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Jazzlyn Miller

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UAB's "New Normal"

By Jazzlyn Miller

The COVID-19 pandemic has been difficult for everyone. Students, including professional writing students, are no exception. Everyone has had to adjust to the “new normal”, and institutions like UAB are attempting to make that adjustment as comfortable as possible for everyone. However, in this process, it seems that the difficulties of some students are not being totally addressed.

Non-traditional students are, exactly like it sounds, students who do not attend college in the traditional manner. Some are transfer students, who have attended either a community college or four-year university before changing schools to their current university.



Others may be students who chose to live off-campus rather than in dorms like many undergraduate students. Many of those reading this article right now may be non-traditional students, who may feel as though their struggles have been ignored in this transition period.

Non-traditional students from all backgrounds and subjects of study have faced their own unique set of difficulties during the pandemic, that often go unseen. To get more information about how they are being impacted, I interviewed a few classmates who are non-traditional students, to see how they have felt about UAB's adjustment to life during COVID-19. Of course, like any group of people, they all had differing views on some aspects. However, there was a lot of common ground shared by all of the interviewees.

One of the most cited issues during the pandemic was, of course, the difficulty of remote courses. Most of the students I interviewed cited an extreme difficulty in transitioning to courses being held online using technology like Zoom. Despite the seemingly “face-to-face” nature of video meetings, and the fact that they can be more amendable to the schedules of off-campus students, many cited a strong sense of discomfort with taking classes this way. One of my interviewees, Emma Herr, said “most of the time it felt alienating and unsatisfying.” This was a common refrain, many arguing that it made them feel disengaged from their courses, classmates and professors.

This disconnect didn't just take an emotional toll on these students, though that aspect shouldn't be understated. It also caused many students to have difficulties with keeping up with their actual coursework. One student, Andrew Ritchey, discussed difficulties with some kinds of courses being taught remotely. According to him, “[s]ome classes, such as drawing, are just not easy to teach over a camera, and as a result, I didn't learn as well in that class.”

Not only do some subjects just not translate to being taught remotely, many of the interview subjects also cited a requirement of a lot more initiative from students, which can make it really easy to get behind on coursework like readings and homework. This learning disconnect is a serious problem, that could have caused some serious gaps in student's knowledge about the subjects they study.

This can be compounded by another disconnect, between students and their professors. Many students may have problems reaching out to professors about information they didn't understand or confusion they may feel about a topic. This can be even worse when students feel they do not know their professors at all, as in the case of online or remote classes. Since returning to campus, many of these issues have started to change. Since we are all on campus full time again at UAB, there is no need to consider how classes taught over Zoom affect students. All of the students I interview also mentioned that their feelings of engagement increased dramatically after their return to campus. Sonia Datnow, another student, said that to her returning to campus felt exactly like it had pre-pandemic.

However, while the circumstances have largely returned to normal for many students, that does not negate the impact of the problems caused by the pandemic. While a return to campus means an increase in student engagement, a stronger sense of community, much more in-person instruction, and less Zoom classes, that doesn't undo every problem that these students have been facing.

For those that have had difficulties with their coursework caused by remote classes, those gaps in their knowledge remain. If they passed their classes, but still have some concepts and ideas that they don't grasp, this can cause a problem if that knowledge is going to be built upon later. This is especially an issue for many newer college students, who are likely to have been learning the basics of their subjects of study.



There are also likely many non-traditional students returning to campus with no ties to any student organizations, any of their classmates, or to their professors. While they can begin to build those connections now—and my interviewees say that they are—that is still a loss of time in comparison to students who were able to establish those connections before the pandemic, and especially when compared to students who live on campus and have many more opportunities to engage.

Though non-traditional students are typically not the students who people think of first, the issues they face are important to discuss when attempting to address the issues caused by the pandemic. Not only do they face the issues already discussed, but many are returning with increased stressors that make focusing on coursework and returning to campus even more difficult than for traditional students, such as financial difficulties also caused by the pandemic.

In trying to understand the way that the pandemic affected students, it is necessary that we consider non-traditional students, their unique struggles, and the ways that the common issues from the pandemic are compounded for them.