Chapter 22
Online Education in the Time of COVID—a Political Science Student’s Perspective

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Abstract The abrupt transition of institutions to distance learning in response to the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 has challenged both teaching staff and students, especially in theory-heavy fields such as Political Science, where it can be difficult for students to grasp complex concepts without having face-to-face interaction with faculty. COVID-19 has elucidated a plethora of equity gaps that were already present in higher education, such as caused by some students not having access to the Internet or an electronic device at home. This chapter presents a student’s eye view of online education, particularly in its accelerated expansion in response to COVID.

22.1 Introduction

The rapid transition to distance learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic was a sudden change that left many university teaching staff and students feeling overwhelmed and unprepared. As a graduating senior, I was devastated to find out that my university was making the transition to distance learning for the final quarter of my undergraduate degree. As a student of a theory-heavy course—political science—I was curious to see how this transition to online education would affect my grades, as well as my ability to learn and be productive.

22.2 Online Learning Challenges and Opportunities

Online education is relatively new, and as a result is still evolving. There are many challenges that can inhibit or enhance student success. First and foremost, I live in a relatively rural area, so the Internet connection is not very strong. This made connecting to Zoom meetings relatively difficult, as I would keep losing access and have to re-join in the middle of the meeting. Furthermore, teaching staff
who are not experienced in using online education tools such as the Blackboard Learning Management System and the Zoom teleconferencing system can make online learning unnecessarily stressful. For example, one of the classes that I took last quarter was a basketball class. I was very disappointed that I would be unable to play in person but was excited to see how the teacher adapted what I believed would be a fun course. He emailed us the syllabus during week two of the quarter, and it outlined five assignments from which our grade would be based. However, there were no due dates, prompts, or guidelines. He was nearly impossible to reach via email, and the next time we heard from him was during finals week.

Another drawback to distance learning is that some teaching staff assigned significantly more work than usual to students in order to compensate for not being able to meet in person. I was fortunate enough to only have one teacher who did so, but peers of mine who had multiple teachers assign more work than normal had to dedicate nearly twice the amount of time to their education than they did when classes were in person. This only added to the stress that everyone was feeling and did not lead to a better understanding of the material.

As an online student, I found that synchronous classes and teaching staff setting aside designated hours for students to ask questions facilitated a more successful online learning environment, as students had a designated time to ask any questions that arose from the readings and assignments. Furthermore, synchronous online education components help keep online students motivated, particularly when they are isolated as this allows them to interact with individuals outside of their home. Additionally, university administrators need to do their part to ensure that all students have access to the online resources that they need to be successful online learners.

While there are many drawbacks to online education, there are also benefits. I am someone who is very involved on campus, and often felt overwhelmed running from meetings to class to work while on campus. One of the benefits of distance learning is that all but one of my classes were asynchronous, meaning that I could complete the assignments in my own time. This made my schedule feel much less hectic, as I had time in between obligations that I did not have when classes were in person. However, there are still individual challenges that students must overcome when learning in an online environment.

22.3 Online Political Science Learning Challenges and Opportunities

Political science is a subject rooted in analyzing and writing. Often times, especially in subfields such as political theory which examine the work of various philosophers and their impact on forms of government, the texts use archaic language which makes the material more difficult to digest. As a result, the majority of class time is typically spent trying to discern the main ideas of the text and how they are applicable to modern society. I took one of these courses, Classical Political Thought, this past
quarter and it was very difficult to learn during Zoom lectures. The unique element of distance learning is that the student has to be autonomous and invested in their education. They must be willing to set aside extra time to essentially teach themselves materials, since teaching staff may not be available after a lecture or during office hours. While this is fine in courses that are relatively simple, it creates a significant problem in classes such as advanced mathematics or philosophy, in which the student cannot read the book and fully understand the material by themselves. This is one of many potential drawbacks to distance learning.

### 22.4 Online Education in the Time of COVID Challenges and Opportunities

A personal challenge that I had to overcome in my online learning was staying motivated during the COVID pandemic. The year 2020, thus far has been packed with challenging international events, such as the USA almost going to war with Iran, the fires in Australia, and then the global COVID pandemic; it has been anxiety-inducing to say that the least. Couple that stress with trying to adjust to working from home, in an environment packed with distractions, and it can be extremely difficult to stay motivated. Furthermore, the inability to go to the gym, see friends, etc., contributed to this lack of motivation. I am someone who thrives on human interaction, and the ability to see my classmates and teaching staff throughout the week, as well as other students in the library, inspired me to be productive. Additionally, I am most productive in social environments such as coffee shops. That was impossible in the wake of COVID-19, and I found myself lacking a productive workspace and the motivation to stay on top of my coursework.

While many people believed that distance learning is the same as online education prior to COVID-19, I did not find this to be the case. I had taken online courses before, and there are many disparities between online education in a time of normalcy and online education in the time of COVID-19. The most notable difference that I found is that teaching staff who teach online regularly are familiar with programs such as Zoom and Blackboard. Furthermore, their syllabi tend to be structured with clear expectations for the term. I found that some professors are not at all familiar with these programs, and therefore the course in and of itself was difficult due to a lack of structure and organization. For example, some teaching staff were unable to effectively lead lectures because they did not know how to use Zoom properly or would send out their course syllabus with no due dates or criteria for evaluation. This was particularly frustrating as a student, because the majority of class time was spent trying to figure out how to use certain platforms rather than discussing the course materials. However, these are issues that can be easily resolved with time and resources investment from university administration and faculty.
22.5 Reflections and Recommendations

Universities that have announced that their next semesters will be taught online can take steps to ensure online student success. Back in March 2020, when the switch to distance learning was made, faculty only had days to prepare for the transition. However, faculties now have a much longer time to prepare to teach online, therefore, there should be no issues with online teaching staff using platforms such as Blackboard and Zoom. Another component of distance learning that should be reassessed is the workload given to students who are participating in online education. These can be stressful, and assigning an excessive amount of assignments to students to compensate for courses being taught online is not conducive to achieving a productive and enjoyable learning environment.

There are many steps that the university administration and faculty members can take to ensure student success in the distance learning environment. First and foremost, clear expectations are essential. Syllabi that outline criteria for evaluation and deadlines for assignments will prevent unnecessary stress for students. Additionally, teaching staff should designate a couple of hours a week to being accessible for students via Zoom. While responding to student emails is helpful, there truly is no substitute for a verbal explanation of a concept in which a student can ask questions as they arise. Lastly, the university administration must ensure that students have access to all of the resources that they need to be successful, such as Internet and an appropriate electronic device, in order to ensure that the already present equity gap in higher education does not worsen. All in all, while distance learning is not always ideal in the time of COVID there are many steps that can be taken to ensure that students are still learning well.

Ciera Hammond is a Ph.D. student at the University of Michigan studying Political Science. Her subfields are American Politics and Methodology, and she plans to specialize in U.S. elections and political psychology. Ciara hopes to become a university professor after completing her Ph.D.