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College Online: Is It Worth It?

Matthew Boisvert, a student at UC Santa Cruz, had just talked to his Computer Architecture professor about joining his research lab for the Spring Quarter, something he was really excited about. After his meeting, he went to the library and began studying for the finals he would be taking the following week. His phone buzzes, but happens to at the same time as everyone else's in the library. They all look at each other, puzzled, and pull out their phones. Matthew reads the email that he had just received from his school, and learns that the rest of his Spring Quarter would be cancelled due to the COVID-19 pandemic. All of his classes and finals would be moved online, and they announced that all of the students must go home as soon as possible. Students in the room began to panic, and started calling their parents to tell them the news.

Once COVID-19 emerged in the United States, universities and schools deemed that it would be unsafe if they continued to let their students physically attend their classes. According to CNBC, "To date, at least 1,102 colleges and universities in the U.S. have closed their campuses due to coronavirus, choosing to move classes online" (Hess). When universities had to close their campuses due to COVID-19, it caused a lot of controversy regarding how students should be graded, and also made schools quickly come up with a plan on how they would

effectively teach their students from home. It also made parents and students question if it was worth it to pay their tuition when they weren't receiving their full college experience.

COVID-19 is a virus that originated in Wuhan, China. It was first considered an epidemic in Wuhan, but as people travelled in and out of the area, it quickly became a pandemic. The virus is very easily transmittable between organisms because symptoms don't always show up until two weeks after an individual has contracted it, so someone could be asymptomatic but have the virus without knowing it. After it entered the US, several states implemented a Stay-At-Home order, which included different guidelines that families had to follow during it. According to Medical News Today, "The global implications have been severe. Many countries have closed schools and are recommending that people work from home when they can. Some countries have completely locked down their international borders and are discouraging travel unless it is deemed essential" (Cohut). Now, almost all students attending a university are attending their classes online.

Once universities announced that their campus was closing, it raised a lot of fear among students. Because it was so unexpected, many students didn't know if they were going to be able to make it home. Low-income students worried about plane tickets and if they were able to afford travelling, while international students didn't know how returning would affect their visas. Getting sent home especially troubled students that were majoring in subjects such as Dance, Theater, Music, and other arts programs. Because most of the activities and assignments in these majors required performances and physical activities, they didn't know how the rest of the semester would play out for them. Leaving the campus also meant a halt in research projects that

students had been working on for months. All of these situations have made students worry if this would affect their path to graduation.

Along with their studies, students worried about returning home amidst the spread of COVID-19. The New York Times stated, “Some altruistically minded students worried about going home and perhaps unwittingly infecting their older and more vulnerable parents and grandparents should the virus already be present at their schools” (Hartocollis). This anxiety made the process of going home a lot more confusing and tough for the students. However, even though all colleges strongly encourage their students to return home, they created the option for students to stay on campus for students that desperately need it. According to Ed Source, “At the University of California, Los Angeles, for example, campus buildings, including university housing and dining facilities, continue to provide services. On-campus dining facilities and university housing also remain open to students at UC Merced.” This option aided thousands of college students who weren't able to return home. This housing option was also extremely helpful for international students who were from hotspot areas suffering from COVID-19, such as Italy and China.

Matthew Boisvert, who is majoring in Computer Science at UC Santa Cruz, was told to go home right when the virus was present in Santa Cruz county. “Things were made stressful for a lot of people because it came in the middle of an important time, with midterms and big due dates coming up,” he says. “A lot of people’s internships, interviews, and job offers were cancelled” (M. Boisvert). Matthew, a sophomore himself, believed he didn’t have too much to worry about because he still had a few years to find opportunities and complete the things he wanted to in college. He luckily finished a major project right before they had to leave campus,

but he was looking forward to the opportunities he would get the next semester, like joining a research lab with his favorite professor. However, Matthew knows this whole situation must be really abrupt and confusing for college seniors. “Because we are hitting a recession,” he says, “it's pretty worrying for a lot of people that are about to graduate from college, that they aren't going to get a job after they finish their time in college” (M. Boisvert).

With most college students being in their late teens and early twenties, most, if not all of these students have never been through a pandemic like this before. Even without schoolwork, the whole situation is pretty scary and new to most of them. According to Inside, “Moving home, taking online classes, losing jobs or dealing with family health care can all have a profound effect on student performance.” Universities took this into account, and colleges handled the situation in several different ways. A few universities, such as Yale and Columbia University have changed their grading policy to a Pass/Fail method. With this approach, student's actual grades will not be shown, and whether they passed the class or not would determine if they received credit for it. This decreases a huge amount of pressure from student's because they know that they might not be able to exceed to the best of their academic abilities from home, and they wouldn't want their grades to reflect that.

