UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA
STUDENTS' UNION

Introduction

The UASU frequently polls students about their interests, needs, and priorities. Recent surveys have focused on the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. Two of these surveys provided insights into students' experiences with the shift to online course delivery.

- SURVEY A: From March 18 to March 20, a few days into the implementation of online delivery, students could opt to take an informal 'exit poll' attached to the UASU Students' Council elections. 655 students completed Survey A.

- SURVEY B: From April 3 to April 10, students took a second informal survey, 'My Quarantined Life,' about how the COVID-19 crisis had affected students' daily lives. 1,586 students completed Survey B.[1]

Students understand the need for the rapid shift to online delivery, and respect and admire their instructors' efforts. In Survey A, 76% of respondents had already seen an instructor try their best and do a good job; another 22% had seen an instructor try their best, even when a class fell apart. When asked if they wanted to name an instructor who'd done an especially good job, they named over 330 unique instructors. However, our 2,200 points of contact highlighted several challenges. To deliver a credible wholly- or partially-online offering in Spring/Summer Term and potentially longer,[2] the University of Alberta will need to address these challenges substantively.

Concerns about the future (Survey A, n=655)

Legend: ■ Very negative ■ Negative ▢ No thoughts ■ Positive ■ Very positive

- How do you feel about your health in the near future?
- How do you feel about the health of your family and friends in the near future?
- How do you feel about your future career?
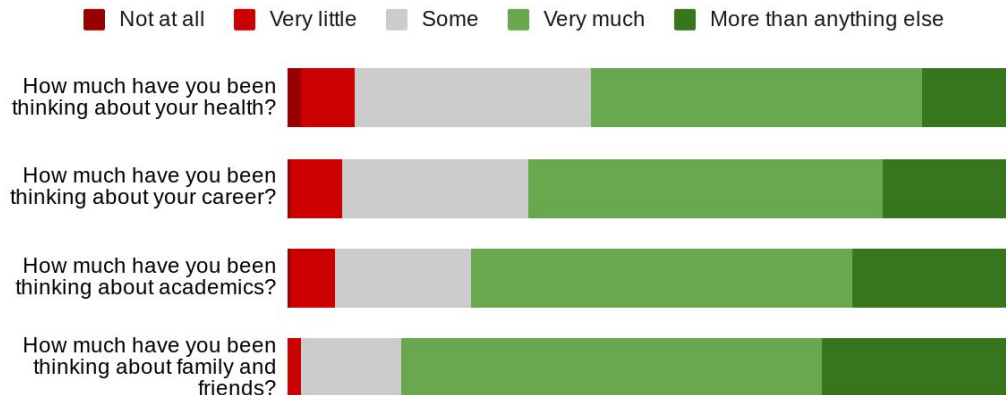- How do you feel about your academic future?

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[1] The Department of Research and Advocacy thanks the UASU IT department for developing and distributing these student surveys through the UASU Perks app.
[2] As of April 23, the Government of Alberta has banned groups of more than 15 people for the foreseeable future.

Survey A is a snapshot of student attitudes during the first days of online delivery, at a high point of COVID-19 anxiety. Nevertheless, students were much more pessimistic about their academic future than about their health and the health of their family and friends.

Preoccupations and priorities (Survey A, n=655)

Legend: Not at all | Very little | Some | Very much | More than anything else

Question	
How much have you been thinking about your health?	
How much have you been thinking about your career?	
How much have you been thinking about academics?	
How much have you been thinking about family and friends?	

In the same time period, academic concerns preoccupied students' attention more than their health or their future career, and almost as much as their family and friends. These concerns and preoccupations speak to the weight that students put on their academics during the early days of the provincial crisis, but also to the challenges they faced while transitioning to online delivery in an uncertain future. To one degree or another, the University will need to address all of these challenges going forward.

