Student Feedback on Virtual Instruction During the Pandemic

The university invited all students enrolled during Spring 2020 to give their feedback on the transition to virtual instruction during the second half of the semester. Among the 1700 students who responded, nearly 75% described the support they received for the transition as very good or adequate, while 20% described it as inadequate or extremely inadequate (those remaining indicated "no opinion"). Students also were invited to respond to the following two open-ended questions:

1. What was most important for helping you learn in your courses?
2. As you think back over your experiences since moving to virtual instruction, do you have suggestions for ways you could have been better supported to continue learning in your courses?

A team of reviewers from the Office of Assessment, the Center for Teaching, and University College reviewed responses and identified the following themes in student comments on what was helpful or what would have been more helpful:

Direct Interaction with Faculty

o The more contact I had with professors, the easier the transition was. Additionally, having Zoom meetings so that there was some level of live interaction was more supportive than lessons that consisted of pre-recorded videos, additional readings or other assignments. Those types of fixes were more confusing, less personal, and more overwhelming.

o Direct support in learning material rather than just being told what to learn instead of how to learn it

o Being able to meet for discussion and engage in back and forth dialogue made a huge difference in what I learned. Also, being able to connect with professors via Zoom helped me feel less isolated and made it easier to ask questions.

o I definitely felt as though I did best in courses that continued to be held live, at the usual scheduled time, with access to instructors. I think it's important to have that ability to ask questions and interact with an instructor as you learn the material.

Clear Expectations, Regularly Communicated

o Lay out everything each week and send out announcements frequently. Remind students of what's coming up as well as what's due and when … Update the syllabus because things get very mixed up when trying to manage 4+ classes all online.

o Professors sending out announcements regarding upcoming material, live discussion sections over Zoom to work through examples or questions, and providing extensive directions on assignments as expectations were difficult to gather from the online delivery method.

o I felt more supported when my instructor would post weekly outlines of assignments and study guidelines, rather than leaving me on my own to learn the material and posting a chunk of lectures.

o Some professors sent out weekly emails about what was coming up, which I found very useful … One of my professors especially has been extremely helpful during this transition and has done everything he can to help his students succeed. I can't say the same for all my professors, but this support has made all the difference

Availability and Responsiveness to Students

o Availability and response time of professors. Some held office hours during their regular class time which was helpful ... however, others would not respond via email within a week which was frustrating.

o What meant the most to me was still being able to have access to my professors, and meeting with them during their 'office hours' even though it was a little different considering our circumstances. I appreciated the time that my professors were still able to take out of their days and lives to still be able to help their students in need like myself

o Office hours was majorly beneficial to my learning, & I'm sure it helped my grades a lot. Getting to talk to my TA's and get 1 on 1 assistance helped me understand the material more thoroughly.

o Professors were very accessible and willing to help, but some have been pretty much silent since the transition!

Demonstrated Concern for Students

o   In one class, the professor took extra care for students ... She created an online survey and asked us whether we encountered more burden due to the transition. She then adjusted homework and … assignments. The care from the professor and the adjustment (changing the due date) really enhanced my learning.

o   I think the teachers understanding our situation and that because of this pandemic adjusted accordingly. Specifically a couple teachers were extremely understanding and changed dates due to my circumstances of having my power shut off

o   Some professors … did not seem to take into account the various difficulties many students were facing in our personal lives that we could not control. Some professors seemed to be under the impression that their students were trying to take advantage of the changes by making unfair requests, but this was obviously not the case, and more understanding from those professors would have helped immensely.

Recognition of Homework and Exam Challenges Faced by Students

o   I would just suggest that all instructors allow extra time for things to be completed. Some students do not have consistent access to internet on their computers, which makes it hard to complete assignments on cell phones.

o   Most of my exams were proctored which led to many problems. For example, if my wifi were to stop working suddenly, I would be locked out of the exam. In addition, it is confusing to take exams over Zoom in one class, on Proctorio in another, and over Gradescope in yet a different class.

o   I had a lot of research papers added to give us points we would have earned in class, but since a lot of my professors did that, it was time consuming. I also had a professor say our final was going to be … open note (printed out notes only which I had to go to a store to pay and do) and then [it was changed to] open book (only hard copy of the book which I had the e-book of so I spent money expediting it).

o   A professor eliminated deadlines, which was very kindly designed so that we could work according to our individual situations, but really just left myself and many classmates feeling confused and overwhelmed when we needed specific directions and expectations.

Preferred Modes of Instruction

Student recognized the value of both synchronous and asynchronous instruction. Advantages and disadvantages were cited for each, often in connection with their own strategies for learning, conditions they were working under (such as availability of internet access or flexibility of their schedules), and the nature of the course itself:

o   Due to the unforeseen circumstances, I believe our teachers did a wonderful job adapting to the situation. Every student is different, therefore it is difficult to please everyone's needs. Personally, I liked pre-recorded lectures over zoom lectures, since I can work at my own pace, but again, everybody is different.

o   Adapting to what's best for the course (This looked different for each course as some courses used Zoom, some used UI Capture, and some just sent out notes)

o   Recorded lectures and schedule flexibility for online courses would be something to consider for all online courses, as not all students have a quiet home with reliable internet connection during daytime hours.

