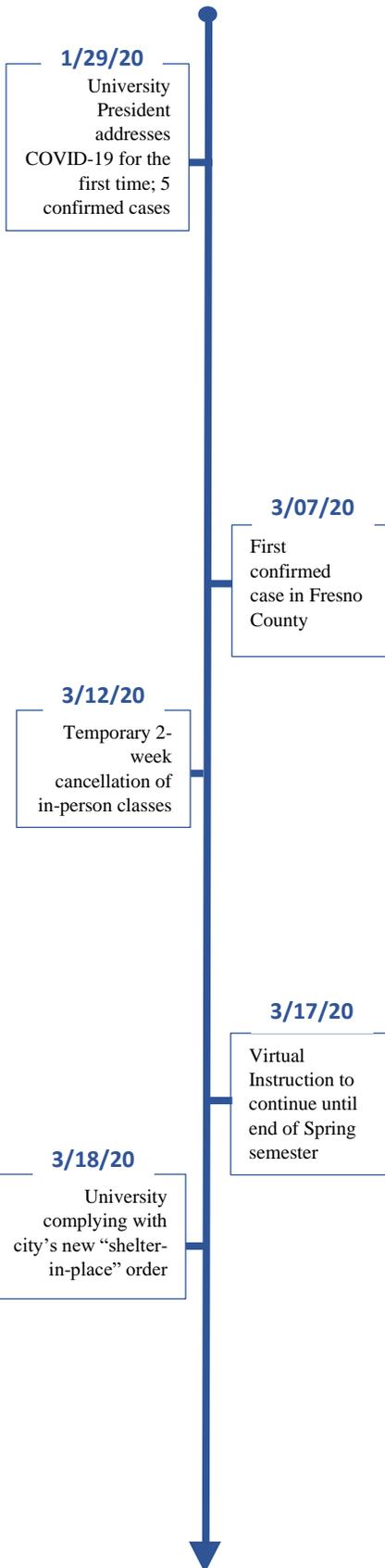


IN THEIR OWN WORDS: STUDENT STORIES FROM THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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May 2021



In March 2020, the coronavirus outbreak (COVID-19) was declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization. The following months ushered in unprecedented change, loss, and disruption for Fresno State’s students, faculty, and staff. During the early stages of the pandemic, the university was required to make substantial changes to its typical daily operations, leaving students to quickly adapt to a new normal. Through a series of virtual interviews and focus groups with students in 2020, we heard 32 students’ stories about being a Fresno State student during the COVID-19 pandemic.

We also recognize that 2020 was a tumultuous year with many historical events that significantly impacted our students and the Fresno community at large, such as the Black Lives Matter movement in June, and state-wide wildfires including the local Creek Fire in September that uprooted many students from their homes. While these events considerably affected many of our students, the focus of this study was to explore our students’ experiences and better understand the impact of living through a global pandemic.

