

The Trainee Experience

during COVID times



Written by Kailey DeLucry, MA (Regina)

When I made the decision to move to Regina, Saskatchewan from Saint John, New Brunswick to pursue my PhD in Clinical Psychology, I was apprehensive at the prospect of moving so far from home. What if a loved one became sick? What if I missed my best friend's wedding? I weighed the pros and cons of trading in the coast for the prairies, and I quieted my anxiety by simply reminding myself that I was only a couple of plane rides away, if anyone ever needed me. In March 2020, when the seriousness of the pandemic became clear, I realized that a couple plane rides is not as close as I'd imagined.



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Aside from the disappointment that comes from being far from home, I also quickly realized that another essential component of my social support system had disappeared as classes transitioned online. Although working from home has its perks, I noticed I really missed those special moments that can only take place on campus. Until it was no longer an option, I didn't realize the value of commiserating with my pals during those late-night study sessions at the library. I never recognized how much I gained from sipping over-priced coffee while walking to class with a colleague. I underestimated the significance of those impromptu run-ins with professors who tell you about this conference and that scholarship opportunity.

Despite all this, I am lucky that the pandemic has not gravely impacted my academic experience; however, I think that has a lot to do with what stage I am at in my career and a lot of luck. In order to gain insight on other students' experiences, I interviewed five individuals who are all at various phases of their academic journey. Each student explained the unique challenges they've faced while trying to pursue post-secondary education during these unprecedented times. These five students generously shared how they've navigated the university experience:

1. The First-Year Undergraduate Student

University of Regina's first-year undergraduate psychology student, Haley McStravick, started her post-secondary education journey quite differently than students of the past. Instead of getting lost on campus or learning which library floor is the best to study on, Haley has been doing coursework online from home. When asked about her experience thus far, Haley reported many of the positive aspects of e-learning. She emphasized the ease of recorded lectures, noting how useful she finds being able to pause and re-watch lectures. Another side of remote learning that Haley has found advantageous is not having to take tests in crowded classrooms filled with distractions.

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One disadvantage Haley noted is having to adapt to the diverse range of e-teaching styles professors have adopted as they switched to remote teaching. With the first semester coming to an end and a second semester looming in January, Haley often wonders how she will transition to in-person learning, if, or when, school shifts to traditional classroom instruction again. Fortunately, Haley has found a sense of community with her peers: “Everyone in all my classes are really nice to each other and know we are all going through it together.”

2. The Fourth-Year Undergraduate Student

Abby Phillips is in the final year of her undergraduate degree at the University of Regina. She is working on her honours thesis and applying to graduate school this year — two very time-consuming and stressful processes. She speculates: “COVID-19 has made my fourth year much more stressful than it would have been otherwise.” When describing her experience, she recounted the disappointment she has felt not having the opportunity to lean on other classmates for support. On top of feeling disconnected from her peers, she said that remote learning has impacted her ability to develop close connections with supervisors and grad students in her lab. Abby highlighted how important these connections are when it comes to applying to graduate school, as such guidance is invaluable when tackling the ins and outs of applications and interviews. Further, Abby discussed the downsides of working from home, which included poor Internet connection, glitchy videos, and the toils of having to share a workspace with an animated (and at times, disruptive) elementary school teacher.

3. The International Student

Yaren Koca is an international student pursuing her Master of Arts in Psychology at the University of Regina. When asked about her experience, Yaren underscored the difficulty she has faced transitioning her research to an online platform. Yaren studies the cognitive mechanisms underlying human visual perception, and she normally administers experiments in person. However, given the restrictions, Yaren has not been able to conduct research in the way she has been trained. In order to continue her research, she had to learn a whole new set of skills in a very short amount of time. Despite lamenting on the stress and challenge of this, she did make a point to emphasize how happy she was to get to learn a new approach. Yaren also expressed one upside of online research—faster data collection!

As an international student from Turkey, Yaren also emphasized how mentally taxing it has been not being able to go back home. Yaren said she debated the option of returning home and working from Turkey, but decided to stay in Regina for fear of catching COVID-19 during the travel and spreading it to her family. She also noted the problems that would arise given the 9-hour time zone difference between Regina and her hometown; after all, a 6PM meeting in Regina would translate to 3AM Zoom call in Turkey! Yaren also voiced concerns about her ability to legally work internationally as a Teaching Assistant. Thus, Yaren made the tough decision to stay in Regina: “it’s been difficult for me not being able to visit my loved ones, but I’m okay as long as I know they’re safe.”

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4. The Graduate Student

Brandon Sparks is in the final year of his PhD program at the University of Saskatchewan. Given all the uncertainty that arose when the initial lockdowns commenced, Brandon made the decision to move back home to New Brunswick where his wife and family are. Because he did not anticipate his return to New Brunswick to be indefinite, he has found himself in a bit of a pickle: "I didn't pack any of my winter clothes and most of my personal belongings are now halfway across the country." This has proven problematic, as he has been in New Brunswick for almost ten months now. Another unfortunate side effect of an abrupt and unplanned move across the country is that Brandon did not get the opportunity to say goodbye to some of his friends who have since moved away from Saskatchewan.



Brandon Sparks, PhD student

At the start of the pandemic, Brandon recounted the increased stress and pressure that faculty were put under transitioning classes to remote delivery. This transition ended up directly impacting Brandon by delaying his Comprehensive Exams to much later than he had anticipated. Aside from being a student, Brandon teaches. Currently, he is teaching a class remotely that he had previously taught in person, and despite having some material already done, he mentioned the online course has ended up taking up far more time than he had originally estimated. To enhance the online student experience, it was recommended that weekly student discussions be included, which has added considerably to Brandon's grading workload. Adding further to his workload is the fact his class size doubled, but no additional TA supports were provided, which has been overwhelming.

Aside from the challenges of online teaching, Brandon recounted missing the camaraderie he shared with his grad student peers. He remembers how those in his shared office space had often gotten together for coffee to discuss research, stresses, and work through any school-related issues. Now, given his swift return home, he says he and his colleagues now all live in different Canadian cities and these daily chats are greatly missed.

5. The Postdoctoral Fellow

Loveness Dube is a postdoc at the University of Regina. When asked how COVID-19 has impacted her academic experience, she noted the huge impact travel restrictions have had on the ability to share research findings, as in-person conferences have been cancelled. Loveness also described the impact COVID-19 has had on her ability to network and meet colleagues within her field. With scientific conferences taking place virtually, the networking part of postdoc training has become a challenge. Loveness worries about the impact this past year could have on career prospects after training, as many employers are uncertain of the future, and few, if any, are actually hiring.

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Thank You

I want to thank these students again for sharing their stories. If anything, the pandemic has shown us the importance of companionship and togetherness when it comes to academic success. Although COVID-19 inevitably impacts students differently across career stages, there is a common theme that makes the demands of post-secondary education sustainable, and that is a sense of community. In many ways, these trainees have shown great resilience and adaptability in the face of uncertainty by being open to learning new research techniques and making sure to remember the advantages of working from home. However, it is abundantly clear that the pandemic and its subsequent (though necessary!!) restrictions has negatively impacted students by forcing them to be disconnected from their peers, colleagues, and professors.

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