools and infrastructure and teaching and learning resources (Rutgers SASN, 2021). At first, classes were canceled until the end of spring break, and continued through virtual platforms for at least two weeks from the return from break; it was later announced that in-person classes would be suspended until the end of the semester. Resources such as training workshops, tutorials, and one-on-one consultations were offered to professors to aid with the online transition, and relevant software applications that were seen as necessary for teaching and learning (Maple and SPSS, to name a couple) were temporarily made free to access by students and faculty to increase the level of remote accessibility to academic resources (Rutgers SASN, 2021).

Over the next few months since the University closures, the administration worked to expand remote access in as many ways as possible, from increasing VPN

capacity to accommodate the surge in use, to providing multiple methods of Internet access, to utilizing new platforms to field student questions and concerns and resolve requests or issues with access to education in an efficient way. Rutgers also made a significant effort to purchase and provide over 800 laptops to students and staff who were in need of one to work from home, as well as over 8,000 iPads for first-year students specifically (Rutgers SASN, 2021). Free Zoom accounts were given to all members of the University in order to better collaborate and participate in the virtual learning experience. The University also converted the underutilized computer labs as a result of the lockdown into COVID testing sites and research hubs for the testing of potential treatments. Health services adopted a more distanced and telemedical approach to providing care for students and faculty. Once the University gradually began to reopen, resources such as curbside printing and COVID screening applications were established; the former was so that students could print documents remotely and pick them up with minimal social interaction, and the latter was so that all members of campus could be encouraged to self-monitor for symptoms of the coronavirus.

Moving into the 2021-2022 academic year, Rutgers University stated a requirement for students enrolled for the Fall 2021 semester. The institution also supported multiple nearby vaccination sites in Camden, Newark, and Piscataway, New Jersey in order to make access to vaccinations more accessible for students (Rutgers SASN, 2021). The University used the percentage of vaccinated students and faculty—99% and 87%, respectively—to support the decision to reopen in the fall

(Rutgers SASN, 2021). As the campus reopened, there was a significant emphasis placed on accommodations for those in need of financial support or disability services; there was also a focus on flexibility, both for professors in terms of their chosen teaching modality, as well as for students regarding attendance policies and assignment completion. Discussion about resources for instructional technology and adherence to health mandates were pushed heavily during the first week of classes, and any violations of campus protocols would be reported through a document called the “COVID Observation Reporting Form” (Rutgers SASN, 2021). Any reports of COVID positivity were passed through Student Health in order to initiate measures of contact tracing and communication to members of the University community who may have been exposed to the virus.

### **2.9.5 Columbia University**

Columbia University in the City of New York is a private research university home to about 31,000 students annually. Its response to the pandemic was similar to other universities mentioned in this report, particularly other schools also situated in New York City. Columbia also moved its operations entirely online in March of 2020 and stayed that way for the remainder of the spring semester (Columbia University, 2021). Vaccination efforts moving into 2021 offered an avenue through which to return to normalcy, and the spring semester of 2021 saw cautious campus returns that were partnered with health guidelines for students and faculty alike. All members of

the university community were required to wear face coverings when indoors and for individuals who were unvaccinated, masks were required both indoors and outdoors, along with social distancing. For the Fall 2021 campus reopen in particular, students and staff were required to upload their vaccination information in order to move back, unless they had a valid exemption (Columbia University, 2021).

The University put a stop on all travel, including those related to international students and study abroad courses. Individuals who have returned from outside travel not affiliated with the University had to complete quarantine for two full weeks, monitor their symptoms, distance themselves from others, and report a negative test at the end of fourteen days before being permitted to access campus facilities and be allowed in the classroom (Columbia University, 2021). Currently, with rising concerns of the Omicron variant spreading, many classes will be continuing remotely for the winter semester in order to have enough time to administer testing for students before the start of the spring semester. Students are also being strongly encouraged to get a PCR test before they return for the spring term, as well as get tested again within 72 hours of their return, especially since there is so little known about how this variant will behave (Columbia University, 2021). As the Spring 2022 semester approaches, Columbia University highly recommends their students and faculty to upload documentation of full vaccination and booster dose reception, as well as to continue completing the campus daily screening and safety training modules in order to reiterate understanding of the COVID-19 health protocols of the campus.



### **2.9.6 Brooklyn College**

Brooklyn College is a public university located in Brooklyn, New York, with about 18,000 students in total. Brooklyn College is one of the institutions that is a part of the multi-school system known as the City University of New York, or CUNY. By May of 2020, twenty-three deaths of students and staff as a result of the pandemic had occurred within the CUNY system, with five of them being at Brooklyn College (Robin, 2020). Like other New York schools, Brooklyn College followed the guidelines and mandates set forth specifically for the state by the Governor at the time, Andrew Cuomo. Aside from face masks being required inside all campus buildings, the University also launched a random testing program that circulated to both vaccinated and unvaccinated students and faculty staying on campus in order to control the spread of the virus on campus; individuals had to participate in order to have access to academic buildings and facilities (Brooklyn College, 2021).

Moving into 2021, vaccines were mandated by administration for anyone aiming to enter campus unless a religious or medical exemption was reported and documented. Students who did not have proof of vaccination registered with Student Health would not be permitted to access campus buildings and would have to submit a negative COVID test on a weekly basis. Random testing of individuals regardless of vaccination status would be administered in order to monitor for the spread of the virus across the campus community. If there were any concerns or issues that arose, the University provided a form accessible to anyone to report those problems, whether

it had to do with access to services or violations of safety policies. For students living on campus but working either fully remotely or a combination of in-person and on-campus classes, several location options were provided in order to establish safe and quiet areas for students to attend lectures (Brooklyn College, 2021). There was also an entirely new course revolving around COVID-19 that was introduced to students, which delved into the background and rise of the virus and all of the implications that it had in an effort to educate students about the history of similar pandemics and what they can learn from this experience in order to be better prepared for the future.

Brooklyn College's reopen in Fall 2021 was based on research conducted about local transmission rates and the feasibility of a successful and healthy fall based on statewide statistics (Brooklyn College, 2021). Seminars were held on campus in order to spread awareness about the potential implications of the reopen across campus and encourage students and faculty to get vaccinated as soon as possible. Other measures of awareness included circulation of return schedules for those who were still working from home, reception of feedback from those living on campus about the return to campus, and messaging about the health protocols in place to gain accurate information about how individuals on campus were responding and adhering to the regulations. Brooklyn College also strived to establish equity across hybrid education and employment, implementing inclusive teaching modalities and "rotational in-person schedules to balance the onsite workload across employees fairly" (Brooklyn College, 2021). The University put together the Coronavirus Campus Reentry Review Board (RRB) to originally plan for how the school's

operations would continue after the initial school closure, and later worked to construct a strategic reopening plan. For example, the RRB set up regulations for PPE use within campus facilities, protocols for a safe campus return, safety plans for campus science laboratory re-openings, structures of classes that would benefit from being taught in-person (such as art, theater, film, and music), and distribution of necessary resources like food and academic equipment.

Several measures were taken to promote hygiene in the on-campus population as well, from physical barriers being placed at high-volume public events, to sanitizing stations being established at entrances to all buildings, bathrooms, elevator lobbies. Campus dining halls offered full food services with grab-and-go meals. Touchless vending machines offered alternate food options with a lowered risk of spread, and students were encouraged to eat alone and outside, if not in their rooms (Brooklyn College, 2021). All classroom and office spaces were thoroughly cleaned once a day, and disinfectant wipes were available in every classroom for student and staff use as well, especially for areas such as science and computer labs that hosted specialized equipment. Specifications for the types of cleaning supplies to be used could be found on Brooklyn College's website. Only public restrooms with ventilation were kept open, and healthy habits were encouraged through signage across campus; administration emphasized the importance of universal language. Student groups and organizations were asked to put a full hold on in-person activities and events until further notice, but could continue to operate at a limited capacity through virtual engagement.

Through the RRB, the University worked to prepare all classrooms and office spaces with the right amount of ventilation and seating distances to be deemed safe for the reopening for the classes and work that would be taking place on site. Fall 2021 school schedules consisted of 50% virtual courses and 50% hybrid or in-person courses (Brooklyn College, 2021). In addition to any data collected by the testing centers on campus and Student Health, members of the campus community were expected to self-report any exposure to positive cases or if they were experiencing any symptoms of the virus through the “COVID-19 Case Collection Form”; this was helpful for the RRB to know how to adjust the breadth of university operations. As such, the college had three levels of preparation to shut down campus operations in the event of a gross outbreak: 1) if there is a positive case reported on campus, the affected office, classroom, and other places of exposure would be closed for 24 hours in order to ventilate the space, followed by disinfecting the area and isolating the individual to prevent further contact; 2) if there are multiple positive cases up to 5% of the population living on campus, University leadership would decide how to scale back activities; and 3) if there is widespread community transmission that seems to be increasing in terms of positive cases, the University would plan on restricting classes back to online modalities in entirety, reimplementing social distancing measures, and gradual shutdowns of campus buildings (Brooklyn College, 2021).

Brooklyn College also seemed to put student success and support at the forefront. Services such as academic advisement, registration support, financial support, housing aid, food aid, transportation, medical and dental care, and assistance

with purchasing academic materials for school were made as accessible as possible, even remotely, through personal counseling offices and appointments that could be made online (Brooklyn College, 2021). In a recent letter from the President of the University, it was stated that the institution will be continuing with random testing, reporting of COVID cases, masking mandates, and contact tracing protocols into the 2022 semester. While religious or medical exemptions for vaccinations will still be permitted, unvaccinated students without a valid exemption will face immediate withdrawal from classes enrolled in for the winter as a consequence of not complying with regulations; all winter classes will be taught exclusively in a virtual format. Finally, in an effort to monitor the behavior of new variants of COVID-19, coursework will carry on in a hybrid format, with 70% of classes being on campus and 30% continuing virtually (Brooklyn College, 2021).

### **2.9.7 Drew University**

Drew University is a private university located in Madison, New Jersey with about 2,000 students enrolled, relatively very small in comparison to the other universities discussed throughout this review. Aside from moving instruction to an entirely virtual format, not unlike other institutions, Drew University took specific precautions over the course of Winter 2020 to put measures in place for a safe return to campus in Spring 2021. As students returned from their winter breaks, they were immediately placed in isolation, and if students sought out health services, the

healthcare providers would wear extensive personal protective equipment (PPE) and wipe down the room before and after the student's consultation, regardless of any signs or symptoms of the virus (Drew University, 2021). Accurate and effective communication with students through multiple platforms was key and included messaging through the website as well as through signage around campus and in health centers to promote healthy habits and encourage vaccinations. Students who had traveled independently over the winter break were given special attention and monitoring, and all students received health information and care through telehealth services whenever possible in an effort to protect all parties from possible exposure (Drew University, 2021).

Study abroad and off-term programs that would have taken place over winter and summer were cancelled for the time being. With an open Spring 2021 semester in mind, testing procedures and health protocols were put in place for those wishing to return to campus. Faculty were asked to modify their teaching methods and tools in order to align with virtual and hybrid instruction. Resources for students regarding student life, career support, counseling, food, and housing were also developed to ease the struggle that many students were facing, as well as to ensure a better guarantee for a fully in-person 2021 academic year (Drew University, 2021). It seems that much of Drew University's success in managing the fallout of the pandemic was due to the administration's ability to allocate resources and support effectively among the student and staff population, and this may be due to the fact that the much smaller size of the school allowed for growth in areas that larger schools with many thousands of students

did not experience the same success. What can be concluded from this section is that the location and size of the school did not grossly impact the change in the specific operations that occurred across institutions as a result of the pandemic. What we did see, however, were major differences in the approaches taken to ensure a safe and healthy environment for campus returns, as well as the results showing varying degrees of progress and gain.

