



## Higher Education Students' Perceptions of Online Learning during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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## HIGHER EDUCATION STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF ONLINE LEARNING DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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### Abstract

This article focuses on the impacts of online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic on students at the University of Hawai'i at Hilo. Using survey data ( $n = 64$ ) and semistructured interviews with currently enrolled students ( $n = 17$ ), key impacts of online learning on the student body were analyzed. The respondents reported disengagement in lectures, negative impacts on their mental and physical health, negative thoughts about dropping out and transferring, apprehension about the quality of course content, and dissatisfaction with tuition. The paper utilizes qualitative data analysis to report the findings.

*Keywords:* online learning impacts, COVID-19, university students, qualitative research, disengagement

### Introduction

In the spring of 2020, COVID-19 swept across the world, and disruptions to university students' education were a critical concern to university administrators, faculty, students, and their families. The University of Hawai'i at Hilo (UH Hilo) is a public four-year university on the Island of Hawai'i with a small student body (2,977 students). The university's student-to-professor ratio (1:15) allows for development of in-depth relationships between students and faculty. Many students appreciate the one-on-one attention they get from their professors, which enriches their educational experience with ample feedback. All of this changed in 2020 as students on spring break had their break extended, and although students were thrilled to have a long break, their classes soon after moved directly online, using Zoom and the university's learning management system (LMS). Students living in on-campus housing left the dorms, abruptly displaced and sent home to their families, forced to endure lockdowns in off-campus student housing. What had been an educational

model of close interactions became one marked by student isolation and distance. One UH Hilo student interviewee, Lisa,<sup>1</sup> said,

Immediately, everyone moved out of the dorms. So, I packed up all my stuff in one night and flew back home, which was so crazy. And then two days after that, school started again. It was all online, which was weird because Zoom was like not a thing that anyone had any knowledge of. And then all the sudden, “bam,” you’re on Zoom 24/7, all you know is Zoom, and it was weird. . . . You’re staring at a computer screen, and I moved back in with my parents.

It was not solely moving away from campus that was disruptive. Lisa’s description captures another major initial challenge: the transition to online learning that extended to January 2022. Because this transition happened unexpectedly and rapidly, students were untrained and unprepared for online learning protocols. Many students did not know how to use Zoom and had to learn it without assistance. Moreover, professors untrained in online teaching used the university’s LMS and Zoom to conduct their courses in ways that were new to them and, to students, seemed inconsistent between courses, leaving students confused and frustrated. Online courses left students isolated from instructors and one another after being used to a system that had relied on small class sizes with considerable faculty input.

In this paper, I examine the impacts of online learning, focusing on a wide range of issues that include students’ mental and physical health, academic performance, and quality of life for the student population at UH Hilo. Isolation from peers and faculty and isolation at home contributed to students’ anxieties and frustrations during the pandemic. I draw upon three data sets collected by students in my Qualitative Research Methods course to examine students’ responses. This research is based on autoethnographic narratives, semistructured interviews, and a short survey of UH Hilo students who were asked to share their experiences and perceptions over a nearly two-year period of online education. Students conveyed their challenges, concerns, and apprehension about the future.

The findings from this research are valuable, as they draw from students’ perceptions over a two-year period of the pandemic. Our study heard from students who reflected on the two years of pandemic learning. Studies conducted during the pandemic’s peak, when there was more uncertainty about how pandemic changes to education would play out, inform this research. I focus on students’ reflections, bringing together past and present as students move forward in a changing educational landscape. Our fellow students’ responses made those of us who did the

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<sup>1</sup> All interviewee names in this paper are pseudonyms.

research realize how connected to each other we were by our similar perceptions, although we all felt isolated from one another. In spite of that isolation, concerns that may have seemed only ours were shared by university students all over the world who experienced similar challenges.

### Research Context

Numerous studies focus on students' responses to academic and emotional challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic. Students of all ages and levels were sent home to meet public health needs until classes could resume online (Chaturvedi et al., 2021; Cui et al., 2022; Gothwal et al., 2022; Plenty et al., 2021; Ratner et al., 2022; Shetty et al., 2022; Xiang et al., 2020). Research is beginning to build a profile of the impacts on the educational, social, and emotional fallout of learning online for university-level students during the pandemic. Summarized below are some of the relevant findings from international studies about university students during the pandemic that inform my analysis.

Twenty percent of UH Hilo's students are first-generation students (UH Hilo IRO, 2023), who often face a wider range of challenges than do their peers. A study by Scharp et al. (2021) identified student groups disadvantaged in the climate of online learning, focusing on first-generation students. The authors identified seven triggers among the participants, including inadequate financial support and university infrastructure, reduced face-to-face communication, changes in campus events and activities, canceled internships and opportunities, motivation problems, and complications of combining school and home life. These student participants reported missing out on the college experience, lacking interaction with peers, and having less support from faculty, as well as problems with procrastination and motivation, and difficulties with separating the home environment from the classroom. Students repeatedly noted that they felt they were missing out on a college experience of building friendships in the classroom and in extracurricular activities. Like these students, UH students had precarious housing conditions, unreliable access to the internet and/or transportation, and poor-quality laptop computers used for class. For all college students, the isolation of online learning compounded a range of preexisting challenges, perhaps contributing to increased anxiety reported by students from all backgrounds.

