

# A Sheltered Kind of Normal: Student Life During COVID19

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## The Expectation

Going into my last semester of undergraduate studies, I originally thought that it would be a semester that any graduating student would have expected to experience: finishing the last batch of classes for the major (and, in my case, a minor), applying for internships or entry level positions, making last-minute requests for recommendations to professors and supervisors for graduate school or job applications, and buying or renting graduation regalia to display the fancy cords and stoles that students would receive from all the organizations they were involved with or academic achievements they have acquired. Simply put, a normal but memorable experience of what a graduating senior would expect months before their graduation ceremony.

With the last two upper division night classes to complete my Public Health degree, a Nutritional Science class to complete my SJSU Studies requirement on Tuesday and Thursday mornings, one weekly Biology course to complete my minor, and a 2-5 pm job as a peer tutor for statistics two days per week, I was ready to tackle a semester that was busier than ever. All I had to do was to make sure I kept up with the deadlines and high expectations of my last upper division public health classes, and I would be able to get through this semester smoothly. Not to also mention that self-care was also a top priority for myself to do well by treating myself to drinks from the Starbucks that was below the Student Union or maybe some snacks and sushi from Ginger Market. It was mostly going to be a smooth, normal semester with a lot of walking around to different areas on campus to take in the last bits of the spring scenery of San Jose State University before the day I walk on the stage one last time. Well, almost.

## The News of the Novel Coronavirus

It was near the end of February when I began hearing about the news of the coronavirus that had caused an epidemic in China. From the news as well as from my public health professors, I clearly remembered that it started in Wuhan, China at a wet market and it was predicted that there might be cases around the world as well due to international travel. However, there were no cases so far in California. From then, I began getting news notifications that California was prepared for the fact that there may be cases in the United States. Even the health officer of the Santa Clara County of Public Health, Sara Cody, talked about how Santa Clara county is remaining vigilant about the presence of coronavirus cases occurring in the county. This reassured me that our county would be well-prepared in countering the number of coronavirus cases. What I did not expect at all were the next steps that they would take if the number of cases and deaths rose to extreme levels.

## The Abrupt Changes

To be honest, March 2020 was one of the most chaotic months that I ever experienced, especially during the first two weeks when cases of coronavirus began to rise in California, yet no cases yet in Santa Clara County. Moreover, the number of deaths rose each day, and it did not seem to stop during those weeks. During this time, I noticed on social media sites such as Reddit,

Wildfire and the SJSU Sammy App that students have begun to worry about the safety of their relatives as well as themselves. Some students even created an online petition addressed to SJSU's president to call off classes or move them online in order to prevent a case of the coronavirus occurring in the university. After a week, and an adamant email from the president that classes would still go on, the president suddenly decided to call off classes in the middle of the second week of March because of a death from coronavirus that occurred in Santa Clara County. It seemed that they needed the approval of the CSU Chancellor in order to be able to make the decision to move the courses online. Thus, during the second week of March, the professors as well as student staff would receive training on using Zoom. At the same time, my part-time job as a tutor was moved online immediately and so the peer tutors and mentors had to attend a one-time orientation to familiarize ourselves with the functions on Zoom.

This pre-shelter-in-place transition to online modalities was supposed to be temporarily in motion until after spring break (the last week of March), when things were predicted to get better in Santa Clara County. However, during the last few days of spring break, another letter was sent out to students saying that the university has decided to extend the online modality to the end of the semester. A few weeks after, the graduation ceremony for the class of 2020 was cancelled due to the shelter-in-place order. It was surprising yet disheartening to see that everything could fall apart because of a virus that no one knew how to deal with. Thinking back on the biology classes that I have taken, I now understand what they meant when they said that the greatest danger to humans comes from the smallest microscopic, nonliving specimens.

## **A Period of Adjustment**

April was a month of rough adjustment for my family members since they had to stock up on groceries and supplies that became limited or not available in stores after the news of the shelter-in-place mandate was released to the public. Amazingly, toilet paper was also limited (what toilet paper has to do with the coronavirus pandemic, I do not know at all) since people bought them in bulk. I also noticed that many people, including my younger brother, who were extroverted and liked to be with friends were not taking the shelter in place too well for the first few weeks since it restricted them from socializing with others.

As for myself, I felt little to no difference in the impact of the coronavirus in my daily routine. In fact, it made my days a lot more relaxed compared to the time when I took all my classes on campus, because everything I needed to do was all at home. On campus, I had to rely a lot on time management to be able to eat dinner within my one hour gap before my night classes after my part time tutoring job on one day and walk to my next class during a 15 minute gap period from Duncan Hall to the Industrial Studies Building on another day, which was all the way across the other end of campus. I did notice during my online classes that a lot of my professors were either not familiar with using zoom and decided to continue their classes asynchronously or would have to take out certain activities out of their lesson plans because the current functions on Zoom are limited. Sometimes I do follow my parents to buy groceries and I would make sure to take precautions when I stepped outside, such as wearing a face mask in public and carrying a bottle of hand sanitizer or a pack of sanitary wipes with me. I was not as worried about the distance between my friends and myself either because I would reconnect with them through social media, text messaging or phone calls.

Working from home was also an interesting experience as well. Compared to last semester, more students seemed to visit me for statistics tutoring during the shelter-in-place mandate. Many students were worried about the changes being made to their syllabus and even a professor for one of the statistics classes stopped teaching for the rest of the semester because they had an injury before the shelter-in-place order. Those students who had that previous professor are currently taught by two other psychology professors who teach statistics in their own teaching style. In addition to the changes, the students that I tutored would also have trouble using the tools on Zoom to show their material to me. I would also come across technical difficulties using Zoom myself such as connectivity issues. Despite the different teaching styles that I had to juggle with and the technical difficulties along the way, I was eager to help those students to succeed in their statistics courses each week.

## **Current Thoughts**

As I am writing this segment now, my classes have officially finished, and I am currently pushing through my final exams and projects that need to be turned in online. Santa Clara is doing somewhat better, but the county has decided to slowly phase into normal life rather than lifting the shelter-in-place all at once. I have also just finished conducting my end-of-the-semester online tutoring workshop for statistics and had a significantly higher turn-out of students compared to last semester to my own surprise. Overall, I would say that I still enjoyed my four years in San Jose State University as an undergraduate even though I did have to go through this pandemic. Graduating during this serious time was honestly not something that I expected at all, but I am truly grateful that I was given the opportunity to pursue a 4-year degree, and the opportunity to learn more about the wonders and impacts of Public Health during these times. Although I will be taking my next steps in higher education at University of California Los Angeles to pursue my master's in public health degree this coming fall, COVID19 won't stop me from pursuing my graduate degree despite the current conditions of COVID19 cases in Los Angeles. By continuing to practice proper hygiene as counties are slowly phasing into normal life, I have high hopes that there will be a day where everyone will be able to live normally as if this virus never existed in the first place.