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The COVID Cohort Meets the New Normal: Community College Student Experiences With Instructional Modality Selection

By

MELISSA REEVE
DISSERTATION

Submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

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Acknowledgements

This dissertation arrived at a singular moment in my life. As I transitioned from thirty years in the classroom to a new chapter in educational leadership, I found myself returning to the question that has guided my work as an educator: How do students experience the institutions we build for them?

Embarking on this doctoral journey late in my career, I knew I wanted to study a question that could only be asked from this particular moment in time. The COVID-19 pandemic had fundamentally reshaped our community colleges, and I wanted to better understand the experiences of the students who had come of age through that disruption. Just as importantly, as I prepared to move from the classroom into administration, I wanted my study to center students' experiences in their own words. Education begins with taking students seriously— not simply as learners to be measured, but as people whose experiences deserve to be understood. Higher education generates an abundance of quantitative data that tells us what students do and how those choices shape their outcomes. But only students can tell us why they made those choices in the first place. My hope is that this study contributes to the ongoing effort to ensure that students' voices remain central to conversations about their education.

This work is, in many ways, a tribute to the thousands of community college students I have had the privilege to teach over the past thirty years. From recent high school graduates to returning adults, from lifelong Californians to students who had only recently arrived in the United States, they entrusted me with their stories, challenged my assumptions, broadened my perspective, and continually reminded me why education matters. I hope I have done justice to

the voices of the ten students who shared their experiences so generously for this study, and that through them, I have honored the many others whose stories have shaped my own.

I owe an enormous debt of gratitude to my dissertation advisor, committee, and the faculty of the CANDEL program. You taught me how to ask better questions, introduced me to new ways of investigating them, and, perhaps most importantly, affirmed that the questions I cared most about were worth pursuing. Thank you for encouraging me to undertake work that has been among the most meaningful of my career.

To Cohort 19, thank you for your camaraderie throughout our time together. Your diverse experiences and perspectives broadened my understanding of what it means to lead with courage, humility, and purpose. You encouraged me through my professional transition with perspective and confidence. Because of you, I never felt alone on this journey.

To my colleagues, thank you for your unwavering commitment to students and to one another. You have always challenged me to teach and lead with compassion, and to keep students at the center of our work. In an era when higher education feels increasingly driven by efficiency, metrics, and technology, I am grateful to stand alongside educators who continue to believe in the transformative power of human relationships.

To the mentors who saw leadership potential in me before I saw it in myself, thank you for calling me in to opportunities that have shaped the course of my career.

To my parents and grandparents, thank you for instilling in me a deep respect for education and for creating the opportunities that made my own journey possible.

To my daughter, your courage to question expectations and forge your own path inspires me. May you remain curious, trust yourself, and continue building a life that reflects who you truly are.

To my husband, thank you for riding stoker on this stage of our long tandem tour. As long as we're pedaling together, I always feel the wind at my back.

Abstract

As community colleges continue to expand online and in-person course offerings, discussions of instructional modality are often framed in terms of student preference. Yet such framing may oversimplify how students understand and evaluate their options. This study explores how traditional-age community college students, whose secondary education was disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic, make decisions about course modality in a post-pandemic context. Understanding how students navigate these choices is increasingly important as institutions seek to balance flexibility, access, and equity while determining the mix of courses offered across modalities.

The study was guided by two research questions: (1) How do traditional-age community college students understand and evaluate their options between in-person and asynchronous online learning, and in what ways have their experiences shaped these evaluations? and (2) How do institutional and contextual factors influence students' modality-related decisions? The study draws on Iloh's (2019) multidimensional college-going framework and Bronfenbrenner's bioecological theory to examine how individual experiences, institutional structures, and broader environmental influences interact in students' decision-making processes.

Using a qualitative case study approach, I conducted semi-structured interviews with ten first-year students at a Northern California community college. Participants were between the ages of 18 and 22 and represented a range of educational backgrounds and modality experiences. Interviews explored students' understanding of instructional modalities, factors influencing course selection, and reflections on both Fall and Spring enrollment decisions. Data

were analyzed through iterative cycles of deductive and inductive coding informed by the study's theoretical framework.

Findings challenge the notion that students hold stable or universal modality preferences. Rather than identifying as either "online learners" or "in-person learners," most participants described making course-by-course decisions based on the subject matter, perceived learning demands of a course, and their own academic strengths and needs. Students frequently weighed considerations such as opportunities for interaction, access to immediate feedback, scheduling flexibility, and their ability to remain motivated and organized in asynchronous environments.

Participants' experiences during pandemic-era schooling remained a significant point of reference when evaluating modality options. For some students, negative experiences with remote learning contributed to continued avoidance of asynchronous online courses, while others described revising their initial assumptions after gaining experience in college-level online courses. Across interviews, students demonstrated an awareness that success in asynchronous environments requires substantial self-regulation, time management, and personal accountability. Institutional and contextual factors—including course availability, scheduling constraints, employment obligations, and transportation considerations—also shaped the options students ultimately pursued.

The findings suggest that modality decisions are more complex than commonly assumed and that student "preferences" are often intertwined with prior experiences, institutional conditions, and competing life demands. For community colleges seeking to advance educational equity, these findings highlight the importance of moving beyond simplistic

assumptions about modality preference and considering how course scheduling, modality availability, and student support structures influence students' opportunities to make meaningful choices. The study contributes to ongoing conversations about equitable access and student success in an evolving post-pandemic higher education landscape.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic permanently transformed the instructional landscape of the California Community Colleges (CCCs), the nation's largest public system of higher education (California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office, 2025). The pandemic-driven pivot to remote instruction, which began in mid-March 2020, kept most campuses fully online through at least the 2020–21 academic year, though the pace and pattern of restoring in-person instruction varied across the system. This shift accelerated the expansion of asynchronous online, synchronous online, and hybrid course modalities. As of 2022–23, more than half of CCC students were enrolled in at least one distance education course, and asynchronous online offerings now comprise a major share of systemwide enrollments (CCCCO, 2023; RP Group, 2025). While the expansion of online and hybrid modalities offers students greater flexibility, these choices carry significant consequences and remain shaped by institutional factors such as course availability and scheduling patterns, as well as contextual factors such as time poverty and lingering effects of pandemic-era educational disruptions (Dorn et al., 2021; Paulsen & McCormick, 2020; RP Group, 2025; U.S. Department of Education, 2023; Wladis et al., 2015, 2023). For traditional-age students whose K–12 education was profoundly altered by the pandemic— referred to in this paper as the "Covid Cohort"—navigating these options requires balancing personal circumstances, learning preferences, and institutional structures in ways that were not previously required.

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, extensive research showed that students' decisions to enroll in online courses were typically constrained by life circumstances. Online learners were disproportionately older, more likely to work full-time, more likely to be caregivers, and more

likely to be managing complex time demands (Aragon & Johnson, 2008; Huntington-Klein et al., 2017; Paulsen & McCormick, 2020; Wladis et al., 2015, 2023; Wolf et al., 2014). While asynchronous online learning expanded access for these students, it also introduced new risks: lower course success rates, greater attrition, and equity gaps in outcomes, particularly for marginalized student groups (Hart, Friedman and Hill, 2018; Johnson & Mejia, 204; Shea & Bidjerano, 2018; Xu & Jaggars, 2014; Wladis et al., 2014). Students' motivations for enrolling online were often pragmatic—driven by scheduling needs and external constraints—rather than grounded in an informed understanding of the demands of online learning (Bork & Rucks-Ahidiana, 2013; Fox, 2017; Jaggars, 2014).

At the same time, Generation Z students (those born between 1997 and 2012) had begun to enter higher education with distinct technological fluency and learning expectations. Studies prior to the pandemic documented Gen Z's strong preferences for mobile, visual, and interactive learning environments, as well as their comfort with on-demand digital content (Cilliers, 2017; Giunta, 2017; Szymkowiak et al., 2021; Twenge, 2017). Yet this fluency coexisted with challenges: shorter attention spans, a preference for structured interaction with instructors, and a desire for learning experiences that balanced flexibility with meaningful engagement (Cilliers, 2017; Giunta, 2017). These tensions suggested that even before the pandemic, Gen Z students were not uniformly well-suited to fully asynchronous modalities.

The pandemic disrupted these dynamics at an unprecedented scale. Forced into emergency remote learning, students across educational levels experienced declines in motivation, mental health, and academic engagement (Aguilera-Hermida, 2020; Aristovnik et al., 2020; Dorn et al., 2021; Turner & Miranda Zepeda, 2023; U.S. Department of Education,

2023). For many current traditional-age college students, this period of disruption coincided with critical developmental transitions– generally in middle school or high school– reshaping not only their academic trajectories but also their attitudes toward instructional modalities. As these students now enter and progress through community college, they encounter an instructional landscape where asynchronous online learning has become institutionalized at scale (RP Group, 2025).

Emerging post-pandemic research suggests that student attitudes toward instructional modality are now more discerning and context-dependent. While many students appreciate the flexibility of online learning, others continue to value in-person modalities for their perceived rigor, interaction, and support (Thomas et al., 2025; Vásquez-Iscan et al., 2023; Steyn et al., 2024). Factors such as learning style compatibility, prior experiences, instructor presence, and course design now play central roles in shaping students' decisions (RP Group, 2025; Steyn et al., 2024). Yet significant questions remain about how Covid Cohort students—whose educational experiences were uniquely shaped by pandemic-era remote learning—navigate these decisions in community college contexts.

Problem Statement

Despite a growing body of post-pandemic research, few studies have qualitatively examined how traditional-age community college students make decisions about course modality in today's hybridized landscape. In this study, traditional-age students are defined as individuals between the ages of 18 and 24 (Choy, 2002; NCES, 2015). Much of the existing literature relies on quantitative surveys, leaving limited insight into the thought processes, perceptions, and values that shape students' choices (Thomas et al., 2025). Moreover, the

structural complexity of modality selection—rooted in systems of constraint, opportunity, and institutional design—remains underexplored.

Purpose of the Study

This study responds to these gaps by using qualitative methods to examine how Covid Cohort students in a California community college setting make decisions about in-person, hybrid, and asynchronous online instruction. Guided by Iloh's Model of College-Going Decisions and Trajectories and selected components of Bronfenbrenner's bioecological theory, this research seeks to illuminate how structural, contextual, and informational factors influence students' perceptions of their modality options—and how these perceptions shape their educational pathways.

For the purposes of this study, **institutional factors** refer to college-level structures, policies, and practices that shape the range of course modality options available to students, such as course scheduling patterns, faculty availability, program-specific modality requirements, and institutional priorities. **Contextual factors** refer to the circumstances in a student's life and environment at the time of decision-making, including work schedules, caregiving responsibilities, access to reliable transportation, broadband availability, and other personal or environmental conditions that affect the feasibility of different modalities. **Informational factors** refer to students' knowledge, beliefs, and assumptions about their available options, including their understanding of key modality terms, prior experiences with online or in-person learning, and guidance received from counselors, instructors, or peers.

Research Questions:

1. How do traditional-age (18–24) community college students, particularly those whose K–12 education was disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic, understand and evaluate in-

person and asynchronous online learning? In what ways have their experiences shaped their modality preferences?

2. In what ways do institutional, contextual and informational factors influence students' perceptions of their modality options?

Theoretical Framework

Understanding how community college students make decisions about course modality in the post-pandemic landscape requires a theoretical framework that moves beyond traditional notions of free and rational "choice." The realities facing students today, particularly those whose K–12 education was disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic, are shaped by intersecting institutional, contextual, and temporal factors. To capture these dynamics, this study draws on two complementary frameworks: Bronfenbrenner's bioecological theory of human development (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998) and Iloh's Model of College-Going Decisions and Trajectories (Iloh, 2019). Together, these frameworks provide a systems-based perspective for analyzing how students engage with modality options in a higher education environment transformed by the pandemic. Key terms from both models, along with their working definitions as used in this study, are summarized in **Appendix A**.

This study first draws on selected components of Bronfenbrenner's bioecological theory of human development, as articulated in his later work with Morris (1998) and interpreted by Tudge et al. (2009, 2022). While the bioecological model was originally developed to explain developmental outcomes in children, its core premise—that human action is shaped by reciprocal interactions within layered environmental contexts—has been applied to understand access to and behavior in higher education (e.g., Perna, 2006; Iloh, 2019). In this study, the

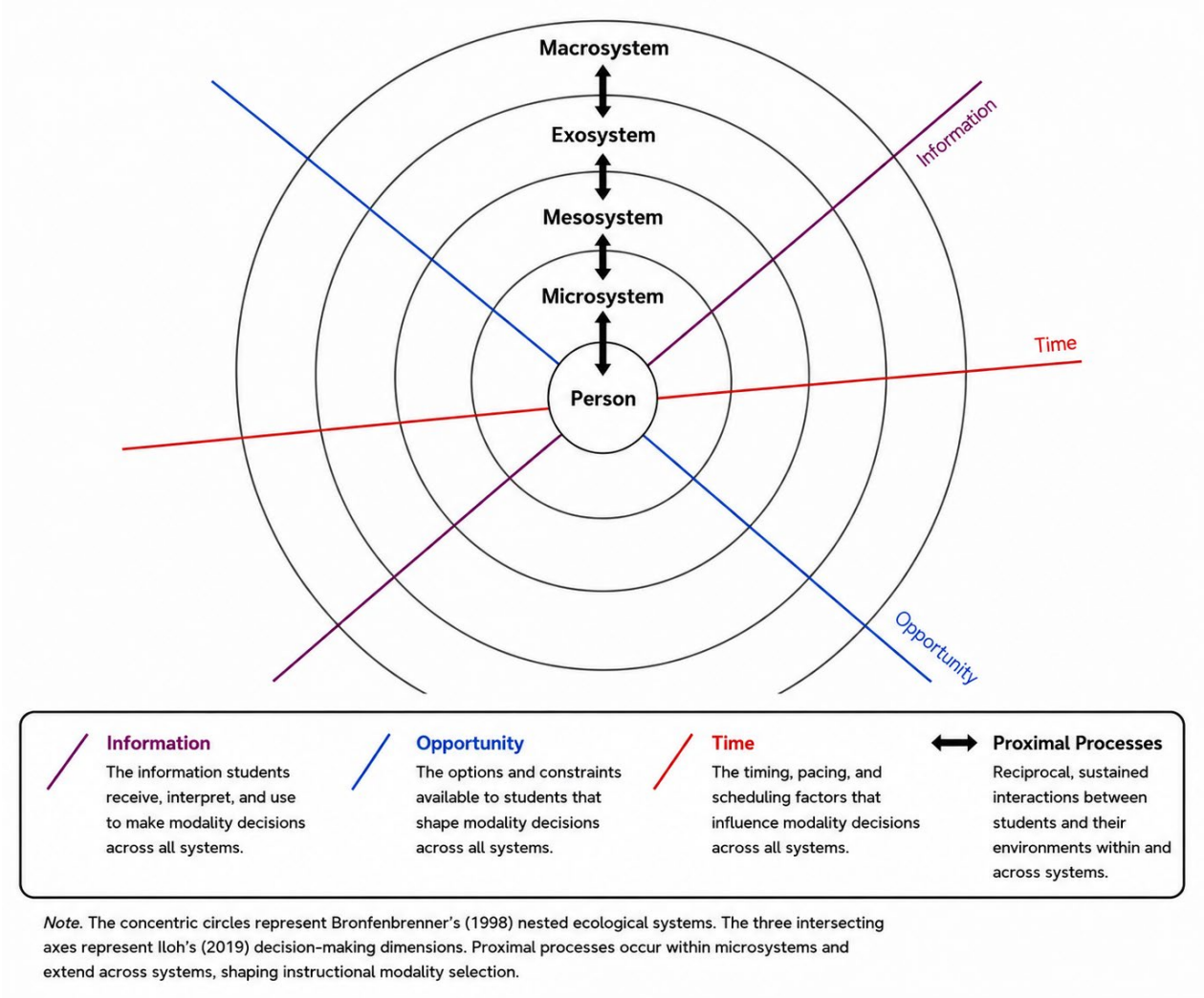
microsystem refers to the immediate settings in which students directly interact, such as the student's home/family/household, the student's workplace, and the college itself. The **mesosystem** encompasses the interconnections among those settings—for example, how a student's employment schedule impacts their availability for in-person class meetings, or how advising guidance shapes registration decisions. The **exosystem** includes structures that do not involve the student directly but still affect their experience, such as institutional scheduling policies or faculty workload assignments. The **macrosystem** represents the broader cultural, policy, and economic contexts (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998; Tudge et al., 2009, 2022), including state-level higher education policy, societal attitudes toward online learning, and the rapid expansion of asynchronous instruction during and since the Covid-19 pandemic. These nested systems form part of Bronfenbrenner's PPCT model (Person–Process–Context–Time). In this framework, **Context** specifically refers to the layered environmental systems described above—the micro-, meso-, exo-, and macrosystems—that together shape students' opportunities, constraints, and decision-making processes. The other components of the model include **Person** (students' dispositions and resources), **Process** (recurring proximal interactions that drive outcomes), and **Time** (temporal influences at micro-, meso-, and macro-scales) (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998; Tudge et al., 2009).

Guided by this systems lens, the study also incorporates Constance Iloh's (2019) model of college-going decisions and trajectories, which reframes traditional notions of student "choice" by attending to the constraints and lived realities that shape postsecondary pathways. Drawing from qualitative research with racially minoritized and nontraditional learners, Iloh (2019) emphasizes that students' trajectories are dynamic and non-linear, often involving

multiple institutions and moments of reentry. The model highlights three interrelated dimensions: **information** (the quality, quantity, and accessibility of decision-relevant knowledge), **opportunity** (the institutional and life circumstances that enable or limit action), and **time** (both individual temporal factors and broader historical conditions). Rather than assuming students make “free and rational” educational choices, Iloh’s (2019) framework centers on how they navigate decision-making within these constraints.

This study's theoretical framework combines Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model with Iloh's (2019) dimensions of student college-going decisions and trajectories. Together, these frameworks provide a way of examining how students' modality decisions are shaped through interactions among individual experiences, institutional structures, and broader social contexts. **Figure 1** presents a visual representation of the integrated framework, illustrating how Iloh's dimensions of information, opportunity, and time intersect with Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems to influence students' educational experiences and decision-making processes.

Figure 1



Note. The concentric circles represent Bronfenbrenner's (1998) nested ecological systems. The three intersecting axes represent Iloh's (2019) decision-making dimensions. Proximal processes occur within microsystems and extend across systems, shaping instructional modality selection.

