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A STUDY OF THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON LATINX COLLEGE STUDENTS IN THE  
MIDWEST

MOLLY RICCI

75 Pages

This study investigates how Latinx undergraduate college students at Illinois State University who were enrolled in the spring 2020 semester experienced the transition to online learning after the onset of the worldwide COVID-19 pandemic. It explores how they were affected by the pandemic and how they coped with it in the aftermath of college closures and movement to online learning. Qualitative data and methods were utilized through a series of 10 interviews collected in a snowball sample with various starting points. Broadly, it was found that the pandemic affected the students' learning and college experiences greatly. There is much already known about racial differences in the impact of COVID-19, and this study found that Latinx students were uniquely impacted in both the transition to online learning and their college experiences. Family life was disrupted, and most participants experienced pandemic related mental health issues. Students' perception of the university's response was also examined, and it was found that most participants felt a lack of support for first-generation students. This work gives voice to the unique experience of Latinx students and contributes to the growing body of work that is emerging about the impact of the 2020 pandemic in college campuses across the nation.

**KEYWORDS:** Latinx college students; COVID-19; online learning; interviews

A STUDY OF THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON LATINX COLLEGE STUDENTS IN THE  
MIDWEST

MOLLY RICCI

A Thesis Submitted in Partial  
Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of

MASTER OF SCIENCE

Department of Sociology and Anthropology

ILLINOIS STATE UNIVERSITY

2022

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A STUDY OF THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON LATINX COLLEGE STUDENTS IN THE  
MIDWEST

MOLLY RICCI

COMMITTEE MEMBERS:

Maura Toro-Morn, Chair

Michael Dougherty

Frank Beck

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I finally want to thank the participants who spoke with me so openly during these interviews. I appreciate the rapport we shared and am grateful for the trust they gave me during this process in sharing their stories, which were often emotional and very personal. Thank you to all who gave me their patience, their perspectives, and their understanding as I completed this work. I could not have done this without the support of many others.

M. R.

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## CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

In the spring semester of 2020, universities across the nation were forced to close for a significant period and transfer all learning activities online as a result of the onset of the COVID-19 worldwide pandemic. The sudden switch of classes to online in such a short time – many over the course of one week – proved to be chaotic, both for faculty and students. While universities have now returned to face-to-face instruction in the state of Illinois, many side effects of the sudden switch to e-learning are still present. Additionally, the memories and impact of attending college in the middle of a pandemic will be felt for years to come. I hope that this research will be in conversation with current and future studies that investigate the myriad of ways college students were impacted by this significant time in history, both in the short and long term. Thus, this project studied the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the sudden move online, focusing on Latinx students at Illinois State University.

It has been apparent both informally and anecdotally that undergraduate students faced many challenges during this switch. Those who lived on campus housing were forced to move back home, shattering the youthful rite of passage of living away from home while going to college. Those who returned home were often met with the challenge of not having a quiet place to study in a home that was suddenly full of quarantined family members. Family dynamics changed for many, and students often found themselves struggling with lack of separation between personal, family, and work spaces. Some were expected to start working to help cover family expenses or help with younger siblings, which made their studies more difficult to manage. On top of this, many students lacked reliable internet, which is essential for online class formats, while others lacked necessary technology such as laptops, headphones, and microphones. Many felt a lack of support from their universities, which were also scrambling to

organize and execute a sudden transition from face-to-face instruction to instruction on Zoom. Additionally, college students tend to be overrepresented in low-paying, on-campus, and service industry jobs, which were made even more precarious during this chaotic time. As a result, many students lost their jobs temporarily or entirely, some were left in a limbo state, and others had to put themselves at risk, often without hazard pay.

During the initial switch to e-learning, many students felt a wave of shock, stress, and confusion surrounding the uncertain future of their classes, extracurriculars, jobs, and internships. One participant from this study, Nadia, describes her initial reaction:

I did struggle, the fall semester here [at ISU] ... that whole school year was really hard for me. [It was] probably the worst one because I was, like, in a new environment and I feel like – as a transfer student – I didn't get a lot of like resources in general, but especially because of pandemic. So, there were like so many things that I didn't know about already, and then having to face like online classes while in a whole new environment and school ... was really hard. I mean I got through all my classes, but it was definitely a struggle.

Here, Nadia begins to capture some of the common and salient issues facing college students during the pandemic, such as access to and knowledge of important resources and support. As I mentioned earlier, college students perceive college to be part of the cherished rituals of young adulthood and thus, moving back home represents a sacrifice of freedoms gained and a sense of going backwards. Not all students had quiet spaces at home or stable internet, among many other issues. In the following quote, another participant who was a senior at the time of the transition, Julia, articulates the kind of technology problems she encountered:

I had a ton of internet problems. It really sucked. I had already booked my lease for this past year [summer of 2020 - spring of 2021], for my apartment and so we couldn't get out of the lease at all, it was horrible. So, I had to live on campus for my last year, and our internet was through the realty company... So, I called a ton of internet technicians during the year because I kept getting kicked out of classes. I ended up having to spend like... all my mornings, either at the coffee [shop on campus], or like, where I could get internet because my internet wasn't working at the apartment. And so, since the library and stuff wasn't open yet, I would either have to, like, sit on the quad or sit like in [the coffee shop].

It will be years to come before the larger impact of this pandemic on college student populations is understood, thus this research will offer ethnographic data analysis of college students' experiences that could support other studies. These data offer rich accounts of Latinx college students' experiences of how they managed the move to remote learning, the problems they faced, and how they dealt with those problems. Some of the most notable themes which emerged from these interviews were family dynamic changes and life disruptions, mental health struggles related to the pandemic, and, most significantly, resilience in the face of these challenges on the part of participants and their families.

This research contributes to the development of groundbreaking analysis about how the pandemic affected college students, in particular Latina/o/x college students, as there is a notable lack of research surrounding this population during the early stages of the pandemic. Overall, this study aims to capture the transition to remote learning, remote learning itself, and its aftermath for Latina/o/x students at Illinois State University.

Since the pandemic is recent and ongoing, there is a notable lack of information as to how the shutdowns have impacted students' learning and wellbeing. I have focused this study on the Latinx student population at Illinois State University. Using qualitative interview methods, I conducted one-on-one interviews with a subset of 10 Latinx students to study their experience during and after the switch to remote learning to learn about the many aspects of its lasting impact.

The main research question guiding this project is:

- How did Latinx college students experience the pandemic?

This is a broad research question guiding this research project overall. From this question come various sub questions. These questions are guided by what is already known based on previous literature, my own observations as a member of the ISU student community, and preliminary analysis of interview data. The sub-questions guiding this project are:

- How did Latinx students at ISU experience the move to online learning in the early stages of the pandemic?
- How did students navigate disruptions to their college experiences?
- How did family life change as a result of the pandemic?
- How did students cope with the move home and to online learning in the early stages of the pandemic?
- Once remote learning became the primary mode of learning for the following academic year, how did students cope?

Broadly, this study seeks to understand what happened to Latinx ISU students when classes went online. Social scientists have documented that minority students faced a unique and diverse set of challenges as college students. Sociologists have documented that Latino students faced many unique problems such as differential treatment from social workers, teachers, and other students. Research has shown as well that students benefitting from DACA have been able to enjoy much greater social mobility and economic inclusion, but even those in this program are in some states restricted from entry into some public universities, among other important barriers (Garcia, 2012; Jones, 2020). With this in mind, I anticipate that undocumented students – many of whom are Latinx and who are already faced with distinctive challenges and uncertainty – are expected to be disproportionately impacted by the pandemic generally as these students are not able to apply for federal financial aid and report many other axes of oppression in university life (Huber, L & Malagon, M 2007).

Newspaper accounts have documented that Latino communities across the US have been impacted by the virus at higher rates in comparison to the white US population. It has been documented that Latinos are overrepresented in essential jobs and many are forced to work in conditions that do not allow for social distance. Latinos are also being found to be more economically impacted than whites by the pandemic, with many facing unemployment prospects due to loss of jobs in the service industry. Those who are undocumented are left out of key benefits such as stimulus checks, or health insurance, which furthers their marginalization. I am compelled to deepen our understanding of the pandemic effects on Latinx college students because it is evident that they are likely a vulnerable population at a critical moment in their lives, in particular for low-income, first-generation students, for whom college is the ticket to better opportunities and social capital.

I use grounded theory as the theoretical framework for this study, as I want the data collected to guide the theory that will be produced inductively during analysis. This theoretical framework best supports these research questions because grounded theory emphasizes allowing theory to be generated and constructed by the data from participants and the researcher during analysis (Chun Tie, Y., Birks, M., & Francis, K. 2019).

### **Contributions of the Project**

This research contributes to a broad and growing body of research that seeks to understand what college students experienced during the early stages of the pandemic, and how that continues to affect their lives today. It adds to existing data which reveals which student demographics were most disadvantaged by the switch to online learning and related life changes. This study, however, provides more detail through the stories told in the qualitative interviews. This indicates that there is still much to be learned and that more qualitative ethnographic work should be done to hear more of these stories, and that that work would best be done soon, so that students' memories are still fresh and rich with detail.

### **Organization**

This paper will be organized as follows: Chapter 2 will discuss bodies of literature that are relevant to this research. I address the literature and brief history behind the term "Latinx," which is used as an umbrella term throughout this paper. I will also lay out relevant research in where the pandemic stands now, as well as general pandemic studies. I also discuss literature surrounding existing racial inequality in schools in the United States generally. Finally, I discuss the current preliminary studies on college students and the pandemic, looking at what is known so far about the complex and lasting effect this time has on students, and what it may look like in

the future. This chapter overall provides a critical evaluation relevant research and findings relating to the research questions of this project.

Chapter 3 will discuss methods at length. I layout the methodological background of this study as well as the theoretical framework and other reasonings behind different aspects of the research design. I specify how data were collected as well as specify demographic characteristics of the sample. I also discuss the methods of data collection, for example, how interviews took place, how they were transcribed, and how they were analyzed. I finally touch on some ethical considerations and limitations of these sampling and data collection methods.

Chapter 4 discusses analysis of the data. I examine the procedure of analysis at length and present major findings from these qualitative interview data. I address how grounded theory guides the analysis process. Interview excerpts are often included to illustrate the origins of analytical interpretations and to preserve integrity to stay close to the data. Data is organized around analytic categories and the process of creating these analytic categories is explained as well.

Chapter 5 serves as the conclusion, wrapping up the paper and reiterating the most important findings from these data. It also addresses the limitations of this study and poses questions for future research.



## CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

This research is nurtured by several bodies of research including Latinos and education, Latinos in the pandemic, and Latino families.

I will first address the choice to use the term “Latinx” throughout this paper. This will be further touched on in the methods section as well. There is rich literature on the reasoning behind the identity of the term Latinx. It is meant to be an inclusive panethnic term which encompasses all related labels but does not erase or negate them. Latinidad is an ethnic identity that speaks to the identity and experiences of people of Latin American descent living in the United States (Pelaez Lopez, 2018). However, Pelaez Lopez (2018) highlights that the identity of Latinx arises in response to several wounds that exist in Latinidad – a term that was meant to include but left out and decentralized many. Lopez writes that the three wounds baked into the X in Latinx include the wound of settlement and subsequent debate over where precisely Latin American borders, both literally and figuratively, lie.