## **Chapter 3**

### **METHODS**

#### **3.1 Study Participants and Instruments**

In Spring 2020, the Center for Research in Education and Social Policy (CRESP) at the University of Delaware, in concert with University administration, formulated and launched several targeted surveys related to the impact of COVID-19, including a targeted survey to undergraduate students. This survey asked students about their experiences during the pandemic, their opinions about how mandates were enforced at the institution, and their concerns and priorities regarding a full return to campus in Fall 2021. This data was collected in order to inform the administration about what to keep in mind as they prepared for a full campus reopen one year after the University's COVID-19 emergency shutdown and was developed at the University. The survey was disseminated to students who were Freshmen, Sophomores, and Juniors in the 2020-2021 academic year via an email link through their University-affiliated email. The data presented here is based only on students enrolled at the Newark Campus (n=2,941). The data reflects roughly 2,941 undergraduate student responses, or 25% of the initial sample. This study was designated exempt by the IRB of the University of Delaware.

The survey tool was originally administered through the Qualtrics survey platform. All survey responses were able to be collected and aggregated through Qualtrics. Responses were de-identified so that the names and emails of the



participants were separated from their responses. While 21 of 23 questions of the survey focused on collecting quantitative information about student considerations about the pandemic at the University of Delaware, the final question of the survey, and the focus of this research, was an open-ended prompt that asked: “Is there anything else you want the administration to know about your experiences, or feelings this past year?” The open-ended nature of this question, and its robust response, enabled a more in-depth understanding of the experiences of students during this time, and they are the focus of this study.

The responses from this question were uploaded to, and analyzed through, Dedoose Version 9.0.46 (SocioCultural Research Consultants, LLC; Los Angeles, CA, USA), a data analysis software that is programmed to code common themes of qualitative data. Responses were systematically examined using an inductive approach. The themes of the qualitative data were developed with a focus placed on understanding the student experience during COVID. Initially, a draft of codes was developed by the Principal Investigator (PI) of the study (the undergraduate student) and was refined alongside the Thesis Director. As the Principal Investigator is an undergraduate student, the coding process was vetted and discussed with the Thesis Director throughout the process, with discrepancies resolved collectively. However, primary coding activities were engaged by the PI.

### **3.2 Principal Investigator Statement About Positionality and Personal Bias**

I approached this research as a college senior who is readily engaged in leadership activities at the University. I experienced the pandemic and online learning with reasonable success. As a BIPOC student who identifies as a cisgender woman, I am sensitive to some issues that students of color and cisgender women face. My intersectionality as a woman of color has informed some of my understandings of the lived experiences of some of the participants in the study. In order to consider assumptions that I might have been making in the data, I worked with my Thesis Director to unpack my own assumptions about online learning, its benefits, and its drawbacks, among the other topics covered in this report.

## **Chapter 4**

### **FINDINGS**

In presenting these findings, we recognize that while students reported significant impacts as a result of transitioning to a virtual learning environment, there were simultaneously profound shifts taking place in all environments due to the COVID-19 pandemic. It is likely that while respondents described isolated concerns, the thoughts and feelings reflected in the data were influenced by multiple contextual factors.

#### **4.1 Qualitative Themes**

##### **4.1.1 Quality and Accessibility of Education in a Virtual Learning Environment**

One of the most frequently discussed themes that was reflected in the qualitative responses was how students felt about the quality and accessibility of the education that they received following the transition to virtual learning platforms during the pandemic year. Four major themes arose from the student responses pertaining to quality and accessibility of education: Virtual Learning Challenges, Virtual Learning Benefits, Transition Between Learning Modalities, and Modified Grading Policy. While these four themes encompassed what students had to say about their experience with education during the pandemic, there were other, minor themes that had a large prevalence within the qualitative responses, specifically the themes of Virtual Learning Challenges and Benefits. Therefore, those two themes have been

divided further into sub-themes, as shown in Table 1. In particular, four sub-categories arose from the theme of Virtual Learning Challenges: Course Organization and Classroom Infrastructure; Technological Issues; Networking Opportunities; Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion; and Academic Impact. The Virtual Learning Benefits theme was divided into three sub-categories: Efficiency, Time Management, and Health and Safety. This section will cover the intricacies of student experiences as they pertain to distanced learning.

Table 1. Quality and Accessibility of Education in a Virtual Learning Environment

<b>THEME</b>	<b>SUB-THEME</b>	<b>REPRESENTATIVE QUOTES</b>
Virtual Learning Challenges	Course Organization & Classroom Infrastructure	I myself am very much a hands on learner, and I learn best when I am able to talk to my peers and professors, which has been extremely difficult in the completely online format.

		<p>Online class is a struggle for me, especially because as a science major I missed all of the critical labs where I was supposed to learn introductory laboratory skills, and these were translated into a very difficult online format where I gained no practice or exposure to lab skills, going straight into upper division lab courses and working in real research labs without ever having learned the basic skills.</p>
		<p>Proctor U exams are extremely difficult to take when living with a roommate or in a noisy apartment building. I had trouble with internet connection and finding the space to be able to do these exams. I also found they were extremely stressful and the cybersecurity issue made me paranoid, making it harder to focus on my exams.</p>
		<p>Some teachers that go completely asynchronous don't post their own lectures and never meet in person. They post random YouTube videos that do not correctly teach the information.</p>
	Technological Issues	<p>The hybrid classes are difficult because it limits my access to UD facilities and resources that I need.</p>

		<p>All year, I have had trouble with my computer. When I use zoom and chrome at the same time my computer overheats and my mic stops working. Because of this, I often can not vocally participate in class. I have made several of my professors aware of this issue, and they do not care. In fact, I have had my participation grade lowered, despite being at every class meeting actively taking notes, due to this tech issue that is fully out of my control.</p>
		<p>As a student and a staff member, I see how remote learning can be difficult for students. I do not always have reliable internet and my work/study space at home is not physically comfortable/ergonomic.</p>
	Networking Opportunities	<p>The restrictions we have now are far too harsh and make it extremely difficult to build connections with peers or instructors.</p>
		<p>Having online classes has made it nearly impossible to connect with others and provide substantial learning.</p>

		<p>One thing I am struggling with is that grad school apps will be asking for letters of rec, and I haven't had the chance to really meet or get to know any of my professors due to online class, although this has gotten better as we all get better at the online format.</p>
		<p>A hybrid learning model can work, but not interacting with my peers in person has drastically hurt my networking and learning opportunities.</p>
	Diversity, Equity, & Inclusion	<p>I think it's unacceptable that I am expected with a learning disability to sit on a computer, in a chair, with my computer on for 4 back to back classes on zoom a day.</p>
		<p>A lot of people cheat as a result of remote learning. It makes it harder for students who actually study and try to learn to stay ahead of those who don't which makes a lot of our efforts essentially meaningless as students.</p>
		<p>As an international student, the pressure comes from the changing world outside the campus, when the political and social opinions are not so friendly, it is the only hope to accomplish the university studies in a safe and steady environment, so please hold on! Thank you!</p>

	Academic Impact	I pull 7-12 hour days sitting on a computer all day long, to the point where the line between the work-life balance has become blurred. Even my professors are burnt out.
		I don't mind taking online classes for subjects that I understand, but taking subjects that are a little harder can be difficult to take over remote learning.
		Remote learning has been extremely difficult. It is hard for me to focus and learn when I am not physically in a classroom, and I do not feel as connected to my professors and classmates.
		It has been very difficult to actually absorb and have new information stick in this online environment.
Virtual Learning Benefits	Efficiency	I enjoy zoom more than in person class. It's easier, I can go to class off of my phone. It saves time from traveling to school and then to work.
		The pandemic helped me save finances between full time work/practicum and being a full time student with online learning.
		Remote learning is the best especially for someone who is taking care of their family.



	Time Management	Being online has given me so much more time to study and prepare for assignments.
		Working remotely allowed me to maximize my learning potential and focus more on my academics.
		I really enjoyed learning at my own pace.
	Health & Safety	For someone with mental illness learning from home has been a delight.
		I struggle with social anxiety, so the remote learning option is much better for me.
		I want school to stay in online format. Health problems prevent me from getting the vaccine.
Remote class is difficult, but I care much more about my safety and health.		
Transition Between Learning Modalities		I'm not sure how easy it will be to integrate back into "normal" school life.
		Many professors went easy on us this semester, so i think we need a transition into regular classwork.

		<p>Remote learning has been hard, but the transition back into in person classes is going to be really hard on students. Learning in a classroom versus at home is a completely different experience, and many students, including myself, will struggle. Please be patient and put leniency practices into classes as we return.</p>
		<p>Also, I don't think that asynchronous classes should continue to be a standard way to teaching in the upcoming semesters. As things are returning to normal, especially with in person classes, I think this should be changed. Before the pandemic this was not the norm and shouldn't continue to be. Learning in this manner, especially very important classes for my major, is challenging and isn't a good way to connect with people and professors.</p>
<p>Modified Grading Policy</p>		<p>This semester I struggled the most with COVID and my mental health due to COVID, and with modified pass/fail gone and no actual break I felt like the school didn't care about my health.</p>

		<p>I was disappointed that they removed the modified pass option. We are still struggling in this pandemic, so it is not fair that we are being treated as if things are back to normal for us academically when they clearly are not. Many courses are not well-adapted to the online format and it is not fair that we are being held accountable for the university failing us, not the other way around.</p>
		<p>If we're still learning online why did you take away pass fail? I have a very difficult time learning on zoom and it seems as though the university doesn't care about students comfort and ability to retain information at this time.</p>

#### 4.1.1.1 Virtual Learning Challenges

Virtual learning challenges can be defined as the variety of difficulties that students faced with receiving an education across online platforms. There was a wide range of virtual learning challenges that were experienced by students throughout the pandemic. These challenges were divided up into five separate sub-categories. First, students faced many obstacles with the way that their coursework was organized. Course organization can be defined as the structure of the class as determined by the professor, including but not limited to how the syllabus is set up, required materials,

order of the lessons, patterns in assignment deadlines, and teaching modality. Overall, students felt that professors should have been more specific with their instructions and been more accommodating to students who were not able to purchase certain course materials, exemplified by the quotes “Teachers and professors absolutely need more detailed and accurate syllabus” and “I’ve had professors this semester who have been very ignorant towards students and requiring subscriptions to different media outlets which a lot of people cannot afford.” Moreover, many students shared that the quality of education provided over online modalities was poor, and did not allow them to build the skills necessary for their future educational and career trajectories. The specific example of applied science laboratory classes came up many times as a course that did not work for students across a virtual format: “There are some classes that have been transitioned into a virtual format that should never be taught in that manner...the hands-on classes that are mostly sciences or nursing or physical therapy...cannot be taught effectively without being hands-on”. Finally, many courses used various browser extensions to control for breaches in academic integrity during course assessments, such as ProctorU and Respondus Lockdown Browser; while effective in preventing cheating, students felt that the use of lockdown browsers served as an invasion of privacy and often made it more challenging to focus on exams, as stated in one quote, “I hated ProctorU when I had to use it. The web extension is unbelievably invasive...it’s really stressful thinking and knowing that there is a program eye tracking with someone staring right at you while taking an exam.”

Second, students had to work around a myriad of technological issues that arose during the period of virtual learning, which are defined as barriers to learning as a result of faults with technology, such as cell phones, laptops, and desktop computers, that are typically used to learn virtually. Many of the issues had to do with inconsistent WiFi connectivity and the inability to use the Internet for schoolwork or maintain video calls on the Zoom platform. Students felt that at times, technology held them back from being able to participate fully in class and engage in group work, since a lot of virtual classroom activities are reliant on stable Internet connection, as conveyed through this quote: “All year, I have had trouble with my computer...Because of this, I often cannot vocally participate in class.” Students also expressed frustration with the limited access to facilities and resources when classes were hybrid or fully virtual, which would not have been as much of a problem on campus: “The hybrid classes are difficult because it limits my access to UD facilities and resources that I need.”

Third, the virtual landscape made it incredibly difficult for students to interact and network with their fellow peers and faculty members. Networking opportunities can be defined as ways for students to build relationships with their fellow peers and instructors in a professional or career-driven context. As conveyed in the data, networking is very important to students, as it provides them with an avenue to garner support when applying for jobs, internships, or higher education. Many students expressed concerns about graduate school recommendation letter requirements, and the adjacent discomfort they felt about asking any of their professors to write reference letters due to the lack of proper networking and connection that took place, as

illustrated through the following quotes: “Classes that never meet on Zoom...have been a bit difficult for me, especially when they have things like group projects because I can’t engage with other students in any in-class capacity” and “I...was applying for an early admission to medical school program through UD that required five letters of recommendations from professors, and I had very few options for professors that knew me in person...to get to five letters I had to ask some professors that I had barely much interaction with.”