Li and Che (2022) examined college students in China in response to their education moving online because of the pandemic. Their study highlights an increase in anxiety among the student population and decreased attentiveness due to social media distractions. There were 622 respondents representing college students from 30 regions of the country. As a general trend, those in their first and sophomore years struggled more academically with the change to online learning than did higher-level students, and male and female subjects performed the same academically. The

authors found a significant decrease in academic performance among those who studied at home, in comparison to those who studied in an office or studio. Physically, 79% of respondents reported eye strain, while cervical stiffness affected about 30% of the students. There was a strong trend that the students who did their schoolwork at home had more mental and physical problems. These findings are similar to effects reported by UH Hilo students, who reported increased anxiety and a decline in their physical activity due to studying at home, citing similar physical ailments. Studying at home led to a more sedentary lifestyle with lockdown restrictions that limited students' mobility. Many UH students reported that studying in their homes and bedrooms was detrimental to their focus because of distractions, leading to overall disengagement with learning.

Branchu and Flaureau's (2022) study of French higher education examined disengagement in students' online learning. The researchers use the term *disengagement* to cover anything from dropouts and disinterest to educational exclusion, including personal student and institutional failure. The authors discuss the inequalities in living conditions and in access to study spaces, as well as the blending of home and school, making it difficult for students to turn off "school mode" and rest, eat, and sleep reasonably. Participants in their study expressed concern with online learning, including that they were not held accountable and could turn their cameras off and not pay attention (Branchu and Flaureau, 2022). Other participants in their study needed validation and recognition from their professors, which was lacking in the online format, and students reported depression due to a lack of interaction with faculty and other students. These findings align with ours and are echoed by UH Hilo students who turned off their screens, tuning out during lectures because they were not held accountable and choosing instead to multitask. Unlike in a face-to-face classroom, where other students' presence holds them accountable for participation, with cameras off, students cooked food, engaged in social media, or napped during the lecture instead of paying attention.

Some UH students attributed their lack of engagement to poor-quality online instruction, becoming increasingly dissatisfied with paying full fees for what they perceived was poor or inconsistent instruction between classes. During the pandemic and in response to online learning, students of South Korea (Generation Z) took it upon themselves to pursue lawsuits with the help of social media to get tuition refunds, as they also perceived their courses to be of low quality (Kang and Park, 2022). According to Kang and Park, students argued that the quality of their education was akin to learning through YouTube videos, which was also heard from interviewees at UH Hilo. One major insight of Kang and Park's study was that online courses needed to improve interactions and provide timely feedback from professors regarding students' questions and assignments and that improvements would increase satisfaction with online courses. Many students at UH Hilo reported similar

frustrations with online courses and felt resentment that tuition costs were the same for online and in-person classes.

Pandemic learning affected some students more than others. First-generation students may have suffered more from separating from other students and faculty, but many UH Hilo students reported that isolation led to feelings of disengagement, which induced a cycle of avoidance of their work. Student isolation may have led to student disengagement with their peers, faculty, and courses, leading to resentment about course quality, overall university experience, and tuition costs.

## Methodology

To conduct this research, students of the course Geography 382, Qualitative Research, used three primary methods to collect data: autoethnography, semistructured interviews, and a short survey. Our research began in January 2022 and ended in April 2022. We began our research by writing autoethnographic reflections about our experiences with COVID-19 and online learning through Zoom. Our autoethnographic research helped us identify key themes in student experiences to devise interview questions around, which would further our understanding of the student experience during the COVID-19 pandemic across a wider range of students. Next, we completed the university's required research ethics course, Human Subject Research and Information Privacy and Security, submitting our project proposal to the institutional review board.

Using snowball sampling, each student researcher recruited two interviewees ( $n = 22$ ), who were compensated with a \$25 dollar payment. We felt that the interviewees' time was valuable and did not wish to place additional burdens on them for their participation. Each interview lasted approximately one hour. The semistructured interviews were audio-recorded and then transcribed using the Otter.ai program. We corrected transcriptions, which we then coded and analyzed, ending up with 17 usable interviews. In May, I used the CAQDAS Dedoose to analyze the interviews, in addition to manual coding.

Finally, in addition to the interviews, student researchers created a Google Form questionnaire. The survey was posted to students at the University of Hawai'i at Hilo over a two-week period (April 18–May 2). We used our social networks to solicit respondents, and 64 students completed the survey. The following categories were identified as common problems among UH Hilo students: impacts on mental and physical health, student dropouts and/or transfers to campuses offering in-person classes, quality of online class content and tuition prices, disengagement in online classes, and impacts on motivation levels.

