

How Has the Covid-19 Pandemic Transformed the Relevance of the Traditional College Experience?

**Zachary Schueller
Bemidji State University**

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Dr. Patrick Donnay, Advisor
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Abstract

Over the past three years, the Covid-19 pandemic has fundamentally altered students' college experience through its location format and delivery. Research and early interviews suggest that students are now less likely to pursue a four-year traditional college experience than they were before the start of the pandemic. Instead, students are increasingly choosing to pursue other options such as not going to college or learning remotely. Even before the start of the pandemic data shows that college enrollment was already declining. While this data shows the short-term effects of Covid-19 on students there are a number of questions about the long-term that are left unanswered. Through my literature review and interviews conducted with students and university personnel, I attempt to answer these questions and explore whether the disruptions and changes Covid-19 caused to students' college experience are unique short-term effects or if this is part of an overall systemic shift in higher education. While the sample size of the interviews is limited, (sixteen students) it does help to provide insight into student's perspectives on how their learning experience was transformed.

Introduction

When the Covid-19 Pandemic first arrived in the spring of 2020, it took most college students by surprise. The traditional college experience which most students had come to expect was no longer a reality. In its place, students found a college experience that had been fundamentally altered in its location format and delivery. The social and emotional support which students had come to expect through peers, activities and other types of interactions was no longer present. In its stead, these social interactions were replaced through a virtual online learning experience. Academically, this shift to virtual learning affected students adversely through its format and delivery. While the full extent of these changes are still emerging, some initial effects can be seen on students through loss of opportunities in the short term.

Literature Review

Mental Health Effects

The effects of Covid-19's changes on students' college experience can be seen in a variety of mental health effects among college students. Liu et al. (2022) found that about a month into the pandemic, nearly half of students 43% reported high levels of stress. In their study of students, the authors found that most respondents had high levels of social support from family but lacked support from peers and partners. Similarly, Hu et al. (2022) conducted a survey that looked at the effects of the pandemic two years later. For one of their methods of gauging students' mental health Hu et al. (2022) looked at students' subjective happiness along with their fear of the pandemic. Hu et al. (2022) found that two years into the pandemic students reported much higher levels of fear along with lower levels of happiness. Compared to Liu et al. (2022), the study by Hu et al. (2022) seems to indicate that as the pandemic progressed the severity of

students' mental health effects and its prevalence increased with 95% of college students identifying moderate to severe mood disorders associated with the pandemic more than two years after it began. Nayak, (2022) studied the impact of virtual learning on students' perceived mental health. Nayak (2022) found that students encountered a variety of perceived mental health problems with motivation related to online learning. These factors included stress, boredom, and frustration. The research by Nayak (2022) also indicates that the extensive use of digital learning created additional stress and negative impacts on students including long screen time and internet issues. All three of these studies help to provide context for the mental health challenges that students faced during the pandemic. While each of these studies used different measurements and data, they all share one common theme. Each indicates that college student's mental health was negatively impacted by the pandemic.

Social Effects

The pandemic transformed college students' social experience dramatically. Browning et al. (2019) put together a study that looked at different psychological impacts among college students during the early part of the pandemic. Their study found that "students' opportunities for socializing significantly decreased in the early stages of COVID-19" (Browning et al., 2019). Students reported missing going out and not having the chance to attend important milestone events such as graduation and sporting events. Similarly, about a year later Filho et al. (2021) developed a study that looked at the impact of Covid-19 and social isolation on college students and academic staff about a year after the start of the pandemic. The study by Filho et al. looked at students and faculty in seven different countries. The survey results found that social isolation mandated by the pandemic had adversely affected 70% of respondents. Some of the biggest personal challenges identified included "students experiencing problems of lack of social

interaction, motivation ... loneliness and anxiety'' (Filho et al., 2021). Filho et al. found that while most students stopped working during the pandemic, most faculty continued to work. Their research suggests that students' lack of job opportunities could have adversely affected their work experience. Like the Browning et al. study, Filho et al. found that students missed out on social opportunities. Both studies also indicate that students were negatively affected by a lack of social interactions.

Hamlin & Barney (2022) assessed the impact of the changes Covid-19 caused to students' lives. Their study found that "84% of students reported reductions in their attendance at social activities, parties, or dating events" (Hamlin & Barney., 2022). Over 50% of the survey respondents indicated that they were less likely to participate in clubs and organizations as well as use campus facilities. The survey also found that people are starting to use technology to communicate and grow social networks. Similar to the research by Browning et al. (2021), and Filho et al. (2021), Hamlin & Barney (2022) suggest that the pandemic reduced students' social opportunities and caused students to miss out on events and other important social occasions. While Browning et al. (2021), and Filho et al. (2021) research looked at the early to mid-effects of the pandemic on students' experience, Hamlin & Barney (2022) research takes a deeper look at the effects of the pandemic two years after it began. Their research suggests that Covid-19 could have long term effects on the way college students interact and communicate. Together, each of these studies help to provide insight into the extent to which Covid-19 affected college students' social experience. The results of these studies also indicate that students' college social experience was drastically changed by the pandemic. While the data on the long-term effects of these changes are still developing, the study by Hamlin & Barney (2022) indicates that these changes could transform the way college students interact and socialize. It is worth noting that

unlike the other two studies, (Browning et al. (2021; Hamlin & Barney, 2022) Filho's research looks at both faculty and students' experiences in other countries. Filho's conclusions suggest that each of these groups were affected differently during the pandemic.

