A Sudden Transition to Online Learning: The Student Perspective

Contents

Executive Summary

Key Data Points

Transitioning to Online Learning

Key Themes

Student Perspectives

Looking Ahead

About Marketing EDGE & Contact
A Sudden Transition to Online Learning: The Student Perspective

Executive Summary

In April 2020, Marketing EDGE surveyed 554 students from 135 colleges and universities across the United States to better understand how they are being affected by the disruptions to education caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. 169 of the 554 students sent the survey responded, a 30.5% response rate.

The purpose of the survey was to explore three separate issues:

1. The sudden transition to online learning;
2. Changes in internship/job prospects; and
3. Interest in participating in Marketing EDGE virtual programs.

This report focuses on the sudden transition to online learning. Specifically, we were interested in hearing students describe in their own words their experience of the swift and sudden change from in-person classes to online instruction.

Delivery of education at a distance is not new, but its current scale is unprecedented. Add to this the persistent threat of a worldwide pandemic and it should be no surprise that both students and their professors have struggled to make the best of a chaotic situation.

We found lessons that can be applied to supporting the online education of students in the future. And that future may be sooner than we think as there is a great deal of uncertainty of how and where the fall semester will take place.

While each student shared their own unique experience, there were recurring themes that can apply to a greater population and provide professors a path for improving the students’ experience of online education.
A Sudden Transition to Online Learning: The Student Perspective

**Key Data Points: Colleges & Universities**

Respondents came from a total of 81 colleges and universities located in 27 states.

- Arizona State University
- Ball State University
- Baruch College
- Bronx Community College
- California Lutheran University
- California State University, Fresno
- Christopher Newport University
- Concordia University Chicago
- Dartmouth College
- DePaul University
- Drexel University
- Elon University
- Essex County College
- Fashion Institute of Technology
- Florida State University
- Fordham University
- Georgia State University
- Gettysburg College
- Howard University
- Hunter College
- Illinois State University
- Iona College
- Ithaca College
- James Madison University
- Kean University
- Lafayette College
- Lehigh University
- Lewis & Clark College
- Lindenwood University
- Loyola University Chicago
- Michigan State University
- Montclair State University
- New York Institute of Technology
- Northeastern University
- Nyack College
- Quinnipiac University
- Rutgers University
- Saint Peter's University
- San Diego State University
- San Jose State University
- Seton Hall University
- Southeastern Louisiana University
- Southern Methodist University
- Southwestern University
- St. Edward's University
- St. John's University
- Stevens Institute of Technology
- Stevenson University
- SUNY College at Old Westbury
- SUNY New Paltz
- Swarthmore College
- Syracuse University
- Texas Christian University
- The College of New Jersey
- The George Washington University
- The Ohio State University
- The University of Texas at Dallas
- Trine University
- Union College
- University of Arizona
- University of California, Irvine
- University of California, Santa Barbara
- University of Connecticut
- University of Delaware
- University of Georgia
- University of Houston
- University of Illinois at Chicago
- University of Maryland
- University of Minnesota - Twin Cities
- University of New Haven
- University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
- University of North Texas
- University of Richmond
- University of Rochester
- University of Virginia
- University of Wisconsin-Madison
- University of Nevada Las Vegas
- Vassar College
- Villanova University
- Virginia Tech
- Winston-Salem State University
A Sudden Transition to Online Learning: The Student Perspective

Key Data Points: Colleges & Universities

Type of Institution

- Private: 52%
- Public: 48%

School Size (based on undergraduate enrollment)

- Large >15,000: 27%
- Medium 5,000-15,000: 38%
- Small <5,000: 35%

Key Data Points: Respondents

Gender

- Female: 87%
- Male: 13%

Graduation Year

- 2020: 36%
- 2021: 35%
- 2022: 18%
- 2023: 11%

First-Generation College Student

- Non First-Gen: 28%
- First-Gen: 69%
- No Response: 3%

Ethnicity

- White: 18%
- Asian: 16%
- Black or African American: 14%
- Hispanic or Latino: 4%
- Two or more races: 1%
- I do not wish to self-identify: 1%
- Pacific Islander: 0%
A Sudden Transition to Online Learning: The Student Perspective

Transitioning to Online Learning

When asked about their transition to online learning, 6% of students surveyed reported that the transition has been easy, with little to no issues focusing on their studies at home, learning remotely, or accessing technology. These students also reported that their professors were able to easily transition their class to an online environment.