Of the 64 survey respondents, 50% had started at UH Hilo prior to the pandemic and 50% had started at UH Hilo during the pandemic. Their ages ranged from 18 to 49, but 74.5% of the survey respondents were 18–23 years old. At the time

of the survey in spring 2022, 65.5% of the survey respondents were juniors and seniors (34.4% juniors, 31.3% seniors) and 65.6% were students working part-time or full-time on top of their university course load. Most of the survey respondents were female (82.5%), and 84.4% of survey respondents lived off campus at the time of the survey.

Interview participants were primarily 19–23 years old (89.5%); two older students were both 28 years old at the time of the interviews. Of the interviewees, 57.9% started at UH Hilo prior to the pandemic. Juniors constituted 68.4% of interviewees, along with two sophomores, two seniors, and two graduate students. As with the survey respondents, most of the interviewees were female, representing 73.7% of the sample. Table 1 shows the demographics of the student interview participants.

Table 1. Interviewee Demographics

| Pseudonym | Class standing: First-year (F), Sophomore (So), Junior (J), Senior (S) | Major                        | Started at UH Hilo before the pandemic | Received loans, grants, scholarships, or other aid to attend UH Hilo | Age | Sex | Gender identity | Ethnic identity                     | First language | On- or off-campus housing | Living with if off-campus | Shared computer/laptop with family members or friends | Had reliable internet at home |
|-----------|--|------------------------------|--|--|-----|-----|-----------------|-------------------------------------|----------------|---------------------------|---------------------------|---|-------------------------------|
| Jay       | J  | Business management          | Y                                      | Y  | 20  | F   | Female          | Hawaiian, Filipino, Spanish, German | English        | Off                       | Family                    | N   | Y                             |
| Rosie     | J  | Chemistry/ Pharmacy          | Y                                      | Y  | 20  | F   | Female          | Filipino                            | English        | Off                       | Family                    | N   | Y                             |
| Kate      | J  | Marine science               | Y                                      | N  | 20  | F   | Female          | White                               | English        | Off                       | Roommates                 | N   | Y                             |
| Ailine    | S  | Marine science               | Y                                      | Y  | 22  | F   | Female          | White                               | English        | Off                       | Roommates                 | N   | Y                             |
| Paul      | J  | Linguistics                  | N                                      | N  | 23  | M   | Male            | White                               | English        | Off                       | Family                    | N   | Y                             |
| Romano    | graduate student   | Master's in Art and Teaching | N                                      | Y  | 28  | F   | Female          | Italian American                    | English        | Off                       | Roommates                 | N   | Y                             |
| Alex      | J  | Business administration      | N                                      | Y  | 20  | F   | Female          | Latino and White                    | English        | On                        | Roommates                 | N   | Y                             |
| Lisa      | J  | Marine science               | Y                                      | N  | 21  | F   | Female          | White, Vietnamese                   | English        | Off                       | Roommates                 | N   | Y                             |
| Elizabeth | J  | Business administration      | Y                                      | Y  | 22  | F   | Female          | white                               | English        | Off                       | Roommates                 | N   |                               |
| Leritha   | J  | Psychology                   | N                                      | Y  | 28  | F   | Female          | Pacific Island, Micronesia          | Pohnpeian      | Off                       | Roommates                 | N   | Y                             |
| JR        | J  | Fire science                 | Y                                      | Y  | 20  | M   | Male            | Hawaiian                            | English        | Off                       | Roommate                  | N   | Y                             |
| Dennis    | J  | Aquaculture                  | Y                                      | Y  | 20  | M   | Male            | Asian                               | English        | Off                       | Roommate                  | Y   |                               |
| Desiree   | J  | Arts                         | N                                      | Y  | 23  | F   | Female          | Pacific                             | Pohnpeian      | Off                       | Roommates                 | Y   | Y                             |



|           |                          |   |   |   |    |   |        |   |         |     |           |   |   |
|-----------|--------------------------|---|---|---|----|---|--------|---|---------|-----|-----------|---|---|
|           |                          |   |   |   |    |   |        | Island,<br>Micronesia                   |         |     |           |   |   |
| Melanie   | J                        | Agriculture/Liv<br>estock<br>production | Y | Y | 20 | F | Female | Hawaiian,<br>White                      | English | Off | Roommates | N | Y |
| Suzie     | J                        | Kinesiology                             | Y | Y | 21 | F | Female | white                                   | English | Off | Roommates | N | Y |
| Aphrodite | So                       | Kinesiology                             | N | Y | 19 | F | Female | White,<br>Asian,<br>Pacific<br>Islander | English | On  | Roommates | N | Y |
| Dareen    | pharmacy<br>(first year) | Pharmacy                                | N | Y | 20 | F | Female | White                                   | English | On  | Roommates | N | Y |

## Analysis

### Students' Perceptions of Their Mental and Physical Health

In this section, I draw on the interviews and surveys to analyze the impacts of online learning on UH Hilo students during the pandemic. Figure 1 shows survey responses to the Likert scale question about students' perceptions of their physical, mental, and social health since March 2020; 46.9% of the respondents reported that they perceived a change for the worse in their physical health (*agree* and *strongly agree*). Most of the respondents reported a perceived change for the worse in their mental health, totaling 67.2% (*agree* and *strongly agree*). More than half (57.8%) reported a change for the worse in their social interactions since the start of the pandemic. These results are consistent with findings from Li and Che (2022) and Scharp et al. (2021).