The second wound is represented by the exclusion of blackness in Latinidad historically and the need for Afro Latina/o/x people to take up space in the label. Finally, the author writes of “the wound of femicide,” which they argue for the need to place value on women and all femme people, citing femicide rates in Latin America, and particularly terrifying murder rates for trans women. Salvador Vidal-Ortiz (2018) echoes these thoughts in many ways, writing that “Latinx is used primarily as a way to challenge the gender binary in both language and society and to point out the marginalization and violence it creates. Everyone who wishes to incorporate the use of the ‘x’ in Latinx generally seeks to be inclusive of gender nonconforming Latinx subjects.” So, while there are many labels that are used (such as Chicano/a/x, Latina/o/x, Hispanic, etc.) for the

reasons identified above, I have chosen to use Latinx as the term to capture the multiplicity of experiences and identities of this group in this paper.

At the time of writing this thesis, in May of 2022, COVID-19 is still a worldwide pandemic, creating widespread disruption. The Johns Hopkins University documents that 81,444,332 people have been infected in the United States with COVID-19. They report that 993,999 people have died from the virus in the US (<https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/>). In the world, there have been a total of 514,677,232 people infected with the virus, resulting in 6,240,394 total deaths to date as of May 3, 2022. Closer to home, in Illinois, there have been a total of 3,147,667 people infected and 36,053 people have passed away in the state according to the Illinois Department of Public Health (<https://www.dph.illinois.gov/covid19/covid19-statistics>).

In the U.S., there is a massive vaccination effort that had led to some leveling of the spread of the pandemic, although there are pockets of high rates of infection in some states. The question needs to be asked: what is known about the pandemic in universities across the nation? This research intends to study the significance of the COVID-19 shutdowns on Latinx college students' experiences involving classes, the transition to online learning, as well as family and community life. Due to the ethnographic nature of this research, there does not exist much literature on this topic yet, but here I offer a review of available preliminary studies on the impact of the pandemic on college students generally, as well as the existing inequality issues in higher education.

This study allows knowledge to emerge in rich detail through these students' experiences during the shutdown and throughout the academic year of remote learning during a generally stressful period. Data from this research inform the impact of the pandemic on Latinx college students and highlight areas in the university's response that could be improved. These data also

guide the university in ways that it can better address students' needs and how it can give more effective support to this group of students generally. To my knowledge, there are no existing studies that have produced detailed qualitative research about student experiences during this turbulent time. More specifically, there exists a gap in literature that addresses Latinx college students in this way. In light of this, this study intends to address this gap to add to the collective knowledge about COVID-19 and its complicated impact on college students.

### **General Pandemic Studies**

Research that has emerged since the beginning of the pandemic in the United States has demonstrated that the economic effects were felt heterogeneously across various demographics in the US population. It has been found that Black Americans have been dying from the virus at a higher rate than that of white Americans (Horowitz 2020). Black Americans are also about twice as likely to know someone who has been hospitalized or died from the virus than white Americans (*Health Concerns From COVID-19 Much Higher Among Hispanics and Blacks Than Whites*, 2020). Black Americans are more likely to be struggling to pay bills due to the pandemic, as about 70% say they do not have emergency funds to help cover expenses, while for white Americans, only about half do not have such funds saved (Lopez et al., 2020). These inequalities are prevalent in other groups as well.

Latinos have been especially hard-hit by the pandemic too and are also reporting struggling to pay bills at a higher rate than white Americans (Lopez et al., 2020). They are twice as concerned as their white counterparts about catching and spreading the virus (*Health Concerns From COVID-19 Much Higher Among Hispanics and Blacks Than Whites*, 2020). They also have been shown to be more likely than the US population overall to see the virus as a “major threat” to the health of the nation (Krogstad, Gonzalez-Barrera, & Lopez, 2020) and received more pay cuts and job losses than the general population (Krogstad, Gonzalez-Barrera,

& Noe-Bustamante, 2020). The Center for Disease Control has attempted some explanations for these racial disparities and mentions healthcare discrimination, unequal access to healthcare, varying risk of exposure at work (which effects ability to social distance), and housing situations as factors (*Health Equity Considerations and Racial and Ethnic Minority Groups*, 2020).

Preliminary existing research regarding undocumented immigrants in the United States during the pandemic more broadly has highlighted the instability of their position. For example, several researchers from Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine and the Department of Epidemiology and Bloomberg School of Public Health write that undocumented Latinos were faced with conflicting instructions from the Trump administration. In early February of 2020, when the implications of the coronavirus were not yet publicly known, undocumented immigrants were instructed via public notice that, if they became “a public charge,” they would be inadmissible to the United States as citizens in the future. Mere months later, they were given a conflicting order and were instead instructed “to seek necessary medical treatment or preventive services” in the event of experiencing any symptoms of COVID-19. This is clearly a problem, as undocumented residents felt an understandable mistrust of the government, and many were thus motivated to avoid seeking medical help for COVID. Furthermore, undocumented students cannot apply for federal aid and are consequently burdened further if they choose to attend college, which is necessary to advance in the labor market. This inequality can be found in other institutions as well; I will discuss some of the ways this exists in US education in the following section of the literature review.

## **Inequality in Education**

These recent findings related to the coronavirus shutdowns exist within an already well-established context of unequal educational settings. Racial and ethnic minorities encounter unequal opportunities in education generally in the US. (Fiel, J., 2015). For example, research has documented how Latinx students routinely experience racial discrimination in higher education. They are often victims of poor academic advisement which presumes they are not as studious or competent as their white peers (Vela-Gude et al, 2009). Another study by Donna Ford – a professor at Vanderbilt University and activist for closing the racial inequality gap in education – echoes these findings by highlighting that, despite making up an increasing proportion of students in the US, Latinx and Black students are underrepresented in gifted programs in schools (Ford D. Y. 2014). Ford also mentions that, while the student demographics are shifting in the US, the demographics of educators are stagnant, remaining about 85% white, which contributes to these persistent issues. Vela-Gude et al. (2009) gathered qualitative data from Latino undergraduate college students and found that, despite these students’ aspirations to attain more education post-graduation, these students often felt that they received inappropriate or inadequate advisement, as well as having trouble accessing sufficient individual attention from advisors. They felt that they were given lower expectations and given more limits than other students.

Another qualitative study uncovered more detail through interviewing both “high-risk” Latina girls in a charter school as well as the clinicians who work with them. This research revealed that Latina girls who were labeled as “high-risk” at their school were burdened by perceptions of cultural poverty and low expectations educationally – even by clinicians, who frequently relied on reasoning based on gender and ethnicity to conclude why their students struggled. The researchers, Vera López

and Meda Chesney-Lind, also note the often classist and racist nature of classifications such as “high-risk,” which impact the students.

Another similar study conducted by researchers Reyna Rodriguez, Izbieta Rocha, and Alinne Z. Barrera investigates emotional triggers for adolescent Latina girls. Their findings echo existing data which show that, even among and already at-risk age group – adolescence, with an age range of 10-19 years - Latinx adolescents struggle more than the general population with mental health issues such as depression. They report higher rates of depression how is a population when compared with non-Hispanic black and white peers (Knopf, Park, & Mulye, 2008; Twenge & Nolen-Hoeksema, 2002). These authors state that, “given the Latinx value of *familismo*, the strong bond that exists between family members (Ayón, Marsiglia, & Bermudez-Parsai, 2010), it would be beneficial to assess whether this cultural value influences or mediates what triggers depression among this community” (Rodriguez, Rocha, & Barrera 2019).

Similarly, Manzano-Sanchez, H., Matarrita-Cascante, D., & Outley, C. (2019) find that, out of a group of 21 Latinx high school students between the ages of 15 and 17, many students reported encountering distinct barriers in their college aspirations such as lack of confidence, family responsibilities, lack of help navigating complex steps in the college process, and lack of teacher support. Among supports cited by participants in this study are support from family members and friends. Gender is important here as well, as Latina girls are more likely to suffer from depression than their male counterparts (Twenge & Nolen-Hoeksema, 2002) but may also be more likely to seek academic support (Manzano-Sanchez, Matarrita-Cascante, & Outley 2019). This relates to findings of this study as participants frequently reported feeling both stress and crucial support from family throughout the unstable transition to online learning and navigating life and college, which will be further discussed in the analysis section.

Clearly, as these studies demonstrate, there exists an already unequal playing field in education within the US. It is not surprising that students from middle- and low- income backgrounds struggle more than those from higher-income families. Additionally, race and ethnicity are relevant because the consensus is that students of color experience different treatment institutionally which impacts their opportunities. Latinx students specifically have their own unique experience with institutional discrimination that deserves more investigation. These studies clearly highlight that Latinx students come up against particular gendered and racial/ethnic biases from educators and other staff that impact them uniquely. Additionally, it is clearly worth investigating this community as abovementioned research highlights their disproportionate job losses and economic distress due to the pandemic, as well as heightened anxiety about COVID-19 compared to white Americans. In the next section, I will discuss some early studies that have been done on students during the coronavirus pandemic which unveil how the additional stressor of the pandemic affects students in this already inequitable landscape.

### **Preliminary Relevant Studies**

In this section, I focus on the emerging literature that exposes inequalities due to the pandemic in the US population in general, which is relevant to contextualize the experience of Latinx students. I anticipate, in years to come, there will be a wave of studies concerning ways that different communities of students faced the pandemic. But, at this point in time, I know that there is very little that has been published about it. The research that I found is relevant and insightful for its diversity.

One source of literature comes from Dr. Jenna Goldsmith of Illinois State University. Her book, *There is No College in COVID*, was published in 2021 and is a collection “of journal entries from first-year first-term students...from the fall term in 2020,” the second semester of remote learning during the pandemic. New students attending Oregon State University –

Cascades who were enrolled in a course designed to help them connect with peers and transition to college wrote journal entries during this time, which were then archived in this work. The narratives captured are telling of the experiences of students during this unprecedented time and in many ways relate to what I find in this study. One informant of this study is quoted saying “college is not just academia, it is a community.” This sentiment is certainly reflected in the interviews I conducted. Common themes that arose in the journal collection include isolation, monotony, loss of and disconnect from family, and difficulty with classes. Below are some notable quotes from the collection:

“Motivation: nonexistent”

“This desk is where I go to relax, but also where I go to work...I’ve come to dread it.”

“Freedom turned into total monotony”

“I now completely understand why people drop out of college”

“I attended my grandfather’s funeral this week. He died of the virus. No comment.”

“Am I really bad at being a student or a virtual student?”

“It was fun while it lasted...the anxiety that came after was not pleasant at all.”

These quotes and many more that come from the collection of journal entries showcase the many extracurricular challenges that students were faced with as the pandemic continued into its second semester.

Broadly, new research supports the above anecdotal evidence and supports that students’ wellbeing has been negatively impacted by the pandemic shutdowns. The following study by Changwon Son, Sudeep Hegde, Alec Smith, Xiaomei Wang, and Farzan Sasangohar investigates various aspects of student wellbeing during the initial switch to online learning. The study utilizes a semi-structured interview and mixed methods to achieve two main goals: they wanted



to investigate stress levels and better understand how students coped with the pressure associated with the pandemic and resulting messy situation. In addition to the semi-structured interviews, survey instruments were used that allowed participants to rate their experiences using scales.

The research was conducted at a large university in Texas which transitioned online in late March of 2020 like most other universities in the US. The interviews were conducted shortly after. Researchers used snowball sampling and recruited participants through email personal connections. To qualify, participants needed to be an undergraduate student in the university. During the analysis phase of this study, 195 participants were used. The majority were upperclassmen students (70%) and there were more female than male participants (57% were female). The vast majority of students reported increased stress levels as a result of the pandemic and also assumed that others were experiencing similar stress and anxiety because of the pandemic. Varying across different measures, more than half of informants reported various negative impacts ranging from mild to severe across categories concerning academics, general life, and health.

