

COVID-19 and the College Experience: The Impact of a Global Pandemic at Syracuse University

A Research Report by the W2O Center for Social Commerce at Syracuse University's S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications

Overview

The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted every aspect of our lives. For college students, in particular, the traditional activities that make the on-campus experience so enriching – like attending sports games, student organization meetings, social events and even in-person classes – were no longer possible. Students at Syracuse University (SU), like many other universities across the country, had to quickly adapt to virtual instruction, remote meetings, mandatory social distancing and new health and safety protocols to keep the campus community safe.

Against this backdrop, the W2O Center for Social Commerce (CSC), a leading academic/industry partnership between SU's S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications and W2O – an analytics-oriented, insight-driven, healthcare marketing and communications firm, part of Real Chemistry, a global health innovation company— conducted a signature research study to uncover a deeper understanding of students' attitudes and perceptions regarding their experiences during COVID-19.

The CSC's mission is to prepare students and professors to excel in a digital world through programming, course enhancement, research, internships and professional development.

The intent of this report is to:

- **assess and summarize how SU students are coping with an unprecedented public health crisis**
- **provide considerations for ways the campus community can enhance the student experience as the pandemic continues***
- **share learnings that may help SU and other universities better prepare for future health pandemics, so that students can continue to make the most of their college experience despite challenging circumstances**

**At the time of writing, it has been more than one year since the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a public health pandemic, and safety measures remain in effect as the Spring 2021 semester gets underway.*

Study Methodology and Tactics

The CSC's Student Ambassadors implemented several research methods to collect quantitative and qualitative data. In total, the data collected represents approximately 200 student opinions

capturing various years of study, academic programs, clubs, organizations and living arrangements.

Research methods deployed include:

- **Online survey** (118 total surveys completed)
- **Six in-depth, one-on-one interviews**
- **Three focus groups** with 24 total participants
- **Review of pandemic-related coverage** in *The Daily Orange* (SU's student-run newspaper) and **social media conversation**

All participant input was collected under the condition of anonymity.

Survey Demographics

Year of study

- 15% first-year
- 3% sophomore
- 33% junior
- 45% senior
- 3% graduate student

Living arrangements

- 34% SU-owned housing (i.e., campus dormitories or apartments)
- 59% independent housing near campus
- <1% live at home/with family and attend classes remotely
- 6% other (including Greek life chapter house)

*Schools where major(s)/degree program(s) are housed: **

- 34% S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications
- 3% School of Information Studies (iSchool)
- 17% Martin J. Whitman School of Management
- 7% College of Visual and Performing Arts (VPA)
- 6% David B. Falk College of Sport and Human Dynamics
- 5% College of Engineering and Computer Science
- 16% College of Arts and Sciences
- 10% Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs
- 2% School of Education
- 0.6% Undeclared

- 0.6% College of Law

**Students were able to choose multiple schools to reflect minors, dual degree and combined degree programs.*

*Class Formats**

- 31% Online only
- 7% In-person only
- 15% Asynchronous (students access pre-recorded lectures and digital curriculum materials at a time of their choosing)
- 47% Hybrid

**Students were able to choose multiple class format options to reflect their mix of classes during the Fall 2020 semester.*

Key Findings: Concerns apparent across SU student community

The study uncovered a number of findings and highlighted important issues pivotal to the SU experience. Comparing across years of study, degree programs and interests, researchers found several key concerns.

- **Social distancing guidelines impact mental wellness**
Students experienced screen time fatigue, which contributed to a decrease in mental wellness, while the cold Syracuse winter limited students' ability to spend time outdoors and safely see classmates and friends. Some students also reported they felt less engaged and not as eager to participate in simple activities, like attend class or log on to a club meeting because of the challenging circumstances.
- **Uncertainty exists around whether peers are following safety protocols**
The pressure of upholding safety protocols has proven to be one of the most challenging obstacles for a campus with more than 22,000 students. While many students are doing their part in helping to slow the spread, they felt it was still unlikely they could stay completely safe from others who did not take the same precautions.
- **Utilizing in-person resources and facilities feels risky for campus community**
Due to increased regulations on usage of facilities, students felt they were unable to utilize many of the resources that make the college experience fun and meaningful. While many areas like advising and seminars moved to online meetings, students struggled with the lack of in-person resources, resulting in a majority feeling disconnected.

- **Finding professional opportunities in an unstable job market adds pressure**
Many discussed how COVID-19 has impacted their post-graduate plans and caused a pivot in their goals and expectations of entering the workforce, especially upperclassmen anticipating graduation in the coming months.