Key Themes

1. Fostering group interaction.
2. Balancing structure with accommodation, synchronous with asynchronous.
3. Difficulties 'getting into gear' at home and staying focused.
4. Accessibility, e.g. low-bandwidth course content.
5. Clear and prompt communications and expectations, both from instructors and administration.
6. The value of personal authenticity.
7. Innovation, adaptation, and sincere effort.
8. Home circumstances, the study environment, risk, and precarious housing.
9. The need for high-quality remote support services, both academic and non-academic.

Interaction with Peers

Students in both surveys highlighted a need for group interaction. The social dimension of class participation resonated with students.

- "Most of my classes were largely unaffected by the shift to online distribution. I do miss the group discussions, though."

- "I really want to be seeing people and COVID-19 is preventing that which is making me really sad. As good as texting and online communication is, you don't realize how much you cherish the in-person interaction until it is taken away from you."

- "Never thought I'd miss going to lectures just to see other people!"

- An instructor "made the rest of our readings optional and is letting us focus on our final papers. Lots of interesting discussions are happening in the forums."

Do you think your quarantine experience has been similar to other students'?

Survey B, n=1586

- 🟩 Yeah, I think we're all going through pretty similar stuff right now.
- 🟨 No.   ⬜ I have no idea, I don't really know what it's been like for them.

| 54% | 10% | 36% |
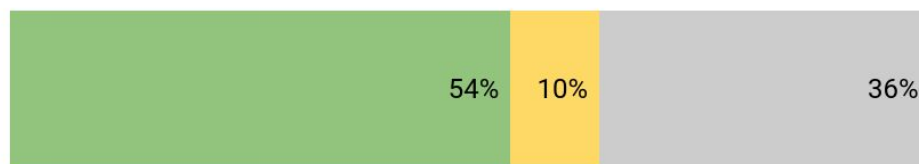
- "It's taking a lot of work to keep my mental health in check because I'm trying to graduate and everything exciting about finishing is cancelled so there's minimal motivation. My psychologist helped a lot."

- An instructor is "doing his best - even made a meme channel on Slack."

THE UASU RECOMMENDS: Emphasize online-delivery practices that connect students with each other in substantive and immediate ways, e.g. shared documents and group chats. Daniel Stanford, a lead instructional designer at DePaul University, classifies

these practices as high-immediacy but low-bandwidth, making them especially accessible for students with poor internet access, as discussed below.

Structure

Many students already struggle to organize their day and stick to a plan. Where one student might find an asynchronous 'watch this video/take this test anytime in the next week' approach beneficial, another might need additional structure or guidance.

- "I'm so anxious. My [relative] is in chemo right now so she's super stressed about it all and my family has all been staying home so it's hard to get away from the stress. <u>I also just wrote a midterm which was super stressful bc it was really uncontrolled which gave me a lot of anxiety</u> bc I didn't feel confident going into it. I'm so stressed that this question made me cry tbh."

45% of respondents "haven't been scheduling anything, mostly because I can't figure out how to make one since I always used to plan around my class schedule." (Survey B, n=1586)
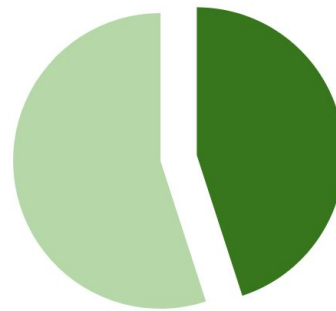
- "Feeling lost, not much motivation to get stuff done these past few days because everything is so crazy, <u>no regular schedule to follow anymore...so here I am...procrastinating even with a few assignments due soon</u>."

- "Kind of scary but the first few days I was happy, no need to wake up early for class anymore! But later I started to feel <u>confused about how to continue now, classes used to help me stay on schedule</u>, now it's hard to stay on track."

- "Shout out to [instructor] for always starting online lectures on the time she specified, still making lectures engaging and interesting, and giving us at least a day's notice before cancelling any classes. Being an overall great prof even during this crisis!"

