College graduate students reflect on personal struggles amid the pandemic

Isolation. Loneliness. Uncertainty. The COVID-19 pandemic paused normalcy, and college graduate students have been searching for ways to deal with these rough transitions while also celebrating their success.

The 4-year path to a degree became near impossible for many as COVID-19 protocols separated students from the traditional classroom environment. Costs, stress and positive cases were all on the rise.

Savannah Haynes, 23, is a graduate masters student from Northwestern University with a degree in clinical mental health counseling. Her graduate program required 600 hours of on-site internship experience with clients, but the pandemic caused internship availability in care facilities to become scarce.

"When COVID-19 hit, there was a very bad shortage of places to actually have students work at," she said. "I was placed three different times, and twice I was basically fired before I even started because of COVID-19 limitations."

Her delayed ability to be placed with a medical care facility extended her college career by a year. Tuition and cost of living expenses continued to increase, which she said was a constant looming stress.

Haynes was also supposed to attend two immersion experiences on Northwestern University's campus, and she wishes that the university had done something different to coordinate an in-person program once it became safer to do so.

Then her grandpa passed. At the start of the pandemic, Haynes explained that it was especially hard because she was not able to see him.

"I wasn't able to see him as he was dying or even after he passed to say goodbye. We also couldn't have a funeral, because we weren't allowed to have any gatherings at the time," she said.

Her university offered free mental health counseling for the few weeks after his death, and she also felt that many of her professors were understanding during that time.

Mackenzie Dyrda, 22, graduated with a degree in psychology with an emphasis in behavioral and cognitive neuroscience from the University of Florida. When she was hired as a certified nursing assistant at UF Health Shands Hospital during the pandemic, her time there took a mental toll.

"I really did get to see the true horrors of the virus," Dyrda said. "For example, I facilitated a lot of zoom conferences with families. . . giving the iPad to the patient for the family to say their goodbyes."

Students also recounted that the pandemic fractured the normal rhythm of their daily routine, which affected their academics as well as mental health.

Dyrda was a dancer and choreographer at UF where she had choreographed some of her own pieces for an upcoming show, but the university was forced to take that opportunity away to keep students socially distanced.

She also said that going to the gym was a large part of her life, but as gyms stayed closed, she had to "get more creative in order to incorporate daily movements."

Kate Brucia, 23, graduated from Nova Southeastern University with a degree in legal studies. Having been dual enrolled while in high school, Brucia said transitioning to the college experience wasn't new, but constantly being at home adversely affected her mentally.

"I was staying home for work and for school, and pretty much being home all day didn't create as much mental stimulation," Brucia said. "I don't like change very much. . . I had a routine of how I would do stuff, and that all got shaken up by no choice of my own."

Brucia added that getting used to the platform of online learning was hard for everyone she knew, and it negatively impacted her overall success in learning when universities first shut down in-person classes.

Ariel Hadley, 21, a graduate with a degree in sustainability from UF expressed similar concerns. She described her situation as a disjointed experience after having spent her first two years in person then moving completely online.

She noticed a drop in her grades, and it became especially difficult for her when isolating at the beginning of the pandemic with her family. Being at her parent's house, it was harder to focus while also trying to learn the new online learning style.

Moving forward as the pandemic continued keeping her classes online, she described moving back and living on campus as a weird dynamic that no longer felt the same. As university facilities began to open up, going to games or transitioning back to in-person classes felt like a different experience for her.

"My last years have been this new normal. . . It didn't feel like UF for a bit, and it was hard to feel like a gator in those moments," she said.

Finances and tuition costs also became an issue for students as the pandemic continued to delay their ability to graduate. For Haynes, she believes her school should have financially reimbursed students being that so many in her program had to extend schooling to match their coursework with their in-the-field experience. Hadley said that it would have been helpful to ease the added financial burden.

Nonetheless, they are hopeful of their future. Brucia, Dyrda, Hadley and Haynes are fully employed in their fields, and amid the struggles each graduate endured, they successfully managed to work with what they were given to overcome their obstacles.