Graduate Student Survey Results: Compiled Across Programs
October 2020

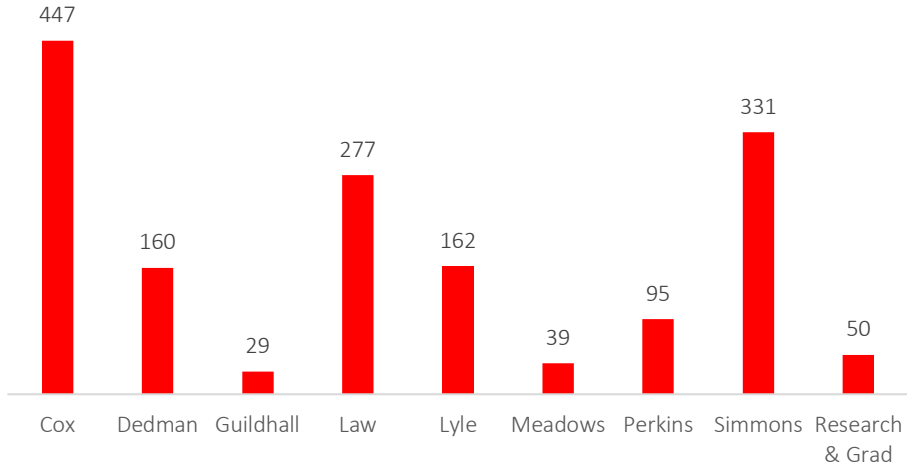### Characteristics of Graduate Student Respondents

- Of the 1,590 students who started the survey, 1,193 completed it (75%).
- Most were enrolled in virtual only (56%), with around a third enrolled in SMUFlex (32%), and 12% in both modalities.
- The majority of respondents were white (53%) or international (16%), with all other races comprising 31% of respondents.

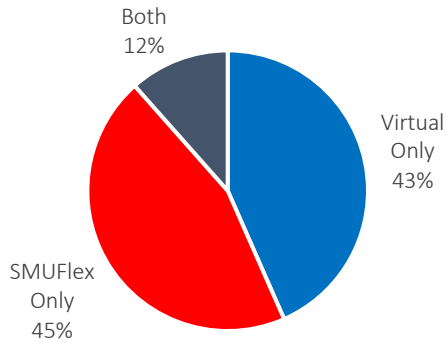### Summary of Findings from Closed-Ended Items

- Just over three-quarters of graduate students were generally satisfied with SMU community upholding principles of the pledge to protect, with under 4% reporting many concerns.
- Nearly 4 in 5 graduate students reported being generally satisfied with university communications, with under 3% reporting many concerns.
- Likewise, nearly 4 in 5 graduate students reported being generally satisfied with access to university services, with under 3% reporting many concerns.
- Nearly 90% of graduate students reported instructional technology experiences being "excellent" (37.5%) or "good" (50.8%).
- Graduate students were slightly more likely to report being satisfied with their overall classroom experiences in virtual classes than in SMUFlex courses (67.6% vs. 60.0%).
- The majority of graduate students in both modalities reported performing "about how [they] expected" in classes, with students in virtual classes slightly more likely to be performing better than expected and students in SMUFlex classes more likely to be performing worse than expected or to not have had assignments yet.
- In general, graduate students tended to prefer either all virtual or all in-person classes for the Spring semester, with fewer students reporting a preference for hybrid models.
  - NOTE: Individual school reports reveal that there were substantial differences by School/College in terms of preferences for all in person, all virtual or hybrid for the spring semester. Deans and department chairs will receive School/College-level results.
- Participating in spring classes virtually all the time was preferred for graduate students in both smaller and larger classes (< or >25 students). This was particularly true of larger classes, where students preferred all virtual to all in-person by a margin of more than 2:1 (41.5% vs. 19.8%). For smaller classes, graduate students were more evenly divided (31.7% vs. 28.9%).
- Participating in spring classes in-person all the time was preferred for graduate students in performance and applied classes. This was particularly true for applied classes (37.2% vs. 24.0%). For performance classes, graduate students were more evenly divided (32.5% vs. 30.5%).