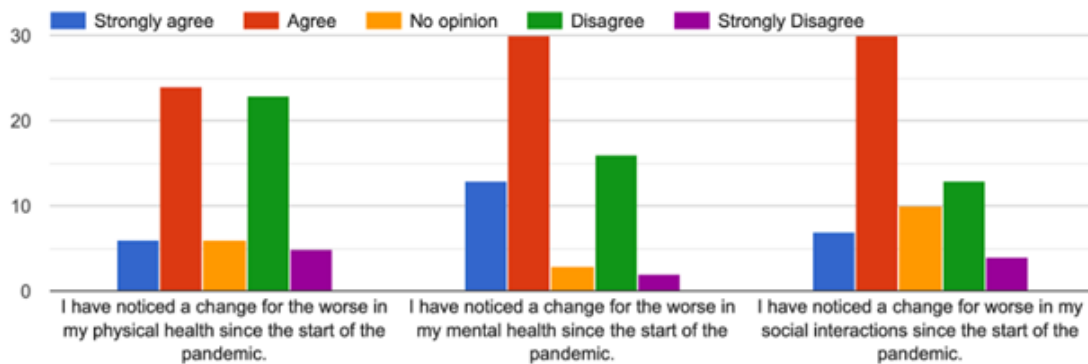


Figure 1. Students' Perceptions of Their Physical, Mental, and Social Health Since March 2020

Our interviewees and survey respondents noted a decline in their mental and physical health. Mental health concerns were prevalent among the students during the pandemic for a range of reasons, yet UH Hilo students reported lasting social anxieties in the late stages of the pandemic, particularly concerns about an anticipated return to in-person classes. One student responded to the online survey by saying, "I have noticed myself becoming more nervous in social settings since the pandemic, probably because I stayed home in isolation for so long. However, I do like

being able to see more people again; it just feels more nerve-racking than before.” Many students shared this late-pandemic social anxiety that may have been a result of isolation from healthy interactions with other students.

We offered students the opportunity to tell us about anxieties in their own words with an open-ended question (Survey Question 5). Many of them cited feelings about anxiety, happiness, stress, and other emotions. They noted concerns about weight gain and loss, stiff necks and backs, sleeping problems, and eye strain. One respondent said about their physical health, “Lately, I’ve had to eat fast food to fit my schedule. This has caused me to gain a few pounds in weight. I also have noticed this affecting my mood and sleep schedule.” Students reported eating processed and low-quality foods that were quick and easy complements to their lifestyles, resulting in weight gain. In contrast, some students reported weight loss because they were not prioritizing their nutrition at this time or because they had more anxiety and stress. Respondents reported that online learning at home affected their physical health because of less daily movement and exercise. Because their classes were all conducted on screens in their homes, they didn’t have to leave their homes and walk around campus to get to class. Like the respondents in the studies of Branchu and Flaureau (2022) and Li and Che (2022), UH Hilo students felt physical, emotional, and social impacts from online learning.

Students’ mental and physical health seemed to decline because of lack of on-campus social interactions with peers. In interviews, students described a range of anxieties that resulted from Zoom interactions specifically, which I had not read about in other studies. More than one student interviewee said that looking into the camera and seeing everyone in the class looking directly back at them in a typical synchronous online Zoom classroom was unnerving. Ailine said,

When you’re in a classroom, everyone’s sitting in rows and you’re all facing a board, you’re all facing one way, face-to-face with the teacher. You have people around you that you can talk to, people you can talk to before and after class. When you go to the online format, social anxieties come out. When you have a camera on, anyone can see your face. When we first came on Zoom, I’d be clicking through and seeing people’s faces and stuff. That’s not something you would do when you’re in person, you know, you don’t have face-to-face with 20 other kids.

As Ailine pointed out, the classroom spatial dynamics and interactions are completely different online compared to those in face-to-face classrooms. The new social space of the synchronous online Zoom room upended the traditional orientation of students looking forward to their professors. In the Zoom room, they looked at themselves and into the faces of their classmates, which was uncomfortable. Additionally, they felt they were letting others into the private spaces of their homes and may have been unable to blur or use a background filter, thus

revealing these spaces to other students involuntarily. For students living with families or in communal or cramped living spaces after being ousted from campus, this was particularly difficult.