Academic Effects: Delivery and Teacher Preparation

One of the biggest changes to students' college experience occurred in the classroom. Soon after Covid-19 was declared an official emergency college students and professors alike were required to make the abrupt transition from the face-to-face classroom experience to a fully online learning experience. Ober et al. (2021) examined how students in an introductory psychology class in New York City made the transition to fully online instruction during the spring of 2020. The most identified issues were technological and motivational issues related to online learning. The study also found that students overall had a less favorable attitude toward learning by the end of the semester. The results of this can be seen in students turning in less assignments and receiving lower grades by the end of the semester.

Similarly, Sharraievaska et al. (2020) developed a study which looked at students' perspectives on the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on higher education during the spring of 2020. The survey was administered to students across seven different universities. Overall, 52% of students provided a negative response while 11% of students provided a positive response. One of the biggest struggles that students identified was making the transition to online learning. Several students reported dropping classes or changing their major due to difficulties associated with making this transition. Another struggle students faced was learning in an asynchronous learning environment. "For some students, when synchronous lectures were absent, "Schoolwork seems like it has lost all instruction and most of my classes are strictly homework and self-teaching" (Sharraievaska et al., 2020). Both sources suggest students had an overall negative

perception of the transition from face-to-face interaction to online learning. While Ober et al. (2021) focuses on students' experience in two course sections at one specific school, Sharraievskia et al. (2020) surveyed students across seven different universities. While Ober et al. (2021) identified more typical effects associated with adverse changes in students' environment such as lower motivation and academic success, Sharraievskia et al. (2020) identifies more systematic changes in student learning experiences. These include difficulties beyond motivation such as students being unable to continue in their degree program. Sharraievskia et al. (2020) also identifies students' challenges with succeeding in an asynchronous learning environment.

Comparably, Nguyen et al. (2021) developed a survey which sought to understand students' experiences and perceptions of remote learning methods. Nguyen et al. (2021) surveyed nearly 5,000 undergraduate students across 95 countries. Related to Sharraievskia et al. (2020), Nguyen et al. (2021) found that while students miss many aspects of the on-campus learning experience, synchronous classes which incorporated active learning components could help to reduce students' feelings of isolation. Students who participated in these classes “report significantly higher levels of engagement, motivation, enjoyment, and satisfaction with instruction” (Nguyen et al. (2021). While Sharraievskia et al. (2020), suggests that synchronous learning is a more effective modality than asynchronous learning, Nguyen et al. (2021) identifies a specific teaching method for improving students' learning experience. Together the studies developed by Ober et al. (2021), Nguyen et al. (2021), and Sharraievskia et al. (2020), suggest that students miss the traditional on-campus learning experience. While Ober et al. (2021) and Sharraievskia et al. (2020) found generally negative effects associated with online learning, Nguyen et al. (2021) identified at least one potential positive outcome.

Challenges Associated with the Transition to Online Learning

One of the most difficult aspects for both faculty and students was making the transition to online learning. Warfvinge et al. (2020) looked at the rapid transition to online teaching and how students' perception of learning experiences was affected. The study found that overall students were less satisfied with their courses. Students indicated that they

“Received less feedback and fewer value comments, and ...found it harder to understand the expectations and standards of work” (Warfvinge et al., 2020). The results of this study suggest that during the transition to online learning there was a disconnect between students and faculty in the learning process. Comparably Seetal et al. (2021) looked at the preparedness and efficacy of academics for online teaching. They found that while academics had the necessary resources and infrastructure to teach online most faculty did not have adequate training to apply the use of technology to teaching. This lack of training limited faculty's ability to design and implement e-learning activities. The study also found that schools' lack of support for academics impacted their work efficacy significantly. Similarly, to the challenges Warfvinge et al. (2020) identifies for students, Seetal et al. (2021) suggests that faculty also faced difficulties with both the format and delivery of online learning. The results of Seetal et al. (2021) study suggest that faculty need more training and support to help provide a better learning experience to students. However, Seetal et al. (2021) falls short of providing specific learning strategies and steps for accomplishing this.

Related to the questions raised by both these studies, Neuwirth et al. 2020 developed a study which looked at reimagining higher education during and post-covid-19. Neuwirth et al. 2020 found that while most faculty had the necessary training and support to teach online students lacked much of this same support. Based on the lack of support for students' online learning experience, the authors of the study developed a series of proposals to help improve the

quality of student engagement in the virtual classroom. In addition to increased dialogue between students and faculty, the authors suggest that students turn on computer cameras, the chat box and use their microphones to ask and answer questions during synchronous classes. For asynchronous classes the authors recommended students filling out discussion boards immediately following or prior to the lecture by answering questions fully. In response to the challenges identified by Warfvinge et al. (2020), Neuwirth et al. (2020) suggests some ideas for improving participation and engagement in synchronous classes. However, Neuwirth et al. (2020) does not provide specific learning strategies for helping to support students' academic success. Beyond feedback for discussion posts Neuwirth et al. (2020) also does not provide specific ideas or support for students in asynchronous courses. The results of the study by Neuwirth et al. (2020) also contrast with the conclusions reached by Seetal et al. (2021), instead arguing that faculty are generally properly trained and prepared to teach online. While each of these sources provides different perspectives into the challenges associated with the transition to online learning, they do help provide important insight into how the traditional learning experience has changed.

Students' College and Career Experience Moving Forward?

