

# Preliminary Findings on Undergraduate Experiences Related to COVID-19

## Introduction

This report provides a preliminary overview of UCLA undergraduate perspectives on the COVID-19 crisis and the shift to online instruction beginning at the end of Winter quarter 2020. Data analyzed in this report come from *early responses* to the 2020 University of California Undergraduate Experience Survey (UCUES)—the set of questions specifically added to the survey to assess experiences related to the COVID-19 pandemic. UCUES was administered online to 30,535 UCLA undergraduates beginning in April 2020; the current data represent responses that had been received by May 4, 2020, the first seven days of the administration. Though survey administration is ongoing, given the urgency of university and departmental needs, preliminary data is being shared in order to aid administrative decision-making.

Open-ended responses to the following items are presented in this report: *Is there anything else you would like to tell us about your experience during the COVID-19 pandemic?* (431 responses), *Please tell us about any positive experiences you have had or benefits you perceive from remote instruction and/or service/program delivery (e.g., useful technology, access to instructor or TA, remote advising, telehealth options)* (533 responses), and *Please share any additional comments (health, family, friendships, child care, new connections/interactions) about your remote learning experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic* (275 responses). Due to similarities in responses across items, the themes below represent responses to all three of the items together.

## Findings

When asked if there was anything students would like to share about the effect of COVID-19, or any comments on the remote learning experience, the following themes emerged:

### Mental, Emotional, and Physical Well-Being

Forty-one students reported increased **stress** levels overall, with an additional 12 reporting that stress was an effect of remote learning. Another 45 respondents reported detrimental effects to their **mental health**. A number of these respondents reported feeling panicked or anxious. Some students with existing mental health issues also reported difficulty accessing the services they needed during the especially challenging time:

“It’s really affected my mental health. My anxiety and panic attacks have increased dramatically and all of my health care providers are in LA when I am in NorCal.”

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Many students' answers, such as the one below, reflected the fact that their studies, while already more stressful, were taking a back seat to even more stressful situations in their lives.

"I work at Costco, so I have to be around people all the time in a hectic, chaotic manner. It has been very stressful because we have to not only keep ourselves safe, but force it onto others because our members do not follow protocols. It is hard to meet these demands of trying to keep up and work fast paced when in a hot mask, making it harder to take a good breath. It is like working out with a face mask on. School has just been another stressor to add onto this."

A few respondents noted physical health challenges: two reported that, as of early May, they had been diagnosed with COVID-19. Some others reported negative physical effects stemming from staying at home and learning via remote instruction, as described below.

"Online instruction has been incredibly difficult for me because I suffer from chronic migraines, so the screen time involved and restrictions on daily activities have led my migraines to get significantly worse. Also, I can't go home because all of my siblings also decided to go home, so there is not enough room for me to stay with either of my parents."

## Difficulties at Home

Twenty-nine students reported needing to take on additional **family responsibilities**; 27 also reported this issue as an effect of remote instruction. Family responsibilities included the care of younger siblings while parents worked, or trying to find additional paid work to replace lost family wages. These responsibilities often cut into their study time, added stress, and made resources or space less available to them.

Many students home with family found it difficult to **find a place to attend class or study** (32 cited this as an overall COVID effect, and 49 cited it as a remote learning effect). Some, for example, reported needing to share a computer with several siblings; lack of resources (computers, printers, library access, and other campus resources) was also an issue for several respondents. Others complained about online exam software being difficult or impossible to use with other family members walking into the frame or making background noise; for example, during oral language exams. Examples of the difficulties students faced at home can be seen below.

"I moved back home and now have to make sure my younger siblings are getting the education they deserve. I have to make sure they are learning as well as staying up to date with all of my assignments. I also have to help pay the rent and get money, so that we can buy groceries. My home also does not have access to stable internet. I have been using my phone to call into classes, but I need my laptop to access online programs such as ArcGIS. We can't afford to get better internet and pay monthly."

"I am falling behind in all of my classes. Being at home has meant that I have no quiet space to do classes or study. I have two small nieces to take care of and a disabled blind father. It's very difficult to manage mental health, family responsibilities, work, and school. With no access to

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the school's library, it makes it very difficult to focus on classwork. I am very scared I will not pass my classes and not complete my major requirements.”

“Now that many students are home, many of us have greater familial responsibilities, such as taking care of our siblings and other family members, as our parents continue working during this pandemic. I would also like to highlight how much undocumented folks have been affected. My mother is a single, undocumented worker who has been temporarily laid off. I was also a work-study student working on campus in order to help with my living expenses and academic needs. Now that I have also been temporarily laid off until further notice, I also do not have access to my wages, which my family and I urgently need right now.”

