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COVID-19 and Campus Life: Student Perspectives

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COVID-19 and Campus Life: Student Perspectives

Ryan Shah

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused unprecedented changes to campus life as students have adjusted to the hybrid class model and physical distancing framework. Simply residing on campus this semester has been a privilege; many Spiders, especially international students and students with pre-existing health conditions, could not come at all. Among students on campus, there are varying attitudes about how this semester of “Protecting Our Web” has gone. To document this historic semester, I interviewed three students in mid- October:

- Colin Sparkevicius, a senior from Pennsylvania majoring in business administration
- Tereza Hernandez, a sophomore from Virginia majoring in global studies
- Karthik Lalwani, a first-year student from North Carolina majoring in chemistry

What were your thoughts when you found out that we would be returning to campus for Fall?

Colin: I was really excited that I didn't have to spend my senior year online. I knew that it wouldn't be an ideal year, but just

having the ability to be in person was kind of enough for me.

Tereza: I didn't believe it at first. I really thought they were going to backtrack on what they said like a week before we actually showed up.

Karthik: I was pretty delighted to hear this news, because I had a lot of friends from high school who didn't get to go to their schools.

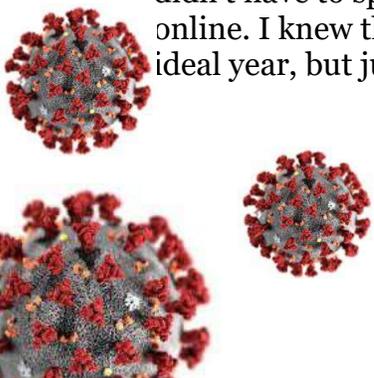
Did you expect us to remain on campus for the whole semester?

Colin: I expected us to shut down, given how some of the other universities were sending kids home after only the first week. I imagined it would be pretty early for us too.

Tereza: I thought we were going to get sent back after maybe two or three weeks maximum.

Karthik: When I spoke to my friends back home, we were thinking that even our smaller schools would not make it more than four or five weeks.

How have your perceptions of life on campus evolved over the semester?



Colin: My first impressions were kind of what I expected. Everyone was really following the protocol. I assumed we would have moved into Orange Phase sooner than we did. I also assumed we would be doing more prevalence testing.

Tereza: Before, I thought that it would be pretty pointless to come to campus. But now, it helps a lot to see people that I know, instead of just being trapped in my house. Since we moved to Orange Phase, more clubs are starting to get together too.

Karthik: I was surprised that we didn't have much of an influx in cases when moving to campus. In the freshman dorms, I noticed that there were some gatherings in the initial weeks, and I was expecting there to be a huge spike in cases. But that apparently never happened, and I am less worried about a spike happening now.

How have you stayed connected with friends?

Colin: My friends and I have been social distancing on the IM fields or patios to talk and eat dinner, which is pretty fun. To be honest, I don't really get together with a lot of other people besides my main friends that live in the apartments. Interacting with other people is generally through either classes or clubs. The organization SpiderBoard that I'm in recently started meeting in person now that student organization guidelines have changed. We had an in-person event last week that was really successful.

Tereza: I'm in a capella, and we did Zoom meetings for new members that were auditioning. Recently, we started

rehearsing in person on Sundays, which is helping a lot.

Karthik: I attended a bunch of Zoom meetings for clubs I was interested in. I also had a couple in-person activities. There's this dance club, Bollywood Jhatkas, and I was able to meet like-minded people there in person.

How many classes do you have online? How has your learning experience been affected?

Colin: I'm really fortunate to have all my classes in person. I have a class in the Robins concourse, which is the concessions stand area. Academically, I feel like it's pretty much the same for me

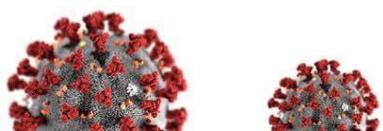
besides the weirdness of adapting to the hybrid model.

Tereza: Only one of my classes is online. In the classes that I have in person, I feel like I pay attention more. In my online class, the only reason I'm kind of engaged is because she divides us up into groups every class, so we actually get to know people.

Karthik: Two of my classes are completely online. Being able to focus in online classes has not been particularly difficult for me, but I definitely prefer in-person learning. One thing that has affected my classes is wearing a mask because I'm taking Spanish, so it's difficult to understand and pronounce words. Besides that, my in-person classes have been fine.

What do you miss most about a normal semester?

Colin: I just miss being able to do certain things without fear.



Tereza: Academically, I miss face-to-face office hours with professors. In person, they get to know you a bit better, and that's kind of the whole point of having a small class size. Socially, for a capella, it's really weird to sing with a mask on.

Karthik: I've heard great things about the amazing dining hall options that were available before, and I feel like I'm missing out on those currently.

Assuming the pandemic is ongoing, what would you like to see done differently in Spring?

Colin: There's just a lot of spaces on campus now that are restricted. Social spaces you used to be able to book are just classrooms. Social spaces now are under tents, which is not ideal if you're trying to push social life on campus. We should

obviously keep having masks on and social distancing, but the locations themselves, I think, should be a little bit more open.

Tereza: I think the dining hall options are something I want them to work on a little bit more. We get a lot of food and stuff, but I think some of the options get really repetitive, especially for people who have dietary restrictions. I can't have pork, so some nights are difficult.

Karthik: One thing is the school's policies regarding breaks. I feel like it's been difficult to maintain social connections and other things to reduce stress. The fact that the fall break was taken out of this semester might have had an impact for some people. I hope that there's some possibility they could add some sort of break in the spring.

Overall, what would you rate UR's COVID-19 response on a scale from 1-10?

Colin: Let's see... probably a seven.

Tereza: An eight.

Karthik: I'd probably give it an eight. It's been good to see the university's willingness to bring us back on campus, and we have maintained it pretty well. In the spring semester, I'm not too worried about how the university is going to deal with it. I think they've got it down pretty well.