



**INDIANA UNIVERSITY**

**Regional Campus COVID Response**  
Perceptions from Student Focus Groups



December 18, 2020

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This project benefits from the substantial efforts made by  
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Likewise, the focus groups would not have been possible without the engagement of our  
“co-researchers”, the students who participated in the focus groups. Thank you!

# Overview

In the fall 2020 semester, campus and university leadership asked that UIRR work with regional campus offices to administer a series of focus groups examining student perceptions about their campus's response to the COVID-19 pandemic and their recommendations heading into the spring semester. UIRR's involvement varied from campus to campus. This report focuses on analyses for the East, Northwest, South Bend, and Southeast campuses. For the latter three campuses, UIRR assisted by sampling and recruiting students, coordinating focus groups sessions, transcribing the focus group recordings, and analyzing the transcripts. IU-East recruited and conducted their focus groups separately and subsequently shared their audio recordings with UIRR for transcription and analysis. IU-Kokomo chose to conduct and analyze their focus group sessions with no assistance from UIRR. See the Methodology section of the full report for more information on how the focus groups were organized and administered.

In reading this report, some limitations should be noted. Ideally, focus groups would include a much larger portion of the population spread over additional sessions. There were a couple of implications brought on by the limited time frame in which focus groups could be conducted. First, the comments provided by the students are only a snapshot in time. Should the focus groups have been held earlier or later in the semester, the students might have presented different views. However, it is worth noting that most of the opinions dealt with issues relevant throughout the semester. Secondly, the timing decreased the recruitment period. As such, groups of students who typically display lower engagement and therefore respond to later recruitment attempts, such as males, are represented at potentially lower rates than they might have otherwise been. This is particularly true with the Northwest and East campuses. As such, nuances that are typical of male students, such as reasons for having lower rates of engagement, might have been drowned out by the opinions of other speakers.

## How to read the analysis

The analysis section has been broken up into overarching themes. In analyzing the focus group sessions, UIRR systematically evaluated approximately 10 hours of video footage and 191 pages of transcription, using *axial coding* to generate central themes across all participating regional campuses. Under each theme is a series of subthemes where the students describe illustrating examples. All sections of the analysis apply to all of the reported campuses unless explicitly stated otherwise.

Relevant quotes from the focus group sessions have been added throughout the analysis. These quotes describe students' experiences at their home campus and also reflect similar sentiments from students at the other campuses. In attributing quotes to an individual, the student has been identified by a pseudonym that corresponds to a record in the set of tables found in *Appendix A: Focus Group Participant Characteristics* of the full report. Within that table, you can find the students' sex, distance education status, academic level, and academic major. Additionally, the students' campuses have been marked in parenthesis next to the pseudonym in the analysis.

# Executive Summary

## Things Done Well

Across the board, the students gave the campuses resounding commendations on how the pandemic has been handled from a **communications standpoint**. They also appreciated that their **safety was the number one concern** and that all policies, practices, and procedures were consistent in that vein (e.g. social distancing, signage, classroom scheduling, and physical layout). They gave high marks to the mask protocols, mitigation testing, and the cleanliness of the facilities. When made available, the **provision of mobile hotspots** was a needed and requisite service that students relied on. In most instances, **faculty members were viewed as being very flexible**. Faculty showed empathy and ethic of care in how they checked in with students, spoke to students, and connected them with various supports (i.e. mental health, financial, disability services to name a few).

See [Student's Perceptions of Institutional Response](#) for more information.

## Student Challenges

See [Student Challenges](#) in the full analysis for more information.

Students are most consistent and vociferous about their **dissatisfaction with the academic experience**. While some students acknowledge gaps in student support services, the academic experience is what they have stressed the most concern about. **Freshman students are feeling the most estrangement and lack of connectivity to peers, faculty, and campus culture**. They have expressed a concern about a lack of efficacy to be able to tackle 200 level (and upwards) courses, and question if they are being effectively prepared to tackle what is up ahead. They have not been able to make connections with their peers and professors. They express feelings of isolation, lack of motivation, and an inability to effectively manage their time. Seniors on the other hand have long-established support systems in fellow peers, institutional knowledge, faculty relationships, and are more confident in their ability to navigate hiccups. To that end, **seniors are more concerned about completing** capstone projects, practicums, and internships, etc. These are all activities that are being affected in external environments that are also making adjustments due to the pandemic.