SPRING 2020

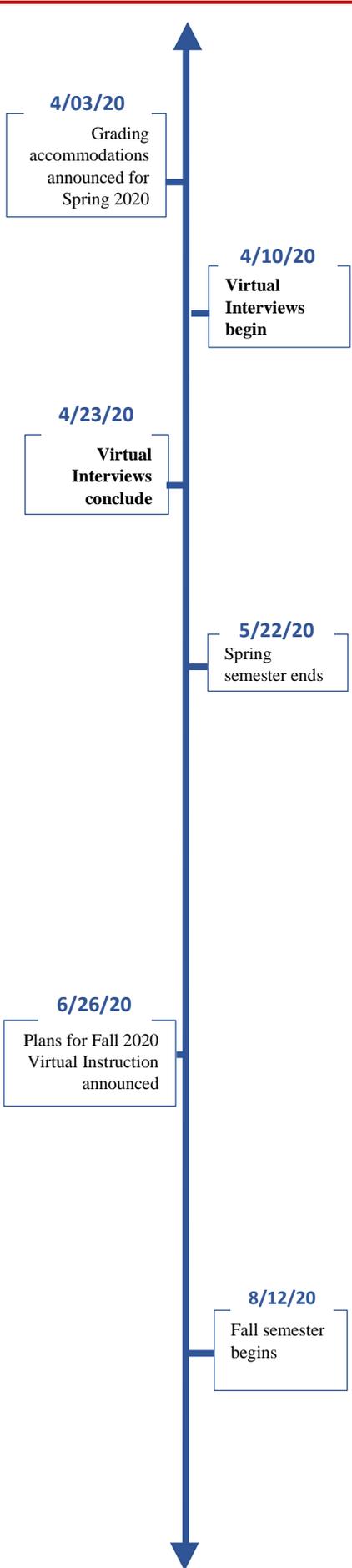
“ I think the thing that was hard for me is that it kind of just happened all of a sudden. I went on a conference trip... and I was on the trip when I got the email that school would be transitioning online. So I didn't know my last day was my last day... I do okay with online school but I think the thing that was hard was the expectations and the trajectory changed so fast. And I know that's not anyone's fault because it's kind of just what happened, but it's been hard... And I worked on campus too and so my job was deemed nonessential. So it's like to not have class, to not have graduation, to not have a job on the same week, it's a lot.”

In Spring 2020, we interviewed 7 students about their experiences with the transition to virtual instruction and the weeks that followed Fresno County’s shelter-in-place orders. Students described the switch from in-person to virtual instruction as happening “so fast.” The COVID-19 pandemic swiftly robbed students of their safety, jobs, opportunities, social connections, and school environment. Students’ learned to quickly adapt to their new reality, but this transition was not without its barriers and struggles.

The initial weeks of virtual learning were filled with confusion and uncertainty as students and faculty adjusted. Students were unsure of the classroom expectations as faculty adapted each class differently. In adjusting to learning virtually, students also had to deal with technical issues (glitchy Zoom lectures, unstable internet connection, lack of zoom training, etc).

“ It's different [having] that interaction online versus having [interactions] in-person because online, you either have technical problems, you're cutting in and out... I feel like some of my peers that usually would be talking and sharing, I see them sharing, but it's not as much as they would when we were in class, so I feel like that's a bit of a downfall.”

In interactions with faculty, students reported mixed experiences during the switch to virtual instruction. Faculty who were more active and involved (e.g., maintaining frequent check-ins and updates on their courses) would help students function well in an online environment. On the other hand, faculty who were slower in adapting their courses and communicating with students exacerbated the difficulties of virtual instruction for students.



“ Even though things develop[ed] so fast, I’m glad they told us as soon as they knew what was happening and didn’t wait. But it’s just with my professors it’s been a little harder. Some of them are really on top of it. And then some of them I’ve basically heard nothing from. ”

Students were satisfied with the communication from the university and appreciated updates on current events and institutional plans about the virtual transition for the following fall semester. While some students were uncertain about the availability of campus resources, other students were grateful for emails regarding resources vital or unique to virtual instruction (e.g., internet hot spots, laptop rentals through the library) as well as continued access to tutoring and Supplemental Instruction in a virtual setting.

“ I felt like, maybe, announcing the hotspots before not closing campus or having a transition to virtual would have been very essential because. Because they had to school virtual, and then they announced that they were giving out hotspots. It's just a matter of-- for me, it's like, "Oh, I have internet at home." But then I didn't take into consideration like, "What if the Internet lags? Or what if I have to travel somewhere?" I didn't take that into consideration. So maybe having these essential items available for us, and then transition us to virtual, that would have been a lot better, in my opinion ”

Overall, as students adjusted to life in a pandemic, they experienced fear and confusion over what the future would bring. Moving into the fall semester, some issues we heard in the spring persisted in the fall and new issues emerged.

“ FALL 2020 ”

Sometimes you just want to get out of your house because you're just stuck on the computer all day. So it's kind of weird because we want to escape school at home. I'd much rather not be in the same place all day. I used to want to escape school. But now, I really just want to escape my house.

