

## **VIRTUAL AND ONSITE LEARNING: BENEFITS AND CHALLENGES PERCEIVED BY PRIVATE COLLEGE STUDENTS**

Ava Ann P. Semorlan, Ph.D  
avaannsemorlan@yahoo.com

*School of Saint Anthony, Lagro, Quezon City*

Teresita P. Semorlan, Ph.D  
*St. Peter's College, Iligan City*

### **ABSTRACT**

This research explored college students' perceptions regarding the benefits and challenges they experienced during the shift to virtual learning when COVID-19 affected the education system worldwide and their insights when it shifted back to the onsite platform. A qualitative research method was applied using phenomenological approach. Follow up interviews in-depth interviews were conducted to some of the participants. The participants comprised nineteen students from the St. Peter's College of Iligan City, selected through Purposive sampling. The data were collected through Google Forms, and responses were analyzed through tables, patterns, and themes. Findings reveal that having a flexible schedule ranked as the top benefit in virtual learning, while internet connection issues were the top challenge. In an onsite learning platform, physical interactions with classmates and teachers were the top responses, while time management and financial concerns were the significant challenges. Three themes emerged in this study. The first theme found was the "Benefits and challenges in life's situations," signifying that there will always be benefits and challenges in every new situation from which people can learn. The second is the "Significance of time," which was considered important among working students in this research. The last theme is the "Value of adaptability," an essential factor for students to imbibe to reach their goals. This research recommended of considering the parents and teachers' perspectives in the future studies, and adding follow-up questions that could enrich the analysis of this study.

*Keywords:* virtual learning, onsite learning, benefits, and challenges, college students; St. Peter's College

### **INTRODUCTION**

College Education is a phase in the education journey of students that can be considered as a valuable key to success, especially educational attainment is a significant requirement for job

application. In the Philippines, educational attainment, is described by most families as the greatest treasure that can be passed on from one generation to the next. Parents of students exert their best efforts to provide their children with a proper education for a promising future. Cariaga (2024) stressed that Education is a significant determinant of the Philippines national development. Thus, the government, parents, administrators, and teachers are considered as important factors in the teaching and learning process of the children.

In 2019, a leap of adjustment was experienced in the education system worldwide, brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic. Covid-19 is an infectious disease caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus and can spread through droplets released by an infected person, such as coughs (World Health Organization, 2024). Those infected with this virus may have respiratory illnesses that can lead to death if unable to recover. This unexpected scenario worries people worldwide, and one factor that concerns everyone is the mode of education. Technology experts researched ways to address the concern of continuing the education of students. The brainstorming of plans and their execution was done in collaboration with the government.

During this time, classes were shifted to virtual mode. Ignacio (2021) cited the method of having classes online as raising certain issues among teachers and students, including technological and mental health concerns.

Moreover, Francisco and Barcelona (2020) investigated the effectiveness of an online classroom. This study concluded that in times of calamities, educators and other institutions can continue learning with the online classroom without compromising classes.

Different stakeholders shared several benefits and challenges related to online learning. In 2022, the hybrid set-up was initially introduced. This is the blend of virtual and onsite learning. During this new normal phase, the students realized the differences between online and onsite learning. Bucata and Babos (2023) explored the advantages and disadvantages of onsite learning compared to virtual learning. The study showed that virtual education is superior to traditional schooling. It provides greater flexibility, lowers expenses and self-discipline, and provides more course selections.

Several studies and articles enumerate the advantages and disadvantages of online learning. In an article by Gautam (2020), efficiency, accessibility of time and place, affordability, improved student attendance, and various learning styles were the advantages cited in an online learning setup. Some disadvantages discussed, on the other hand, include the inability to focus on screens, technology issues, a sense of isolation, teacher training regarding the usage of online platforms, and how to manage screen time.

