

COVID-19 Challenges, Impacts Social Interactions for Penn State Students

By: Eric Fenstermaker

STATE COLLEGE, Pa. – Any normal fall semester at Penn State would be filled with plentiful tailgates, crowded classrooms and rowdy parties.

This was no normal semester.

COVID-19 drastically altered the way Penn State students go about their day-to-day activities, and every aspect of student life has changed.

No change has impacted students more than the lack of an in-person football season.

Penn State football returned in mid-October, but Beaver Stadium was not filled with students this season.

Brandon Smith (sophomore- broadcast journalism) is a starting linebacker for Penn State. Smith said the football team had to adapt and change some of its procedures to meet COVID-19 safety standards.

Smith said some of the procedural changes included daily COVID-19 tests, extra cloth masks or visors on or inside the helmets and extra distancing when players weren't wearing their helmets.

Smith said that these changes didn't drastically impact how he prepared for practices and games, but they did make him more aware of his surroundings.

"It doesn't bother you, but it keeps your mind flowing," Smith said.

Smith said internal communication between players was vital to the team's growth.

"It's small things that keep us together," Smith said. He said everyone is always checking up on each other.

Smith said that teammates keep in touch via text messages and group chats, and this was even more important this year due to required distancing protocols.

While communication between players is vital for the team's success, Smith said this is not the only gameday factor that impacts the team in a major way.

Smith said that fans – particularly students – are incredibly impactful and play a major role in the team's success, as well.

"We definitely feed off the energy of the crowd," Smith said. "It gives me added motivation knowing there are people depending on me."

Smith said that a lack of fans didn't impact the way that he prepared for games. However, he did say that there were moments during games where he missed the energy that fans provide.

Penn State's student section, Nittanyville, is one of the most passionate student sections in the country, highlighted by their "2019 Liv Más Student Section Champion" Award.

Patrick Bodnar (senior- rehabilitation and human services) is the president of Nittanyville. Since the club thrives on in-person activities, the club has been forced to change a lot.

"Overall, we are getting along as best we can," Bodnar said. He said the club shifted from camping out for games to online meetings and virtual activities.

Nittanyville's main concern is safety this year.

"The ideal situation is everyone is safe and healthy," Bodnar said. "That's the number one priority."

Bodnar said Nittanyville used QR codes to get new members involved, especially freshman.

Freshmen were at a disadvantage this semester because of the lack of in-person contact. Many freshmen were finding it incredibly difficult to find their niche on campus.

Marcus Cofre (freshman- cyber security) said that COVID-19 drastically impacted his ability to make friends and meet new people.

"Social interaction is at an all-time low," Cofre said. "You can't make friends, man."

Cofre said that he chose not to go out a lot because he has family members that have health issues at home in Northampton, Pennsylvania. He wanted to be especially careful to protect them.

"I value safety over fun," Cofre said.

Instead of traditional activities, which could put people at risk, Cofre said he and his friends did fun activities virtually.

Cofre said Netflix parties were popular, and the movie "Jumanji" and the show "Stranger Things" were popular choices. These parties helped friends watch movies and shows together over the internet so they felt connected yet stayed distant.

The game "Among Us" was also a popular activity.

These virtual opportunities took the place of traditional parties. Cofre said he expected to be partying more during his freshman year.

While freshmen were finding it tough to meet new people, those students not living in State College were also feeling the effects of reduced social interaction.

Jordan Hession (junior- broadcast journalism) chose to stay home this semester, and he's completing his classes from Annapolis, Maryland.

Hession misses the university's atmosphere.

"I miss the vibe that is on campus," Hession said.

Hession said he's never seen a university with the type of comradery that Penn State has.

Hession said that he contributed a lot to some of his clubs, but some just aren't feasible.

Penn State Sports Night TV (PSN TV) is an organization that Hession would like to contribute more to. However, his distance from campus eliminated his opportunities.

"There are outlets, but it's not the same experience," Hession said about PSN TV.

However, Hession still felt that he was an active member of Penn State's CommRadio.

Hession contributed podcasts, articles and other content for CommRadio, and he felt that he made good connections with new members in the club.

"The freshmen are hungry to write," Hession said. "I'm influencing them, and they are influencing me."

Hession said he felt that he was a little behind other students who were on campus, but he didn't feel as though he was at a major disadvantage.

Another major club on campus that has been impacted by COVID-19 is THON.

Natalie Ament (junior- rehabilitation and human services) was a dancer last year in THON, and she is a member of the Rules and Regulations (R&R) committee this year.

All of the meetings for R&R went gone virtual, and the plan for THON, as of right now, is for it to be held virtually this year, as well.

Ament said this change isn't ideal, but the safety of the children is the priority.

"The kids and their families come first," Ament said.

THON will be held Feb. 19-21, 2021. Ament said she is still not sure how dancers will be involved.

While there are talks about dancers still participating virtually, the lack of in-person spectators would impact the dancers' morale.

Ament said she was struggling last year, but a conversation with a distant cousin helped her power through during last year's THON.

"He took me out of the wall I hit," Ament said.

While some activities like THON will go on in adjusted ways, some activities may not be possible at all.

Club sports attract some of the best athletes across campus; however, these students may not get the chance to compete this year.

Vincent Gehret (senior- material science and engineering) is the president of the Club Bowling Team.

The team was unable to compete at nationals or sectionals last season (while still using a season of eligibility), and the team may not be able to compete at all this year.

Since bowling is an indoor sport, it would be one of the last sports cleared to participate by the University. Even if the United States Bowling Congress (USBC) allows competitions, the team would still need approval from Penn State first.

Gehret said he doesn't see Penn State allowing indoor sports anytime soon.

However, Gehret said he understands the precautions, and he's happy with what the university has done to protect athletes.

"There's nothing they can do," Gehret said.

Like club sports, many other opportunities at Penn State may be cancelled all-together.

One of these opportunities is shadowing programs for students pursuing grad school.

Lee Bryant (senior- kinesiology) has been trying to contact local physical-therapy practices to shadow as part of his requirements for his degree.

Without this experience, Bryant won't be able to solidify his application for grad school.

"COVID basically made me take a gap year," Bryant said about his future plans.

While some students are exploring their options for their future, many students are worried about their current situation.

Abigail Nelson (senior- telecommunication and analytics) has worked as a server at Primanti Brothers since January.

COVID-19 drastically altered Nelson's job. She and all the other staff must wash their hands every 30 minutes once a buzzer sounds throughout the entire restaurant.

"I can hear it in my dreams," Nelson said talking about the buzzer.

The pandemic cut Nelson's shifts down to just two or three days a week, where as she used to work five to six shifts a week. This impacted Nelson in a major way as she said she needs the job to afford rent.

Additionally, a major part of Nelson's earnings come from tips, as she only makes \$2.83 an hour. Since the restaurant is at half capacity, Nelson's earnings are slashed even further.

Nelson said she knows she's taking a risk working during the pandemic, but she needs to make ends meet.

While there are a lot of negatives as a result of COVID-19, many students are making the most of this opportunity and doing great things.

Marie Hardin is the Dean of the Donald P. Bellisario College of Communications.

Hardin said some clubs and students are using making good use of this time.

"It's been absolutely remarkable," Hardin said.

Hardin said some examples of creativity during these unique times include club branding on masks and a professor using a mini golf outing as a story topic in a sport-writing class.

"People are taking it seriously," Hardin said.

Hardin also said the access to virtual speakers has opened up relationships for students, as well.