The changes that Covid-19 caused to students' learning environment raise some important questions regarding both the college experience itself and students' career decisions. Stauffer (2021) in an article for Vox shares some insights about the college experience from her new book titled *An Ordinary Age*. Stauffer (2021) explains that the college experience for traditional students is an important period in their lives where they'll make crucial decisions on their own for the first time about things that will directly impact their future such as taking out loans, deciding where to live, and taking courses that could outline their career path. Stauffer (2021)

outlines that for many students “college represents access and opportunity and a chance for freedom, reinvention, and discovering a “true self” (Stauffer, 2021). Related to Stauffer (2021), Fishman & Hiler (2020) analyzed a recent study by Global Strategy Group which looked at the impact of Covid-19 on current and future college students. The results of this study showed that 32% of high school seniors are now less likely to go to college after graduation. Four-in-ten students reported that they are choosing schools closer to home while 22% of students are planning to apply to schools that offer online classes. Fishman & Hiler (2020) indicate that high school students are having second thoughts about the college experience that Stauffer (2021) described. While this survey does provide some insights into the decisions of potential college students, it is important to note that Fishman & Hiler (2020) did not create this study and that it was developed by a think tank with a left-leaning bias. While the study analyzed by Fishman & Hiler (2020) has its limitations, it does suggest that students do not place as much value on the student experience as did before the pandemic. Rather, it appears that students are prioritizing other factors over the college experience such as online classes and being closer to home. Similarly, Aucejo et al. (2020) looked at the impact of Covid-19 on students' experiences and expectations. The study's results indicated a variety of negative effects associated with the pandemic. “Due to Covid, 13% of students delayed their graduation, 40% lost a job or internship offer, and 29% expect to earn less at age 35” (Aucejo et al., 2020). The results of Aucejo et al., (2020) study helps to provide insight into some of the potential motivators for why students are less likely to want to participate in the student experience as identified in Fishman & Hiler (2020). Aucejo et al. (2020) research also identifies some challenges students face which could make them less likely to see the value of an in-person college experience. The results of Fishman & Hiler (2020) and Aucejo et al. (2020) help to provide insight into some of the factors affecting

potential students' decisions about college. These studies also help to suggest the extent of some of the possible changes to the traditional college experience. The results of Aucejo et al. (2020) as well as the limitations of Fishman & Hiler (2020) raise a lot of potential questions regarding what the future of the traditional student experience looks like moving forward.

Assessing the Literature

The results of each of these studies help to show how the Covid-19 Pandemic altered students' college experience. Overall, the result of these studies suggests that for the most part students had a negative experience with the transition to online learning. While much of the short-term effects on students have been documented, there are many questions about the long-term effects on students' college experience that are left unanswered. This poses the question of if the disruptions and changes Covid-19 caused to students' college experiences are just temporary or permanent. Another aspect of this question is whether students still value the benefits associated with the traditional college experience. Related to this, the potential changes caused by Covid-19 raise the question of whether students will decide to learn online rather than living on-campus. Each of these possibilities leads to the question of what role the traditional college experience plays in all of this. Will the traditional college experience as we know it continue to exist or will it need to change and adapt moving forward?

Interviews & Analysis

My analysis and conclusion are based on a series of sixteen interviews conducted with students at Bemidji State University over a month-long period. The interviews consisted of students of each class standing including first-year, second-year, third-year, and fourth-year students. In the analysis section, interview abbreviations are based on year in school and interview number. For example, the first interview shown on table one is listed as FRYS-INTV-#1. This abbreviation stands for first-year student interview number one. For privacy reasons students names and personal information are not included. The information collected includes academic level, school, and learning modality. Each section of the analysis is formatted around students' answers to a specific interview question. The analysis is constructed around seven interview questions designed to help answer the overall thesis topic question of how Covid-19 has transformed the relevance of the traditional college experience.

Table 1; List of Interviews Conducted

Interview #	Academic Level	School	Learning Modality	Citation
#1	First Year	Bemidji State University	In-person	FRYS- INTV-#1
#2	First Year	Bemidji State University	In-person	FRYS- INTV-#2
#3	First Year	Bemidji State University	In-person	FRYS- INTV-#3
#4	First Year	Bemidji State University	In-person	FRYS- INTV-#4
#5	Second Year	Bemidji State University	Mostly in-person	SYS- INTV-#1
#6	Second Year	Bemidji State University	In-person	SYS -INTV-#2
#7	Second Year	Bemidji State University	In-person	SYS -INTV-#3
#8	Second Year	Bemidji State University	In-person	SYS -INTV-#4
#9	Third Year	Bemidji State University	In-person	TYS -INTV-#1
#10	Third Year	Bemidji State University	In-person	TYS -INTV-#2
#11	Third Year	Bemidji State University	In-person	TYS -INTV-#3
#12	Third Year	Bemidji State University	Mostly in-person	TYS -INTV-#4
#13	Fourth Year	Bemidji State University	Mostly in-person	FYS-INTV-#1
#14	Fourth Year	Bemidji State University	In-person	FYS-INTV-#2
#15	Fourth Year	Bemidji State University	In-person	FYS-INTV-#3
#16	Fourth Year	Bemidji State University	In-person	FYS-INTV-#4

Citation Key:
FRYS = First-Year Student
SYS = Second -Year Student
TYS = Third-Year Student
FYS = Fourth -Year Student
Example: FRYS-INTV-#1 = First Year Student Interview Number One

