

AUSTIN WRITING SHOP'S GUIDE TO
Going to College During a Pandemic



Navigating Your Way to a Successful Year

We wrote this guide to help college students, in particular new freshman/first-year students, navigate the uncertain waters of higher education during the SARS-CoV-2 (COVID-19) pandemic. A lot of plans that were made in 2019 or 2020 have been upended by this crisis. Here we have put together advice and ideas to help you figure out if, where, and how you can continue your education in the fall of 2020 and beyond.

In this guide, you will find advice on community college, online coursework, and taking a “gap year” in lieu of school. Our advice is informed by our many years of experience in the classroom and working with students individually.

■ To the Class of 2020: Many of you have missed out on the end of your senior year and all its activities, including proms, celebrations, and graduation ceremonies. If you’re feeling anger, disappointment, or even grief that your high school career ended without the usual fanfare, that’s understandable and totally natural. We’re sorry you missed out and we sincerely hope that your college career will have all the things you’re hoping for, despite this crisis. ■

Do You Feel Like You Can’t Go to School This Fall?

There are a number of reasons you might not be attending your ideal college or university as planned in the fall:

- Your school’s campus is not reopening in the fall. Because things are so uncertain right now, it’s hard to tell which campuses will be open and which will remain closed (or open and then close again...since influenza tends to have two waves).
- Your school is open, but you don’t feel safe returning to campus. Because we don’t have a set of unified, national responses to the pandemic, in some places, each person has to decide for herself what to do. Perhaps you or a loved one are immunocompromised, so being exposed to COVID-19 is not a risk you want to take. Maybe you live with elderly family members who are at greater risk. Whatever your reason, it is a valid choice to want to minimize your exposure to the virus this year.
- Your financial situation has changed, and you and/or your family cannot afford for you to be in school at your top choice. Many families have taken a financial hit because of the pandemic. People have lost jobs, been furloughed, or had their hours cut. New hires have been frozen as everyone waits to see what the

future holds. If funds are tight, you may want to consider other options so you can stay in school.

If you can't or won't be attending classes at your preferred school, **you still have options** for what to do this semester. None of these options are one-size-fits-all and none of them are perfect. Unfortunately, even adults with settled careers are currently finding themselves just trying to pick options that suck the least. But we hope this will help you figure out what your options *are* and which one is best (or the least disappointing) for you.

Option 1: Community College

Community college may be a viable option for you, whether you take classes on campus or online. (As of this writing, it's unknown whether in-person classes will be available at Austin Community College.) The good news is that the quality of education at a community college can be excellent. The Revealing Institutional Strengths and Challenges Survey was conducted among community college students in 2017 and 2018. Of some 6,000+ survey respondents, 95% were very likely or somewhat likely to recommend their school to a friend, and 97% felt that their education was a good value or a fair value for the money they paid.

Many of you may be considering community college because of price and location. But there are other benefits to community college that perhaps you haven't considered:

- **Small class sizes and access to professors.** In a small, informal survey that we conducted, most respondents cited small class sizes and access to professors as things they appreciated at their community college.
- **Focus on academics.** A community college can be an excellent academic environment, in part because the community is less focused on extracurricular activities (in contrast to bigger universities).
- **Diverse student body.** Many of our survey respondents enjoyed having classes with a diverse group of students in terms of age, ethnicity, and life experiences.
- **Flexibility.** At community colleges, many students are taking basic degree requirements, so it can reduce the pressure to have a major selected and a path to graduation mapped out.
- **Fun and personal growth.** Because the cost per class is lower, students may feel more freedom to try classes just for fun or a desire for personal growth.

Community college can have some drawbacks as well:

- **Financial aid woes.** Getting your financial aid straightened out may be challenging. One of our survey respondents (who had an overall positive experience) said he always had to contact the financial aid department at the beginning of each school year.
- **Lack of support from academic advisors.** Some schools don't offer as much academic advising or support as students need or want. You may need to dig deep to make sure you get all the advice and information you need to reach your goals.
- **Lack of four-year degree options.** Community colleges generally don't offer a wide range of four-year degrees, unlike universities.
- **Stigma.** Community college is sometimes viewed as just a step above high school in terms of academic rigor and prestige, despite the fact that most instructors are as highly qualified as professors at any university.