The qualitative interviews revealed some main themes as well. For example, the most frequent theme was “own health and the health of loved ones,” which includes participant worries surrounding medically high-risk family members as well as getting sick with COVID-19 themselves. Another standout finding was that 173 out of 195 participants had difficulty focusing on schoolwork; many students cited difficulty working from home and experiencing unwelcome distractions and a lack of motivation. Some other concerns that arose were disrupted sleeping habits, social isolation, and difficulty with academic performance. The study found that college students are experiencing heightened stress due to a multitude of factors: “of the 195 students, 138 (71%) indicated increased stress and anxiety due to the COVID-19 outbreak” (Son et al.,

2020). Almost all respondents predicted that peers were similarly struggling with mental health and high stress levels. Although this is relatively a small study, the findings are a significant indicator of the impactful negative influence of the pandemic on students' mental health.

Researchers from the same university conducted another relevant survey, this time with a much larger sample which consisted of 2,031 participants. Xiaomei Wang, Sudeep Hegde, Changwon Son, Bruce Keller, Alec Smith, and Farzan Sasangohar used quantitative methods and a cross sectional survey to collect their data. The researchers utilized the Quadratics platform to reach out to all students at Texas A&M college through their college email. They used the patient health questionnaire (PHQ-9), a common scale employed in mental health care, as well as other forms of questionnaires including generalized anxiety disorder, questions related to COVID-19 and stress, as well as barriers and coping mechanisms. On the measure of anxiety, 71.75% of respondents showed anxiety in varying levels ranging mild to severe.

For the measure of COVID-19 stress, the vast majority (71.26%) reported worsened stress levels from the beginning of the pandemic, with a stark minority reporting a reduction in anxiety (5.48%). Just as in the preceding study, almost all participants (97.83%) reported that they thought other students were suffering pandemic-influenced anxiety. For participants that reported heightened stress, the biggest contributing category was stress related to academics. This includes anxiety about grades, graduation time, transition to online classes, and more. The general uncertainty brought on by the pandemic was the second most influential reason for heightened stress in respondents. Following that were health concerns, financial concerns as well as stress about unemployment and work/living environment. Under the umbrella of academic concerns, the vast majority (over 90%) of participants had problems with concentrating; students

also cited issues related to internet connection and adapting to online learning. Over half of students struggled with an increased class workload.

Importantly, the study also highlighted significant barriers that students reported facing including barriers to mental health care during and increasingly stressful period. The greatest barrier reported in this area were “financial concerns (fees and insurance),” with 70% of students reporting experiencing this. This is significant because the study also uncovered that over 80% “of respondents had scores on the PHQ-9 that indicated some level of depression, with about 48% in the moderate-to-severe range... Nearly 1 in 5 respondents reported having suicidal thoughts” (Wang, et al. 2020). These findings are concerning and reveal that the pandemic’s uncertainty exacerbated challenges for already stressed and struggling students.

Research conducted in the early stages of the pandemic at Arizona State University also hint at the impact of the pandemic on students. To date, this is the most extensive study on COVID-19 university closures impact on students— because it included a large sample of undergraduate students surveyed. Researchers Esteban M. Aucejo, Jacob F. French, Carmen Paola Ugalde Araya, and Basit Zafar surveyed 1,500 students at the university. They studied the ways the pandemic affected students across various demographics, looking particularly at how the school closures impacted students’ graduation time, study habits, grades, social lives, future prospects, mental health, and more. They were motivated to conduct this study to find out how coronavirus closures played out along already unequal socioeconomic conditions within universities – some of which I discussed in the previous section of this literature review.

The research team documented how school closures and the switch to online learning exacerbated existing differences between high- and low-income students. “For example, compared to their higher-income counterparts, lower-income students (those with below-median

parental income) are substantially [about 55% more] likely to delay graduation” (Aucejo et al. 2020). The pandemic also worsened an already notable difference in high- and low- income students’ expected GPAs – doubling the existing gap between these two socio-economic categories from 0.052 to 0.098 on the 4.0 GPA scale. The data show that, generally, students with strong GPA’s were able to maintain their grades while those who were already struggling pre-pandemic did worse, demonstrating an inadequate response to support struggling students. They also find that “disparate economic and health impacts of COVID-19 can explain 40% of the delayed graduation gap between lower- and higher-income students” (Aucejo et al. 2020). These findings are alarming as the students who need support most urgently were effectively left behind in the aftermath of the switch to online.

Similar inequalities were observed across racial categories as well. The findings revealed that the impact of the shutdown was not felt evenly and that it exacerbated existing racial inequalities at the university (Aucejo et al., 2020). For example, they found that nonwhite students were 70% more likely to change their major due to the pandemic than their white peers, and that first-generation college students were more likely to delay graduation than those with college educated parents (Aucejo et al., 2020). Another startling finding uncovered that students who work saw lower wages, fewer working hours per week, or lost their job entirely, and over half reported having a family member who lost income in some form. These impactful findings lead the researchers to conclude that the pandemic and subsequent tumultuous switch to online learning proved to be significantly disruptive to students’ academic and working lives and that these disruptions are likely to influence their long-term academic goals and careers.

Another report relevant to college students and the pandemic is offered by researchers Andrew Kelly and Rooney Columbus. Andrew Kelly is a researcher and professor. He currently

works at UNC Chapel Hill as the senior vice president for strategy and policy, where he also works as a professor. In addition, Kelly is a researcher in education policy, and serves as the director of the center on higher education reform at the American Enterprise Institute (AEI). As a leader and a academic, he focuses on issues of accessibility to higher education such as financial aid reform and education policy. Rooney Columbus is also an AEI research associate in the Center on Higher Education Reform. Their report echoed the findings from the aforementioned study, finding that students from low-income backgrounds as well as students who are underprepared academically struggled more than their higher income and academically prepared counterparts (Kelly & Columbus, 2020). Additionally, these authors mention that while other recessions have led to an increase in enrollment, the same could not be extrapolated from the coronavirus pandemic as it came on much more abruptly than past recessions and changed higher education institutions' ability to provide their full services. In many cases, colleges and universities were not able to offer vital financial aid to incoming students during the pandemic due to already tight budgets that were underprepared for the financial blow brought on by COVID-19. The authors also reference a study which questioned over 16,000 incoming and continuing undergraduate students about their class format preferences. The data demonstrate that there was an overwhelming preference toward in-person classes, with 79% of respondents reporting finding this format appealing. On the other hand, only 29% reported fully online classes appealing (Patch 2020, found in Kelly and Columbus 2020).

Another survey conducted in the early stages of the pandemic focused on the efficacy of various remote teaching strategies (Gillis & Krull, 2020). Several surveys were distributed to students in a class throughout different stages of the online portion of the spring semester of 2020. The researchers wanted to uncover what types of modalities were the most effective and

popular teaching styles. They asked students to rate different teaching modalities – such as Zoom, VoiceThread, discussion forums, drop-in office hours, and more – on measures of accessibility, enjoyment, and effectiveness. Gillis administered three surveys throughout the remainder of the spring 2020 semester after classes went online. These were not initially intended for research, but by the third survey, she invited Krull to use the instrument as well. It is the data from the final survey on which the researchers base the analysis. Gillis had 40 complete the final survey, while Krull had 26 students participate.

Asynchronous modalities such as VoiceThread were found to be rated highly in accessibility but not as highly in enjoyment for students. They also found that live Zoom class was rated as more accessible and more enjoyable when the class reflected the format of in-person class. Students responded favorably to a mixture of synchronous and asynchronous modalities as well. Drop-in office hours were effective, enjoyable, and accessible, with students responding approvingly to this option. Additionally, they discovered that over half of students who participated had issues with reliable internet. Although their study is limited by the size of their sample, which was around 40 students, it provides an important insight into ways that educators can better facilitate student learning while minimizing anxiety and stress should the need to go online happen again. Importantly, they also found that nonwhite, first-generation, and female students were impacted disproportionately. Internet and general technology access proved to be one of the most common and problematic barriers which the students faced in their study.

This highlights another important finding in emergent literature in this area. It has been further found that those with less education are more negatively impacted by the pandemic in general. “Pfeffer (2018) found that, over the past two decades, around 50% of high school graduates from low-income households have consistently enrolled in college, compared to 80%

from high-income households. Additionally, college costs and student loans have risen, which makes attending college a heavier burden for those who start out with less income, often those in minority groups” (Daly et al., 2020). These findings are significant as they relate to first-generation students and the potential for them to face distinct challenges because they often have fewer financial resources and guidance than those with higher-income, college educated parents. In addition, Daly, Buckman, and Seitelman found that those with a high school diploma but no higher education were more likely to lose their jobs than those with more education who could more often work remotely online. They discovered that those in lower socioeconomic statuses go to college at a lower rate and therefor are underrepresented and considered on campuses. This echoes the findings of Aucejo (2020) who reported that “lower-income students are 55% more likely to have delayed graduation due to COVID-19 than their higher-income peers.”

The literature review offered here is limited because there is still very little published research about how the pandemic has affected students across colleges in the U.S. I found that the studies that have come out have pointed to an inadequate response from universities in supporting students in the most need, showing in many ways that existing inequalities worsened during the stresses brought on by COVID-19 and online learning. There are substantial inequalities across racial, ethnic, and socio-economic statuses that have been worsened by the pandemic. It is yet to be seen if these will be lasting as colleges and universities transition back to in-person classes. There is an absence of research on the impact of the pandemic on Latinx college students specifically. The larger landscape of inequality suggests that this population has a unique experience that deserves investigation to better understand the complex myriad of challenges brought on by COVID-19. This study intends to shed light on Latinx college student

experiences to add to this body of literature. In the following section, I discuss the data and methods proposed for this project.



### CHAPTER III: METHODS

This study was completed using qualitative interviews from 10 Latinx self-identified participants. For the purposes of this paper, the term Latinx is used as a panethnic term for all identities that fall in its range, for example Latina, Latino, Mexican, Hispanic, Puerto Rican, etc, which will be discussed more thoroughly later in this chapter.

As a researcher, it is important to recognize the role of reflexivity in this project: “reflexivity turns the researchers’ lens back onto themselves to recognize and take responsibility for their own situatedness within the research and for the effect that it may have on the setting, participants, questions asked, data collected, and data interpretations (Berger, 2015, as cited in Finefter-Rosenbluh, 2017). As a member of the ISU student community, I recognize that I am an insider to that aspect of this population, but – as I am not an insider to the Latinx community – I am an outsider in that aspect. There are benefits and drawbacks to both insider and outsider researcher positions.

While outsider positions may result in more reliably objective research perspective, insider positions may benefit from better rapport with participants, have the benefit of insider knowledge to guide the construction of more succinct interview questions, and, as a result, may be better positioned to represent group experiences (Finefter-Rosenbluh, 2017). However, with these important benefits also come drawbacks such as personal experiences and perspectives influencing the data and interpretation. I acknowledge that, as a member of ISU’s student population during the transition to online learning, I have my own perspective on the issues about which I ask participants in this study. However, I strive to let the data shine through and remove my own personal opinions as much as possible in order to center reflexivity and grounded theory throughout these methods and analysis.