While most students had positive experiences, they often had a professor or two who did not meet their expectations of what they thought was needed for them to meet course learning objectives. **Students across the board feel most alienated when faculty:**

- are not responsive to emails
- did not provide timely and constructive feedback on completed work
- used only asynchronous format with no actual face time with the professor in a synchronous zoom lecture or online office hours
- inundated students with what is perceived as “busywork” with unclear or uncommunicated learning goals
- did not make content amenable to multiple learning styles
- inflexible and/or inconsistent with rubrics and deadlines, in the context of students’ lived experiences of trying to balance life, work, and school during a global pandemic

The students also had a visceral reaction to **a few administrative hurdles that were perceived as unfair**. The two prominent ones were parking and online fees. The overarching sentiment is that an alternative *pay for what you use* option should be applied to parking. In terms of online fees, the sentiment is “if you [administration] are forcing us to be online why are we paying for it? Also, if we are paying for it, we expect the quality we get in-person to be replicated.” Many focus group participants expressed that they felt they had been left to teach themselves online.

## Research Reliability and Confirmation

The themes that emerged are consistent and lend support to the work completed in Summer 2020 by Ben Motz et. al., titled *Going Remote: Actionable Insights from Indiana University's Transition to Remote Instruction due to COVID-19*. Their recommendations were:

1. Assign classwork judiciously, and in alignment with clear learning goals.
2. Create opportunities for student-instructor communication, especially for first and second-year students.
3. Facilitate student success and foster a sense of virtual community through student-to-student communication.
4. Collaborate with other members of IU's vibrant teaching community by sharing materials and successes and providing venues for others to do the same.

These recommendations largely focus on academic instruction. It is important to realize that administrative staff in concert with faculty could facilitate a sense of belonging and peer-to-peer connections. Intentional programming that uses technology to recreate in-person engagement and connectivity should be the goal. Other things like parking, access to the internet, time management, etc. all hint at some opportunities for support staff to create feedback loops sooner in the semester to get student voices centered in their learning. The student voice on what they would like to see change for Spring 2021 is espoused in the Analysis section next.

# Analysis

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## Students' Perception of Institutional Response

Areas in which students expressed the most satisfaction during the focus groups included campus communications, COVID-related safety measures, and administrator and faculty flexibility.

### Campus Communications

Students felt that communication at both the system and campus level was timely, consistent, and for the most part transparent. Ziggy (SE) said his campus had been *“good about communicating what's happening, what the plans are, and where things are going with the students.”* April (EA) stated that she was able to make informed decisions about her schedule because of the consistently updated email stream. Other students expressed being happy with the tone that the campus communities set regarding COVID-19 safety measures. Love, a student from South Bend, said she liked that the university was clear about the *“severity of breaking the rules.”* She went on to affirm that the safety communications *“set the tone of making it a priority of everyone on campus to be safe.”*

Despite overall satisfaction with institutional communication from most students, they thought some messages lacked clarity. Emails communicating last-minute course modality changes left students scrambling to find housing or childcare, or not having enough credits and shuffling to sort out financial aid implications. Some students were confused by perceived contradictions between campus and university protocols, especially dealing with changes in athletics. Zanyia (SB) expressed her need for clear and consistent communication in terms of managing all of the components of her life including childcare: *“If the schools close, that would be another variable for me. I'm trying to reduce variables.”*

### COVID-related Safety Measures

Almost all students who participated in the focus groups were in full support of the safety protocols that IU as an organization put into place. Mitigation testing was one area of general satisfaction. Olivia (SE) described it as *“an objective way to get numbers, to see how [COVID] is affecting our campus, and if [the university] needs to do things better.”* Other students commended on-campus efforts of crowd control and social distancing. Geraldine (EA) said, *“I think they did well with the classes since they're only allowed to have so many kids on campus at once.”*

In expressing their satisfaction, students compared IU's overall containment efforts with those of other Indiana institutions. Bartholomew (SB) stated, *“If you look at other colleges, we haven't had a problem with COVID really on campus.”* He went on to say that IU's consistent operations throughout the semester were *“a testament to how well we handled the situation here.”*