“It's been really hard taking zoom calls and doing work when I live with 5 other family members in a 3 bedroom house and we all share our kitchen table to study. Teachers have shown me that they do not really understand how much work they are assigning and it is very overwhelming.”

Students also reported difficulty **focusing**, whether due to their study environment or simply added overall stress. They felt that learning in isolation required a higher level of **self-motivation**, which they found difficult to maintain.

## Academic Challenges

Thirty-seven respondents overall felt that the **quality of online learning** compared unfavorably to in-person instruction.

“While teachers are doing their best to teach using online tools, the quality of education I am receiving remotely is nowhere near the quality of on campus learning. The fact that we are still being charged the same amount of tuition is absolutely unbelievable to me. I know that the university has to support itself in some way, but I also know that it has large reserves of money, and that to students it seems extremely obvious that we should be paying less because we are now receiving an entirely different education than the one we signed up for.”

Many respondents complained that **professors were not understanding** and appeared to assume that students' lives were continuing as normal, or with fewer obligations. While some stated this more generally, other responses fell into two specific categories: an **increase in workload** (mentioned by 44 respondents) and an increase in **exam difficulty** (mentioned by 17 respondents). Students reported that a number of professors had increased assignments and the hours of lecture students were required to watch on the assumption that they had more time to work. Students also felt that professors had increased the difficulty of exams, speculating that this was in response to presumed cheating.

“It's week 5 and one of my syllabuses is still changing so things that aren't due for weeks have become due the next day and vice versa. Some professors are creating MORE work and MORE lectures because ‘we have nothing better to do.’”

“I have found that professors have made exams harder in order to compensate for use of notes/internet. However, I feel that this is not useful for student learning. Not only are exams taking much longer than what it should be (taking 7 hours for a max 3 hour exam) but it also

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establishes with students that they shouldn't bother studying since the only way to do well is to access notes + internet.”

Several, like the student whose response is seen below, also complained about the rigidity of the timing of online exams, which took them longer to complete but allowed for no flexibility due to technical difficulties. These complaints were not necessarily directed at the professors themselves, but require professor awareness in order to be addressed.

“Timed online exams have especially got on my nerves these days since there has been a lot of miscommunication from the professors and technical difficulties which makes it harder for students to accommodate some professor's strict time policy (i.e. if your submission is 1 minute late, they will not grade it). I do agree that late tests should not be accepted, but considering this special situation, they have to provide some flexibility. For example, changing one simple answer on a pdf file would take additional time than changing it on a physical paper since you have to re-upload your test.”

A few students, however, thanked their professors for being understanding; these positive responses will be further analyzed below in this report.

In addition to the challenges listed above, some respondents did not have **laptops or reliable internet**. Furthermore, others complained that their learning was affected not by their own technology, but by their professors' (and professors' proficiency with, and willingness to learn, new technologies). Without uniform access to reliable technology, many students felt they were not able to complete work or exams.

“UCLA is not an accessible place for all. Online methods such as Respondus Browser requires all students to have a certain type of laptop. It doesn't work on Chromebooks which is the type I have, so I had to stress during my finals and ask my neighbors, who we're not supposed to be interacting with, if I could borrow their electronics. This is just one example of how there is an assumed level of wealth for all students, and if you're not in it you are left behind without any help or mention from the university. I am lucky to have a laptop at all, and know there are students in worse situations than I.”

An additional obstacle for a number of students was the difference in **time zones**. Students who moved home to other time zones had difficulty attending synchronous lectures and taking exams at assigned times.

A serious concern for a number of students was the loss of **research** opportunities. Many worried they were losing ground in terms of gaining experience that would help them learn more about their fields and find future internships and jobs. As one student wrote,

“I am a second year Psych undergraduate. I have been involving myself in the field since my Winter quarter of my freshman year. On campus I held a volunteer position at the [campus department]. I was also recently accepted into the Applied Developmental Psychology minor for

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the Spring and summer cohort. BOTH of those activities are cancelled and I am no longer able to develop myself professionally.”

Some respondents worried about **grades**, imploring professors and TAs to show leniency in light of the other struggles they were facing. Fourteen students, in particular, wished the university had implemented a mandatory **pass/no pass** system for spring quarter, although some stated they did not want mandatory pass/no pass, as they felt it would hurt their transcripts when applying to graduate or professional schools. Students felt that academic honesty was threatened by taking online exams, and had other worries about the fairness of grading due to different home environments.

