

## **How Have Students Been Impacted by Online Classes?**

Sara McNicholas

The struggles of students have been amplified in the past few years due to the COVID-19 Pandemic. Even now with many students returning to campus and in-person classes, the ramifications of the pandemic are still being felt in higher education. According to a Gallup poll done with college students, almost half of them said that the pandemic was “likely or very likely” to impact their ability to earn a degree. As students across the world have been impacted, looking at individuals' circumstances can provide insight into these struggles. Although these struggles may not have impacted the education of each student, many of them have still had to make major adjustments to how they approach their education.

One student, Tiba Hashem, a junior studying Bio Chem at the University of Illinois Chicago spoke about the online classes she took freshman year and how they led her to ignore other aspects of her life. “[They] were so isolating... and I think that was part of the reason that I struggled so much,” said Hashem.

“You would think that I was doing great, that I wasn’t struggling at all, but I was neglecting everything else,” Hashem added.

Hashem, like students across the world, faced the challenge of learning how to learn and interact with her classes and instructors through a screen. She acknowledged that during her first year at UIC, there were difficulties. “The uncertainty made it really hard to just push through... when it came to learning how to do everything online,” she said. Gradually, she adjusted. “The first year was difficult getting acclimated and then it was great,” she said.

Similar to students going through these abrupt adjustments, many teachers were scrambling to make changes to classes now that aspects of their courses would no longer work over a Zoom call. Robin Gayle, a professor of Literature at UIC mentioned some of the difficulties they faced with creating online courses. “I had to learn new technology quickly in order to ensure a seamless transition, or as seamless as possible,” they said. An additional struggle that Gayle faced with many low-income college students was an inability to access their courses and content.

“Many students in vulnerable communities had issues accessing courses and materials, which adversely affected their academic performance... even students who had access to technology were often hard to engage in dialogue or remote, synchronous classrooms,” Gayle said.

Looking at both sides of the struggle, everyone seemed to have issues adjusting to online classes and no longer being in person. Some people seemed to thrive while others appeared to be visibly struggling with the changes. “I was taking difficult courses [when the pandemic hit] and I knew that I wouldn’t be able to take online,” said Rebecca McNicholas, a junior at Governor State University going into physical therapy (she is the sister of the author). “So, when they were moved online I...dropped those classes...it put me back a bit farther in my education than I wanted to be,” she said.

With the setbacks to education on both the educators' and students' side, most would consider the pandemic a brake in higher education, but there were some opportunities that arose from these setbacks. Both McNicholas and another college student, Katie Hogan, a junior at Grand Valley State University, felt that online and hybrid classes gave them the benefit of working more often and increasing their income while still continuing school.

“I like hybrid classes since it is difficult to plan my work schedule around classes. Hybrid classes give me a bit of flexibility with my schedule,” Rebecca McNicholas stated.

When classes were online during her second semester of school, Hogan realized that she could work more often and increase her income, leading to a change in her priorities. “I put school on the back burner,” she said, “making money was more important to me [at the time].”

Now that classes are back in person, everyone has once again had to readjust. With different students taking different paths in their preferred methods of learning, some, like McNicholas, are happy in some ways to return to in-person classes. At the same time, students like Hogan continue to see the benefits of online classes. With more remote options as well as the return to in-person learning, students now can decide which method of learning they prefer, hopefully giving those who were negatively impacted by online classes a chance to return to in-person learning and the education that they would like, and for those who prefer online courses to continue with a wider array of virtual options. Gayle, having seen students in both settings, said “Students can be successful in either venue, depending on each person’s unique circumstances.”