71% of students described the transition as okay. They reported experiencing a few hiccups along the way, with technology and lessons that were unclear or difficult to complete in the new online environment.

23% of students said that their transition to online learning has been challenging. They reported having many issues focusing on studies at home, trouble with their technology, and difficulty learning in a remote setting. These students reported that some of their professors struggled with transitioning their classes online, noting that some professors seemed to give up on engaging the class beyond posting assignments.

Most students and academics transitioned to online learning with little or no difficulty. Nevertheless, it is essential to provide concrete support to those students and professors who struggled so that quality education can be provided to all.

Overall Experience

- Easy: 6%
- Okay: 71%
- Difficult: 23%
Key Themes*

When asked to share the details of the transition from in-person to online classes, several key themes emerged. Not surprisingly, students’ struggles ranged from the personal to the technical.

**Distractions & Lack of Motivation**
- 41%

**Home Environment**
- 35%

**Learning & Teaching**
- 27%

**Technology Issues**
- 20%

**Workload**
- 14%

**Family**
- 10%

**Mental & Emotional Health**
- 8%

**Increased Responsibilities**
- 7%

**Internships & Jobs**
- 5%

* Several students reported multiple issues.
Distractions are high and motivation is low. 41% of students reported that they were struggling to focus on schoolwork due to increased distractions in their home environment. They commented on being consumed with the current news cycle; being concerned with the well-being of their family; and an inability to change their environment to one more conducive to studying.

In their own words:

“The biggest challenges that I face comes from focusing on schoolwork when so much is going on in the world around me.”

“My environment has changed drastically along with my circumstances. It is difficult to complete assignments as if I’m living in normal conditions. My family’s health is constantly at risk; I am not focused at all.”

“Social distancing has made it extremely hard. It’s difficult to focus or be motivated to complete the work when I’m stuck at home. If it weren’t for the pandemic, I would have occasionally changed my environment by going to the library, coffee shop, park, etc.”

“I have had a lot of trouble trying to motivate myself to keep up with readings and lectures like I did while at school. There are a lot of distractions at home where I can’t escape to a library like at school.”

“There’s a lack of student morale and engagement in classes which makes it hard for me to motivate myself to do work.”

“I have had a lot of difficulty maintaining engagement and motivation levels. It’s hard to keep track of assignments and put the same amount of effort into academics as when classes were held in person.”
35% of students commented that their living situations are affecting their ability to learn. They report struggling to balance the expectations that come with living at home and the demands of their studies.

**In their own words:**

“I’ve been really struggling because I can’t get work done at home with all my siblings home and my parents working from home too. It is a full house and it is tough to be productive!”

“I enjoy being at home with my family, but some of my professors believe that being at home means I have more time—which is not true—and they are assigning more work. I am still working 20 hours a week remotely for an internship, and it has been difficult to manage since my professors have increased my academic workload.”

“It’s been a bumpy road trying to handle at home responsibilities and focusing on my work. Structuring my days takes a learning curve, especially since my motivation has consisted of ups and downs.”
27% of students reported that the transition to online classes has made many aspects of learning more difficult. They specifically noted that some professors had changed their teaching strategy and that those changes did not translate to the virtual classroom. Several respondents reported feeling as if they had to teach themselves the material.

In their own words:

“Garnering motivation and keeping on top of deliverables has been difficult with the lack of structure. I have had to self-learn most of the information for my courses, due to the combined effect of the limitations of the online learning platform as well as my professors’ poorly handled transition to online teaching.”

“The format of online learning is up to each professor. As a result, all classes have adapted in different ways. For example, all live virtual lectures, all pre-recorded lectures, a mix of the two, or no lectures. It’s been difficult to stay on top of all these formats, especially when the rigor of coursework does not change.”

“I feel like my education is being severely negatively impacted. Everyone is confused, professors are struggling with the transition, and I feel like I am either teaching myself everything when I do have work, or not learning anything at all.”

“It has been an adjustment, and a lot of the work is being done without learning. Many of my professors have given up on lectures and just assign work so we are pretty much teaching ourselves.”