Similarly, Moran (2021) discussed some benefits of onsite learning. She cited access to all equipment materials, receiving a psychological boost knowing that you are not alone in your learning journey, and there is a work-life balance that promotes good mental health and develops critical and interpersonal skills better.

In this light, the college level is a stage in a student's life where students are groomed toward their professional and livelihood experiences. This is when they are further trained in their preferred careers. Likewise, college students are found to be more expressive with their insights regarding their experiences in the learning system during and after the pandemic. Thus, the researchers found it interesting to determine the perceptions of College students in the Southern Part of the Philippines in a private school in Iligan City, Mindanao. The inputs gathered in this area of the country could enrich the findings of relevant studies, and would contribute significant ideas that could guide students faced with similar situations.

Thus, amidst the unexpected circumstances in the educational system in the Philippines, the researchers found interest in exploring the views of College students at St. Peter's College, Iligan City, about the Benefits and Challenges of Virtual and Onsite learning. As the year progresses, students who experienced the education shift because of the pandemic, had significant experiences and realizations, that can guide the youth when faced with unexpected circumstances.

### **Research Questions**

This study explored the Perceptions of College Students enrolled in St. Peter's College City, Iligan City, on the Benefits and Challenges of Virtual and Onsite Learning. This research seeks to answer the following questions:

1. What are the benefits and challenges of virtual learning based on the perspectives of College students?
2. What are the benefits and challenges of onsite learning based on the perspectives of College students?
3. What are the major effects of pandemic in the educational experiences of the College students?
4. How did the College students faced the transition in the education platforms?
5. What is the preferred learning set-up of the College students?
6. What were the realizations of the College students about their learning experiences both in virtual and onsite learning?
7. What are the themes that emerged in this research?

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Research Design**

The study employed a qualitative research method, which applied a phenomenological approach, with follow up in-depth interviews. Alhazmi and Kaufmann (2022) explain phenomenology as an approach in research that aims to understand aspects of human social experience. Furthermore, Rutledge & Hogg (2020) explains an in-depth interview as a qualitative research technique

implemented to gather detailed interviews to fewer participants. A significant amount of time is allotted with every participant in a conversational format.

### The setting of the Study

St. Peter’s College is the setting of this research and is located at Sabayle Street, Iligan City, Lanao del Norte, Philippines. It is a private, non-sectarian, coeducational basic and higher education institution. At present, the school has 15 academic programs offered to the public. All programs are being prepared for accreditation. Moreover, its four programs, Bachelor of Elementary Education (BEEd), Bachelor of Science and Business Administration (BSBA), Bachelor of Secondary Education (BSE), and Bachelor of Science and Mechanical Engineering (BSME), are scheduled for re-accreditation visits in 2024 and 2026.

### Sampling

The researcher employed non-probability sampling, which is a non-random method of selecting participants. The sampling is purposive, and the participants were selected based on a specific purpose to fulfill the objectives of the study. The participants are from the College of Arts and Sciences Spanish class, and College of Education Math class. The following steps were conducted in implementing the purposive sampling (Hassan , 2024):

1. The objectives were clearly identified to help determine the criteria for participant selection;
2. The selected participants were those who could provide valuable insights;
3. Referrals as participants were considered; and
4. Potential participants were determine, and sufficient number were invited to have a representative sample.

The study participants were nineteen St. Peter's College students for SY 2023-2024. Thirteen were female and eight were male, aged twenty-one to thirty-four.

**Table 1**

*Gender, Age, and Level of Participants*

Gender	n	%	Age	n	%	College level	N	%
Male	6	32	21- 24	11	58	4th year	10	53
Female	13	68	25-29	5	26	3rd year	8	42
			30 and above	3	16	2nd year	1	5
	19	100		19	100		19	100

Table 1 shows the profile of the participants in this research. There are 19 participants in this research, and most of them are female (68%). In addition, more than half of the participants

are between 21 and 24 years old (58%), and most are in 4<sup>th</sup> year College (53%). The participants are students of the researchers in their Spanish and Math classes.

