

Oral History Interview with student Chris Vazquez at St. Mary's University
Chris Vazquez Oral History, 2020/11/12

Christopher Hohman 0:00
Okay,

I am recording and today is November 12 2020.

And it is 2:02pm.

And I am here with Chris Vasquez who is a St. Mary's University, St. Mary's University student in the Greehey School of Business and is also a residential assistant (R.A.). So, my very first question is, how would you describe life as a resident at STMU prior to the outbreak of COVID-19?

Chris Vazquez (Student and Residential Assistant)) 0:34

Yeah, so prior to the outbreak of COVID-19, life as a resident was, it was new. That was I think, my first year, I'm only a third year right now, so it was new getting adjusted to college. But St. Mary's did a very good job of helping transition. Another really interesting thing about St. Mary's is that they had a lot of events, like food truck Tuesday, which is when you know if we try to come by on a Tuesday, it's usually once a semester and we grab some food and hang out with residents. From then, there were a number of other on-campus events. And it was fun. So it's always been, it's been a fun experience at St. Mary's University.

Christopher Hohman 1:19

And if you had to pick something that you thought was your favorite part of being a resident from before, COVID, what did you think? Is it the food truck? Or is there a particular other activity?

Chris Vazquez (Student and Residential Assistant)) 1:30

I'd say, just being able to walk outside and have more...I'd say the biggest thing would just be the number of students. Right now, given the current state of affairs, certain students aren't exactly on campus, and so the campus population is low. And so I missed the camaraderie that we had pre-COVID, where I could walk down, you know, into the commons or study area and just see almost anybody I could before class and just talking to them. It's very rare now, but still good, I mean it happens.

Christopher Hohman 2:05

Okay, my next question is, um, well, so, like we said, we've been discussing the, what life is like for you as a resident before COVID-19. But then, the university sent out an email on March 13 2020, announcing that the university would be switching to a virtual format for the remainder of the semester, and that students will be required to leave campus. How did you feel when you learned that the courses that you that you had been enrolled in previously in-person are now

going to be taught virtually for the remainder of the semester, and that you were more likely going to be at home for the remainder of the semester.

Chris Vazquez (Student and Residential Assistant)) 2:46

So for me, that was...it was a mixture of emotions. At first, I was a little scared, a little startled because over the course, at that point in time, over the course of like, two or three weeks, everything just, you know, stopped, you know, businesses started to close down. bars, Not that I was going to any but bars shut down, for example. And then the university closed, and they sent us all home. So I was scared, I didn't realize at that point in time, how quickly the virus spread. And as far as that affected me, the second emotion I felt was kind of like a bittersweet emotion. It was sweet in the sense that I was I was able to spend more time with my family, which, during the school year doesn't happen a whole lot. So that was nice. But it was also a little bitter, in the sense that I would have liked to have finished off in-person if it were possible. But I understood that things were changing rapidly. And so as we got new information, we'd have to adjust. And I was also a little concerned for how the quality of education would be affected through online teaching, and how that would affect grades as they were. Thankfully, the university was proactive and had, at least for my classes, each professor pre record, in preparation for shutting down, their lectures, and I was also able to meet with them at their, at our leisure. So those are my general overall feelings about, you know, the transition from in class to being online.

Christopher Hohman 4:27

And we talked, we touched on, I think you touched on this a little bit, but you talked about some of your concerns about about switching from in-person to virtual learning. And was there anything that you found particularly challenging about virtual learning? You know, about, you know, just like you said, you were you were concerned about how professors were going to take their lecture material and transfer it to a virtual format and concerned about the grade format, but was there anything for you that throughout the course of the remainder of the semester that you thought was really challenging, that you hadn't had to that you really hadn't had to deal with prior to virtual courses?