THE UASU RECOMMENDS: Develop options to give students more structure, both in and out of the figurative classroom, without jeopardizing the flexibility, leeway, and asynchronous delivery that many students need. Structure goes hand in hand with clear communication, which is discussed below.

Learning Preferences and Habits

Some students firmly believe that online learning is not the best fit for them, for one reason or another. Students occasionally tie their worries to popular misconceptions about learning styles[3] - that is, they may not believe they can learn to learn effectively and enjoyably in online classes. Others believe that their habits at home can be insurmountable obstacles.

- "This was pretty crippling for my style of learning. Thank god for CR/NC."

- "I'm healthy, but stressed about online classes (I much prefer in-person lectures)."

- "I knew for a fact that I was going to become an unproductive potato. School me and home me are two very different creatures. I got home, looked at my notes knowing full well I'd never look at them again, and then redownloaded Hearthstone like the degenerate that I am and spent the next six hours forgetting that I'm in electrical engineering."

75% of respondents missed "getting my work done on campus. It's hard to stay motivated at home." (Survey B, n=1586)

- "Got worried because I tried online classes for one class in high school and I had absolutely no motivation to get it done because I wasn't going to an actual class. And so I procrastinated a lot and that is exactly what has happened again and now I am so behind on everything."

- "It's become difficult to stay motivated when all you need to do to get out of class is not log into a computer."

- "I'm scared. My GPA is not the best and I'm already at the end of my degree. I want a break to refocus myself and figure out how to work again."

THE UASU RECOMMENDS: Both in course design and in general student support, find ways to encourage students to develop study skills, personal accountability, and self-discipline that can help them thrive academically in a non-academic environment.

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[3] For example, see the American Psychological Association's 2019 release: https://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/2019/05/learning-styles-myth

Accessibility

Many students simply do not have sufficient internet access to support common models of online instruction. Students who now live in remote and rural communities are at special risk.

- "Submitting assignments is hard when you get kicked out of your residence and don't have wifi."

- "Going home was hard for classes because I don't have a stable source of internet."