Fourth, students felt that much of the structure of online learning was lacking in diversity, equity, and inclusion across individual differences. Diversity, equity, and inclusion pertain to knowledge of and counting for individuals’ identities and lived experiences in the way that education is structured. For instance, there were expressions of unique obstacles faced in education and student life by students of color and those with attention and learning disabilities, as exemplified by the quotes, “As someone who suffers with ADHD online learning is not and has not been a sustainable form of education” and “I would like to see UD create more in-person safe spaces for the Black and AAPI communities”. There were also reports of grading disparities due to students who cheated on exams and assignments: “A lot of people cheat as a result of remote learning. It makes it harder for students who actually study and try to learn to stay ahead of those who don’t.” This reveals a deep gap in the realm of virtual learning, and something for the University to keep in mind for the future is to aim to structure online education in a way that speaks to a range of learning styles and abilities.

Last, online learning had a particular impact on academia, described by students as a loss of a work-life balance, lack of classroom engagement during lectures, and difficulty absorbing new information. One quote stated that “Distant learning has been difficult since the whole class usually has their camera off and almost nobody ever answers the instructors.” Another response said, “Learning online is very difficult and made my grades suffer.” Factors such as these, among others, have resulted in challenges with maintaining grades, even for self-reported hardworking and consistent students.

#### **4.1.1.2 Virtual Learning Benefits**

Alongside the challenges experienced with virtual learning, many students also reported multiple benefits that they experienced with the online modality. Virtual learning benefits can be described as positive outcomes that resulted from the transition to learning through online platforms. The benefits conveyed in the data have been divided into three sub-themes, which are Efficiency, Time Management, and Health and Safety. In the context of this report, efficiency is defined as an aspect of online learning that made the day-to-day routine of an individual easier or more manageable in some way. For instance, as illustrated in the following representative quote, students who had to maintain work schedules while they were at home to support themselves found virtual classes more convenient so that they could join from their cell phones while still being able to commit to a paid job: “I enjoy Zoom more

than in person class. It's easier, I can go to class off of my phone. It saves time from traveling to school and then to work." Some students who were caring for their families also preferred taking classes online: "Remote learning is the best especially for someone who is taking care of their family."

The second sub-theme of time management was distinguished from efficiency by depicting ways that online learning helped students monitor the time that they allotted to school-related work specifically. Many students reported that remote work removed the factor of commute times and gave them the opportunity to focus more on their assignments and learn at their own pace: "I feel like I would have struggled completing much of my school work if I had to deal with commute times on top of attending classes."

The final major sub-theme derived from the benefits of virtual learning was considerations regarding health and safety, which can be described as health benefits pertaining to being able to learn and work from home. Several students expressed that they were experiencing some concern related to a health issue, whether it involved mental health, problems that prevented vaccination administration, the health of a family member, or general anxiety with COVID cases on UD's campus. Working remotely offered these individuals the step away from campus that they needed to focus on their health and protect against contraction of COVID-19, as exemplified by these quotes: "For someone with mental illness learning from home has been a delight" and "I want school to stay in online format. Health problems prevent me from getting the vaccine."



#### **4.1.1.3 Transition Between Learning Modalities**

Transitioning between learning modalities can be defined as the experiences of the gradual shift from learning entirely online for a year to starting in-person learning. The Spring 2021 and Fall 2021 semesters at the University were unique in that much of the coursework was hybrid, with some classes being offered in-person, and others being offered virtually, either synchronously or asynchronously. When reviewing student responses about their experience transitioning between in-person and learning modalities, there were no major sub-themes that stood out, so there are none identified in Table 2. Some challenges that students faced included finding spaces to set up for a virtual class following an in-person class, or vice versa; the combination of taking classes in both modalities placed the burden of balancing class times and finding locations to take an online class solely on the student. This is revealed in the quote, “If the classes are mixed, I may need to find somewhere quiet to sit down for an hour to watch a lecture if it is in-between two in-person classes. Finding a place where I can work and won’t be asked to leave has been an issue.” Moreover, during the pandemic, many operations were modified with regards to course structure and work assigned to students. Students recognized that the return to a fully in-person semester would be new and unfamiliar ground for many, since they may not have developed or retained the skills needed for a normal term, including classroom interaction, study strategies, and note-taking. In fact, some of the comments in the data included requests for administration and faculty to practice leniency so that students would feel eased into a

new learning environment, such as, “Seeing that most of my classes have had open note assessments, I think it will be hard to adjust back to the style of closed note tests. I have forgotten how to truly study and I need time to adjust.”

#### **4.1.1.4 Modified Grading Policy**

The final major theme concerning quality and accessibility to education is the modified grading policy administered in Spring 2020 (Executive Committee Meeting, 2020). Similar to the Transition Between Learning Modalities theme, this was a theme for which no outstanding sub-themes were identified, so this topic also stands alone. Overall, there was a majority agreement in the data that UD’s modified grading policy was beneficial to students, as many grades dropped due to a variety of factors, including financial burdens, family health, mental health, and struggles with virtual learning: “The modified grading and extra support to students has been beneficial.” In particular, many of the comments expressed disappointment that the grading policy was lifted for Spring 2021. Students felt that they could have taken advantage of a policy change like this for one additional semester, since many were still experiencing struggles with mental health, keeping up in school, and because it was still a hybrid semester. This is exemplified by the following quotes: “I was disappointed that they removed the modified pass option. We are still struggling in this pandemic, so it is not fair that we are being treated as if things are back to normal for us academically when they are clearly not” and “With modified pass/fail gone and no actual break I felt like

the school didn't care about my health." Something to point out here is the overlapping of more than one issue—the lack of modified grading and no school break—which exacerbated the negative impacts of the pandemic experience of the students. This is a testament to the many factors that influenced students' feelings about any one topic, whether they were aware of this subtlety or not.

#### **4.1.2 Quality of Student Life**

Another frequently discussed issue throughout the qualitative data was the quality of student life, as expressed through the following common themes:

Challenges with Campus Services, Department Support, and Student Resources (both when attending school in-person and online), Financial Burdens and Responsibilities, Social Activities and Student Events, Campus Safety and Social Unrest, and External Student Circumstances. Similar to the section about students' experiences with the quality and accessibility of education in a virtual learning environment, four of the five themes stated presented with additional minor themes that were prevalent in the data and important to note. The Challenges with Campus Services, Department Support, and Student Resources theme is comprised of these five sub-themes: Center for Counseling and Student Development, Residence Life & Housing, Academics and Career Advising, Study Spaces, and Other Services. Then, four sub-themes were derived from the Financial Burdens and Responsibilities theme: Stability and Self-Support, Financial Aid, University Tuition, and Return on Investment. The Social

Activities and Student Events theme did not present with prevalent minor themes. However, sub-themes of UDPD and Other Social Issues were extracted from Campus Safety and Social Unrest, and sub-themes of Family Health and Employment Insecurity were extracted from External Student Circumstances. All of the minor themes are further described following the table, within the paragraphs describing each corresponding major theme.

Table 2. Quality of Student Life

THEME	SUB-THEME	REPRESENTATIVE QUOTES
Challenges with Campus Services, Department Support, and Student Resources	Center for Counseling and Student Development	We need help. These past sems have been extremely difficult. We barely hear from our counselors.
		Continuity of guidance even during transitions, keeping the same counselor for four years even tho your transitioning from aap, keeps students feeling interconnected.
		Mental health services were not prepared for these new circumstances (I don't blame them) but it has resulted in letting students fall through the cracks. I am now not receiving services even though I live in the state and I need them.

	Residence Life & Housing	I would have preferred to stay with UD for housing but the policy would force me to wait until already late in the semester to find out if I was guaranteed.
		Housing has been very stressful because the communication about the availability of on-campus housing came too late in the year to find affordable off-campus housing.
		Their housing department did a terrible job of trying to adapt to the pandemic. Moreover, they were rude and not easy to deal with. They were not sensitive to people's situation at all. There is no reason we should not have been on campus last semester. If we are paying full tuition- that money should be allocated to the proper resources to provide more testing and implement safety measures. Housing should be ashamed.
	Academic & Career Advising	I had to come into freshman year without the freshman introduction everyone gets. so i was just throw into a completely new learning system, i wish i had assistance during that time.
		Almost none of the classes I need for my major were offered this year but I'm still paying the same tuition.

		There has been little help when it comes to advising and career advisement virtually. This school has not been flexible.
	Study Spaces	I know its not the libraries fault, but I've really wanted to check out things from the library on the weekend and them being closed sucks. You gotta bring back regular library hours, maybe even expand them.
		The library is vital part of my study routine and my ability to prepare well for exams and the hours were absolutely ridiculous this past year. By the time I'm done with my classes for the day and ready to study the library is closed.
		I have been utterly crushed by online classes and the removal normal resources (library, library cafe, student centers, etc.). I went from a straight A student to a B's and C's student. Please don't put me through this again.

	Other Services	<p>Please do not cut the funding for RSOs and such, and please do not fire more professors. RSOs and the professors are the heart of the community. If the university is losing money, there are more responsible and sustainable ways to reduce funds in other departments. For example, why can't President Assanis take a higher pay cut? Thank you.</p>
		<p>While access to little bob was still available, I think the current model should be re-evaluated given student vaccine rates, because some equipment I needed was on different floors, but you can't move between floors at the moment, so re-evaluating that should be considered and movement between floors allowed or at least be an option.</p>
		<p>Student financial services has been incredibly difficult to deal with and don't respond to my emails.</p>

		<p>Eliminating eating in student centers and dining halls was the worst decision because for students who had a super short break to grab lunch or dinner, it was frustrating to try to find a place that allowed you to eat food (especially when it was super cold, windy, or raining/snowing). Please don't take away dining again, but rather decrease the capacity of the dining halls if need be.</p>
<p>Financial Burdens &amp; Responsibilities</p>	<p>Stability &amp; Self-Support</p>	<p>As a low income student, I'm constantly worried about what happens if I can't work (due to COVID) and can't support myself.</p>
		<p>Financial hardships have been a struggle and I am just making it by to pay for next semester all with loans in my own name since my parents get denied.</p>
		<p>With online classes, students who can't afford to sit around all day are working full time to pay bills.</p>
		<p>I've been applying for jobs and have been rejected from many after stellar interviews because of UD's late graduation date. This was the deciding factor in employers' decisions. This is relevant because I am desperately in need of a job because of COVID's financial implications.</p>



	Financial Aid	I wish UD could give us more grant money for students with the financial need.
		I did not qualify for the student crisis fund when I had a very good reason to qualify.
	University Tuition	The financial burden you have placed on students of the university is astounding. Given the recession and job losses many families including mine struggle financially and this excessive request from admissions when the world is still trying to heal and repair the damages are drowning. As an institution with such pride and prestige I assumed there would be more compassion during these times.
		I'd like to point out in no way shape or form should we be paying even close to full tuition with lack of access to services and academic environment my money is paying for. I along with the rest of the student body are deeply ashamed rates stayed the same during the pandemic when people are struggling to make ends meet and pay for medical, funeral bills on top of full tuition.

		I am angered that I am still being charged full out of state tuition for this year, when I am home doing school, and the fact that basically half of my classes are asynchronous so I feel like it is super unfair to be charging that much, especially with a pandemic that has effected many's (including mine) financial situations.
	Return on Investment	I pay the same in tuition as I would for a normal school year for half the opportunities I would receive in person. College is more than the classes, you pay for the experience, and this gained me little to no extra "experience" of college. I am so tired of this.
		Online labs are not a good use of money/resources/time. I feel like the debt/money I've accrued and spent are not worth taking a lab in a virtual setting. I feel I'm not getting the most out of these resources.
		Most of my teachers still struggle with teaching online and I haven't enjoyed or felt like I was getting my money's worth out of classes.