Chris Vazquez (Student and Residential Assistant)) 5:05

Yeah, so one of the first things that I found challenging right off the bat was just the sheer volume of messages through Canvas and emails. Since we couldn't be in person that was the primary means of communication. And so it was very easy at that time, especially that first week for me to be flooded with a number of emails that were coming from different classes and even students, a classmates. That was the first challenge was being able to adjust to that. Then, the second challenge was just being able to adjust to the online environment. I mean, I was 20 years old, when the when we transition online, so about, you know, you know, for 15 years of my life, I've always had someone there had been present in class. That's a very, that was a very rapid shift to just being taught completely online. The professors are really good, though. The quality of education didn't change, I still felt like I learned a lot. Some of the downfalls, that, not downfalls, but some of the challenge, I guess, challenge with another one was just that, um, I was kind of alone. Meaning that, like I didn't have my classmates to talk to, like I would have, if I were in class, I didn't have that social interaction that would have liked. And so just that sudden shift to seeing anybody, you know, overnight to just, everyone's going home, and I'll see them online, if they even choose to show their camera in their face was a little tough. I mean, yeah. And also, I

think another challenge was that some of the classes were asynchronous, which was beneficial to most students' schedules, because, you know, some students live in different countries, so they were in different time zones. And it was a rapid shift. But for me, had I not been as disciplined, like, had it been my freshman year, it might have been difficult for me to attend class at the same time block, rather than just waiting till the end of the semester, and then watching all the videos and catching up. So those are just my concerns about that, challenges.

Christopher Hohman 7:11

And so, um, this semester ended at the beginning of May, I mean, much like we do for in person classes back before COVID. It ended I think, about may 4, or may 5. And during the summer, a lot of universities, including our own, were considering whether or not they've would reopen for the Fall, and they were considering, you know, how and when, and, you know, if they were going to reopen. And then on July 16, the university sent an email to the community of students included, basically laying out the basics of how they would reopen the campus for this coming fall. And they described the three different types of, three different types of classes that would be offered: the online asynchronous, the virtual, and the in-person virtual, and they gave out general information, like what date the classes would be beginning, you know, August 11 2020. How did you, as a student, feel about the campuses' plans to reopen?

Chris Vazquez (Student and Residential Assistant)) 8:12

Could you repeat the last part, it cut out on my end?

Christopher Hohman 8:14

Okay. Um, how did you as a student feel about the university's plans to reopen?

Chris Vazquez (Student and Residential Assistant)) 8:23

When they had sent the email out, explaining that we had the option to take it all online, we didn't have to return to the university. That made me feel better. I intended to return if it opened up to begin with, simply because...I don't recall if they sent it in the email. But I remember having like, in the back of my mind, a thought that if they're opening the university, they intend to, at some point have in-person classes. And the reason why I decided to come to the university is because I thought that, and in a way it's been pretty true, that the campus would probably be safer, if not, if not one of the safest places during COVID because St. Mary's has done a lot to try and protect the students. Like my I'm a resident assistant, as you mentioned and so my boss is trained in contact tracing, as well as the other hall directors. And so, and I was also aware of the changes they were making on campus to try and protect the students. And I felt like it would be better for me to as a student to try and have that social interaction that I didn't get just being online, and at my house on campus, because I assumed that it would be safe and has been safe. And I would still be able to see people. So that's those are my thoughts for wanting to come back to campus.

Christopher Hohman 9:53

And you actually touched on this a little bit, just a few moments ago, when you talked about your duties as an RA, and how your boss had been trained in, in contact tracing, but um, how would you say if in any way would you say, has COVID-19 and the pandemic and the current world

situation changed your responsibilities or not maybe not changed, but how do you think it's affected your responsibilities as an RA?

Chris Vazquez (Student and Residential Assistant)) 10:23

Sure, yeah. That's a good question. So originally, the role of an RA in the role of an RA, at least at St. Mary's University is still what it was pre COVID. And that's to be a type of guidance for the residents try and help them to the best of our ability, to succeed in school to whatever it is they have goals. And that didn't change. The...what did change though, was the way in which we would approach how to do that. And so previously, you know, pre coven, we would have programs in-person where we kind of market where we put fliers up on different parts of the dorms and talk kind of word through word of mouth about these programs, and try and get people to come together and meet new people, form new friendships, and just new connections all around. And during COVID, especially now, in an effort to protect everybody and following CDC guidelines, there were limitations on how many people we could have at a program and if we could, and what capacity that would look like. And so we shifted online to an online platform. And so an example would be one of my programs at the very beginning of the semester was just a fun game. It's like a fun charade game. And it was, it was different. It wasn't necessarily different, bad, but it was having a perspective of what it's like pre COVID, going into COVID, and having a program in COVID. Because I have those two perspectives, I can sense the difference. If I were a freshman, and this is this were my first year and that was my first program that I had went to, I wouldn't have a baseline to compare it to. So as an RA, one of the things that I had to get acclimated to is that a number of students weren't attending all the programs, and that's okay, we're there to help them out. And so we would always follow up with them to the best of our ability. But it was difficult to try and build that sense of community because everyone at the at the very beginning of the semester was very much, at least what I could see, in their rooms, taking, studying, grabbing food from the Caf, the food area, and then bringing it back to the room and eating there. It wasn't until about halfway through the semester that residents started coming out and attending more online events. So that was that was a pretty big shift, I'd say.

