

Final Feature Story: Online Learning in the Time of a Pandemic

At colleges and universities around the world, we've seen a slow but sure transition to online learning. Students, professors, and even parents have had to adapt to new changes. Some students have opted to move home with their parents in order to save money, while other parents have lost jobs. Professors who don't normally teach online have had to learn how to create a classroom, with a similar environment to in-person classes, so students may still be able to have that experience.

At universities, alumni associations have been raising money and creating funds for students affected by the pandemic. Students can send in requests for money and the university can approve the payment, depending on the condition of the need.

"We've really been trying to raise money for students that have been affected. We received a lot of donations on Giving Tuesday and a lot of students have really been able to benefit," said Maureen Stewart, 21, a third-year student who works for the Grand Valley State University Alumni Association. "It's been a crazy time for our students here on campus, and I'm lucky to be able to help raise money for those in need."

Many students that live in the dorms on Allendale's campus have decided to go home for the semester, starting after Thanksgiving break. Although there are still two weeks left in the semester, most students won't return until the start of the new semester, in January of 2021.

Ms. Stewart is just one of twenty students that work for the alumni association. Each of them have made several hundred calls over the duration of this semester. Thousands of dollars have been donated towards the Student Support Fund. This fund aims to help students who have been impacted by COVID-19, including things like unemployment and the loss of a parent or guardian.

For the most part, students aren't really sure about the state of remote learning or in-person classes.

"I've read a lot of different articles by communications professionals and with the new vaccine, I'm hopeful that by next fall we might back to in-person teaching," says Tim Penning, an advertising and public relations professor. "It might not be until 2022 that we see ourselves back on campus."

Professor Penning is just one professor that has opted to move completely online in order to teaching his students. "I'm entirely back at home and everything is done through a computer screen. I'd say the technology is the most difficult part. The university provided us with technology but it can be hard to teach when there are glitches." Many collegiate online servers have been overwhelmed with the number of students that use their systems. Glitches are just one of several issues that universities everywhere are struggling to fix. Common classroom websites, such as Blackboard, have been down throughout the semester.

"The one thing I miss the most is seeing students' faces. They don't have to turn their cameras on so I feel like I'm not really talking to anyone. That's one thing I miss about teaching in-person. You miss out on the rich experience of being in a classroom," Professor Penning stated.

Students vary in the best ways for them to learn. Some enjoy the flexibility that being online has given them, but other students have said being in the classroom allows them to focus more on the topic at hand instead of being distracted in their living environment. "I have the ability to plan my own day and I'm not at the mercy of a set schedule," said Mikki Massura, 20, junior. "But I don't really feel like I've learned a lot. I feel most engaged when I'm in the

classroom and am able to look people in the eye and discuss what I'm learning. I like being able to react live to bodily and facial expressions and I just can't do that online."

Ms. Massura is in a sorority, Sigma Sigma Sigma, on campus. Like many other organizations and clubs, her sorority has not been able to meet in-person for weekly meetings or host philanthropy events. She misses being able to interact with her sisters and participating in social activities. "I've made so many friends because of my chapter. I'm disappointed for my friends that are graduating and won't be able to have their senior formal or socials with other fraternities and sororities on campus."

There are "currently more than 1.2 billion children in 186 countries being affected by school closures due to the pandemic" (Li & Lalani, 2020). Students all over the world have been negatively impacted due to online learning. Ms. Massura stated, "I thought I was failing myself because I didn't take fifteen credits this semester, but it was so good for my mental health." Grand Valley State University, like many other colleges, has decided to take spring break off the academic calendar. Instead, students will have an extended winter break and have a full, uninterrupted, fifteen weeks of learning.

"If there's one thing I've learned, it's that there is no shame in giving up changing the way you're used to doing things and realizing that certain things don't work for you anymore," said Ms. Massura. "I started off taking fifteen credits, which is the normal amount, but I realized I couldn't handle that with online learning. I dropped down to take twelve credits this semester because of the heavy workloads we're getting." Many professors have decided to put everything online, which means that normal activities students would do in class now have due dates.

Although there does appear to be more work for many of the students on GVSU's campus, many professors have decided that they need to cut back on the workload. "I've learned a lot from this whole experience. I had to make accommodations for my students and eliminate some reading materials to focus on more important topics," said Professor Penning. "Although online learning is very efficient, for me, it's about what the students learn. This year really reinforced that for me."