

My Dilemma on the Reopening of Schools

The last thing I said to my high school classmates was, “See you next month!”. At this point, back in March, I still thought that was a stretch. School only announced we were closing for two weeks due to the coronavirus. Over the weekend, I called my friends to laugh and talk about our good fortune for school to close, meaning we wouldn’t get homework for at least a week. I made plans for my last banquet with orchestra and GradNite at Disneyland, which was only two months away. However, over the next week, the news and rising Covid cases told me to not get my hopes too high. But I didn’t want to believe that the chance to participate in events I’ve waited four years for were going to disappear that quickly. Unfortunately, two weeks of school closure turned into a month. That month turned into the rest of my senior semester. And it was pretty clear the lockdown was going to stay for the rest of the summer. By this time, some parents, students, politicians, and others were begging schools to reopen to allow students back on campus. My initial response was, “I cannot believe people would be willing to risk their health and others to get back to school. I’m having a wonderful time having less homework than usual”. However, as I would soon learn, this question was not as black-and-white as I presumed.

I didn’t feel the effects of the lockdown until my semester at USC started. Suddenly, I lost the time to socialize with my high school friends, the only friends I had at that point. It felt I was constantly bombarded with schoolwork and deadlines, with nobody to talk to or stress with. I experienced high anxiety like I’ve never felt before and cried almost every day from the stress. But I was still at home and the same people surrounded my daily life. I had access to the same resources throughout the whole summer and I was in the same environment. My life had drastically changed, but nothing changed. And I could not handle this juxtaposition. This contrast of a sudden transition to a rigorous academic college workload without the fun and socializing

had me revisiting the question for myself, “Should schools be reopened?” At that point, all I knew was I desperately wanted a change in environment and the possibility of meeting new people to experience this new journey with, but I was denied that.

My experience transitioning to college, especially one as rigorous as USC, is not unique. According to a study done by UC Berkeley, college students across the country suffering from anxiety disorder rose 50% compared to a similar research from Spring 2019. For freshman college students, the transition to a college workload, combined with additional financial stresses, the virtual barrier to connecting with peers, and the uncertainty of when the pandemic will end so we can finally experience college life presents a unique challenge to overcome. I had imagined where I would be at this point of the year many times: studying in the Doheny library, scrambling across campus to get from one class to another, hanging out with new friends around Los Angeles. It’s difficult to comprehend that I wouldn’t be receiving this, and time is only ticking away from my 4 years of college.

As a freshman college student, the social scene was one of the biggest factors in my conflicts. Freshman college year is commonly advertised as the year to find your group of people for your next 4 years. Some freshmen already have trouble in traditional school but trying to make new friends in an environment of virtual learning is even harder. Classmates become just another face on the screen, and virtual interactions usually don’t go beyond a follow on Instagram. There is little opportunity to make close relationships with others that would usually be able to form through being able to conveniently turn to those sitting around you in a class and talking with them. While in-school experiences could facilitate the formation of friendships by naturally grouping people together in physical classrooms, dorms, clubs, and various other activities, online learning feels like I have been thrown out into the vast ocean of the college

student body with no connections or guidance of where to start. This virtual barrier presents an obstacle to the feeling of belonging, which is one of the foundational levels on Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs.

Luckily, USC also realizes how integral socialization is to college life. All freshmen have been put into Virtual Clusters, which imitates the grouping residential colleges would provide, and are assigned faculty-in-residences and Virtual Peer Mentors. I am extremely grateful for my virtual peer mentor as she was the first upperclassman I got to know to tell me about USC from a student perspective. We have biweekly events between virtual clusters that have allowed me to get to know some classmates in a way other than academic. I look forward to these events every week since they remind me that I'm not alone in this. Socializing looks different during a pandemic, but it can be done, nonetheless.

Additionally, academics and the quality of education, in my limited college experience, does not seem to have fallen. Although as a Biology student, I am unable to gain the needed experience from hands-on labs that would be useful in professional or graduate school, I am learning a lot about each subject. My professors have been very helpful and understanding in helping us learn the material required for the course. Being online allows me the opportunity to attend more office hours when I would usually be walking from class to class, as well as teachers to hold more office hours. Not having the need for travel allows students the opportunity to roll out of bed just before class starts and gain precious extra minutes of sleep. The convenience of staying at home also allows me free access to snacks whenever I want. As we are able to do online school, it makes it a viable choice to keep schools closed until the pandemic is over and we can safely resume on-campus classes.

I stay at home to protect my family. Although my age group has been reported to be least affected from Covid symptoms, I would not forgive myself if I were to pass the virus onto my parents or my grandpa, who is at great risk of falling ill from coronavirus symptoms. The possibility of being asymptomatic with this virus is extremely frightening, and why I wouldn't take any chance that would increase my probability of contracting the virus. Because I am able to learn, stay in touch with my family and friends, and meet new people online, I would not risk my or my family's health to go to campus if it were open.

I understand that I am privileged enough to live in a loving household. Others may not be as fortunate and have to take care of other family members or deal with additional stressors. We all have our own losses in these pandemic circumstances, and all of our emotions are extremely valid in such an unusual situation.

In a time of such great uncertainty, I do not blame those who are trying to regain any sense of normality. I, myself, want to regain some control and predictability back into my life. However, during a novel pandemic where we are learning new information about the virus every day, normality, sometimes, is a privilege we cannot afford. However, we must not lose hope that a day will arrive when we can safely return to campus and enjoy walking down Trousdale Parkway as if it's just another day. I cannot wait for the day I can reunite with my friends, and when I can finally see my whole classmate. In particular, I cannot wait for the day I can finally meet Professor Rumi Tirebiter. However, until we can get the virus under control, we need to find new ways to socialize and stay connected to others; we need to find new ways to be together apart.

Bibliography

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