To further clarify these intersections, **Table 1** maps Iloh's three decision-making dimensions across Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems. For example, the **"opportunity"** dimension highlights how students' concrete choices are shaped at multiple ecological levels. At the **microsystem** level, opportunity is defined by immediate options within students' direct environments, such as whether an in-person section is open at the time of registration or whether a particular class location is accessible without a car. At the **mesosystem** level, opportunity reflects the interconnections among microsystems, such as when a student's work

schedule conflicts with required lab hours or when family responsibilities limit the feasibility of attending evening classes. The **exosystem** captures institutional structures that shape opportunity without students' direct input, including institutional scheduling practices, faculty preferences for certain modalities, and program requirements that determine whether a course is offered online or in person. Finally, at the **macrosystem** level, opportunity is influenced by broader systemic factors, such as state policies expanding online course offerings or funding models that incentivize particular instructional modalities. Together, these intersections illustrate how individual modality decisions are enabled, constrained and experienced within nested ecological systems. The interactions among Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems and Iloh's dimensions of student decisions and trajectories illustrate how individual "choices" about course modality are enabled or constrained.

Table 1

Examples of interactions between Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems and Iloh's decision-making dimensions in the context of instructional modality selection.

Iloh Dimension	Microsystem	Mesosystem	Exosystem	Macrosystem
Information	Direct settings where students receive and interpret information (e.g., advising sessions, peer conversations, instructor reviews)	Connections among microsystems that shape consistency or conflict in information (e.g., advisor's explanation vs. friend's description of "asynchronous" classes).	Institutional channels shaping information without direct contact (e.g., course listings on the college website, marketing materials, automated registration prompts).	Cultural, policy, and societal narratives influencing the meaning of information (e.g., public discourse on the rigor of online vs. in-person learning).
Opportunity	Immediate, concrete options available in direct environments (e.g., open sections at registration, class location).	How opportunities or constraints in one microsystem affect others (e.g., work shifts limiting attendance at scheduled classes;	Institutional structures shaping opportunities without direct student input (e.g., scheduling practices, faculty modality	Broader systemic factors affecting opportunity structures (e.g., state policy expanding online courses, funding

		family obligations affecting lab access).	preferences, program requirements).	models incentivizing certain modalities).
Time	Immediate time constraints and scheduling realities within direct settings (e.g., class meeting times, commute duration, time needed to complete online modules).	Ongoing patterns of time use across settings (e.g., weekly work schedule interacting with course meeting times;).	Institutional or structural timing outside the student's direct control (e.g., registration timelines, add/drop deadlines, block scheduling)	Historical and generational context shaping current choices (e.g., pandemic-era remote learning as a formative experience; post-pandemic shift in CCC modality ratios).

Note. Key terms are adopted from Bronfenbrenner & Morris (1998); Tudge et al. (2009, 2022); and Iloh (2019). The organization of these terms across ecological systems and decision-making dimensions represents the author's synthesis for this study.

Time is especially salient for this study. Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model distinguishes among **micro-time** (the timing and duration of specific events or interactions, such as the moment a student attempts to register for a course and finds it full), **meso-time** (the frequency and consistency of experiences, such as how often a student meets with an advisor), and **macro-time** (the broader historical and generational context) (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998; Tudge et al., 2009). Iloh's (2019) model complements this structure by directing attention to how both individual time constraints (e.g., work schedules, caregiving responsibilities) and generational time markers (e.g., pandemic-era remote learning) shape decision-making. For Covid Cohort students, macro-time includes their formative experiences with emergency remote teaching and the enduring post-pandemic shift in the California Community Colleges toward a much greater proportion of asynchronous offerings, as documented across both developmental and higher education frameworks (Iloh, 2019; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998; Tudge et al., 2009). These temporal dimensions combine with

information and opportunity to expand or constrain the set of options students perceive as viable.

Finally, this study interprets Bronfenbrenner's **proximal processes** as the recurring, sustained interactions between students and their environments (people, tools, settings) that influence modality selection (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998; Tudge et al., 2009, 2022; Iloh, 2019). Examples include seeking advising, interpreting course schedules, reflecting on prior learning experiences, and navigating online registration systems. These processes occur within microsystems but are shaped by mesosystem connections and exosystem-level policies. In combination with Iloh's (2019) framework, they support a more nuanced and equity-oriented understanding of instructional modality selection—one that acknowledges students' lived constraints, contextual histories, and the shifting structures of a post-pandemic higher education landscape.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Understanding how today's traditional-aged community college students navigate course modality decisions requires looking back at the conditions that shaped the current landscape. Before the pandemic, students who enrolled in online courses often did so out of necessity, with clear demographic patterns emerging among those balancing work, caregiving, and education. Outcomes for these students varied, and concerns about success gaps persisted even as access to online learning expanded (Johnson & Mejia, 2014; Shea & Bidjerano, 2018; Xu & Jaggars, 2014). Alongside these trends, Generation Z arrived in higher education bringing new expectations about technology's role in learning—expectations shaped as much by digital fluency as by the unique pressures of growing up online.

The sudden shift to remote instruction during the COVID-19 pandemic (mid-March 2020 through March 2021 or longer, depending on location and context) disrupted these existing patterns and left lasting imprints on student engagement, confidence, and perceptions of learning environments. As institutions and students alike moved beyond the use of remote learning as an emergency response, recent research reveals a complicated picture: while some students embraced the flexibility of online learning, others sought a return to the structure and interaction of face-to-face classrooms (Robert, 2022; Thomas et al., 2025; Vásquez-Iscan et al., 2023). Across these shifts, students' modality preferences appear to be shaped not only by their pandemic experiences but also by broader questions of fit, access, and evolving expectations about what college should look and feel like.

Pre-Pandemic Patterns: Demographics and Motivations for Online Enrollment

Before the COVID-19 pandemic radically expanded online offerings, community college students who enrolled in asynchronous online courses differed in important ways from those who attended face-to-face classes. Research consistently found that online learners were more likely to face life circumstances that constrained their educational decisions, sometimes hindering academic success, and that students' motivations and expectations for online learning were complex and not always aligned with course realities (California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office, 2017; Paulsen and McCormick, 2020; Hachey et al., 2022). Understanding this pre-pandemic landscape is critical to contextualizing current patterns of modality choice among students whose educational experiences have been shaped by pandemic-related disruptions.

Multiple studies identified distinctive demographic and situational characteristics among students who enrolled in online courses before 2020. Wladis et al. (2023) found that community college students who chose online classes often experienced greater non-discretionary time demands, including higher levels of employment and caregiving responsibilities, compared to their face-to-face peers. Paulsen and McCormick (2020) similarly found that fully online students tended to be older, lived farther from campus, were more likely to be single parents, were more often part-time students, and worked more hours. Wolf et al. (2014), Huntington-Klein et al. (2017), Ortagus (2018), and the California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office (2017) likewise observed that pre-pandemic online learners were disproportionately older, employed, caregivers, and more likely to be women or from specific racial/ethnic groups. Hachey et al. (2022), synthesizing findings across the field, confirmed that employment, caregiving responsibilities, and nontraditional student status were persistent predictors of online enrollment.

Systemwide enrollment data from the California Community Colleges add further demographic nuance. Since at least 2013, students aged 25 and older, female students, and those identifying as American Indian/Alaska Native, Black/African American, or White have been consistently more likely to enroll in online courses (RP Group, 2025). In contrast, younger students, Hispanic students, students with disabilities, military-connected students, and male students have been less likely to do so. These disparities help contextualize more recent questions about how the pandemic may have altered and/or reinforced longstanding demographic patterns in modality enrollment.

Students' own perspectives highlight the complexity of modality selection. Fox (2017) identified four motivations for choosing online courses: balancing responsibilities, individualized pacing, efficiency, and dissatisfaction with campus experiences. Students weighed course difficulty, instructor interaction, and goal relevance when selecting courses. Jaggars (2014) found that while students appreciated the convenience of online learning, they generally perceived it as less effective, particularly in challenging subjects. Bork and Rucks-Ahidiana (2013) revealed misalignments between student and instructor expectations about flexibility, workload, and support. Even experienced online learners often misunderstood the demands of online coursework.

Pre-Pandemic Patterns: Student Outcomes in Online Learning

Besides documenting the demographics and exploring the motivations and perceptions of students enrolling in online classes, a great deal of pre-COVID research focused on performance gaps between online and in-person instruction. Xu and Jaggars (2014), Bettinger et al. (2017), Hart et al. (2018), Hart, Friedmann, and Hill (2018), and Xu and Xu (2019) found that students in online courses were more likely to withdraw and less likely to succeed than their face-to-face peers, with particularly large gaps for underrepresented racial minorities, younger students, and academically underprepared students. Importantly, Spencer and Temple (2021) identified age as a moderating factor. Their large-scale study of a four-year university found that traditional-aged students performed worse online than in person, whereas older students experienced better outcomes online. These mixed findings reflect the broader complexity identified in the literature. As Spencer and Temple (2021) summarize, student demographics, students' prior experiences, course structure, and instructor practices were all

found to influence modality outcomes—complicating efforts to draw broad conclusions about the relative efficacy of online versus face-to-face instruction.

While course-level performance gaps between instructional modalities raised concerns, several studies point to more complex longer-term outcomes. Johnson and Mejia (2014) and Sublett (2018) found that California community college students who took some online courses were more likely to earn degrees or transfer than those who took only in-person classes. Shea and Bidjerano (2018) similarly found that taking up to 40% of courses online positively influenced degree completion for community college students in the SUNY system, though success declined beyond that threshold. Ortagus (2018) reinforced these patterns using nationally representative data, showing that partial online enrollment in the first year of community college was associated with higher odds of degree attainment, transfer, and lower odds of dropout. At the university level, Fischer et al. (2021) found that greater access to online courses, particularly required lower-division courses, during summer session, was linked to faster degree completion, though low-income students experienced smaller gains.

Pre-pandemic research paints a complex picture of modality selection in community colleges. Online learning expanded access for students navigating time poverty and logistical barriers, but "choice" was often shaped by necessity rather than preference. Moreover, online learning outcomes were uneven, especially for marginalized groups, and varied based on age, course structure, and support systems. These patterns reflect the ways that students' decisions are shaped not only by personal circumstances but by the broader structures and systems in which they are embedded. Bronfenbrenner's ecological perspective (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998) offers a way to conceptualize how individual choices are influenced by intersecting forces

at the microsystem (e.g., family obligations), mesosystem (e.g., institutional practices), and macrosystem (e.g., societal narratives about online learning) levels. Similarly, Iloh's (2019) multidimensional model draws attention to how decisions are shaped by context, timing, and students' lived experiences within educational systems. Together, these frameworks help illuminate how "choice" in course modality reflects a complex interplay of personal, institutional, and sociocultural factors—an interplay that has continued to evolve in the post-pandemic landscape.

Generation Z Learning Preferences and Digital Fluency

Understanding the educational preferences and technological behaviors of Generation Z is essential for situating how students from the Covid Cohort are approaching course modality decisions today. Generation Z, typically defined as individuals born between 1997 and 2012, entered higher education with learning expectations and habits shaped by a lifetime of digital immersion. Long before the COVID-19 pandemic, researchers and educators noted that Gen Z students interacted with information, technology, and educational institutions in ways distinct from earlier generations (Pearson Education, 2018; Seemiller and Grace, 2017; Turner, 2015). Pre-pandemic research on Gen Z learning preferences highlights how technological fluency, self-directed learning habits, and expectations for immediacy and applied learning may have positioned these students to thrive in some ways, but also to face new challenges in online learning environments (Guinta, 2017; Selingo, 2018; Turner, 2015; Rothman, 2016).

Among the most comprehensive early studies of Generation Z learners, Seemiller and Grace (2017) surveyed over 750 students across fifteen U.S. colleges and universities. Their findings describe a cohort deeply shaped by constant access to information and technology.

While Gen Z students expect information to be "a click away," they also favor independent, self-paced learning that allows them to observe, experiment, and construct understanding on their own terms. Video-based learning emerged as a preferred method, with many students reporting greater comfort watching demonstrations before applying new skills themselves.

These themes are reinforced by large-scale national data from Pearson Education (2018), based on a Harris Poll of over 2,500 participants. Compared to Millennials, Gen Z students reported a stronger preference for digital tools such as YouTube and mobile apps over traditional printed materials, though many still valued printed resources and instructor interaction as part of the college experience. Notably, 71% of Gen Z students indicated they would attempt to solve academic problems independently—often through online research or peer collaboration—before seeking help from professors. Yet, despite their self-reliance, 78% still identified teachers and professors as among the most influential figures in their learning and personal development. Additional reports similarly highlight Gen Z's complex relationship with technology and learning environments. Studies by Selingo (2018), Turner (2015), and Rothman (2016) describe a cohort accustomed to on-demand, applied learning and highly reliant on platforms like YouTube for self-education. These students seek instant access to knowledge, often multitask across digital platforms, and demonstrate emotional attachment to their devices. While this digital fluency facilitates rapid information gathering, researchers caution that it may come at the expense of critical evaluation skills and sustained academic focus. Concerns about fragmented attention and reduced academic engagement are echoed by Twenge (2017) and Turner (2015), who argue that Gen Z's constant connectivity and multitasking habits may undermine their ability to engage deeply with complex academic

material. Although Gen Z students express high comfort navigating multiple digital environments, their ease with technology does not necessarily translate to sustained focus or critical thinking in learning contexts.

Importantly, research also reveals that Generation Z students do not view digital tools as replacements for human interaction or structured learning. Cilliers (2017), surveying urban planning students in a South African university, and Giunta (2017), surveying business students in a small, private college in the U.S., found that while Gen Z learners appreciate rapid, visual, and technology-integrated instruction, they also seek meaningful contact with instructors, opportunities for discussion, and structured guidance. Students in these studies valued flexible, tech-enhanced learning environments, but continued to express a desire for connection, clarity, and instructor presence—factors that become especially salient in evaluating online and hybrid modalities.

More recent qualitative research provides insight into how these generational preferences intersect with the experiences of community college students navigating post-pandemic learning. Airhart and Spielvogel (2025) conducted focus groups with Latinx students at a California community college, exploring how Gen Z learners perceive their educational experiences and supports. Students in the study described themselves as able to locate information quickly using digital tools, yet often uncertain about the reliability of the sources they encountered. Newcomer students, who had started college after the height of the pandemic, reflected on the mental health strain of prolonged remote learning in high school, and described long hours spent in front of computers as "draining," despite their tech adeptness. Participants highlighted struggles with home distractions and unreliable internet

access during the pandemic, underscoring that digital skills alone did not shield them from the challenges of online learning. Peer networks, family members, and college counselors were all identified as critical sources of support, reinforcing prior findings about the enduring value of interpersonal connection alongside digital fluency.

Collectively, these studies portray Generation Z as highly adept with technology, deeply reliant on digital resources, and inclined toward independent, self-paced learning environments. At the same time, they reveal a cohort that values instructor interaction, and personalized learning experiences—preferences that complicate assumptions about Gen Z students being uniformly well-suited for fully asynchronous, self-regulated modalities. These patterns suggest that while Gen Z students possess many of the technical skills required for online learning, they may simultaneously experience tensions between their need for flexibility and their need for structure, connection, and meaningful engagement. The COVID-19 pandemic amplified these tensions, forcing an entire sub-cohort of Gen Z into remote learning at scale and reshaping student expectations, behaviors, and perceptions of instructional modality.

Pandemic-Era Disruptions and Shifts in Student Engagement

The sudden shift to online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic introduced an educational experience that differed significantly from intentionally designed online instruction. As Hodges et al. (2020) explain, "emergency remote teaching" (ERT), characterized by rapid, unplanned transitions to distance education with minimal time for faculty training or instructional design, became the operative model for most institutions. This distinction is critical. While high-quality online learning relies on purposeful design, regular interaction, and digital pedagogies tailored to an online environment, ERT was reactive and constrained. Yet this

hurried model served as the first or only exposure to "online" education for many students across all educational levels during the pandemic. As a result, students' perceptions of online learning may have been shaped more by the deficiencies of ERT than by the possibilities of well-supported virtual instruction, potentially influencing how they now interpret and choose between course modalities.

Several studies highlight the academic and emotional impact of ERT on students who were enrolled in college at the onset of the pandemic. In a survey of 270 undergraduates, Aguilera-Hermida (2020) found that students experienced marked declines in motivation, cognitive engagement, and self-efficacy after the shift to remote learning. Students who preferred face-to-face instruction reported greater difficulty adapting, particularly in managing time and sustaining focus. Similarly, Al-Mawee et al. (2021) found that university students across levels expressed less positive perceptions of distance learning, with undergraduates reporting more negative academic impacts. Freshmen in particular noted diminished peer interaction and a stronger preference for synchronous instruction, underscoring the importance of connection and structure.

Means and Neisler (2020), in a national survey of 1,008 undergraduates who experienced mid-semester shifts to online formats, documented a sharp drop in satisfaction: while 51% of students were highly satisfied with their courses pre-pandemic, only 19% remained so after courses moved online. Students cited loss of motivation, reduced interaction, and difficulty staying focused as primary challenges. However, the survey also revealed that many students did not attribute problems to the online format itself but rather to the chaotic, emergency-driven transition. Similarly, Turner and Zepeda (2023), drawing on qualitative

interviews with 11 students enrolled between 2021 and 2022, most of whom had experienced the pandemic transition while already in college, found that learners expressed mixed feelings about online instruction. Although students expressed confidence with digital tools, many reported screen fatigue, diminished focus, and a desire for greater structure, personalization, and meaningful engagement in post-pandemic courses. These reflections suggest that students' experiences of ERT may have had a lasting influence on their modality preferences and expectations for instructional design.

Additional studies focusing on community college students provide further insight into the specific impacts of ERT on this population. Bird et al. (2022), analyzing the Virginia Community College System, found that the abrupt transition from in-person to virtual instruction in Spring 2020 resulted in a 4.9 percentage point decrease in course completion, primarily due to increased withdrawals and failures. These negative impacts were most pronounced among students with lower GPAs, less credit accumulation, and no prior experience with online learning—characteristics common among first-time and younger students. Similar patterns emerged within the California Community College system. Hart et al. (2025) found that students whose in-person courses shifted online during Spring 2020 were 8.5 percentage points less likely to complete their courses and 3.4 percentage points less likely to earn passing grades compared to students in prior terms. Performance declines were particularly steep among students without prior online learning experience. Linden et al. (2022) further reported that persistence rates during the pandemic dropped most sharply for California community college students under age 24, first-time students, and those with fewer than 15 completed units. Consistent with these findings, a statewide survey conducted by the

California Student Aid Commission (2021) found that nearly half of California college students reduced their course load during Fall 2020 as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, with reductions particularly common among community college students and those from lower-income backgrounds. Findings from that statewide survey were reinforced by Reed et al. (2022), who reported that many community college students, particularly those from lower-income backgrounds, faced heightened challenges with technology access, increased home responsibilities, and work demands that disrupted their education during the pandemic. While these outcomes reflect the unique conditions of the pandemic, they offer important context for understanding how early experiences with emergency remote teaching, as well as the broader strains of the pandemic, may continue to influence current attitudes toward instructional modality.