As Fresno State continued to operate virtually since the outbreak of the pandemic, students experienced the Fall semester fully online for the first time. In Fall 2020, we spoke with 25 students about their continued virtual learning experiences. From student perspectives, there were both positive and negative aspects that came with learning from home.

On the positive side, virtual learning allowed rooms for creativity in learning from home and connecting with other students (Discord, breakout rooms, group chat, etc.), less commuting, flexibility, and self-paced learning. In interaction with peers, students were willing to exchange contact information and resources with each other. While classroom interactions were limited, a few students were able to make use of virtual events for connecting. At times like this, students expressed gratitude for support from the school, professors, and staff as it helped alleviate their stress and concerns to a certain extent. Furthermore, students found that virtual learning was best facilitated when professors showed their empathy, understanding, and flexibility.

“ It's sort of good for some of my professors. I have a professor that I have for marketing. And he's a really good professor. He's always available. And he's not really tech-savvy, but he shows that he's willing to work with students. And I feel like that's really helpful. When I have professors that don't, it's harder for me because I know they don't want to help me virtually. ”

9/10/20

CSU system
announces Spring
2021 will be
virtual

On the other hand, virtual learning took away the irreplaceable in-person learning experiences: classroom engagement, a set schedule, clear expectations, and human interactions. Students struggled as virtual learning came with a heavier workload and challenges to collaborate with peers for group work. Class materials were harder to follow since students received less guidance compared to in-person classrooms, especially when professors were absent or difficult to get a hold of. Students also expressed frustration over technical issues and delay in communication from peers and professors. In particular, Freshmen suffered from virtual learning as they had a harder time adjusting to college workload and scheduling while navigating college from home.

“ I’ve also had trouble with having to teach myself everything. I’m much better in a classroom. And I like to be able to ask my questions right away. And with online some of the teachers, they do their Zooms like they just upload them so you just watch them at your own pace. And that’s kind of difficult because I have questions as I’m watching them.”

9/29/20

Virtual Focus
Groups Begin

The pandemic has taken a toll on students physically and mentally. Physically, students were not able to engage in many in-person activities, attend social events, or make use of the gym/ recreation center due to restrictions related to COVID-19. They also had to share their workspace with other people at home, where it was difficult to carve out a quiet space to concentrate on school. Not all students were able to afford a designated area and reliable devices for virtual learning, which also refrained students from fully dedicating their time and attention to school. As a result, students showed signs of depression, such as feeling isolated, having a hard time keeping up with classes and homework, staying in bed, and wanting to escape home and to be away from the computer. Many students found it hard to motivate themselves to study or complete assignments, even when they had never been the type of student to procrastinate before.

“ Yeah. So I’d say my workspace is kind of the opposite, just far from ideal, because- or I think I mentioned earlier that I was in a really loud house. And so my sister, she’s in school too. And my mom, she’s on online meetings all the time. So half the house I can’t even go to because there’ll just be people yelling in the background all the time. And my room’s kind of small, and that’s about all I have. So it’s kind of-- right now, I’m kind of crunched up on my bed. But I guess that’s about it, really.”

10/29/20

Virtual Focus
Groups
conclude

Overall, as students continued virtual learning from the Spring, their fear and confusion turned into defeat and despair, where students expressed distress and hopelessness about their learning progress and future.

Throughout a historically challenging year, our students have persevered through the challenges the COVID-19 pandemic has presented. In learning how to be a student in a global pandemic, many have experienced struggles with mental health, missing connections with faculty and peers, motivation, troubleshooting technological problems, and sharing physical spaces at home. While there were many challenges, students proved impressively resilient. They showed deep appreciation for their faculty members who went above and beyond to create connections with their students and to Fresno State for providing constant communication during the rapidly changing times.

12/21/20

Fall semester
ends

We urge the campus community to continue to foster connections with our students and provide more opportunities and resources for mental health support as we look towards moving back to an in-person university experience. As much as students expressed gratitude throughout the interviews/ focus groups for having a space to be listened to and understood, we are grateful to the students that allowed us to give voice to their stories in these unprecedented hardships.