<i>Table 2; How did the Covid-19 pandemic affect your learning experience?</i>			
1 st Year Responses	2 nd Year Responses	3 rd Year Responses	4 th Year Responses
“It definitely affected it in a negative light” (FRYS-INTV-#1).	“We had the option of online or hybrid, so it was alright” (SYS-INTV-#1).	“It taught me to do more stuff by myself ...but it wasn’t as engaging” (TYS -INTV-#1).	“Making that chance was a really big shift for me. No-one really knew what was going on” (FYS-INTV-#1)
“I like being home, but my grades were really bad” (FRYS-INTV-#3).	“While classes seemed easier and laid back...people were more in survival mode than school” (SYS-INTV-#2).	“I felt I had to teach myself everything ... I was more reliant on my own skills” (TYS -INTV-#2).	“I don’t do good with online learning. I don’t get good grades. I had to retake classes.” (FYS-INTV-#2)
“It really didn’t affect me the way it affected other people” (FRYS-INTV-#3).	“I can’t really focus that well online. I get distracted really easily by things such as my phone” (SYS-INTV-#3).	“Personally, I thought it was fine, I was used to and accustomed to it with PSEO” (TYS -INTV-#3).	“A lot ... it went on. zoom and it was a lot harder to pay attention. Not as much enjoyment” (FYS-INTV-#3)
“It forced me to go online and miss out on the social of high school” (FRYS-INTV-#3).	“It wasn’t the greatest learning wise” (SYS-INTV-#4).	“It made it worse. Once we made the switch to online learning, I wasn’t retaining information. I wasn’t actually learning” (TYS -INTV-#4).	“I really prefer in-person so it definitely an unfortunate shake up to go online from in-person” (FYS-INTV-#4).
Color Key Red = Negative Blue = Positive Gray = Neutral			

The purpose of this question was to get a general understanding of how the disruptions caused by Covid-19 have affected student’s learning experience. As table two indicates students have a generally negative perception of how the pandemic affected their learning experience. The results of these interviews are consistent with the research of Nayak (2022) and Hu et al.

(2022) which found that students had a generally negative learning experience during the pandemic. It is important to note that the setting, location and format for students do differ by year.

Fourth-year students that started classes in the fall of 2019 had the unique perspective of having a full semester and a half of a traditional college experience before the start of the pandemic. These students' experience is unique as this perspective gives them the ability to describe what the college experience was before, during and in the aftermath of the pandemic's restrictions. First, second, and third-year students do not have this perspective as they started their college experience after the start of the pandemic.

Unlike fourth-year students, third-years experienced Covid-19 through it affecting the last two months of their high school senior year. Due to this, they began college in the midst of the pandemic when most campuses were almost fully shut down. Entering college during the fall of 2020 these students had a vastly different college experience than the previous year before them. These students generally experienced orientation, convocation, floor meetings, events, classes and nearly all other aspects of their first year of college in an online setting. While some students were allowed to live on campus many of these students also began college learning from home while living with their parents.

In contrast to third- and fourth-year students, second years spent an entire year of high school learning online in addition to the first couple of months of Covid-19. These students had the perspective of coming into college with a full year's worth of experience with online learning. Entering college during the fall of 2021 these students had the experience of being on campus largely after many of the initial Covid-19 restrictions had been lifted.

First-year students had the perspective of Covid-19 affecting nearly all of their high school experience starting during the end of their sophomore year in the spring of 2020. For these students much of their time in high school was defined by online learning and the pandemic. Similarly, to second-year students, first-years are familiar with online learning. However, unlike second-years these students are less familiar with what a traditional in-person learning experience could be like.

Table 3; How has the Covid-19 pandemic affected your learning experience over the last four academic years?

1 st Year Responses	2 nd Year Responses	3 rd Year Responses	4 th Year Responses
<p>“While things slowly got better over time, I would say that overall, it was a negative experience” (FRYS-INTV-#1).</p>	<p>“I had a lot of missed opportunities senior year due to the pandemic” (SYS-INTV-#1).</p>	<p>“Learning online the culture and interaction in and classes are just non as engaging as in person”. (TYS-INTV-#1).</p>	<p>“I am not as focused as I was before the pandemic. It wore me out academically” (FYS-INTV-#1)</p>
<p>“While I like being home my grades weren’t good and the school environment wasn’t the greatest” (FRYS-INTV-#2).</p>	<p>“I think end of high school career was affected most. It was filled with just filler material. It was really repetitive. It was easier to slack online” (SYS-INTV-#2).</p>	<p>The main effect of the pandemic was doing a lot of things on my own such as assignments. (TYS-INTV-#2).</p>	<p>“Learning during covid was not good. I hated the covid years” (FYS-INTV-#2)</p>
<p>“It was different for me because my classes didn’t really go online” (FRYS-INTV-#3).</p>	<p>“I felt like I was more so teaching myself then my teachers teaching me... I felt like I didn’t learn anything for two years” (SYS-INTV-#3).</p>	<p>“Overall, it was fine for me as it allowed me to do things and set my own schedule” (TYS-INTV-#3).</p>	<p>“More stress ... paying for school... in person this year has been much better (FYS-INTV-#3).</p>
<p>It was a lot of busy work with less discussions and interaction (FRYS-INTV-#4)</p>	<p>“It was nice not being in high school ... but I didn’t really feel like I was learning anything online”. (SYS-INTV-#4).</p>	<p>It had a major impact being an ed student. I didn’t retain most of the information I should have. I lacked vocabulary and knowledge I needed when I started teaching. (TYS-INTV-#4).</p>	<p>“I felt that I missed out on a lot of opportunities for valuable learning.” (FYS-INTV-#4).</p>
<p>Color Key Red = Negative Blue = Positive Gray = Neutral</p>			

The goal of this question was to see how Covid-19 has affected students over an extended period of time. Answering this question helps to provide insight into the long-term effects of the pandemic on students. Fourth-year students that were interviewed identified a number of negative effects associated with the pandemic. FYS-INTV-#4 describes how they felt like they weren't as engaged with their learning during Covid-19, and their professors and classmates were also not as engaged. Instead, their experience felt like it was more so "just trying to get through it and stuff than actually an emphasis on learning material" (FYS-INTV-#4). In particular, fourth-year students identified challenges associated with completing hands-on degree programs that required field experience. Another fourth-year student that was interviewed describes how they had to watch YouTube videos for their first field experience class instead of completing their hours in person (FYS-INTV-#2). Overall, a common theme among the frustrations that fourth-year students experienced was not gaining the hands-on skills and knowledge that they needed for their career paths.

