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# NAVIGATING THE SHIFT: EXPERIENCES OF COLLEGE STUDENTS TRANSITIONING FROM ONLINE TO IN-PERSON LEARNING MODALITIES

**Marah Catherine R. Abundo[i],**
**Apple Shane Barao,**
**Maria Cassandra Maui Butay,**
**Diana Mea R. Dumaoal,**
**Kim Bernadette B. Juan,**
**Shainah Janel A. Lazaro,**
**Althea Edhelleveisse C. Mateo,**
**Maria Stephanie Padayao,**
**Kassandra Mae G. Romosod,**
**Katrina Mae G. Romosod,**
**Roselyn P. Rosete,**
**James Cesar A. Metiam**
Values Education Program,
Secondary Education Department,
College of Teacher Education,
Mariano Marcos State University
Laoag City, 2900,
Philippines

**Abstract:**
This study examines the academic experiences of college students transitioning from online to in-person learning. Conducted through qualitative research using a semi-structured questionnaire and thematic analysis, the study identifies key challenges and support mechanisms encountered by students. Findings reveal that during online learning, students struggled with poor internet connectivity, lack of proper learning environments, and limited interaction with instructors, which affected their academic performance and engagement. As students transitioned back to face-to-face classes, they faced difficulties adjusting to structured schedules, increased academic workloads, and financial strains. However, the return to in-person learning also brought positive outcomes, including improved student motivation, better peer interaction, and more direct instructor feedback. Support from family, peers, and empathetic teachers played a crucial role in helping students cope with these transitions. The study underscores the

[i] Correspondence: email marahabundo@gmail.com

 

importance of providing both academic and emotional support to students during transitions in educational modalities.

**Keywords:** academic experiences, in-person learning, online learning, transition

## 1. Introduction

The transition from online to in-person learning modalities has emerged as a critical focal point within contemporary higher education, particularly in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. The instructional experiences of college students during this shift are vital for understanding the new dynamics at play, which encompass both challenges and opportunities stemming from a rapid pedagogical adjustment. As noted by Masri and Sabzalieva (2020), the pandemic fundamentally reshaped the global educational landscape, compelling institutions to urgently adopt online learning formats as a direct response to school closures. As educational entities gradually resume in-person instruction, the task of ensuring a seamless and effective return to traditional classroom settings has become paramount.

Barrot *et al.* (2021) highlighted the necessity of rethinking educational delivery, noting that many institutions were required to swiftly redesign their instructional modalities, resulting in technological innovations as well as pedagogical challenges. The urgency of understanding how students adapt to these changes is underscored by the experiences of over 1.6 billion learners worldwide who were impacted by abrupt school closures (Moawad, 2020). The disruptions caused by the pandemic have thus drawn attention to the critical need to examine how students cope, adjust, and maintain academic performance both during and after the transition from remote to face-to-face learning environments.

An examination of how various countries, including the Philippines, managed the shift from online to in-person learning highlights broader patterns of educational resilience and the capacity for adaptation in the face of global disruptions. Masri and Sabzalieva (2020) noted that a significant percentage of higher education institutions in the United States swiftly transitioned to remote instruction during the pandemic, emphasizing the shared experience of educational systems worldwide. Meanwhile, Rajab *et al.* (2020) highlighted the considerable challenges faced by students across different regions, including technological limitations and heightened academic stress, which further complicated their adaptation to remote learning.

Bai (2023) argued that examining transitional experiences can offer invaluable insights for long-term educational policies and reforms aimed at fostering resilient and equitable learning systems. The implications of this transition are reflected not only in the reported experiences of students but also in large-scale data, such as that from the U.S. Department of Education, emphasizing the widespread impact of educational

disruptions (Liverpool *et al.*, 2023). These insights are crucial as institutions refine policies in response to collective student experiences.

Moreover, the Philippines faces distinct challenges due to its diverse geographic and socioeconomic conditions. Lim *et al.* (2022) point out that uneven access to technology and infrastructure contributes to disparities in learning experiences, disproportionately affecting marginalized student populations. Alibudbud (2021) further asserts that to effectively address these inequalities, institutions must understand the socio-economic barriers encountered by students. This understanding is crucial for developing comprehensive strategies aimed at mitigating disruptions and fostering academic success for all students.