### **Research Instrument**

A Google form research instrument was prepared and presented to research experts to check its reliability and validity. The first part of the questionnaire consisted of profile questions for the participants. The second part consisted of essay questions gathering the perspectives of the participants about the benefits and challenges of virtual and onsite learning. The last part of the questionnaire also asked the participants about their realizations.

### **Data Collection**

The instruments used in this study were the Google forms shared with the College students through their teachers. The essential data were encoded in the spreadsheet to analyze the data better. Pens and papers were utilized for further data analysis. Data are obtained through questionnaires, freely answered by the participants based on their experiences. The perspectives written by the participants are considered significant inputs for this research. Moreover, follow-up interviews were also conducted to some participants to enrich the data of this research.

### **Data Analysis**

The College students' responses in the Google form were encoded in a table format to observe and analyze data and determine patterns and themes. Significant ideas answered in the google form and in the responses of the participants were encoded in a table. After gathering the initial data, the frequency and percentages were computed and compared. Afterward, the top responses shared by the participants were analyzed.

Other key ideas from the data collected from the participants were outlined in tables. The responses were explored. The patterns were observed from the data, and then these were carefully analyzed to determine possible themes of this research.

### **Ethical Consideration**

Permission to conduct research for the classes in Spanish and Math, was requested by the researchers to the Dean of the Institution . Then, the participants were informed about the purpose of the research through their professor. Consent was also obtained from the College of Arts and Sciences dean. The participants were also requested to answer an informed consent form. The participants, professors involved, and the dean were informed that this research would be conducted, and submitted for publication purposes.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The following are the data obtained in this research, presented in tables with discussions. This section also discusses the themes that emerged from the data.

**Table 2**

*Top Benefits of Virtual Learning Based on the Perspectives of College Students*

<b>Benefits</b>	<b>n</b>	<b>%</b>
Flexible Schedule	12	63
Save Money	7	36
Accessibility	5	26
Working student	5	26
Convenience/Comfortable	3	6

Table 2 shows the benefits shared by College students regarding virtual learning, and most participants expressed their positive remarks on the flexible schedule they experienced. It can also be gleaned from the table that other responses are also connected to the flexible schedule factor mentioned by the participants. Students can save more money, can easily access classes, can work part-time, and feel convenient and comfortable in a virtual learning approach. This was the response of one of the participants, “I have a free time for working student, and can manage my time well. “This is in connection to the study explored by Bucata and Babos (2023), which emphasizes how virtual learning provides greater flexibility, fewer expenses, and more self-discipline to students.

**Table 3**

*Top Challenges of Virtual Learning Based on the Perspectives of College Students*

<b>Challenges</b>	<b>n</b>	<b>%</b>
Connection	7	36
Technical issues	5	26
Motivation/social isolation	3	16
Time management	2	11
Procrastination	2	11

Connection and technical issues were the top concerns raised by the College students, as displayed in Table 3. One of the participants expressed that “There is lack of communication and not receiving clear instructions or expectation and technical difficulties.” Few percentages expressed issues with motivation or social isolation, time management, and procrastination. As what one participant shared “Too many distractions, and I have low motivation” This is in line with Ignacio's (2021) explanation of raising issues among teachers and students regarding technological and mental health concerns. Moreover, this is also in connection with the article shared by Gautam (2020), which indicates that technology issues and isolation are disadvantages in a virtual setup.

