

For SPHTM student, online learning leads to unexpected benefits

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For Sarah Matthews (SPHTM '19), a first-year student studying for her master's in public health in epidemiology, the switch to remote learning brought early challenges but also surprising benefits.

Matthews is a San Antonio, Texas, native, and she chose to stay in New Orleans for remote schooling because some of her family members are older or essential workers, and she didn't want to put them at higher risk for COVID-19. She and her classmates adapted quickly to remote learning.

“The transition to online learning has forced us to really communicate with each other and our professors about our learning needs. That increased communication has probably strengthened our relationship with professors and peers. Also, it's definitely taught me some self-discipline from having to manage all my time from home.”

Matthews commended her professors for quickly and flexibly adapting their courses to an online format within only a week.

“I've found that all of my professors are really flexible and really took into consideration our needs when adjusting their courses,” Matthews said. For example, her biostatistics professor listened to student feedback about exams, changing the evaluation format from an exam to a group project. “That flexibility and receptiveness is a really good example of how professors have handled this online learning experience.”

Even separated socially from her classmates, Matthews says they are still able to connect and collaborate. “The group projects I've been assigned are actually pretty conducive for the online format, and we've all just been using Zoom to meet.

Additionally, I've found that even though we're not in person together, we've all stayed in touch and been actively checking in on each other to give support and see how to navigate things."

Matthews has found it an interesting time to be an epidemiology major. "This pandemic is a real-world example of what we're learning, and our professors have definitely kept us aware of this. We've been applying some of the concepts that we're learning to the current COVID-19 pandemic, and it's generated some interesting in-class discussions. If anything, it's made me more aware of the importance of epidemiologists and confirmed my choice in major.

Despite the learning curve and some early challenges, online learning has actually introduced positive changes according to Matthews.

"I think the one thing the online learning situation has definitely taught us is how to be flexible and adapt quickly, which is a pretty invaluable skill."