Given the ongoing challenges in these contexts, this study seeks to explore the academic experiences of college students at Mariano Marcos State University–College of Teacher Education (MMSU–CTE) during their transition from online to in-person learning. The research aims to elucidate how students adjusted to this change, the support mechanisms available to them, and the ways in which these factors have influenced their academic performance during the transition.

The study is guided by the following research questions:

1) What are the academic experiences of college students during the online learning mode?
2) What are the academic experiences of college students as they transition from online to in-person learning?
3) What support mechanisms do students encounter during this transition?

## 2. Methods

### 2.1 Research Design

This study used a qualitative approach to explore college students' experiences during the transition from online to in-person learning. Qualitative research is ideal for understanding how individuals perceive and adjust to changes in their educational environment, and it helps explore the challenges students faced, their impact on academic performance, and the support that aided adaptation. According to Creswell (2013), qualitative research captures the complexities of people's experiences. Furthermore, it allows researchers to interact with respondents' points of view (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). An online semi-structured questionnaire was used to gather open-ended responses, and thematic analysis was applied to identify patterns in the data. This method provided a comprehensive understanding of students' experiences and the broader educational context in the post-pandemic era.

### 2.2 Population and Sampling

Purposive sampling was used to identify the respondents of the study. This sampling method was chosen to target Junior students from various departments and majors within the College, who have experienced the transition from online to in-person learning. Purposive sampling is commonly employed in qualitative research to select participants who meet specific criteria relevant to the research topic (Patton, 2015). In this study, participants were selected based on their direct experience with the shift in learning modalities, as they had undergone both online and face-to-face instruction. This ensures that the respondents can provide rich, relevant insights into the academic challenges, adjustments, and support mechanisms during the transition.

### 2.3 Data Collection

In gathering the pertinent data for the study, a semi-structured interview questionnaire was used to explore the academic experiences of college students during their transition from online to in-person learning. This approach is effective for qualitative research as it allows for in-depth responses (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). The questionnaire focused on the challenges, adjustments, and support mechanisms students encountered and was distributed through Google Forms to avoid disrupting class schedules. Respondents were given the flexibility to complete the questionnaire during their free time within a three-day period. The responses were kept private and secure throughout the process.

### 2.4 Data Analysis

Data analysis in this study will be guided by thematic analysis, which is a widely used method for analyzing qualitative data by identifying and interpreting patterns or themes within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The process begins with familiarization with the data, where the researcher immerses themselves in the collected responses to gain a deep understanding of the content. Following this, initial codes are generated to label significant elements of the data. These codes are then examined to identify broader patterns or themes that capture the core experiences of the participants. Once potential themes are identified, they are reviewed for accuracy and relevance to ensure they reflect the data without unnecessary overlap. After finalizing the themes, they are defined and named, offering clear descriptors that encapsulate the essence of each theme. The final step involves writing up the analysis, where the researcher organizes the findings into a coherent narrative, explaining how the themes were developed and what they reveal about the students' experiences with the transition from online to in-person learning.

## 3. Results and Discussion

### 3.1 Academic Experiences During Online Learning

#### 3.1.1 Poor Internet Connectivity as a Persistent Barrier

One of the most frequently cited challenges among participants during online learning was unstable and limited internet access. Students recounted how poor connectivity disrupted their participation in synchronous classes and contributed to gaps in comprehension. R13 emphasized, "*Internet connectivity is the topmost problem for me… lessons are harder to understand*," while R15 added, "*We don't have Wi-Fi at home, and I cannot afford to buy mobile data every day*." R11 also recounted, "*I often missed classes because the signal in our area is weak, especially during typhoons.*" These testimonies illustrate how access to digital infrastructure emerged as a significant equity issue, barring full and meaningful student engagement.

These accounts are consistent with the findings of Adnan and Anwar (2020), who emphasized that the digital divide, particularly in rural and low-income contexts, impairs students' ability to engage effectively with online education. Similar insights were also noted by Hoque *et al.* (2021), who described how unstable internet access leads to missed learning opportunities. Additionally, Kuo-Hsun (2021) pointed out that students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are disproportionately affected due to limited access to reliable technology.