<p>Social Activities &amp; Student Events</p>		<p>RSOs need to be brought back and able to meet. Not having in person interaction with my sorority or getting involved in the clubs I wanted to (ie AMT) has seriously impacted my mental health.</p>
		<p>Please allow club sports to be able to be played. D1 sports are allowed to travel and play and practice for longer than an hour and club sports are not allowed to do any of those things. Not having this destressor in our lives right now has proven to be very difficult for many club athletes since many are not able to get the outlet they need.</p>
		<p>It has left me feeling very isolated, with almost no interaction between students in my dorm section. Allowing/encouraging socialization (in a safe manner) I think would significantly improve the overall state of student mental health.</p>
<p>Campus Safety &amp; Social Unrest</p>	<p>UDPD &amp; Law Enforcement</p>	<p>I don't like how the Newark police deal with parties and situations that are not Covid safe on or near campus. They pay too close attention to minor things and disregard big issues.</p>

		<p>There are armed robberies, break ins, and stalkers- and somehow the school/police force is more concerned with suspending kids for doing things every college kid does to have somewhat of a social life rather than arresting these people.</p>
		<p>I think it is crazy that they will have extra cop cars out on the weekends, yet students are getting mugged/assaulted outside their dorms.</p>
	Other Social Issues	<p>Why are there no blue lights on main street? I have heard of many girls getting followed home and many muggings occurring. Blue lights on mainstreet would help make me feel more comfortable with the amount of violence that has been going on.</p>
		<p>There has been a clear and egregious attack on the greek community and I feel personally offended and disregarded as a person and valued member of the university of Delaware.</p>
		<p>Your complete lack of meaningful attention to racial justice has been pitiful and embarrassing.</p>

External Student Circumstances	Family Health	When classes go back to fully in person, I will not be able to remain at home as a caretaker for a family member and I will not be able to continue working in person as I live far from campus.
		My father committed suicide and ended up dying in my arms in the middle of the previous semester, the psychological ramifications regarding my school work have been tremendous.
		My family is immunocompromised. I have to help my disabled mother. I do not want to risk exposing her to covid because a school opened too early.
		I'm depressed because in the past year, I was continuing to suffer from an ankle injury that lasted a year and a half, my mom died, my grandfather that helped raise me died, my dad is going through a divorce and has to sell our home and basically everything he owns, and I'm withdrawing from the semester because I can't keep up with the work that has piled up as a result of my mental health.
	Employment Insecurity	I am unemployed and so are my parents and this year has been incredibly frustrating and difficult.

		I was working three jobs, lost 5 family members in a month, and had to manage school and club work.
		Literally 12 people I know died in the last year, we have faced food insecurity, threats of eviction, and utility shutoffs and I can't figure out what timeline is required of me for graduation with a big radio silence from the school.

#### **4.1.2.1 Challenges with Campus Services, Department Support, and Student Resources**

This theme describes the various challenges that students faced during the pandemic that pertained specifically to services, resources, and sources of support provided through the campus. Throughout the pandemic years, the University administration aimed to identify the ways in which students would need additional support, and communicate that information across various platforms. The data that discussed these services and support resources explains how available students felt that those resources were to them, as well as their experiences with specific services and campus departments. One major sub-theme was with regards to the University of Delaware’s Center for Counseling and Student Development (CCSD), a center that works to promote students’ psychological well-being. Students expressed that they had negative experiences gaining mental health support from the University, and had to seek out resources outside of the institution: “These online classes have been

detrimental to my mental health, and as a result [I'm] seeking help outside of the school, since I've had bad experiences gaining help from UD." Students indicated that there was a lack of consistent communication between students and CCSD counselors about services and resources, which exacerbated the struggles that many students were already experiencing with their emotional well-being. This is exemplified by the quotes "These past [semesters] have been extremely difficult. We barely hear from our counselors" and "Sean's House was never promoted by the school as a place for students to go." Students felt that the mental health promotion and quality of services at UD was not as effective as it should have been during such a volatile time.

Students also experienced challenges with housing insecurity, which can encompass a number of issues related to a person's living situation, from financial affordability, safety, and quality of the living environment. Communication about available on- and off-campus housing was not early enough for students to make adequate plans about where they would live in the following year: "Housing has been very stressful because the communication about the availability of on-campus housing came too late in the year to find affordable off-campus housing." Operationally, students were also unhappy with safety measures in residence halls and the housing application process: "If we are paying full tuition, that money should be allocated to the proper resources to provide more testing and implement safety measures."

A third area of concern was with academic and career advising services, which, in this context, are advising services provided through academic advisors. Many students expressed a need for assistance as they transitioned into the rigor of the

academic programs at UD, including tutoring and degree planning, as conveyed in these quotes: “I need help with tutoring” and “I had to come into freshman year without the freshman introduction everyone gets so I was just thrown into a completely new learning system. I wish I had more assistance during that time.” Students also struggled with the lack of flexibility with degree requirements, as the lack of availability of certain courses was not conducive to fulfilling graduation requirements: “Almost none of the classes I need for my major were offered this year but I’m still paying the same tuition.”

Along a similar vein, students expressed experiencing a lack of availability and flexibility of common study spaces on campus, places where students are able to work on homework and study during the day. Students typically turn to these areas for quiet places to study or take a virtual class, but the hours that they were open and the system of seat reservation did not work with students’ class schedules. These sentiments are expressed in this quote: “The library is a vital part of my study routine and my ability to prepare well for exams and the hours were absolutely ridiculous this past year. By the time I’m done with my classes for the day and ready to study the library is closed.”

Aside from the campus and student service needs discussed above, other student resources and services that students experienced problems with included funding for student organizations, communication with COVID testing centers, availability of equipment and regulations in the athletic center, responsiveness of Student Financial Services, parking expenses, the lack of interfaith prayer spaces on



campus, and dining hall hours and services. Some of these issues are illuminated in the following quotes: “While access to the Little Bob was still available, I think the current model should be re-evaluated given student vaccine rates, because some equipment I needed was on different floors” and “For students who had a super short break to grab lunch or dinner, it was frustrating to try to find a place that allowed you to eat food.” While these were not as prevalent in the data as the previously discussed sub-themes, they do reveal inconsistencies, discrepancies, and areas for improvement in student support, so they are also outlined in Table 2.

#### **4.1.2.2 Financial Burdens and Responsibilities**

The Financial Burdens and Responsibilities theme outlines the major ways in which students coped with financial difficulties in a variety of financially afflicted areas during the pandemic. The first major sub-theme derived from this data was Stability and Student Support, which, in the context of this study, is described as how financially stable students felt and the efforts that they had to make to support themselves or their families due to the economic issues that arose from the pandemic. Examples of issues that students experienced include managing student debt, handling loans, and difficulties with finding and balancing a full-time job outside of school: “Financial hardships have been a struggle and I am just making it by to pay for next semester all with loans in my own name since my parents get denied.” Students who had financial responsibilities found it a challenge to also manage schoolwork while

maintaining a job: “With online classes, students who can’t afford to sit around all day are working full time to pay bills.”

On the note of student debt, another sub-theme that arose was Financial Aid. Students felt that they would have benefitted from financial aid and grant money, even though the process through which financial aid decisions are made is selective: “I wish UD could give us more grant money for students with the financial need.” The University of Delaware also offered financial assistance through a separate pool known as the Student Crisis Fund, which is a donation platform through which students could apply for need-based aid. One student stated that they were not able to receive money from this Fund although they qualified for the money.

Another facet of financial burdens experienced by undergraduate students was specifically university tuition costs. One quote that expresses this is “I don’t understand why I’m still paying as much for tuition when I haven’t been on campus for classes or live on campus.” There was an overwhelming majority of negative sentiments towards the full charges of tuition placed on students despite the modified teaching modalities, lower quality of education (Table 1), lack of access to various aspects of student life (Table 2), and coping with job losses in the family (Table 2) that students were experiencing. This is exemplified by the quotes “I understand that the university took a major financial hit, but I feel as though I am paying full tuition for what feels like a rather subpar education” and “Especially due to the fact that parents have lost their jobs. Many cannot afford these prices for online learning.” Students felt

that the University lack compassion for their student body, and should have not placed a priority of recovering from their own financial losses over student needs.

Adjacent to this, students felt that they put more into the school, their education, and their daily lives than they got out of it. These feelings are conveyed in the quotes “I don’t feel like I’m getting my money’s worth from online school being fully priced” and “Student fees were overpriced to cover student services that I never used.” In other words, they felt that the tuition paid and the time spent on their learning and living was not worth the investment, as they were not able to access and use many resources to the fullest extent.

#### **4.1.2.3 Social Activities and Student Events**

The next theme of this section encompasses students’ social life, including student groups, friendship circles, and the overall campus atmosphere outside of the classroom, which is a huge part of students’ experience at a college. It impacts students’ daily routine and how much they are valued as an individual. As such, there were a lot of responses in the data that addressed opportunities for socialization and building community. Students faced lots of difficulties with connecting to their peers and friends while learning online and felt that there was a lack of in-person events that could have been held in a safe manner to allow for this kind of socialization that was not always possible in the classroom. This is expressed in the quotes, “There was a lack of in-person opportunities that could’ve happened while still being safe” and “It

was very difficult to connect with my peers outside of class or even to form new relationships with others in our community.” Students were also upset about the restrictions placed on club sports and student organization meetings, which are two elements of campus life that add a lot of value to the student experience through events and engagement, and without which students can feel isolated from their social circles.

#### **4.1.2.4 Campus Safety and Social Unrest**

With the theme of Campus Safety, the focus was on how safe and protected students felt on and around campus once they returned. A large topic that was covered was sentiments about the University of Delaware Police Department (UDPD) and law enforcement on campus. Students noted that there was an increased number of various crimes, assaults, and break-ins, especially in and around residence halls, and there was less focus placed on those serious cases and more focus placed on enforcing gathering regulations and stopping partying around campus. This is conveyed by the quote “I think it is crazy that they will have extra cop cars out on weekend, yet students are getting mugged/assaulted outside their dorms.”

Aside from concerns with law enforcement, there were a number of other social issues that did not fall into the major thematic categories, but should be highlighted in the table. These included experiences with violence, stalking, and attacks on various racial and ethnic communities on campus: “Discrimination [is] still

faced by BIPOC students, students with disabilities, LGBTQ+ individuals, and women.” Generally, students felt that the priorities of the administration with regard to student safety and social justice were misplaced.

#### **4.1.2.5 External Student Circumstances**

The last major theme under the umbrella of student life was External Student Circumstances, which covered other issues that students were experiencing during the pandemic years that did not fall into any of the previous categories, but were important to be mentioned. One sub-theme is Family Health, which encapsulated health issues that students were coping with within their families. Students reported having to serve as family caretakers for immunocompromised family members, as well as family members who were going through physical and mental health issues of their own. This resulted in students having less time to focus on academic work, which had an impact on their education: “COVID increased my personal family responsibilities in caring for elderly parents and children with compounding medical conditions. I had considerably less time for academic work.” Something else that stood out is that the students who were living with family members or loved ones with health issues, sometimes even contracting COVID, were the students who included in their statement that they did not feel safe returning to campus. This is potentially because these students had a visual and experiential reference for what contracting COVID, or

any other dire health problem, could look like, and were thus more hesitant to support a full campus return.

The other sub-theme that was prevalent within External Student Circumstances was Employment Insecurity. A lot of students reported that they or their parents (sometimes both parties) were unemployed and struggling to find jobs, making it incredibly difficult for their families to make ends meet: “I am unemployed and so are my parents and this year has been incredibly frustrating and difficult.” Some students were at the other end of the spectrum and taking on multiple jobs in order to support their families: “I was working three jobs, lost 5 family members in a month, and had to manage school and club work.” Unemployment led to various other issues, such as food insecurity and possibilities of eviction from the home, so education dropped as a priority for students going through those difficulties. In fact, many had to take semesters off or cut back on classes, resulting in degree plans that pushed their graduation date past when it originally was. Moving forward, challenges, like unemployment, that tend to proliferate into deeper hardships need to be better anticipated and planned for so that proper support can be provided to impacted individuals.