Christopher Hohman 13:03

And we've talked a little about, like how this baseline and how you have kind of two points of view both experiencing life on campus as a resident prior to COVID. Life and life after COVID or during COVID, rather, during COVID.

How would you say the university has changed since since they implemented the new guidelines. And since they the new COVID guidelines.

Chris Vazquez (Student and Residential Assistant)) 13:33

So fundamentally, the university hasn't changed there. Their goal is for us to become educated and they want us to form have a better relationship with you know, the Marianist Charisms. And they've done a really good job of trying to keep those to the best of their ability under the pandemic. So those core values that the university has, I haven't sensed a change at all in my three years that I've been here. What did change are the... I'll give you an example. So in the Caf pre COVID, there were there were anywhere between 15 to 20 chairs along a row of tables that you could sit in. And in their efforts to try and protect students and limit contact, they took out a

number of the seats and they alternated it. So there'll be a seat here. And then about 6 feet over on the opposite side of the table there'd be a seat, six feet over on the opposite side, there'd be a seat. So they were taking precautions like that. And they were also putting up signs to try and remind students to try and maintain at least six feet apart. University also did from my understanding through something called the University Programming Council (UPC). They were also doing their best and working with the university to try and have events that satisfied the safety of the students. So those are just some examples of procedural changes that occurred in seniors University

Christopher Hohman 15:01

And, um, my final question is, what are your hopes for campus life and classes after COVID-19?

Chris Vazquez (Student and Residential Assistant)) 15:14

So after COVID-19, what are my hopes for classes? I'd say, if the if the state of the world is in such a way that we are allowed to go back to class and it's safe to go back to class, I would love for that to happen. That would, that would be a big thing that I would like. The other thing that I kind of like is that um that the the professor's right now they record their lectures so that if a student's connection isn't sufficient at that time of class, they can, at least at their leisure, go back and watch it. I think that would be interesting to try and do in following semesters, because sometimes students just might be sick, or they might have to attend other other matters, and might not be able to be in class. And if they're not there, then pre COVID, they wouldn't have received the content, you might have received class notes, but that would have been it. But if it had been recorded, at least they could have gone by and still, you know, more or less attended the class seeing what was going on. I think that would be a change that interesting.

Christopher Hohman 16:21

So in other words, kind of blending some aspects, you know, returning to class, but also taking some of the lessons we've learned from virtual classes, like recording our lectures and and, you know, recording our lectures and kind of taking some of lessons we've learned and keeping those for when we return the in person classes?

Chris Vazquez (Student and Residential Assistant)) 16:39

Yeah, exactly. Taking some of those...some of the pluses that occurred out of this and trying to merge them as best as they can fit with a world without COVID.

Christopher Hohman 16:50

Then that's an interesting point, because I think...I spoke to a professor of mine just a couple weeks ago. And she said, I think one thing about COVID is that, and maybe you felt this as a student the way I have, is that teachers are more accessible to us now, more accessible to us than they've ever been before. Because prior to COVID, you know, I remember, you know, we like you said we had to be in class. And if we had to meet with a professor, we did it in office hours. But now, because of things like Zoom, we can meet with them in our homes, and we can meet with them can still have that quality, you know, a quality meeting with our professor, but we can do it from a variety of different locations. So, you know, if I were you and I, you know, we're not on campus, we could still meet with our professors, even if, you know, we weren't in their rooms.

Chris Vazquez (Student and Residential Assistant)) 17:38

Right? Yeah, the ease of accessibility did increase for sure. They've all been really great at responding to my emails and being willing to meet with me at anytime that they're able to so your're right yeah. I would agree with that.

Christopher Hohman 17:54

And I do think that that is my final question for you. Um, I'd like to thank you again for joining me and agreeing to agreeing to this interview. I really appreciate it. And I'm going to go ahead and stop recording now.

Chris Vazquez (Student and Residential Assistant)) 18:08

Sounds good, Thank you.

Transcribed by <https://otter.ai>