

In Fall 2021, OIE conducted 10 focus groups with a total of 24 student participants. This participant group consisted of 22 female, 13 first generation, and 16 underrepresented minority students. There were six freshmen, five juniors, eight seniors, and five graduate students. The following are the most frequently discussed points of interest for students and experiences unique to the Fall 2021 semester.

Course Modality

Overall, students expressed a desire to have flexibility in their course modality (in-person vs. online). The students were split in their preferences between online and in-person modalities. Students who preferred online courses wanted all online courses because this course modality allowed them to learn at their own pace and take care of outside responsibilities. Students who preferred in-person courses wanted to be on campus because their learning and motivation was improved by being on campus. Some students expressed frustration with changes in course modality especially when they were given short notice of the change. While these modality changes were mildly frustrating to most of the students we spoke with, these changes were more upsetting for students who had to spend time and money to relocate or commute to Fresno.

“But I do know several other students who have had that issue where they were specifically planning their schedules based on being in-person or virtual... And then when you show up the first week of class and then things get changed, it definitely has a huge impact on the students.”

Additionally, students liked being in-person when it came to interactions with faculty and students. They preferred being able to ask questions to faculty during lectures or immediately after class instead of having to email them and wait for an undetermined amount of time to receive a response. Students also enjoyed being able to interact with their peers in-person and discuss group work instead of participating in Zoom breakout rooms which were typically less interactive. Students often brought up these interactions in comparison to their previous virtual classes.

Resources

Another topic that students brought up was utilizing campus resources. Most students were taking advantage of the school’s services, and specifically mentioned how they appreciated SupportNet, tutoring, the Student Health and Counseling Center, and technology lending. The ways students engaged with the services were based on their main course modality: students who were taking classes on campus tended to go in person, and those with mostly online courses used more virtual and self-service options online. One resource that stood out this semester was students’ use of the library, with many students citing it as a great environment to study in and helped them feel motivated and focused. Students also liked using the individual study rooms but occasionally ran into challenges with the reservation process and wanted increased access to more private spaces.

“The resources I’ve used so far is the library at the most. Let’s see. tutoring has helped a lot too, especially with my math class. Mainly the library, a lot of areas to look for studying and achieving your goals and coursework and stuff.”

COVID-19 Regulations

Many students shared their opinions on the university's COVID safety regulations. There was variability in the level of concern students held, but overall students were satisfied with the COVID-19 safety rules on campus and appreciated the vaccine and masking mandates. Students' biggest worry was how others on campus would follow these rules. Enforcement of masking rules varied within classes and was highly dependent on the professor teaching the course. This made some students feel uneasy attending in person class when masking rules were not being enforced. They also appreciated the email updates on potential COVID-19 exposures on campus. However, for the few students who were potentially exposed (e.g., a person in their class had COVID), they were not directly notified and found out through word of mouth. They felt that being in a classroom with someone who contracted COVID was close enough of an exposure that they would have appreciated being notified directly. Overall, for the students taking classes in person, they felt that the rules and regulations put in place this semester helped them to feel safe on campus and wanted masking and expanded testing opportunities to continue.

"Safety. I knew that the school probably did tests to make sure that we were good to go to come on campus. So I think I felt pretty safe to come back knowing that vaccinations had been implemented so far and that a lot of places were requiring masks and everything. So I felt pretty safe."

In-Person Impacts

Many students experienced life on campus for the first time. For some students, they had been Fresno State students for years virtually, but were just now physically coming to campus for their classes. Many students described their excitement to participate in campus events and activities, to engage in person with peers and faculty, and to get a "real" college experience. For many first-time freshmen, this proved to be a significant and somewhat difficult transition as many described the rigor of college to be more challenging than they expected. Even prior to virtual learning, the transition to college is not easy for many students, and the impact of completing a majority of high school virtually exacerbated this challenge for many.

However, being back on campus led to many students feeling more motivated to complete their coursework. For both new and continuing students, they described how motivating it was to be in a physical classroom or study space, like the library, where they were surrounded by peers who were focused and eager to learn. In comparison to previous semesters, students were beginning to feel a lift in their mental health. They described enjoying getting back into a routine, being able to make friends more easily, and learning became easier in person. Students' attention and mental health noticeably improved, primarily because of in-person interactions with faculty and students, increased opportunities to socialize, and getting the college experience.

"I also was hoping to come back and feel much more motivated about school because I feel like I learn a lot better with the in-person face-to-face environment and just getting to develop interpersonal relationships with my classmates and my teachers and just other people on campus. That's been a really big thing for me, coming on campus; and overall, just getting to see what college gives out in terms of the experience."

Questions? Contact the Office of Institutional Effectiveness for more information.
Alex Nottbohm (anottbohm@csufresno.edu) or Cory Cowan (cowan Cory@csufresno.edu)