#### **4.1.3 Mental Health During the Pandemic**

A major area of need expressed by the students was the detriment that the pandemic had to their mental health and the need for support for their emotional well-

being. The qualitative responses represented in Table 4 are a reflection of students' experiences with maintaining their mental health during the pandemic, most commonly the challenges with doing so because of the snowball effects on academia and daily life that the pandemic caused. These experiences have been organized into five sub-themes: Academic Workload, Faculty and Instructor Accommodations and Behavior, School Breaks, Motivation, and Student Needs and Personal Health. Something to note is that the table below emphasizes student needs in a variety of areas with regard to mental health; some of those needs do include support services and resources that were mentioned in other tables. These sentiments were retained in the quotes for authenticity, but the Findings will focus on the aspects of mental health struggles that students went through. Specific information about campus support services that were in demand is further elaborated on in Table 2.

Table 3. Mental Health During the Pandemic

<b>THEME</b>	<b>REPRESENTATIVE QUOTES</b>
Academic Workload	Being online does not mean that learning becomes easier or faster. Personally I have found that the lack of in person classes makes it difficult to fully digest lecture material, and it takes more time to understand new concepts in such a stressful time.

	<p>Teachers have used the opportunity to assign more work to students which has taken a severe toll on my mental health. My day-to-day involves remaining at my computer for hours, some days I never make it outside or eat food, or even exercise.</p>
	<p>I am burnt out, overwhelmed with busy work, and feel extremely disconnected from my school, peers, and family i currently live with. Beign online consumes my day from 4am-7pm with class and homework and I am in a constant cycle of waking up and then working until I pass out form exhaustion. I need to be on campus and in person for all classes or due to my mental health I will need to drop education entirely. I can not learn another year online.</p>
	<p>I think that professors have increased the workload for their courses, which has been absolutely absurd. I have no time to do anything but coursework, and have miserable because of it all semester. professors should have been much more lenient when it comes to late work, and grading should not have gone back to normal this semester.</p>
<p>Faculty &amp; Instructor Accommodations &amp; Behavior</p>	<p>For some reason teachers think we have so much more time and pile on work or take advantage of being asynchronous and tey to give students exam on the weekends when we already never have time for ourselves and its really selfish that they can just give us work and never talk to us.</p>
	<p>I love that my professors were willing to work with me and that we had the online classes with zoom.</p>



	<p>I feel like although this pandemic has been hard, some teachers have not changed their teaching styles to accommodate to the students as they've had to accommodate to remote learning, specifically the physics department.</p>
	<p>I am pleased by certain professor's understanding and lenience, but others have shown no sympathy, understanding, or desire to help their students succeed, which depresses me.</p>
<p>School Breaks</p>	<p>Although it's understandable why spring break was cancelled, having just two recoop days was not beneficial for students. Additionally, those who would've travelled for spring break would have likely found time to travel anyway during this semester.</p>
	<p>I think replacing the spring break week with sporadic re-coop days was not the best option. We/I count a lot on this week to catch up on some assignments and the final papers, and most important issue is that this week can balance out stress and help to maintain mental health. It would have been better if we had been surveyed regarding this issue; some good suggestions may help to reconciliation between the spring week break and preventing students from traveling due to Covid-19.</p>

	<p>Next, the lack of a spring break this semester was extremely taxing. While I understand removing spring break to eliminate travel, the 2 days we got as a replacement were essentially pointless. I spent both days in my room, alone, completing and catching up on work for my classes. So while these days were designed to be a brain break, if I had taken advantage of that, I would have fallen more behind than I already am. This lack of break from my academics has been extremely taxing on my mental health and has caused extremely levels of stress, anxiety, and depression. Overall the University has left me very disappointed and frustrated.</p>
<p>Motivation</p>	<p>Remote learning has been extremely difficult. As I am always a very good student, this past year has been so hard to be motivated for school / go to class / complete assignments. I see a huge difference in the amount of time I put towards studying when in person vs. when remote.</p>
	<p>I used to love attending lectures and interacting with professors and classmates. Since things have gone online I have lost all my enthusiasm for my work and it's reflected in my performance. Please stop ignoring the consequences of the isolation you are inflicting.</p>
	<p>It's been hard. Staying on the computer and maintaining focus is becoming increasingly difficult - my will to even want to do well has practically diminished. Please take it easy on the students as we acclimate back to in person.</p>

Student Needs & Personal Health	I have detested this past year. I ended up with a rotated hip from sitting in-front of my computer every day for months on end.
	My sleeping schedule has been a mess since the Fall 2020 semester. I usually sleep at 11:30pm or 12:30am by the latest but now it has becoming a habit for me to sleep at 3:00am or 4:00am. It affected my productivity throughout the day and I am having a hard time fixing my sleeping schedule.
	Just be patient with the students as they will need time to get back on their feet after almost 2 years of this.

#### 4.1.3.1 Academic Workload

This theme focuses on how the amount of classwork and homework were impacted during the pandemic years and students’ experiences with changes in academic time demands. At UD, students reported experiencing a major increase in workload: Being online consumes my day from 4 AM – 7 PM with class and homework and I am in a constant cycle of waking up and then working until I pass out from exhaustion.” This was made even tougher to manage with less leniency for late work and the University of Delaware’s modified grading policy being lifted (for further elaboration on student perspectives on the modified grading policy, see Table 1). This sentiment is exemplified by the quote “Professors should have been much more lenient when it comes to late works, and grading should not have gone back to normal this semester.” Students expressed that they had no time for anything but schoolwork, and would frequently spend hours in front of their computers with little

rest, meals, and physical activity. Moreover, some comments stated that the virtual landscape made it harder to learn new concepts, which added to the academic pressure that students were feeling during this time: “I have found that the lack of in person classes makes it difficult to fully digest lecture material.” The majority of comments agreed that the workload assigned was overwhelming, and, when paired with a disconnection from peers and community, led to feelings of mental fatigue and exhaustion.

#### **4.1.3.2 Faculty and Instructor Accommodations and Behavior**

This theme can be described as what students thought about teacher and faculty demeanor with students in and out of the classroom. When it came to students’ experience with their teachers, feelings were split into two main directions. One major group of students had positive comments about their relationship with their professors, stating that they afforded their classes a lot of flexibility, and treated students with sympathy and understanding. These emotions are illustrated in the following quote: “I love that my professors were willing to work with me and that we had the online classes with Zoom.” Some said that some instructors were willing to work with students to decide the trajectory of the course so that online learning would be as adapted to the students’ needs as it could. The other major group had negative comments about their professors, reporting that their teachers often assumed that students would have more time learning from home, so double the work was assigned

with fewer to no accommodations: “Most of the professors have not even been teaching. They have been asynchronous classes with recorded lectures from Spring 2020 that they use every semester and tell students not to contact them, only contact the TAs.” Many students wrote that their professors stuck to their teaching styles, even if it did not work well for online learning; in fact, some said that their professor did not teach at all, posting prepared lectures from years prior and assigning asynchronous work, which really impacted the quality of education received in the class: “Some teachers have not changed their teaching styles to accommodate to...remote learning.” This might speak to a larger issue of instructors at the University not being well-trained with online teaching and being adaptable for external circumstances that a student may be facing. Proper educational materials for how to manage difficult situations that students may be going through may be something to include in professional training in future crisis planning.

#### **4.1.3.3 School Breaks**

School breaks are extended periods allotted for students and staff away from the regular academic session for reprieve from the current semester; In the United States this typically takes the form of one week off for Thanksgiving in the Fall term and one week off around Easter for the Spring term. For the Spring of 2021, the University administration released the decision to cancel the annual spring break as a precaution against students traveling abroad for vacation, potentially contracting

COVID-19, and spreading infection to others once back on campus. In the place of spring break, the University implemented two weekdays off from school in the middle of two separate weeks, known as mental health “Re-Coop” (recoup) days. As reported throughout the data, school breaks are a time for students to recuperate from the semester and mentally prepare themselves for the rest of the term. Students felt that without a traditional spring break, the opportunity to take time off and feel motivated for the remainder of the semester was taken away: “This semester is the most stressed I have ever been and the fact that I wasn't allowed a spring break to mentally prepare myself for the remainder of the semester has severely impacted my academic performance, motivation, and mental health.” The majority of comments stated that the “Re-Coop” days were not useful breaks at all for several reasons: 1) teachers tended to assign work or exams regardless of the day off, 2) if there was no assigned work, students spent the time studying and catching up on work anyway, and 3) as the “Re-Coop” days were weekdays, there was no prospect of an extended weekend that would have been more effective in improving the emotional well-being of students. One quote that exemplifies this sentiment is “The breaks that we have had this semester have not been enough. On the Blue Hen Re-coop day, I still had assignments due that night and an exam at 8 a.m. the next morning.” Some even noted that while they understood the rationale for canceling spring break, the “Re-Coop” days were not a successful replacement, especially since they felt that others would travel regardless of regulations if they wanted to. In essence, the way that school breaks were handled

at the University of Delaware made students feel as if the administration did not care for their students' emotional well-being.

#### **4.1.3.4 Motivation**

In the context of this study, motivation can be defined as an intrinsic desire to set personal goals and work diligently to reach them. A considerable number of responses in the data discussed motivation concerning schoolwork and personal achievements. Remote learning meant that most students were spending more time at home than they were on campus, and this was associated with difficulties feeling motivated to focus on work and put in effort on assignments. Students reported lots of challenges with being able to pay attention in virtual classes, and the lack of engagement from classmates in the form of staying muted with cameras off during lectures further exacerbated feelings of isolation and discouragement. One response that indicated this was "It is harder to pay attention in virtual classes...it is particularly frustrating that most students will not engage or even turn on their cameras during the class." Students also experienced a heavily monotonous education, with each school day feeling like a repetition of the last; one comment described it like this: "I sit for hours in my room on my laptop, and then I am supposed to do more and more hours of online homework...my life is standing still." Furthermore, many students were not able to maintain grades in their classes despite the hours of time dedicated towards

education; the diminished returns also had an impact on how enthusiastic students felt about attending school online.

#### **4.1.3.5 Student Needs and Personal Health**

This category focused on extraneous student needs that did not fit into the other mental health themes that were developed, but that did highlight an important facet of students' experiences and should be given attention. Some students expressed that during this time, they leaned on their families for support, which contributed to some consistency in their educational activities: "Staying with family during this pandemic has supported me a lot in terms of my education." This raises the need for seamless transitions for student support as they transition between learning modalities, environments, and locations. In other words, that feeling of support, both in and out of the academic space, should not be lost during the return to campus life. Other students mentioned dealing with physical health issues, such as headaches, back pain, rotated hips, and unstable sleep schedules, which informed their daily levels of productivity in school. Some comments illustrated a need for study support, as those skills had been forgotten in the years spent online: "I have forgotten how to study and I need time to adjust." Having dedicated and convenient sessions for students to transition back into a traditional school environment from what they were accustomed to during the pandemic should be a priority for the future. Finally, there were several students who requested patience and leniency as they transitioned back to an in-person semester,



since they had been out of it for so long: “Just be patient with the students as they will need time to get back on their feet after almost 2 years of this [online learning].” A common motif among these responses was appeals for sympathy and understanding from faculty and administration as students once again experienced a shift from fully virtual, to hybrid learning, to fully in-person education. Given these points, it would be worthwhile to explore strategies for seamless transitions between modalities so that those movements may be as steady as possible, and with the students’ best interests in mind.

#### **4.1.4 Thoughts and Attitudes About Vaccination Policies, Masking, Testing, and COVID Guidelines**

Table 4 outlines qualitative responses that conveyed thoughts and attitudes about students pertaining to policies around vaccinations, masking, testing, and other COVID-related guidelines as enforced at the University of Delaware’s campus. This table is composed of two major themes, Mindsets About Pandemic Regulations and Student Activities and Lack of Adherence to Rules.