The validity of the data collected is supported by several bodies of research above which highlight that Latinx populations in the United States have been disproportionately negatively impacted by the pandemic across several measures including mental health, physical health, and economic wellbeing. The data collected in these interviews reflect these impacts in the lives of Latinx college students at ISU suggesting that the findings are valid in that they are reflected in other research findings. My interpretations of the data from these interviews remain open to interpretation and discussion among legitimate knowers and I have the ability and permission to remain in contact with participants to follow up on anything that needs further clarification in their responses.

One important limitation in terms of validity and reliability in this study comes from the small sample size. While this small sample has allowed for rich ethnographic detail to emerge, it is also limited in that it only accounts for 10 participants. Due to this, it is not as applicable to the population as it would be with a larger sample. I hope that later research will do this and that it will be guided by what is found in this study. This method was an intentional choice in order to extract and analyze rich detail in these interviews, and it should be noted that in-depth qualitative methods do not prioritize generalizability, but rather focus on giving voice to the participants and uncovering valuable details. Without such methods, this type of knowledge production would not be possible.

### **Participants**

Participants were recruited and selected using a snowball sampling technique. As an outsider to the Latinx community, I relied largely on participants referred to me by the thesis committee chair, Dr. Maura Toro-Morn. As the head of the Latino Studies program at ISU, she has important insider knowledge of and connection to students who experienced the pandemic

while still in their undergraduate studies. This method of recruitment was important as it helped establish rapport with participants who already know and have a relationship with Dr. Toro-Morn. This made them more open and willing to participate and share their stories. I also used some connections with students that I had from classes at ISU, which further assisted establishing comfort and rapport with participants. Additionally, participants were asked at the end of each interview if they would be open to sharing contact information of other potential participants for the study. This led to snowball recruitment of students that had no prior relationship with Dr. Toro-Morn or me.

To participate in this study, students needed to be over the age of 18 and be an undergraduate student at Illinois State University, preferably at the time of the initial switch to online learning during the spring semester of 2020. Students who participate in the study self-identify as Latinx/o/a or any label related to that panethnic term (Hispanic, Latin@, etc.). There was no gender requirement for participation, however I chose to have a mix of gender identities in the participant pool in order to better understand multiple gender perspectives. Participants were chosen based on whether they fit these criteria and were willing to meet over Zoom for an interview. In total, 10 participants were chosen for in-depth interviews for this study. This sample is ideal to answer the research questions posed in the introduction for many reasons.

**Table 1. Sample Demographic Information**

	Year in School (as of Spring 2020)	Self ID Ethnicity	Self ID Student Type	Current Age	Major
Vicente	Senior	Latino	First-generation	23	Sociology
Nadia	Junior (transfer)	Latina	First-generation	22	Sociology
Maya	Freshmen	Latina/Latinx/Mexican	First-generation	21	Social Work
Mary	Senior	Hispanic or Latino	First-generation	24	Nursing
Carmen	Junior	Hispanic/Latina/Mexican	First-generation	27	Education
José	Senior	Latino	First-generation	24	Legal Studies
Jordan	Senior	Latino	First-generation	23	Sociology
Julia	Junior	Latina/x	First-generation	24	Communications
Kamila	Junior	Latina/Mexican/Puerto Rican	First-generation	24	Unknown
Demi	Senior	Latina	First-generation	21	Business Administration

**Identification of participants**

In the tradition of grounded theory, each participant was asked to self-identify their ethnicity. It is important to note that all participants in this study self-identify as first-generation college students. They also all identify in some way within the panethnic term Latinx (see Table 1). It is important to acknowledge the tumultuous nature and history of the panethnic term *Latinx*. This term, although designed to be a gender inclusive term that encompasses in some way all people of Latin American descent, has important critiques. Ronald Mize (2019) discusses the complexity and history of this term and explains that many people of Latin American descent

refer to themselves as *latinoamericano*, which was then shortened to Latino. However, this encouraged rightful questions of gender identity inclusivity due to the patriarchal nature of the Spanish language, which produced labels under this umbrella such as: Latin@ and Latina/o. But, even within these labels which attempt to include marginalized people, issues of inclusivity still arise. Mize writes “when we use the term Latino, who is left out?... women. When we use the term Latina or a Latin@, who is not being included?... gender nonconforming Latinxs... the challenges of imposed definitions...will continue to be opposed and new terms will always be introduced to better align experiences with language and identities with names” (Mize 2019, p. 7).

Additionally, it should be noted that the term Latinx has also been criticized for not encompassing the experiences and identities of Black Latina/o/x, or Afro Latina/o/x people, who have often been marginalized within their own communities. Because the identities and experiences of those of Latin American descent are so diverse, it is a challenge to find a label to suit all identities and experiences accurately. It is common, Mize explains, for Latina/o/xs to describe themselves based on national origin rather than by the panethnic label of Latinx. In the findings of this study, this can be seen as well, as participants often choose to identify themselves using both a panethnic label and a label of national origin. This can be most clearly seen in Kamila’s case, since she describes herself as Latina, Mexican, and Puerto Rican.

The majority informants define themselves using the term Latina/o/x. Jordan explains that he chooses to identify himself under the term Latino “because,” he says, “I learned... that the label ‘Hispanic’ was made up by the US government, so I don’t want some prescribed umbrella label.” Demi echoes this sentiment but doesn’t outright distinguish why she chooses to avoid the Hispanic label, stating simply but clearly “yeah, so I don’t use ‘Hispanic’ I use Latina.”

Maya chose to most closely identify with the term Latinx and mentions that she liked the term “as a broad, general term” which is preferable because it is “not within the binaries of gender.” For those that elaborated on their rationale for choosing their label, the inclusivity of the Latina/o/x label was underscored most often.

This only scratches the surface of the complexity and tensions within labelling the diverse experiences of Latina/o/x people. Kamila’s view on the intricacy of this question highlights the depth, nuance, and tension that comes with being asked to choose a label:

I usually like to stay on Latina because I then I go on to say the difference about being a Latina is that I'm Mexican and Puerto Rican... a lot of people like to make the assumption that I'm only Mexican and I always have to inform them [that] I'm not only Mexican, I'm Puerto Rican. They're two different locations on the map, one's an island that one's by California down there. Yeah, I have to explain that to them and they're like 'what's exactly the difference?' I have to go on to explain the culture and everything else and ... sometimes it's tiring because I don't like to explain my history, but I have to go on to explain everyone my history of both.

In this example, Kamila grapples with the erasure that she feels comes from only identifying with Latina, when her ancestry and culture from both Puerto Rico and Mexico are equally important to her sense of self and identity.

To reiterate, this research is set to find out how Latinx students experienced the switch to online learning, how they navigated disruptions to their college experiences, how family life changed, and how they coped with moving home and learning online during this time and the following year. Because this research seeks to answer these many questions in detail, it was important to dedicate significant time to each participant to allow meaning to derive from

participants themselves – which they identify in the interviews – in the tradition of grounded theory. This allowed for rich ethnographic detail to be extracted from these 10 interviews and for in-depth analysis to follow for each. This sampling method has allowed for this project to serve as preliminary research for many studies to come that will further develop research on college students and the Latinx community in the pandemic in conversation with the findings of this research.

### **Method of Data Collection**

To conduct these interviews, Zoom was used as the modality for several reasons. As abovementioned, there are many research questions guiding these interviews and, in the tradition of grounded theory, it was important to allow participants to speak freely without time constraints as much as possible. To facilitate this goal, Zoom was used to allow for the interviews to be as convenient and accessible as possible for participants. Many participants have now graduated and are not all living in Normal, Illinois at the time of data collection, so meeting virtually allowed for meetings to be in the most convenient place and time for participants, since they could cut out any travel and meet whenever was best for their schedules. Additionally, after more than a year of online learning for most, students were also already knowledgeable of and comfortable with the platform, making it an ideal choice for interviewing.

Using Zoom benefitted the research process in that it also has features that can record and automatically transcribe interviews as well. These transcriptions were then saved after each interview and later thoroughly edited, as they contain many errors. Even still, this streamlined the transcription process and aided in navigating time constraints of the researcher during analysis. The video recordings saved from Zoom also allowed for later analysis of pauses, body language, and other latent content from participants during the interviews. Latent content is

addressed by coding for what is not always directly said, for example the consensus among participants that COVID-19 is dangerous and a major concern, is evident in many interviews but not always directly stated. Berg (2009) writes on important techniques for latent qualitative interview data analysis: “By reporting the frequency with which a given concept appears in text, researchers suggest the magnitude of this observation. It is more convincing for their arguments when researchers demonstrate the appearance of a claimed observation in some large proportion of the material under study (e.g., 20 percent, 30 percent, 40 percent, etc.)” Whenever possible, I include in analysis the frequency of conceptual trends across interviews. It is further important to demonstrate where my interpretations of latent content originate so that justice is done to the meaning created by participants and that interpretations stay close to the data. Berg (2009) underscores that “researchers should offer detailed excerpts from relevant statements (messages) that document the researchers’ interpretations.” I adopt this method wherever relevant in the analysis section.

### **The Coding Process**

The analysis of these data, after collected, was done based in grounded theory through the use of the program MAXQDA. This program allows for streamlined qualitative data analysis and was a good fit since it easily facilitated line by line coding, “a coding technique whereby you develop categories by coding as you are reading” (Hesse-Biber 2017). This program has a feature specifically made with grounded theory in mind called open coding mode, where the program will allow for codes to be simply named from the words used by participants in the interview directly. This allows for initial codes to be made using participants words and meanings that they have created, which can then later be reanalyzed and recoded in more focused codes. This follows the grounded theory approach to coding outlined by Kathy Charmaz (2004)



which recommends extracting meaning from the data in the tradition of grounded theory through coding line by line: “one begins with carefully coding each line, sentence, and paragraph” (Hesse-Biber 2017). Charmaz (2004) also suggested that researchers keep in mind several questions throughout this iterative coding process, and urges that researchers ask themselves, among other things, what are people doing and saying, what is generally going on, and importantly, what “these actions and statements take for granted.” Throughout my analysis of these interviews, I followed this process in order to identify meaningful sections of the interview data, assigning codes to these in order to keep track of and identify emerging trends and themes across different interviews.

### **Limitations of Methods**

As briefly discussed earlier, a notable limitation of this sample is its size. This sample is small, which has been a benefit in the sense that vivid detail surfaced from the interview process, despite time and financial constraints. However, it should be noted that it is difficult to generalize these findings to the larger population from a sample of this size, which is not the goal of these methods. Another potential limitation comes from the Zoom interview format. While Zoom provides many benefits, it also has drawbacks such as potentially reduced rapport with participants due to the distance and lack of in-person connection as well as internet issues that occasionally arose. These issues were resolved each time by waiting until connection was reestablished, but still damaged the fluidity of the interviews in some instances.

Qualitative interviewing methods were chosen so as to allow interviews to be unique with each participant, rather than following a rigid set of questions. While an interview instrument was used, as seen in appendix A, as the interviewer, I was able to ask follow-up questions and generally tailor each interview to each participant. Forgoing uniformity and inflexibility in

qualitative interviewing is meaningful as it allows for more information to be learned from each respondent as the interaction is customized. This greater time and energy commitment to each participant results in a smaller sample size than what would otherwise be possible. “Because the fuller responses obtained by the qualitative study cannot be easily categorized, their analysis will rely ... more on interpretation, summary, and integration. The report [they] ultimately write can provide readers with a fuller understanding of the experiences of our respondents,” Robert Weiss (1994).