However, as noted previously, many students reported positive learning experiences in courses that utilized in-person (online) interactions, and noted the value of pre-recorded lectures when they were used in conjunction with interactive sessions:

o   [My professor] pre-recorded some lecture material into short (5-10 min) video segments and assigned those to us to watch *prior* to the classes. That meant our class time could be used for interactive learning modules and group discussions to *apply* the lessons from the video … He used Zoom to alternatively talk to all of us at once, and also to break the group down into smaller groups of 3-5 students to work on an exercise together for 20-30 mins and then we'd regroup together to discuss.

o   My professor did a fantastic job transitioning class to online. He … flipped the class, so that our class time we worked with peers and TA's on problems and were able to use the time more effectively. Some professors just basically disappeared when we went online, but … [this] class almost made it seem like it was meant to be taught online.

- It was tough given the time constraints that we had with an unexpected transition to online courses, but I think recorded lectures probably would've been helpful. That way, students can access those lectures on their own time and space out their screen time a little bit, and Zoom class meetings can possibly be made a little shorter and focus more on questions and discussion of the lecture material.

Overall, students placed a high value on the active presence and visible involvement of faculty members (whether synchronous or asynchronous), and comments revealed a widespread consensus that direct engagement with faculty members cannot be replaced solely by lectures recorded during previous semesters or static materials that student work through on their own:

- Some professors put up online modules and kept homework intact, but stopped holding class-time and just sent out emails. It felt like I had been abandoned and wasn't being taught course material but still expected to turn in all of the homework.

- I had one course … where the professor just switched to online pre-recorded lectures and completely got rid of our discussion section. This hurt my grade in that class a lot.

- I had a professor who … uploaded lecture powerpoints with no additional teaching information and expected us to learn the material completely on our own.

- Live classes should not be swapped out for … online youtube videos that we could have looked up anyway.

- A lot of professors just disappeared and were hard to get ahold of after the transition. Some stopped lectures and just added homework instead of taking the time to continue to teach us.

- Some professors great and did everything they could to facilitate learning, some just posted old lecture recordings from previous years and checked out. When the teacher wants the student to learn as much as the student wants to learn, it doesn't matter whether we meet online or through a computer.

Appreciation of Faculty Effort Under Emergency Conditions

- The stressful aspects of online learning were manageable for the most part. I understand that teachers are human too and that this is a difficult time.

- The online instruction was hard for both the instructors and students, I understand that. With that said, if an instructor simply put forth effort to ease the transition, I was grateful and reciprocated that.

- So there's not a whole lot more I could have reasonably wanted out of the transition since this is as unprecedented as it is, so none of my suggestions here are criticisms as much as they are ideas for if/when this happens again. Given the circumstances y'all did a bang-up job.

- I just wanted to take the time and say that I really appreciate all the long hours our administrators and faculty put in to make this the best possible transition and learning experience for us. It didn't go unnoticed and I am truly thankful.

Student Perceptions: Need for More Instructional Support for Faculty

Though many students expressed appreciation for faculty efforts in response to unanticipated conditions caused by the pandemic, the unevenness of experiences across courses suggested to many that more uniform instructional support for faculty members would have been helpful.

- I think the most important change would be to provide instructors with best-practices or training. There was a dramatic difference between the effectiveness of the best and worst instructors, much more so than with in-person classes.

- I believe that this pandemic taught us one thing (among others): we ALL need to be equipped and trained to take online courses, students included. I'm extremely grateful that the university was always honest and open about changes, but I do believe that we can prepare better if this is to happen again.

- All teachers should be trained in using technology as supplemental to student learning. It is not right that we as students are expected to know so much, yet teachers for college level courses are inexperienced with ICON, UICapture, Zoom, etc. One of my courses basically ended when we went online because the professor had no idea how to put everything online. I am disappointed that I missed out on the course material for a class I was really excited about.

- One of my professors handled the transition seamlessly. One really had no idea how to navigate around Zoom and could have used training to help the transition. The third handled the transition fairly well, but 2.5 hours of discussion only was tiring every week, so break-outs could have helped. Moving forward, professors will need additional supports in how to differentiate instructional strategies with Zoom, how to use various features to enrich learning experiences, and how to juggle 2.5 hour classes with incorporating a break or different activities.

Going Forward

Throughout these themes, a few observations stand out:

For students, there is no substitute for meaningful engagement with faculty. It's clear in their responses that students highly value interacting with faculty and knowing that their questions and concerns are being heard. Students greatly appreciate input from faculty to guide their learning and to help them assess how well they have understood the course material.

Good instructional practices for in-person classes are also important in virtual instruction. Faculty efforts to directly engage with students, communicate clear expectations, and respond to student concerns were highly valued by students.

Non-academic challenges faced by students (such as quality of internet access, home conditions, and work schedules) play a significant role in student ability to meet academic responsibilities.

Students understood that conditions were far from ideal, and they recognized that some challenges were due to the suddenness of the transition. It is unclear how these expectations might be different in future semesters when faculty members have had more advance notice to plan classes and adapt them as needed for virtual instruction.

Resources

Upcoming events offered by the Office of Teaching, Learning, and Technology: https://teach.its.uiowa.edu/events/upcoming

From Pandemic to Planned: https://teach.uiowa.edu/pandemic-to-planned
A collaborative effort of Distance and Online Education and the Office of Teaching, Learning, and Technology

Faculty Collaboration: Departments that held regularly scheduled teaching-focused faculty meetings during the second half of Spring 2020 found them to be a valuable opportunity for faculty to exchange ideas and problem-solve together on the challenges of adapting to virtual instruction.

This project was initiated by the ACE Task Force, with the goal of helping the improve teaching and learning throughout the university. For more information about the Task Force, contact co-chairs Annette Beck, Director of Operational Services for University College, or Ken Brown, Associate Dean for Tippie College of Business.

The ACE Supplement Survey was sponsored by the Provost's Office and managed by the Office of Assessment.