

My College Students Are Not OK

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By Jonathan Malesic

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In my classes last fall, a third of the students were missing nearly every time, and usually not the same third. Students buried their faces in their laptop screens and let my questions hang in the air unanswered. My classes were small, with nowhere to hide, yet some students openly slept through them.

I was teaching writing at two very different universities: one private and wealthy, its lush lawns surrounded by towering fraternity and sorority houses; the other public, with a diverse array of strivers milling about its largely brutalist campus. The problems in my classrooms, though, were the same. Students just weren't doing what it takes to learn.

By several measures — attendance, late assignments, quality of in-class discussion — they performed worse than any students I had encountered in two decades of teaching. They didn't even seem to be trying. At the private school, I required individual meetings to discuss their research paper drafts; only six of 14 showed up. Usually, they all do.

I wondered if it was me, if I was washed up. But when I posted about this on Facebook, more than a dozen friends teaching at institutions across the country gave similar reports. Last month, The Chronicle of Higher Education [received comments](#) from more than 100 college instructors about their classes. They, too, reported poor attendance, little discussion, missing homework and failed exams.

The pandemic certainly made college more challenging for students, and over the past two years, compassionate faculty members have loosened course structures in response: They have introduced [recorded lectures](#), flexible [attendance](#) and deadline policies, and lenient grading. In light of the widely reported [mental health crisis](#) on campuses, some students and faculty members [are calling](#) for those looser standards and remote options

to persist indefinitely, even as vaccines and Covid therapies have made it relatively safe to return to prepandemic norms.

I also feel compassion for my students, but the learning breakdown has convinced me that continuing to relax standards would be a mistake. Looser standards are contributing to the problem, because they make it too easy for students to disengage from classes.

Student disengagement is a problem for everyone, because everyone depends on well-educated people. College prepares students for socially essential careers — including as engineers and nurses — and to be citizens who bring high-level intellectual habits to bear on big societal problems, from climate change to the next political crisis. On a more fundamental level it also prepares many students to be responsible adults: to set goals and figure out what help they need to attain them.

Higher education is now at a turning point. The accommodations for the pandemic can either end or be made permanent. The task won't be easy, but universities need to help students rebuild their ability to learn. And to do that, everyone involved — students, faculties, administrators and the public at large — must insist on in-person classes and high expectations for fall 2022 and beyond.

In March 2020, essentially all of U.S. higher education went remote overnight. Faculties, course designers and educational technology staffs scrambled to move classes online, developing new techniques on the fly. The changes often entailed a loosening of requirements. A [study by Canadian researchers found](#) that nearly half of U.S. faculty members reduced their expectations for the quantity of work in their classes in spring 2020, and nearly a third lowered quality expectations. That made sense in those emergency conditions; it seemed to me that students and faculties

just needed to make it through.

That fall, [most students](#) were learning at least partly online. Simultaneously, colleges gave undergraduate students more autonomy and flexibility over how they learned, with options to go remote or asynchronous.

Faculty members and students across the Dallas-Fort Worth area, where I live, described a widespread breakdown in learning that year. Matthew Fujita, a biology professor at the University of Texas at Arlington, said the results of the first exam in his fall 2020 genetics class, a large lecture course, reflected “the worst performance I’d ever seen on a test.”

Amy Austin, who teaches Spanish at U.T.A., began calling her students her “divine little silent circles” — a reference to Dante Alighieri’s “Divine Comedy” — because she would typically see only their initials in a circle on her computer screen, none of them speaking.

Students’ self-reports track with these observations. A June 2021 [survey by Inside Higher Ed](#) found that more than half of students said they learned less that academic year than they did before the pandemic.

There is [much evidence](#) that students learn less online than they do in person, in part because online courses demand considerable self-discipline and [motivation](#). And some lessons just don’t translate to a remote format. “You can’t learn how to use a microscope online,” said Melissa Walsh, who teaches biology and environmental science at U.T.A. “You just can’t.”

