

As difficult as it is to have our “normals” pulled out from under us, it often exposes our greatest strengths and encourages improvement of our greatest weaknesses. The past year has undeniably destroyed the “normal” of nearly every person in this world, but it has also precipitated incredible beauty and growth in our global community. Adapting to the vastly different educational climate of 2020 taught me to flexibly pursue goals not only academically but also personally, lending lessons that have helped me identify possible educational improvements for such a situation.

Upon entering quarantine, I had already been taking several of my classes independently. Since my school could not provide actual sections of much of my schedule, I was learning five of my classes alone, turning in work to a sponsoring teacher for my grade. Due to a heart defect that caused frequent hospital visits and heavy involvement in activities, I often missed the courses for which I had a formal class, and keeping up required a lot of independent work. Though this situation was stressful, I believe it prepared me for the sudden switch to fully independent learning. As I was forced to develop my own schedule and determine how to form independent lessons, I strove to meet the same academic goals I had previously set for the year even though the manifesting steps looked different. By allowing myself to try and fail in the process of such a vast change, I learned to behave more elastically and eventually discovered that I am actually much more productive when I work on my own schedule. Our school did not use video conferencing during the shutdown due to the legal liability, which made communication with teachers and classmates very difficult, but, by consistently contacting teachers and group project members through email, I was able to, for the most part, stay on the same page with others. Despite the difficulty and uncertainty of the spring 2020 semester, it became one of the most valuable, engaged periods of education I have ever experienced.

As a high school student, it is quite easy to become so busy that we neglect to properly take care of ourselves. Before the shutdown, I was guilty of such a problem. Though I always made time for friends and family around my other commitments, I forgot to take time for myself, even just to sleep and stay physically healthy. Once I was bound to my house, I was confronted by my own thoughts and insecurities, which was very difficult at first, but I decided I wanted to use the strange situation to improve the issues rather than wallowing in them. I began to intentionally designate adequate time for sleeping, working out, and trying activities outside my comfort zone every day. Committing to this approach rendered me significantly more confident in my view of life and much healthier overall. Such personal improvements also enabled me to better connect with and love other people despite not being able to see them in person.

After handling responsibilities such as converting statewide programs to online alternatives and running a dining establishment during the pandemic, I have experientially learned tactics that might better prepare schools for another such situation. In my district specifically, we could have benefitted from stronger communication abilities and more available offline materials. In the absence of video conferencing, many students made zero contact with their teachers for weeks, months, or even the entire shutdown. Living in a rural area where many families have no internet access, and those who do experience frequent outages, it was difficult for students to learn entirely online. By providing stronger communication channels and inclusive learning options, students would have greater academic potential.

Ultimately, living without the bounds of our “normals” empowers us to live in a new sort of extraordinary. As challenging as 2020 has been, it has lent me new perspective and experiences academically and personally that I would never trade for a “normal” 2020. With all we have learned in the last year, I believe our world is truly stronger than it ever has been and would have the understanding to better respond in the event of another shutdown.