For these reasons, qualitative interviewing was the best option for answering the research questions posed in this study. In sacrificing quantity of interviews, quality of depth is gained. Because theory is generated from the data, allowing participants to have unique and personalized interviews best supports this goal, especially within the methodological theoretical context of grounded theory.

## CHAPTER IV: ANALYSIS & DISCUSSION

Throughout the interview process, these students each provided powerful accounts of the transition to online learning and as the pandemic unfolded in their lives. Because of this, it's hard to summarize these findings in a succinct way because each student's account was unique and full of details specific to their lives. However, some overall themes emerged which I will briefly outline here and discuss at length in this chapter. Resilience was a salient theme that underscored many participants experiences; many families found new ways to maintain old traditions during quarantine and beyond, and students discovered new methods of navigating social and educational life, often overcoming a myriad of unforeseen challenges. Additionally, their stories seem to coalesce around the struggles they encountered as well: many participants experienced internet issues, most had to move home at the beginning of the pandemic, and those that did all experienced changing family dynamics as a result.

Overall findings from these data demonstrate that participants struggled greatly with many aspects of the sudden switch to online learning. Unsurprisingly, for each participant, the sudden switch to online learning came with significant disruptions to their lives in academics, mental health, family dynamics, and more. The findings will be organized into categories; I will first discuss living situations of participants, then address findings related to online learning, class structure, grade changes and lack of connection with peers and professors as a result of these issues. I will then transition into mental health trends that emerged and discuss issues relating to family such as changing dynamics and navigating contracting the virus. Finally, I address positive trends like family resilience.

In this chapter, I will provide analysis and discussion of the results of the data collected in these interviews. As mentioned in the introduction, these students were all at some stage of

their undergraduate studies at ISU when the pandemic hit, and the university switched to online learning in the spring of 2020. Below, one participant named Maya who was a freshman in her second semester, living in the campus dorms, details the complicated mix of emotions from the experience of a sudden move home in the middle of her first college year:

So it was just like a lot that was going on at home, but college life wise, I was doing good, academics were good and everything. Just like that external factor, family wise... so going back home and sort of like being stuck with my family while I had such low, not such a good life, but [before] I was like socializing and like getting used to what college life was like that comfort that I felt completely got knocked down, I felt like, 'oh my gosh,' I was just starting to get elevated and like meeting new people and all this stuff and then going back home I had no one because at home, my hometown I don't really have like any high school friends. So, essentially the only people that I ever saw were my mom, my dad, and my sister and occasionally when I went to the grocery store those are the individuals I like interacted with.

Here, she captures a feeling mentioned by many participants in the study, the odd combination of feeling down and isolated while at home while on the surface appearing to do fine in classes. Maya, about three quarters through her freshman year, was just getting into her groove, finding balance in her new friendships and social life along with her grades. More on participants' mental health and experiences at home will be discussed later in this chapter at length.

### **Living Situations**

Unsurprisingly, sudden (and often stressful) changes to living situations was a significant trend in these data. During the initial switch, students throughout the country needed to hastily move out of dorms and back into their family homes. Those in apartments could choose to stay,

but they too were often met with difficult decisions on where to live, since they were no longer obligated to attend in person classes, but already committed to a yearlong lease. Additionally, many in apartments had already signed leases for the following year which they were not able to get out of.

Two participants, Demi and Maya, were working as Resident Assistants (RAs) during the spring semester of 2020 and both were required to move out during the initial switch to online. Maya returned as an RA for a while during her sophomore year the following semester but said “it was just like a little too stressful, so I just decided to go back home.” She cited COVID-19 cases spiking and constantly changing school policies for the increased stress on the job. For these reasons she ultimately quit the position. She also wished that the university had done more to protect student workers like herself during that time: “I wish that they would have done something like requiring people to get tested ... I wish that in that sense, like, ISU would have done something more, because ... I personally, as an RA, would have felt like a lot more comfortable.”

Demi echoes Maya’s feeling of increased stress in the position and emphasized her discontent with university policies at the time as well: “I think as a resident assistant, it was a lot more added onto, like your role, a lot of pressure, a lot of stress, a lot of just unnecessary things.” She also mentioned that the university forced RAs to come back to campus the fall semester of 2020, or face losing the position entirely. Demi mentions lamenting the unempathetic tone of the university toward its RA workers and expresses her overall disappointment with the handling of the situation:

I don't know just something about like the way that they handled it did not sit right with me, and there was even like the situation when we came back where we got tested, and it

was like the PCR [test]. And like back then – it wasn't that long ago – but back then it was like you had to wait like 2 or 3 days until you got your results. So, they weren't like super rapid, and I remember 2 of my friends, which were they were RAs as well. In the same building they broke quarantine, and somehow, the word got out. But they saw each other for like a couple of minutes and got out of their room, when they weren't supposed to and they basically told them, you know, you resign, or we fire you. I feel like that was kind of just done to send a statement. Because I'm almost sure that there was how many other like RAs that broke quarantine. So, it was just like little things like that that just did not so right with me, which is why, from the beginning, you know, I told my supervisor 'I'll finish off the year, but you're not getting me back.'

Clearly, the university's policies at the time were unclear and constantly changing; they also placed what Demi felt was unfair expectations on RAs, who were already putting themselves at risk for work, to uphold COVID safety protocols while allowing resident students to come and go freely. Both Demi and Maya mention that, especially living with freshmen and sophomores in close quarters, it was especially unsafe during a time of high transmission as these young students wanted to continue living their lives and having their college experiences – something they were both empathetic to, albeit uncomfortable with, under the circumstances with no support from ISU.

In total, 8 out of the 10 participants – at least temporarily – moved back home with their family. Since this experience is so intertwined with other aspects, such as family dynamics and internet issues, the discussion surrounding living situations will inevitably be touched on throughout those (and other) sections as well.

## **Struggling with Internet and Online Class Structure**

One significant trend which emerged from the data was the prevalence of internet issues and e-learning issues more broadly. Three participants cited frequent battles with poor internet connectivity, two of which mentioned that the issue arose from poor Wi-Fi at home, especially with younger siblings in high school also needing to be on Zoom for class at the same time. With the sudden need for a higher demand on Wi-Fi routers, the internet was slow and resulted in frustrations when attending class online.

One participant in particular named Julia, who was a senior at the time, struggled with internet connectivity throughout the semester while she lived in her apartment off campus. This issue was briefly discussed in the introduction. She detailed her frustrations with consistently poor internet connection at her apartment and explained that she needed to take advantage of a local coffee shop's WIFI to attend classes since the library and university were closed. Despite her best efforts to manage the situation, Julia was unable to get reliable internet connection from her living space through her apartment.

However, it wasn't just Wi-Fi and internet issues that kept students from a smooth transition to online learning. Many participants cited family disruptions, extra responsibilities at home, general incompatibility with asynchronous and online lecture formats, among other reasons surrounding the increased difficulty of classes online.

A trend that arose in all the interviews was the issue of lack of separation between work, home, and school life and responsibilities, which often left participants feeling disconnected from classes. One participant named Vicente, who was a senior at the time of the switch, recalls this feeling: "It just felt like ... I was at home, you kind of feel like you're on vacation, when you're [actually] in school, you know? You feel like you're in school like you're at work basically

trying to get your education.” Students who never agreed nor wanted to be in online and often asynchronous classes were thrust into this position all across the country.

Nadia, who was a recent transfer the fall semester after the switch, recalls feeling frustrations surrounding the online class format: “I have a better time learning in a classroom environment. with no accountability with like class, little box of class time I just, I think that was part of the struggle as well.” Participants frequently cited feeling disconnected during online classes and the class experience felt cheapened as a result. This sentiment is exhibited through one participant named Jordan, who said:

What I remember the most is just like the constant... belittlement. I felt like the online format was very belittling compared to the physical in class format you know like it just, it just felt so artificial, like, I don't know... I thought Zoom when we first got on it was a positive ... medium because it allowed us the opportunity like now you and I [referring to me, the researcher, as the interview took place over Zoom] can speak because the pandemic is still a concern ... but because I was such an engaged person...it just felt shallow to speak, because I didn't have peer engagement.

Jordan explains that his online learning experience was cheapened through being online, and although he saw the need, he felt most affected by lack of human connection. He continues to mention that his major, sociology, was not suitable for online class: “I studied sociology so like the stuff that I was into was all about engagement, you know that was the most fulfilling aspect of studying sociology to me is the human conversation ... the discourse over ideas and concepts ... I feel like Zoom kind of neutered that experience.” Julia echoes the issues brought up by Jordan and said “honestly when you're online schooling, it doesn't feel like school, it just feels like work it because you don't get to create memories of you sharing experiences with others. You don't get



to be on campus so like you don't get the student life aspect of being a college student. All of that was gone.” Demi felt similarly and mentioned that she used to be more engaged and go to the library to really solidify what was being taught in her business administration classes. After switching to online, however, she lost this passion for classes and said she was “just going to class just to go to class, honestly.”

Kamila, who had been in military training at the time of the switch to online, and who registered for online classes the following semester said: “It was hard because I had to create a method for learning online. So... I came home [from training] I was like ‘great I already have a plan. I'm going to do in-person learning, like, I know what to do I can figure it out I can manage [being in the] army and I can learn in school.’ But, when I came home, I have to do online learning and I was like ‘what is this?’” Kamila went on to say that she was unsupported and confused trying to initially learn online: “I felt like I had no guidance, and I was just stuck pushed into it like, ‘hey, go figure it out.’ ...There's not a manual to go figure out online learning.”

Maya cited the same issue with the sudden need to attend class online as well: “I didn't know how to work the audio. I didn't know that you had to connect to it. I thought that if I connected to it, it would unmute me. So, I basically sat there for maybe minutes Googling like what to do because no one taught us like how to use Zoom or, like, any of the resources.” She, unlike most participants, found that she overall enjoyed the new modality of asynchronous online classes after getting used to the format, but felt entirely unsupported in the beginning. Overall, these participants lament the lack of support with resources and lack of connection to class and peers. All cite their transition from excitement and enjoyment that came with school to classes just feeling – as Julia puts it – like work.

## Grade Changes

Participants mention that, among the myriad of challenges stemming from online learning and the chaos of the switch in the spring of 2020, came changes in grades and GPAs overall. This was a significant finding, as all but one participant mentions experiencing notable grade changes. Two participants reported slight grade improvements and seven participants described experiencing worse grades than normal and a drop in their GPAs after the switch. Notably, all but two participant's grades were in some way changed after the switch.

Those who experienced a grade increase mentioned that they changed their habits as a student to accommodate for the class changes such as Zoom lectures or asynchronous formats. Mary says this of her grade improvement after the switch: "I feel like I kind of ... I focused more, like I made myself pay attention because I knew it was harder, so I somehow ended up getting better." The other participant who experienced an increase, José, says of his grade increase: "Um, so honestly I think they got better but not for good reason, you know? It wasn't because I was studying harder." José later mentions that he felt that, at that time, he was "doing almost like participation credit. 'Oh you tried to do the assignment? Here is 100%.' So, even though like I'm not complaining, my grades improved, but I feel like I didn't deserve that improvement. I feel like it was just handed to us ... because all the assignments are online and just the grading scale was completely off." Here, José explains that his grade improvement was due to changes to the grading scale and class assignments which resulted in receiving better grades more easily.