“Proctored online tests are horrible. It’s impossible to focus when my family is being loud in the background. I have to constantly check that my internet didn’t drop me from the zoom meeting. People can EASILY cheat. These are just 3 of many reasons why proctored online tests are unfair and cruel. I hope UCLA has the heart to require take home tests for the rest of online class, or at the very least, take home finals. It just makes sense. And if UCLA is worried about losing its “academic integrity”, just remember that Stanford is requiring all exams to be take home.”

Seventeen respondents felt that collaboration and participation had been reduced in an online class format. As one person reported,

“[We] can't make any student interactions or relationships with classmates. Students aren't willing to talk in break out rooms. Lack of social contact takes a toll on the overall experience and I wish the teacher was able to provide a forum or space for students to interact and share contact information, or make a class Facebook page.”

However, as will be noted in a later section of this report, a number of people actually felt that the remote format worked well as students in some classes collaborated well online, sometimes taking the initiative to create the online spaces mentioned in the response above.

Finally, 29 remaining respondents, while not citing specifics, stated **negative feelings towards online classes**. “Online classes have been extremely difficult,” one stated, although the individual did not elaborate as to why. Fifteen others stated that they were missing the “**college experience**” overall. However, a few respondents did state that they had a **positive experience with online instruction** (the next major section will break down these positive experiences in more detail).

## Financial and Professional Worries

**Concerns about finances** made up a large proportion of the total responses. Students worried about their own finances (57 respondents, or 13% of Question 1; plus an additional seven respondents for Question 3), with many sharing that they and/or their family members had lost needed income. Students who worked on campus, in many cases, had lost their jobs (as had students working off-campus jobs). Others expressed frustration over paying rent for apartments that they were not living in.

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“Being an undocumented student means that I cannot apply for unemployment and I do not qualify for a lot of help. My family and I are rationing food and are running low on basic essentials. We do not know how we are going to make it through these tough times and what we will do when it is over. We will not have a job, we are falling behind on payments and therefore accumulating debt, our physical and mental health is declining. I feel really alone, scared and stressed.”

“I have lost my job due to COVID and had to move back home due to my pre-existing health conditions. I still have to pay rent back in Westwood, and the money I made from working helped with that, so now I am scared of all the debt I am going to accumulate.”

The most common sentiment expressed in responses was anger over the amount of **tuition and fees** owed to the school despite the loss of instruction quality and resources. Sixty-seven respondents (16%) in Question 1, and eight (3%) in Question 3 stated that they were upset about paying fees for campus services they were not using (such as the Wooden Center) and paying full tuition for what they felt was an inferior learning experience. Some students expressed confusion and frustration over paying non-resident tuition while learning remotely, suggesting a university response may be necessary to clarify the reasons behind out-of-state tuition costs.

“I think it is completely outrageous that UCLA is making us pay full tuition when campus is not open and half of the tuition is for the library resource or other campus resources! We shouldn’t be forced to pay for things on campus that is not open. Also, online learning is not the same quality of learning as in person learning, so the tuition price should change to reflect this.”

“I think the fact that there is no reduced fee of tuition for out-of-state students makes no sense; there is no way the entirety of tuition out-of-state students are paying is needed to maintain operations if we are online at all for another quarter.”

“We are paying full tuition for online classes and are still being charged with on campus fees although all of the gyms and recreation centers are closed down.”

In addition to their current financial situations, eleven students worried about the upcoming **job market** and the loss of **internship** opportunities as well. Students felt apprehensive about graduating when many organizations in their field were implementing hiring freezes, and underclassmen worried that their future opportunities would be limited by the loss of potential internships during the summer or academic year.

“So many lost internship opportunities, and as someone who is low income and has no career connections, I feel like losing time at UCLA is costing me my ability to get into law school.”

“I was so excited to graduate, start a job, get an apartment, and begin my working life. Now I have no graduation, it is very unlikely that I will get a job, and I will have to move home and essentially undo all of the work I have done in college. I have worked SO hard - double-majoring, working, volunteering, working on research in both of my majors, maintaining a 4.0, being an honors college student. It feels as though all of my hard work was for nothing. I can't get a job. I

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will have no income as soon as school ends. I will have to move home for who knows how long - a year, two years? How long will it be before I can get a job? All of my friends are gone, I did not get to say goodbye. My mom and I struggling financially and are deeply concerned about riding this virus out. COVID-19 ruined every single part of my life. I went from having innumerable things to be excited about to having nothing to be excited about.”