Similarly, to fourth-year student's, third-years for the most part indicated that Covid-19 had a negative impact on their learning over the last four years. While TYS-INTV-#3 suggested that they enjoyed the flexibility of online learning the other students that were interviewed disagreed. A common theme among these responses was a learning disconnect between the information that was taught in courses and the information that students retained. One of the biggest challenges students described facing in relation to this was the different culture and style of interactions in online courses. TYS-INTV-#1 describes how online classes are just not as engaging as in-person. Similarly, to the fourth-year students that were interviewed TYS-INTV-#4 also identified challenges they faced with gaining the hands-on skills and knowledge that they needed for their career path. Being an education student TYS-INTV#4 describes how they did

not retain much of the information they were taught online. Due to this they were less prepared to start teaching.

For second years, much of their learning over the pandemic took place during high school. A common theme among second years was missed opportunities. For most of these students their entire senior year consisted of online learning. Due to this they missed out on social events such as prom and graduation. Other aspects of their high school experience that were impacted included, clubs, sports, and other activities. Many of these activities were done online or in a very limited in-person setting. Some sports seasons were completely canceled altogether. SYS-INTV-#1 describes how their senior year was a lot of missed opportunities due to the pandemic. Another aspect of high school that was affected for second-years was learning. SYS-INTV-#2 explains how much of their senior year consisted of filler repetitive material. Because of this it was easier for them to put in less effort and slack in their online classes.

Similarly, to second-years, first-year students were most affected by the pandemic during high school. In contrast to most students interviewed FRY5-INTV-#3 had the unique experience of having classes in-person for most the pandemic. Unlike FRY5-INTV-#3 the other first-year students that were interviewed had a generally negative experience with learning during most of the pandemic. Similarly, to the second-year students that were interviewed first-year students missed out on a lot of opportunities such as sporting events. While they enjoyed being at home FRY5-INTV-#2 describes how they didn't get good grades and that the school learning environment wasn't the best online.

Overall, table three shows that students had a negative experience with learning online over a four-year period. While two students indicated that they did not have a negative experience with learning during Covid-19, this was not the case for the majority of the student

body. The results of table three show that students faced a variety of negative academic effects associated with the pandemic. These included a lack of motivation, class interaction, and an overall disconnect with the delivery and format of the learning material. While second, and first-year students shared many of the same negative experiences with online learning as third- and fourth-year students many of their experiences were also impacted by missing out on important high school milestone events and opportunities.

Table 4; Based on your experience with learning online during the Covid-19 pandemic would you do it again or would you pursue another option? If so, what options would you pursue?

1 st Year Responses	2 nd Year Responses	3 rd Year Responses	4 th Year Responses
“Yes” (FRYS-INTV-#1)	“No” (SYS-INTV-#1).	“Yes” (TYS-INTV-#1).	“No” (FYS-INTV-#1).
“No” (FRYS-INTV-2)	“Yes” (SYS-INTV-#2).	“Yes” (TYS-INTV-#2).	“No” (FYS-INTV-#2).
“No” (FRYS-INTV-3)	“Yes” (SYS-INTV-#3).	“Yes” (TYS-INTV-#3).	“Yes” (FYS-INTV-#3).
“Yes” (FRYS-INTV-#1)	“No” (SYS-INTV-#4).	“No” (TYS-INTV-#4).	“Yes” (FYS-INTV-#4).

Color Key
 Red = No (I would not choose to do online learning during the Covid-19 pandemic again)
 Blue = Yes (I would choose to do online learning during the Covid-19 pandemic again)
 Gray = Neutral

The goal of this question was to see if students would still choose to go through the experience of learning online during the pandemic if given the choice. This is an important question to explore as the work of Sharraievksa et al. (2020) and the two previous tables suggest that students had a generally negative experience with online learning. This question also helps to show if students would be willing to explore other options based on their experience with the pandemic. Overall, 93% of students interviewed said that they would choose an in-person option if given the choice. However, it is important to note that a slight majority (56%) signified that they still would choose to learn during Covid-19 again if learning in-person wasn't an option.

The primary reason students gave for this answer was their desire to graduate on-time and not delay their graduation.

Student’s answer to this question also differ by year. Overall, about half of first, second, and fourth-year students interviewed shared that they would choose an in-person option if given the choice. However, about 40% of them expressed that they would take time off from school to avoid the pandemic. In contrast to this only one third-year student said they would consider taking time from off school, two said they would choose in-person if it was offered while, one said that they preferred the flexibility of online learning despite the challenges associated with Covid-19.