One participant who reported neither a grade increase nor decrease, Carmen, mentions that even though her grades stayed within their normal range, her classes also changed and required more work on her part: "It felt like they gave us more things to do like they crammed

more into the half of the semester we had left.” She remembers responding to this demand, saying “I just remember not going to bed until like the AM, the next day... I was just trying to cram everything out... I just felt exhausted.” Another student, Maya, who was a freshman in her second semester at the time of the switch, found that she was able to thrive academically with the asynchronous class format. She says that “asynchronous classes in which I was able to go back and forth in the video. I personally really like that.” she later explains that being able to rewind videos and, if needed, email the professor for clarification on any remaining confusions, made it easier for her to understand class material as she often felt that she didn't want to ask questions during Zoom or in person class. Both Mary and Carmen changed their behavior to meet new demands which resulted in her grade increase, José felt his was undeserved relative to the unchanged the effort he put in, and Maya found that she enjoyed the changes in her class formats. However, these students are in the minority as most participants experienced uncharacteristically low grades.

Six participants experienced at least temporary if not lasting grade decreases as a result of the switch to online learning. This is a significant portion of the sample, and it is important to note. While each participant identifies different reasons for their grade decreases, the most common issues that arose were related to the transition to online learning as well as lack of support from ISU and mental health reasons. I touched on other reasons cited as well, but these were the most apparent and universal. Most saw their grades and GPAs return to normal over time. One story in particular from Julia, however, captures the challenging experience of being a student during the onset of COVID, and suffering the consequences of unfair, lacking university policies:

I actually failed a class. I mean I didn't fail it I passed it with a D, but I had like a B, or an A in the class. I actually failed the class because I had COVID during week of an exam. Because it was an exam that was online, I was unable to retake it, so he just failed me. I had like documentation of me going to the hospital and everything and nothing was done, and I contacted the dean of communications, and nothing was done for me. It sucks because it just brought my GPA down. As a student, I worked so hard, it was the last... week of April... I couldn't take my exam, I had told him the situation that I had proof that like I had a positive COVID tests, and I had like all the documentation of like everything that had happened, and they said there is nothing that they could do. The add that he would speak to the professor. They were his rules. He wasn't going to allow me to take the exam again. .... so, I ended up like failing a class. Well, I mean, I considered failing. It was a D, but like it for sure plunged my GPA. I was so frustrated and so upset with, like, the school and I was upset with the dean because he didn't do anything. I was put in a situation where ... there's nothing [they] can do for [me] and for a student to hear that really sucks.

Julia explains that she was the victim of an unfair policy, lack of support from administrations, and overall bad timing. Had it been even the following semester, ISU would by then have implemented the necessary safety net policies for students in this situation. So, due to being sick with COVID in a time when it was difficult to get tested and little was known about the disease, Julia also had to cope with receiving a “D” grade in a class in which she had once been doing very well – even despite her above average efforts to advocate for herself as a student and willingness to take her exam on a different day to accommodate her situation of having COVID and being in the hospital. Mary suffered from the same issue in many ways, as she too

was subjected to unfair expectations after the switch to online mid semester. In the nursing program, she had an in-person clinical grade that she needed to make up and had planned to do so after spring break. Due to classes being online, she said “ I had emailed the instructor and he was like, 'Well, I don't know I guess that means you fail that' and I was like, 'What do you mean that means I fail?' you know, like in some points like it ended up turning out to be fine but it was just like that big question or like what do I do if I can do this in-person? You know like what's the protocol, I guess.” These experiences provide potent examples of the many ways COVID-19 and the chaotic switch to online learning had a profound impact on students. Julia mentioned that she had never told anyone of this grade debacle before the interview. She clearly felt angry, saddened, and disappointed at this unfair blow to her GPA and overall mental well-being.

Other participants mention additional issues that posed a challenge to their grades. For example, Vicente describes that his grades initially went down, but bounced back after he got used to navigating new class format and a new way of communicating. He said “my grades kind of for some classes... did struggle at first, just because of how hard the communication was, I'd say probably that first month was a little tough, but once I got adjusted and used to what it's going to be like they went back up.” Adjustment to the new class format was a recurring theme among those who saw their grades decrease. Nadia said that when classes moved online, the new format resulted in her classes “always get[ting] pushed to the side of [her] attention,” and later concluded “yeah I'm just not good with online classes.” Jordan experienced something similar, saying “initially, I definitely noticed a brief decline in my grades and honestly my overall work ethic and attitude towards it. That wasn't even deliberate.” Kamila expressed “it was really scary and hard because my grades did suffer due to coming back and adjusting to online learning. Because ... I already had a method for learning in-person.” Finally, Demi sums up these

common issues with her experience: “I think it's just my grades definitely did suffer and so did my GPA. I think it was just like a mixture of lack of motivation and not being able to adjust to like a new environment, because I'm also used to, like, having my routine here. I struggled with having the boundary of like being home and also doing like school all together.” Overall, these participants similarly struggled with transitioning suddenly to online classes, communicating with other students and professors, coping with the loss of their routines, as well as lack of separation between spaces for school, work, and relaxation. Of course, these issues are tied to mental health as well.

### **Lack of Support, Connection to Peers and Professors**

Relatedly, another interesting theme which emerged was participants’ emphasis on feeling generally under supported by the university during this time. In total, 80% of participants emphasized the significance of feeling supported or not supported by the university during the chaos of online learning in that first spring semester of 2020 primarily, but also beyond into the following year for some.

Firstly, those who expressed positive sentiments about receiving support from the university all highlighted that it was the ISU faculty that made the difference. For example, this is what Jordan, who is one of only two participants who felt supported, says: “I felt supported by ISU staff...I can't speak for the university, because I only engaged with one branch of it... the Department of Sociology...every professor I contacted was more than sympathetic, more than willing to help. I can say with absolute certainty that I probably would not have finished my undergraduate [without it].” Carmen also emphasized the difference her professors made: “my professors were really nice and understanding to the different family situations they were going on...especially when I got when we have to do anything with my mom's unemployment or my

dad was also starting to file for retirement, so I had to help him figure that out, and they were calls back and forth.” In both cases, professors were identified as the main source of support, rather than university policies or resources. Because so much of their experience relied on individual professors, other participants had very different sentiments.

On the other end of the spectrum are six participants who felt left on their own. Demi, who, after her poor treatment from university policy toward her position as an RA, said of feeling supported by ISU: “I wouldn't say I felt supported...I'll put it this way: I think since I got to ISU a lot of things, I have figured out myself as a first gen [generation] student.” This feeling of being left to figure things out was echoed by other participants. Like Demi, Maya was also working as an RA during this time and said that she too wished there had been better university policies to protect students and student workers like herself: “I wish that they would have done something like requiring people to get tested... I wish ISU would have done something more, because I personally as an RA would have felt a lot more comfortable.” Vicente also specifically said that he too wished there had been more COVID precautions like required classroom sanitizing and mask wearing at school. In addition to Demi, Julia specifically mentioned lacking support systems for first-generation students: “that was really hard and me being a first-generation student like I had to figure it out all on my own. I mean I'm proud of it, but it would be nice to know that I have some type of support.”

Another first-generation transfer student, Nadia, brought up similar issues and offered similar suggestions for improvement: “I feel like ISU has a lot of resources in general for any student, but like...they're not very good at showing it like at least like reach out like even if it's like a general body email type thing. I feel like even now, I'm learning all these different opportunities that I've had all this time to do this or that or to get support in this way or that way

that I didn't know about and wouldn't have known about.” She said that she only found these resources from connections with peers. She said the inconsistent support from the university wasn't enough and if they had given students access to resources “it would have been better.” Julia also specified what would've made things better for her, saying ISU “could have done a better job at giving options for students to still have their community and meet people ... ISU could have sent like a mass email every week saying like ‘hi these are the events that are happening this week.’ Nothing was ever sent. So, it just really sucked, to not be able to get that option...when it came to like finding jobs after, that was really hard too. It was hard to even schedule appointments with... the [career] counselors.” On top of this, she said that in her and her peers' experiences “it just felt like the professors weren't as understanding as they should be” to different circumstances students were dealing with, such as having to babysit siblings or generally have unreliable places to do work. Overall, she says, “I don't think they helped enough.” Maya too brought up the lack of support for learning how to navigate classes online, since she struggled to use Zoom and quickly realized the school offered no student trainings. She said she instead turned to YouTube and said “I had to sort of figure that out on my own. Resource wise, the university could have done more.” Maya, Nadia, Julia, Vicente, Demi, and Kamila all stated they wanted more action from administration so that students could more easily maintain social connections while feeling safe and supported.

As mentioned earlier, Julia also suffered from the university's lack of protocols when her professor disallowed her to take the final exam during her COVID hospitalization, which drug her grade to an uncharacteristically low “D” final grade, affecting her GPA until graduation. Mary lamented this lack of organization as well: “I mean I don't know what they're doing now (at the time of the interview), but definitely that like protocols and like specific things, you know,



just to think about what someone could be going through and just make up solutions for that.” As discussed in the grade section, Mary also almost suffered from unfair professor decisions due to lack of guidelines from the university. The only difference in her case was that her professor was fortunately understanding after some convincing, while Julia’s was not. Mary said that, at that time, she was wondering “what's the protocol?” worrying that her professor would be unwilling to be understanding of the circumstances.

The biggest takeaway from all these narratives is the need for ISU – and other universities in the US – to have policies and protocols in place that consider the many needs of their diverse student bodies, especially in extenuating circumstances like a global pandemic. Julia said, “we felt very alone... it just really sucked... it was very hard to go through those moments alone.” No student should feel left alone during these times, especially as students continued to pay the same tuition and fees which are supposed to fund student services that, as these interviews made clear, did not live up to expectations. University policies need to serve and protect these students. Moreover, these narratives make clear that, in the void of protocol, professors made the difference – whether for the better or the worse – for these students’ school experiences during COVID-19.

### **Mental Health**

Unsurprisingly, mental health and a general feeling of anxiety was a common theme among these interviews. All participants at some point mentioned dealing with increased anxiety, a decline in mental health overall, and/or lack of motivation compared to before the switch. The majority of participants (six total) detailed that they experienced significant struggles with mental health. Jordan, who was a second semester senior at the time of the switch said, “there were periods where I had serious mental health declines, or I was hitting serious time

management issues.” He credits his own “mental fortitude” as well as his professors’ care and empathy for his struggles, highlighting that without it, he feels he wouldn’t have graduated on time or at all. Demi says that she lost a lot and gained a lot mentally from COVID and remote learning: “as soon as like spring semester hit, and it was like completely virtual, and I was like kind of back home. I think my mental health deteriorated a lot, so I struggled with that. But what I gained from that was that I learned a lot more about mental health, and I learned about like the importance of taking care of myself and stuff like that. And I kind of open the door to therapy as well. So, I think I grew a lot from the time that I struggled.” She says that the issues she faced mentally still linger even as classes have returned to normal but is grateful for having learned more about mental health and how to seek support. Other participants including Julia, Nadia, and Kamila mentioned being impacted by the anxiety of not knowing what was going to happen with classes, health, income, and living situations.

Maya’s story with mental health during remote learning is salient because, as a freshman in her second semester, she was forced to deal with not only getting used to living away at school, but to also suddenly moved back home with her family in the middle of the year. This is a lot to handle, and on top of the stress of feeling disconnected from friends and learning to navigate classes online, she was feeling stressed due to changing family dynamics as a result of the many adjustments brought on by COVID. “College life wise,” she said, “I was doing good like academics were good, and everything. Just like that external like factor of like family wise... so going back home and sort of like being stuck with my family... [at school] I was like socializing and like getting used to what college life was like ... I felt completely got knocked down... So, that was like a really tough transition. I remember like I did eventually get a therapist.” She, like Demi, was able to learn more about mental wellbeing and seek support from

a therapist. Another important thing that impacted Maya's – and others' – mental health was changing family dynamics general during the early stages of the pandemic.