Table 4. Thoughts and Attitudes About Vaccination Policies, Masking, Testing, and COVID Guidelines

<b>THEME</b>	<b>REPRESENTATIVE QUOTES</b>
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Mindsets About Pandemic Regulations	<p>Students should be required to get vaccinated in order to attend in-person classes. We need to get vaccines to be on campus regardless, and these vaccines extremely important in the context of eliminating the spread of COVID-19. Other schools have already confirmed they will require vaccinations in order to attend in person classes, so there is precedent and you would not be making this decision alone.</p>
	<p>The pandemic response was way overreacted. I think the college implemented shitty, unnecessary rules and policies for somethign that, objectively, is not that dangerous. You guys really suspended people for having large gatherings and not wearing masks? Thats disgusting and a breach of personal choices. You don't get to control your student's.</p>
	<p>The university should not maintain covid policies as many are vaccinated and those who are not can get vaccinated, not get vaccinated or choose to not come to campus. The rest of us should not be punished for those who are still worried about getting COVID. If they are still scared, stay home and let the rest of us have a normal college experience. The university should also not be forcing us to do things to protect ourselves if we do not think it is necessary.</p>
	<p>From my perspective, the University of Delaware has done an excellent job of active testing and prevention.</p>

<p>Student Activities &amp; Lack of Adherence to University Rules</p>	<p>I live in Newark and have a job on Main Street and the amount of people i see every day still not wearing masks, not social distancing, partying every single day, etc. is really worrisome and makes me very uncomfortable. I just feel that most of the students on campus don't really care about COVID anymore and are very careless with their actions.</p>
	<p>We absolutely need to implement some type of vaccine awareness program for students to take online as part of a requirement to coming back to campus. I see a concerning amount of UD students sharing false information on social media about the vaccine/COVID-19. Obviously, there are valid reasons that people are unable to get vaccinated, but ignorance should not be one of them.</p>
	<p>The main reason I do not feel safe returning to campus is my peers. Most of the people I have talked to through randomly assigned groups in classes believe that COVID isn't real, that it won't affect them, and that people are making too big a deal out of it all. Many of my peers want to be able to party and drink like they did before the pandemic, but I believe that is not safe to do right now. I know this behavior will continue, so I will not feel safe returning to campus after there has not been a COVID case in the country for a couple of weeks.</p>

#### 4.1.4.1 Mindsets About Pandemic Regulations

This theme describes general feelings and attitudes that students had about the mandates that the University of Delaware put in place to prevent the spread of infection on campus. When reading about general mindsets about pandemic guidelines

at UD, there was a very wide range of student opinions and feelings, and no one perspective stood out above the rest. Therefore, not every perspective could be included to the full capacity in this table. However, the table does list examples of how dispersed students were in their opinions about COVID guidelines. For instance, some were very pleased with the decisions that the University made and were supportive of the pressure that the administration may have been feeling to provide students with a complete college experience: “I’m happy that the school made good decisions this school year. I’m hoping the school will remain strong in making the right decision for all of its students, despite the pressure of students wanting the full college experience.” Others demanded that the University require vaccinations ahead of a full campus reopen, stating that masks policies should be revoked as long as everyone is fully vaccinated: “If we were to be back on campus in the fall, then I would want the majority of people to be at least half vaccinated and I would not want to wear a mask 24/7 on campus.” Some students expressed great concern about and discomfort with getting the vaccine at all: “I am very concerned about the vaccine. It makes me very anxious to think that it will be required for me to return to campus. There has been so little testing done and the long-term affects are unknown. I would not feel comfortable being forced to receive it.” Still others felt that the rules in place were unnecessary and felt that the virus was not dangerous enough to warrant the regulations in place: “I feel as though this whole pandemic has been exacerbated beyond belief. Every single person who attends this university has above a 99% [chance] of surviving the cold that is going around.” More representative quotes are compiled in Table 4, but to reiterate,

every response to this question was a little bit different, so it was a challenge to identify and capture any predominant themes here.

#### **4.1.4.2 Student Activities and Lack of Adherence to University Rules**

This theme encompasses student activities pertaining to following or not following pandemic mandates, such as gathering in large crowds or not adhering to masking policies. The behavior of other people was one of the largest influential factors that shaped student attitudes about pandemic guidelines at the University was other people, as exemplified by the quote “It gives me so much anxiety to go back on campus knowing how many students still party, don’t wear masks properly, refuse to get vaccinated, and don’t follow proper social distancing.” There were overwhelming reports of students not properly socially distancing in in-person classes, not wearing masks in mask-required areas of campus, engaging in party culture (which contributed to a rise in COVID rates), and refusing to get vaccinated. For example, “In my in person classes I often feel uncomfortable because kids choose not to sit where the socially distanced stickers are in the lecture hall.” Another example states, “Just the fact that there were tons of huge outdoor parties and nothing was done about it. It’s frustrating that these people are doing this while I’m taking measures to make sure if I do something it is within the guidelines of Newark/CDC.” The reckless and careless actions of other students was an important factor that led to feelings of anxiety about returning to campus because students felt that others not following mandates was

unfair to those who did. This separation contributed to students having a lack of trust in their own peers and classmates, which in turn impacted their experience of student life.

#### 4.1.5 Priorities and Considerations About the Return to Campus

The final table below breaks down the student responses received that pertained to what students’ priorities and considerations were when thinking about a full campus return in Fall of 2021. There are three major themes included in this table: Priorities for Campus Return, Pandemic Planning, and University Legacy and Retention. All three are elaborated on below.

Table 5. Priorities and Considerations About the Return to Campus

THEME	REPRESENTATIVE QUOTES
Priorities for Campus Return	I enjoyed taking my last year online but I feel with vaccinations going around we should go back to in person.
	If mostly everyone is vaccinated and we do daily health checks , regular testing and contact tracing, I think we will be okay to go back to school normally.
	I am uncomfortable in the idea of being back on campus. I feel pressured to be on campus because of the housing contract. I felt pressure to agree to the housing contract because I had no idea if we would be offered remote learning.

	<p>I would just like to highly encourage the administration to return 100% back to normal in Fall 2021 semester and so on because we UD students need to be back in the classroom with proper learning and teaching and having the ability to ask professor questions along with chatting with our peers if need assistance with the course -- our brains did not grow up adapting to learning complex classes online, we learned them in person and that is how our brains work best when retaining knowledgeable information.</p>
<p>Pandemic Planning</p>	<p>I think UD needs to be better and more cohesive in their decision making process for similar situations to COVID.</p>
	<p>Even though I have not been directly on campus in the past year, as I am still relatively local I know that the Covid spikes at times have been concerning and this is just something that I would like to see continuing to be monitored and adjusted to as needed into the Fall semester.</p>
	<p>UD should require that all faculty have 1) Pedagogy Training (including inclusive teaching) and 2) Basic Mental Health Training. Too many professors use archaic teaching practices even though the science and literature show teaching methods that actually work. The switch to virtual made it difficult for professors because they could not use their old ways anymore, which meant that students lost out.</p>
	<p>We must remain conscious of the fact that many students continually break the guidelines and this must be factored into our return to campus plan.</p>

University Legacy & Retention	The school needs to open up. Another semester of intense and excessive covid restrictions will result in many students relocating to other institutions that have actually opened up.
	Lastly, the rules about outside guys not being allowed made it difficult to show friends around who were contemplating UD as an option for schooling next year. I had a friend who is the class of 2025, unable to schedule a tour as they were all booked, come to be shown around and I felt I could not give an effective tour as half of the attractions could not be accessed due to the no outside guest policy.
	I know many people transferring because of what student life has looked like here.
	Honestly, I will never donate to or recommend this school to anyone in the future. You all ought to be ashamed.

#### 4.1.5.1 Priorities for Campus Return

This theme encompasses the factors that were most important to students as they made decisions about whether or not to return to campus. The priorities that students were considering spanned a wide spectrum of opinions and perspectives. Some felt strongly about requiring vaccines in order for students to be permitted to return to UD and attend classes in person, as conveyed through this quote: “I would want people attending class in person to be vaccinated.” Others felt that campus should be open to everyone, but that those who are choosing to attend classes in person should be vaccinated. There was a large group of students who stood by personal choice and advocated against the idea of mandating vaccines for campus



return: “I am nervous the school is going to make students get the vaccine in order to return to campus and if that is the case that wouldn’t be fair to the students like me who aren’t comfortable with taking the vaccine. We should have a choice and our chose should be respected and not affect our education.” Many students felt reluctant to return at all, stating that although the virtual learning year was a challenge, it was not safe for a full reopening just yet, as explained in this quote: “I don’t think having more in person classes will benefit anyone. I don’t feel safe and I don’t think the students take this seriously at all.” Similar to feelings about faculty behavior described in Table 3, student perspectives were polarized in several different directions with this topic area.

#### **4.1.5.2 Pandemic Planning**

Throughout the data, students voiced a lot of thoughts and recommendations about how they feel the University should move forward from this pandemic, and this section of the table includes students’ feelings and attitudes about how the pandemic could have been better handled. On one hand, students expressed that the administration needs to be more cohesive with their decision-making, and communicate those clearly to the student body. For instance, “I feel that the University administration has been very distant from students...I truly believe that the University...does not have what the students actually want in mind when making decisions.” Some comments even stated that the decisions made about COVID-19 at

the University did not seem to keep the students in mind, so in the future, students and families should be consulted and included in decision-making processes that will ultimately impact them: “I think some more student input in the future can help make easier and better decisions for students on campus.” On the other hand, there were a few responses that emphasized that the administration evaluate what did and did not work in the past couple of years, and utilize that information to monitor and adapt operations in future crises, as exemplified by “This will likely not be the last global pandemic in our lifetime so focusing on what safety/disciplinary measures worked and what didn’t will be needed for next time.” Finally, teaching faculty are a huge part of the higher education body and play significant roles in students’ academic experiences; thus, students proposed that professors be trained in a variety of areas that impact those lived experiences with learning. These may include, but are not limited to, inclusivity, mental health, and technological platforms.

#### **4.1.5.3 University Legacy and Retention**

This theme can be described as the impacts on how students and their families regarded the University following the pandemic and how their opinions about the institution changed as a result of how the University handled the pandemic. Despite what students’ experiences were during the pandemic, as well as what their priorities were concerning the return to campus, an overwhelming majority of students felt a massive disconnect from the University of Delaware community. Moving forward,

many did not feel encouraged to advocate for the institution to fellow, incoming, or prospective students, which is explained in these quotes: “I personally will not be vouching for UD as a school when high school students ask me my thoughts about it” and “You are ruining how all your student think about this school, and it will show in your future admission numbers.” This may have a large impact on how future students view the school as well. Additionally, students disclosed an outstanding expectation that a number of students would transfer from the University; many of those students were considering a transfer themselves, and the decision to not do so was mostly associated with financial burdens, class year, and waiting it out for one more year, among other, less prevalent reasons. This is exemplified in the following quotes: “Many students plan to transfer because of the lack of care UD has shown toward its students” and “Overall, if fall 2021 looks like classes this year, I will be attending community college instead.” In general, students felt that they were not respected and treated well at UD, and this changed the way that they thought about the school. This was also true for many of the students who reported loving the school themselves within the same statement.

#### **4.1.6 Additional Student Expressions**

Many of the responses analyzed fit into multiple categories or highlighted specific issues or expressed sentiments that should be recognized here. Table 6 showcases themes related to emergency closure, transitions to virtual modalities, and

plans for reopening the campus. Nested within this parent code is a subset of codes, which include the following topic areas: Experience of College Environment, Enforcing Regulations and Rule Consistency, Communication with the Campus Community, Comparisons to Other Schools, Campus Reopen, and Relationship to Administration.

Table 6. Additional Student Expressions

THEME	REPRESENTATIVE QUOTES
Experience of College Environment	As much as the restrictions have made me feel isolated at times, I feel that I have still had the opportunity to make some meaningful connections to UD and see it as my home.
	I am happy with how well everything was adapted to being online, but I am definitely looking forward to being in person.
	The pandemic has absolutely stripped many college students of a valuable education and a valuable college experience. This is especially true at UD.
	Everybody is trying to do their best in finding ways and making things work. We have to remain flexible and supportive of each other and keep the dialogue going.
Enforcing Regulations & Rule Consistency	The fact that the school has suspended/deferred many many students is disgusting(I did not get any of these but many friends did). It is so sad that this school was out for their students this semester, they did not care about our safety or health.