Interviewees struggled with people seeing their private home environments. They also had difficulty with their private home spaces becoming part of the classroom background, as each student stared at one another in the Zoom squares. Romano changed his home space to make it more like a classroom:

I had to get a desk, and I feel so much better. I feel keeping it in my room helps just because your room is where you do your hibernating, you know, you sleep and just get dressed and like, it's your space. And so, I feel like doing it in my room was private, you know, just me. Because I feel like we're also bringing our private lives now, in front of people like that was wild to me, people are literally seeing my bedroom. That's weird, you know, but then also, there wasn't availability elsewhere in the house and I don't think I'd really want to be anywhere without a closed door, like I needed, like, everything blocked off to make it feel like I could learn effectively and be focused.

As Romano stated, sharing his home spaces with other students didn't happen before online learning, and he did not have anywhere else in the house to study. Many students felt uncomfortable that the private and intimate spaces of their bedrooms were being viewed by strangers on video through Zoom.

Another interviewee, Melanie, noted that many students felt more uncomfortable speaking in the online format, compared to speaking in an in-person classroom. She said, "I'm a lot more confident in the classroom to just ask a question. But if it's online, it's a little more intimidating to press unmute. Your little face box gets highlighted, being the only one talking." Furthering that point, Paul brings it all together:

It is kind of uncomfortable. I have a set place where I turn my camera on. I don't use it in any other location. I don't like to. I do feel bad for people that have kids or pets that will bark or get in the camera or something like that. Yeah, it's a very weird thing because you have to invite people into your house when you turn on your camera.

It is clear from the feedback provided that the students feel that the classroom dynamics online are very different from those of an in-person classroom. As Paul said, many students had children or pets that were not part of their education prior to online learning and caused distractions or embarrassment in the Zoom classroom. Students struggled with separating their home environments, meant for private activities, and the classroom, meant for lectures, assignments, and studying. Yet another new point made by our interviewees was that they were uncomfortable staring at one another on camera, which made speaking up while sharing their home environments online that much more difficult, leading to disengaged learning.

## Disengagement in Online Class

During the pandemic, much of the online learning conducted at UH Hilo was through Zoom. Zoom social anxieties, such as staring directly at the camera and turning the camera off, led to a less-fulfilling classroom environment for both students and professors. Class discussions allow students to interact with other students and their professors, creating a more interactive learning environment. Students retain more information learned in class by participating in class discussions, leading to better understanding and exam preparation. In the survey data, we found that 87.5% of students were taking their online classes in their bedrooms or dorm rooms. When students were asked if they had an easy time separating their schoolwork from their home life, 34.4% responded with *not at all* and 21.9% responded with *less than half the time*. Compounding the lack of separation and adding to disengagement were students' blank screens. Students turned their cameras and microphones off. Though many professors requested that people turn their cameras on, it seemed to be the group consensus to refuse, leaving classrooms silent when professors asked for questions or discussion. This left students who had their cameras on feeling alone and isolated while others had their cameras off. Many students disengaged when given the option to turn on their cameras. The dilemma of students refusing to participate in class exacerbated the issue of feeling isolated, and students lacked a sense of community with their peers. Professors tried to put students in Zoom breakout rooms, hoping students would engage when they were alone in the breakout rooms, but many students continued to refuse to speak and kept their cameras off in group activities, leaving students feeling even more disconnected from their peers.

Our interviewees provided insights about the blank-screen phenomena. When Elizabeth was asked if she felt nervous talking to people, she responded, "I do because people turn off their cameras and it makes me feel awkward. Everybody just has their cameras off and it's like two people with their cameras on." Kate's experience echoes Elizabeth's discomfort. She said, "It was pretty lonely and kind of sucked a lot of the time. I know about ten people, and I sat in online class all the time with everyone's cameras off, so I still don't know that many people because that has been my reality at school here for the past couple years." Dareen said that she would prefer the in-person classroom because it holds her more accountable to pay attention: "It would probably be better for me to be more productive to go in-person and be forced to listen while they're looking at you, because you know, on your computer, you can just go do whatever, like, leave it there." Jay also felt that it was hard to stay productive in the online format because of distractions at home. He said, "It's an option to just turn off the camera and not even go to class and just knock out on the bed. Some classes are during lunchtime, like I'm going to want to make a sandwich and make a drink like in the middle class." Many students found that being at home while attending a class led to them ignoring the lecture and doing things they normally would do in

their homes. When in a classroom on campus, students would not have the option to take naps or make lunch but would be fully focused on listening to the professor.

Breakout rooms were no better for student engagement. When asked about group breakout rooms, Jay said, “Breakout rooms have to be the worst thing for me! Especially if you have a group that doesn’t participate . . . all blank screens, it’s like you just sit there and you don’t really know what’s going on.” Jay’s concern about the lack of participation in Zoom courses is like Kate and Elizabeth’s experience with students refusing to contribute to conversations and keeping their microphones and cameras off in class and breakout rooms. The lack of participation and contribution online leaves students feeling even more isolated from their peers.

