

Learning Loss during the Pandemic: An Overview

Students will likely have experienced learning losses and knowledge gaps during the pandemic. Student engagement levels may be down in general, with students experiencing both burnout and increased stress levels. Students may have been impacted by teachers who lacked training/tools on teaching remotely or to a split classroom. Finally, students may have lacked home-based resources, such as adult help at home or in their community and technology access issues.

Of particular areas of concern, sophomores (the class of 2024) graduated from high school shortly after the pandemic started, and have been remote their entire time at Bentley.

Students may have been disproportionately affected by a lack of home-based resources. For example, students sharing a home with others who went to college might have had access to more help with their course work. Technology access and time zone issues may have disproportionately affected students, particularly those living around the globe.

Faculty should expect that certain disciplines will have been more seriously impacted, such as math, science, and accounting.

Recommended Resources:

[*Should Colleges be Thinking About High School Learning Loss?* \(Article\)](#)

[*The Other Freshmen Class* \(Article, also attached below\)](#)

[*Dealing With Students' Learning Loss* \(Podcast\)](#)

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SOPHOMORES' 2ND CHANCE

The Other Freshman Class

By *Beckie Supiano*

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GETTY IMAGES

A student prepares for an exam from home. Last year’s freshmen missed out on the normal first-year experience.

Wyatt Ashton's freshman-year experience would sound familiar to many students who started college under the shadow of the Covid-19 pandemic. He met just one of his professors in person. He didn't participate in any extracurriculars or join any clubs. He mostly hung out with his three suitemates and four women from a suite in their hall, and figures he socialized with about 15 students, total. The number only grew that high, he says, because one of the women in his core group from the dorm was particularly outgoing.

Ashton, a secondary-education major at Arizona State University, maintained a perfect grade-point average. But he withdrew from a math class he feared he'd otherwise have failed. Meanwhile, he found his other courses unchallenging. Often, Ashton says, "teachers didn't know how to adjust their lesson plans away from lectures." And, he adds, "lectures over Zoom were just insanely boring."

Freshman year is about figuring out who and what you like. Ideally, students interact with at least one instructor outside of class, and move from making acquaintances on campus to making friends. They begin pinpointing their interests, academically and otherwise, and figuring out how to pursue them. To facilitate this, colleges offer first-year students an abundance of people to meet and new things to try — and push them to take advantage of that at every turn.

This year's rising sophomores — even those like Ashton who technically spent a year living and learning on campus — didn't have access to the full abundance. And they didn't get that push. As a result, come fall colleges will in many ways have two cohorts of first-year students.

Sophomores don't want to be treated like freshmen. But they are eager to make up for lost time socially. "The No. 1 thing they want is to be able to get to know their fellow students," says Paula Patch, assistant director for first-year initiatives in the core curriculum at Elon University. "They want to expand their friend group." That means interacting with classmates in a more normal way, she says. It means gathering in larger groups without university supervision, too.

In their first year of college, rising sophomores know, many professors extended academic grace, so students haven't had courses at their full intensity yet. At the same time, many have seen their

study habits crumble, adding to the fear that they're behind. Professors will have to act like trainers or coaches getting them back into condition, says Patch, who is also a senior lecturer in English. "We need to develop stamina," she says, "not assume it's there."

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Rising sophomores transitioned into college with a lot less in-person support than they'd normally receive, on both the high-school and college sides, says Aaron Thompson, president of the Kentucky Council on Postsecondary Education. That made the adjustment harder for everyone, he says, but especially for first-generation students.

That's why the council [included](#) efforts to support rising sophomores when it [awarded](#) \$1.5 million in competitive grants to support summer "bridge" programs at the state's colleges this year. "It's not whether or not they can handle a college course," Thompson says. "It's whether or not they can handle college."

