

Education amidst the chaos

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The days when COVID-19 was all we talked about may seem distant, yet its prevalent impact still reminds us of what it was like to live in a crisis that affected every individual's life. Among all those whom COVID-19 impacted, college students seem to have had their fair share of psychological, financial, and educational obstacles. For an institution like Lake Forest College, whose student population is 16% international, the pandemic posed more intricate and unique challenges.

While comprehensive research on COVID-19's impacts is still young, studies find a solid association between the pandemic and adverse mental health issues in children and undergraduate students. These students face worse and more intense mental health problems if they live in rural areas, are friends or family members of a healthcare worker, or come from a lower-income background (Elharake et al., 2022). Many students of the classes of 2023 and 2024 were displaced from campus or did not get to study on campus for their first year. Considering the college's diverse student body and its students' versatile socioeconomic backgrounds and circumstances, the pressures this period posed had an immense effect on students' mental health. I remember the intense process I had to go through to obtain my visa, as embassies were partially closed, and I firmly believed I would have had to take a gap semester. I knew I could not do online school due to the time difference, the internet infrastructure, and the resources I could not access where I lived. That situation put my pursuit of education into perspective, especially within the context of a raging global health crisis.

When looking at the multidimensionality of the issue, it becomes apparent that all the dimensions of COVID-19's disturbance of the academic experience are interwoven. The financial implications were one of the most horrifying dimensions. "Among private 4-year universities, 50.1% of students reported housing disruption or change, 28.2% reported job or income loss, and 7.9% had difficulty paying for food" (Governale et al., 2023). Many international students at Lake Forest College are financially independent. The pandemic placed a considerable number of them in a position where they could not go back to their home countries, could not come to campus, could not have access to the needed internet connection for online classes, or could not even have access to basic life necessities like food and proper clothing because of financial struggles. While all these obstacles are enormous on their own, they all contribute to students experiencing a significant deterioration in their mental health. On the brighter side of things, many students enjoyed their online semesters. I loved listening to my friends' stories about how they were settling in back home, connecting with friends and family, and even finding jobs. Some other friends traveled to the countries that allowed tourist entry back then and attended their online classes at the most exciting sights!

Overall, COVID-19 remains an experience that has marked our lives forever. As someone whose entire life path was rerouted due to the pandemic, I will never forget how these circumstances put me on an intense emotional rollercoaster of uncertainty, fear, and despondency. However, I will also never forget how this crisis restored my faith in our ability to form communities and support each other. While we live in less hectic times now that COVID-19 has become endemic, we still carry the responsibility of being prepared for future global crises and ensuring that students will be supported in their education and other aspects of life despite their socioeconomic backgrounds.

References

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