Disengagement is prevalent in online courses; many students are multitasking and not paying attention to the lecture being conducted. This leads to lower quality of education than provided by an in-person class. Students perceive that it is easier to pay attention in a physical classroom because they want to show respect to their professor and are “forced to pay attention,” but students struggle with self-discipline to engage when left alone in their bedrooms to attend class. Disengagement during class lectures makes it very difficult for students to retain the information being taught and to succeed in their courses.

### Impacts on Motivation Levels

Many students reported decreased motivation levels in response to online learning during the pandemic. In the survey, 60.9% of respondents reported decreased motivation and 73.4% reported decreased concentration. Unsurprisingly, decreased motivation and concentration led to increased procrastination (62.5%). Many students attributed their lack of motivation to not being held accountable by their professors in class or reported that combining their home and school spaces led to an unfulfilling social life in the classroom that affected their schoolwork. Others said it was boredom because of the Zoom lecture format. Melanie said the abrupt transition and lack of training in online learning led to low self-discipline: “Technology is a learning curve. I did not know how to do anything online, so that was tough. Then it’s just more difficult to be motivated and stay focused on Zoom because you’re not really held accountable for paying attention and not procrastinating, stuff like that.”

Ailine said that before the pandemic happened,

I was a go-getter type of student. I was really excited to learn, and I wasn’t just going to school to get a degree, I was going to school to better my understanding of the ocean. Now, especially as a senior, I’m just ready to be done. I can’t do this online, back-and-forth stuff anymore. I just want to be done.

Similarly to Ailine, Elizabeth was a student who normally excelled academically and felt that her motivation dissipated during the pandemic because of the online learning format. She said, "I used to be really on top of school my freshman year and my sophomore year, and then my junior year, I was like, 'I'm over it.' I don't like the learning environment." Desiree felt her motivation was more affected by lack of socialization, being isolated indoors, and being bored without her normal social schedule:

I like adventure. I like social activities. COVID has taken away a social life. The fact that I'm new here and can't meet new people because of COVID. I am not motivated in school, and I am tired of sticking indoors. The fact that I'm always home, bored out of my mind, keeps me less motivated.

Lack of motivation was a common complaint among interviewees. Kate had had ambitions to go to grad school following her undergraduate education, but the online experience has changed her mind about her goals. "Online school has made stuff so incredibly hard that the thought of going back to school after I graduate is unbearable," she said.

Students attributed their lack of interest to faculty not holding them responsible, and they wanted faculty to demand more from them, such as turning on their cameras. JR said, "It's gotten worse, in fact, procrastinating. And like I said, it's the self-discipline of being in-person. It's a lot easier when you have a teacher face-to-face." Similar to JR and Melanie, Romano felt that problems with motivation and procrastination surfaced because of not being held accountable by the professor online as they would be in-person:

Procrastination for sure (has declined). I feel as though I pushed the limits on some things. Not seeing somebody kind of took away the accountability by not having the instructor face-to-face. You know, I feel like accountability to an instructor requires respect, and true respect requires face-to-face. I respect my instructors 100%.

It is notable that the students perceive the need to respect their professors in person but do not feel the need to respect them online, as if the barrier of computer screens makes their connections feel less human and authentic.

### Student Dropouts and/or Transfers to Campuses With In-Person Classes

Lack of motivation led some students to drop out or to transfer to schools that returned to the classroom earlier as UH Hilo lagged in its return because of state restrictions. Many students transferred to other universities and campuses that moved back to in-person classes much earlier than the University of Hawai'i. Other students moved back home to save money, as Hawaii's living expenses are the highest

in the country. Because classwork would be online regardless, students relocated. Unfortunately, many students dropped out of college in response to online learning, as it is more difficult for students to remain engaged in their education with online learning. As shown in Figure 2, 31.7% of respondents considered dropping out and 27% considered transferring, while 44.4% thought about taking off a semester from school.