### **Navigating Family and School**

4 out of 10 participants brought up the issue of family members disrupting online learning. Demi put it this way: “I live in a Latino household, and [the parents] just sometimes don't know how to decipher between like ‘Oh, I'm in class,’ you know like, ‘don't bother me’ and like going and asking stuff and stuff like that. So that was a struggle.” She was able to resolve this by eventually creating a routine of doing classwork in the basement of the house and said that eventually, her family “knew as long as [she] was down there not to interrupt.”

Vicente, who also moved home during the initial switch said that he felt that his needs for a quiet space to learn challenged family dynamics in ways not before addressed: “I was at home with my parents. So, like they were still working they were still doing their thing. So, there were times, and it was really fresh for them too. I would be like, 'keep it down a little bit, I'm trying to listen and stuff,' and [my mom would] be like 'what the heck? You're telling me to be quiet in my own house?' Like, I'm sorry like school is online now, what can I say, right?” Vicente was not trying to be disrespectful, but the sudden need for the blending of schoolwork and homelife at first caused some clashing. Carmen experienced something similar and said “It was little bit different thing back home than at the apartment. My roommate and I would just close the door to bedrooms when we were in class ... We knew that when the door was closed...we had to be kind of quiet, but my dad would come back from work, and he just open my door and say, ‘Hi,’ and it's like ‘I am in class,’ or my mom would stick her head in my room and go ‘you want something?’ [and I would reply] ‘I am in class.’” Just like other participants, this sudden need to take class online at home left family members a bit confused on necessary boundaries. Like in

Demi's case, Carmen was able to somewhat resolve the issue: "I put a schedule on the fridge and then they would just knock on my door because they'd forget to look at the fridge." So, posting her schedule didn't resolve this issue completely, but it helped to guide her parents.

Nadia also felt disrupted by sudden changes with family members being home and working from home as well: "I mean I it was definitely stressful for all of us too because I'm in that house. There's seven of us and we're not used to like us all being home at once. I know my stepdad, he had to work from home for a while. And he works for like a trucking company so I would see him, and I'd be like on my Zoom classes in the dining room at the table and then he would be like on Zoom calls for work and I could just see him getting so frustrated trying to figure out Zoom. And it was a lot of, I guess, when we had our downtime, we were...kind of going stir crazy." Nadia suddenly needed to do schoolwork in a space where other family members needed to navigate remote working as well. Generally, these interviews revealed that taking classes online at home with family challenged existing dynamics, but these families were able to communicate and adjust to accommodate these changes overall.

### **Changing Family Dynamics**

Family dynamics changing in many ways as a result of the pandemic was discussed at length by many participants. 8 out of 10 detailed that their family dynamics were affected by the pandemic. As mentioned earlier in the chapter, Maya – like many others – struggled mentally during this time. The stresses brought on were worsened by changing dynamics in her family and an impactful comment her mom made after she had moved back home during the initial switch to online learning. She remembers her mom impactfully telling her one day "you have changed." She explained that this was hurtful and confusing and that she's not really sure what exactly her mom meant in saying this. Maya said that maybe she had been outwardly projecting her dislike

about being home and not at school, which may have influenced her mom's comment. She also felt frustrated with tensions that arose in the household, because at school, Michelle never needed to ask to go out, but at home her parents still expected that she would. She says that it was also challenging that her parents expected her to help with her sister, who was struggling with depression at the time: "because my sister like needed the resources and everything, it was just like a lot...my parents pushed a lot of responsibility [on me] with my sister like that." For Maya and many other participants, changing family dynamics that came along with the pandemic had significant impacts across categories of mental health and academic success.

Like many have experienced throughout this pandemic, many participants explained family tensions that grew, especially in the early stages of the pandemic as they were trying to learn online and navigate COVID safety and boundaries at home. As Maya mentioned, family expectations of participant responsibilities at home were frequently brought up as stressful and or distracting, even though families were not intentionally causing these side effects. For example, Vicente describes that he basically acted as his younger cousin's 1st grade teacher during lockdown. He explains that he was "helping him out with his like connecting the class and making sure he's paying attention, or certain homework he might have," but laughs as he confesses that this extra task, coupled with being in online classes himself, lead to him "not really [pay] much attention" to his own work oftentimes. This story is similar to that of other participants, who were given additional tasks and responsibilities upon moving home.

Carmen, who was a junior taking teaching courses at the time of the switch, described that she had the additional weight of helping her mother navigate unemployment during this time: "My mom got laid off so there was a lot of paperwork she had file and everything's in English. My mom doesn't speak or read English. So, it was just easier for me to go back and help

her fill up the day for do the phone calls with her.” This, like Vicente’s experience, occasionally disrupted her learning. She mentioned one instance where her mom received a call from unemployment about benefits in English, despite requesting a call in Spanish, while Carmen was in Zoom class. Because of this, Carmen had to leave her class to help her mom sort out a few things on that call. Thankfully in her case, her professor was accommodating and understanding, and she was able to be filled in on class material from another student. Kamila brought up her extra responsibilities as well: “I was having to juggle going back home and trying to help my family as best as possible and making sure that like I was able to provide groceries for them. I would use my weekends and go home and take them groceries and leave it at the door – making sure had they had enough hand sanitizer and cleaning supplies everything possible to stay COVID free.”

José also mentioned tensions that arose within his family, especially due to different opinions surrounding COVID safety. He describes his living situation after moving home temporarily during the spring of 2020: “[we’re a] big family with two houses right next to each other. We just kind of fenced them as one property. In total, there’s 13 of us, and with people living their lives, you know, it was hard not to get COVID. So, we eventually got COVID. And for the most part, it wasn’t terrible. We all kind of got mild cases I guess, and the impact that my family had wasn’t too major.” Like many during this time, this led to some tension over who was and wasn’t taking the pandemic seriously enough. José said: “when half of the family was, you know, doing whatever they wanted and the other half was like taking all the crazy steps or precautions ...extreme steps that some people were taking to not get COVID, it kind of just, you know, made it pointless to take those steps if half the family wasn’t taking those steps. Then, with those two positions there, you know obviously [they’re] going to clash, and a lot of fights

were breaking out because of it.” To sum it up, he put it simply: “[there was] a lot more tension basically just because of disagreements on how to handle the pandemic and general.”

### **Getting Sick with COVID-19**

As seen in the example from José’s interview above, participants and/or their family members getting sick with the virus was a common thread: 6 out of 10 got the virus themselves and all participants saw family members contract the virus.

Julia and her father, as mentioned in the “grades” section, suffered from getting sick with COVID during the first semester of the pandemic, which resulted in her grade plummeting as she missed an important exam while recovering in the hospital. Since she had moved back home, she ended up getting the virus from her father, who was exposed at work:

I got sick with my dad, and we were both having to go to the hospital and stuff. ... Since COVID was new then, they didn't know what to do, so they just told us to [take] Tylenol or Ibuprofen. We relied a lot on each other. So, when we found out we were positive [my mom] ended up moving in with a relative for the time that we had COVID. So, it was just me and my dad here [at home], in our rooms, and just trying to fight through it. So, it was really hard. But I don't know, it just makes you appreciate life like once you get through it, and you've been through how hard COVID hits sometimes, you just a really appreciate the simple things like being able to breathe properly and smelling things and tasting things.

Here, Julia highlights that her and her family really relied on each other to get through this scary time. She emphasizes the importance of the support of her family and drawing closer in the face of this uncertainty.

Drawing on strength from family resilience came up for other participants as well. Maya got sick with COVID and recovered comfortably thanks to her mom taking care of her as she quarantined in her room: “I got COVID. I guess like it was nice to that I was at home because my mom was sort of able to take care of me. That moment was also like weird because I was just stuck inside my room.” Mary also got sick with COVID from a patient at the hospital she was working at and said that her family “would just bring [her] food and just leave it at [her] door.” In both cases, these students were able to rely on their families to care for them as they quarantined in their rooms. Both were successful quarantines, as no other family members ended up catching the virus in these cases.

Furthermore, Demi mentions that, while she did not get sick with COVID, her mom did: “she was okay, I think, like as a Latina, I kind of understand like my own culture and stuff. She's one of those moms that never stops and just like keeps going and is always doing something. So, I think she struggled with like staying in quarantine, definitely struggled, and she was not a fan, but she was fine health-wise.” In this situation, her family also came together to support her mom as she recovered – even though her mom was uncomfortable with this, albeit temporary, shift in family dynamics and roles.

As families took care of each other, another common theme was the feeling of fear due to the uncertainty of COVID. Vicente also got the virus from his father who contracted it at work. He explains that they got sick early in the pandemic and his father’s workplace had yet to implement proper COVID safety protocols to keep workers safe: “he works in a factory and the person that worked on the machine he was on the night before the night shift had COVID. So, there was nothing about sanitizing the station you were on ... He came home and then all of a sudden, he was getting some symptoms... My dad has diabetes when he got it, we were



definitely really concerned. Luckily, he was okay, maybe two days he was [pretty sick] but he recovered, and everything went back to normal.”

Nadia got COVID and found out she was positive while over at her father’s house to visit her 2-year-old little sister, after initially receiving a false negative COVID test result. Realizing that she was positive while in the same room as her sister, she immediately ran to a room where she could be alone to minimize exposure as much as was still possible. She says of the situation: “we were all freaking out because we didn't know it was going to happen with my sister possibly getting it, or ... especially my dad [who would] not be able to go to work. But luckily, none of them got it.” She says that a major concern was the “threat to their financial security, because they were especially struggling with it [then], so it was scary.” For Nadia’s family, not only was there a fear for her and the rest of the family’s physical health, but they were deeply concerned about their financial security since her father could not afford to miss any work. Jordan had a similar sense of uncertainty and fear in his family and says “it was extremely scary. I have had several relatives get it, but fortunately, I can say that I did not lose any family members. I'm very I'm grateful for that. I even had my own mother contract it once, so she had she had to do a quarantine and our home.”

As these stories demonstrate, families overwhelmingly faced the fear and uncertainty that came with COVID by supporting one another and taking necessary steps to minimize transmission as much as possible. These participants and their families found success in quarantining while sick and taking precautions in everyday life to avoid getting sick, such as sanitizing often and wearing masks around at-risk family members. This resilience of participants’ families was emphasized throughout many interviews.

## Family Resilience and Positive Changes

As seen above, changing dynamics in the family was not always negative. Most participants mentioned some positives to changing family life as they persevered in work, school, and more during the pandemic. Vicente mentioned that he was grateful to reconnect more with his family during this time after having lived away at school for so long. He noted that his family bonded of their shared affection for the game “Loteria” which he described as the “Mexican version of Bingo.” He talked at length about the fun he and his family had playing this game during the initial lockdown. Kamila mentioned that her family was able to stay connected during lockdown by maintaining a family group chat. She said the family used this as a way to say good morning and goodnight each day as well as share any life updates. She mentioned how her family drew on their religion to get through scary times: “We're very religious so that's something that signifies my family a lot... it was really scary so every day we would always pray. Something that my grandma and I and my mother and my sisters, always say is, like, ‘Thank God that you have another day.’ That's what COVID did for us.” Kamila’s family relied on faith, new modes of communication, and gratitude to navigate the uncertainty.