These issues go hand in hand with the items explored under 'Study Environment and Home Circumstances,' such as precarious housing.
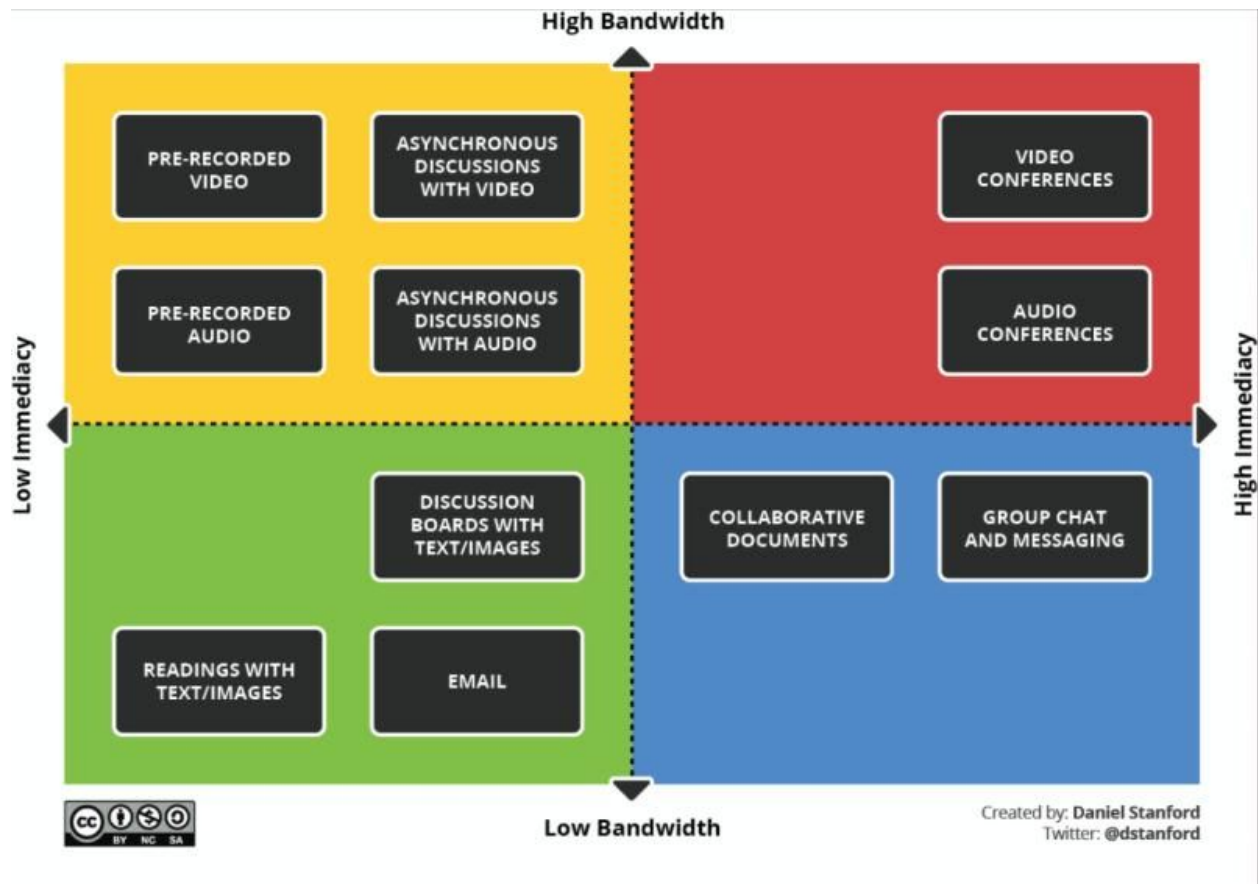
THE UASU RECOMMENDS: Adopt low-bandwidth online teaching practices where possible. As mentioned above, DePaul University's Daniel Stanford has a valuable perspective.[4]

> High-bandwidth technologies work great for students who have newer computers, fast and reliable internet access at home, and unlimited data plans on their phones. For other students, courses that require _frequent_ use of high-bandwidth technologies can _limit their ability to fully participate_ in course activities. This can jeopardize their success in the course, create a sense of _shame and anxiety_, and leave them feeling like second-class citizens...
>
> Videoconferencing is a great way to engage with students when they truly need to see and hear each other in real time. It can also be useful for online office hours, since it's easier to feel connected and avoid misunderstandings when you have the benefit of tone of voice, facial expressions, and body language. Unfortunately, videoconferencing is one of the most inflexible and bandwidth-intensive activities we can ask our students to do. Before you rely on it too heavily, look at the other quadrants and ask yourself if there's any other way to accomplish your learning objectives without it.

Stanford notes that low-bandwidth practices can have higher or lower immediacy ("how quickly we expect our students to respond when interacting with us and with each other"), making them suitable for both synchronous and asynchronous delivery. Note that we are not recommending replacing all videos and Zoom calls, just sensitivity to needs and options.

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[4] "Videoconferencing Alternatives: How Low-Bandwidth Teaching Will Save Us All" (March 16, 2020) https://www.iddblog.org/videoconferencing-alternatives-how-low-bandwidth-teaching-will-save-us-all/

High Bandwidth / Low Bandwidth / Low Immediacy / High Immediacy matrix:

- **Yellow (Low Immediacy, High Bandwidth):** PRE-RECORDED VIDEO, ASYNCHRONOUS DISCUSSIONS WITH VIDEO, PRE-RECORDED AUDIO, ASYNCHRONOUS DISCUSSIONS WITH AUDIO
- **Red (High Immediacy, High Bandwidth):** VIDEO CONFERENCES, AUDIO CONFERENCES
- **Green (Low Immediacy, Low Bandwidth):** DISCUSSION BOARDS WITH TEXT/IMAGES, READINGS WITH TEXT/IMAGES, EMAIL
- **Blue (High Immediacy, Low Bandwidth):** COLLABORATIVE DOCUMENTS, GROUP CHAT AND MESSAGING

Created by: **Daniel Stanford**
Twitter: **@dstanford**

Clear and Prompt Communication

This priority encompasses expectations for the near and longer-term future, situation updates, time sensitivity, and fair, easily-understood expectations for coursework.