Broader patterns in K–12 education similarly reflect the academic and socio-emotional toll of the pandemic. The U.S. Department of Education (2021) reported widespread academic disruption and mental health challenges among K–12 students during the pandemic, particularly for students of color and those lacking access to digital infrastructure. Dorn et al. (2021), analyzing data from over 1.6 million students nationwide, found that elementary students were four to five months behind expected learning benchmarks by spring 2021, with the largest losses occurring among low-income and racially minoritized students. Kuhfeld et al. (2022), using a national sample of 4.9 million students in Grades 3 through 8, further documented that pandemic-era learning disruptions widened pre-existing racial and socioeconomic achievement gaps, with Black and Hispanic students experiencing lower growth rates in both reading and math. More recent findings suggest these challenges have not fully

resolved: in a national survey conducted in August 2024, Fittes (2024) found that 46% of high school teachers reported a decline in student engagement since 2019, and 78% identified motivating students as their most pressing instructional challenge. These enduring shifts in learning and engagement may continue to shape how these students approach higher education.

These patterns of disrupted learning and disengagement are particularly relevant given their downstream effects on postsecondary pathways. National data on high school graduation and college enrollment suggest that, while high school completion rates continued to rise during this period, the pipeline to college—especially to two-year institutions—was significantly disrupted. Harris et al. (2024) analyzed national data on high school graduation and immediate college enrollment through 2022, finding that high school graduation rates continued to rise during and after the pandemic, with particularly strong gains among historically marginalized groups. However, college matriculation rates told a different story. Two-year college enrollment dropped sharply in the first pandemic year—by 16%—and continued to decline through 2022, suggesting that students entering community colleges during this period did so within a postsecondary landscape still experiencing the effects of pandemic-related disruption. These enrollment trends were echoed in a statewide survey of California high school seniors conducted during the pandemic, in which concerns about virtual learning—including preferences for in-person instruction, perceived instructional quality, ability to learn effectively online, and access to institutional support—were among the most frequently cited reasons students were reconsidering their college plans (California Student Aid Commission, 2020). Together, these findings highlight how the pandemic altered both students' academic readiness

and their immediate postsecondary pathways, setting the context for understanding current patterns of modality engagement in community colleges.

In the years immediately following the pandemic, studies documented persistent patterns of disruption and disengagement among students entering or navigating higher education. Wright et al. (2023) found that students attending at least one in-person class per week in Spring 2021 reported greater faculty engagement and academic satisfaction compared to peers whose learning remained fully online. However, these benefits were not evenly distributed; racially minoritized students reported smaller gains in engagement and satisfaction relative to their White peers. Reflecting on the 2021–22 academic year, McMurtrie (2022) noted widespread faculty observations of heightened student disengagement, increased social anxiety, and mounting mental health concerns among students returning to in-person instruction. While these findings capture the immediate post-pandemic landscape, they provide important context for understanding the educational experiences of today's traditional-aged community college students, many of whom navigated these disruptions during their formative secondary schooling years.

Cumulatively, this body of research suggests that today's traditional-aged community college students are entering higher education with disrupted academic foundations, elevated mental health needs, and ambivalent attitudes toward online learning. Persistent technological barriers, uneven prior exposure, and the lingering effects of ERT may have shaped both their expectations and preferences, affecting how they perceive the rigor, supportiveness, and legitimacy of different instructional modalities. As students who were in grades 8–12 during the pandemic now comprise the bulk of traditional-aged community college enrollees, their

challenging experiences with ERT may have shaped current expectations and perceptions of online learning. Understanding this context is essential to interpreting how these students approach modality decisions today.

Evolving Student Preferences and Modality Decision-Making in the Post-Pandemic Era

In the years following the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, students' experiences with emergency remote learning significantly influenced how they approached course modality decisions. While some embraced the flexibility of online instruction, others gravitated back toward face-to-face environments, citing a desire for greater interaction and engagement (Robert, 2022; Thomas et al., 2025; Vásquez-Iscan et al., 2023). Recent research suggests that student preferences are neither fixed nor uniform but shaped by evolving experiences, personal learning styles, and structural access (Thomas et al., 2025; Vásquez-Iscan et al., 2023). These studies illustrate how the pandemic reshaped students' expectations of what learning should look and feel like.

Emerging research on the **postsecondary intentions of California high school seniors** reinforces this pattern of evolving preferences. Hurtt et al. (2024) surveyed over 10,000 graduating seniors in Spring 2023 to examine their college preparedness and anticipated engagement with online learning. While 42% indicated they did not plan to take any online classes, 58% anticipated enrolling in at least one online course, with most expecting to take just one or two. Notably, planned online enrollment varied by parental education and race/ethnicity: White students and students with more highly educated parents were less likely to plan for online coursework, while students from less advantaged backgrounds were more likely to see online options as part of their immediate educational future. These findings

highlight how recent high school graduates, many of whom experienced ERT during critical developmental years, continue to navigate modality decisions with a mix of caution and pragmatism.

A systemwide survey by Vásquez-Iscan et al. (2023) illustrates the stark reversal in student modality preferences during and after the pandemic. Conducted within the City University of New York (CUNY) system, the survey asked students to select their preferred instructional modality—fully asynchronous online, synchronous online, hybrid, or fully in-person—at three timepoints: Fall 2021 (mid-pandemic), Summer 2023, and Fall 2023. In 2021, 76.1% of respondents preferred online formats, with a strong leaning toward asynchronous instruction. However, by late 2023, only 36.7% favored fully online modalities, while 63.3% preferred in-person instruction (including hybrid). The authors speculate that this shift may reflect both a return to pre-pandemic norms and persistent digital inequities—such as lack of access to reliable internet or personal devices—which may have discouraged sustained engagement with online learning.

National data from Robert (2022) further complicates the narrative, highlighting increased interest in online learning but also significant variability based on prior experience. While students' preference for mostly or completely online courses more than tripled between 2020 and 2022—from 9% to 29%—this growth was uneven. Among students who had taken online or blended courses before the pandemic, 82% reported being just as likely or more likely to take such courses again. In contrast, for those whose first exposure to online learning came during the pandemic, only 58% expressed the same willingness to re-enroll in online formats. These findings reinforce the idea that for many students, negative or incomplete experiences

with ERT—not online learning itself—continue to shape modality preferences and academic self-perceptions.

Longitudinal findings from Bright and Vogler (2024) further illustrate how student preferences for course modalities have fluctuated since the onset of the pandemic. Their five-year study of undergraduates at a large Midwestern university found that from Spring 2019 to Spring 2021, students consistently preferred face-to-face courses by a two-to-one margin. However, by Spring 2022, this pattern reversed, with nearly twice as many students preferring online formats. In Spring 2023, preferences rebalanced, with nearly equal numbers of students indicating preference for online and face-to-face instruction. Students cited diverse reasons for their preferences, reflecting key dimensions of the learning experience. Those who favored online learning emphasized the modality's flexibility, particularly for balancing work and family responsibilities and progressing through material at their own pace. In contrast, students preferring face-to-face instruction highlighted greater opportunities for human interaction, improved self-regulation, and enhanced communication with instructors. Notably, desire for human interaction increased during the early pandemic period but declined in later semesters, while the importance of self-regulation rose during peak COVID-19 disruptions.

Thomas et al. (2025) offer a closer look at students' reasoning behind their modality preferences. Surveying over 650 undergraduates taking in-person sections of a nutrition class at a suburban CUNY campus between Fall 2021 and Fall 2024, the study found that only 30% of these students preferred online courses outright. Yet a full 68% said they would be willing to take an online class again in the future. Even among those who had a self-reported "bad experience" with a previous online course, over one-third remained open to trying the format

again. Common complaints about the asynchronous online modality included boredom, limited interaction, and reduced learning effectiveness. Notably, while nearly 70% of students rated their computer skills as “good” or better, 62% still believed they would earn a lower grade in an online course. These findings suggest that confidence in technology does not necessarily translate into confidence in academic outcomes, and that students weigh multiple dimensions—such as instructor engagement and perceived rigor—when making modality decisions.

Understanding how students perceive, select, and experience different course modalities carries significant implications for academic outcomes. Recent research from the RP Group (2025) highlights the potential stakes of these decisions within the California Community College system. While concerns about equity gaps in online learning persist, the study found that higher proportions of online enrollment were associated with stronger degree completion outcomes, particularly among students who completed all their coursework online. At the same time, performance disparities at the course level remain, especially for Black/African American, Pacific Islander, American Indian/Alaska Native students, and older learners. A recent study by Hart et al. (2026) reports similar findings, documenting that although course-level success gaps between face-to-face, synchronous, and asynchronous modalities have narrowed over time in the CCC system, meaningful disparities persist—particularly for Black and Hispanic students enrolled in online courses. These studies suggest that while online learning can expand access and support student progression, outcomes are shaped by both structural factors and the quality of instructional design. As such, understanding how students make modality decisions and how those decisions interact with institutional practices remains a critical area of inquiry.

Supporting students in making informed, context-sensitive choices is essential to fostering equitable success across all instructional modalities.

While recent research has provided valuable insights into online enrollment trends, modality preferences, and course-level outcomes within the California Community College system (e.g., RP Group, 2025; Hart et al., 2026), several important gaps remain. Much of the existing work draws on administrative data or large-scale surveys (e.g., RP Group, 2025; Hurtt et al., 2024), offering limited insight into the lived experiences and meaning-making processes of students themselves. In particular, the perspectives of traditionally aged, first-year community college students navigating the post-pandemic landscape remain underexamined. This study aims to address that gap by foregrounding the voices of these students and exploring how they interpret, negotiate, and act upon their course modality options within specific institutional contexts.

Chapter 3: Methods

Research Design and Methodology

I chose a qualitative research design because my aim was to understand how students perceive and navigate the course selection process in their own words. While institutional and systemwide data provide valuable insights into what students do—for example, the number of units they take, their course modality patterns, and their rates of persistence or completion—these data cannot reveal how or why students make the choices they do, or whether they even perceive themselves as having made a meaningful choice. Nor can quantitative data show the extent to which students understand what they are signing up for at the time of registration, particularly in relation to course modality.

Qualitative research is well-suited to addressing these gaps. As Merriam and Tisdell (2016) note, qualitative inquiry seeks "to achieve an understanding of how people make sense out of their lives, delineate the process… of meaning making, and describe how people interpret what they experience" (p. 15). This approach aligned with my interest in exploring students' lived experiences and decision-making processes. It also allowed me to approach the research inductively, remaining open to themes I may not have anticipated and building concepts and insights from participants' narratives rather than imposing predefined categories (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 17).

In many institutional settings, efforts to improve student outcomes often rely on large-scale quantitative metrics—success rates, fill rates, or disaggregated performance data—which, while useful for identifying patterns, rarely illuminate the reasoning or experiences behind those outcomes. Qualitative research offers a method for turning informal student perspectives into rigorous, systematic evidence that can inform institutional planning. By collecting and analyzing student narratives around course modality selection, this study aimed to elevate student perspectives as a resource for improving scheduling, instruction, and student support practices in the hybridized, post-pandemic community college environment.

Finally, as a non-member of the student group I studied, qualitative inquiry supported a stance of curiosity and humility. Rather than testing student responses against institutional expectations (as might be required by a survey design), I used an open-ended, exploratory approach to better understand how students themselves make meaning of their educational choices and constraints.

Setting and Participants

This study explored the experiences of first-year, traditional-aged students in navigating the course selection process at one Northern California Community College Falcon College is a single-college district serving an exurban Northern California county, with annual enrollment of over 12,000 students (unduplicated headcount enrolled in at least 0.5 units of credit coursework) as of the 2024-25 academic year. (California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office, n.d.). According to data from the California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office DataMart, delayed-interaction (internet-based) courses, commonly known as asynchronous online courses, accounted for approximately 18% of Falcon College's credit FTES in 2018-19, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2024–25, asynchronous online enrollments comprised roughly 43% of credit FTES, reflecting the sustained integration of online learning into the college's post-pandemic course schedule (California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office, n.d.).

My participants were traditional-aged (18-21), students whose first year of college was the 2025-26 academic year. I recruited participants by email, using a contact list provided by the institutional research office. A recruitment email (see Appendix B) went out to all students meeting the following parameters: those aged 18-24 who first enrolled in Fall 2025 and who subsequently enrolled in Spring 2026 (n= 361). The recruitment email offered a participation incentive of a $25 Amazon gift card and included a link to a brief screening survey to identify eligible and willing participants (see Appendix C). Of the twenty-eight (28) students who responded to the survey, thirteen (13) were eligible and provided their contact information to participate. I sent each of these students a follow-up email, inviting them to sign up for an

interview and asking them to complete an additional, 4-question survey to collect basic demographic data and written consent to participate (See Appendix D). Of the thirteen (13) students contacted, eleven (11) signed up for interviews, and ten (10) attended their interview appointments.

Students who agreed to interviews completed a brief pre-interview survey to collect basic demographic data, consent, and contact information for potential follow-up questions (see Appendix). My aim in this purposeful sampling (Merriam and Tisdell 2016) was to capture typical experiences among a large sub-population of current community college students: those whose middle or high school years were disrupted by COVID-era remote instruction.

Participant Characteristics

Although recruitment was open to students between the ages of 18-24, all ten students who completed interviews were between 18 and 21 years old. Nine were members of the high school class of 2025 and had been 8th graders in the 2020-2021 school year, experiencing a year or more of emergency remote instruction beginning in the spring of seventh grade. The tenth participant was a high school freshman during the 2020-2021 academic year.

Table 2 summarizes the basic demographic characteristics of the participants included in the study. Although participants were relatively similar in age due to the study's focus on students whose secondary education had been disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic, the group reflected broader diversity in terms of gender and race/ethnicity. Participants also varied considerably in their educational goals, life circumstances, and relationships to instructional modality, as summarized in **Table 3**.

Table 2

Participant Demographic Characteristics (N = 10)

Characteristic	n
Age	
18–19	9
20–21	1
Gender	
Female	7
Male	3
Race/Ethnicity	
African American/Black	2
Filipino	1
Hispanic	2
Multiethnic	3
White	2

Note. Participants self-identified demographic characteristics through the screening questionnaire.

Table 3 provides an overview of participants' educational goals, course modality patterns across their first two semesters of college, and their stated future modality preferences at the time of the interviews. The table illustrates the diversity of participants' academic pathways and educational circumstances despite their relatively similar age and educational backgrounds.

These characteristics provide important context for interpreting the findings presented in Chapter 4. The individual participant profiles presented at the beginning of that chapter build upon this overview by introducing each participant and providing additional context for understanding the themes that emerged across interviews.

Table 3

Participant Educational Goals and Modality Patterns

Participant	Educational / Career Goal	Fall 2025 Course Load	Spring 2026 Course Load	Stated Future Modality Preference
Alondra	Exploring nursing or other health professions; uncertain between AA and transfer pathway	3 classes (all IP)	5 classes (3 IP / 2 OL)	As much in-person as possible
Angela	ICU nurse; undecided between AA and transfer pathway	4 classes (2 IP / 2 OL)	4 classes (2 IP / 2 OL)	Mixed; harder classes in person, easier classes online
Ariyah	Political Science major; transfer and law school goals	3 classes (all IP)	3 classes (all IP)	All in-person
Cambria	Previously pre-med; currently exploring future goals	3 classes (all IP)	6 classes (3 IP / 3 OL)	Mixed; mostly online, but preferred some engaging/interesting classes in person
Drew	Biology major; transfer to UC Davis with goals in wildlife conservation	3 classes (all IP)	3 classes (1 IP / 2 OL)	Mixed
Ivan	Music major with transfer goals	2 classes (1 IP / 1 OL)	3 classes (2 IP / 1 OL)	All in-person
Jude	Studio Art major with transfer goals and interest in game design	4 classes (3 IP / 1 OL)	4 classes (all IP)	All in-person
Julissa	Real Estate certificate	3 classes (1 IP / 2 OL)	3 classes (1 IP / 2 OL)	Mixed
Luna	Transfer goals; aspiring speech therapist	4 classes (3 IP / 1 OL)	4 classes (1 IP / 3 OL)	Mixed; mostly in-person
Olivia	Nursing program pathway	4 classes (all OL)	4 classes (2 IP / 2 OL)	Mixed

Note. IP = in-person; OL = online/asynchronous online.

The following section describes the procedures used to collect interview data from these participants.

Data Collection

I conducted semi-structured interviews with ten (10) students identified through the process described above. The ten interviews proved sufficient to reach a saturation point at which the interviews began to become repetitive (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016). I conducted interviews in weeks 2-4 of the 18-week Spring semester. This timing allowed students to report and reflect on their Fall semester, including their process and reasoning for their Fall course and modality decisions, as well as their experiences in those classes. In addition, students were able to report on their process and reasoning for their Spring course and modality selections, and to express their first impressions of those classes.

I developed a semi-structured interview protocol to ensure alignment with my research questions and to support consistency across interviews (see Appendix E). While the protocol provided structured prompts, the interviews remained conversational in tone to encourage storytelling and personal reflection (Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2022). I conducted seven (7) of the interviews by Zoom video-conference and three (3) in person, according to participants' availability and preferences. With participants' permission, I recorded each interview on Zoom (including those done in-person), and used Zoom's auto-transcription function to prepare preliminary transcripts. I reviewed each transcript against the audio recording within 48 hours to edit for accuracy and sent the corrected transcripts back to each participant for confirmation. Quotations presented in Chapters 4 and 5 were lightly edited for readability by removing filler words (e.g., "um," "uh"), repeated words, and minor verbal false starts. These edits were made only when they did not alter the substantive meaning, tone, or intent of participants' statements.

In asking students to reflect on decisions made weeks or months earlier, the interview protocol included prompts designed to help them distinguish their recollection of the Fall course selection process from their subsequent experiences in those courses. After the initial interviews, the protocol was revised to more explicitly separate questions about Fall enrollment decisions from questions about Spring registration decisions. This adjustment helped participants distinguish between the expectations and assumptions that informed their initial course selections and the experiences that later shaped their subsequent modality choices. For example, I asked students what they understood about different instructional modalities at the time of registration, what factors they remembered considering, and whether and in what ways those perceptions had changed over the course of the Fall semester. While some retrospective reinterpretation is inevitable, these distinctions were intended to elicit clearer accounts of decision-making as experienced in the moment, while also capturing how students made meaning of those choices in hindsight.

As an additional step to ensure the accuracy of my data, I shared each participant's transcript back with them (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016) and asked specific questions in cases where context suggested they had used different words than intended (e.g. saying "online" when they meant "in-person"). Participants approved these adjustments which are shown in [braces] in quotes from the transcripts. I also invited participants to add any comments or clarifications they wanted to make upon reviewing their transcripts, but none chose to do so. To add trustworthiness to my analysis (Lincoln and Guba, 1985), my advisor back-read a sample transcript in the initial coding stage, suggesting some new codes as well as additional codes that could be applied to certain passages.