The following sections will take a deeper dive into how the pandemic has impacted students across three key areas: **academics, extracurricular activities** and **social experience**.

Academic Experience

Remote learning poses challenges for students to stay motivated and engaged in coursework

During the pandemic, some classes remained in-person with enforced social distancing in the classroom, while others transitioned to virtual format with professors conducting their classes via Zoom.

While the majority of students agreed they are able to easily participate in classes (53%), and meet one-on-one with professors (65%), survey results revealed the challenging learning environment has made it difficult for some students to feel fully engaged in their coursework. For example, half of students surveyed do not feel they are able to learn what they need to know to advance their studies.

Students reported that even their most academically motivated peers were retaining very little from coursework and were not seeing as much value in their classes as they had in previous semesters. The effects of “Zoom fatigue” appear to be taking a toll, as many students expressed the difficulty of staying motivated and paying attention during virtual classes.

Many students also reported a lack of uniformity in the ways in which professors structured their classes. Classes that were more discussion-based could be more easily transitioned to an online learning format, while others – like science labs or design courses, for example – continued to be held in person due to the need for hands-on experiential learning. Several participants in SU’s Education program noted their usual in-person student teaching or tutoring opportunities fell through or were moved to a virtual format, which posed a challenge to getting the experience they needed to feel equipped for their careers.

Uncertainty exists regarding internship and post-grad job opportunities

Beyond their current classwork, participants also discussed the impacts of the pandemic on their internship and entry-level job prospects. While a significant majority of survey respondents (72%) agreed they were able to meet with their academic and career advisors, several interview and focus group participants voiced concerns about longer-term career considerations. A few upperclassmen shared that they are rethinking their internship options and post-grad job search, with many industries in decline and employers on hiring freezes. Some noted they are considering attending graduate school, staying at home with their families

after graduation, or finding a job that “pays the bills” until they have greater clarity on job opportunities and depending when a sense of “normalcy” returns.

	Strongly Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Somewhat Agree	Strongly Agree
My tests/exams are running smoothly	4.2%	17.8%	11.9%	44.1%	22.0%
I am able to easily participate in class	5.9%	29.7%	10.2%	40.7%	13.6%
I have the ability to meet one-on-one with my professors	7.6%	16.1%	10.2%	40.7%	25.4%
I have the ability to partake in group projects	4.2%	17.8%	12.7%	42.4%	22.9%
I have the ability to meet with academic/career advisors	3.4%	11.9%	11.9%	36.4%	36.4%
I am able to learn what I need to know to advance in my studies	11.0%	22.9%	16.1%	39.0%	11.0%

- “Opportunities seemed endless a year ago for professional opportunities and now I feel like I’m scrambling.” - Junior Magazine, News, Digital Journalism student
- “My professors and advisors have all been extremely supportive and understanding, but the general experience of being a student right now is completely awful, confusing and disorganized.” – Sophomore Accounting student
- “I’m losing the chance to make connections, which is a big part of why college is important to my career.” - Junior Policy Studies student
- “I feel isolated and like I am wasting my time. I am not getting out of the online classes a fraction of what I’d get in person and have had no opportunities to get to know my peers.” -Senior Acting student
- “I have studied retail management and supply chain for four years to work in fashion, but with so many companies in distress, I have completely changed my career plans from buying and planning to consulting. I had to completely rethink my path for a stable job and am now moving across the country for this position.” - Senior Supply Chain Management and Retail Management student
- “This year has made me think about how I can adapt what I have learned to do something I don’t hate, adapting passion to something to pay the bills and find an opportunity after graduating.” -Senior Television, Radio, Film student

Extracurricular Experience

Virtual environment is a significant barrier to getting and staying involved in student activities

In a typical semester, students are highly involved in 300+ organizations, which include club sports, a cappella groups, Greek life, multicultural student unions, pre-professional groups and many more activities.

As social distancing policies took effect, clubs and organizations found creative ways to operate meetings and events virtually, but members had a difficult time genuinely connecting with peers and staying motivated and excited about their organizations’ missions and day-to-day activities.

The majority of survey participants (85%) agreed it is has been challenging to feel engaged in extracurricular activities during the pandemic. More than half (52%) of participants indicated they would not know how to get involved in a new organization, which could be particularly challenging for first-year students who may not have established networks of peers on campus and are not familiar with the broad array of extracurricular opportunities.

Further, while most survey participants (89%) agreed they were able to attend meetings virtually, two-thirds (65%) did not agree that they have been able to get to know other members of their organization during the pandemic. This reflects challenges in building and maintaining connections with professors and peers – a significant part of the traditional college experience.