- "I'm feeling okay - a little anxious because of all the uncertainties but just hoping for more communication from profs."

- An instructor was praised "for keeping us updated about our class from before in-person classes got shut down!"

- "So hard to adjust to online classes. Can't understand a thing, maybe because of the situation, too."

- An instructor "Kept us updated the whole time and uploaded everything to EClass fast. Buddy is retiring this year and he has to deal with all this. I have received maybe 20 emails from this legend and he has kept an incredible humour about it and his online Zoom class went really well."

- An instructor was praised "for communicating clearly and accommodating the class despite the circumstances."

- "I was in my final teaching practicum and was very frustrated with the lack of information I received. All the other students were told delivery was switching online, yet those out in practicum, clinicals, etc., did not <u>receive information promptly</u>."

- An instructor "did an amazing job of getting information up ASAP."

- An instructor "has been great! She sent the whole class an email almost immediately after we were told that we would be moving to remote delivery of classes and uploaded recorded lectures really fast. <u>She also immediately let us know what we should expect from the rest of the term and what the final will look like</u>, which I really appreciate when everything at this point seems to be very uncertain."

THE UASU RECOMMENDS: Prioritize clear, prompt communication and easily-understood expectations. When students are well informed, they are better able to handle anxiety and uncertainty.

Authenticity
Students tend to appreciate getting a lens into their instructors' lives and thoughts, and knowing that their instructors care.

- An instructor was called "epic. She deserves some [redacted] tenure at this uni. One of the few <u>competent and nice</u> psychology instructors without a massive ego lol."

- "<u>She is so caring</u> and it broke my heart to hear she is retiring and her last program was cut short. She was a fantastic prof."

- An instructor <u>"had us all organized and going with a Zoom meeting, gave us all the slideshows, shared her screen, AND showed us her awesome couch ('chesterfield')."</u>

- An instructor was praised "for <u>sending doggo pics</u> and teaching really great lectures."

- An instructor's "class is always incredible and very <u>interactive</u>. I have now had 4 hours of lecture and seminar with him online and he is doing amazing. <u>This is the best version of a university class I have experienced in the last 5 years. As a bonus, students are more willing to participate from behind the screen.</u>"

- An instructor was praised "mostly because <u>he eats cake every morning</u> and I applaud that."

- "She made her video class Star Wars themed, with the scrolling yellow text between segments, and <u>introduced us to her giant fluffy dog</u>, Thor. A+"

- An instructor was praised "not for the COVID-19 stuff in particular, although she's doing an awesome job at that too, but for <u>caring about her students as more than USRI.</u>"

- An instructor "<u>isn't even teaching one of my classes right now but we are using her resources. Thanks for sharing your slides with [a course's] students even though you are not teaching [that course] this semester.</u>"

- "She<u> made 'break out rooms'</u> for students to <u>chat online on her EClass page </u>to help her students avoid feeling isolated. [Another instructor] set up breakout rooms for us using <u>Adobe Connect Online </u>so that the class can video chat about whatever, not even school, but just hang out."

- "<u>Thank you so much for trying to make everything as clear as possible and giving us prompt updates. Your 16 hour a day week has not gone unnoticed. We love you.</u>"

THE UASU RECOMMENDS: Recognize instructors for developing connected, personable, authentic experiences that help counter students' sense of isolation. Explore ways to build community in spite of isolation.

Innovation and Adaptation

Many students appreciate their instructors' efforts to adapt. Several students mentioned older professors who went the extra mile with sincerity despite technical challenges and upcoming retirement.