#### 3.1.2 Unconducive Home Learning Environment

Beyond technological issues, students also highlighted how their home settings were not conducive to focused academic work. Many shared stories of noise, household responsibilities, and the absence of dedicated study spaces. R7 shared, "*I can't concentrate when I'm at home because my siblings are noisy and there's no space for me*." R10 added, "*I'm the eldest, so I also do household chores while attending class. It's hard to focus*." Similarly, R4 explained, "*Sometimes I attend class while lying on the bed because we don't have a proper study table*." These narratives reveal the hidden pressures and structural limitations that compromised students' capacity for academic focus and productivity at home.

These reflections align with the study of Baticulon *et al.* (2021), which highlighted the role of household environments in influencing students' online learning experiences. In particular, the presence of competing responsibilities and distractions significantly impacted students' ability to concentrate. Moreover, Yates *et al.* (2020) emphasized that female students and older siblings often bore the additional burden of domestic duties, which further limited their academic engagement.

#### 3.1.3 Limited Communication and Perceived Instructor Inaccessibility

A recurring concern among participants was the limited communication with instructors and the lack of timely feedback. While online platforms promised flexibility, many

students described feeling isolated and unsupported. R8 noted, "*They tell us to reach out but don't reply when we do,*" indicating a disconnect between expected and actual support. R5 shared, "*I was too shy to ask questions even if I didn't understand,*" while R2 stated, "*Some teachers just send the modules without any explanation, and we're left to figure it out ourselves.*" These remarks underline how perceived academic neglect and limited real-time interaction discouraged help-seeking behavior and reduced motivation.

These concerns are supported by the findings of Rapanta *et al.* (2020), who emphasized the importance of timely feedback and consistent interaction in sustaining student engagement and motivation. Similarly, Baticulon *et al.* (2021) and Iivari *et al.* (2020) underscored the negative effects of instructor inaccessibility on students' emotional and academic well-being during remote learning.

### 3.1.4 Challenges in Online Collaboration

The shift to online learning also posed challenges to peer collaboration. Despite the availability of digital tools, students frequently reported uneven participation and unclear expectations. R3 noted, "*We tried Google Docs but most of the group members were not cooperating*." R12 commented, "*Messenger groups helped but only a few were active*," and R14 added, "*We were assigned to groups, but I ended up doing most of the work alone*." These reflections indicate that collaboration in digital spaces requires more than just technological tools—it demands active facilitation and accountability mechanisms.

These observations reflect findings from Muflih *et al.* (2020), who noted that online group work often suffers from poor coordination and unequal task distribution. Capacio *et al.* (2021) further stressed that successful peer collaboration in virtual environments depends on well-defined roles, structured guidance, and clear communication protocols to foster equitable participation.

## 3.2 Academic Experiences During the Transition from Online to Face-to-Face Learning

### 3.2.1 Struggles with Adjusting to Structured Schedules

A significant challenge students faced during the shift back to in-person learning was adjusting to structured schedules after months of self-paced, asynchronous learning. Many shared their difficulty in transitioning to early mornings and fixed timetables. R6 expressed, "*It is hard to adjust. In an online class, we can manage our own time. But now, I have to get up early every day*." R10 added, "*I got used to waking up late and working at night. Now I'm always tired in class.*" R1 also mentioned, "*We're expected to be active again in the classroom, but I still feel mentally in online mode*." These responses reflect the fatigue and disruption brought about by the sudden return to rigid academic routines.

As Wut *et al.* (2022) noted, such transitions pose considerable challenges as students adjust to new learning modalities, particularly when returning to structured formats without adequate preparation. Similarly, Adnan (2020) highlighted how sudden

shifts in academic settings can result in "adjustment fatigue," which may impair students' mental readiness and engagement.

### 3.2.2 Overwhelming Academic Demands and Expectations

Alongside scheduling challenges, students reported increased academic demands that made the transition even more stressful. Many perceived the workload as an attempt to recover from what was perceived as lost learning during online education. R9 shared, "*The number of tasks is overwhelming. I feel like I can't keep up*." R11 remarked, "*There are more quizzes and reports now compared to online learning*." Likewise, R17 stated, "*It's as if we are catching up for everything that was missed during online classes*." These sentiments illustrate how heightened academic pressure intensified feelings of stress and exhaustion.