“It’s been harder to focus and get assignments done because I am very much a hands-on physical learner.”
20% of students struggled with some aspect of the technology supporting their online education. The most frequent complaints centered on: (1) access to stable Wi-Fi and (2) their professors’ inability to use online teaching platforms.

In their own words:

“I am someone who learns better when being in a classroom setting. It is difficult to concentrate when internet connection slows down, or the professor has a difficult time handling technology (volume, clarity, etc.).”

“My house’s Wi-Fi is extremely weak, so it’s been hard to get homework done, especially with three other students sharing the Wi-Fi.”

“I have a few professors who struggle with technology and even before COVID-19 they had us complete everything on paper so that has been difficult as they learn the online platform.”

“It’s difficult to remain engaged with prerecorded lectures, learning how to use new technology to have the few live classes professors and students alike, changes in syllabus that alter the class dynamic and grading.”
14% of students commented on a perceived increase in their class workload. Specifically, they said that their professors made changes to syllabi like increasing the amount of readings, homework, quizzes, etc.

**In their own words:**

“I feel like more work is being assigned and I'm getting so much less face time with my professors. I'm really teaching myself everything.”

“I have had some teachers who give us more work since we are learning from home.”

“Some professors have been giving extreme amounts of workload to make up for time lost and to substitute other assignments that we needed to do on campus.”

“My professors are assigning lots of reading to compensate for the lack of lectures.”

“Some professors have given more work, which has made it harder due to at-home distractions and responsibilities.”

“Some of my professors believe that being at home means I have more time, which is not true, yet they are assigning more work.”
10% of students reported struggling with a variety of family issues. With the closure of campuses, many students returned home, often to a stressful environment. Some found themselves in close quarters with siblings who are also learning online and parents who are working from home. One student reported struggling with the death of a grandparent due to the pandemic.

In their own words:

“One issue is that I don’t have a space in my home to do my work at without distractions. I live in a two-bedroom apartment with 4 adults and 3 children under the age of 5.”

“I primarily struggle with getting into work mode earlier in the day since I work best in the early evening, but my family values all eating dinner together and that’s also when they want to spend the most time with me.”

“When you are not going home to the best conditions, physically or emotionally, it is very hard to sit down and get 6 classes worth of work done.”

“Since almost everyone is home in my house, except my dad who still works in a factory 3-4 days a week, it is loud. My family always fought before, but it is worse now. It’s super hard to focus on my schooling with that.”

“My home is very loud and crowded. Additionally, my grandmother passed away (we were unable to say goodbye) and many of us are at high risk if we contract COVID-19. Our health, acquiring food, and safety are our first priorities. With that in mind, my education has taken a back seat.”
8% of students surveyed commented on the effect that this transition has had on their physical, mental, and emotional health. They reported missing friends, feeling stressed, depressed, and anxious about the future.

**In their own words:**

“The volume of work has increased exponentially, and it has become difficult to balance my personal interests, mental health and school.”

“Keeping myself on track at home has been very hard. I also really miss my friends and the independence I had at school. Knowing that I’m missing the last part of my senior year has been hard to accept.”

“I've had depression since I was 10 so it is hitting harder now than ever before, especially when reading about the looming Great Depression.”

“My motivation to do my best has significantly decreased since moving online. I’m struggling greatly with a loss of socialization through classes and it is taking a toll on my mental health.”
7% of students mentioned that since moving to online education, they've taken on additional responsibilities. This was often in relation to living at home and having more familial obligations.

In their own words:

“Another factor that makes it difficult is that some of us have families/children who we live with so not only do I have my work cut out for me, I have to help my child complete theirs.”

“It's hard to focus in an environment with so many distractions and other obligations.”

“My transition to online learning has been extremely challenging and difficult. It is hard to focus while having a lot of family issues to take care of.”
5% of students mentioned working at internships and jobs concurrently with online learning. Some students reported struggling to balance virtual internships and online education, while others were dealing with increased stress due to job loss and general uncertainty about future job prospects.

In their own words:

“My environment has changed drastically along with my circumstances. I lost my job due to the pandemic which has also added to my problems. While I understand school is important, it is not the most pressing issue at this time.”

“Not having the space to focus away from my family dynamic as well as needing to move my job online in the process has been challenging.”

“My laptop camera doesn’t work, and I lost my job so I can’t participate in video online classes.”