## Social Life and Future Uncertainty

**Uncertainty** about how classes might resume in the future led to worries about **finalizing leases for housing** (as mentioned by 15 respondents), and the future of their class planning (as mentioned by five respondents). Students felt left in the dark as to the possibility of receiving on-campus housing, and those who had already planned to live off-campus were unsure whether to pursue a new lease or not without knowing if they would be required to be present in the fall. Other students wanted to know whether summer and fall instruction would be in person, stating that it would affect their decisions about when to take certain classes. Thirty-one students expressed a wish to return to in-person instruction in the fall, although others worried about their health and safety.

“The pandemic has made it difficult to plan for housing. I live off campus and the lease is generally for a year. However, I don’t know if UCLA will be open in the Fall or at all next year so I don’t know if I should commit to a new lease. Financial aid doesn’t cover the costs of housing for me, so knowing what might happen would save me thousands of dollars.”

“I am mainly concerned about when we will be able to go back into our normal lives. After getting an email about the possibility of a suspension on my housing contract for the 2020-21 academic year, I am even more concerned about my next year of college.”

“I also think we should be hearing more from UCLA about the conversation regarding fall quarter, even if there isn’t much of a decision yet, the students should be kept in the loop.”

Students also missed their friends, their student groups, and other **extracurriculars**. Fifty-one stated that the lack of **social life** was affecting them in their studies. Some noted that it was more difficult to perform academically without their social network providing support.

“All I want is to be able to finish my senior year on campus at UCLA. I am in charge of directing [campus event] next year and want to be able to see the end of my hard-earned college experience become a reality.”

“It’s been very hard working from home. I feel like at school, regardless of how many in person lectures I’m able to attend, I always have a supportive friend network that helps me get through the quarter. Without this network it has been hard to concentrate on classes. My hope is that UCLA is able to open in the fall for the sake of its students. Even in some sort of hybridized classroom experience, I greatly value my in person discussions and would be willing to take any safety precautions necessary to be able to go back to school in the fall.”

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Finally, 29 respondents reacted to UCLA's response during the start of the COVID-19 shutdown. Although 11 responses focused on the negatives – what they felt were empty gestures, or a lack of communication about future plans – more (18) expressed appreciation for what they felt was a positive effort from UCLA under the circumstances. These students acknowledged that administrators were doing the best they could under the circumstances and appreciated feeling seen and heard.

“Adjusting to online learning has been a bit more difficult than I would've imagined but UCLA faculty and staff have done an amazing job at making this experience as smooth as possible.”

## Positive Experiences Surrounding Remote Learning

When asked to provide comments about remote learning (Question 3), responses were overwhelmingly negative (27 positive responses, 221 negative responses, 10 neutral responses, and 17 mixed responses). However, *when asked specifically to list positive aspects of remote learning* (Question 2), 533 students were able to provide answers that reflected positive aspects. These responses fell into two major categories: (1) those that reflected specific actions or experiences that had improved the online experience (in other words, mitigating the negative aspects somewhat), and (2) those that reflected advantages of or preferences toward online learning as opposed to in-person learning.

### Aspects Improving Remote Learning

Seventy-five respondents took the time to praise their professors and TAs, saying that many of their instructors had been **understanding and supportive**, and put in additional effort to make the transition smoother for students. Some also expressed feeling a sense of comfort in realizing that the situation was difficult for everyone and that they were all “in the same boat.”

Some students reported that their professor were adding **extra Q&A time** to class, or incorporating more opportunities for student feedback on the class as the quarter progressed. An additional 10 respondents felt that professors had established **clearer expectations**, learning goals, or administrative policies than they had in the past in response to the shift to remote learning. In addition, 15 respondents noted that professors were making **additional materials** available (such as videos, past lectures, or online resources) in order to aid student understanding.

“The professors I have been taking should be praised for their concern and investment in their students at this time.”

“Instructors are taking significantly more feedback from students.”

“Many professors are posting past lectures along with new videos. Although there is more pressure to get through 2-3 times as much work, there is a benefit to having more access, and more references.”

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Seventeen students cited positive discussion experiences and breakout rooms in online sessions. They felt that breakout rooms allowed for active discussion, and noted that classmates often took initiative to **collaborate** through other online platforms outside of class.

“Classmates are more likely to work together and form GroupMe groups.”

Although respondents elsewhere in the survey complained about increased exam difficulty, a small number (11) reported that their professors were allowing for more time for exams or open-book formats, which they appreciated.

Students appreciated having more **time with family**, whether this was due to an increase in family obligations, or simply spending time together for enjoyment. Some respondents appreciated the increased **comfort** of being able to watch lectures from home.