As noted by Adnan (2020), the return to face-to-face instruction was often marked by intensified academic workloads, which were intended to compensate for prior limitations but ended up creating added pressure. Sari *et al.* (2022) similarly emphasized that this intensified environment contributed to student anxiety and burnout.

### 3.2.3 Economic Pressure and Daily Expenses

For many students, returning to face-to-face learning also revived financial burdens. Expenses such as transportation, meals, and school supplies became daily concerns. R5 shared, "*My allowance isn't enough because of school fees, food, and fare.*" R16 reflected, "*Online was cheaper. Now I spend so much just going to class.*" R8 pointed out, "*Even school uniforms and other expenses became a burden*." These reflections highlight how economic strain became a persistent issue in the transition, especially for those from less privileged backgrounds.

Hew *et al.* (2020) identified this trend in their research, emphasizing that students from lower-income families were disproportionately affected by the additional costs tied to physical attendance, such as commuting and daily sustenance.

### 3.2.4 Renewed Motivation in Physical Classrooms

Despite the difficulties, students also spoke about the positive aspects of being back in the classroom. The opportunity to interact face-to-face with peers and instructors brought renewed focus and energy. R10 shared, "*I feel more focused now in class. It's good to see my classmates and teachers again*." R6 commented, "*It's easier to understand the lessons when explained in person*." R2 added, "*I missed the classroom vibe. Being with others helps me stay motivated*." These insights show how the physical classroom environment contributed to re-engaging students both emotionally and academically.

According to Anh (2021), a positive classroom climate plays a crucial role in reigniting student motivation and enhancing academic success. Perera *et al.* (2021) also pointed out that in-person interactions support deeper emotional and cognitive engagement, which may have been lacking in remote learning environments.

### 3.3 Support Mechanisms During the Transition

#### 3.3.1 Peer and Family Support as Coping Pillars

Students consistently identified peer and family relationships as essential sources of emotional and academic support during their transition. Emotional reassurance, collaborative learning, and shared experiences were particularly beneficial in helping them cope. As R7 expressed, "*Your family is the one you can tell your problems to... they're always there to support you*." Similarly, R3 noted, "*Classmates help me understand lessons better. It's easier to ask in person*," while R15 added, "*We study together after class. It's less stressful when you're not alone*."

These insights reflect the findings of Tian *et al.* (2022), who emphasized that strong family bonds provide emotional strength and stability, especially during periods of academic adjustment. Kayani *et al.* (2022) likewise noted that family support plays a critical role in maintaining student well-being and reducing the psychological strain associated with academic transitions. In addition, Norcia *et al.* (2022) pointed out that peer collaboration through group study sessions helps lower stress levels and enhances students' ability to cope with academic demands.

The importance of peer support is further supported by Zorbaz and Ergene (2019) and Kayani *et al.* (2022), who found that close peer networks act as protective barriers against academic stress. These findings collectively show that strong social connections, both familial and peer-based, are central to students' emotional and academic resilience.

#### 3.3.2 Supportive and Empathetic Teachers

Another important factor that helped students adjust was the presence of understanding and responsive teachers. Participants appreciated instructors who showed patience and empathy and were flexible in addressing student needs. R1 shared, "*Ma'am was very helpful. She explains slowly and answers our questions patiently*." R13 stated, "*Our teacher gave us extra time to submit because she knew we were adjusting*," while R4 commented, "*I felt that my teacher understood our struggles and did not pressure us too much.*"

These responses align with the research of Zee *et al.* (2021), who found that emotionally intelligent teachers who show patience and care are able to create secure classroom environments that promote both academic engagement and student well-being. Freire *et al.* (2019) also emphasized that empathetic and adaptable teaching practices contribute to emotional stability and increased participation in academic activities.

Simić and Vukelić (2023) added that even small gestures, such as giving deadline extensions, can foster a positive learning atmosphere where students feel supported and respected. Likewise, Ayuningtyas *et al.* (2019) highlighted that positive teacher-student relationships are key to enhancing student motivation and adjustment, especially during times of academic transition.