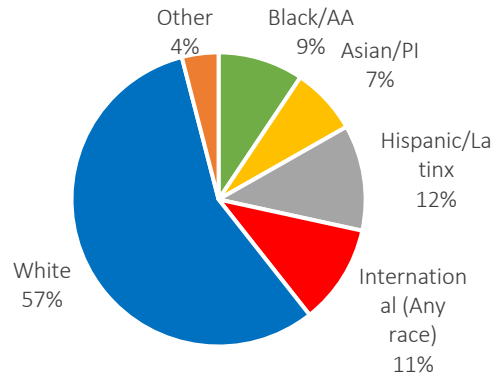The following charts provide more details information about the graduate students who responded to the survey.

Graduate Student Survey Respondents by School

School	Respondents
Cox	447
Dedman	160
Guildhall	29
Law	277
Lyle	162
Meadows	39
Perkins	95
Simmons	331
Research & Grad	50

Instructional Modality

- Virtual Only 43%
- SMUFlex Only 45%
- Both 12%

Race/Ethnicity

- White 57%
- Other 4%
- Black/AA 9%
- Asian/PI 7%
- Hispanic/Latinx 12%
- International (Any race) 11%

Pledge to Protect

How have members of the SMU community (students, faculty, and staff) upheld the values of the SMU CAN Pledge to Protect (commitment to social distancing, wearing masks, and maintaining a safe campus)?
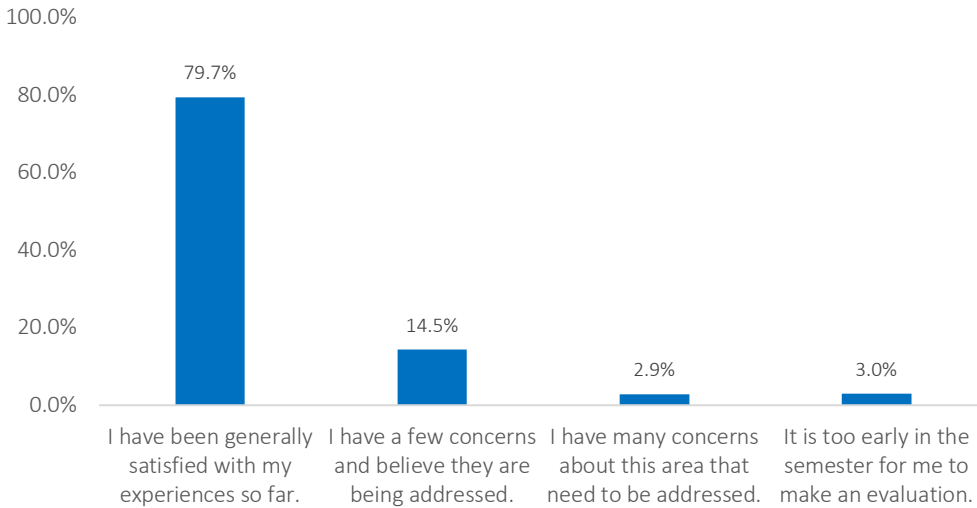