### Administrator and Faculty Flexibility

Students lauded their campus's ability to be agile. They praised administrators and faculty for their flexibility in scheduling classes and willingness to provide alternative pathways to success. Zanyia (SB) reasoned, *“You know, the reason why we have all these different options is because they're trying to be flexible and responsive.”* Zelda (SB) agreed by saying, *“If you have any issues, you could message [instructors] and just say, ‘Hey, I'm having a hard time.’ I think they've been great.”*

While students were generally happy about their interactions with campus faculty and staff, they expressed dissatisfaction with some instructors who had changed their expectations over the semester. Violet (SE) shared one example involving an instructor who had an inconsistent and last-minute pattern for scheduling Zoom calls: *“A lot of us students are at our jobs, and we can't really attend. The professors give us zeros for participation.”*

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## Academic and Learning Experience

Focus group attendees were most vocal about the perceived gaps in moving from in-person to completely online or hybrid. In many cases, students would report doing well academically, but express an absence of real learning. Several students noted that the online environment also promoted feelings of disconnectedness and disengagement by both students and faculty.

### Learning Styles

The main reasons provided by students as to why they were struggling with online instruction often had to do with their traditional learning preferences. Many students noted that the online format sometimes inhibits immediate two-way communication and feedback, with both peers and faculty. Rashida (EA) declared, *“I value face-to-face interaction, so getting moved to all online, I almost feel like there is a deficit in my learning experience.”* Lily (SE) relayed the story of a peer who had dropped out because he considered himself an *“in-person learner”* and did not want to pay for an education in which he *“wouldn’t grasp the information.”*

Students are accustomed to using being on campus and relationships to other students as psychological and physical benchmarks for their progress. They rely on faculty and peer interaction for support and motivation. April (EA) lent voice to this saying, *“I’m really, really bad about keeping myself accountable for schoolwork.”* However, she recognized that she did *“a lot better when doing things in class and interacting with my classmates.”* JT (SB) partially attributed a lack of learning to the absence of communication between students. Other participants shared stories of blank screens in Zoom class sessions due to students not using a camera. This communicated a lack of engagement that clouded their enthusiasm to engage. Similarly, in Zoom breakout sessions, it was not uncommon to encounter total silence—barring faculty intervention—especially if the students did not have prior established relationships.

### Modality and Subject Area

Students pointed out that some complex classes (e.g., advanced math) or courses that require a collaborative synthesis of ideas (e.g., literature classes) were best taught in person. Dina (EA) pointed out that as an English major *“not being able to have those discussions for literature, and especially literary criticism, you really don’t get that same kind of feel as if you’re in the classroom.”* Janelle (NW) described the difficulty of transitioning to online in her upper-level Spanish class in which conversation was paramount to achieve learning objectives. The concerns about modality were especially apparent in the comments of two of the students from the Northwest campus, Abena and Allison, who described their different experiences taking the same geology class. Abena took the class online and had problems with the labs where it was important to see and sometimes feel different types of rocks to identify the mineral content. Allison, who took the in-person class because she *“needed that extra help and didn’t know much about [the subject],”* explained that it was easy to see the minerals up close.

### Busy work

Busy work, in the context of this report, is a term that students used to describe tasks or activities that students perceived as being assigned simply for the sake of doing “work” but not explicitly aligned with the course learning objectives. Bartholomew (SB) described that he thought some of his instructors had been assigning more busywork as a way to *“stimulate you to keep working as if it were an [in-person] classroom experience. But, at the end of the day, it really just comes off as forced extra homework that is doing nothing more than adding time onto my day.”* Other students were undecided about whether classes had more busy work. Tarah (SE) described her Chemistry lab saying that the workflow had inherently changed because it was not in-person. She was unsure if this constituted busywork, but she was also quick to say that, in other classes, she feels like *“they are just giving me the work to do the work, instead of wanting [me] to learn more about the subject.”*



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## Student-Faculty Communication

Timely, thought-out feedback from instructors was expressed as being paramount to students. Almost all of the students expressed both positive and negative sentiments about communicating and receiving feedback from instructors. Some students expressed inconsistency with how quickly professors would respond to emails. Marsha (SB) described a more drastic experience where she had not had any contact with her professor all semester. In addition to inconsistent communication, students also expressed that much of the feedback they did receive lacked substance. Margaret (SB) mentioned that while some of her instructors were very good about providing critical feedback, others simply provided short, one-sentence explanations. In the absence of critical feedback and lacking the engagement of a typical in-person class, some students suggested that it was difficult to know whether or not they were learning what they were supposed to be learning, even when receiving high marks on assignments.