It’s no surprise, then, that in one of the first studies to examine broad-scale learning outcomes during the pandemic, researchers found that the switch to online learning resulted in [more course failures and withdrawals](#) in the Virginia community-college system, even despite more lenient grading. Students nationwide reported a [greater willingness](#) to cheat, too.

It's bad enough that so many students had to take classes through a medium where they don't do their best. More disconcerting is that when classes returned to mainly in-person in fall 2021, student performance did not bounce back. The problem isn't only that students learn poorly online. It's also that when they go through a year or more of remote classes, they develop habits that harm their ability to learn offline, too.

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Dr. Austin said the quality of her students' work had not recovered after the return to campus. On grammar tests, students continued to score lower than they did before the pandemic. Now, she told me, the students in her classroom often met her questions with blank stares. "This is like being online!" she said. That was my experience, too. In my classes, it often seemed as if my students thought they were still on Zoom with their cameras off, as if they had muted themselves.

Many students got out of the habit of coming to class at all. Dr. Walsh estimated that in her biology course for non-majors this spring, just 30 percent to 40 percent of students attended class, and only a handful watched her recorded lectures. The students who don't attend class are missing out on the best of Dr. Walsh, who recently won a campuswide teaching award.

"What makes me an effective instructor," she said, "has a lot to do with my personality, how I engage in the classroom, using humor. I'm very animated. I like to walk around the classroom and talk with students." Doing so is a way not just to get them engaged but also to test their learning and adjust her teaching on the fly. "I'm not able to do that with students who don't come to the classroom," she said.

Dr. Walsh added that if students aren't in the classroom, she can't recruit

them to collaborate with her on research, an invaluable learning experience. She also has little to go on when writing recommendations for medical school.

The problem is bigger than any one professor's class. It's hard to insist on in-person attendance when colleagues are [demanding flexibility](#) or, as Dr. Walsh noted, when non-tenure-track faculty members like her are evaluated for contract renewal and promotion based on student evaluations. If students expect recorded lectures — even ones they won't watch — then instructors will feel pressure to provide them.

It's true that some students thrive with the flexibility and freedom afforded by Covid-era policies. Jeffrey Vancil, a sophomore at the University of Texas at Dallas (where my wife teaches and where I taught last year), said that in his first year, he could study more efficiently by watching lecture recordings on his own schedule and at faster speeds. He didn't have to waste time moving from building to building. And with the extra time, he could work for political groups and as a volunteer firefighter.

After his classes went mostly in-person, he said, he had to pull back on his extracurriculars, and his grades suffered. The best approach, in his view, would be to "let people choose" how to take their classes, "because we now have the infrastructure in place that we can record lectures and have in-person ones for people who learn best each way," he said.

Remote and recorded classes can also enable students who work or care for children to fit school into their schedules. Ahlam Atallah, a senior at U.T.A., said that online courses allowed her to take classes while her two children were at home. She also didn't have to commute to or find parking on the vast suburban campus.

But she found that taking classes at home divided her attention. "You can't

talk about this novel you're reading when you have a 2-year-old running around, asking, 'Mom, Mom, can I have a snack?'" Ms. Atallah said. This past academic year, with both children at school in person, she went to nearly all her in-person classes, even those with recorded lectures. In the classroom, she said, "I can give my full attention to the class, to my professor and my fellow students."

For most students, including those with children, being in person helps them focus and excel. Mr. Vancil told me he had already developed good learning habits by the time he got to college. In my experience, most students haven't. And so it's worrying to hear [students](#) call for more remote classes and more flexibility. They are asking for conditions in which they are, on average, more likely to fail.

Some instructors are taking on extra work to offer students chances to close the learning gap. Dr. Walsh described her workload as "astronomical, exhausting." Dr. Austin allowed students to rewrite papers in the past, but she extended the policy to exams. She found that many more students needed to rewrite their assignments. She estimated that grading the rewrites "doubled" her workload. But, she added, "If I didn't do the rewrites, I'd have more people failing my classes."

Because it is students whose educations are at stake, they bear much of the responsibility for remaking their ability to learn. But faculty members and administrators need to give students an environment that encourages intellectual habits like curiosity, honesty and participation in a community of inquiry. These habits aren't only the means to a good education; to a large extent, they *are* the education.