Gratitude stemming from stress and uncertainty also came up in Julia’s interview. She said, after her and her father recovered from their bad cases of COVID early in the pandemic, he and the rest of the family experienced a new wave of gratitude for their health: “I think my dad really got scared after [getting sick] ... my dad when he tells us his COVID story he, like, cries about it, and I like get emotional too because he really thought he was going to die ...he was really sick. In two weeks, he lost like 25 pounds. It’s crazy to think, but like, he got through that and, ever since then, we've just...really valued our health and our safety and so we try to have fun in, like, new ways at home.” Reeling from this frightening experience, her family still found

ways to stay connected to the things they used to do together in new ways, such as watching a movie at home rather than seeing it in theatres.

Similarly, Jordan recalled a lovely memory of his family drawing close and finding new ways to continue old family traditions:

My family finds a lot of restaurants ... that I don't know about. So, when I come home, they're like, 'hey, we want to show you this place that we found' or whatever. They had found a great Italian restaurant by our home that they had been telling me about for so long, and I hadn't I hadn't ever been. So, I was finally home from the pandemic, and we went and, this is pretty much my first time eating out like at a restaurant, like, once this whole pandemic happened. And we didn't even go in, but it was my first time going to a restaurant setting you know usually...so we ordered our family meal. I remember just like laughing and loving how we just got all our food and went in our car, and we parked in a nice, shaded area and we just ate in our car as a family, like, laughing. And it was just like, I bring it up because you just think of how you change, how no matter how much changes, there's still things that stay the same. Like, [it was] such a radically different time period at a radically different way of life, and yet here I still eating with my family.

These examples of changing dynamics within families – from challenging to uplifting – clarify the significance of family throughout these interviews. During the stress and uncertainty of remote learning and the pandemic at large, these participants and their families often found ways to stay emotionally close and create new traditions.

## CHAPTER V: CONCLUSION

Overall, the pandemic has impacted college students in many ways and will continue to do so. It is also clear that Latinos in the United States have been hit harder by many factors associated with the pandemic including being more concerned about catching and spreading COVID than white Americans and struggling to pay bills at a higher rate during the pandemic, among many other measures of inequality. Already unequal systems such as universities which consistently fail to adequately support students of color and first-generation students saw their disparities worsen during this time, highlighting institutional failures that are not built to work evenly nor withstand disruptions like COVID-19. Within this climate, it was important for this study to investigate the Latinx college student experiences during this time.

From these rich qualitative interviews, many themes emerged. It is clear from the data collected in this study that these students experienced mental health changes, changes in family dynamics and grades, navigated internet issues, and relied on resiliency to persevere during this time.

The findings in this research echo what has been found in related research that was discussed in the literature review. For example, although this study doesn't compare interviews with white or non-first-generation students, the data do demonstrate that first-generation and Latinx students' needs are not being met – especially during the pandemic. The study by Esteban M. Aucejo, Jacob F. French, Carmen Paola Ugalde Araya, and Basit Zafar at Arizona State University (discussed in chapter 2) found that students of color were more likely to delay their graduation and students from lower income backgrounds were more likely to see a drop in their GPAs, among many other alarming findings suggesting a lack in effective university support systems and policies.

The findings in this study, although much different in design and size, supports what was found at ASU in many ways, since participants overwhelmingly felt an increase in stress, many saw an (at least temporary) drop in their grades, and overall expressed that they did not get the support they needed from ISU during the pandemic. It also echoes the unsurprising findings that mental health of students worsened during the pandemic and that more students are experiencing heightened COVID related stress (Xiaomei Wang, Sudeep Hegde, Changwon Son, Bruce Keller, Alec Smith, and Farzan Sasangohar).

Overall, what is known from existing research is that universities are already unequal playing fields, whose systems need improvements to better serve students of color and first-generation students. This study and those discussed in the literature review demonstrate that the pandemic illuminated these issues even more. This study and other research like it can guide administration in universities on how to make better policies to protect and serve their students as well as highlight what kinds of policies students and faculty can advocate for in their futures.

### **Questions for Future Research**

I hope future researchers will continue to investigate in depth what was found in the data collected here. The following are some questions I raise for research to come:

- Who did universities serve best during the pandemic?
- Why did universities fall short for nonwhite and first-generation students?
- What policies were the most effective at keeping students healthy, both mentally and physically?
- Did family dynamics change back to the way they were pre pandemic?
- How can students build networks of resiliency for future emergencies?

## **Limitations of the Study**

While there are many significant benefits to these research and analyzation methods, there are limitations that are worth noting. As mentioned earlier in the paper, the small sample size limits the reliability of the findings. This is knowingly sacrificed to allow for more rich and detailed information to be collected during the research process.

It is also noteworthy that this study relied on participants' memories of the early stages of the pandemic when classes were abruptly moved online, and students' lives were greatly changed in a short period of time. There is certainly a risk of participants' attitudes changing as the pandemic progressed – for example, they are certainly no longer feeling the same type of intense uncertainty that existed at the very beginning of the pandemic when little was known about COVID -19. Since these interviews were conducted largely during the fall of 2021, students have lived more than a year after these initial events, which could potentially soften the severity of some feelings, and emphasize others. Additionally, their current perspective on the issue is inevitably tied to where they were in their lives at the time of the interview.

There are also some limitations associated with the research methods of using qualitative interviews. This method of data collection is time consuming, as the interviews themselves take much more time than other methods, such as quantitative survey methods, and take considerable time to transcribe and code. This commitment to time, detail, and depth limits the quantity of the sample, which would allow these findings to be more generalizable to larger populations. However, generalizability is not the goal of qualitative interview methods. These were the best methods to answer the research questions posed in the introduction, but it is still important to acknowledge these limitations.

## **Policy Implications**

There are a few policy implications of the findings discussed in this paper, which would be most useful to university administrations, but could also extend to broader policy recommendations at the local, state, and federal levels. These findings underscore the inadequate response from the Illinois State University for these participants, and other studies that have emerged since the pandemic began stress that this issue is not unique to ISU. Thus, university administrations should take note of the needs of students to prepare for the next unprecedented time and maintain robust protocols for emergency situations so that students can have clear and easy access to crucial resources to which they are entitled. Of course, it would be in the best interest of students across the U.S. to have their rights protected, especially as many students continued to pay fees to their universities which supposedly guarantee resources which were inaccessible throughout much of the first and second semesters of the pandemic.

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## APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW INSTRUMENT

### *Life and Studies at ISU Before Pandemic (Before Spring Break)*

1. What classes were you taking in Spring 2020? Describe to us how the semester was going for you.
2. When did you first hear about Covid-19? What were your initial thoughts?
3. Where were you doing when the university moved classes online? What was your first reaction?
4. Thinking back, how do you feel the transition to online learning went for you?
5. Before school closures, where did you live? After?

### *Life and Schooling During Pandemic*

1. Describe to us how you went about working on your classes. Did you face any problems? What kind of problems? Were your problems resolved? If so, how?
2. Did you work while going to school? Tell us about it. What did you do?
3. If yes, did you lose your job because of the university closure or pandemic generally?
4. How did you feel about the spring 2020 semester? In retrospect, how do you feel about it? Tell me a story that summarizes the kind of semester you had.
5. Did your grades suffer from the transition online? If no, why not? If yes, why? What did you do about it?
6. Has you or anyone in your family contracted covid-19? If so, did it impact you?
7. Has one or more of your immediate family members lost a job as a result of the pandemic? How did this impact family life?
8. How stressful was your school workload after the switch to online learning and what contributed to any changes (if there were any)?

### *Family and Community Life During Pandemic*

1. Were you and your family dynamics affected by Covid-19? If so, how?
2. Were you able to socially distance yourself from your friends? Family?
3. Is there a story that encapsulates how you and your family dealt with the pandemic?

### *Fall 2020: Returning to school*

1. How do you feel about your educational experiences? Do you think that you gained the same benefits from online learning? If not, how and why?
2. How do you feel about the way ISU has handled the pandemic ~~so far?~~
3. Do you feel ~~adequately~~ supported by ISU?
4. If not, what would improve this?

### *Identification*

1. With which of the following labels do you feel you most identify:
  1. Hispanic
  2. Latino



3. Latinx
4. Other(s)
2. Are you a first-generation college student?
3. Can you connect me to anyone else who may want to interview?

## APPENDIX B: INFORMED CONSENT FORM

### Consent

The department of Sociology and Anthropology at Illinois State are conducting an interview survey in order to better understand the experiences of students when classes went online at the start of the Covid-19 pandemic. Your input will be used as data which I will analyze to uncover any trends that may appear. This will help improve university response in the future as well as contribute to an emerging body of research about the pandemic's effects on colleges.

#### **Why are you being asked?**

You are being asked to participate in a research project that is being conducted by Dr. Maura Toro-Morn and Molly Ricci of the department of Sociology and Anthropology at Illinois State University. The purpose of the research project is to gather information about how students responded to the switch remote learning and how this switch, along with the pandemic in general, affected all aspects of life for students. You have been asked to participate because you are or were a student at Illinois State University. You are ineligible to participate if you are under the age of 18, or if you were not an undergraduate student at Illinois State during the spring semester of 2020. You must also self-identify as Latina/o/x and/or Hispanic. You are also ineligible to participate if you are currently within the European Economic Area

Your participation in this study is voluntary. You will not be penalized if you choose to skip parts of the study, not participate, or withdraw from the study at any time.

#### **What would you do?**

If you choose to participate in this study, you will be asked to provide your opinion about your experiences as a student in spring 2020 and your future needs as a student. You will participate in one interview over Zoom, which will record and transcribe your responses. Your involvement in this study will last approximately 30 minutes.

#### **Are any risks expected?**

I do not anticipate any risks beyond those that would occur in everyday life.

#### **Will your information be protected?**

I will use all reasonable efforts to keep any provided personal information confidential. Nothing that will identify you will be linked to your responses in any publication without your consent below. Information that may identify you or potentially lead to reidentification will not be released to individuals that are not on the research team. The findings from this study may be presented in conferences, meetings, and publications. When these findings are presented, your responses will be combined with the responses of other participants, and not tied to your identity as an individual unless you consent below to use of your first name. While your instructor may know who does or does not agree to participate in the research before grades are posted, you will not be penalized if you choose to not participate.

However, when required by law or university policy, identifying information (including your signed consent form) may be seen or copied by authorized individuals. After your data has been deidentified, your data may also be used in other research projects.

**Will your first name be used in publications of this study?**

Do you consent for us to use your first name in publications of this study? Your last name will remain omitted in publications. If you do not consent to use of your first name, I will use a pseudonym instead.

Please select one:

Yes

No

**Who will benefit from this study?**

While you may not directly benefit from this study, your responses will help inform on your experiences as students which will help the university better understand the needs of the student community.

**Whom do you contact if you have any questions?**

If you have any questions about the research or wish to withdraw from the study, contact either Molly Ricci at [mericci@ilstu.edu](mailto:mericci@ilstu.edu) or Dr. Maura Toro-Morn at [mitmorn@ilstu.edu](mailto:mitmorn@ilstu.edu).

If you have any questions about your rights as a participant, or if you feel you have been placed at risk, contact the Illinois State University Research Ethics & Compliance Office at (309) 438-5527 or [IRB@ilstu.edu](mailto:IRB@ilstu.edu).

Documentation of consent by electronic signature. By typing your full name, you are indicating your willingness to participate. You can print this form for your records.

Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_