Even though it's not yet clear how much the pandemic affected learning, it doesn't make sense to wait to offer help, Thompson says. Colleges already know what kinds of efforts improve retention. "You get nothing but return on investment," in this kind of support, says Thompson, who had long wanted to raise funding for bridge programs. In the unlikely event that learning was unaffected, the state's extra support will have accelerated learning, he says, "and that's not bad."

'We Can't Pretend That Everything Is Fine'

Kevin Gooding wears two hats at West Virginia University's Honors College, directing its living-learning community and teaching as a service assistant professor. In both roles, his focus is on helping students build the relationships he knows are crucial to their success.

Last year, Covid-safety precautions precluded many of Gooding's go-to moves, like taking students on field trips and spending time in the dorms. Gooding continued to teach in person, and shifted the rest of his work online as well as he could. But it wasn't the same, he says. "We all just got so sick of Zoom."

Something that mattered was missing, Gooding says. “We can’t just kind of pretend, for our second-years, that everything is fine, that they had anything approaching a normal year.”

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Advancing from freshman to sophomore year is “perhaps as hard as the transition from home to college,” Gooding says. At West Virginia, sophomores usually move off campus, which introduces a host of new responsibilities — and reduces their contact time with university staff.

If the second year of college is known for anything, it’s the sophomore slump. A growing number of colleges have established programs meant to make sophomore year distinctive in a good way, perhaps by students’ working closely with a mentor or embarking on a research project. Even where such support already exists, this group of sophomores may have an unusual set of needs.

Gooding knows the first-year students he worked with last year will require extra help getting plugged in, and is talking with colleagues across the Honors College to figure out how best to provide that. He knows he wants to take this year’s sophomores on the sort of field trip they’d normally have had as freshmen. It’s an academically minded excursion — Gooding includes a professor with expertise relevant to whatever site they visit. Even so, Gooding says, for many students the most meaningful part of the trip is the conversations they have with one another on the bus ride home.

Getting Back on Track

Everyone worried about what remote instruction would mean for students’ academic performance. When officials at Georgia State University looked at students’ grades during the pandemic, the distribution was pretty similar to previous semesters. But that’s in the aggregate. The picture looked quite different when grades were broken down by class year, says Tim Renick, executive director of the university’s National Institute for Student Success. Juniors and seniors did a bit better than usual. But among freshmen, there was a significant increase in the numbers of courses in which students got a D, failed, or withdrew.

It makes sense, once you think about it. Upperclassmen have figured out how to be successful college students. They're likely to be taking courses they are interested or invested in. Rising sophomores, in contrast, had no previous college experience and were more likely to be in large, introductory courses whose importance might have been unclear to them.

In response, Georgia State is running an accelerator program this summer to help rising sophomores get back on track. The university has identified a set of core prerequisite courses and recruited instructors who excel in teaching freshmen to run them, with support from student peer mentors. Georgia State is using stimulus money to cover students' tuition, so that the program won't put a dent in their financial aid. Courses are being offered in person and online, and 750 rising sophomores are participating.

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University leaders are thinking about students' lives beyond the classroom, too. Last year, Renick says, students who lived on campus might have been in a suite alone, where normally they'd have had three suitemates. Many clubs have not been able to operate normally.

"So how do we recover all of that?" Renick asks. "It's not going to be a one-time thing." One approach Georgia State is trying: Applying its analytics to student affairs, using a platform to ask students about their interests and connect them to extracurriculars that could be a good match.

Ashton, the Arizona State student, knows he could have gotten more involved on campus, but the idea of going to a Zoom clubs fair was unappealing. He would have been more likely to join something, he figures, if he'd seen fliers around campus, or heard other students talking about their own involvement.

Academically minded and introverted, Ashton says that a year ago he'd never have imagined joining a fraternity. Now he's planning on it. "I hadn't considered the social need for myself to be that great until last semester," he says. Even if he doesn't participate in everything the fraternity

does, Ashton figures, it will give him connections: to other students, and to other activities like intramural sports. Those connections, he’s learned the hard way, are the heart of the college experience.

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STUDENT LIFE

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