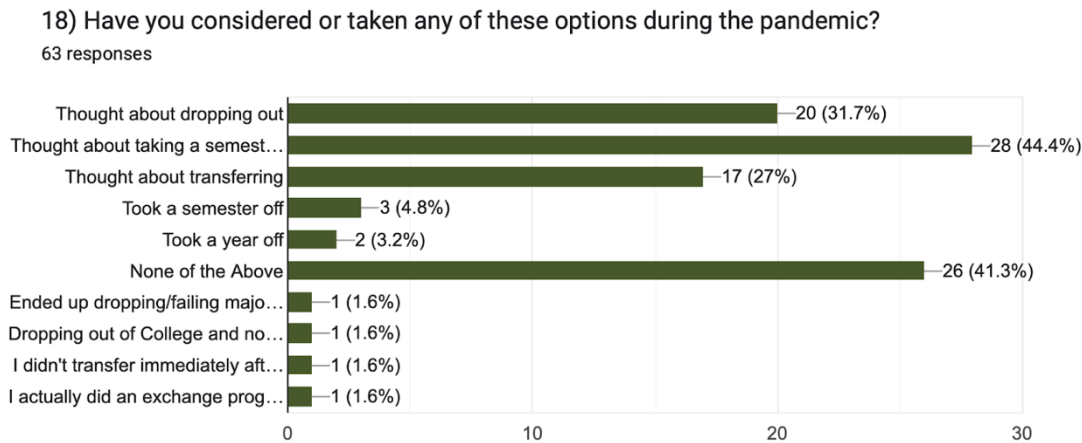


Figure 2. Responses to Survey Question 18

Jay mentioned that she had considered dropping out and said, “My motivation for education [has declined], and it was like, should I just stop now? I wasn’t even halfway at the point, so it’s not like I was on that homestretch. So yeah, at one point, I really wanted to quit.” Melanie didn’t consider dropping out herself but watched it happen to multiple friends:

I’ve had friends drop out of college because they feel like they’re not getting, you know, the ‘full experience of college’ and they figured they might as well just wait until things go back to normal, I guess when people are face-to-face and learning is always in the classroom because otherwise they see it as a waste of my time.

Similar to Melanie, Cornelius felt that he did not get the college experience. He pointed out that college is expensive and that his friends transferred to other schools that moved back to in-person quicker than UH Hilo, providing a better college



experience. He noted that some students chose to take time off college at a time of uncertainty to see what would unfold next:

People are deterred from going to college. Obviously paying a lot of money and not getting a lot out of it and everything's online. So, I know a lot of people that have either transferred like myself or just completely taken a semester or a year off just to wait and see or do something different.

Cornelius's concerns about tuition cost and lack of the full college experience were echoed by Lisa: "The first semester that we had online classes, I told my parents that I wanted to take the year off and wait for COVID to be over to go back to class because I wasn't learning. I told them, 'You're not getting your money's worth. I'm not getting my money's worth.'" In summary, students considered transferring and dropping out during the pandemic. They didn't feel it was worth staying, because they were missing out on the college experience, and paying full tuition prices for a lower quality of education didn't seem right for them.

Of the survey respondents, 60% thought that online classes should cost less than in-person classes (Figure 3). Many students attributed this view to the quality and experience of online classes as being lesser than those of in-person classes. Another reason that respondents cited for online classes to cost less was because of on-campus services: Students paid for services that were not used, such as janitorial services, on-campus technology, medical, and student life services.

14) Do you think that UH Hilo's tuition for online classes should cost less than face-to-face classes?  
63 responses

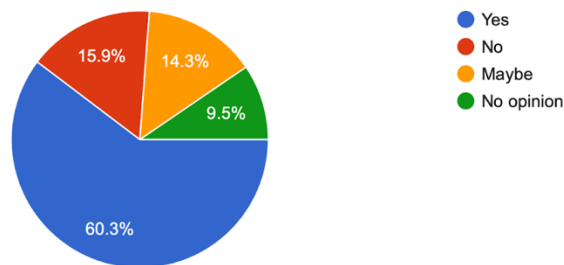


Figure 3. Response to Survey Question 14

When asked about tuition costs of online learning, Dareen felt the quality of online courses was lacking and compared online learning to a video game, saying, “They can charge so much for a video on a screen. I think it should have been less because it has been less of an experience. Like, why is this worth my time and credit when it was literally like a video game?” Ailine felt that with online learning, she was left on her own to teach herself. She used external resources like YouTube and Chegg to try to understand the content of the courses she was in, and she felt her professors were not teaching her as thoroughly as they had before the pandemic. She felt strongly that the tuition of online learning should be less than that for in-person classes because of lower-quality content:

A lot of times you had to look up stuff, you had to teach yourself. So the whole point of college is getting these PhD professors to teach you information that they’ve learned. But instead, we’re going on YouTube and going on Chegg, and going on whatever else sources there are, and teaching ourselves. So, what’s the point in paying full tuition prices if we’re doing a teacher’s work for them?

Paul felt that tuition should cost less because on-campus resources were not being used: “I feel like a lot of your tuition goes to on-campus services. So, if you’re paying tuition for an online class, when you can’t go to campus, it should probably be less.” Jay shared Paul’s stance stating,

I think they should have subtracted some of the tuition, because if you look at the full layout of what your tuition covers, it doesn’t just cover the class itself but it’s also for the resources that you have access to on campus. So that’d be the Medical Center, the Student Life Center, the gyms and stuff like that. And there’s like smaller fees here and there. But for those that are strictly off-campus, like they’re from a different state, different island, different side of the island . . . I feel like those kinds of things they shouldn’t be paying for.

Of the students who responded that tuition should not be different between in-person and online courses, several expressed concerns about protecting professors’ salaries and suggested that the costs should remain the same. When asked about tuition, Leritha said,

This is a funny question. I’m a student; of course I want cheaper tuition. I’d side with anyone who is against expensive tuition no matter how lame their ideas are. But I don’t know the amount of money the universities need to run their facilities or pay their professors or other workers, so I don’t really have a say.