However, most colleges are still assigning the same load of coursework the students would have gotten if they were still attending their classes in-person, which has caused an uproar among students. Students are expected to take their exams, such as finals and midterms, along with other tests and assignments from their own homes. With some students who are helping family members who may have the virus, to others who have difficult family situations, it's hard for students to turn in all the work with all the distractions at home. According to NPR,

“Students at Simmons University in Boston, Cornell University and several other colleges have created petitions and contacted their administration to argue why it is unethical to allow a student to fail or stress about their GPA during a global pandemic” (Retta). However, the universities that have not yet changed their policies have reasons for holding back. Administrators have argued that following the Pass/Fail policy would take away the opportunity for students with lower GPAs to get their grades up. According to *U.S. News & World Report*, “College GPA can carry significant weight in determining scholarships, grad school admissions and requirements for majors and programs, which is why students should understand the policy at their college regarding how pass-fail may appear on a transcript” (“What to Know About Pass-Fail Classes”). While this is a valid reason, many students argued that their mental health and situation is more important. Having to juggle school work, families, and the overall news of the pandemic has caused a dramatic increase of anxiety and depression within college students. In fact, “One in five college students say their mental health has significantly worsened during the coronavirus pandemic, according to an April survey of more than 2,000 students conducted by the nonprofit Active Minds” (“What to Know About Pass-Fail Classes”). Being at home during self-isolation means that they won’t be able to see their friends, and they also lose a loss of structure in their lives. Having to juggle the overall pressure of the virus and schoolwork at the same time isn’t good for students' mental health, which is ultimately more important than “raising their GPA” and other academic aspects.

At UC Santa Cruz, Matthew says that “At the School of Engineering on campus, they haven’t changed anything regarding the way we are graded, and I definitely wish they would implement the Pass/Fail policy. The workload hasn’t really changed and it’s very stressful

because we don't have access to the same resources as we would on campus, and they haven't changed the expectations of what we are supposed to turn in" (M. Boisvert). Matthew is on Zoom calls with his professors right when he wakes up, and is working on his assignments until the end of the day. His professors have been trying to figure out ways to give the assignments and tests without the possibility of cheating, but it has backfired. "Our university has been making people use online proctor services where someone watches your webcam and computer the whole time you're taking the test," he says, "it's a pretty big invasion of privacy and people are frustrated because they kind of have to use it or they will fail the test" (M. Boisvert).

Colleges have also been slammed with lawsuits from students and their parents that are demanding to get refunds after having to go home due to COVID-19. Many students have argued that they shouldn't have to pay for their campus housing, because they aren't living there anymore. Other students have insisted that they shouldn't have to pay the full tuition, because they aren't receiving the "level of education they signed up for." In specific, students that are attending a school within the University of California school system have filed lawsuits and asked for refunds for on-campus fees that they are still paying for, even though they aren't even on the campus and able to access them. According to ABC News, this includes "paying for library fees, for the in-campus gym, paying for the pool, paying for all these things that we would normally get to use on campus." However, the UC president has already announced that they would not be giving out refunds for the Spring Quarter. Many colleges have responded by saying that their online classes contain the same material that they would have learned if they were physically attending their classes, so there would be no reason to give refunds.

Being a student within the UC system, Matthew wasn't required to pay for on-campus housing for the Spring Quarter. However, he believes that they are making students pay an unreasonable amount of money for the quality of education they are receiving now. "They are still expecting us to pay tens of thousands of dollars while all they have been giving us is Zoom codes to join so they can give us a lecture, along with loads of assignments," he says, "You could basically get all of those for free if you knew someone who gave you a link to the Zoom code" (M. Boisvert).

Sevindj Boisvert, Matthew's mom, also disagrees with how much they are paying with the current situation. "With the amount of money we are paying for Matthew's tuition, we believed it was worth it for the level of education he was getting," she says. "However, now that he is at home, I don't think it is reasonable to make us pay the same tuition even though the quality of education he is receiving right now is a lot worse" (S. Boisvert).

The COVID-19 pandemic is also raising many questions on how it will affect universities and students for the Fall Semester of 2020, and the upcoming years to follow. Colleges are currently debating if they will even be able to open their campuses and allow their students to return for the Fall semester, as it might still be unsafe. Due to this, many high school seniors are debating if it is worth it to go to college this year if there's a chance of it being online. According to Market Watch, "If there's anything worse than resigning yourself to a freshman year spent online, it would be moving across country or across town, into a dorm room or an apartment — only to have to move out weeks or months later, with no guarantee of any refund." It is possible that many high school seniors will take a gap year, and begin college in the Fall of 2021.

However, universities have been coming up with alternatives to closing their whole campus down. They will possibly be “offering more online courses compared with the previous fall semester, and 57% talked about reducing the number of in-person courses for the same time frame” (Market Watch). This would allow less students to be on campus, which reduces the risk of the spread of COVID-19 over a larger group of students. Other alternatives to this issue includes shortening the school year, or starting Fall semester later than usual. However, most universities won’t be able to determine this until they see how the virus develops over the next few months.

Matthew doesn’t really know how the whole situation is going to play out. “As of now,” he says, “Most of us are just waiting until it’s safe to go outside again. I hope that I will be able to return to campus in the Fall, but I would rather stay home if the circumstances were the same. For now, all I can hope for is that everyone stays safe and spends time with their families” (M. Boisvert).

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