**Table 4**

*Top Benefits of Onsite Learning Based on the Perspectives of College Students*

<b>Benefits</b>	<b>n</b>	<b>%</b>
Classroom Interaction	8	42
Access to facilities	5	26
The teacher can personally help	4	21
Hands-on learning	3	16
Can learn more	2	11

College students considered interactions in the classroom to be a significant experience for them in an onsite learning experience, shared by 42% of the participants. Other classroom experiences that they found beneficial in an onsite setting are access to facilities, the assistance of the teachers, and hands-on learning experiences that can guide them to learn more. It is observed in Table 4 how the students found it valuable to once again physically communicate with their classmates and teachers and personally apply their learning through the use of facilities and other manipulatives. One participant shared that more learning was learned and expressed the statement “we can communicate face to face and we can express our emotions face to face.” Some of the responses were aligned with the discussion of Moran (2021), citing access to equipment materials and the development of interpersonal skills in an onsite learning platform.

**Table 5**

*Top Challenges of Onsite Learning Based on the Perspectives of College Students*

<b>Challenges</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>%</b>
Time Management	7	37
Money/allowance	6	22
health/safety	2	11
Pressures in academics	2	11
Can't focus in school	2	11

Concerns about time management (37%) and daily budget expenses (22%) appeared to be the top challenges faced by college students in an onsite learning experience. The inclusion of transportation time in the students' schedule and the incorporation of school expenses into their daily budgets trouble them in their onsite learning routines. Moreover, a few of the students also cited health and safety challenges, academic pressures, and difficulty focusing on lessons when they shifted back to onsite learning. The responses in Table 5 depict the importance of time among some students, especially those who work part-time and earn additional income that can financially aid their studies and provide for the family. One participant also shared the challenge observed wherein “students may struggle with time management and in balancing their personal lives with their academic responsibilities while attending classes in person.”

**Table 6**

*Major Effects of Pandemic in the Educational Experiences of the College Students*

- difficulties in making focus due to notifications popping on screen during class
- limited interaction with peers and instructors
- lack of access to physical resources like libraries and labs
- higher levels of stress and mental issues
- Self doubt if one can do it because of mobile usage and connectivity concerns
- there are distractions in the environment (noisy), and can't focus on class
- disparities in the internet access created a gap in learning opportunities
- the pandemic impacted mental health
- created a gap in learning opportunities
- increased feelings of isolation and anxiety

When some of the participants were interviewed regarding their educational experiences during the pandemic, they initially expressed the challenges faced in general, as presented in Table 6. The challenges maybe categorized into the self-phase, social circle, environment factors, and technological aspect. In terms of the self, there are psychological aspects affected such as mental health, stress, isolation and anxiety. As what one participant expressed “I have been greatly affected by the pandemic, experiencing higher levels of stress and mental health issues.”



Interaction with peers and instructors were also shared as concerns in terms of the social aspect during the interviews. Environmental factors such as the use of school facilities and a noisy environment also contributed to the troubles faced by the participants. Furthermore, technological aspects brought problems to the students specially relevant to connectivity, distractions, and adjustments. The data revealed how the educational experiences of the students during the pandemic holistically affected and challenged them. Given the unexpected situation, and its challenging effects, the participants opted to hurdle these challenges, and move forward with their studies, to gradually attain the goals.

**Table 6**

*How the College Students Faced the Transition in the Education Platforms*

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|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li><i>-became more self-disciplined</i></li><li><i>-learned to manage time effectively</i></li><li><i>-sought ways to engage with new material, such as joining online study groups and utilizing digital tools</i></li><li><i>-developed patience and flexibility</i></li><li><i>-tried to adapt to new technologies like Learning Management systems and virtual collaboration tools</i></li><li><i>-faced challenges related to internet access, device availability, and technical support</i></li><li><i>-needed to familiarize with the platforms</i></li><li><i>-challenged with the lack of necessary equipment, and area had limited internet connectivity</i></li><li><i>-found ways to stay motivated without the usual classroom dynamics</i></li></ul> |
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Table 7 showed the perceptions of the College students in a positive light. From the challenges shared in Table 6, the participants eventually expressed how they tried to cope with the transition in the education platforms. Similarly, there were factors on self, others, and technology based on the participants' responses. Factors on self improvement such as self-discipline, time management, patience, and flexibility were observed on the table. Social factors such as joining study groups and virtual collaborations tools were also noticed. Technological aspects were likewise observed such as the needed equipment, connections and platforms. During the interview, one participant shared that "I also sought out new ways to engage with the material, such as joining online study groups and utilizing digital tools to enhance my learning. It required patience and flexibility, especially in adjusting to new technologies and virtual communication." These findings show how the participants exerted the necessary efforts to face the challenges during the pandemic, and coped with the transition in education platforms.