On the other hand, the majority of students said that most of the instructors were excellent at responding to students. Students described online office hours and using various modes of communication (e.g., email, text, phone call) as valuable efforts made by instructors. Etsuko (NW) along with several other students commented that professors had done a phenomenal job at simply checking in on the well-being of students: *“Professors typically always either open up with asking, ‘How are you guys doing? How are you feeling?’”*

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## Student Challenges

Among all of the challenges mentioned by the students, maintaining motivation and balancing school and other obligations ranked among the highest. Although all of the students expressed some challenges, upper-level students (i.e., juniors and seniors) and students who were online before the pandemic seemed to be faring better due to pre-built social networks and preferred learning style, respectively.

### Struggling to Stay Motivated

One of the central themes that emanated from the focus groups was a decline in motivation stemming from the change in physical space and a lack of engagement with peers and instructors. Bartholomew (SB) expressed this concept saying, *“I learn a lot more from the interactions that I get with [the] professor. When I’m going to Zoom classroom, whether I’m at school or [at home], I’m a lot more distracted by my surroundings.”* This increased distraction translated into difficulties with time management for some students. Ziggy (SE) said he had an easier time in classes that had a more regimented schedule: *“We have something due Tuesday and something usually due Thursday or Friday. We have a Zoom meeting Wednesday. So the work is spread out throughout the week. It forces you to sit down multiple times and work on stuff”*

### Balancing Work, School, and Life

COVID-related uncertainties are amplified for students who typically juggle multiple roles. These students are forced to balance work, school, and family in a more complicated and less predictable way than they ever have before. Janelle (NW) is balancing her practicum, homeschooling, parenting, and household responsibilities. She described the “dorm fort” that she had created for herself in her basement as a necessity to provide a quiet area away from her kids and a private place in which she could perform case management activities for her internship for the American Red Cross. Janelle’s story is analogous to many other students who were already working many hours pre-COVID and whose list of responsibilities is likely to have multiplied.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> According to the [IU Financial Wellness Survey](#), 80% of student respondents from East, Northwest, South Bend, and Southeast combined were working for pay with 50% working over 20 hours per week.

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## Campus Life

### Sense of Community

The majority of the students who shared their opinions about campus life were quick to describe our campuses as *ghost towns* or *shells of their former selves*. Many of the upper-level students conveyed that they had been reaching out to peers with whom they had built a relationship in previous semesters. Likewise, some students mentioned turning to novel forms of peer-to-peer engagement. Sebastian (SE) shared how a fellow student in his program had set up a series of chat channels in Discord, an online chat and collaboration platform: *“He has a whole group [of students in his department]. And there's a chat room for each different class in the program. It's been really helpful, and I wouldn't have thought to look out for something like that.”*

However, other students describe a harder time developing a sense of community. Everald is a resident advisor on the South Bend campus. He said, *“It's hard to get a grasp on the sense of community that we usually have on campus. I imagine that's really hard for freshmen. They're not getting the experience that they should.”*

### Accessing Campus Resources

Most of the focus group respondents who utilized an online student support service had positive experiences. Though, most of the students also said that they would prefer to receive those services in-person. Margaret (SB) expressed the perception that staff in administrative offices *“whether it's subconsciously or consciously, they take you more seriously [in-person].”* While she echoed views from other students that online appointments were timely and convenient, she added, *“Face-to-face visits gave me more immediate results that actually helped.”*

One would assume that the reduction in student-faculty interaction would increase the use of tutoring services. Two students who were tutors shared that they were actually seeing fewer students. Faith (SB) shared her experience by describing the difficulties of relaying information and sharing examples—especially from a physical textbook—through a Zoom interface. Ziggy (SE) mentioned a perceived decrease in coordination and an increase in lag time between students reaching out for help and receiving an appointment.

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## Administrative Hurdles (South Bend and Southeast)

The students on the South Bend and Southeast campuses spent time revealing how they saw the associated fees with parking and online learning as financial burdens that were unfairly imposed upon them, especially because of the timing and lack of forthright communication.