Data Analysis

As recommended by Merriam and Tisdell (2016), I began to analyze my data as I continued to collect more. As I reviewed and corrected each transcript, I wrote memos recording my initial observations. Starting analysis immediately as each new transcript came in surfaced topics or themes my initial questions had not anticipated, allowing me to probe for more details in subsequent interviews.

Following data collection, I analyzed my data through interactive coding, identifying descriptive category names (Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2022). In my first pass, using open coding, I focused on identifying units of data which answered my research questions, including: (1) students' process for selecting courses and modalities; and (2) the structural, contextual, and informational factors that influenced students' perceptions of their modality options. As suggested by Lincoln and Guba (1985), I ensured that each unit of data was both "heuristic… reveal[ing] information relevant to the study and stimulat[ing] the reader to think beyond the particular bit of information," and that each unit could stand by itself without additional context (cited in Merriam and Tisdell 2016, p. 203). As I coded each transcript, I compiled my codes with definitions and examples in an Excel codebook to allow for recursive review, refinement and renaming of my categories as needed.

Through iterative coding passes, I subdivided, collapsed and refined my categories to identify themes in the data that answered my research questions. Following a process adapted from the RAdaR method (Watkins 2026) I moved through three stages of coding: an inductive / "discovery" stance in my earliest coding; a stage of "discovery and verifying" as I coded additional interviews, and finally a primarily deductive, "testing and confirming" stage as I took

additional passes through my full data set to ensure that my codes were applied consistently and that my thematic categories meaningfully addressed my research questions (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016). Through this process, I regularly revisited my theoretical framework as well as my positionality and biases to guard against interpretations that merely reinforced my own prior beliefs about instructional modalities (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016). Ultimately, I reduced my themes into categories meeting the criteria suggested by Merriam and Tisdell (2016, p. 213): responsive to the research question; exhaustive; mutually exclusive; sensitive to the data; and conceptually congruent.

Researcher Positionality

I approached this research as a tenured community college English instructor with over twenty years of classroom experience, primarily teaching first-year students. In that time, I worked with thousands of learners, including many whose educational pathways, as I learned through casual conversation, were shaped by constrained access to information, institutional complexity, and systemic inequality. These observations have informed my professional involvement in initiatives to improve new-student onboarding at my college.

My positionality was also shaped by my experience as the parent of a student whose academic and developmental trajectory was significantly disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2020–2021, my daughter completed eighth grade entirely online while I was teaching asynchronous college writing courses from home. During that time, I observed the toll that remote learning took on my teenage daughter's mental health, motivation, and social development, as well as similar patterns among many of the traditional-aged students enrolled in my online classes. These experiences deepened my interest in how pandemic-era learning

disruptions may have shaped students' perceptions of, and responses to, different instructional modalities. My daughter went on to attend a California community college from 2023-25, giving me further insight into the challenges facing COVID cohort students as they transition into higher education. Conversations with my daughter about online and in-person learning—along with my observations of her ongoing efforts to navigate modality decisions, course demands, institutional systems, and her own academic identity— informed my perspective as a researcher.

My institutional role provided both practical advantages and ethical responsibilities. As a long-time faculty member and (at the time of the study) an academic administrator at the study site, I benefited from easy access to participants and an insider's understanding of local practices, structures, and discourse. At the same time, I recognize the power dynamics present in my relationships with student participants especially given differences in age, race, class, and institutional role. Although I did not interview my own students, participants may still have perceived me as aligned with faculty or with the institution. This dynamic may have shaped how students chose to represent their experiences. I attended closely to this in my interactions and analysis, using reflexive memos and ongoing critical self-awareness to surface and interrogate my assumptions.

My roles as a faculty member, as an educational administrator, and as a parent reinforced my commitment to approaching this research with respect for students' lived experiences and with attentiveness to the ways my own perspectives shaped the process of inquiry.

Chapter 4: Findings

Introduction / Purpose

This chapter presents findings from semi-structured interviews with ten first-year community college students whose secondary education was disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings examine how these students understood, evaluated, and navigated instructional modality during their transition into postsecondary education at a California community college in the post-pandemic context. Drawing on participants' reflections about both prior educational experiences and their first year of college, the chapter explores how students made sense of in-person and asynchronous online learning options while balancing academic goals, institutional structures, and personal responsibilities.

Research Question 1 asks how traditional-age community college students, particularly those whose K–12 education was disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic, understood and evaluated in-person and asynchronous online learning. Research Question 2 examines how institutional, contextual, and informational factors influenced students' perceptions of and access to those modality options. The first section therefore examines how students understood and evaluated instructional modalities, including the role of self-regulation, social interaction, and course-specific decision-making in shaping modality preferences and experiences. The second section explores how institutional, contextual, and informational factors influenced students' perceptions of and access to modality options. Across both sections, findings suggest that students' modality decisions were shaped not by fixed preferences alone, but through dynamic negotiations among prior experiences, evolving self-

assessments, institutional constraints, and the broader post-pandemic educational environment.

Participant Profiles

Although participants shared a common educational context as members of the COVID cohort entering community college in Fall 2025, they brought diverse educational goals, life circumstances, prior experiences with online learning, and perspectives on instructional modality to their first year of college. The individual profiles that follow build upon the participant characteristics presented in Chapter 3 by introducing each student's educational pathway, personal circumstances, and experiences with instructional modality at the time of the interviews.

Alondra was a first-year student interested in pursuing a healthcare-related field, though she described herself as still exploring her long-term academic goals. Entering college after difficult experiences with remote learning during the pandemic, she intentionally enrolled in fully in-person classes during her first semester because she found online learning distracting and felt she “couldn’t learn very well” in those environments. Struggling with anxiety and concerned about becoming overwhelmed, she also limited herself to a part-time Fall course load of three in-person classes. By Spring semester, however, Alondra had expanded to five courses, including two online classes that “spiked” her interest academically, even though she concluded that she still preferred learning “fully in person.” Alondra lived with her grandparents, balancing school responsibilities with assisting with their care. She described struggling at times to find quiet space and uninterrupted time to complete coursework at home.

Angela entered college planning to pursue nursing, with a particular interest in eventually working as a pediatric ICU or oncology nurse. Although she had initially considered trade school rather than college, she described "falling in love with science" during high school and becoming increasingly interested in healthcare careers, while also carefully considering the financial realities and competitiveness of nursing programs in California. Angela participated in the college's disability support program and used accommodations and priority registration to help navigate her coursework as a student with dyslexia. Reflecting on pandemic-era schooling, Angela described remote and hybrid learning in middle school as socially and academically difficult and initially expected online college classes to include more synchronous instruction than they often did. At the same time, she described herself as "a very social person" who valued passionate instructors, classroom interaction, and opportunities to connect with others through in-person learning. Outside of school, Angela balanced significant family and work responsibilities, including helping support her single mother financially, caring for her nieces, and preparing to begin a campus library job during the Spring semester.

Ariyah was a Political Science major who hoped to transfer to a university and eventually attend law school, though she described herself as nervous about maintaining the grades needed to achieve those long-term goals. Diagnosed with inattentive ADHD, she intentionally enrolled in fully in-person classes during both her Fall and Spring semesters because she felt more focused, motivated, and engaged in face-to-face environments. Reflecting on both pandemic-era remote learning and an additional semester of online high school coursework during 9th grade, Ariyah described online learning as highly isolating and demotivating, recalling that she "barely passed" during that period and struggled to stay

engaged while learning from home. She emphasized the importance of relationships with instructors, explaining that she had “always felt like teachers just understood me” and that she enjoyed talking with teachers “like they’re my friends.” Outside of school, Ariyah helped care for her younger brother, who is non-verbal and autistic, while also beginning to think about how part-time employment might fit around her academic schedule and goals.

Cambria entered college initially planning to pursue a pre-med pathway. However, during her first semester she began reconsidering those goals after speaking with doctors and professors, ultimately deciding she was still exploring possible future directions. Having felt socially withdrawn during high school and unsure how to navigate Canvas and other college systems, Cambria intentionally enrolled in fully in-person classes during her first semester because she “wanted to be outside,” meet new people, and ease the transition into college. By her second semester, however, she had become much more comfortable with online learning and enrolled in a mixed schedule that included three online academic courses alongside in-person English and fitness classes. Cambria described online learning as especially helpful for balancing work responsibilities and for revisiting difficult material, particularly in science courses where she appreciated being able to replay lectures. At the same time, she continued to value some in-person participation for “social interactions” and encouraged future students to begin college with at least one semester of face-to-face classes in order to learn college systems and adjust to the college environment.

Drew was a Biology major planning to transfer to the nearest University of California campus through the TAG program, with long-term goals of working in wildlife conservation and fisheries biology. Drawing in part on advice and examples from his three older siblings, all of

whom had attended Falcon College, Drew intentionally began college with a light, fully in-person course load in order to ease the transition from high school to community college. By his second semester, however, newly added work responsibilities plus lengthy daily commute significantly shaped his scheduling decisions, leading him to shift two of his three courses online. Drew also brought extensive prior experience with online learning, having spent much of his freshman and sophomore years of high school in a long-term independent study program while managing significant mental health challenges and social anxiety. Although he described in-person environments as emotionally difficult and sometimes overwhelming, he also viewed face-to-face classes as important opportunities for social interaction and personal growth, explaining that attending in-person classes sometimes felt "kind of like an exposure therapy" that helped him avoid withdrawing completely from challenging social situations.

Ivan was a Music major whose long-term goal was to transfer to a four-year university and continue pursuing music academically and professionally. Slightly older than most other participants, Ivan experienced the transition to remote learning during 9th and 10th grade and described the pandemic period as deeply disruptive both academically and emotionally. Previously a strong student, he explained that he became severely depressed during remote learning, stopped completing schoolwork, and ultimately left high school before later earning his GED and beginning community college. Entering college, Ivan hoped to avoid online classes whenever possible because of these earlier experiences, but he discovered that foundational Music courses in his pathway were only offered asynchronously online. Although initially worried about succeeding in these courses, Ivan adapted successfully, earning an A in his first online Music course and feeling more confident about continuing with additional online

requirements in his second semester. At the same time, he continued to describe in-person classes as more engaging, socially fulfilling, and easier for maintaining focus, particularly while balancing approximately 25 hours of work per week alongside school.

Jude was an Art major hoping to transfer to a four-year university and possibly work in game design or game art in the future. Before enrolling at Falcon College, Jude attended a charter high school that required students to complete multiple dual-enrollment college courses for graduation. Although some of these courses were offered in person on the high school campus, most were online, and Jude described consistently struggling in asynchronous online classes while succeeding in face-to-face environments. As a result, Jude entered community college with a strong preference for in-person learning; nevertheless, he enrolled in an online Astronomy course during the first semester because it fulfilled a general education requirement and was only offered online. Though he ultimately earned a passing grade, he found the experience frustrating and explained that he "definitely [didn't] ever want to take an online class ever again." Jude also reflected on pandemic-era remote learning as highly isolating and academically challenging, particularly because of reduced interaction with both teachers and peers. Outside of school, Jude helped support responsibilities at home as the oldest sibling while also managing a lengthy daily commute on public transportation.

Julissa was pursuing a Real Estate certificate rather than a transfer-oriented degree pathway. After initially planning to complete only the minimum coursework required for real estate licensure, she decided to pursue the full certificate after learning it might offer greater professional advantages. Because Falcon College's Real Estate certificate courses were offered entirely online, Julissa consistently enrolled in two asynchronous Real Estate courses alongside

one in-person general education class each semester. She described appreciating this balance because online classes provided flexibility and reduced transportation costs, while in-person classes still allowed opportunities for social interaction and engagement on campus. Reflecting on pandemic-era remote learning in middle school, Julissa acknowledged struggling to stay focused at that time, but explained that entering college motivated her to approach online learning differently because she was now "actually paying for the classes" and viewed success as directly connected to her future career goals. Although she was not employed during the study, Julissa balanced school responsibilities with contributions at home, including caring for dogs and assisting with errands and cooking for her parents. Julissa intentionally maintained a part-time, three-course schedule, stating that she found it difficult to handle a heavier course load.

Luna planned to pursue a career in speech therapy and hoped to eventually transfer to a University of California campus after completing her first two years at Falcon College. Interested primarily in child development and education-related coursework, she selected classes she believed would best support her future professional goals, though this had resulted in enrolling in more online courses than she would have preferred. During her first semester, Luna took mostly in-person classes but chose one online course after noticing the instructor's strong reviews on Rate My Professor. By Spring semester, however, many of the courses connected to her intended pathway were only available online, pushing her to enroll in three online courses and only one in-person class despite her preference for more face-to-face instruction. Reflecting on college overall, Luna described the experience as less stressful than she had expected. Outside of school, Luna helped with household responsibilities including

cooking, cleaning, grocery shopping, and occasionally assisting with caring for her grandparents, while also hoping to eventually find paid employment.

Olivia was a full-time student completing prerequisite coursework in hopes of eventually entering Falcon College's nursing program. Before beginning college full-time, she participated in an early college high school program on the Falcon College campus and took several online dual-enrollment courses, experiences she viewed positively because they allowed greater flexibility around transportation, scheduling, and personal responsibilities. During her first full semester of college, Olivia chose a fully online schedule rather than the more science-heavy, mostly in-person schedule initially recommended by her counselor, because she was living far from campus at the time and didn't feel ready to manage multiple overlapping science courses simultaneously. Although she appreciated the flexibility and independence of online learning, she also described feeling isolated during the fall semester and chose a mixed-modality schedule for Spring in order to spend more time interacting with other people on campus. Reflecting on pandemic-era remote learning during middle school, Olivia described online instruction more positively than other participants, explaining that she often focused better at home with fewer distractions and felt she matured academically during that period. At the same time, she recognized limits to fully online learning, especially in reading-heavy courses where information from multiple classes sometimes felt difficult to separate mentally. Looking ahead, Olivia expected that many of the science courses required for her pre-nursing pathway would need to be completed in person, a reality she viewed pragmatically as part of progressing toward her goals.

Although these ten participants shared important generational and historical experiences, including pandemic-era disruptions during secondary school and entry into community college during the post-pandemic expansion of online learning, their educational goals, responsibilities, prior experiences with online instruction, and relationships to instructional modality varied considerably. Participants included transfer-oriented students; career and certificate-focused students; students balancing employment or caregiving responsibilities; and students managing mental health or disability-related challenges. Their experiences also reflected differing levels of familiarity and comfort with online learning, ranging from strong preference for face-to-face instruction to strategic acceptance of mixed-modality schedules. At the same time, several participants demonstrated evolving or context-dependent perspectives toward modality, adapting their schedules across semesters in response to academic pathway requirements, prior classroom experiences, or changing responsibilities. This variation within a relatively narrow age cohort provided an opportunity to examine how students with shared historical experiences nevertheless navigated modality decisions in diverse and contextually specific ways within the post-pandemic community college environment.

Research Question 1:

How do traditional-age (18-24) community college students, particularly those whose K–12 education was disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic, understand and evaluate in-person and asynchronous online learning? In what ways have their experiences shaped their modality preferences?

This section presents findings related to Research Question 1, which examines how students from the COVID cohort understand and evaluate in-person and asynchronous online learning, and how their experiences have shaped their modality preferences. Analysis of

interview data revealed several interrelated factors informing these evaluations and decisions, including students' self-assessments of their ability to manage coursework independently, their desire for social interaction and connection, and their perceptions of how different courses and modalities aligned with their learning needs. Rather than reflecting fixed preferences, students' accounts point to a dynamic decision-making process in which prior experiences shaped initial assumptions that were then confirmed or revised through subsequent college experiences. The sections that follow explore these themes, beginning with students' perceptions of attention, motivation, and self-regulation, followed by the role of social interaction, and concluding with course-level decision-making processes.

Self-Assessment of Attention and Self-Regulation as Drivers of Modality Preference

Participants' modality preferences were shaped by their self-assessments of their capacity for attention, motivation, and academic self-regulation. Students frequently grounded these assessments in prior experiences with both in-person and remote instruction, using those experiences to anticipate where they would be most likely to succeed.

Several students described the shift toward independence in online learning in terms of feeling that they were "teaching themselves." Angela reflected that in online classes, "you have to actually go to your teacher and talk to them… it's more independence. I didn't expect that for online… you had to teach yourself." Alondra expressed a similar sentiment, explaining, "I don't like the feeling where I'm kind of teaching myself, and I'm not on one-on-one with the teacher… I don't feel as focused as I am in person." These accounts further illustrate how students experienced online learning as requiring not only greater self-regulation, but also more initiative in seeking out instructor interaction. In turn this shaped their preferences for in-

person courses, particularly among those who felt less confident managing these demands independently.

Three students identified learning disabilities among their reasons for preferring in-person instruction for some or all of their classes. For example, Angela emphasized that though she had taken some classes online, she always takes English classes in-person due to her dyslexia:

> For English, I will always take [it] in person because I struggle with English a lot. Because my dyslexia … There's no cure or make it easier for me in the long run, so I just do it in person.

Although Angela was the only student receiving support from the college's Accessibility Support Center for a diagnosed disability, the two students with the strongest preference for in-person classes—Jude and Ariyah—both spoke of ADHD as an aspect of their learning needs. Ariyah had not enrolled in any online classes in her first two semesters of college and expressed that she never intends to. When asked what she would do if a class she needed were only available online, she replied:

> I would probably take the online class. I would definitely take the online class, but I would probably… be one of those annoying kids who just… constantly have the microphone on [pantomimes poking the keyboard to turn the mic on and off and on]. Just asking questions, because I don't know, I feel like that's what my brain needs. You know, I have inattentive ADHD, so I just need…all the information that I can get.

In addition to illustrating her preference for real-time, interactive instruction, Ariyah's response reveals a mismatch between students' assumptions about "online learning" and the institutional reality of predominantly asynchronous course design. Her expectation that she could "constantly have the microphone on" suggests that her modality preferences are shaped not only by her learning needs, but also by assumptions carried forward from the synchronous,

Zoom-based instruction she experienced during and after the pandemic. Because the courses discussed in this study were primarily asynchronous, her comments illustrate how students sometimes evaluated online learning through the lens of prior educational experiences. When asked what advice she would give other new students selecting between online and in-person classes, Ariyah suggested:

> …do what's best for your brain, honestly, if that makes sense.…I did what's best for my ADHD brain. I know I'd get distracted. If you would get distracted like me, even if you don't have ADHD, definitely do in-person class.