**Table 8**

*Preferred Learning Platform*

<b>Mode</b>	<b>n</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>Reasons</b>
Virtual	9	47%	Free time; can work and study, save money, be flexible, focus more, care for the child, and stay home.
Onsite	10	53%	Personal interaction, enhanced communication skills, loaded with work if online, can participate better, can be supervised well, enjoyable, more effective.

Table 8 shows a close difference between the preferred platforms of the College students under study. Ten out of nineteen participants preferred the onsite platform, and the remaining College students opted for the virtual platform. Here are the perspectives shared by two participants: “I prefer for Virtual learning offers flexibility and accessibility, making education more inclusive for diverse learners,” and “I prefer for Virtual learning offers flexibility and accessibility, making education more inclusive for diverse learners.”

Factors shared by those who chose the onsite approach better geared their responses towards better interaction, communication, and participation in class along with classmates and teachers, and considered these more effective. Factors in time, money, and time for the family emerged in the responses for those who preferred the virtual platform of learning, which was also aligned with the responses shared by the participants when asked about the benefits and challenges of the virtual and onsite learning platforms.

**Table 9**

*Realizations on Virtual and Onsite Learning*

<b>Realizations in Virtual Learning</b>	<b>Realizations in Onsite Learning</b>
-good internet connection compared to others	-difficult and time-consuming
-both convenient and challenging	-value of in-person communication, hands-on learning
-lucky to have resources	-adjustment in finances
-relieved to be at home	-sad, I need to leave my work
-Internet dependent	-happy can learn from the teacher personally
-technology democratizes education	-relief, back to in-person interaction
-distraction with internet connection	-engagement, progress, happiness
-relaxed and flexible experience	-challenging at first, need to adjust, look for a nanny
-can multi-task	-complicated, has an online job
-can do sidelines	Face-to-face communication is important
-varying experiences in a virtual learning environment	-exciting and challenging, a mix of good and tough moments
-technology can reduce the hassle of traditional classroom set-up but can isolate from others	-not easy for me to adapt to the new learning modality
-it makes me feel lazy	-the importance of face-to-face interactions with classmates and interactions
-the importance of time management and flexibility	-want to experience onsite, excited and happy
-complex and unstable connection	-better before graduation
-work and learn, multitask	-happy for onsite
-become lazy	

Table 9 presents the realizations of the College students regarding their experience as learners of the virtual and onsite platforms. In a virtual set-up, some students shared that they are fortunate to have a stable internet connection. They also found it helpful that they can multitask and do sidelines. However, they were also expressive about the chances when they tend to be lazy, dependent, relaxed, and isolated.

Moreover, when the learning set-up was back on-site, the college students realized the importance of relationships and communication in learning, and they found themselves happier. One even mentioned that it was a better experience, especially during graduation. It was also stressed by one of the participants in the interview that the “shift highlighted the importance of self-motivation and adaptability in learning. Balancing modes could be the key to a more resilient and comprehensive educational experience” However, some are not that happy since they have to face financial adjustments, they need to leave work, and so much time is consumed. Yet, a realization was also shared by one participant regarding the importance of adaptability in new situations, the participant expressed that “I think a mix of the two might be the best approach going forward, I learned how important it is to be adaptable and take charge of my own learning.”

These realizations convey that there will always be some benefits and challenges in any learning platform, and adjustments are always present every time unexpected changes occur. The realizations shared by the participants are positive points that could guide them in their decisions regarding adaptations to new situations.