## Advantages of Remote Learning

Respondents overwhelmingly cited having posted **recorded lectures** as a positive effect of online learning. With 191 responses (36% of Question 2), it was by far the most common response in any of the questions examined; an additional 51 respondents did not mention recorded lectures specifically, but alluded to the increased flexibility remote instruction allowed, as home environments and family responsibilities often demanded that they study or take exams at odd hours. For many, fully recorded lectures (i.e., asynchronous learning) allowed them the needed flexibility while juggling time and resources with family at home. Others simply cited the ability to re-listen to lectures as beneficial to their learning and expressed the desire that more professors post recorded lectures when classes resumed in person.

“Remote instruction allows me to take care of my younger sister.”

“Since sometimes the professor speaks at a high speed, with the class recorded now, I can replay what I did not understand in the first place and take notes carefully.”

Similarly, twelve respondents noted that they were better able to manage their time in a remote format, and three students remarked that they felt they had used the opportunity to create better time management habits for themselves.

“It's easier to stay on track of assignments and it's easier to retain information from lectures. I feel like I'm learning at a better and more structured place, and it feels less stressful.”

One hundred and five respondents found professors to be more available for **office hours** or more communicative through **email**. Many stated it was easier to attend office hours since they did not have to commute to campus specifically to do so, or because asynchronous classes allowed them flexibility.

“Instructor office hours are easier to access now since I no longer have to travel for half an hour to attend them in person.”

“It is more convenient to go to office hours as professors are providing more time outside of class to help.”

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Similarly, 20 students appreciated having online availability for resources such as academic counseling, health care, and career advising, which they felt was more convenient.

Many respondents (66 in this specific question, plus three elsewhere in the survey) enjoyed the lack of **commute**, whether to campus or within campus. Off-campus students had more time in their day due to less travel, and many students felt it was easier for them to get to class and other appointments on time due to not having to travel long distances between buildings on campus. A few additional respondents reported that the extra time allowed them to sleep, study, or even take an additional class.

Forty-four students felt it was easier for them to **participate** or ask questions in the remote learning format, as they felt more comfortable doing so via the typed chat feature in Zoom than by raising their hand to ask a question in an in-person lecture. Students also stated that their “raised hands” (in Zoom) were often more likely to be seen online than in a crowded lecture hall, and that the Zoom format allowed professors to know the names of students who had questions or comments.

“I get nervous to speak up in class so through remote learning I am able to type my questions rather than speak out loud.”

“More interactions [are] possible with fellow students in breakout rooms in Zoom.”

Finally, some respondents appreciated having to learn and adapt to new technologies, suggesting that they felt the new skills and applications they were learning would be of use in the future, and that they appreciated the fact that professors were adapting to the new format and using it to their advantage.

“There’s a lot of useful technology that I’ve gotten to learn about and I’ve actually had a meeting with one of my professors something I had never done before, I talk a lot more during group exercises.”

## Summary and Recommendations for Remote Learning

- Students wanted access to online lectures, even when they were able to attend synchronously.
- Students appreciated when professors were understanding of technical difficulties, accommodating in regards to family situations, and lenient with deadlines.
- When possible, professors should be encouraged to post past lectures or other *optional* supplemental materials, such as lists of scholarly or professional resources compiled by organizations in their field of study. Departments are also encouraged to facilitate collaboration between faculty to provide additional materials to students across the department.
- Provide additional time for questions (in class) or feedback (throughout the quarter).
- Utilize online chat, Zoom breakout rooms, and facilitate methods of student-to-student communication, such as GroupMe.
- In addition to in-class chat functions, professors can further student participation through channels such as online polls or shared Google documents.

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## Overall Recommendations

Based on the above findings, we first recommend the university provide information to students regarding tuition, particularly non-resident tuition. An understanding of why tuition costs have remained at pre-COVID levels may help alleviate student frustration.

Faculty are encouraged to recognize that many undergraduates are facing unanticipated familial and financial difficulties at home. While some students do find themselves with extra time, others have taken on caretaking and work responsibilities to help families, and may be trying to attend class with insufficient resources, space, or internet connection. Many share computers and class time with younger siblings also attending school from home. We recommend faculty continue (or begin) offering accommodations such as relaxed attendance policies, flexible open-book exams, and opportunities for asynchronous learning.

Finally, even once campus operations have returned to normal, we suggest departments consider ways in which they can continue to utilize technology to aid students. Many students felt that having recorded lectures aided their studies. Others noted that they spent more time in office hours and accessing other campus resources due to the flexibility and time savings offered by having remote options. While we are not suggesting all services remain fully remote, additional options for remote appointments may benefit all students, and commuting students in particular.

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