	Strongly Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Somewhat Agree	Strongly Agree
I have the ability to attend meetings in person	33.9%	29.7%	5.1%	22.9%	8.5%
I have the ability to attend meetings virtually	1.7%	5.9%	2.5%	23.7%	66.1%
I have been able to get to know other members in my organization(s) this semester	31.4%	33.9%	11.9%	17.8%	5.1%
It is challenging to feel engaged in my extracurricular activities during the pandemic	3.4%	4.2%	6.8%	21.2%	64.4%
If it were interested in joining a new organization or club, I would know how to learn more and get involved	21.2%	31.4%	17.0%	21.2%	9.3%

- “I feel isolated and unmotivated as a student, and not being on campus has impacted my relationships with student activities, opportunities and resources I had in previous semesters.” -Senior Public Relations and English student
- “I have had such a difficult time keeping track of my commitments and felt confused and disengaged... in a way that I have never experienced.” - Junior Advertising student
- “I'm the head of an 80-person organization for my capstone and it has been terrible getting everything to work the way it should and to make sure everyone is interacting. I have ADHD and can't learn over Zoom.” - Senior Television, Radio, Film student
- “I am struggling because I feel as though my senior year, a year that I have looked forward to for four years, has been torn away from me. Sure, I am able to have fun experiences, but all of the work I've dedicated to my extracurriculars especially has become seemingly pointless.” - Senior Inclusive Elementary, Special Education student

Social Experience

Dynamic of social interactions and friendships significantly impacted by social distancing

Social life everywhere was significantly impacted during the pandemic, and the traditionally vibrant social scene at SU going mostly “on pause” was one of the starkest changes felt by students.

Most survey participants (89%) agreed it has been challenging to have a fulfilling social experience during the pandemic, and only 11% agreed they were able to meet new people on campus.

In particular, underclassmen are struggling to connect with their peers and reported they are only able to make genuine connections with students within their on-campus residential buildings.

Many others, including upperclassmen with established networks on campus, felt their group of friends had shrunk significantly as they formed small social circles, or “bubbles” to prevent the spread of the virus. Participants shared the stress and concerns they experienced regarding holding roommates, friends and significant others accountable for limiting physical contact with those outside their bubbles and setting personal boundaries.

In interviews and focus groups, several students remarked how the isolation and lack of social activities have taken a toll on their mental health, which has been compounded by the overall uncertainty and anxiety of living through an unpredictable health crisis.

- “I am not growing socially or academically. I am losing my drive, focus and passions because I'm sitting in front of a screen all day.” -Junior Television, Radio, Film student

	Strongly Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Somewhat Agree	Strongly Agree
I am able to hang out with friends outside of class	17.0%	28.0%	2.5%	40.7%	11.9%
I am able to eat meals with friends at dining halls and cafes on campus	28.8%	15.3%	28.8%	21.2%	5.9%
I am able to meet new people	54.2%	29.7%	4.2%	10.2%	1.7%
I am able to travel outside of campus on weekends	42.4%	18.6%	7.6%	20.3%	11.0%
I am able to visit a friend's dormitory/apartment/house	23.7%	23.7%	5.9%	37.3%	9.3%
It is challenging to have a fulfilling social experience during the pandemic	3.4%	1.7%	5.9%	17.8%	71.2%

- “This semester has added extra stress to situations and there aren't always coping mechanisms available such as visiting friends or working out.” - Senior Policy Studies and Information Management Technology student
- “Having the opportunity to come to campus was positive but the reality of life as a college student regarding how I learn and my social life is extremely negative.” - Junior Communication Sciences and Disorders student
- “I have a small social bubble that’s been my saving grace, but I miss going out to dinner or going to a party or getting together with more than five people.” – Junior Musical Theater student
- “Everything that brought me joy here still has the potential to bring joy, but I feel like I have to jump over seven hurdles to feel anything anymore. About three of them are necessary, and the other four are because of mismanagement or the kids who go to this school and refuse to stop going to parties. It's a bad time to have a senior year, and while I recognize my privilege in being able to be healthy and financially stable right now, I'm really frustrated at how this is playing out.” - Senior Television, Radio, Film student
- “I kept such a close circle all semester, but individuals in my peripheral circle were not safe, so I ended up getting COVID-19 only a few weeks before heading home for break. I thought to myself, ‘What was it all for anyway?’” – December 2020 graduate
- “I knew it would be hard socially, so my friends and roommates always had daily check-ins and tried to focus on things to look forward to each week.” - Sophomore Public Relations student

Finding Ways to Cope

Students are finding ‘silver linings’ despite challenging circumstances

COVID-19 has up-ended so many aspects of everyday life, and there is no question that the college experience has been considerably compromised. Despite the frustration, stress and uncertainty students feel, there is recognition that the safety measures in place are meant to protect the campus community, and that it is the collective responsibility of the school, students and faculty to work together to prevent the spread of the virus.