## 4. Recommendations

In light of the findings, it is recommended that educational institutions implement structured hybrid readiness programs to better prepare students for transitions between online and in-person learning. These programs should focus on enhancing students' time management skills, developing consistent study habits, and improving digital literacy to support learning across varied modalities.

It is also essential to improve communication between students and instructors. Faculty development initiatives should emphasize the importance of responsiveness, empathy, and timely feedback to cultivate a more supportive academic environment. Strengthening teacher-student interaction can help reduce feelings of isolation and disengagement that were evident during both online learning and the transition to face-to-face classes.

Equitable access to learning resources remains a pressing concern. Institutions are encouraged to address digital and economic disparities by providing students with access to reliable internet, learning devices, and printed instructional materials. Additionally, financial assistance programs should be reevaluated to consider the increased costs students face when attending in-person classes, such as transportation, meals, and academic materials.

To further support student well-being, schools should establish or strengthen psychosocial support systems, including peer mentoring, mental health counseling, and group-based interventions. These efforts are critical in addressing the emotional challenges and adjustment fatigue experienced during the transition.

Lastly, educators are encouraged to adopt inclusive and flexible teaching practices. Flexibility in deadlines, varied modes of assessment, and interactive learning methods can help accommodate the diverse needs of students and ease their re-engagement with academic routines.

## 5. Conclusion

The findings of this study provide a compelling picture of the academic experiences of students during online learning and their subsequent transition back to face-to-face instruction. Challenges such as poor internet connectivity, lack of digital tools, and unconducive home environments significantly hindered students' learning during the remote setup. Added to this were feelings of isolation and minimal interaction with teachers and peers, which led many to struggle with motivation and understanding of the lessons. Despite these limitations, some students displayed resilience by developing self-paced learning strategies and seeking support from family and peers.

As students returned to in-person learning, they faced new difficulties in adjusting to rigid schedules, heavier workloads, and the social demands of classroom settings. The

transition was far from seamless, with many expressing anxiety, academic fatigue, and financial burdens. While some students found renewed motivation and a sense of belonging in the classroom, institutional support mechanisms were notably lacking. Most relied on personal networks for emotional and academic support, underscoring the need for more structured, school-led interventions. This study emphasizes the importance of not only addressing academic gaps but also strengthening the emotional and psychological scaffolding that students need in periods of educational transition.

**Conflicts of Interest Statement**
The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

**About the Authors**
**Marah Catherine R. Abundo, Apple Shane Barao, Maria Cassandra Maui Butay, Diana Mea R. Dumaoal, Kim Bernadette B. Juan, Shainah Janel A. Lazaro, Althea Edhelleveisse C. Mateo, Maria Stephanie Padayao, Kassandra Mae G. Romosod, Katrina Mae G. Romosod** and **Roselyn P. Rosete** are pre-service teachers at the Mariano Marcos State University, College of Teacher Education under the Bachelor of Secondary Education major in Values Education. Currently, they are conducting their Classroom-Based Action Research which aims to improve teaching practices in the field of Values Education.

**Marah Catherine R. Abundo**
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0009-0004-9983-6656

**Apple Shane Barao**
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0009-0000-3685-0937

**Maria Cassandra Maui Butay**
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0009-0001-0773-7430

**Diana Mea R. Dumaoal**
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0009-0008-6701-2686

**Kim Bernadette B. Juan**
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0009-0009-3571-4736

**Shainah Janel A. Lazaro**
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0009-0002-0763-6039

**Althea Edhelleveisse C. Mateo**
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0009-0009-8097-107X

**Maria Stephanie Padayao**
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0009-0002-1994-790X

**Kassandra Mae G. Romosod**
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0009-0007-1668-9905

**Katrina Mae G. Romosod**
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0009-0005-7429-4042

**Roselyn P. Rosete**
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0009-0002-6545-652X

**James Cesar A. Metiam (MAED)** is an instructor at the Mariano Marcos State University, College of Teacher Education. He teaches ethics and majors courses under the Values Education Program. Presently, he is the program coordinator for the Value Education program and has been involved in various research endeavours in the college.
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0009-0008-0367-6301

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