- "His videos are really good and easy to follow and <u>he splits them into smaller chunks so you have breaks in between each one</u>. He's been really helpful in his emails."

- "She is <u>trying her hardest learning all sorts of new technology</u> to help us and is doing a great job."

- An instructor "took such an effort to ask us for our opinions and perspectives on how to run the course, and <u>actually took it into account when designing the online course</u>. He got 50-50 responses for a live course and pre-recorded material, and he's doing both!"

- "He's my oldest prof but was the first to get everything figured out."

- An instructor "literally was stuck in Argentina for, what, 2 months. Had TA's lecture for the first bit and completed the rest of the material via online lectures. <u>Took feedback and utilized it within her lectures</u>, and ended up producing a really good product. Now that she is back and is already doing online lectures, they are by far better than any of my other classes."

Respondents especially appreciated when their instructors went out of their way to figure out what worked best for the students in their classes.

THE UASU RECOMMENDS: Embrace student feedback in instructional design. Prioritize and support the Centre for Teaching and Learning as a core resource. Reduce structural barriers to experimentation in the virtual classroom.

Study Environment and Home Circumstances

Some challenges are unavoidable. Many instructors understand that students are doing their best in environments that may not be conducive to learning.

- "Panicking about being a music student and having to <u>practice in an apartmen</u>t."

- "<u>I can't study at home well but I'm trying my best. My house is very small so it's hard to get some privacy and quiet time.</u>"

- "I was not concerned about my courses at first. <u>My children and family's health are my first priority</u> so I needed to prepare for their change before I could focus on myself and school again."

- "Everything happened so fast and so suddenly that I had barely any time to process what was actually going on. <u>I couldn't go home and wasn't prepared to do so as school has been my escape for the past few years</u>. My home life is not pleasant, not safe and certainly not ideal for a school work environment. So, instead I <u>stayed with my buddy for a bit</u>, but that was weird, too."

That final response recalls other UASU surveys of student homelessness and food insecurity, especially among marginalized groups. For example, in a survey of 3944 University of Alberta undergraduates using the Health Canada Household Food Security Survey Module (HFSSM), 31.9% ranked as moderately or severely food insecure, consistent with other post-secondary institutions.[5] In a previous survey with

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[5] '2019 Annual Survey Report,' University of Alberta Students' Union (January 2020) https://www.su.ualberta.ca/media/uploads/1143/2019%20Annual%20Survey%20Report.pdf

5042 points of contact, dozens of students reported homelessness or related experiences.[6] The current crisis exacerbates the dangers of precarious housing.

A few students made oblique references to unhealthy tension at home. A very recent Statistics Canada survey found that, among Canadians age 15 to 24, 12% of women and 8% of men were very or extremely anxious about the possibility of domestic violence.[7]

Infographic 2
Proportion of crowdsourcing participants who reported being very or extremely anxious about the possibility of violence in the house, by age group and by gender

◀ Back to main article

Source: Crowdsourcing: Impacts of COVID-19 on Canadians, April 2020
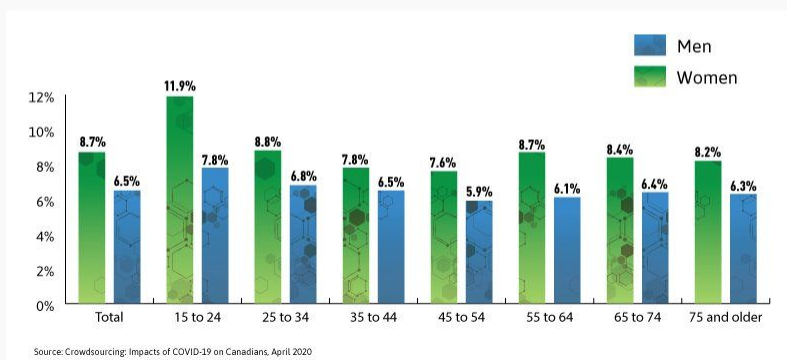
Also, these challenges go hand in hand with the items under 'Accessibility,' such as inconsistent or insufficient internet access.