<i>Table 5; If you had the option of learning completely online from home, would you choose that or an in-person college experience?</i>			
1 st Year Responses	2 nd Year Responses	3 rd Year Responses	4 th Year Responses
“In-person” (FRYS-INTV-#1).	“Hybrid” (SYS-INTV-#1).	“In-person” (TYS-INTV-#1).	“Online” (FYS-INTV-#1).
“In-person” (FRYS-INTV-#2).	“In-person” (SYS-INTV-#2).	“In-person” (TYS-INTV-#2).	“In-person” (FYS-INTV-#2).
“In-person” (FRYS-INTV-#3).	“In-person” (SYS-INTV-#3).	“In-person” (TYS-INTV-#3).	“In-person” (FYS-INTV-#3).
“In-person” (FRYS-INTV-#4).	“In-person” (SYS-INTV-#4).	“In-person” (TYS-INTV-#4).	“In-person” (FYS-INTV-#4).
Color Key Red = Online Blue = In-person Gray = Neutral			

The goal of this question is to see student’s perspectives on online learning after the pandemic. While students shared a lot of negative experiences associated with learning during the pandemic, many students have also acknowledged that online learning has improved since the beginning of the pandemic. The purpose of this question is to help determine whether factors

such as convenience, flexibility and cost would lead students to choose a completely online or traditional on-campus learning experience.

Overall, 87% of students interviewed expressed that they prefer in-person classes vs completely online learning. While most students agreed that online learning has improved only one student said that they preferred this format for learning over in-person classes. FYS-INTV-#4 shared that the only reason they would choose online vs in-person would be for the cost-price differences. However, they prefer in-person for the learning benefits. While their initial experience with online learning was mostly largely negative, FYS-INTV-#1 explains that they now prefer the option of online learning. For them online classes are easier to place into their work schedule. On the other hand, students that were interviewed such as FYS-INTV-#2 explain they prefer in-person despite the additional cost and reduced flexibility. “I would 100% choose in-person over online for the learning benefits it offers” (FYS-INTV-#2).

Table 6; Do you think that you gain the same social and academic benefits from a virtual college experience as you can gain from a traditional on-campus learning experience?

1 st Year Responses	2 nd Year Responses	3 rd Year Responses	4 th Year Responses
“No” (FRYS-INTV-#1).	“Yes” (SYS-INTV-#1).	“Academic yes” “Social No” (TYS-INTV-#1).	“No” (FYS-INTV-#1).
“No” (FRYS-INTV-#2).	“No” (SYS-INTV-#2).	“No” (TYS-INTV-#2).	“No” (FYS-INTV-2).
“No” (FRYS-INTV-#3).	“No” (SYS-INTV-3).	“Academic yes” Social No (TYS-INTV-#3).	“No” (FYS-INTV-3).
“No” (FRYS-INTV-#4).	“No” (SYS-INTV-#4).	“No” (TYS-INTV-#4).	“No” (FYS-INTV-4).
<p>Color Key Red = No, I do not gain the same social and academic benefits from a virtual college experience as you can gain from a traditional on-campus learning experience? Blue = Yes, I do gain the same social and academic benefits from a virtual college experience as you can gain from a traditional on-campus learning experience? Gray = Mixed opinion</p>			

While the question in table six was focused on if students prefer the option of in-person or online classes the goal of this question is to compare the benefits each of these options offers. This question can help to show whether students think a virtual college experience is comparable to the social and academic benefits a traditional college experience offers. Examining this question is particularly important as a significant number of students have missed out on a traditional in-person college experience due to the pandemic. As Nguyen et al. (2021) highlights online courses have clearly improved since the beginning of the pandemic. Nguyen et al. describes how synchronous classes which incorporated active learning components can help to partially replicate some of the interactive components of in-person classes.

Despite the findings of Nguyen et al. (2021), 81% of students interviewed indicated that they believed that the traditional college experience offered more academic and social benefits than a virtual college experience. Student's responses between academic and social benefits differed slightly. Overall, 81% of students said that an in-person experience offered more academic benefits compared to 94% that said in-person offered more social benefits. Of those interviewed only one student (6%) said that a virtual college experience offered the same benefits as a traditional college experience.

Academically, first, second, and fourth-year students highlighted a number of challenges they faced with online learning. One aspect of learning in-person that really stood out to students was its hands-on focus. As a hands-on learner TYS-INTV-#2 describes how they gain much more in an in-person classroom setting than online. A common theme among student's responses were challenges associated with retaining information. FYS-INTV-#3 describes how they didn't retain most of the information they learned online. For them it was harder to focus and concentrate in an online setting. SYS-INTV-#2 explains how it was much easier for them to slack in their online classes as the lack of structure gave them less motivation to get things done.

Another aspect of online learning students struggled with the lack of human interaction. FYS-INTV-#2 explains how social interaction and discussion a big part of learning for them. However due to the nature and seup of online courses they struggled to find this type of connection with their classmates. FYS-INTV-#1 had a similar experience. Instead of seeing people and having interactions, "You're just sitting behind a screen, and you don't get to meet people and make connections with them" (FYS-INTV-#1). SYS-INTV#2 explains how there are certain aspects of communication you miss out on with screen-to-screen vs face to face

interaction. In this type of setting, it's harder to read facial expressions and other types of body language.

Related to the academic side of learning, many students explained how the social aspect of learning is a crucial part of their college experience. Overall, 94% of students interviewed indicated that an in-person college experience offered more social benefits compared to online. The results of these interviews suggest that the social aspect of college may hold more value for students than academics. As Stauffer (2021) explains the college experience plays a crucial role in students' growth and development as it allows them to help discover their true self. SYS-INTV-#4 explains how they missed out on a lot of things due to the pandemic. However, for this student what stood out most was losing the opportunity to get to know people personally. Instead of getting to know students in their major for example their conversations were limited to screen-to-screen interactions over zoom.