Another student with a strong preference for in-person classes was Jude, who also described struggling with ADHD. Jude attributed his avoidance of online classes to his history of failing them, especially while attending a high school which required dual-enrollment. He had enrolled in one online class in his first semester of college because the subject (Astronomy) was one he had enjoyed in high school and was only available online at the college. Though he had passed that class with a C, by the time of the interview he planned to avoid taking additional online classes if possible. His advice to hypothetical new students was direct: "Don't do online classes. If it's hard. No. Yeah, don't do online classes at all, unless you really have to."

While only Ariyah and Jude explicitly identified ADHD, several other participants described similar challenges with sustaining attention—particularly in unstructured, home-based environments. This pattern suggests that students' modality preferences were shaped less by formal diagnoses than by their perceived capacity to manage attention and distraction across settings. Those who described themselves as easily distracted at home tended to prefer in-person classes whenever possible. For example, Alondra described her reasoning for choosing mostly in-person classes in her first two semesters in these terms:

> …my choice was to do in-person a lot, because from COVID-19, I got to experience online classes a little bit. Even though these college classes online aren't on Zoom, it's much different from that, but I could tell from my experience from going to middle school and a little bit of high school in COVID time. … I couldn't learn very well. I was very distracted, because I was in my own home. I didn't have to listen, I didn't have to do anything, so I felt very unmotivated to do the work. So, when I got [to college], I specifically request for in-person classrooms, and I know I can't always get in-person classrooms, but that's what I wanted the most, because of how I already knew… from the experience before, I wasn't gonna be paying attention or apply myself more.

Alondra's response illustrates how experiences with emergency remote instruction during the pandemic continue to function as a reference point through which students evaluate their own learning capacity in online environments. Even while recognizing that asynchronous college courses differ structurally from her earlier experiences with Zoom-based instruction, she interprets both through the same experiential lens, leading her to anticipate low motivation and engagement in online settings.

Ivan expressed similar concerns about his ability to focus at home:

> … I feel that I focus a lot better in, like, a physical school environment, which is why sometimes I'll just go to the library to do my homework instead of doing it at home, because I can focus better. Whereas I tend to get distracted so easily at home.

Like Alondra, Ivan's perception of his limited ability to focus at home was initially shaped by his experience with remote instruction during the pandemic, which occurred during his 9th-grade year. He stated that coming into college, he was "hoping to take as little online classes as possible" because the pandemic quarantine had taught him that he wasn't good at "leading [his] own education." Although he acknowledged that pandemic-era remote instruction had been "thrown together last minute" and coincided with a difficult emotional period in his life, these contextual factors did not fully displace his lasting impression that online learning was not

a good fit for him. His continued preference for in-person classes, alongside his strategy of studying in the library, reflects an effort to align his learning environment with his perceived attentional needs.

Despite describing themselves as easily distracted and expressing a preference for in-person classes, both Alondra and Ivan had enrolled in some online courses by the time of these interviews, primarily because specific classes they needed or wanted were only available online. Ivan had performed well in his first online class in the fall semester and was therefore feeling more confident about taking another in the spring. Alondra, by contrast, was only a few weeks into her first two online classes at the time of the interview and was already finding the modality to be a poor match for her learning style.

Notably, while several students associated in-person learning with improved focus, two participants described challenges with maintaining attention in classroom settings, identifying this as a limitation of in-person instruction. Describing his decision to take one class in-person and two online in the spring semester, Drew explained:

> I'm still not as good at being in classes for very long periods of time. So, I was like, I don't know if I want to be in these two-hour classes so regularly.
> …my attention span is a bit lower than most, so… 2 hours feels very long to me, and my high school classes were all actually 2 hours. So, it's not that I'm not used to it, but I would say I don't know if I really enjoy two-hour classes compared to, you know, one-hour classes, or even just an hour and 30 minutes' worth classes.

Although Drew's shift toward online courses was partly influenced by the time demands of a new job, his account also reflects a self-assessment of his ability to sustain attention over extended class periods. For him, asynchronous learning offered a way to engage with course material in shorter, more manageable intervals.

Cambria made a similar observation, highlighting the role of timing and mental readiness in sustaining attention:

> …sometimes you go to class in person, and you're not mentally there, so you're there, but you're not really paying attention, whereas if you're in your room, you can do it when you know you can pay attention, and you know you're motivated to do it.

For Cambria, the flexibility to engage with coursework at times when she felt most focused and motivated represented a key advantage of online learning, suggesting that modality preferences were shaped not only by where students learn best, but also by when they are able to sustain attention and engagement.

Despite variation in where and how students reported being able to focus, participants consistently emphasized that success in asynchronous online courses requires a high degree of self-motivation, self-regulation, and organizational capacity. Students characterized online learning as a modality in which responsibility for structuring time, tracking assignments, and maintaining engagement shifts largely to the student. For example, Cambria made the following comparison between in-person and online modalities:

> It's harder to fall behind in person because you have your professor kind of reminding you every class, “this is due this day, this is due this day,” whereas online, you kind of have to figure it out yourself. They give it to you, but you have to find it, you have to remember, you write it down. I write it down, I actually have it right here [holds up a paper calendar] … which assignments are due when for online… But if you don't do something like that, it's really [easy] to fall behind online.

Olivia made very similar remarks about the lack of assignment reminders in asynchronous online classes, and the resulting importance of organization and self-motivation:

> You have to have a lot of structure when you do online, because it’s all up to you. Nobody's telling you to do this, to do that, and you have to remember, you have to plan everything out, which I am luckily able to do. But it is a bit hard in a way, because you

> have to put pressure on yourself, and remember that there's a lot of things that you have to do. So if that's not your strong forte, I wouldn't recommend taking online…

This shared understanding became a key factor in how students decided whether to enroll in online courses. Students evaluated online learning not only in terms of convenience or scheduling, but in relation to their perceived ability to stay organized, manage their time, and remain engaged without external structure. In this way, modality decisions were closely tied to students' self-assessments of how they function academically in different learning environments.

Consistent with their descriptions of strong self-regulation, Cambria and Olivia also expressed the strongest preference for online learning. Cambria had taken her full fall load of three classes in person, but in the spring had shifted to a mixed schedule that included three online classes and three in person—only one of which was an academic course (English). She indicated that she would have preferred to take the English class online as well and described a preference for completing most coursework online moving forward, reserving trips to campus for classes she considered especially engaging.

Cambria's initial hesitation to enroll in online courses was shaped in part by her prior experience with remote learning during the pandemic:

> I think that experience [of COVID-remote learning] was one of the main reasons I didn't take [online classes] first semester, because I thought that I would do the same thing, I wouldn't be motivated, I would just feel… like it was optional. But it really wasn't at all like that. I think I was just very unmotivated… in middle school.

Her reflection highlights how earlier experiences with low motivation during emergency remote instruction initially led her to avoid online courses, even though she later found that both the

structure of college courses and her own increased motivation shaped a different experience of online learning.

In contrast, Olivia described a markedly different experience with pandemic-era remote learning. Olivia had taken her full fall course load online and then moved to a mixed schedule in the spring. Her account of her pandemic-era learning experience differed markedly from that of many other participants:

> I think [COVID-remote during 7th-8th] was fine, like, I don't think it affected me that much. I think I did better, because before COVID,… I was slacking a little bit. I kept on getting distracted by everything, but since it was just me at my home and the computer… I think I tried better at understanding things. You know, I didn't have so many distractions around me, so I actually ended up doing better than I was before. And also, because I think I matured a little bit during that time, so I understood the importance of education, so I think that also helped.

Rather than associating remote learning with disengagement or distraction, Olivia described it as a context in which she was better able to focus and take responsibility for her learning. This experience appears to have contributed to her confidence in managing online coursework in college.

Both Cambria and Olivia described themselves as equally capable of learning in either modality and emphasized the strategies they had developed to manage online coursework effectively. Their accounts reinforce the link between self-regulation and modality preference. These contrasting experiences illustrate how similar structural features of online learning—independence, flexibility, and reduced external prompting—can be experienced as either barriers or advantages depending on students' self-assessments and prior experiences.

Together, these findings suggest that students' modality preferences were shaped less by fixed characteristics and more by evolving self-assessments formed through prior learning experiences, particularly during the pandemic.

While students' self-assessments of attention and self-regulation played a central role in shaping their modality preferences, participants also described social interaction and connection as important considerations in their decisions about whether to enroll in online or in-person courses.

Social Interaction and the Desire for Connection as Drivers of Modality Choice

While participants varied in their modality preferences and the reasons for those preferences, most had, by their second semester, settled into a mix of in-person and online courses. Only Olivia enrolled fully online in either semester, while Ariyah took all of her classes in person and Jude largely avoided online courses after his first semester. For many students, decisions about modality were shaped not only by academic considerations, but also by a desire for social interaction and connection.

After taking all of her Fall classes online, Olivia reflected:

> During Fall, I think I got a little bit lonely in a way, because it was just me at home, usually. So, I think it started messing up with my socializing with other people, so [for Spring] I did try to do in-person classes, and I am in [three] of them right now.

Other participants echoed Olivia's sense of isolation in online classes. Luna described online courses as "a bit isolating," while Ivan noted that "a con [of online learning] is that it's, like, quiet. You don't see anyone-- [there's] rarely any interaction." These accounts reflect a shared perception of online learning as socially limited, even when it functioned adequately from an academic standpoint.

The desire for social interaction emerged as an important factor in most participants' decisions to take at least some of their classes in person. Having experienced prolonged social isolation during COVID-era remote learning, participants frequently described in-person classes as an opportunity to re-engage socially, not just academically. Julissa, whose classes for the Real Estate certificate were only offered online, made a point of taking an additional class in person each semester in order "to not be cooped up in [her] house," and because she "wanted to socialize." Similarly, Cambria explained that she took all of her Fall classes in person partly because she "wanted to be outside… to leave [her] comfort zone… [and] to meet new people." Luna described in-person classes as "opening and inviting to new experiences," while Ivan emphasized "being able to socialize more" and having "a more fulfilling college experience [with] a lot of social connections." He advised hypothetical new students to "go for whatever in-person classes you can find… it's a great way to get out there, you know?"

Drew's account complicates broader narratives about Gen Z as disengaged from in-person interaction. After a year of covid-era remote learning during 8th grade, a prolonged struggle with mental health led him to enroll in an online independent study program for the second half of 9th grade and all of 10th grade. He returned to school in person for his junior and senior years. Halfway through his first year of college, Drew described the value of in-person classes this way:

> I think the most obvious pro of an [in person] class, aside from direct instruction from a professor, it's also, being surrounded by other people. I think it's always a good thing to interact with other people. For me, it's a little bit difficult…because I get overwhelmed by other people. I get kind of scared of a lot of other people. But that's also a reason why I take in-person classes… it's kind of like an exposure therapy to me, where it's like, this is something that I probably would have avoided most of the time, but it's like, okay, I should probably go to these classes anyways and not constantly avoid these

> situations. Online has none of that. And I think that can limit a lot of people's interactions with others. Which, like I said, I think interacting with other people is important. Even if it can be frightening, or even if you're not really talking to people, just being around them, I think, is very good. I mean, humans, they're social creatures, you know, this is something that, even if it scares us, sometimes I feel like most people will crave in one way or another.

Rather than avoiding in-person interaction, Drew described it as something he actively sought out despite discomfort, framing it as a form of personal growth. His account underscores the importance of social exposure and presence for students whose prior experiences with isolation extended beyond the pandemic.

Participants consistently emphasized the importance of being physically present with others. Even those who felt they learned equally well or better online still saw value in keeping at least some classes in person for this reason. Cambria, who was taking a mixed courseload in the Spring and was finding herself to be an effective online learner, stated that if all her future classes are available in both modalities, she "would probably do all online, except one. Or, like, a few, just for the social interactions." And despite her own growing preference for online classes, Cambria's advice to new students was this: "I think in-person is better… if you want to socialize with others because it can get pretty lonely in online classes."

For some students, the social dimensions of in-person classes also translated into academic benefits. Jude said he found succeeding in online classes easier because "you have people to help you, and also you can actually make friends in the class, and actually want to go to class… you can talk to [your friends], and ask them, 'Hey, what did you do for this?'" Alondra similarly noted that having friends in class made attendance more appealing: "One of the pros

[of in-person] is just get to know your classmates… so you're not dreading the class. You're just like, 'Oh, I have a friend in there I could talk to. I'm not alone.'"

Most of the online classes participants had taken included weekly discussion boards, a common strategy aimed at replicating class discussion in asynchronous environments. However, students portrayed these interactions as requirements to fulfill rather than authentic communication or opportunities for connection. In Ivan's words:

> We have some interaction on my online classes, because there's… discussion posts that are graded... that we're required to make replies to other people, so… it's a little bit of communication that's facilitated there, but not really enough to form connections or bonds with other classmates. Whereas when I went to my first in-person class, the math class, I made a few friends there, which just doesn't feel very possible with online classes.

These accounts highlight a clear distinction between interaction as a structured requirement and interaction as a meaningful social experience.

Although the desire for social interaction was an important factor in many students' modality preferences, participants did not apply this preference uniformly across all of their courses. Instead, decisions about whether to enroll in a class online or in person were often made at the level of individual courses, taking into account the specific demands, structure, and context of each class.

Course-Level Decision-Making: Subject Demands, Instructor Considerations, and Perceived Support

While several participants expressed a strong overall preference for in-person classes, many others described making modality decisions at the course level, with those decisions shaped by their perceptions of different subjects' demands and their own learning needs. These distinctions often reflected students' beliefs about which courses required more structure,

interaction, or support, and which modality best supported their engagement and understanding.

Several participants described choosing in-person instruction for courses they perceived as more difficult or requiring greater support, while reserving online enrollment for classes they expected to be more manageable. For example, Angela explained that she strategically selected modalities based on both the perceived difficulty of the subject and the importance of building relationships with instructors:

> I would say take the easy classes, like nutrition and stuff, online. Just so you have more leniency, because in the summer, I am planning to work more, hopefully. But for, the difficult classes, like English, chemistry, anatomy, and… anything science, I'd say go in person, because you can't really build a relationship with those teachers during online… and I feel like getting a letter of recommendation from them if I were to go transfer to UC, UCLA or something like that, it would be better from the sciences.

Angela's reasoning reflects a multi-layered evaluation of modality, in which course difficulty, anticipated need for support, and longer-term academic goals all factor into decision-making. For her, in-person classes offered not only greater access to help, but also opportunities for sustained interaction with instructors, which she saw as important both for understanding course material and for building relationships that could support future transfer plans. In this way, preferences for particular instructors and forms of instructor interaction were embedded within students' broader evaluations of course modality.

Julissa similarly described choosing in-person instruction for a course she perceived as more challenging, emphasizing the importance of immediate access to assistance:

> In the first semester, I was just thinking that accounting would be better in person anyways, because it is something better to do in person and online… I'm not the best at math, so, I thought, since it contains more math than the real estate classes that I

> should take that in person, to get help. And not need to get Zoom meetings and make an appointment …. and wait two days to hear back or something.

Her account highlights how perceptions of subject-specific difficulty intersect with logistical considerations, particularly the immediacy of instructor feedback, in shaping modality decisions.

In contrast, Drew described selecting online courses for subjects he felt confident managing independently:

> English in person and English online, it's not that different. I say that mostly because English has always been such an easy subject to me. It's just reading and writing. And it's something I've always been good at, so I don't really struggle with it, and I don't really need assistance. Which makes it pretty good when I'm online, because like I said, I don't have to be asking for assistance and waiting for answers.

For Drew, the perceived simplicity of the subject and his confidence in his own abilities made online learning an efficient and appropriate choice. His account underscores how students' self-assessments of their need for support in a given subject, rather than the subject itself in any objective sense, shaped their modality decisions.

In addition to evaluating courses in terms of difficulty and need for support, some students also described making modality decisions based on their level of interest in a subject and how they preferred to engage with the material. Cambria, who generally preferred taking academic courses online, explained that she would choose in-person instruction for subjects she found especially engaging:

> In person, I would for sure take communications. Communications, and… Psychology? I actually just like hearing the lectures about psychology. It's something I'm really interested in, so if I take a psychology class, I would want to hear it in lecture form. Whereas English and Chemistry and Math I'm not a big fan of, so I would just do it online, so that I could actually pay attention to it, or, like, understand it, if that makes sense.

Cambria's account suggests that modality decisions were shaped not only by perceived difficulty or need for assistance, but also by students' desire to experience certain subjects more directly. For courses she found less engaging, online learning functioned as a way to manage attention and complete required work more efficiently, whereas in-person classes were reserved for subjects she found intrinsically interesting and wanted to experience through live instruction.

Cambria also described revising her earlier assumption that chemistry would be easier in person. Instead, she found some STEM courses easier to learn online because asynchronous materials allowed repeated review at her own pace:

> I considered taking chemistry in person because I thought it would be easier to learn in a classroom. But I'm actually finding it to be a lot easier to learn STEM classes online, because then most of them are either videos or articles you read, or they have discussion posts, and if you don't understand it, you can just re-read it multiple times… if you're in a lecture classroom, you can't really ask four times if they could repeat it.

Her account complicates the assumption that more challenging subjects are necessarily better suited to in-person instruction. For Cambria, online learning supported comprehension by allowing her to revisit explanations multiple times in ways not always possible during live lectures. This suggests that students' modality decisions were shaped not only by subject area, but by how each format aligned with their preferred learning processes.

In addition to these considerations, some students described using external sources of information, such as Rate My Professor, to guide their course selection. Luna explained that she researched instructors in order to identify classes that would be both manageable and aligned with her preferences:

> I talked with a counselor…and they told me that these were good for general education, so I just did basic general education classes. And when doing Rate My Professor, I researched all the professors, I made sure that I would be having the best and easiest class that I could take. And one of them [Statistics] just happened to be online, and I said, I'll see how it is.

Luna's account suggests that modality was sometimes a secondary consideration within a broader process of course selection shaped by perceptions of instructor quality and course difficulty. In this case, the availability of a preferred instructor aligned with an online format, but the decision itself was driven primarily by a desire to identify a course experience she expected to be manageable and effective.

These examples illustrate that in many cases students did not approach modality as a fixed preference, but as a flexible strategy that varied by course. Decisions about whether to enroll in a class online or in person were shaped by a combination of perceived subject difficulty, anticipated need for support, instructor-related considerations, and broader academic goals.

Across these findings, many students described making modality decisions at the level of individual courses rather than adopting a single overall preference. Decisions about whether to enroll in a class online or in person were shaped by a combination of factors, including students' self-assessments of their ability to manage coursework independently, their desire for social interaction and connection, and their perceptions of the specific demands of different courses, including how they preferred to engage with course material. At the same time, a subset of participants described more fixed preferences, particularly a strong inclination to avoid asynchronous online courses, often based on prior negative experiences and expectations about their ability to succeed in that modality. Across both patterns, students' decisions were

shaped initially by pre-college learning experiences during the pandemic and high school, which informed their first-semester enrollment choices. First-semester and early second-semester experiences then served to confirm or revise those expectations, suggesting that modality preferences remained dynamic as students encountered new opportunities and constraints in college. Overall, these findings suggest that modality preferences are best understood not as uniform or static, but as shaped by evolving self-assessments and prior experiences, expressed either through flexible, course-level decision-making or through more stable modality preferences.

