

Routine Maintenance

Students adapt to 'new normal' during COVID-19 pandemic

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MOLLY GEORGE '23 STUDIES AT HER KITCHEN TABLE WITH HER DOG NEARBY.

Molly George's new neighbor in class doesn't say much, tends to have a short attention span and is easily distracted by objects that make noise.

She also happens to be a 10-year-old pug mix named Miley.

George '23, like all fellow UNH students, has traded the traditional classroom for a makeshift setup at home as the university has suspended all in-person classes through the rest of the spring semester due to the COVID-19 pandemic, shifting entirely to remote online learning.

That has resulted in routines being reimagined and the establishment of a new “normal” that for some includes sharing learning space with family pets. George has found that waking up and getting dressed as if she were still walking to class has helped establish a little regularity where it has otherwise ceased to exist.

“After about a week I decided I should start getting dressed as if I had somewhere else to go,” George says. “It makes me feel less like I’m stuck in the house every day because I feel like I’m getting ready for something. It gives me the motivation to get up and get things done.”

For Mallory Cashman '22, recreating her customary workspace and sharing it with a familiar face have been instrumental in keeping her on track. She is staying with her roommate’s family for the remainder of the semester and shares a workspace in the basement with her roommate and her roommate’s father, who is working from home.

Cashman set up her desk as she did at school – complete with whiteboard and laptop – and has tried to study during the same hours she typically would on campus.

“I went home to see my family first, but my roommate and I spend all of our time together, so not having her to work with would have been extremely challenging from a productivity standpoint,” Cashman says. “Being here has made the transition much smoother.”

The pressure to stay productive has landed more squarely on the shoulders of the students than it ever has before. Some classes are still “meeting” at their regular time via Zoom video technology, but many professors have shifted to a model through which they assign work at the beginning of the week and expect it to be submitted at the end of the week, leaving the time management entirely to the students.

Anna Burns '20 resorted to creating something of her own course schedule to keep herself from feeling untethered.

“A lot of teachers are doing a work-at-your-own-pace kind of approach,” Burns says. “It’s strange because you’re at home and it feels like it’s summer, but it’s not. I started making a schedule for myself – from 10-11 I work out, from 11-12 is Spanish, then psych, then lunch. It makes you more productive so it’s easier to focus.”

Finding that focus is difficult without friends, roommates or teammates around. The anticipation of such an adjustment prompted Burns and her friends to unexpectedly imitate a Leonardo Da Vinci classic prior to campus shutting down.

“The Thursday before spring break, it felt so weird on campus and you could just tell something was going to happen, so my friends and I said, ‘should we go to HoCo (Holloway Commons) one more time, just in case?’” Burns says. “So about 12 of us went and had our last supper in case we didn’t come back.”

For some students, such foresight wasn’t possible. The cancellation of all on-campus activities meant that Jamie Wilkes’ junior season as a member of the men’s track and field team was erased before it started, a sobering reality for a three-season athlete.

Wilkes '21, who also competes on the cross country and indoor track team, is used to experiencing the competition and camaraderie of college athletics throughout the academic year. Without practice or a team workout routine he's taken to running on his own to stay in competitive shape and build up mileage, supplementing with at-home weight work to add strength. But the change in intensity – and lack of meets to prepare for – have been somewhat jarring.

“My initial reaction was that I was kind of stunned. I didn't really believe it was happening,” Wilkes says. “Luckily as a junior, I have another year at UNH, but I feel bad for all of those seniors that had their college careers cut short.”

It's hardly just athletes from the senior class coming to grips with a new reality. Commencement has been postponed, and even a delayed in-person celebration remains uncertain. The final semester of college – usually a celebratory apex – has turned into a mental and social challenge unlike anything the seniors expected.

“We all sort of had this huge sadness that washed over us,” Max Mayone '20 says of he and his classmates. “This was supposed to be the culmination. Not being able to celebrate the spring with the friends and family I've made at UNH, it really hurts.”

Technology has been crucial in helping to bridge that gap, though. Mayone noted how thankful he is to have outlets like Zoom, FaceTime and group text threads to stay in touch with people from afar. He said he and some friends have even gone old school and started writing letters to each other in the mail.

Burns, George and Cashman all said they are texting and FaceTiming frequently, and Wilkes said the track and field team has established recurring Thursday Zoom calls that allow teammates to pop in and out to socialize over the course of a few hours, and the gatherings have grown to feature guest appearances by alumni.

Nothing can replace in-person interaction, though, and Mayone and Burns both suspect that if a delayed commencement ceremony is ultimately held on campus, it will be well-attended by graduates eager to celebrate together.

“We don't have a graduation day in May, but I'm still in my apartment – so, it's kind of like, when do I decide that college is over?” Burns wondered. “It just kind of fizzled out. That's why I'm hoping we can have an in-person graduation – it has the potential to be even more special now, to kind of put a nice bow on things for everyone.”

“I didn't expect UNH to become as big a part of my life as it has,” Mayone says. “I'm so connected emotionally to the school. I'd definitely come back for a postponed commencement, and I think a huge portion of the class would, too, just because of our love for our classmates and the community here.”

- **WRITTEN BY:**
[Keith Testa](#) | Communications and Public Affairs



University of New Hampshire

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