University Communications

How useful have university-wide communications been as provided through newsletters, webpages, and social media campaigns?
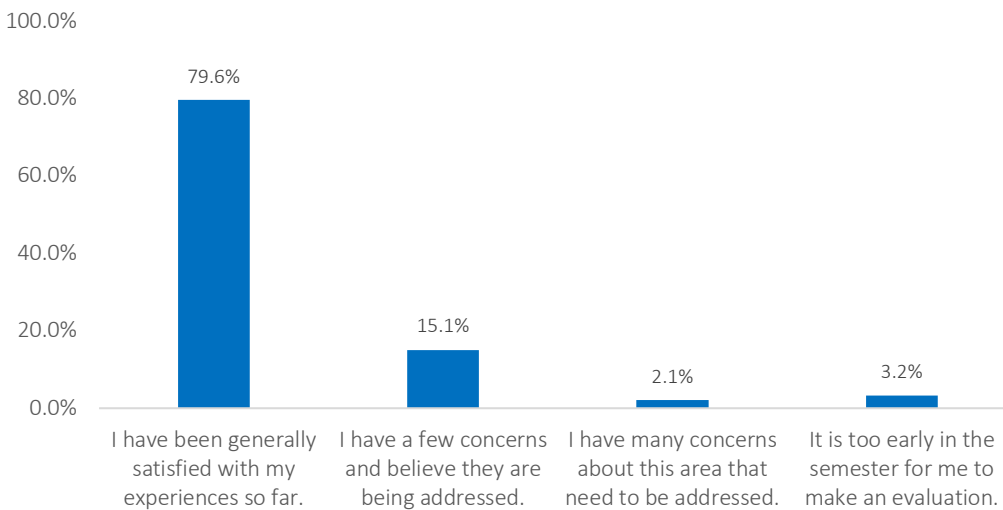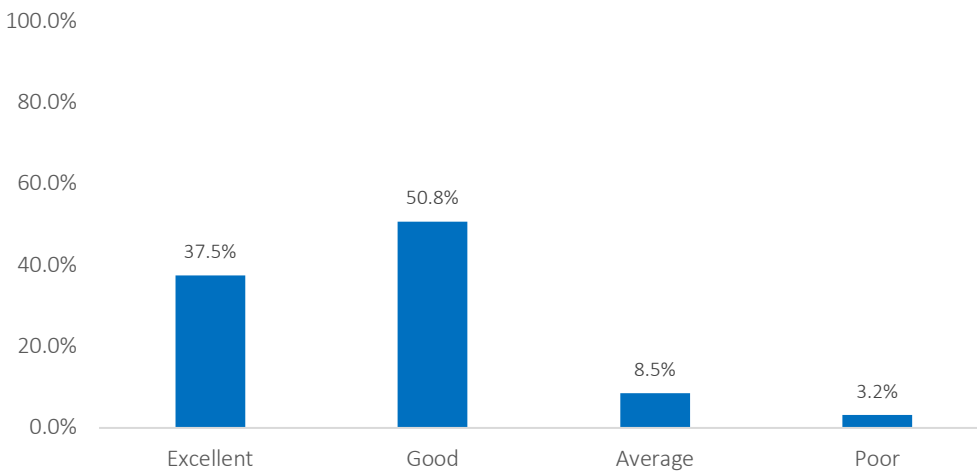
University Services

How has access to university services such as Zoom Spaces, the libraries, Dr. Bob Smith Health Center, and Dedman Recreation Center been handled?
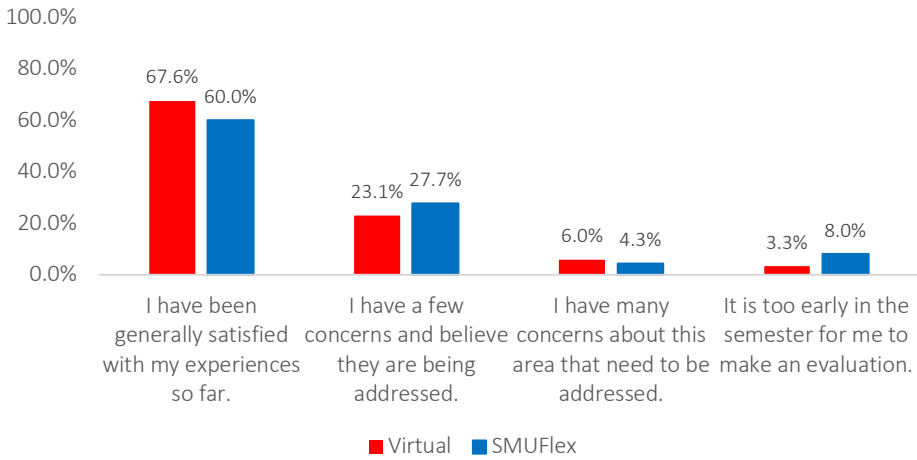