As the researchers organized and explored the data of the study, the following themes emerged in this research:

### ***Benefits and Challenges in Life's Situations***

This research conveys the realization that in any situation, there will always be benefits and challenges from which every person will learn. The pandemic is an unexpected situation that affected schools worldwide, and the virtual learning platform introduced and experienced by the students paved several benefits and challenges.

Wyatt, et al. (2023) emphasized that transitioning to online learning during the pandemic created challenges and opportunities for instructors and students alike. Almost half of the population in this study shared their preference for having the virtual or onsite approach in class, depicting that both learning platforms are beneficial and significant to them. Thus, the perspectives shared by the participants in this research are geared towards the significance of embracing new learning from new experiences.

### ***Significance of Time***

One factor that was found significant by the participants in this research is the value of time. Aside from the situation shared by the participants, who considered transportation experiences time-consuming, time has been essential to the working college students in this study. They have expressed how they have struggled from virtual to onsite learning. They could work part-time during the virtual setup but needed to stop when onsite learning was back. This part of the study shows a phase in a student's life that not everyone can afford the expenses of a full-time student. This serves as a realization that there are also students struggling financially, even in a private school, and need to seek ways to earn extra income to spend on school and other home responsibilities.

### ***Value of Adaptability***

It is evident in the study how the students adapted to the shift of their classes from onsite learning to virtual learning and vice versa. When asked about each platform's benefits and challenges, they could share their insights, revealing how they tried to adapt to these new learning experiences. A valuable idea shared by one participant stressing this point that “the pandemic also made clear the need for a balanced approach, combining the strengths of both online and onsite learning, to create a more resilient and adaptable education system.” This part of the research conveys that every person's reaction to every new situation matters, driving them forward to achieve one's goal. Research in the field of positive psychology has shed light on the effectiveness of meaning-focused coping in fostering resilience and psychological well-being (Psychology, n.d.).

Based on the participants' profiles, most are 4<sup>th</sup> year College students. They experienced the challenge in the learning shift in their 1<sup>st</sup> year of college, since 2019, wherein COVID-19 affected the world. The students adapted to this shift and exerted the necessary efforts to reach 4<sup>th</sup> year and become 2024 graduates.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

Based on the findings of the study, the following conclusions were drawn:

The participants educational experiences were challenged during the pandemic. They were affected in the aspects of self, others, environment and technology. In line with this, they tried to cope with these challenges through their significant realizations about the situation, optimism, flexibility and adaptability.

These realizations imply that there will always be some benefits and challenges in the changes in learning platforms, and these guide every student in the come up with appropriate decisions to adapt with challenging situations.

Three themes emerged in this research. These include the challenges in life's Situations, the significance of time, and the value of Adaptability. The first theme emphasizes that in any situation, there are benefits and challenges that we can learn from. As for the second theme, time has been an essential factor, especially for those working part-time to sustain one's studies and the family's needs. Furthermore, the third theme signifies adaptability as a critical factor for the students to drive forward and reach one's goals.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

Based on the conclusions, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. Follow-up questions may be generated from the participants to gather more in-depth significant information from their experiences, such as how the shift of platforms affected their academic performance, relationship with significant people in one's life, and lifestyle.
2. Input from a more significant number of participants may be gathered. The number of participants may be increased to 20-30, and the responses may be balanced. A balance in the profile of the participants may also be considered so that the gender, age, or college-level participants are well-represented.

3. In future research, in- depth interviews with teachers and parents can also be gathered. This could enrich the research data and formulate better recommendations for stronger school and home collaborations.
4. The findings of this research can be shared with relevant stakeholders such as school administrators, academia, mental health/guidance advocates, government groups, family representatives, etc. They will be enlightened about the results of this study, realize the insights of the youth when faced with changes in life situations, and guide them toward positive dispositions in life.

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