

My name is Faaiz Siddiqui and I am 19 years old. I am the son of an immigrant mother and father who migrated from Pakistan to the United States of America in the late 1980's. I was born in Sacramento, California and have lived there all my life. I was raised as a Muslim and was educated at an Islamic private school called Al-Arqam Islam School for elementary, middle and high school. Immediately after my high school career, I began my undergraduate degree at California State University, Sacramento in the field of Electrical and Electronic Engineering. I am currently at the end of my sophomore year in college.

I am writing with the intent to convey my circumstances during the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020 to future individuals who are curious. I want to specifically focus on the impact of the pandemic on the school system and my education, and highlight how the pandemic induced sudden change that detrimentally affected my life as a student.

Once the pandemic was declared a danger to public health and the phenomenon of “social distancing” was announced, it was not long before school went online. What was a physical address soon became an internet address. The campus including classrooms, halls, library, dining halls, coffee shops, and the Well (gym) were all closed until further notice. Even the permanently full parking lot became a barren, empty land. All in person class meetings became recurring online meeting rooms, where the professor would lecture with a webcam and microphone, or were otherwise completely canceled. What was my once *alma mater*, the nourishing ground for my heart, mind, and soul, became my messy room with a laptop, desk, and chair. Only once I realized what had happened, how I temporarily lost my passion to learn, I began to gather the evidence of how dependent I was on the university campus.

The campus was my place of solitude. It encouraged individualism and critical thought; concepts that were lacking in my life at home with my family. I was able to sit alone and think

about my life, my interests, my passions, and explore them in a place where everyone around me was trying to do the same. It was a place where future leaders explored the depths of knowledge together, and were bolstered in their studies merely by the presence of other students who walk the same path. Being in the presence of other scholars and professors fueled my passion to delve deeper in my studies and increase my knowledge. When everything went online, it became difficult for me at home to maintain the same focus and effort as I did when I was on campus. My passion began to diminish. Home for me, was not a place to reflect and study, but a place to obey my parents. As is in the Pakistani culture, filial piety and reverence for my parents is something expected of me at home, and it negatively impacted my critical thinking mindset. Not only was my mindset disturbed, but other aspects of school were also affected. Since lectures were recorded, I stopped attending most of my lectures except the ones that were discussions. However even the discussions felt largely useless because all the student's webcams were off and microphones muted. The lecturer tried their best to start a discussion but all they could see were black screens. People spoke only when absolutely necessary and otherwise stayed quite. I began to question whether or not the listed students were even there, maybe they just logged on and left. This change challenged my notion of what a class even was, because at home all it became was a long list of assignments. After I brainlessly read and regurgitated the material on assignments, I guess I was "educated".

My environment at home also did not complement the new "virtual classroom". Since I live with my four family members, and we were all quarantined at home, all of us have to work, school, and live in the same space. I had a difficult time adjusting to the fact that the space where I sleep and play games is now the same space where I have to listen to lectures, study, and do homework. My family members were also growing restless in their respective rooms, tired of

being in the same place all day, doing work at home practically all by yourself, and then staying at home. All day through the various activities we do, we must stay in the same place and have nowhere else to be. The idea of “quarantining” seems more and more like putting everybody in a jail cell.

The blessings I enjoyed as a member of society grew apparent to me, and I acknowledged their significant role in making me a sound human being. The warmth of friends at school, the freedom to walk to the park and play around with my cousins, the freedom to sit and eat at a restaurant with my family, the freedom to take a break and go stare at the clouds outside without having to be afraid of a deadly virus on the loose, and much more, all of which made me feel fulfilled, was sadly taken away. Even the overlooked short walks from class to class that kept me healthy have been replaced with sitting crouched in a broken chair for hours.

Not in a million years could I have guessed that in April everything would change, but the power of the media continues to prove me wrong. Due to the lackluster educational environment at home, I have deeply considered taking my next semester off because I feel like I am not learning anymore. During the course of this semester I felt like I was doing assignments and readings for the sake of credit, and not for the sake of learning, which is what I focused on when I was at school. If virtual classes cost me my passion to learn, I did not want to take them. From physical health, to mental health, to emotional health, to spiritual health, all were compromised when the university closed. It has been easier to pray because now I can pray five times a day at home, rather than having to walk to the University Union Meditation Room every time I want to pray. Aside from religious practices, having to stay at home for all hours of the day, and still function at the same level as normal is quite impossible. This is why, as humans have done for ages, my family and I are adapting. We are spending more family time together to

compensate for the lost social interactions in quarantine. We walk more around the neighborhood whenever we can, and in our backyard, and sometimes even in a circle inside the house. We switch rooms, or go to other rooms, to diversify our environments and make ourselves feel less enclosed. We try our best to live healthy lives together and make do with what we have.

I have also made a resolve with my education. I want to foster an environment at home that will allow me to pursue knowledge because I want to learn and increase my knowledge with the hope of making use of it in a meaningful way. I end with this because I want to emphasize no matter how difficult it gets we must always move forward. We can't just stop. If we stop, we lose. Living is what makes life meaningful. Hope can never be lost, Hope will never be lost. The better times are right around the corner. Let mankind not die until we are dead.

- Faaiz Siddiqui 5/12/2020