Technology

Based on your experiences with instructional technology this semester, how would you rate your overall technology experience?
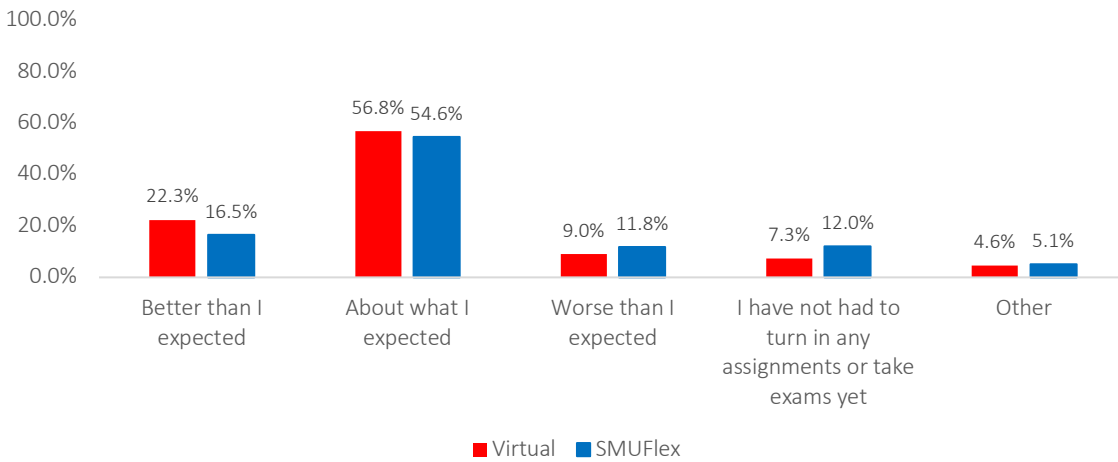
Classroom Experience

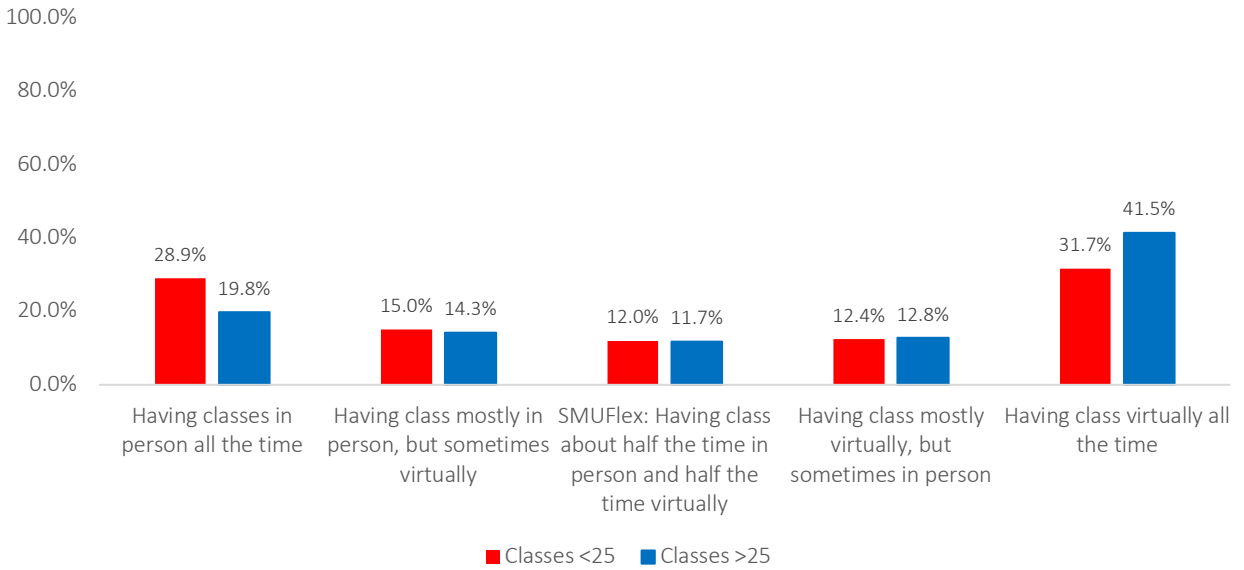*How has the overall experience in the classroom been?*