Many are finding ways to make the best of a disappointing situation. For example, some participants shared that the need to keep their social circles smaller has brought them closer to friends and roommates than ever before. Others shared that more downtime and less pressure to participate in social events has given them new perspective on their priorities, allowing them to be more introspective and grow on a personal level.

In addition, some participants reported they were taking the opportunity to explore “the hidden gems of Central New York,” such as parks, markets and trails that lend themselves well to outdoor social distancing.

- “The experience on campus taught myself about being an individual, pushing myself out of my comfort zone, which methods work well for learning and being on my own. I genuinely feel more set up for the workforce and the unpredictability that comes with it.” - Junior Marketing student
- “I think this experience has helped me get closer with people I already knew and strengthen those bonds.” -Senior Public Relations student
- “I got to learn so much more about my professors despite being online by seeing a glimpse into their personal lives making them feel less like strangers.” - Junior Public Relations student
- “Taking classes online has been much more comfortable, especially since I consider myself a huge introvert.” -Senior Psychology student

Considerations & Recommendations

As students continue another semester during COVID-19, our research provides several areas for students, professors and school administrators to consider. Although the situation is challenging and constantly evolving, these recommendations may be useful to help the SU community and other schools navigate the current challenges and be better prepared in the future.

1. **Adopt practices to combat “Zoom fatigue”:** Both professors and students are figuring out how to effectively lead and engage in virtual classes. Adopting ground rules like “no multitasking” and setting phones to ‘Do Not Disturb’ mode may help students focus better. Building in several short breaks during class time may also give students a needed respite from a marathon of video classes. Similarly, student organization and

club leaders may consider making some of their meetings audio-only or choose to shift some events to creative formats like live podcasts or live tweet conversations with guests.

2. Ensure transparency and consistency in communications and policy enforcement:

Students understand that rules set in place by the University and New York State are important, but were only effective with joint enforcement from the entire University community, including administrators, faculty, staff and students. Students are eager for more transparency within their institution and more consistent communications. In addition, students said they would like to see more diligent COVID-19 testing and consistent restrictions on students who are not complying. Students found there to be a lack of consistency in the enforcement of rules, which led to confusion and discomfort.

3. Maintain strong connections with advisors and career services: The stress of navigating an unpredictable internship and job market has added another layer to students' anxiety throughout the pandemic. By being proactive about staying connected to academic advisors and career services, students can keep a pulse on what is happening in their desired industry and stay connected to potential opportunities if initial plans fall through. Academic advisors and career services can also support students by continuing to offer one-on-one meetings, FAQ sessions and updates from employers to provide guidance and reassurance as the landscape evolves. Career services can also continue to facilitate connections with alumni to help bridge the gap caused by cancelled internships, a challenging job market and limited networking opportunities.

4. Create a peer support network: Given that the toll on overall wellness and social life was identified as one of the most pervasive challenges, students may consider working with administrators and faculty to bolster existing mental health resources with a grassroots network of peers who can act as a support system. For example, peer network leaders could host virtual check-ins with other students to provide support, lend a listening ear or provide suggestions for how to get involved in extracurricular opportunities. They could also drop-off care packages at students' residences to help lift spirits, or put students in touch with University resources or counselors who can provide professional support if needed.

+++

The effects of COVID-19 have been felt in every corner of our society, including on college campuses. For students, it has been a time of uncertainty, stress and discomfort. Although many students have found strategies to adapt to the unconventional circumstances, our

research shows the broad extent of the challenges faced across the SU community. By working together with peers, friends, faculty and University leadership, students can take steps to stay engaged in their studies, remain involved in campus activities and maintain social connections that are critical to the college experience.

About the W2O Center for Social Commerce

The W2O for Social Commerce (CSC) was formed in 2012 as a partnership between Syracuse University's S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications, a leading academic institution for public relations and communications, and W2O – an analytics-oriented, insight-driven healthcare marketing and communications firm, part of Real Chemistry, a global health innovation company. The CSC was made possible by W2O's CEO/founder Jim Weiss, and his wife, Audra – both Syracuse alumni – and is aimed at ensuring students are immersed and educated in the digital world. The Center develops programming on social commerce, social media, technology, analytics and the influence they each play on our society and industry, providing students with cutting-edge skills and insight that will enable them to stand out amongst their peers as they enter the workforce.