	<p>I feel that the University has been inconsistent with rules and regulations surrounding covid. They have made it especially hard for on-campus students to socialize with one another by only allowing one person per dorm room and leaving many in fear of getting trouble</p>
	<p>I believe that following CDC guidelines to the letter is the most fair and safe way to ease campus restrictions while keeping people safe. Don't pull guidelines out of the air, just stick with the changing CDC guidelines.</p>
	<p>I think UD has done relatively well, but from my point of view the University was not very clear about some of the plans to combat COVID. Initially, there was a lot of back and forth reports of what the plan was as far as allowing research to continue if it could be done socially distanced, when certain decisions would be made, etc. I think UD needs to be better and more cohesive in their decision making process for similar situations to COVID.</p>
<p>Communication with Campus Community</p>	<p>I appreciate the opportunity to study/learn despite the challenges of COVID. I feel the university has done a great job in their communication and precautionary measures.</p>
	<p>Please be more consistent with policy enforcing. I have no problem following policy but when it is unclear or inconsistent, it can be hard to follow the rules.</p>

	<p>I wish that the administration (particularly earlier in the pandemic) had been more forthcoming and transparent with information about changes to on campus guidelines. It often felt as if we were kept in the dark until the last minute of decisions regarding teaching and research. Made it difficult to plan and find some footing during the pandemic.</p>
<p>Comparisons to Other Schools</p>	<p>I think I am the most frustrated when I see almost every other school returning to in person activities and classes all throughout the year and we have had nothing and the most strict guidelines.</p>
	<p>Other schools are able to have in person classes while also keeping their COVID numbers low--schools bigger than UD at that. Why can't we?! Please figure this out.</p>
	<p>This was my first semester at UD after transferring from a community college. I'm really glad I came to UD. I have been much less stressed and I have felt like everyone is trying to help me and is understanding that online classes can be tougher than in person classes. I have been so happy here.</p>
<p>Campus Reopen</p>	<p>I appreciate the university's decision for conducting most of the classes online during this pandemic and I hope it will continue to do so in the coming fall semester as well.</p>
	<p>I have been very disappointed in the administration's disregard for student health and safety and the health and safety of the community. We should have never gone to 60% capacity and that spike in cases because of that decision cost lives. It really seems like that decision was motivated by money and not the safety of the community.</p>

	<p>I think that UD was very reckless in allowing so many more students back on campus this semester. It seems like they did not have a plan or where prepared for so many people to get COVID even though everyone knew it would happen.</p>
<p>Relationship with Administration</p>	<p>While my prior years at UD had been quite as a result of great people I've encountered, this year showed me UD's true colors. I can't express how little affinity I now feel for this school which has so immensely let us all down repeatedly.</p>
	<p>I feel like you have completely ignored me as a student. It is beyond offensive that the UD administration would continue to charge in-person rates of tuition for multiple all-but-online semesters and not have the decency to provide legitimately for all students' mental and physical health concerns--or, at the absolute least, publish some kind of statement with more substance than an intern-produced generic apology email about "the way things are" and what the fall "will" look like.</p>
	<p>This year has been hard for everyone, and there is obviously no right answer or way to please everyone 100%. I feel that the university and staff have been handling everything to their best ability, and I appreciate it.</p>

#### 4.1.6.1 Experience of College Environment

One theme that emerged from the set of codes described above was Experience of College Environment. This theme encompasses general feelings about the atmosphere of the UD campus during the pandemic and how they felt about returning.

The quotes here represent a mix of sentiments among the student body that did not quite fit into any other category. Some felt that the “best years of [their lives were] stolen” from them because of their experiences of how the University handled the pandemic. Others were optimistic that “everybody [is] trying to do their best” and were willing to stay flexible until it was safe to fully return to campus. A third major group expressed the difficulties that they experienced with remote learning and the pandemic, and while they believed that the shutdown was necessary, were eager to go back to school in person, as stated in this quote: “I am happy with how well everything was adapted to being online, but I am definitely looking forward to being in person.”

#### **4.1.6.2 Enforcing Regulations and Rule Consistency**

This theme encompassed how students felt about the regulations towards safety and infection control implemented at the University of Delaware campus in response to the pandemic. There were some individuals who believed that the mandates put in place by administration were well-founded and should be followed, but the majority of students felt negatively about the regulations, especially those regarding social gatherings and masking, examples for which can be found in Table 4. Specifically, they felt that the rules were too severe and that the University was overreacting to COVID-19 case spikes. Many students also felt that there were a lot of inconsistencies in the rules and requested that they be put more in line with the CDC guidelines at the time, such as what is conveyed in the following quotes: “I feel that



the University has been inconsistent with rules and regulations surrounding COVID. They have made it especially hard for on-campus students to socialize with one another by only allowing one person per dorm room and leaving many in fear of getting trouble” and “I believe that following CDC guidelines to the letter is the most fair and safe way to ease campus restrictions while keeping people safe. Don't pull guidelines out of the air, just stick with the changing CDC guidelines.”

#### **4.1.6.3 Communication with Campus Community**

Students provided rich feedback about their frustrations and challenges with communication to the campus community. There were a handful of students who did appreciate the communication and felt that the school did a great job, exemplified by the quote, “I appreciate the opportunity to study/learn despite the challenges of COVID. I feel the university has done a great job in their communication and precautionary measures.” However, most responses leaned towards wanting less “last-minute decisions” and more proactive messaging about change: “I wish that the administration (particularly earlier in the pandemic) had been more forthcoming and transparent with information about changes to on campus guidelines.” Throughout the pandemic, all news and updates regarding regulations and how the pandemic landscape was changing were most commonly shared through student emails, along with supplemental platforms such as the University’s COVID-19 website and UDaily news reports. Students reported that the information shared lacked clarity and

transparency about the school's plans with pandemic regulations, which left many confused about the policies that needed to be followed. For example, "It often felt as if we were kept in the dark until the last minute of decisions regarding teaching and research. Made it difficult to plan and find some footing during the pandemic" and "There was a lot of back and forth reports of what the plan was as far as allowing research to continue if it could be done socially distanced, when certain decisions would be made, etc. I think UD needs to be better and more cohesive in their decision making process for similar situations to COVID." Some were also unhappy with the tone of the messages, and felt that they were aggressive towards students when sharing warnings of disciplinary action, like so: "Despite so much of this awful virus being out of one individual's person's control, the University phrased many of its messages in ways that blamed the students." This sentiment suggests that the language of the messaging when communicating about pandemic regulations may have turned many students off to reception of the University's communications. There were a handful of students who did appreciate the communication and felt that the school did a great job; however, most responses leaned towards wanting less "last minute decisions" and more proactive messaging about change.

#### **4.1.6.4 Comparisons to Other Schools**

Several comments drew comparisons between the pandemic at UD and the pandemic at other, similar institutions. A considerable amount of students were

frustrated that other schools were able to open up their campus and ease regulations, while keeping cases low: “Other schools are able to have in person classes while also keeping their COVID numbers low--schools bigger than UD at that. Why can't we?! Please figure this out.” Many even considered transferring, and this lens is elaborated more in Table 6. A quote that exemplifies this attitude is “Another semester of intense and excessive COVID restrictions will result in many students relocating to other institutions that have actually opened up.” One trend is that some of the students responding to the survey were transfer students from other universities, and of those, the majority stated that their experience at UD was much better than where they came from. This raises the theory that the pandemic experience was, in large part, dependent on context and influential factors, such as the experience of learning at another school, that students may or may not have had.

#### **4.1.6.5 Campus Reopen**

When thinking about the potential for reopening the campus, many of the student responses reflected an appreciation for moving classes online, as so many people were adversely affected by the pandemic and virtual learning was the best way to stay safe. A common theme was expressing hope that the future semester would also be mostly or fully online: “I appreciate the university's decision for conducting most of the classes online during this pandemic and I hope it will continue to do so in the coming fall semester as well.” Many students felt that the initial reopen to 60%

capacity was not a good idea, and rather a reckless one on the University administration's end: "I have been very disappointed in the administration's disregard for student health and safety and the health and safety of the community. We should have never gone to 60% capacity and that spike in cases because of that decision cost lives." Students felt that there was not a clear plan behind the return, which led many to believe that the decision was motivated by lost funding and revenue. An interesting nuance here is that although the sentiments about the campus reopen were mainly reluctant about returning, these thoughts are contradicted by Tables 1 and 2, which outline students' thoughts on Quality of Education and Quality of Student Life, respectively; in these, there is more of an eagerness and urgency to return due to the detriment of online education lack of access to student resources; for more elaboration, see Tables 2 and 3.

#### **4.1.6.6 Relationship with Administration**

The last section of Table 6 lays out how students regarded their relationship with University administration as a byproduct of how they felt treated as students on campus. A few students stated that the University administrators managed the pandemic to the best of their ability and that there was "no right answer or way to please everybody 100%." While this may be the case, most comments conveyed that students felt ignored as they faced a myriad of challenges, and while this may not have been the intended message, the University of Delaware came off to students as an

institution only interested in their revenue and not the health of their students and staff: “I can’t express how little affinity I now feel for this school which has so immensely let us all down repeatedly.” This perception of UD held by a lot of students did hurt the positive reputation and opinions that they had about the school prior to the pandemic, which is something to consider for future years.

#### 4.1.7 Overall Feelings About the Pandemic at the University of Delaware

Much of the feedback provided by students expressed a range of feelings about their experience at the University of Delaware that did not fit it into any other specific category. Therefore, they are broadly captured under the parent code “Overall Feelings About the Pandemic at the University of Delaware,” which captured general sentiments about the student pandemic experience as it evolved at the University of Delaware. These are showcased in Table 7.

Table 7. Overall Feelings About the Pandemic at the University of Delaware

THEME	REPRESENTATIVE QUOTES
Overall Feelings About the Pandemic at the University of Delaware	Everybody is trying to do their best in finding ways and making things work. We have to remain flexible and supportive of each other and keep the dialogue going.
	COVID-19 has sort of affected everyone in one way or the other.
	We all did the best we could in a rapidly changing environment.
	This wasn’t too bad, but I don’t want to do it again.

	This year has been hard for everyone, and there is obviously no right answer or way to please everyone 100%.
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Table 7 encapsulates much of the general experiences of students throughout the pandemic. One student stated that everyone “did the best [they] could in a rapidly changing environment”, expressing that the pandemic had its impacts and that everyone did their part to adapt to a changing world. Another student said that everyone was finding ways to make things work and that it was important to “remain flexible and supportive of each other.” This quote exemplifies a perspective that is accepting of the circumstances, and highlights the significance of flexibility and helping one another through unprecedented times.

## **Chapter 5**

### **DISCUSSION AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS**

The COVID-19 pandemic had significant implications for the way that students at the University of Delaware, and across the nation experienced their education, communities, and personal lives. While there were several positive aspects of the transition to working from home and virtual connections, there is a lot to learn from the past two years of the pandemic about how to approach crisis management regarding a global pandemic in the future. This section aims to highlight and discuss the key findings derived from exploring qualitative student responses concerning their pandemic priorities and experiences.

Beginning with the focus of the first section of the Findings chapter, which examined overall feelings that students had about the pandemic as it evolved at the University. Many students were unhappy with how much of their college experience was spent online and were eager to go back to campus, while others were content with remote working and in some cases, preferred it. Two areas of concern were enforcing regulations and communicating with the campus community, with inconsistency and lack of clarity being the main issues with both. The distant learning environment, paired with what students considered severe mandates and aggressive messaging, impacted the relationship and level of understanding between the study body and the administrative body, and is captured in this data as intense reactions. When deciding on guidelines and the plan to enforce rules on a college campus, it is important to consider the effects and downsides, including the protocol for when those

rules are not followed, and communicate those expectations effectively across a variety of platforms, being mindful of the tone of the messaging.