Performance in Classes

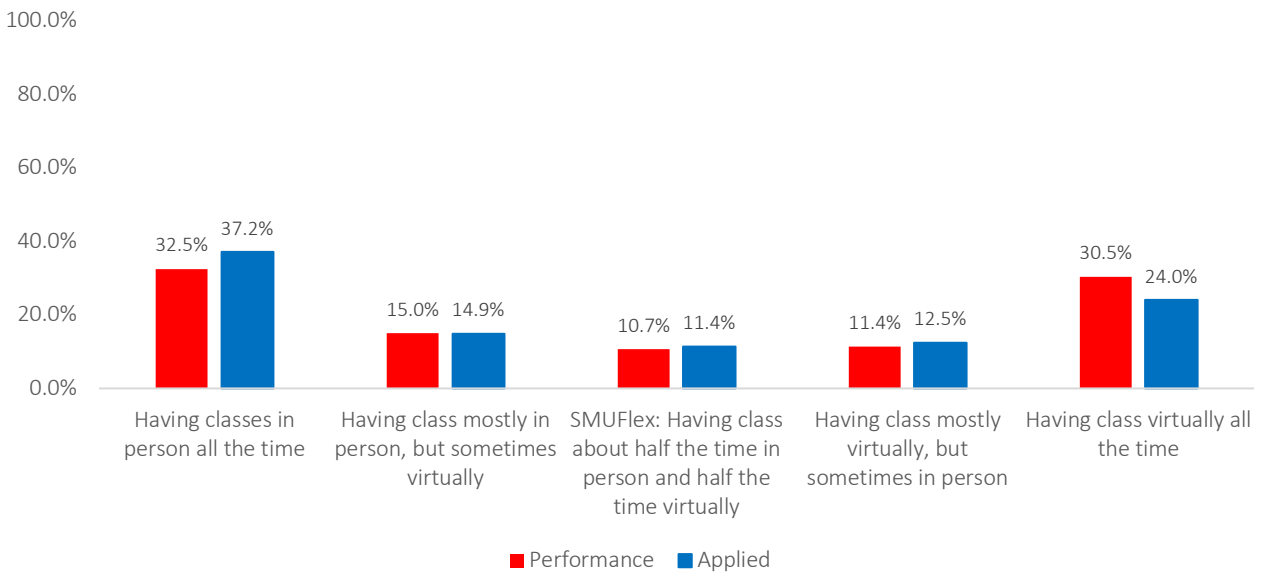*How have you performed on assignments and exams in your courses?*

Format Preferences for Spring Courses

By Class Size

Bar chart showing format preferences by class size with legend: Classes <25 (red), Classes >25 (blue).

Format	Classes <25	Classes >25
Having classes in person all the time	28.9%	19.8%
Having class mostly in person, but sometimes virtually	15.0%	14.3%
SMUFlex: Having class about half the time in person and half the time virtually	12.0%	11.7%
Having class mostly virtually, but sometimes in person	12.4%	12.8%
Having class virtually all the time	31.7%	41.5%

By Class Type

Bar chart showing format preferences by class type with legend: Performance (red), Applied (blue).