Research Question 2:

In what ways do institutional, contextual and informational factors influence students' perceptions of their modality options?

This section presents findings related to Research Question 2, which examines how institutional, contextual, and informational factors influenced students' perceptions of and access to instructional modality options during their transition into community college. While the previous section focused primarily on students' internal evaluations of in-person and asynchronous online learning, the findings presented here shift attention toward the external conditions shaping those decisions and experiences. Participants' accounts revealed that modality choices were often influenced not only by personal preferences, but also by institutional scheduling structures, academic pathway requirements, transportation realities, employment schedules, and the availability of courses in particular modalities.

Although informational factors initially appeared likely to play a significant role in students' modality decisions, participants generally demonstrated relatively clear awareness of

modality expectations and institutional systems. Instead, institutional and contextual constraints emerged as more influential in shaping how students navigated their options across their first year of college. The sections that follow examine these external influences, including transportation and scheduling constraints, pathway-related modality requirements, and students' evolving adaptations to the post-pandemic community college environment. Across these themes, modality decisions emerged not as mere expressions of students' learning preferences, but as negotiations within structured, interacting environments.

Institutional factors

Institutional factors played a significant role in shaping students' perceived modality options during their first year of college. Eight of the ten participants described circumstances in which the courses they needed or wanted were unavailable in their preferred modality, at workable times, or at accessible campus locations. As a result, students often enrolled in classes in a different format than they would have otherwise chosen.

More often, students took classes online that they'd have preferred to take in-person. For example, Angela explained that she had enrolled in some online sections each semester when she could not find in-person options that met her scheduling needs:

> [In Fall '25] My Ethnic Studies and my Women in Health [were] online. … For the Women in Health, there wasn't any in-person one that would fit my schedule. So, I just took that one [online]...
>
> [In Spring '26] So, again, I always took English in person. And then chemistry, I don't think they have an online one for that. Chem 160, and I always wanted to take [a specific instructor], because he also taught chemistry preparedness. So, I just wanted to take him for that, to get me to Chem 10. And I already had a relationship with him, so I might as well just take him… My psychology class, I was gonna take that in person. But they didn't have any [at the main campus] that fit into my schedule, only [at the satellite

> campus]. Which means I have to go take a bus there. Or one of the [campus shuttles], and that wouldn't fit with my schedule, really. So I took that online.

Angela's experiences illustrate the difficulty many students faced in piecing together a workable schedule of in-person classes. As a student with priority registration due to her disability status, she was able to register early, when space was available in all sections. Nevertheless, each semester there was at least one class she would have preferred to take in-person but decided to take online when time and/or location conflicts rendered the in-person options unavailable.

Whereas schedule constraints drove Angela to select online options for some of her GE classes in cases where in-person sections were also available, several students were surprised to find that specific classes required for their major pathways were only offered online. Ivan, Luna and Julissa had all encountered modality-specific course requirements in their majors: Real Estate, Education and Music, respectively. As a student who came in hoping to take all of his classes in-person, Ivan described his experience getting started as a Music major:

> [In Fall '25] I scheduled an appointment with a counselor first, and they advised me on what I should take first. I had kind of picked out what classes I was interested in already by going through the catalog and seeing… my first Intro to Music class and a math class. And I remember picking the Intro to Music one, because that seemed like a good first start… and I remember when I was registering, I had no idea that my music class I was taking was only available online. Because I was kind of going into this hoping to take as little online classes as possible. … so I was really worried when I signed up for that class that I wasn't gonna do well. But I was actually able to pass the class just fine with an A.
>
> [In Spring '26] the English and the piano class are both in person, and then the Music Fundamentals class is also another class that was only available online, which I also wasn't expecting, but it was a major requirement, and so I figured if I got through the first one, then I'll do okay.

Ivan's experience reflects a progression common among several participants: entering college hoping to take all fall classes in person, discovering that one or more online courses would be

necessary because of institutional constraints, and gaining confidence after a more positive experience than expected. At the same time, his account illustrates that for some students, modality was not simply a matter of personal preference, but part of the institutional structure through which progression in their intended academic pathway was organized. Although he was initially surprised and worried that foundational music courses were only offered online, he ultimately adapted to this constraint.

Similar patterns appeared in other participants' intended pathways. Luna also described surprise at discovering that recommended Education courses would require online enrollment, while Julissa discussed completing Real Estate coursework within a pathway organized almost entirely online. Together, these accounts suggest that modality structures were sometimes embedded within academic pathways themselves rather than functioning solely as individual course-level choices.

However, not every student reported positive experiences adjusting to classes that were only offered online. Exploring her interests in health professions, Alondra chose some of her Spring semester classes purely out of interest and discovered these were only offered online. Three weeks into the semester, she described her experience as follows:

> I really wanted to take much more workload of classes, so I'm taking five. But the two online classes were the ones that really spoke [to] my interest. There were Abnormal Psychology and Children with Special Needs, and I really wanted to take them because I do like learning about that. But it really bummed me out that they were online, and I didn't want to do it, but a lot of my friends convinced me, they were like, "oh, I love online classes so much"… "it was so good", so I was like, "okay, let me try", and even though it's, the third week of school,…or fourth week, I already could tell I do not like it. The class is very interesting, I do like it; I just don't mesh well online.

In Alondra's case, the institutional constraint of offering classes in only one modality not only shaped her enrollment decisions, but also negatively affected her experience in courses chosen out of genuine interest. Her account suggests that when exploratory or interest-driven classes are available only in a modality students find uncomfortable, institutional constraints may influence not only course selection, but the quality of early academic exploration.

Although institutional constraints such as schedule conflicts or single-modality offerings more often pushed students toward online enrollment, institutional limitations also sometimes restricted access to preferred online sections. As a student with a preference for online learning who had taken her full load of Fall classes online, Cambria enrolled in her Spring English class in-person because, as she explained: "There was none available online that … were available to me. They were all full at the time." When asked if she would have taken the class online if space had been available, she replied: "Absolutely. Oh, absolutely." Cambria's experience demonstrates that institutional constraints did not operate in only one direction; limited online capacity could also require students to enroll in in-person sections despite a clear preference for online learning.

Together, these accounts suggest that students' modality decisions were shaped not only by personal preference, but by institutional opportunity structures such as scheduling patterns, section capacity, campus geography, and modality-specific course offerings. In many cases, students adapted pragmatically by enrolling in available sections rather than preferred ones. Most often this meant taking asynchronous online courses when in-person options were inaccessible, though the reverse also occurred when online sections were unavailable.

Contextual factors

Employment. While institutional constraints shaped one set of modality options, time constraints arising from life outside the college influenced students' decisions as well. Participants frequently described needing to coordinate class schedules with work, transportation, and other responsibilities, which often limited their ability to take in-person courses even when such sections were available.

At the time of the interviews, three participants were employed off campus, and a fourth was preparing to begin work at the campus library. The three employed students all worked at school sites in the afternoons, requiring them to leave campus by around noon. Given long class meeting times, limited early-morning offerings in the college's post-pandemic schedule, and commute demands, these students could realistically fit only two or three in-person classes into their weekly schedules.

In Cambria's case, organizing her college coursework around her employment schedule was the primary reason for moving toward online classes in her second semester. In the Fall, she had taken only 3 classes, all in-person, and had sometimes struggled to make it to work on time: "I had 5 minutes in between my Intro to Psychology class to get to my work … some days, it was really bad." When she expanded her courseload to 6 classes in the Spring, she kept 3 in-person but took the other 3 online, explaining:

> I work from 2 to 5:30, sometimes 1 to 6, so… I don't have a lot of time, and I don't really want to wake up at 8 a.m. to go to an in-person class. It just seemed easier to me to take online classes. That way I could do it whenever I'm free, or whenever I have time, or if I want to wake up early, or if I want to stay up late, it's easier to do my classes then.

Later in the interview, explaining why she would prefer to take mostly online classes in the future, Cambria again cited her work schedule:

> I don't have a job where I can just give them my availability, and then they'll help me work through it, because I work at a tutoring center. So we're there [for] a specific amount of time, and if I'm not available, then I can't work. So it's mainly my job.

Cambria's account suggests that her growing preference for online learning was shaped initially by the flexibility online courses provided within the constraints of her work schedule. At the same time, her early positive experiences in those spring courses appeared to reinforce her sense that online learning could work well for her moving forward.

Even among students who were not yet balancing substantial employment obligations, anticipated future work schedules shaped modality planning. Olivia described intentionally limiting her on-campus commitments in order to preserve flexibility for potential employment opportunities, while Angela—who had recently been hired for an on-campus position but had not yet begun working—anticipated continuing to take a mixed-modality schedule in order to accommodate increased work hours in the future. These accounts suggest that students' modality decisions were influenced not only by current time constraints, but also by anticipated future demands.

Overall, these findings reflect how factors outside the institution interacted with college scheduling structures to shape students' practical modality options.

Transportation / Geography. In the sprawling exurban region served by Falcon College, geography and transportation significantly shaped students' practical modality options. Long commutes, public transit schedules, and travel between campuses often limited the feasibility of in-person enrollment, even when preferred sections were available.

Students relying on the county bus system faced particular challenges. For Drew, commuting by bicycle and public transportation exacerbated the time constraint of his work schedule at an elementary school in a neighboring county:

> So today, for example, I bike [to campus], that's 2 about miles, it takes me 15 minutes or so. So, to and from here, from my house, a total of 30 minutes. I get back to my house, my dad, he drives me over to the [Falcon Town] Transit Center. From there, I hop on my bus… I work over in [West County], and it gets to [West County] in about 45-50 minutes. Then I bike to my work, which takes about 15 minutes or so. I work in schools as well, so I have to pick up supplies from my center, bike to the school, which is another 15 minutes, come back to the center, drop the stuff off, bike to the [West County] Bus Center, catch my bus. Like I said, it takes 45, 50 minutes to get back to [Falcon Town], and then my dad picks me up again. So, my commuting times altogether, on an average day of going to school, and then commuting to and from work… Jeez, that's about what, 3 hours? 3 and a half hours of being on the move… Four days a week.

Drew had started his job in mid-December, just as the Fall semester was winding up. He had taken all 3 of his Fall classes in-person, when he could easily reach campus by bicycle and did not have to plan around his long commute to work. But in Spring, he had reduced to only one in-person class along with two online classes in order to accommodate his work and commute obligations. Drew's account illustrates how transportation burdens accumulated across school, work, and regional travel demands, making a more online-heavy spring schedule a practical necessity rather than a simple preference.

While Drew's combination of commuting and working was unusually complicated, students without jobs also cited transportation challenges as a limiting factor in their course and modality decisions. Jude's experience further illustrates this dynamic:

> I have to take the bus here to school from [Urbanville], which is only an hour and a half commute, but it's 3 hours a day, so that's kind of hardish. And I have to kind of restrict myself to a certain time to be here so I don't get stranded in here, you know? … I can't do classes too late or too early. And I can only go to one campus a day, and so that's

> what was also in the way of picking my classes. I can't go to [the North satellite center], because it's gonna take a billion hours.

Jude was taking his full spring courseload in person despite a three-hour daily bus commute to campus four days a week. Although he had managed to piece together a workable schedule, his account demonstrates how transit schedules, travel time, and multi-campus geography sharply narrowed the range of in-person options available to him.

Jude found the demands of his commute to be worthwhile, but for students without his strong preference for in-person instruction, the difficulty of getting to campus can be a significant factor in modality decisions. Olivia, for example, explained that she overrode the fall semester classes her counselor had recommended because “most of them were in person, but at that time, I could not go. Because I was living far from the campus, so it was just not ideal. And so I decided to take online instead.” Olivia’s account suggests that for students without a strong commitment to in-person learning, distance from campus could readily shift enrollment decisions toward online courses.

Together, these accounts suggest that transportation and geography influenced modality decisions not only through commute time, but through the cumulative effort required to coordinate travel across home, campus, and work responsibilities. In this context, online courses often functioned as a means of reducing logistical strain.

Informational Factors

While students drew on various sources of information when selecting courses, lack of understanding about online learning was not a major barrier to their course modality decisions. Most participants demonstrated a clear awareness of how asynchronous online courses functioned and distinguished these courses from the emergency remote learning experiences

they had encountered during the COVID-19 pandemic. Rather than expressing confusion about modality formats, students generally made decisions with an understanding of the expectations associated with online and in-person classes. As discussed earlier, Ariyah was the only participant who continued to interpret online college courses through the lens of her pandemic-era "Zoom school" experience, and she avoided online classes on that basis. In contrast, other students who expressed concerns about online learning did so not because they misunderstood its structure, but because they anticipated that the disengagement or low motivation they had experienced during the pandemic might resurface, even in a different style of remote learning.

Participants described multiple pathways through which they had learned about the structure of asynchronous online courses prior to or during their first semester. Olivia and Jude had each taken asynchronous online courses as dual-enrolled high school students and were therefore familiar with the format. Angela described learning from her older sister, who had previously attended Falcon College and explained that online courses often required a high degree of independence. As Angela recalled:

> I thought it was gonna be like Google Classroom… like there would be Zooms and stuff. But then I asked my oldest sister… and she told me sometimes there's Zooms and sometimes there's not, and that you have to be more independent than you expect to be… you kind of have to teach yourself.

Drew also mentioned receiving guidance from both older siblings and counselors, though he did not attribute his understanding of modality to a single source. Ivan, meanwhile, described inferring the structure of asynchronous courses from how they were presented in the college's course registration system. As he explained, "I kind of just figured it out with context clues…

some of the online classes said they had, like, live Zoom meetings, and then some said asynchronous, and I kind of just assumed what that meant—and I was right, basically."

Together, these accounts suggest that students' understanding of online learning was shaped through a combination of direct experience, social networks, and institutional cues. In this context, informational factors played a more limited role than institutional and contextual constraints in shaping students' modality options.

Across these findings, students' modality decisions emerged not simply as expressions of preference, but as responses to a set of structured conditions. Institutional factors determined which courses were available in particular formats, while contextual factors shaped which of those options were realistically accessible. Within these constraints, students generally demonstrated a clear understanding of how different modalities functioned and adapted their enrollment decisions accordingly. Taken together, these findings suggest that modality choice in this context was less a matter of uninformed preference and more a process of navigating and responding to constrained opportunities.

Chapter Summary

This chapter examined how first-year community college students from the COVID cohort understood, evaluated, and navigated instructional modality during their transition into postsecondary education. Across participants, modality preferences emerged not as fixed characteristics but as evolving judgments shaped by prior experiences, self-assessments, academic goals, and changing circumstances. Students frequently evaluated in-person and asynchronous online learning in relation to their own perceived strengths, needs, and learning dispositions, particularly with respect to motivation, focus, self-regulation, and opportunities

for social interaction. At the same time, many participants described revising their assumptions about online learning as they gained direct experience with college-level courses, sometimes discovering advantages or challenges they had not anticipated.

The findings also revealed that modality decisions were shaped by factors extending beyond individual preference. Participants navigated a range of institutional and contextual influences, including course availability, pathway requirements, transportation constraints, employment obligations, caregiving responsibilities, and scheduling realities. Although students generally demonstrated awareness of modality options and expectations, their decisions were often constrained by the practical conditions under which those options were presented. In several cases, students enrolled in courses offered in nonpreferred modalities in order to maintain progress toward educational goals, complete major requirements, or balance competing responsibilities. These findings suggest that modality selection is best understood not as a simple expression of preference, but as a process of navigating opportunities and constraints within a broader institutional environment.

Taken together, the findings highlight both the shared and diverse experiences of students within this COVID cohort. Although participants entered college having experienced similar historical disruptions during adolescence, they described markedly different relationships with online learning, different educational goals, and different circumstances shaping their decisions. Their accounts suggest that post-pandemic modality decisions cannot be reduced to assumptions about generational preferences, technological fluency, or modality itself. Instead, students described an ongoing process of evaluating, adapting to, and negotiating instructional modalities within a transformed postsecondary landscape. The next

chapter situates these findings within the study's theoretical framework and the broader literature on student decision-making, instructional modality, and post-pandemic community college experiences.

Chapter 5: Discussion

Interpretation of Findings

One Size Does Not Fit All

Findings from this study suggest that students experienced and evaluated instructional modalities in highly individualized ways shaped by prior experiences, perceived learning needs, course-specific considerations, and personal circumstances. Viewed through Bronfenbrenner's PPCT framework and Iloh's (2019) college-going model, these differences reflect the ways students' modality decisions emerged through interactions among individual characteristics, prior experiences, and institutional contexts rather than from stable modality preferences alone. Participants did not express uniform preferences for either asynchronous online or in-person learning. Instead, students described weighing flexibility, motivation, instructor interaction, self-regulation, pacing, and engagement differently depending on the context. Several participants articulated strong preferences for one modality over another, while others described modality decisions as highly course-specific or evolving over time. These findings suggest that modality effectiveness and desirability cannot be understood as universal student experiences, but rather as dynamic and context-dependent.

These findings align with prior research highlighting the complexity of modality selection among community college students. Fox (2017) identified multiple motivations for online enrollment, including balancing responsibilities, individualized pacing, efficiency, and

dissatisfaction with campus experiences, while Jaggars (2014) found that students simultaneously valued the convenience of online learning and questioned its effectiveness, particularly in more challenging subjects. Participants in the present study expressed similarly varied perspectives. Cambria, for example, described preferring online courses for subjects she found difficult because asynchronous formats allowed her to revisit lectures and materials repeatedly at her own pace. In contrast, students such as Ariyah and Jude described strong preferences for in-person learning grounded in concerns about motivation, focus, and academic success in online environments. Other participants emphasized the importance of instructor interaction, immediacy, or classroom engagement in shaping their modality preferences. Together, these findings reinforce prior research suggesting that students do not experience instructional modalities in uniform ways and may weigh the perceived advantages and disadvantages of each modality differently depending on both personal and academic context.

The findings also align with broader research on Generation Z learners and their complex relationship with digital learning environments. Prior studies have described Gen Z students as highly comfortable with technology, accustomed to self-directed online information seeking, and strongly oriented toward flexibility and digital convenience (Pearson Education, 2018; Rothman, 2016; Selingo, 2018; Turner, 2015). At the same time, researchers have emphasized that digital fluency does not eliminate students' desire for structure, instructor guidance, or meaningful human interaction (Cilliers, 2017; Giunta, 2017). Participants in this study reflected these same tensions. Several students appreciated the flexibility and autonomy associated with asynchronous courses, including the ability to revisit instructional materials, work independently, and manage coursework around other responsibilities. However, many

also described difficulties with motivation, focus, accountability, or feelings of disconnection in online environments. Even students who viewed online learning positively often continued to value in-person courses for discussion, engagement, social interaction, or immediate access to instructors. These findings suggest that students' comfort with digital technologies should not be interpreted as evidence that online learning environments function equally well for all learners or all purposes.