FRYS-INTV #4 and TYS-INTV#1 explain how the in-person college experience helps to create a sense of community for them. FRYS-INTV #4 describes how being in-person made it much easier for them to develop connections in their classes with professors and classmates while also forming friendships with other students they met outside of class. For TYS-INTV#1 one of the most impactful aspects of their college experience has been having the chance to get to know other students on campus through clubs and organizations they have been a part of.

Overall students' responses to these questions show that students still place value in the unique benefits a traditional on-campus experience can offer. Academically, student's responses showed that they enjoy the structure and format of in-person classes. At the same time, responses also showed that the social aspects of in-person courses and the campus experience are still very important to students.

<i>Table 7; Do you think universities should offer more online courses and degree options?</i>			
1 st Year Responses	2 nd Year Responses	3 rd Year Responses	4 th Year Responses
“Yes” (FRYS-INTV-#1).	“Yes” (SYS-INTV-#1).	“Yes” (TYS-INTV-#1)	“Yes” (FYS-INTV-#1).
“Yes” (FRYS-INTV-#2).	Yes (SYS-INTV-#2).	“Yes” (TYS-INTV-#2)	“Yes “ (FYS-INTV-#2).
“Yes” (FRYS-INTV-#3).	“Yes” (SYS-INTV-#3).	“Yes” (TYS-INTV-#3)	“Yes” (FYS-INTV-#3).
“Yes” FRYS-INTV-#4).	“Yes” (SYS-INTV-#4).	“Yes” (TYS-INTV-#4)	“Yes” (FYS-INTV-#4).
Color Key Red = No Blue = Yes Gray = Neutral			

The purpose of this question is to better understand students’ perspectives on online learning. While students shared a number of negative experiences with online learning it is clear that it does hold value for students. Overall, each of the students interviewed expressed the sentiment that schools should offer more online courses and degree options. While most students agree an in-person course offers more educational benefits they do believe that online learning is a good option. FYS-INTV-#4 explains how having online course options is useful as it helps to create flexibility in their schedule. For this student taking a couple of online classes helps to complement their in-person classes as it makes it easier to balance their course load while still getting the benefits of an in-person college experience.

Many of the students interviewed expressed the sentiment that having online course options is nice but that it should not be at the expense of other course options. FRYS-INTV-#2 explains how online courses should not be offered at the expense of in-person courses. In their view having both online and in-person sections would be the best option. TYS-INTV explains

how they support the idea of having the option of online courses. However, in their view they think that hands-on degree programs such as law enforcement, nursing and education which require field experience should be taught in person.

Another benefit of online classes that students highlighted was how it can help to close equity gaps. While most students indicated that they prefer the benefits that a traditional in person classroom experience offers, this is not an option for all students. FRYIS-INTV-#1 explains how having this option is important for students who need it. Some students may not have the option to be in person due to a number of factors such as financial reasons or family matters. In particular, having the option of online courses could be beneficial for non-traditional students. For non-traditional students in person might not be an option as they could be supporting their families as well as working full-time.

Table 8; What can universities do to increase the value of a traditional college learning experience

1 st Year Responses	2 nd Year Responses	3 rd Year Responses	4 th Year Responses
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. More classes 2. Smaller class sizes 3. Offer more hybrid classes (FRYS-INTV-#1).	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. More intramurals (SYS-INTV-#1).	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Improve orientation process 2. More student programming 3. Change the culture (TYS-INTV-#1).	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Not sure (FYS-INTV-#1).
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Build a sense of community (FRYS-INTV-#2).	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. More course options 2. More hands-on opportunity's 3. Incentivize students to go to class (SYS-INTV-#2).	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Lower the cost of school 2. Increase student engagement 3. Improve orientation process (TYS-INTV-#2)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Better teachers 2. Better program 3. More support for student clubs (FYS-INTV-#2).
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Being more student focused (FRYS-INTV-#3).	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. More study aboard 2. More clubs and orgs 3. More speakers and panelist for career fields (SYS-INTV-#3).	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. More course options 2. More student engagement in planning events 3. More weekends programing (TYS-INTV-#3)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Improve the freshmen residential experience 2. Lower the cost of school (FYS-INTV-#3).
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. More class interaction 2. Less busy work 3. Support/promote clubs and sports. (FRYS-INTV-#4).	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Promotion of sports and clubs 2. Promote fun events 3. Promote fun classes outside of majors (SYS-INTV-#4).	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Promote dorm life (TYS-INTV-#4)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. More career guidance 2. Making it easier to switch degree paths (FYS-INTV-#4).
Color Key Blue = Shared feedback Gray = Not sure Red = Didn't share feedback			

Asking this question is important as it helps to provide student feedback on how the traditional college experience can be improved moving forward. Through their responses to this question, students can help to provide university staff and personnel with ideas for specific changes that can help to improve the college experience moving forward. Overall, 94% of students interviewed responded with ideas for at least one specific way the college experience can be improved. These responses were reflective of each class standing with both, first, second, third- and fourth-year students providing feedback. Only one student (6%) that was interviewed did not provide specific feedback.