Like Leritha, Alex was uncertain about tuition and was concerned that if tuition were cut, faculty may not be paid adequately and the university infrastructure could suffer:

I think being online, I still want my professor to get a fair salary; I still want more universities to provide computers and books for students who can’t buy

them for themselves, so I'm going to pay the same amount, and if I want to pay less, then I can go to a different school.

Gerald also recognized how hard professors had to work in a time of adjustment: "I think tuition should stay the same because the professors are still working just as hard as they were." Dureen also felt concerned by this question and how it would impact professors. She said, "It's not like the school is completely shut down, or something. Maybe it should be a little cheaper, but not cheap, or else how are the professors going to get paid?"

### Positive Aspects of Online Learning During the Pandemic

Although many students voiced concerns and complaints, interviewees also noted positive perceptions of the online experience. Romano felt that his resilience increased throughout the pandemic. As a future teacher, he felt that the change in learning format was enriching because he was more prepared after his pandemic learning experience:

I learned to adapt, and it was so much better and more rewarding. Now I feel like I have the skills that I need to teach virtually, which is great as a student teacher, and soon-to-be teacher; I've learned skills because of online learning. So, what was then hard and then became easy. What was once like "I can't wait for this to be over" actually became a lesson. It taught me how to learn virtually. And if that's the way the world is moving, then you can't really hate it, because at least a skill set was born in it too.

Another interviewee, Alex, found online learning to be beneficial to her lifestyle and time management. She reflected, "I prefer online learning because I can build out those aspects of life that aren't necessarily available in a traditional sense. I also think it is more effective for time management." Dureen noted that the online format of learning provided for more flexibility to her schedule. She felt that this time of online learning helped her to prioritize her needs better and make changes in her lifestyle. She said, "Because in being home during the pandemic, you can go outside, you can go do things that you wouldn't typically be able to do if you weren't at home, and it made me reevaluate in the sense that I need to make more time for myself and prioritize my time better, I guess." Melanie found that online learning helped her become a better student by becoming more independent and self-disciplined:

Now, I think I'm a lot better at school just because I know how to take it into my own hands. I kind of like it now because I figured out how to stay on top of my things. It probably helped me in the long run. That's just because it forced me to be better. I really learned how to take control of my own studies.

Like Melanie, Aphrodite felt she became more independent. She said, "I'm more capable of living on my own now." Ailine found that the experience of online learning during the pandemic provided self-growth and helped her to identify ways to take care of herself better. "I prioritize myself more now. I was able to also work on myself," she said.

These positive feelings from the students remind us that online learning can provide students an opportunity to grow in self-discipline and to have more freedom with their schedules. Many students learned to take control of their mental and physical health during the pandemic and to become more intentional and aware of their needs and priorities in life. The students who thrive in the online classroom will want universities to offer online courses that may work better for those who have families or jobs that they must work around.

### Conclusion

The pandemic challenged students to adjust to learning online. The rapid transition to online learning affected students' mental and physical health negatively because of isolation in their homes, lack of movement, and limited interaction with faculty and peers. Many students felt lonely and alienated from others at this time while coping with the pressures of their school course loads, which led to high levels of stress and anxiety, and low levels of academic engagement. The nature of online learning affected many students' motivation levels, leading to disinterest in the classroom, as evidenced by their blank screens. Students dropped out or transferred to other schools in reaction to these difficulties.

A sentiment that is particularly concerning to universities as they move forward after the pandemic is that interviewees perceive online learning as a lower-quality education than they receive in in-person courses. Many institutions, UH Hilo included, may wish to retain some of the online flexibility that came from the pandemic; however, some students feel that they should not have to pay the full tuition for classes that are not high quality, which presents major concerns for institutional goals for academic excellence.

Many students identified positive outcomes from the online learning experience, including personal health benefits, more time spent with family, greater independence and discipline, more outdoor activities, and new coping skills; thus, although the negative outcomes from the pandemic are significant, many students also identified positive impacts, which universities should listen to carefully as they move on from the pandemic.

A major implication of the study was that online learning could be beneficial to campuses by supplementing in-person courses, although our study highlighted the effect of lack of motivation because of online learning isolation and the negative cycle of disengagement that it can create. Universities must seek out ways to make online

courses as engaging as possible and must use strategies to get students participating by using their cameras and their voices in the online classroom. Our interviewees and survey respondents shared their feelings toward the end of the pandemic, which was unique to other studies done during the early part of the pandemic, thus reflecting the wear and tear of nearly two years of online learning. Because students in our study were still in a pandemic mode of learning amidst the uncertainty of face-to-face classrooms, it is possible their answers may have been more emotionally charged than they would be now, in 2023, looking back on their experiences. It may be useful for similar qualitative studies to be done on campuses around the world to hear from students reflecting on the lasting impacts of online learning now that the pandemic is over.

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