The findings further support recent post-pandemic research suggesting that students' modality preferences are dynamic rather than fixed and continue to evolve through experience (Thomas et al., 2025; Vásquez-Iscan et al., 2023). Several participants described entering college with assumptions shaped by pandemic-era remote learning, only to revise those assumptions after experiencing asynchronous online college courses firsthand. Cambria, for example, initially avoided online classes because she associated them with the disengagement and low motivation she had experienced during emergency remote learning in middle school. However, after taking online courses during her first year of college, she described discovering that asynchronous learning could work well for her in some contexts, particularly when balancing work responsibilities or navigating difficult subjects. At the same time, other participants experienced the opposite trajectory. Alondra, for example, enrolled in online courses despite her initial hesitation, hoping they would support subjects she found interesting, but quickly concluded that the format did not suit her learning style. These contrasting experiences mirror post-pandemic studies documenting wide variation in how students interpreted and responded to online learning after the pandemic, including differing evaluations of flexibility, engagement, self-regulation, and instructor interaction (Bright &

Vogler, 2024; Robert, 2022; Vásquez-Iscan et al., 2023). Together, these findings suggest that students' modality preferences are not static traits, but evolving evaluations shaped by ongoing educational experiences and changing personal circumstances.

Beyond their consistency with prior empirical research, these findings also reinforce the explanatory value of Bronfenbrenner's PPCT framework and Iloh's (2019) model of college-going decisions and trajectories. Although participants navigated the same institutional environment during the same historical moment, they interpreted and responded to instructional modalities in markedly different ways. Bronfenbrenner's concept of Person helps illuminate how students' differing dispositions, motivations, prior experiences, and self-regulatory capacities shaped these responses. At the same time, students' evaluations of instructional modalities developed through ongoing proximal processes, including repeated interactions with course structures, instructors, institutional systems, and prior educational experiences. The role of macro-time was particularly significant for this COVID cohort. Participants' understandings of online learning were shaped both by their formative experiences with emergency remote teaching and by the broader post-pandemic transformation of community colleges toward expanded asynchronous offerings. Importantly, students did not respond uniformly to these shared historical and institutional conditions. Instead, their preferences and evaluations evolved through reciprocal interactions among personal characteristics, prior experiences, institutional contexts, and emerging understandings of how they learned best. These findings suggest that modality policy therefore cannot assume universal student fit or uniform adaptation to online learning environments, even among students within the same generation and institutional setting. At the same time, participants'

ability to act on their preferences was often shaped by institutional and contextual constraints beyond their direct control.

Modality Decisions as Constrained Navigation

While participants experienced and evaluated instructional modalities in highly individualized ways, their ability to act on these preferences was often shaped by institutional and contextual constraints. Students did not navigate modality decisions within conditions of unlimited choice; rather, they frequently adapted their enrollment decisions in response to scheduling structures, transportation barriers, work obligations, course availability, and other practical limitations. Thus, understanding students' modality preferences requires not only examining how students evaluated different learning environments, but also how institutional conditions shaped which options were realistically accessible.

Findings from this study suggest that students' course modality decisions were shaped less by stable personal preferences than by their efforts to navigate institutional and contextual constraints. Although participants frequently articulated preferences for either in-person or asynchronous online learning, these preferences were often negotiated within a limited set of practical options shaped by course availability, scheduling conflicts, employment obligations, transportation barriers, and campus geography. Rather than functioning as a process of unconstrained individual choice, modality selection more often reflected students' attempts to adapt pragmatically to the opportunities and limitations available within their educational and personal circumstances.

Prior research on community college online learners frequently emphasized the role of external life constraints such as employment, caregiving, and commuting responsibilities in

shaping online enrollment patterns (California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office, 2017; Hachey et al., 2022; Paulsen & McCormick, 2020; Wladis et al., 2023). Several participants in the present study similarly described work and transportation pressures influencing their modality decisions. Cambria, for example, increasingly turned toward online courses after beginning to balance a larger course load with a rigid afternoon work schedule, while Drew's long commute between school and work made maintaining a fully in-person schedule impractical. However, the findings also differed in important ways from pre-pandemic patterns described in the literature. All ten participants in this study were traditionally aged first-year students, and only three were employed at the time of their interviews. Despite this, many participants still experienced significant constraints on their modality options. Institutional scheduling structures, limited in-person availability, campus geography, and modality-specific course offerings shaped students' practical choices even in the absence of substantial adult-role responsibilities such as full-time employment or caregiving. These findings suggest that in the post-pandemic community college environment, modality constraints may increasingly emerge from institutional opportunity structures themselves, rather than solely from students' external life circumstances.

This interpretation aligns closely with both Bronfenbrenner's bioecological framework and Iloh's (2019) model of college-going decisions and trajectories. Bronfenbrenner's concepts of mesosystem and exosystem interactions were particularly visible in participants' accounts. Students frequently described mesosystem tensions in which work schedules, transportation systems and campus schedules interacted to narrow the range of realistically accessible classes. At the exosystem level, institutional structures such as scheduling practices, campus geography,

section capacity, and decisions about which courses would be offered online or in person shaped students' available options without students themselves participating in those decisions. Iloh's dimensions of opportunity and time further illuminate how students navigated these constraints. Rather than making "free and rational" educational choices, participants often described adapting to the options available at specific moments in time, including registering for online sections when preferred in-person courses were unavailable or restructuring their schedules around anticipated future employment obligations. In this sense, modality decisions functioned less as expressions of abstract preference than as situated responses to constrained opportunities.

These findings complicate common institutional assumptions that increased online offerings necessarily expand student choice and flexibility. For some participants, online learning clearly did function as a form of expanded access, allowing students to coordinate coursework with employment, transportation limitations, or scheduling conflicts. At the same time, participants also described online enrollment as something they sometimes accepted reluctantly in order to remain on track academically. Students such as Ivan and Alondra encountered required or highly desired courses that were available only online, despite their preference for in-person instruction. In these cases, online participation functioned not simply as an additional option, but as a practical condition of accessing particular academic pathways or exploratory interests. The findings therefore suggest that online learning may simultaneously expand access for some students while also becoming a required adaptation to institutional and structural pressures for others. Participants also frequently demonstrated a willingness to adapt modality choices in response to changing academic goals, scheduling realities, and institutional

constraints. Rather than adhering to fixed modality preferences, many approached enrollment decisions pragmatically, selecting modalities that allowed them to maintain academic progress under varying circumstances. While the present study cannot determine whether such adaptive decision-making contributes to student success, these findings suggest one possible lens through which to interpret research linking partial online enrollment with persistence, transfer, and completion (Johnson & Mejia, 2014; Ortagus, 2018; Shea & Bidjerano, 2018; Sublett, 2018). In increasingly hybridized community college environments, successful navigation may depend not only on modality itself, but also on students' ability to strategically engage with the opportunities and constraints presented by multiple instructional formats.

Importantly, these constraints operated in multiple directions depending on disciplinary and institutional structures. While many participants described adapting to online enrollment in order to access required or desired coursework, other students encountered the opposite constraint. Discussing her future pre-nursing coursework, Olivia explained that many of the science classes she still needed would only be available in person, meaning she would “have to work around it” when planning her schedule. Similarly, Cambria enrolled in an in-person English course despite preferring an online section because the online offerings available to her were already full. Across these accounts, students consistently framed modality requirements pragmatically as institutional conditions to navigate rather than purely preference-based choices.

These findings also raise important institutional questions about how online enrollment patterns are interpreted in the post-pandemic community college context. At Falcon College, 75.8% of students enrolled in at least one degree-applicable online course during the 2024–25

academic year (Falcon Community College, 2026). While such figures might initially appear to reflect widespread student preference for online learning, the present findings suggest a more complicated reality. Participants frequently described enrolling in online courses not because they preferred the modality, but because institutional scheduling structures, transportation barriers, work obligations, or modality-specific course offerings rendered in-person alternatives impractical or unavailable. Notably, as of this writing the college had not conducted an internal analysis of how many degree-applicable courses were offered exclusively online. These findings suggest that institutional online enrollment rates may reflect not only student preference, but also the structural organization of educational opportunity itself. In some cases, however, these constraints extended beyond general scheduling or logistical challenges and became embedded within academic pathways themselves, shaping not only how students enrolled in courses, but how they accessed educational opportunities more broadly.

Modality Structures and Educational Opportunity

Findings from this study suggest that instructional modality functioned not only as a course delivery format, but also as part of the structure through which students accessed educational opportunities and navigated academic pathways. Several participants described enrolling in courses offered in nonpreferred modalities in order to remain aligned with recommended sequences, complete major requirements, or explore subjects that interested them academically. In these cases, modality operated not simply as a personal preference, but as a practical condition of participation in particular academic opportunities.

This pattern was especially visible among students whose intended majors included courses available only in specific modalities. Ivan, Luna, and Julissa each encountered required

courses within their intended pathways that were offered only online. Although Ivan had initially entered college hoping to avoid online learning whenever possible, he ultimately adapted to taking multiple foundational Music courses asynchronously because they were required for progression in his major. Similarly, Luna described taking online courses in order to remain aligned with the recommended sequence for her Education pathway. These accounts suggest that students sometimes accepted modality arrangements they would not have otherwise chosen in order to maintain academic momentum and continue progressing toward their educational goals. Rather than framing these decisions primarily in terms of preference, students often approached them pragmatically as necessary adaptations to institutional conditions.

At the same time, modality structures appeared to shape not only formal pathway progression, but also exploratory participation and emerging academic interests. Alondra, for example, enrolled in online psychology and special education courses because the subjects strongly interested her, despite her hesitation about online learning. Although she found the course content engaging, she quickly concluded that the online format did not suit her learning style. Notably, her dissatisfaction centered less on the subject matter itself than on the modality through which she experienced it. While this study cannot determine whether such experiences ultimately influence students' long-term educational trajectories, Alondra's account raises important questions about how modality structures may shape students' willingness to continue exploring particular academic areas. For community college students still forming academic identities and considering possible future pathways, modality may

therefore influence not only how courses are taken, but how educational opportunities are experienced.

These findings extend the study's broader application of Iloh's (2019) opportunity dimension. Participants were not simply selecting among fixed academic goals; several of them were actively exploring interests and refining educational and career plans during their first year of college. In this sense, instructional modality was not merely a pedagogical format, but part of the broader institutional context shaping how students encountered academic opportunities and evaluated their resulting experiences. Viewed through both Iloh's (2019) framework and Bronfenbrenner's ecological perspective, modality organization may therefore function as part of the institutional opportunity structure shaping how students access courses, maintain academic momentum, and explore possible futures. While additional research is needed to examine the long-term implications of these processes, the findings suggest that modality structures may influence not only course enrollment decisions, but also how students engage with and imagine future educational possibilities.

Engagement, Presence, and Human Connection

Although many participants recognized the practical advantages of asynchronous online learning, students also consistently described valuing in-person instruction for reasons extending beyond simple content delivery. Participants frequently associated face-to-face classes with greater motivation, accountability, focus, immediacy, and social engagement. Even students who had successfully adapted to online learning or appreciated its flexibility often continued to describe in-person participation as important for maintaining structure, sustaining attention, interacting with instructors and peers, or simply "getting out" of the house. These

findings suggest that students evaluated instructional modalities not only in terms of convenience or academic efficiency, but also in relation to broader social, emotional, and developmental experiences associated with college participation.

Participants' reflections strongly align with research documenting the academic and emotional effects of pandemic-era remote learning on adolescents and college students. Aguilera-Hermida (2020) found that students reported declines in motivation, cognitive engagement, and self-efficacy following the abrupt transition to remote learning, while Means and Neisler (2020) similarly documented widespread struggles with focus, interaction, and motivation during the pandemic. Participants in the present study frequently described these same concerns when discussing both prior remote learning experiences and current modality preferences. Ariyah, for example, strongly associated online learning with distraction and disengagement, while Cambria described avoiding online courses during her first semester because she feared she would experience the same lack of motivation she had felt during pandemic-era remote schooling. Even students who later adapted successfully to asynchronous college courses often continued to frame in-person environments as more conducive to focus, accountability, and sustained engagement. These findings also align with Turner and Zepeda's (2023) observation that post-pandemic students often expressed comfort with digital technologies while simultaneously desiring greater structure, personalization, and meaningful engagement in their courses.

At the same time, participants' accounts suggest that students valued in-person learning not only for academic structure, but also for interpersonal connection and embodied participation in college life. Several students described appreciating opportunities for

discussion, immediate instructor feedback, campus interaction, or simply being physically present in a learning environment shared with others. Cambria, for example, explained that she still preferred some in-person courses because she enjoyed “getting out” and being around people, even while increasingly appreciating the flexibility of online learning for other purposes. These findings resonate with Airhart and Spielvogel’s (2025) study of post-pandemic community college students, in which participants described prolonged screen-based learning as emotionally draining and emphasized the continuing importance of peer networks, counselors, and interpersonal support. Similarly, Wright et al. (2023) found that students attending at least some in-person classes during the pandemic reported stronger engagement and satisfaction than students learning fully online. Together, these studies and participant accounts suggest that technologically fluent students may still value face-to-face participation because of the relational and motivational dimensions of learning environments rather than because of any lack of digital competence.

Importantly, participants in this study rarely framed online and in-person learning as mutually exclusive categories in which one modality was universally superior. Instead, students often described different modalities as serving different purposes within their academic and personal lives. Some valued online courses for flexibility, pacing, and independence, while simultaneously valuing in-person classes for interaction, accountability, or emotional engagement. This pattern complicates simplistic narratives positioning post-pandemic students either as fully “digital-native” learners naturally oriented toward online instruction or as students uniformly rejecting online education after the pandemic. Rather, participants appeared to be actively negotiating how different modalities fit their evolving academic needs,

social preferences, and life circumstances within a hybridized post-pandemic college environment.

These findings can be understood through Bronfenbrenner's concept of proximal processes, which emphasizes the importance of recurring interactions between individuals and their environments in shaping development and behavior (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998; Tudge et al., 2009, 2022). Participants often discussed instructional modality not simply as a method of content delivery, but as a structure shaping attention, interaction, motivation, and daily routines. For this COVID cohort, whose formative educational experiences included prolonged periods of emergency remote instruction during adolescence, decisions about modality were shaped not only by academic considerations, but also by broader developmental and social experiences associated with the pandemic era. Most participants in this study experienced the height of pandemic-era remote schooling during approximately eighth or ninth grade, with some also encountering additional periods of remote instruction later in high school. These experiences occurred during a developmental period characterized by increasing academic independence, identity formation, and heightened importance of peer interaction, potentially shaping participants' later expectations regarding structure, engagement, and interpersonal connection in educational settings. In this sense, the value these students continued to place on in-person participation may not reflect resistance to online learning itself, but a desire for forms of engagement, structure, and connection that many perceived as more difficult to sustain in fully asynchronous environments.

Taken together, these findings suggest that institutional decisions about instructional modality may carry implications extending beyond convenience, scheduling flexibility, or

enrollment efficiency. While asynchronous online courses may expand access and flexibility for many students, participants' accounts indicate that face-to-face environments continued to serve important motivational, relational, and developmental functions within students' college experiences. Evaluating modality structures solely through enrollment patterns or completion metrics may therefore overlook important dimensions of how students experience engagement, belonging, and participation in post-pandemic community college environments.

Implications

Implications For Research

This study contributes to a growing body of research examining instructional modality in community colleges following the COVID-19 pandemic. Much of the existing literature on modality selection has either focused on pre-pandemic enrollment patterns or examined students' experiences during the period of emergency remote instruction. The present findings extend this work by examining how traditional-aged community college students whose secondary education was disrupted by the pandemic navigate modality decisions within a post-pandemic environment in which online learning has expanded to become a normalized component of institutional offerings. Rather than treating modality preferences as stable characteristics, the findings suggest that students' evaluations of in-person and asynchronous online learning are dynamic, context-dependent and shaped through ongoing interactions among prior experiences, institutional structures, and shifting personal constraints.

The study also contributes to emerging understandings of the COVID Cohort as a distinct group of learners entering higher education. Although participants shared common experiences of educational disruption during adolescence, their relationships to online learning varied considerably both upon entering college and as they transitioned into their second semester.

Some students viewed online learning as a practical and effective option to manage their college coursework, while others associated the modality with isolation, disengagement or academic difficulty. Several students described revising assumptions formed during emergency remote teaching as their gained experience with college-level online courses. These findings suggest that COVID Coort students should not be understood through generalized assumptions about technological fluency or modality preference. Instead, their experiences highlight the need for continued research examining how pandemic-era educational experiences continue to shape students' expectations, decisions and learning behaviors in the transition to college.

Finally, these findings offer important context for quantitative research linking online course-taking to outcomes such as persistence, completion, and transfer. Participants frequently enrolled in online courses for reasons unrelated to modality preference, including transportation constraints, employment obligations, academic pathway requirements, and course availability. As a result, enrollment in online coursework may not necessarily reflect a student's preferred learning environment or instructional modality. Future research should continue to examine the institutional and contextual conditions that shape modality enrollment patterns in post-pandemic community colleges, where online participation may reflect both student agency and structural constraints.

Implications for Institutional Practice

This study's findings suggest that students' modality decisions are shaped not only by individual preferences and learning experiences, but also by the institutional environments in which those decisions occur. Participants generally demonstrated thoughtful awareness of the advantages and disadvantages of both in-person and asynchronous online learning in relation

to their individual needs. However, they frequently described adapting their decisions in response to scheduling structures, pathway requirements, transportation constraints, work schedules and course availability. These findings suggest that colleges seeking to support student access and success in the post-pandemic environment should consider not only the quality of instruction in each modality, but also how modality options are organized, supported and communicated to students.

Several participants described enrolling in courses offered in nonpreferred modalities because of scheduling conflicts, limited section availability, or modality-specific offerings. While online courses often expanded access and flexibility, participants also reported situations in which online enrollment functioned as a practical requirement rather than a preferred option. These findings suggest that institutions should exercise caution when interpreting online enrollment patterns as straightforward indicators of student demand. Enrollment behavior may reflect the interaction of student preferences with institutional and individual constraints.

As community colleges continue to balance in-person and online offerings, colleges may benefit from examining modality patterns both at the course level and across broader schedules and pathway sequences. Questions such as which courses are offered exclusively online, whether students have realistic access to in-person alternatives, and how modality distributions vary across disciplines may provide valuable information for enrollment management and scheduling decisions. The findings suggest that modality availability itself has become part of the institutional context through with students navigate educational opportunities.

