

TO: Boston University Faculty

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SUBJECT: Surveys of Student and Faculty Experience with Learn *from* Anywhere

As the pandemic reached Boston in March 2020, BU faculty moved rapidly and successfully to remote instruction for the second half of the spring semester. As the spring term concluded, we needed to decide how to proceed for fall 2020. A set of working groups, including faculty, administrative leaders, and staff, was charged by the President and the Provost to develop options. Those groups settled on a hybrid approach we came to call Learn *from* Anywhere (LfA). Through LfA, we have been able to provide our students the ability to continue making academic progress, despite the many constraints of the public health crisis.

Once the fall semester was underway, we began to hear of successes – large and small – and also about challenges, from Zoom fatigue and connectivity problems to the inadequacy of time for students to move between classes and audibility concerns in some classrooms. As the semester approached its midway point, we wanted to get a better sense of how faculty and students were experiencing LfA. In collaboration with colleagues in the schools and colleges, we surveyed all teaching faculty and all undergraduate and graduate students. Here, we want to relay some of what we learned.

Perhaps the most significant take away from the collective responses is that there is substantial disconnect between how the faculty and students experience wholly remote teaching and learning. Faculty responses indicate a high level of satisfaction with fully remote teaching, but students (particularly undergraduates) indicate a high level of dissatisfaction with fully remote learning. Further, the fact that some on-campus students are choosing not to attend class in-person does not appear to be correlated with a preference for remote engagement, rather the decision is linked to other factors. This disconnect is important to note and to address as we enter into the spring semester continuing our sustained commitment to residential education.

Faculty Experience

A survey of 5,445 faculty, instructional staff, teaching assistants, and fellows was launched to collect data on the efficacy of LfA and BU's remote teaching capabilities. A total of 1,063 people completed the survey, representing a 19.5% response rate. Of these, 88% of respondents indicated they were teaching a class in fall 2020.

Of 940 complete responses from instructors teaching this semester, 612 (65%) were teaching a course in the LfA hybrid format. Overall, respondents were split in terms of overall satisfaction with LfA this fall, with 43% indicating they were somewhat or extremely satisfied, and 41% indicating they were somewhat or extremely dissatisfied. STH, Pardee, Wheelock, and SAR instructors were among the most dissatisfied. LAW, SHA, Questrom, and CGS respondents were generally more satisfied.

The biggest challenges shared by faculty respondents include the ability to engage with students in a productive way, getting students with a non-remote LfA status to come to class, balancing in-class and remote instruction, having general audio/video difficulties in classrooms, and navigating technical issues with Zoom and Blackboard. Respondents generally approved of the technology (with special mention of Zoom breakout rooms) that was installed/utilized for LfA purposes.

In addition to their overall experience, faculty respondents were asked to rate their satisfaction with various elements of the LfA format, including classroom technology, classroom audio, moderators, faculty coaches, classroom safety, and achieving course learning outcomes. Classroom safety and the use of faculty coaches and moderators generated the greatest share of positive feedback, with 63% to 68% of respondents saying they were somewhat or extremely satisfied. Classroom audio drew the highest level of dissatisfaction, with 48% of respondents reporting as either somewhat or extremely dissatisfied.

Of the respondents teaching this fall, 41% indicated that they have taught a course entirely remotely. Of these, 82% were either somewhat or extremely satisfied. LAW had the greatest proportion of extremely satisfied faculty respondents. Only six respondents in three schools reported being extremely dissatisfied.

[View additional faculty survey results.](#)

Undergraduate Experience

5,204 undergraduate students completed surveys administered by their school/college. They were asked about the modalities of their courses; how many of their courses included in-person components; if and with what regularity they were attending in-person components; how satisfied they were with the various modalities; if they experienced difficulties; and what motivates them to engage across modalities. Most respondents (94%) are attending at least some class sessions remotely but synchronously, while just over half (53%) indicate they have the opportunity to attend one or more classes in person (this includes in-person components or rotations).

Survey responses reveal that students engaging with their courses wholly or partially in person have higher levels of satisfaction and fewer difficulties than those who engage via remote modalities. In-person components generated the highest levels of satisfaction, with 67% of respondents indicating they were extremely satisfied or somewhat satisfied. Students cite Zoom fatigue, lack of connection with faculty and classmates, difficulty staying engaged and not becoming distracted, and audio/technical issues as primary difficulties related to remote learning. Responses indicate that while in-person learning garners higher satisfaction, just 40% are

attending every in-person session they can, 26% indicate they attend most, and 34% indicate they attend just some or few. Further, instances where in-person students are asked to log into Zoom from the classroom were viewed as a real disincentive to attend classes in person.

Other themes emerged through open response questions. Students appreciate the convenience and flexibility of LfA, the significant effort undertaken by faculty to make this semester work, and the ability to have asynchronous materials to review and reinforce class content. But students are also indicating high levels of stress, longing for connection and engagement with their faculty, and a perception of increased workloads.

Overall, undergraduate students are generally satisfied with LfA, but it is clear that there are ways we might improve the experience for both students and faculty in the spring semester, creating opportunities for interaction as well as addressing some of the audio and technical issues.

[View additional undergraduate student survey results.](#)

Graduate and Professional Student Experience

Most graduate and professional school respondents (80%) are living in the Boston area, including 5% who live on campus. Despite this, just over half (51%) of these students are not taking any in-person courses, with somewhat more students in ENG, MED, GSDM, GMS, and SAR taking in-person courses. Students give a host of reasons for this, but highest among them are convenience, safety, and travel time. Among all of the graduate and professional student respondents, whether they were entirely remote, some remote and some in-person, or all in-person, nearly three-quarters (72%) were somewhat or extremely satisfied with LfA.

Graduate and professional student respondents, while broadly satisfied with LfA, did note difficulties. Just over half (54%) of those students who said they were fully remote indicated that they faced problems. By contrast, only a third (33%) of in-person students registered challenges. In open-ended questions, our respondents listed a wide array of problems. In class, students regularly noted having trouble hearing the instructor and difficulty hearing the students who are remote. Maintaining social distance was sometimes challenging in laboratory classes. Remote students also reported audio challenges, as well as problems with Zoom or Wi-Fi.

[View additional graduate and professional student survey results.](#)

The results of our faculty, undergraduate, and graduate/professional surveys are consistent with what we have heard in several student forums, assorted meetings, and one-on-one conversations. With that said, while we feel confident that the results of our surveys reflect realities on the ground, we also read and report them to you with some caution, and we suggest you do the same, given the low response rates (as low as 10%) in some schools and colleges.

We are grateful for the hard work faculty have put in to ensure the success of our pivot to new modes of instruction due to COVID-19. We are pleased by students' efforts to make this radical change in our teaching and learning environment work and for their appreciation for your efforts to make their educational experience a success. As the fall semester winds down, we are

considering how we can improve LfA for the spring. To that end, our faculty, undergraduate, and graduate/professional working groups are considering all of the survey responses, as well as what we have heard directly from faculty and students. We hope to provide some new information on this front shortly. In the meantime, we want to thank again for your work and encourage you to reach out to us directly with any questions.

Cc: Robert A. Brown
Provost's Cabinet