One of the main area's students provided feedback for in their responses was first year experience. Many of the students highlighted how their first-year of college and in particular the first few weeks of it played a huge role in defining the rest of their college experience. TYS-INTV-#3 explains that there should be more of a focus on dorm life during students first year. In their view having this focus can help to teach them what actually happens in the dorms and its importance. TYS-INTV-#2 describes how the orientation process consists of too much information which was presented in a format that is hard for students to understand. From their perspective there should be more of a focus on the social aspect of college through events, bonding time and other activities which help to show what the college experience is all about. TYS-INTV-#2 explains that another area that can help to improve first-year experience is more integration of upperclassmen with freshmen. The integration of different years can help to build a sense of community and make first-year students feel more included.

Another area of improvement that students highlighted during their interviews was student engagement. TYS-INTV-#1 explains how from their experience many students don't feel a strong sense of community. "It still feels really individualized and isolated" (TYS-INTV-#1).

TYS-INTV-#1 believes that the best way of addressing this is through budling back the community feeling students lost during the pandemic. In their view this can be accomplished through more resources being devoted to consistent and sustained programing efforts. Similarly, TYS-INTV-#3 expressed the view that there needs to be more done toward supporting programs and in particular weekend programming. “We need to make people more motivated to be here” (TYS-INTV-#3). TYS-INTV-#3 believes this can be accomplished through more campus engagement in planning events and finding ways to build incentives into doing more things on campus. FRYs-INTV-#4 points out how sporting events draw students to college, however similarly to other types of events many students end up not going to them. SYS-INTV-#3 explains that the lack of student engagement in the aftermath of the pandemic demonstrates the need for a greater focus on the promotion of campus events. In their view college is more about the social experience than academics. Because of this they believe that it is important to highlight the wide variety of social opportunity’s college offers through, sports, clubs, organizations, and other types of activities. Another idea they shared was having more “fun classes” outside of students majors which could allow them to explore their interests and try new things.

One of the main areas of improvement students highlighted was academics. Many of the students interviewed expressed the view that more can be done to expand the size and scope of the academic benefits offered outside of the classroom. SYS-INTV-#4 brought up how having more career preparation opportunities through speakers and panelists as well as more field trips would be beneficial. Another area SYS-INTV-#4 highlighted was having more study abroad opportunities. From their perspective the opportunities these trips offer are extremely beneficial, but only accessible to a small amount of students due to a number of factors such as cost and time-conflicts. Another area of improvement students highlighted within academics was career

advising and employment opportunities. FYS-INTV-#4 explains how it would be helpful to have more guidance from support staff on navigating career options and as well as making the process of changing majors more streamlined. FYS-INTV-#4 describes how employment opportunities is one of the main reasons students enter into four-year degree programs. However, in their view “something that is not exactly provided for by universities is good resources into gaining employment after graduation” (FYS-INTV-#4). FYS-INTV-#4 believes that one way this can be addressed is through more resources being devoted toward supporting academic clubs within degree programs.

While students provided a number of suggestions relating to academics outside of the classroom many students provided classroom-specific feedback. FRYS-INTV-#1 and SYS-INTV-#2 highlighted the need for more course options. They explain how many students need more options for accommodating their schedules. Another challenge with fewer course options is larger class sizes. FRYS-INTV-#1 explains how larger class sizes make it harder to interact with teachers and have class discussions. “In a larger class setting, I feel like discussions are less meaningful and productive as you only get to engage with the material at a surface level” (FRYS-INTV-#1). FYS-INTV-#2 and FRYS-INTV-#4 explain one frustration they have with their classes is the amount of busy work they have. In their view this type of work takes away from students’ ability to participate in other aspects of the college experience such as clubs and other activities that require more of a time commitment. FRYS-INTV-#4 explains that this also takes away from the interactive piece of learning. “In my view having more interactions and discussions would make class time more engaging and meaningful” (FRYS-INTV-#4).

Discussion/Conclusion

For the most part, the results of the interviews I conducted with students are consistent with my literature review showing that Covid-19 had a generally negative affect on students during the initial stages of the pandemic. While the findings of my literature review were largely limited to showing the short-term effects of the pandemic, they do help to provide context for many of the challenges students identified in the interviews I conducted. It is important to note that while students shared relevant feedback in their responses, the extent of the conclusions that can be reached based on their interviews are limited due to the small sample size (sixteen) of students surveyed. The sample distribution of the interviews I conducted with students is also important to note as it helps to compare the perspectives of both students that started their college experience before the pandemic and those who entered college after it had begun.

Overall, student's interview feedback was consistent, showing that regardless of year most students in each academic year had a negative experience during the pandemic. The negative effects of the pandemic on student's learning experiences can be seen through 87% of those interviewed indicating that they would choose the option of an in person college experience over being completely remote. Related to this question, 81% of students interviewed said they believed an in person college experience was better for both the social and academic benefits it offers. Students feedback on this question is important as it suggests that students still place value in the traditional college experience. Along with this feedback, students shared that while they prefer an in. person college experience, they do appreciate the flexibility and options that online classes offer. Students feedback on this question suggests that they believe online classes can play a role in improving access to, and accessibility of higher education. This could

be through helping to balance student's schedules or by making it possible for other students to have the chance to be a part of the college experience.

Overall, the results of the interviews I conducted with students suggest that the changes caused by the Covid-19 pandemic are part of an overall systemic shift in higher education. One of the clearest examples of this shift has been the negative effect Covid-19 has had on the college experience through hurting student engagement. However, despite this, it is also clear that students still place value in the benefits that the traditional college experience offers. The quantity and quality of feedback that students provided to the question of how the traditional college experience can be improved moving forward shows that there are ways to combat the current disruptions and changes which are affecting higher education. Students' feedback on student engagement, academics, and the residential experience shows three specific areas which can be reexamined moving forward.

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