“I am still working 20 hours a week remotely for an internship, and it has been difficult to manage since my professors have increased my academic workload.”
Looking Ahead

Although the spring semester has now finished, the COVID-19 pandemic will continue to affect large gatherings and there is uncertainty as to what lies ahead, especially for the fall semester.

Already, the California State University system has announced that the majority of their 482,000 students on 23 campuses will have virtual classes in the fall. With other schools likely to follow suit, online learning will continue to loom large on the educational landscape and the issues surrounding it must be faced head on.

The good news is that educators have the experience of what has and has not worked and time to plan their next moves. Teaching is collaborative, and teachers learn from not just their colleagues but also their students. All good teachers will tell you that listening is a powerful tool—when they listen, their students become better learners. So, what are your students telling you?

They want you to:

- **Be present** – Find ways to be present and draw students into your lessons. Communicating often and clearly is an effective way to engage your students.
- **Meet them where they are** – like the rest of the world, students are distracted and worried about their future. Their home environment may be causing additional stress and they have unreliable access to the internet or a computer. Breaking your lessons into smaller chunks, recording shorter videos, explaining complex ideas several times, and checking for knowledge using virtual quizzes will help students who have competing claims on their time. Providing more flexibility on how the work gets done is also important.
- **Master the technology** – There are some amazing tools out there to help you master online teaching. Using these will enable your students to get the most out of their online classes.
- **Be creative** – many of the ideas that work so well in your classroom will not work online and assigning more readings to make up for lack of face-to-face discussions is not always the solution. Your solutions may not always work but your students will appreciate the effort and they may pitch in to provide solutions.
- **Keep them connected** – Online learning can be isolating in normal times; in the middle of a pandemic that isolation can be crippling. Setting up virtual office hours for small groups will provide students an opportunity to interact with you and each other. Structure your class to encourage peer-to-peer connections. While students in the survey struggled with traditional group projects that started in person but had to be completed online, they may adapt to online work groups if provided with more prompts and structure. Remind them that they will likely have to work in remote groups in their future careers and the practice will do them good.
Online Education Resources

Help is closer than you think. Your school may have resources that you have not tapped into, including colleagues who may be more familiar with teaching online. Reach out across departments and disciplines for ideas.

1. 8 Lessons Learned From Teaching Online (Video)
2. Association of College and University Educators Online Teaching Toolkit. ACUE provides both resources and recommendations that can help instructors transition to and/or enhance their online teaching.
3. Faculty Playbook: Delivering High-Quality Instruction Online in Response to Covid-19
4. Merlot. The MERLOT system provides access to curated online learning and support materials and content creation tools, led by an international community of educators, learners, and researchers.
5. National Communication Association: Online Learning Resources. NCA’s Teaching & Learning Council has developed a list of online teaching & learning resources.
6. Rubric for Online Instruction (ROI) is a tool that can be used to create or evaluate the design of a fully online or blended course.
7. teachonline.ca is a resource for post-secondary faculty and to find the latest information on new technology and new developments in online learning, as well as practical tools and resources to help them integrate technology in their teaching in a way that improves the learning experience for their students.
8. Campus Technology: 9 Resources for When Coronavirus Moves Your Course Online
9. 10 Best Practices To Be An Effective Online Teacher
10. Tomorrows Teaching & Learning: Chapter 3 Ten Best Practices for Teaching Online
About Marketing EDGE & Contacts

Headquartered in New York City, Marketing EDGE is a 501(c)(3) that is shaping the future of marketing by connecting students, academics, and professionals to the resources and relationships they need to see, move, and stay ahead. Empowering skill-ready, responsive, and responsible marketing leaders for more than 50 years, Marketing EDGE expands access to leading research resources and events, fosters deep personal connections and diverse ideas, and provides real-time insights for real-world impact.

Our vision is to launch the next generation of diverse and inclusive marketing leaders.

For more information, visit www.marketingEDGE.org/about-us

Terri L. Bartlett | CEO & President
212.790.1510 | TLBartlett@marketingEDGE.org

Marie Adolphe | SVP, Program Development
212.790.1535 | MAdolphe@marketingEDGE.org

Kelsey Farrell | Program Coordinator
212.790.1518 | KFarrell@marketingEDGE.org