To build a culture that will foster such habits, colleges might draw lessons from what may seem an unusual source: the University of Dallas, a small

Catholic university with a great-books curriculum and a [reputation for conservatism](#). Several of its faculty members told me the nationwide learning breakdown simply wasn't happening there.

As everywhere else, University of Dallas classes went remote in March 2020. But most were in person again that fall. Returning so quickly was an unconventional move, though one that people at the university said was consistent with the institutional culture. In September 2020, a student wrote in an [op-ed](#) in the campus newspaper, "The anticipation of returning to campus this August made me wonder, 'Is this how Odysseus felt as he returned home after ten years?'"

Anthony Nussmeier, who teaches Italian at the university, praised its response to the pandemic as exhibiting a holistic understanding of care for students, balancing "the immediate health imperative with other imperatives that are no less important: the importance of mental health, the importance of friendship, the importance of physical proximity to other human beings for most of us."

As a result of the school's decision, its students didn't have as much time to develop the habits of disengagement that their peers in Zoom U. did.

Gabriella Capizzi, a junior at the University of Dallas, said the accountability of attending classes in person pushed her to work harder and learn more. In person, Ms. Capizzi said, a positive sense of anxiety motivates her to prepare for class discussion, because some professors cold-call students. "You go in with yourself, and you have a notebook, but you either know it or you don't," she said. "There's a rush of adrenaline when you get something right. You're actually moving forward and learning."

Last month at the school, I visited Scott Crider's Literary Traditions II, a required first-year English course that reads Dante, Milton and Shakespeare.

The 16 students — two were absent — sat in a rough circle, their wheeled desks backed up to the walls. No laptops or phones were visible. (Dr. Crider said he prohibits both — a common custom at the university.) Students intently marked up their spiral-bound notebooks and copies of sonnets.

Two students debated the syllabic rhythm in the last two lines of “Paradise Lost.” Others craned their necks to watch their classmates work at the whiteboard. Parsing out poetic meter is not everyone’s idea of a good time, but the students looked anything but bored. They laughed at Dr. Crider’s humor. Just about everyone spoke up, sharing observations, questions and even a complaint about a William Carlos Williams poem. I didn’t want class to end.

To the people I spoke with at the University of Dallas, the personal, relational character of education is inseparable from high intellectual standards. Ms. Capizzi recalled a literature course she took with a professor who was known as a hard grader. She visited his office at least once a week to talk about the material, and even more often when there was a paper due. “Him having a high standard for each of us was good, but then we have the standard for ourselves,” she said. “It’s difficult, but you want it to be difficult, and you want to be a part of it because it’s difficult.”

Ms. Capizzi’s comments echo those of the sociologists Daniel F. Chambliss and Christopher G. Takacs, who in their 2014 book, “[How College Works](#),” found that students learn when they’re motivated, and “the strongest motivation to work on basic skills comes from an emotionally based face-to-face relationship with specific other people — for instance, the one-on-one writing tutorial with a respected professor who cares about *this* student’s work.”

Those relationships are much harder to forge remotely, and students who

don't discover early on that they learn through relationships will never know to seek them out. Even Mr. Vancil, who wishes he could take all his classes remotely, said he learns a great deal from his frequent visits to his professors' office hours.

Professors must recognize that caring for students means wanting to see them thrive. That entails high expectations and a willingness to help students exceed them. Administrators will need to enact policies that put relationships at the center. That will mean resisting the temptation to expand remote learning, even if students demand it, and ensuring that faculty workloads leave time for individual attention to students.

"Young people are the hope of the world," Dr. Crider told me. Current students, he added, "are capable of rising to the same standards as before, and we do them a disservice when we presume they're too mentally ill or too traumatized to function."

A mantra of teaching, at any level, is "Meet the students where they are." But if education is built on relationships, then colleges must equally insist students meet their teachers where they are. The classroom, the lab and the office are where we instructors do our best and where a vast majority of students can do their best, too. Our goal is to take students somewhere far beyond where they meet us.