One of the largest themes of the data was the quality of education administered across virtual and hybrid learning modalities. Students had to work with a lack of clarity when it came to the structure of their courses; they were often confused as to what was expected of them in a class. Another big challenge was trying to absorb information in courses that were built for in-person interaction and did not adapt well to virtual platforms, such as applied science laboratory classes. Students often struggled with technological issues, including access to electronic devices to engage in online classes and inconsistent Internet connectivity. Moreover, students were faced with technology and teaching styles that did not work across individual differences and did not allow for networking opportunities with professors and peers in the class. They frequently felt that they did not have the learning support that they needed.

On the other hand, the main benefits that students experienced throughout the pandemic was greater efficiency, time management, and a sense of safety from the virus. Especially for students who were holding down a full-time job, caring for family members at home, or had other demands on their time, remote work offered them more flexibility with their schedules. Knowing this, future educational structures should include that flexibility built into the course structure to allow for greater student agency with learning, as well as implement and provide training for more adaptable teaching styles and assigned work so that it speaks to students from diverse



backgrounds with an array of lived experiences. What is unclear, however, is the extent to which the flexibility that allowed “multi-tasking” to occur between home, school, and work demands put unrealistic pressure on students and contributed to less of a focus on educational goals and achievement. As a final note on this topic, there were a lot of strong opinions about the revoking of the modified grading policy. The data suggests that discontinuing modified grading may for Spring 2021 may not have been in the best interest of the students. In the future, the University may benefit from placing more emphasis on the potential consequences on student academics when making decisions that would directly impact their education and well-being, as well as initiating a more streamlined and moderated transition from the pandemic atmosphere of college back to a traditional one.

Another frequently discussed topic was the quality of student life, both during the fully virtual year, as well as when the University began to open up. An overwhelming number of students saw a lack in the availability, adaptability, and accessibility of campus and departmental resources throughout the past two years. Lack of communication to students about resources and support for students was vague and not sent out regularly, which had negative impacts, especially in the realms of mental health counseling, financial, and career services. The University tuition costs that had students paying for resources and services that they were not utilizing was another major issue which contributed to opinions about the effectiveness of student support. Major restrictions were placed on student activities after the campus reopen, so although students were returning back to campus, there were limited

engagements to get involved and socialize, which impacted students' academics and mental health. Meanwhile, students were coping with a number of personal issues of their own, from serving as caretakers for sick family members, to unemployment, to the lack of safety around campus grounds. Through these lenses, the University is being called upon to show sympathy for students' lived experiences and asked to exercise caution and consider all possible factors of student lives before making decisions about financial structures. In addition, in a future situation, the administration should be clearer in their rules for student events and formulate a plan with students to foster controlled and safe socializing. Finally, there is a need for targeted support for those going through family health issues and job insecurity, as well as widespread and more prioritized law enforcement on campus grounds.

In terms of student health, mental health issues were particularly exacerbated among the undergraduate population during the pandemic. Students expressed that many of their professors made assumptions about the time that students had to dedicate to school work, and that these assumptions led to a major increase in workload and time commitment needed to complete assignments. Many students also had professors who were stubborn about adapting their teaching styles, which impacted the way that the course was taught and how much students were able to engage with and retain the information that they learned; furthermore, many faculty were not very accommodating of student needs, which had negative implications for learning. A frequent issue that was brought up in the data about mental health was the lack of a spring break in the middle of the semester; students were unhappy with the

lack of a reprieve from the rigor of the semester, and the two Blue Hen “Re-Coop” Days that were implemented in place of a spring break were neither effective in reducing stress nor useful in catching up on work, as many professors still administered exams and assigned homework. The majority of students experienced some drop in motivation during the virtual semesters and dealt with co-occurring physical health issues as a result of online learning and the stress of the pandemic, such as headaches, body pain, and irregular sleep patterns. Moving forward, it is encouraged for the University to invest in new training for teaching faculty about adapting lessons to online platforms, as well as layout expectations for accommodations, assigning work over breaks, and exercising patience with student performance during times when stress levels are high. Alongside this, if the University administration is considering revoking a school break for a semester due to an instance such as a global health emergency, they should explore a variety of alternative options for allotting breaks to students. In fact, it is preferred if students are included in the conversation to begin with and able to provide support and feedback to administrators so that the dialogue between the two groups can be seamless and more meaningful.

Policies around vaccinations, masking, testing, and general guidelines for COVID safety are very polarizing social health issues across our nation and beyond, and this was the case among undergraduates at UD as well. Some felt that vaccinations should be required in order to return to campus, while others felt strongly about personal choice with vaccines and masking. Some felt that the current campus regulations were overreacted and unnecessary, while others believed they would help

control the spread of infection. Regardless of the view, it was often articulated with strong conviction. While there was a diverse array of perspectives about any topic surrounding mandates and policies, one major concern that was prevalent in the data was regarding other students and their lack of adherence to the rules. Students felt anxious and unsafe returning to campus because of the potential for others' behavior to put them in danger; neighboring this sentiment is once again the request to be included in the conversation when making policy decisions, which could help to level out the attitudes about and experiences with campus rules.

The final piece of the findings centered around what students' priorities and considerations were when thinking about a full campus reopening. Again, there was an assortment of viewpoints and perceptions expressed. Some comments conveyed that the University should perform a full evaluation of what worked and did not work, for them operationally and for students experientially, in order to determine what measures to put in place for the coming semester. A staggering perspective held by many students was the reluctance to advocate for the University of Delaware as a whole as a result of how they felt treated as students. A lot of students disclosed wanting to transfer schools or knowing peers who already did. This insight suggests that administrators should strive to anticipate the long-term effects of their choices pertaining to their student body and be cognizant of how their decisions may impact student retention and the legacy of the institution.

Drawing from the outline of the main themes of undergraduate student experiences and the directions to move forward, the hope of this report is to offer a

framework that can inform future crisis management strategies and education reform so that in the event of another health emergency, the lives and academics of those in higher education can be less disruptive and more constructive.

## **Chapter 6**

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

Based on the Findings pertaining to student priorities and experiences outlined and discussed in the previous two chapters, these are some key recommendations for the University administrators to consider for future crisis management procedures.

1. When implementing policies for enforcing regulations, be consistent with instructions and clearly communicate expectations of students across a variety of frequented platforms, including but not limited to email, social media, and University websites, being sure to be mindful of the tone in the messaging.
2. Include flexibility in future educational structures, including courses and teaching modalities, to allow for greater student agency with learning.
3. Execute, incentivize, and provide trainings for teaching faculty that address elements of student learning beyond the surface level: this could include (but is not limited to) practice with flexible teaching styles, developing accommodations for students across individual needs, mental health education, and helping students cope with stress during times of crisis.
4. Consider all factors of students' lived experiences before establishing financial structures of tuition and student fees.
5. Convey clearer rules for student events and foster environments for controlled and safe socializing.
6. Anticipate, prioritize, and create systems for student support in areas of financial stress, academia, and mental health.

7. Offer targeted support for those coping with family health issues and job insecurity that impact personal finances and academic success.
8. Enforce regulations in a way that encourages students rather than cause panic and focus University law enforcement more on campus grounds around residence halls.
9. Explore a variety of options for school breaks and ask for student opinions on matters that will involve and affect them.
10. Include students and their families in conversations about topics that impact them such as University mandates, vaccination policies, campus returns, and financial breakdowns, and take their feedback and support seriously. Some ways in which this could be implemented is through focus groups, surveys, interactive listening sessions, or an advisory board that involved students and their family members.
11. Emphasize and show a preference for student experiences at the University over lost revenue and fiscal recovery to optimize the quality of student treatment and value.
12. Be cognizant of how administrative decisions may impact student retention and the legacy of the institution.

## **Chapter 7**

### **LIMITATIONS**

While this study contributes significantly to understanding the perspectives and experiences of undergraduate students during the pandemic years, as well as identifying what steps can be taken in the future to ensure a more balanced approach to health crisis management at institutions of higher education, there were a number of limitations that may have impacted the way that the research was carried out and the outcomes that resulted. The first limitation is with regards to the sample population. The qualitative responses that were analyzed were from nearly 3,000 Freshman, Sophomore, and Junior students from the 2020-2021 academic year. While this is a considerable sample size, there may have been inherent reasons unbeknownst to the researchers for why some students chose to complete the survey over others. It's possible that students from marginalized and minority groups were less likely to complete the survey, therefore making our sample less representative of the actual demographic breakdown of the University of Delaware undergraduate population. Therefore, future research that uses a stratified sampling method might assist in controlling for demographic misrepresentation in the sample population.

A second limitation of the study is with an aspect of the research design itself. The original Student Return to Campus Survey from which the qualitative data was isolated was administered between March and May of 2020, and it is being reported on in full 2 years following its initial release. Thus, the data collected was from one point in time, from one university. There was no repeated sample later in the



pandemic or prior to the start of the pandemic that is available for comparison.

Therefore, the results and conclusions may not be generalizable to other points in time or other locations. Adjacent to this, as mentioned in the introduction of the Findings, students often reported significant impacts to their academics and college experiences as a result of the virtual learning environment. However, the passionate thoughts and feelings expressed by students was likely influenced by a number of drastic changes that occurred during the pandemic, which would have added much deeper context to their lived experiences. These could have included but not been limited to family life and health, struggles with employment, and financial insecurities.

Third, as the Principal Investigator of this study, a limitation that I faced that may also be reflected in the analysis is that the survey was administered a year prior to me getting involved. My original research interest had to do with applying the Theory of Planned Behavior to students' decisions concerning returning to campus after a year of virtual learning, which would have explored how students' attitudes and beliefs about COVID and related health regulations were or were not motivating factors in their pandemic experiences and decision-making. Due to time constraints, as well as the nature of the secondary data that I would be using, the trajectory of the research project changed. Further, I engaged with the data only after the survey was closed and the data had been collected, so while I could use the data to answer modified research questions, I had no part in the development of the survey instrument or tools of the initial project.

A final major limitation of this research is the way in which the survey data was analyzed. As a fourth-year undergraduate student completing a full research project for the first time for the purpose of writing and defending an undergraduate thesis, I was required to complete each step of the research study process on my own, with mentorship and guidance from my faculty director. While this process lent itself to greater internal consistency, the downside lay in the analysis wholly reflecting my personal interpretation of the qualitative data as I coded the survey responses into thematic categories. Moreover, as a novice coder, the lack of a research team to discuss the qualitative data codes and categorization of the open-ended content on a regular basis at times raised questions and challenges that were discussed during scheduled meetings with my Thesis Director. The coding process did not have the benefit of many perspectives and broad discussion amongst a team.

Here, I will also state that I identify as a cisgender woman from a Hindu American background, both of which have influenced my lived experience at the University of Delaware; throughout the pandemic and to this day, I strongly favor in-person, classroom-based instruction, and I acknowledge my passion and compassion for the issue of student pandemic experiences. I recognize that my ethnic background, gender, and bias towards a particular learning modality are all lenses through which I looked at the data. To combat this, I strived to include well-rounded comments with both positive and negative undertones when providing examples for the qualitative data codes through the tables in the Findings section of this report. However, future

studies in this area should aim to involve a research team to bring in multiple diverse perspectives to control for as many internal biases as possible.

## **Chapter 8**

### **CONCLUSIONS**

The qualitative data collected in this study was for the purpose of gauging the thoughts and feelings of undergraduate students at the University of Delaware in order to prepare for a full campus reopening in Fall 2021. The Student Return to Campus Survey provided the opportunity for students to express open-ended comments, resulting in rich feedback and expressions of gratitude and concern. The findings from the data analysis showed that students experienced benefits and challenges in a variety of different areas, including learning modalities, student support services, quality and accessibility of education, student life, campus safety, financial burdens, mental health, pandemic mandates, and returning to campus, among others. There are twelve distinct recommendations for administration derived from the findings of this analysis. The hope of this study is that it may stimulate changes in how planning for a crisis takes place and inform improvements for the quality of education and future lives of undergraduate students in higher education.

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## **Appendix**

### **MARCH 2020 UNIVERSITY OF DELAWARE STUDENT RETURN TO CAMPUS SURVEY QUALITATIVE QUESTION ANALYZED**

Is there anything else you want the administration to know about your experiences or feelings this past year? (Space was provided within the survey for students to provide an open response).