Participants in this study rarely approached modality as an all-or-nothing choice. Instead, most assembled schedules that combined the flexibility of asynchronous online courses with the interpersonal engagement and structure of in-person learning. Several students described intentionally mixing modalities, assigning different functions and advantages to different types of courses. This pattern raises questions about whether modality planning might be considered not only at the level of individual course sections, but also from the perspective of students' aggregate educational experiences. Rather than viewing modality as a series of isolated scheduling decisions, institutions might explore how modality distributions across pathways and semesters schedules shape students' overall experiences of flexibility, connection, support and academic engagement. While the present study cannot determine what optimal modality balances might look like, the findings suggest that students may benefit from opportunities to experience both the flexibility of online learning and the relational dimensions of campus-based instruction as they progress through their programs.

Implications for Instructional Practice

Participants' descriptions of effective learning environments suggest that instructional practices may play an important role in shaping how students experience different modalities. Although students varied considerably in their preferences, many identified specific features of online and in-person learning that supported their engagement and success. These findings suggest opportunities for instructors to incorporate elements traditionally associated with one modality into the other, potentially reducing some of the tradeoffs students perceived between flexibility and connection.

Several participants described appreciating features of asynchronous online learning that allowed them to engage with course materials on their own time, at their own pace. Students such as Cambria valued the ability to replay lectures, revising explanations, and work through difficult material multiple times. These findings suggest that students may benefit from instructors providing course materials through multiple formats, including recorded lectures and demonstrations, written explanations, and other resources that allow students to review content outside of scheduled class meetings. Such approaches may be particularly valuable in courses involving complex concepts or technical skills, where students especially benefit from revising instruction after class. More broadly, the findings suggest that some of the flexibility students associated with online learning may be incorporated into in-person courses through intentional use of digital resources and supplemental materials. At the same time, students in this study consistently identified interacting with instructors and opportunities for real-time feedback as important advantages of in-person learning. Participants frequently described situations in which waiting for responses to questions in asynchronous courses discouraged them from seeking help or slowed their progress through assignments. Students also emphasized the value of classroom discussion and the sense of connection developed through regular contact with instructors and peers. These findings suggest that online courses may benefit from intentionally designed opportunities for real-time support, including virtual office hours, drop-in tutoring, optional synchronous review sessions, or other mechanisms that allow students to receive timely assistance when needed. Many students appeared to value having access to human support and interaction alongside the flexibility of asynchronous online learning, suggesting that more effective inline instruction may combine flexible access to content with opportunities for meaningful connection and support.

Limitations

As with all qualitative research, this study was shaped by a specific set of conditions—its setting, participants, timing, and the researcher's own position— all of which create important boundaries on what can and cannot be known from the findings.

The study was situated at a single Northern California community college ("Falcon College"), which serves a specific student population and operates within a localized institutional culture. While many aspects of Falcon College's structure and students are typical of California's community college system, others may be unique to its geographic, demographic, or administrative context. This site-specificity allows for depth of inquiry into one institutional setting but limits the transferability of findings to colleges in other regions or systems.

Transferability is also shaped by the characteristics of the study participants themselves. While this study focuses on traditional-aged students, defined here as individuals between 18 and 24 years old (Choy, 2002; NCES, 2015), age alone does not fully capture students' educational pathways or personal circumstances. Community college students within this age group may still possess characteristics commonly associated with nontraditional student status, such as delayed college enrollment, parenting responsibilities, full-time employment, or financial independence. As none of the participants in this study reported these characteristics, the findings may not fully reflect the experiences of traditional-aged students balancing more substantial family, employment or financial responsibilities. These intersecting factors may shape students' experiences of course modality in ways that age alone cannot account for. The study did not attempt to filter out such variation, but collected relevant background

information (e.g., employment, home responsibilities) as part of the interview process to help contextualize findings and explore patterns across subgroups.

Other limitations arise from the timing of data collection. Interviews were conducted during weeks 2-4 of the Spring semester—the second semester of college for all participants. Focusing on students who persisted from Fall to Spring necessarily excluded students who withdrew from college during their first semester or who did not return after their first semester. The study was therefore unable to capture the perspectives of students who withdrew from college before the Spring semester, some of whom may have experienced modality decisions differently than those who persisted.

In addition, while the early Spring timing allowed participants to reflect on their Fall course-modality experiences with some depth, their perceptions may have been shaped by eventual outcomes such as academic performance, instructor relationships, or feelings of success or regret. To address this, the interview protocol was designed to help students distinguish between their initial expectations and their later assessments of each modality. Even with this structure, memory is fallible, and participants may reconstruct their experiences in ways that are not entirely accurate—but that are still meaningful in understanding how they make sense of their educational journeys.

Closing Reflections

While this study offers new insights into post-pandemic modality decision-making, it also raises questions that warrant further investigation. Future research could examine how students' modality preferences and decision-making evolve over time as they progress through college and refine their educational goals. Additional work is also needed to better understand

how institutional modality structures influence students' exploration of academic pathways, persistence, and educational opportunities. Finally, comparative studies involving broader community college populations— including older students, returning students, parenting students, and students attending institutions with different modality distributions— could help determine the extent to which the patterns identified in this study transfer across diverse institutional contexts and student populations.

By centering students' voices and experiences, this study contributes to a growing understanding of a generation of learners whose educational experiences were shaped by an unprecedented period of disruption and change. By centering students' voices and experiences, The findings offer insight into how COVID Cohort students understand, evaluate, and navigate instructional modality within the hybridized environment now typical in California's community colleges. In doing so, the study provides an important step toward understanding how institutions can support students as they balance flexibility, connection, opportunity, and access in a rapidly evolving postsecondary landscape.

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Appendix A: Key Concepts and Definitions from Iloh's Model and Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Framework

Concept	Definition	Source
College-Going Decisions and Trajectories	A non-linear model that acknowledges students' movement between institutions, stopping out, and making decisions based on evolving life contexts. Emphasizes trajectories over single-point choices.	Iloh (2019)
Information	In Iloh's model, the quality, quantity, and accessibility of information available to students as they make decisions about college or course options. Informed by the broader *Person* and *Context* elements in Bronfenbrenner's PPCT model, as information is shaped by both personal resources and institutional structures.	Iloh (2019); Bronfenbrenner & Morris (1998)
Opportunity	In Iloh's model, the range of institutional and life circumstances (e.g., admissions policies, course availability, campus proximity, work schedules) that enable or limit action. Parallels Bronfenbrenner's *Context* element, which situates opportunities within micro-, meso-, exo-, and macro-level systems.	Iloh (2019); Bronfenbrenner & Morris (1998)
Time (Iloh)	In Iloh's model, encompasses both *individual temporal factors* (e.g., how long it has been since a student engaged with college information or processes, whether they are currently experiencing time-intensive obligations) and *macro-time factors* (historical or generational conditions such as pandemic-era remote learning and post-pandemic shifts in course offerings). Bronfenbrenner's PPCT model includes **micro-time** (timing/duration of specific events), **meso-time** (frequency/consistency of interactions over time), and **macro-time** (broad historical context shaping experiences and decisions).	Iloh (2019); Bronfenbrenner & Morris (1998); Tudge et al. (2022)
Context (Ecological Systems)	Nested systems in which individuals are embedded: **microsystem** (immediate settings such as classrooms, family, advising), **mesosystem** (connections among microsystems, such as how family or work influences school engagement), **exosystem** (indirect external structures such as institutional scheduling policies), and **macrosystem** (cultural, economic, and policy contexts, including societal attitudes toward online learning).	Bronfenbrenner & Morris (1998); Tudge et al. (2022)

Proximal Processes	Regular, sustained interactions between students and their environments (people, tools, settings) that influence decision-making. In this study, includes processes such as seeking advising, interpreting course schedules, discussing options with peers, and navigating online registration platforms. These processes often involve acquiring or refining information (overlapping with Iloh's Information dimension), but in PPCT are conceptualized as the mechanisms through which person characteristics interact with context over time.	Bronfenbrenner & Morris (1998); Tudge et al. (2022)
Person Characteristics (Dispositions, Resources)	Dispositions such as motivation, self-efficacy, and learning preferences; resources such as time, finances, internet access, transportation, advising support, and **information/knowledge about educational options**. In PPCT, information is treated as a personal resource; in Iloh's model, it is one of three core dimensions influencing decision-making.	Bronfenbrenner & Morris (1998); Tudge et al. (2022); Iloh (2019)
Instructional Modality Selection	The process by which students choose among online, in-person, and hybrid courses based on preferences, constraints, and prior experiences. Informed by Iloh's framing of decision-making as dynamic and constrained, and by Bronfenbrenner's systems-based view of environmental influences.	Adapted for this study; informed by Iloh (2019) and Tudge et al. (2022)
Institutional Constraints	College-level structures, policies, and practices that limit or shape students' choices, such as course scheduling patterns, faculty availability, or program-specific requirements. Understood in relation to Iloh's *opportunity* dimension and Bronfenbrenner's *exosystem* and *macrosystem* levels.	Adapted for this study; informed by Iloh (2019) and Perna (2006)

Appendix B: Interview Solicitation email

Invitation to Participate in a Study on First-Year Community College Students' Course Modality Selection Process

Researchers at the University of California, Davis would like to invite **students in their first year of community college** to participate in a research study about how they make decisions about whether to take their classes in online or in-person formats.

Each participant will be interviewed for approximately 45 minutes and will receive a $25 Amazon gift card for participation. Interviews can be conducted in-person or online (through Zoom). Interviews conducted in person will be audio recorded, and Zoom interviews will be video recorded.

To be eligible for participation, you must: 1) be between the ages of 18-24; and 2) be in your first year of college enrollment.

This study is meant to help us understand the factors that are most important in shaping students' selections between in-person and online class options. Individual interview responses will not be shared with Solano College faculty or staff**.**

This research project is being conducted as part of a dissertation project by a researcher at the University of California, Davis (Principal Investigator: Melissa Reeve). The project has been approved by the Institutional Review Board at the University of California, Davis (IRB **#** 2371916-1).

If you are interested in participating, please click here to submit your contact information.

Please contact the Principal Investigator at mmreeve@ucdavis.edu or (707) 864-7142 if you have any questions about the project.

Appendix C: Eligibility Screening Survey

Q1 Thank you for your interest in participating in my research study on how first-year community college students decide whether to take their classes in online or in-person formats. I am interested in interviewing students who started college in Fall 2025 to understand what factors were most important in shaping their selections between in-person and online class options. Before I collect contact information from you, I want to let you know what to expect if you participate. Each participant will be interviewed for roughly 45 minutes and will receive a $25 Amazon gift card for participation. Interviews can be conducted in-person or online (through Zoom). Interviews conducted in person will be audio recorded, and Zoom interviews will be video recorded. Your participation in this research is voluntary. You have the right to withdraw at any point during the study, for any reason, and without any prejudice. If you would like to contact the Principal Investigator in the study to discuss this research, please e-mail Melissa Reeve at mreeve@ucdavis.edu.

- Continue (1)
- I do not wish to participate (2)

Skip To: End of Survey If = I do not wish to participate

End of Block: Survey Instruction

Start of Block: Age

Q3 Please select your current age group:

- 17 years old, or younger (1)
- 18-24 years old (2)
- 25 years old, or older (3)

End of Block: Age

Start of Block: Ineligible

Q8 Based on your responses, it appears that you are ineligible to participate in this study. Thank you for your interest!

End of Block: Ineligible

Start of Block: Prior enrollment

Q4 Select the option that best describes your community college enrollment history:

- Fall 2025 was the first time I enrolled in any college classes (1)
- I took some college classes before Fall 2025 (2)

Skip To: End of Block If Select the option that best describes your community college enrollment history: = Fall 2025 was the first time I enrolled in any college classes

Q5 Please select the option that best describes your college enrollment prior to Fall 2025:

- I dual-enrolled in community college classes while I was in high school (1)
- I enrolled in community college classes (at Solano or another community college, not as a high school student) (2)
- I enrolled in classes at a 4-year college or university (3)

End of Block: Prior enrollment

Start of Block: Current classes

Q6 How many community college classes were you enrolled in at the start of the Fall 2025 semester? (Note: please include any classes you dropped during the semester.)

- 1 class (1)
- 2 classes (2)
- 3 or more classes (3)

Q7 Which of the following best describes the meeting format(s) of your Fall 2025 classes?

- All of my Fall classes met in person. (1)
- All of my Fall classes were fully online (no in-person lectures, discussions or activities required). (2)
- I took a mix of in-person and online classes in Fall 2025. (3)

End of Block: Current classes

Start of Block: Contact Information

Q9 Based on your responses to the screening questions, it seems that you are eligible to participate in this study. Please provide your name, your e-mail address, and your phone/text number below, and the researcher will contact you to discuss participation.

_____

Skip To: End of Survey If Condition: Based on your responses to ... Is Equal to . Skip To: End of Survey.

End of Block: Contact Information

Appendix D: Pre-Interview Demographics and Consent Survey

Start of Block: Informed Consent

Q1 Consent to Participate in Research

Title of study: The COVID cohort meets the new normal: Community college student experiences with instructional modality selection

Investigator: Melissa Reeve

Introduction and Purpose: You are being invited to join a research study. The purpose of this study is to talk to first-semester community college students, to get a better understanding of the factors that shape new students' choices between in-person and online course options.

If you agree to participate in this research, you will be asked to participate in an interview. You will be asked questions about how you chose which class format(s) (online or in-person) to enroll in, in Fall 2025-Spring 2026 semesters.

The interview will take between 45 minutes and an hour. The interview will be recorded (audio only for in-person; video for Zoom interviews) and transcribed, but your name will not be included on the transcription.

There is no direct benefit to you from taking part in this study. The goal of this research is to help community colleges improve their scheduling practices; to improve systems for informing and advising students about online and in-person course options; and to support students to succeed in whichever class format(s) they select.

The risks of this research are minimal. Some of the questions might make you feel uncomfortable or upset. You do not have to answer any of the questions you do not want to answer.

Confidentiality: As with all research, there is a chance that confidentiality could be compromised; however, I am taking precautions to minimize this risk.

Your responses to the interview questions will not include information that identifies you or your instructors. Any identifiable information that you do provide will be handled as

confidentially as possible. To minimize the risks of breach of confidentiality, I will store transcripts and recordings of interviews in secure, password-protected folders on password-protected computers. Access to study records will be limited to project personnel. I will remove your name from any transcripts generated. I will delete audio and video recordings after I have transcribed the interviews.

I will save the data collected through December 2027 to allow for the completion of my research.

Compensation: To thank you for participating in this study, you will receive a $25 gift card to Amazon. The gift card will be delivered to you within 2 weeks after you complete the interview.

Rights: *Participation in research is completely voluntary*. You are free to decline to take part in the project. You can decline to answer any questions and you can stop taking part in the project at any time. Whether or not you choose to participate, or answer any question, or stop participating in the project, there will be no penalty to you or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

Questions: If you have any questions about this research, please feel free to contact the investigator at 707-864-7000 x4314, or mmreeve@ucdavis.edu. If you have any questions about your rights or treatment as a research participant in this study, please contact the University of California Davis, Institutional Review Board at 916-703-9158 or HS-IRBEducation@ucdavis.edu.

If you agree to take part in the research and allow the interview to be recorded, please type your full name in the box below.

_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

End of Block: Informed Consent

Start of Block: Participant Demographics

Q2 Which category below includes your age?

- 17 or younger (1)
- 18-19 (2)
- 20-22 (3)
- 23-24 (4)
- 25 or older (5)

Q3 What is your gender?

- Male (1)
- Female (2)
- Non-binary / third gender (3)
- Prefer not to say (4)

Q4 Choose one or more race(s) that you consider yourself to be:

- African American or Black (1)
- American Indian or Alaskan Native (2)
- Asian (3)
- Filipino (4)
- Hispanic (5)
- Multi-ethnicity (6)
- Pacific Islander or Native Hawaiian (7)
- White Non-Hispanic (8)
- Other or Unknown (9)

End of Block: Participant Demographics

Appendix E: Semi-Structured Interview Guide (Final Version Used During Data Collection)

Introduction

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview. Today I'll be asking about your experiences selecting and taking college courses, particularly your experiences with online and in-person classes. The interview has three sections. First, we'll talk about your educational goals and how you made decisions about your Fall and Spring classes. Then we'll discuss your experiences with online and in-person learning. Finally, we'll talk about future course choices and any advice you would offer other students.

Section 1: Educational Goals and Enrollment Decisions

1. To get started, could you tell me a little about your educational goals and what brought you to Solano College?

   Possible probes:

   • Career goals

   • Transfer goals

   • Full-time or part-time enrollment

   • Intended major or program

2. Thinking back to Fall 2025, when you were first starting college, what was your process for deciding which classes to take?

   Possible probes:

   • How did you figure out what classes you needed?

   • What information sources did you use?

   • Did anyone help you make those decisions?

3. How did you decide whether to take those Fall classes online or in person?

   Possible probes:

   • Were you able to get the classes you wanted?

- Were you able to get them in the formats you preferred?
- Were some classes only available in one format?

4. When it came time to register for Spring classes, what was your process for choosing your courses?

   Possible probes:

   - What classes are you taking now?
   - How did you decide which classes to take?
   - What information sources did you use?

5. How did you decide whether to take your Spring classes online or in person?

   Possible probes:

   - Which classes are online and which are in person?
   - Were you able to get the formats you preferred?
   - Did your Fall experiences influence those decisions?

Section 2: Expectations and Experiences

6. Before you started taking online college classes, what did you expect online learning to be like?

   Possible probes:

   - What experiences shaped those expectations?
   - Previous online learning experiences
   - Dual enrollment or Early College experiences
   - Remote learning during COVID
   - How did the actual experience compare to what you expected?

7. {Depending on experience: Now that you have experience with both online and in-person learning}, how would you compare them?

   Possible probes:

   - Interactions with classmates
   - Interactions with instructors
   - Communication and participation

- Engagement and motivation
- What feels easier or harder in each format?

8. What would you describe as the advantages and disadvantages of online learning? What about in-person learning?
9. How has the technology used in your classes affected your learning experience?

   Possible probes:

   - Canvas
   - Zoom
   - Other learning platforms
   - Ways technology supports learning
   - Ways technology creates challenges

Section 3: Future Choices and Reflections

10. What responsibilities outside of school do you balance, such as work, commuting, family responsibilities, or other commitments?

    Possible probes:

    - How do those responsibilities affect your course choices?
    - How do they affect your modality preferences?

11. Looking ahead, if all of the classes you needed were available in both online and in-person formats, what would you choose?

    Possible probes:

    - All online
    - All in person
    - A mix of both
    - Does the answer depend on the subject?
    - Why?

12. What advice would you give a new student who is trying to decide between online and in-person classes?
13. Is there anything else you would like me to understand about how you make decisions about course modality?