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From a Student's Perspective

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COVID JOURNAL: FROM A STUDENT'S PERSPECTIVE

By Abby Maguffee

We began to hear of COVID-19 in the spring of 2020. At that point, it sounded like a distant disease that would not impact us greatly. We were in normal, in-person classes. We didn't wear masks or social distance. Our world still felt like it did before. The coronavirus pandemic greatly impacted our nation's education system at all levels. As a college student, I saw firsthand the strain it put on my demographic socially, educationally, emotionally, spiritually, and physically.

When we began talking about spring break a friend laughingly told me that her biology professor told his classes to take home their books because the situation with COVID was going to escalate quickly. He thought we would not return after spring break. We did not take him seriously at the time, but as spring break progressed we realized that he had done his research. I was sitting in a restaurant with my friend when it hit us that everything was about to change. Her school had decided to shift online, and we assumed Harding would soon follow.

Online classes and in person classes are vastly different in every facet. From the setup of the assignments to the delivery of class content, there are very few similarities between the two types of classes. The shift to online courses made student's academic lives completely different. With these changes there were new barriers to break down. Students faced unreliable internet, family dynamics, and even being able to find a quiet study area.

Unreliable internet made it nearly impossible for some people to continue their education at home. If you cannot connect to your online class, it is unlikely you will pass the class. Public places were typically no longer open to the public so even places such as libraries could not be used as a venue for online education. For students who found a stable internet connection they next had to find a quiet place where they could focus and pay attention. Being at home made this hard because the rest of the household's lives were still going on even during school hours. On top of internet issues and volume levels, the majority of families have multiple students and often parents working from home as well. For some this created yet another barrier: technology. Shared devices had to be allocated to different students at different times.

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Universities made the difficult decision to close their physical campuses. This left thousands of students in the precarious position of not knowing where they would live for the remainder of the semester. For many of us, our lives had been housed in tiny dorm rooms which left us confused and lonely as we searched for new plans. Many students moved back into their parents' homes which unexpectedly and abruptly separated them from their college friends. The transition from seeing your friends daily to not seeing them for months was not an easy one. College students' social lives were turned upside down.

Social distancing rapidly became an everyday word. We were told it was needed, that it was the only way we, as a society, could survive. College students struggled with this, but so did everyone else. As time rolled on, we grew used to staying away. As restrictions eased people were often nervous to leave their homes. However, much to my surprise, we did get to come back to school in-person for the fall 2020 semester. I was so excited to get to see people again, yet I was still nervous that classes were in person. I had not been in situations where I was in a room with so many people at once as we would now be in the classroom.

Harding kept a public record of active cases and quarantines online. Levels of fear grew as the number of cases steadily increased. Vigilant social distancing was rare as it is hard to keep six feet between you and your friends. I went to dinner with my roommate and two of our friends. We sat across from each other so we knew we were not six feet apart. We discussed and acknowledged that this would mean if any of us had COVID we would all have to quarantine, but we decided that if we are going to be on campus we might as well let ourselves see at least a couple of our friends.

The next day one of those friends didn't feel well, got tested, and received a positive result. This meant that the rest of us had to quarantine. I talked to a friend about going to quarantine together at her house, but we decided against it just in case only one of us ended up testing positive. This was a good decision because she did end up testing positive that same day while I, somehow, received a negative result. Even with a negative test, the guidelines still required a quarantine period so I stayed at a family member's home who had already had COVID. Since they all already had antibodies, it was a much less stressful

situation than it would have been to be around other people who had not been exposed.

Individual's identities are made up of a variety of factors, and people regularly identify heavily with their occupation. Although being a student is not a job, per se, many students look at their classes as their work. College students were greatly affected by the overhaul of the education system which was brought on by the coronavirus pandemic.

All types of learning transformed for online access, but hands on learning was especially different online. Courses with lab expectations were forced to adapt. Some professors tried to show themselves doing labs, explaining each process along the way. Others used services that allowed students to "do" the lab as an avatar in a virtual simulation. No matter what type of online component was available, a hands on learning experience is never quite the same online.

Isolation is a powerful thing. It is used as a harsh punishment in prisons because it truly can break you. Having to quarantine had a negative impact on all people, and college students were no exception. Students who live on college campuses usually have to really seek out solitude in order to have any time spent alone so being forced into loneliness was a shock for a lot of us.

The emotional toll of isolation has been huge, but the stresses of living through a pandemic go even further than that. We have to consider everything we choose to do in light of the risks presented. Should I see anyone? Should I take my mask off in certain situations? The list of questions we ask ourselves could go on forever; this is taxing on everyone, but college students are in a unique position since we are generally in a lower risk category. Not having as much to lose as people who are higher risk makes it much more tempting to think about going back to living normally.

The effect of the pandemic on people's spirituality has not been lost on college students. Harding students, specifically, are very spiritual as a whole. The importance of social distancing encouraged many students to disconnect from churches physically. In the same way that online education is not the same as in person, online church is also vastly different from in person worship. Many students felt the spiritual repercussions of the physical divide.

For those who got sick, there were mild to severe physical side effects. Since COVID can manifest itself so variably, some had worse

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cases than others or had symptoms for more extended periods of time. Long COVID is uncommon but still a risk for our age group. A pandemic is in and of itself a very real physical threat. Still, there are other physical consequences beyond just the possibility of contracting coronavirus. Students lost their daily, often walking, commute to classes, which widely led to getting significantly less exercise. We were also encouraged to wear masks to slow the spread, which does not make being active any simpler.

Currently, there is a huge change happening. Scientists have created a vaccine, and nearly everyone in America has access to it for free. COVID fatigue, feeling tired of the restrictions imposed by living in a pandemic, is rampant. In light of this new development, people are realizing that the pandemic could soon be added to the history books and taken out of our daily lives. This will be yet another shift in everyone's lives. College students will face new challenges and barriers to overcoming the traumatic experience of living through a deadly pandemic. Since the vaccine has not fully rolled out, we are not able to measure how the end of the pandemic will shape the future, yet we can look ahead with renewed hope that there is the potential for return to a normal, healthy society for everyone.

The education system and students are affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Students' lives have been changed socially, educationally, and emotionally. Living in a pandemic is really stressful. Some of our classrooms have tiny wooden cubbies to keep people away from each other when there is no room for six feet; this is not at all a normal environment. Everyone is struggling, and it feels like it is getting more socially acceptable to admit that. There are not many people who are doing as well today as they were a year ago, but the fact that we are all in this together has helped us as a society leave more room for grace as we navigate these unprecedented times together.