### Parking

Marsha (SB) said her *“greatest concern this semester is only having one class that's in-person but having to pay the \$65 (or \$75) to park for only an hour a week. It's just kind of a big expense for me.”* Violet (SE) complained that *“It didn't really make any sense to pay the full amount for a parking pass when we're not actually on-campus for the full amount.”* One participant was a member of the Student Government Association (SGA) on the South Bend Campus. He described the SGA's failed attempt to provide students with alternative parking pass options such as a Monday/Wednesday pass or a Tuesday/Thursday pass.

## Fee Reductions and Billing Transparency

Students were also upset about increased fees associated with online learning, which they saw as a forced charge for a service that they did not choose. Although there was a lot of strong contention about this issue, some of the more salient comments were about the implementation of the fee rather than the fee itself. Bartholomew (SB) thought there were communication breakdowns and lack of transparency in itemizing the fee structure, explaining what the fees were associated with, and why they were necessary. He felt this lack of communication further exacerbated a perceived lack of concern for the financial hardships some students were facing.

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## Expectations for Spring Semester

In discussing what other types of challenges were expected in the spring semester, students were quick to mention some of the items that had already been mentioned about the fall semester along with novel concerns, especially dealing with starting the semester online and a sense of unease dealing with practicum courses.

## Starting the Semester Online

In talking about heading into the spring semester, Olivia (SE) noted a lack of motivation associated with online learning from both students and instructors. She went on to say that the transition from online to in-person mid-semester might negatively impact intensity and class expectations in a way that was not apparent in the fall semester since classes started in-person. Richie (SB) echoed this sentiment saying, “Getting a good start on a semester may be hard because of a lack of motivation [due to having a long break flowing into online classes] and because of a lack of on-campus resources.”

## Practicum Courses

Some coursework or campus activities are difficult to translate into a virtual environment and many of those occur in the spring as upper-level students are preparing to end their programs. Some students expressed uncertainty about losing clinical sites and how those adjustments might impact their spring semester, especially given the rapidity at which establishments have been restricting access to contain the pandemic. Faith (SB) expressed this sentiment about her clinical: *“We’re losing capstone sites and clinical sites. So it’s more readjustment mid-semester or last minute.”* Olivia (SE) described having a lot of simulations in the spring 2020 semester due to closed or limited clinical sites. She said that those simulations took substantially more time to complete and didn’t provide the same level of practical experience. Jo Ellen (SB), a student in an education program, expressed the concern that she might catch COVID-19 when she starts teaching in the classroom as part of her practicum. She also had apprehension about the possibility of teaching virtually if the schools go all online again, especially since her program spent little time exposing students to virtual teaching formats.

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## Student Observations and Recommendations for the Spring

Following other talking points, students were asked to provide their recommendations about how to approach the spring semester and what types of improvements they would like to see. The following section outlines specific suggestions posed directly by focus group participants based on their perceptions and lived experiences that they wanted leadership to consider when making decisions for the upcoming Spring semester.

## On-campus Study Locations

A handful of students noted that the lack of on-campus study locations or reduced hours for those locations has impacted coursework. Love (SB) describes the library as a “*huge resource*” in which she studies “*super well*.” However, she said that she had been negatively impacted by reduced hours. This sentiment was echoed by Richie (SB) who said that it is difficult for him to focus at home because he lives with four other students and two dogs. He describes the reduced library hours as a “*huge loss*,” especially since it’s currently closed in the evening when he does most of his studying.

## Campus Communications

Several students also mentioned ways in which communication could be improved for the spring semester. Margaret (SB) stressed the importance of online communications in terms of providing a connectedness to the campus and IU in general, especially since so many face-to-face events have been canceled. She recalled missing a drive-in movie event being hosted by the campus because of a lack of adequate notification about the event. Other students were more concerned about knowing what the semester is “*going to look like*.” Bartholomew (SB) mentioned the importance of having messaging that is more personal to students and suggested that communications from a student’s department might sometimes be appreciated, especially emails concerning students’ health and well-being.