THE UASU RECOMMENDS: Gather substantive information on the specific needs of students and increase efforts to connect them with necessary services. Provide all necessary accommodations with empathy.

32% of respondents missed "having access to resources like libraries or SUBprint, and the normal in-person services at The Landing or the Peer Support Centre." (Survey B, n=1586)

[6] 'Student Homelessness and Food Insecurity among UAlberta Students,' University of Alberta Students' Union (July 2019)
https://www.su.ualberta.ca/media/uploads/1143/StudentHomelessnessandFoodInsecurity.pdf
[7] 'Impacts of COVID-19 on Canadians: First results from crowdsourcing,' Statistics Canada (April 2020)
https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/200423/dq200423a-eng.htm?HPA=1

Supports

The University faces an ongoing challenge to increase awareness of academic and non-academic support services, and improve those services. The current crisis demands adaptation as students feel the need for high-quality supports.

- "I was scared and wanted there to be more explanation. It was too sudden and it felt unfair that my support was gone all of a sudden."

- "I really do miss the in-person connections at the university and opportunities to speak with career counsellors (it's not the same online)."

45% of respondents missed "having access to the places/people that are sort of essential to my degree." (Survey B, n=1586)
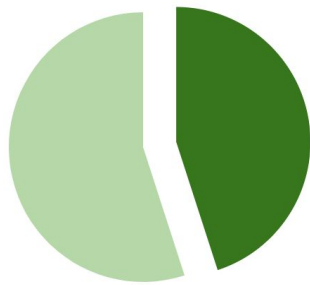
THE UASU RECOMMENDS: Remote support service delivery is just as essential to a credible remote academic experience as course design and teaching practices. The University should embrace and pursue remote services, both academic and non-academic, that provide good value for money. Benefits can include enrollment retention and other factors that will influence the University's performance-based funding.

Positive Views of Online Delivery

A small portion of respondents prefer the new format as delivered so far.

- "I love online delivery. It's wonderful to not spend two hours on the bus every day to get to and from classes. More online courses need to be offered at the U of A."

9% of respondents "liked that my classes came to me this semester." (Survey B, n=1586)

THE UASU RECOMMENDS: Refine the University's capacity for meaningful, valuable remote delivery to suit students' current and future needs.

Conclusion

> *There needs to be much more thought – collective thought, at the departmental and faculty level, informed by best practices from local teaching and learning centres – about pedagogical design and execution. Because if that's not there, students aren't going to show up in September (or if they do, they won't stay past the withdrawal date). Not domestic students, and definitely not international students. If you think you have financial problems now, just think very carefully about what they will look like if students decide not to come back. Bottom line: your instructional design people, your teaching and learning centre, and the folks in your CIO's office: they're the most important people on your campus right now. Beef them up. Give them anything they need.[8]*

The average undergraduate is not an expert on instructional design, but students have a keen sense of what helps them learn, what gets in the way, and what's missing. They struggle with online delivery for a wide variety of reasons, but they appreciate their instructors' authenticity, effort, adaptation, and innovation. They respond well to attempts to build community and fellowship in a time of isolation. Many students face major challenges to their education, from limited internet access to unsafe home environments. They feel unsure about their own ability to stay on track, and they identify either needs for specific supports, or areas where innovative supports would benefit them.

On top of all the recommendations listed throughout this report, the University needs to be intentional about understanding and supporting the remote student experience. This information should inform the design and delivery of courses and both academic and non-academic support structures in a remote context. These adaptations are essential for institutional credibility and student retention in the most likely scenarios over the coming semesters.

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[8] "Coronavirus - The Decision," Alex Usher, Higher Education Strategy Associates (March 2020) http://higheredstrategy.com/coronavirus-7-the-decision/