Format	Performance	Applied
Having classes in person all the time	32.5%	37.2%
Having class mostly in person, but sometimes virtually	15.0%	14.9%
SMUFlex: Having class about half the time in person and half the time virtually	10.7%	11.4%
Having class mostly virtually, but sometimes in person	11.4%	12.5%
Having class virtually all the time	30.5%	24.0%

Summary of Graduate Student Open-Ended Responses on October 2020 Survey

Graduate students shared a number of areas that have been going well for them and consistently used the survey to express their gratitude to faculty and support staff. Many graduate students described the following as working well:

- Instructors being flexible and available to students and understanding of students' difficulties, which helps offset stress in other areas.
- Instructors adapting well to virtual and hybrid teaching; both in-person and virtual modalities are appreciated
- Availability of library and other resources is going well
- Technology platforms (Zoom, Canvas) are working well for the most part

Graduate students also shared a wide range of challenges they are facing. Challenges shared by multiple graduate students in the open-ended responses include the following:

- Difficulty in digesting and retaining material delivered virtually, as opposed to in-person
- Instructors in hybrid classes having difficulty delivering content effectively to students in the classroom and remote at the same time
- Instructors having difficulty managing the technology—Zoom, Canvas—to deliver content online
- Request that instructors receive additional training and more extensive Zoom training to use in pedagogical ways
- Technical, audio-visual, and internet issues for students attending classes remotely; in particular, the audio in some classrooms is inadequate
- Students with families at home having difficulty managing distractions, balancing school and caregiving responsibility, managing time
- International students studying from abroad not being able to learn synchronously and engage with instructors and students in the US about classwork
- International students are concerned about their visa status and its impact on their studies
- Limited communication with classmates and limited opportunities to collaborate with them
- Frustrations with restrictions on campus resources—Libraries, Dedman Center for Lifetime Sports, etc.

A more detailed analysis of the themes emerging from the open-ended responses can be found in the Appendix A (pp. 8-10).

Appendix A: Close Analysis of Graduate Student Open-Ended Responses (October Survey)

Of the graduate students who responded to the write-in option of the following two multiple-choice questions, the following themes emerged.

How have you performed on assignments and exams in your SMU Flex courses? In general, graduate students reported performing on par or better than their expectations in the SMU Flex courses. A subset of 27 students chose "other" for this item and used the write-in option to highlight the following:

1. *Concern with exams.* 18% of students mentioned concerns with exams. Several students mentioned a desire for face-to-face exam options, clarity around final exam procedures, and suggestions for better formatting of online exams.
2. *Professors can help.* 18% of students implied that professors' flexibility and disposition heavily influence student success. When professors are sympathetic, understanding, and present, students are able to better manage their personal and academic lives.
3. *Not performing well.* 18% of students described their performance as subpar.

How have you performed on assignments and exams in your Virtual courses? In general, graduate students reported performing on par or better than expected in their Virtual courses. A subset of 40 students chose "other" for this item and used the write-in option to highlight the following:

1. *Not enrolled in lecture classes.* 32% reported they are not enrolled in lecture courses. They noted either working on their dissertation, thesis, or teaching (TA/lecturing).
2. *Unsure of performance.* 15% reported that they are unsure of their performance, as no assignments have been graded.
3. *Neutral.* 15% offered a neutral response such as, "It's a mixed bag" or Some good, some bad."
4. *Faculty & Staff Interactions.* A few students offered responses concerning a range of faculty and staff interactions, ranging from troublesome, kind and understanding, and inaccessible.
5. *Other mentions.* There were 3 mentions of student workload and 1 mention of a webcam issue.

The following themes emerged from the open-ended items at the end of the graduate survey.

Overarching Concerns Regarding the Intersection of Technology Issues and Course Delivery

1. *Zoom Issues*. The responses indicate an overarching (across both Flex and Virtual) concerns about Zoom. Students reported that Zoom's functionality is spotty, resulting in skipping words, lagging, glitches, automatic muting while students are speaking, malfunctioning links, freezing frames, etc. As a result, students indicated that they regularly missed valuable instruction time and experienced frustration with the incessant issues.
2. *Professors' uneven use of Zoom*. Another overarching concern across Flex and Virtual was the suggestion for professors' additional training with regard to troubleshooting, engaging, and utilizing technology. Students highlighted that significant class time is often wasted due to professors trying to navigate the technology (e.g., Zoom breakout rooms, utilizing speaker vs. gallery view on Zoom, allowing students entrance, screen sharing, use of captions, remembering to unmute self, utilizing Zoom options such as the chat and raised hands, etc.).
3. *Sound is inadequate.* Students mentioned that the sound is inadequate, particularly in Flex classes, resulting in virtual students unable to hear in-person students and vice versa. As a result,

students reported difficulty in meaningfully participating in class, particularly during discussions which inherently require attentive listening. Students also suggested that at times it is quite difficult to hear professors. A recommendation was made to have professors to wear lapel microphones.