If you decide community college in the fall is right for you, here are some things you can do to help you succeed:

- Clarify your goals for yourself. What do you hope to get out of community college? One or two semesters of college credit? Credits to transfer to another school? A two-year (associate's) degree? A chance to explore different classes?
- If you are planning to transfer from community college to another school, look into the transfer process early and focus on earning credits that will transfer easily.
- Take care of yourself. If you are going to school, working, and/or taking care of family, you still need time in your schedule to eat and sleep.
- Have fun! Community college can be a great time in your education. As cliché as it may sound, learning to "bloom where you are planted" is a good life skill, as a community college student and beyond.

Option 2: Online Classes

If you decide to take online classes, you may have a lot of options, depending on what is available in the fall of 2020 and beyond. Schools offering online classes may include your home institution, local community colleges and universities, and even schools that offer entire degree programs online. A discussion of these options is beyond the scope of our guide, but here are a few tips to help you navigate online coursework:

- **Motivation.** Be aware that taking classes online requires a lot of motivation on your part, perhaps more than in-person classes. Without the rhythm of attending classes and seeing your professors and classmates in person, you may find it hard to put in the work required to succeed in online classes.
- **Organization.** Completing an online class requires you to stay on top of deadlines for assignments, quizzes, and tests. The online format makes it easier for email and blackboard announcements to slip by unnoticed. *Read the syllabus* and take note when due dates are announced or changed.
- **Accountability.** We highly, highly recommend that you find a way to build accountability into your semester. Do you have a trusted friend or family member who can hold you accountable for staying on top of your work? Can you build rewards into your semester to celebrate milestones like finishing midterms or major research papers?
- **Accessibility of instructors.** If you can, do some research into how accessible your online instructors are. How often do they respond to student emails or messages? Are they available for phone calls? Which formats do they use to give you feedback on your work? Greater accessibility of instructors increases the likelihood that you'll have a positive experience.
- **Difficulty.** Think carefully about which classes you take online. Taking a very difficult class online may not be a good idea if instructional support is minimal. A difficult class may require you to look for a lot of external resources in order to teach yourself the material.
- **Emotional stress.** We are all dealing with a lot of emotional stress around the pandemic. You may be experiencing disappointment and uncertainty. Those feelings may dampen your ability to focus on school. If you fear you won't be able to focus on school, ask yourself if taking easier or fewer courses might be a good idea.

Option 3: A Lighter Course Load

Taking fewer classes in the fall of 2020 or spring of 2021 may be a good idea. Here are a few reasons why a lighter course load could make sense for you:

- You are dealing with a lot of emotional stress.

- Your home situation is chaotic right now.
- Finances are tight. (Taking fewer classes can mean you are paying less money for school if you pay per credit hour.)
- Your internet connection and/or speed is not always great. This is most relevant if you are considering taking online classes.

So why take fewer credits instead of just taking the semester or year off from school? (We'll talk about taking a year off next.) Taking fewer credits may be a good idea if:

- You generally enjoy school and want to stay engaged intellectually.
- School would be a welcome diversion from the stress of pandemic news.
- You have some easier classes that feel doable, despite the current challenges you face.
- You're afraid if you stop taking classes altogether that you won't return to school.

Option 4: Take a Gap Year

Finally, there is the option to take the next school year off. You might consider a "gap year" if:

- Your mental health is suffering.
- You feel completely overwhelmed by the rest of your life.
- Your finances are extremely tight, and you don't want to take (additional) loans.
- You seriously doubt your ability to complete any coursework.

There is nothing wrong with taking a year off of school, especially now. Many people take a gap year and then return to school and do well in their classes. It might be a good idea to take the time to think about what you want to get out of a gap year if indeed you choose that path. Do you want to focus on your health? Earn some money? Take care of your family? Volunteer? Having a focus or a goal for your gap year can provide a sense of purpose and motivation.

Final Thoughts

It's a difficult time to be trying to make long-term plans. Everything feels very uncertain, and it can feel futile to make decisions that can be undone by circumstances out of your control. We encourage you to take care of yourself as best you can. You may feel "behind" on your education because of the pandemic, but you are in good company. Many of us are in survival mode, not living our best lives or moving forward with our biggest dreams. But pandemics don't last forever. Stay strong and good luck!

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