## Course Modality and Consistency

Students who were accustomed to an in-person experience favored synchronous classes with predictable schedules over asynchronous classes, where informal routines could lead to decreased motivation to keep up with classwork. Antoinette (SB) mentioned that she has a mix of synchronous and asynchronous classes. She expressed an appreciation for the flexibility of being able to watch recorded lectures on her own time or re-watch them if she didn’t retain the information. However, she added that regularly scheduled classes promoted time management skills. Other students were not tied to the idea of having a scheduled class time, but they still preferred routine, week-to-week deadlines to either hold them accountable or to help with juggling other aspects of their lives. Jamaica, an online student from the East campus, explained that the assignments for all of his classes are typically due by Sunday at midnight. Since he works the rest of the week, he can reliably leave Thursday and Sunday available to catch up on coursework.

Although students were sympathetic with the fact that instructors had limited time to prepare and structure their classes, students also recommended that more time be devoted to providing a consistent and thought-out learning experience, perhaps using additional teaching materials, such as videos, to supplement routine class time. Zanyia (SB) described the voice-over PowerPoint videos that her instructor created in Kaltura saying that, in addition to adding a way to review lecture material, these materials could be used to facilitate more active learning during synchronous classes by diverting time from lecture to discussion of the pre-recorded content.

## Respite/Breaks

Although students were understanding of the need to sacrifice academic breaks, they also conveyed a sense of fatigue and burn out. Faith (SB) said that she understood the idea of “*front-loading spring break*.” However, she said that having a mid-semester break is necessary when powering through a busy 16-week period. Margaret (SB) mentioned that, for her, breaks typically marked a period during which she could devote time to time management activities, such as planning and organization, without diverting attention away from day-to-day coursework or outside obligations.

Recognizing that reinstating spring break isn’t an option, Zanyia (SB) suggested having an “*easy week*” built into the calendar, during which typical assignments would be replaced with fun, course-related activities. She described this as an opportunity to provide a “*mental reprieve*” without sacrificing course content.

## Canvas Consistency

Participants in the focus groups belabored the point that faculty had an endless permutation of how courses were arranged and designed in Canvas, making it harder to comprehend how to use the interface and engage with course material. Faith (SB) commented that some professors prefer to communicate via email while others will post announcements on Canvas. Another student, JT (SB), mentioned that sometimes, even when notifications are sent through Canvas, they are posted as an afterthought to an earlier announcement made during class. In some cases, the notifications only appear on Canvas a couple of days before the due date. Other students commented that class materials were placed in disparate places on the Canvas platform. Cullen (NW) described the Canvas experience as a “*scavenger hunt*.” Joe (SB) explained that this also happens with the Zoom links for the class. He explained that for one of his classes, the instructor created a different link for each class period. To find the appropriate URL, students had to find the current module, search for the correct date, and copy/paste the link into the browser window.

The issue of faculty members using completely different platforms in conjunction with Canvas was a concern that arose in the East focus groups. The resources that students cited faculty using the most were *Mastering*, *Top Hat*, *Matlab*, and *Piazza*. Students reported being accustomed to faculty using other platforms with Canvas pre-COVID, so while additional adjustments were needed at times to navigate two systems, this was a practice that predated COVID. Regardless of the additional platform, through prolonged exposure, students generally gained comfort. As long as faculty synchronized these platforms with Canvas, the students were able to stay on track with assignments.

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## Conclusion

Throughout the focus groups, students discussed a plethora of challenges as well as positive steps taken by the campuses. However, course design, communication, and engagement rose to the top as specific themes of concern—especially since these concepts flow hand-in-hand with the traditional learning experience. While understanding that instructors had little time to transition their classes to an online format, students nonetheless expressed a desire that course designs be improved for the spring semester with an emphasis on finding novel ways to facilitate the types of discussions that would normally happen in a face-to-face learning environment. The students’ comments also alluded to the ways in which certain aspects of communication, such as setting clear and consistent channels of communication and providing critical feedback, have become more important without face-to-face interactions. Students expect communications to be timely and forthright, from the campus community in general, to provide the information needed to juggle competing obligations of academics, work, family, finances, etc. The students attributed lack of engagement with peers and instructors as a potential reasons for decreased motivation. While the focus group participants spoke about engagement or connectedness in relation to individual topics, researchers noted that this common theme might be indirectly related to their overall self-identification as a student—especially since their current engagement with academia might be incongruent with traditional perceptions of what it means to be a student. As such, many of the students’ comments alluded to a desire to have some of the tenets of a traditional educational experience reshaped, in a recognizable fashion, to fit the current online and socially distanced environment.