4. *SMU Flex concerns.* A few students mentioned that SMU Flex is inadequate due to technology issues, to subpar discussions which might be more meaningful in person, and other distractions. A few students mentioned that this type of offering is misaligned with the cost of SMU's tuition, standards, and "world-class" designation. One student explained identified as having a low-SES status with concerns about low inaccessibility to "prime technology."

5. *Inconsistent Canvas use across faculty.* Students mentioned that the use of Canvas is inconsistent:
   a. Some faculty are recording class sessions while others are not.
   b. Each professor posts assignments differently, resulting in students' confusion/frustration over where to find and submit assignments.

6. *Online testing not ideal.* Some students suggested that due to technology glitches and in one case a desire for in-person instead of online proctoring, online testing is difficult.

Other Overarching Concerns

1. *Personal Concerns.* Students expressed difficulty managing family, work, and graduate school. Several mentioned personal issues including stress associated with financial difficulties. Many expressed a need for increased professor leniency and understanding.

2. *International Students.* Students reported concern with their visa status and the completion of their on-campus studies. A few students mentioned a desire for SMU to "closely monitor the situation" and "protect the student." Students also mentioned a desire for SMU to consider the time difference between students who are virtually attending while living in their home country.

3. *Connection to SMU.* Students reported feeling disconnected due to an inability to meet and intimately interact with peers and faculty. Several reported difficulty networking with and building camaraderie among classmates, in and out of class. Others described difficulty intimately connecting with faculty. Several students offered that departments and schools should facilitate efforts that build community.

4. *Communication.* Students expressed a range of ideas concerning communication.
   a. *University-level communications.* Most described the university communications as overwhelming. Specifically, students mentioned that the daily health checks were unnecessary, especially for students who do not come to campus. Several students suggested reducing the number of daily emails administration sends. Additionally, students mentioned a lack of communication concerning the plans for Spring. A few students suggested using the subject line to denote information that alludes to relevance and importance.
   b. *Classroom communications.* Students described difficulty communicating with peers. Several mentioned the difficulty of establishing groups for projects, communicating with students who are attending via a different method (f2f reaching out to virtual). Several students mentioned a need to facilitate community in the class.

5. *In-class technology concerns.* Students reported technology concerns specific to navigating Canvas, unreliable on-campus internet, professors' user error, inadequate audio, etc.

6. *Classroom operations.* Students described a range of frustrations related to classroom operations.
    a. Faculty reducing lecture time and increasing independent or "busy" work. Consequently, students are overwhelmed.
    b. Request for more rigorous, thoughtful lectures so the burden of learning is not on the student.
    c. Concern and frustration that the caliber of learning opportunities misaligns with the tuition cost.
    d. Need for improved classroom technology.
    e. Requests for on-campus class options in lieu of either Virtual or SMUFlex.
    f. Request for on-campus study spaces that exceed 3 persons, particularly for students with group assignments.
    g. Implication that online or virtual is better than the SMUFlex option. Several students mention the need to keep Virtual as an option.
    h. Need to accommodate students whose program requires in-person activities but who cannot participate in person.
7. *Covid-19.* Concern with mask wearing. Students mention a range of opinions. Several reiterate the importance of mask wearing and that the University should enforce mask wearing and social distancing inside and outside. One student mentions that parties are still occurring and recommends a reporting system. Several students are concerned with the fidelity with which cases are reported by both students and SMU.
8. *Library.* A small number of students mentioned a concern with library hours.