

## After Leaving During the Pandemic, Texas Students Give College Another Chance

By Alexis Austin

Kiara Araujo and Flor Franco, both current students at The College of Health Care Professions, decided not to continue their education in college because of the challenges related to attending school in a remote learning environment. But this semester, they are giving college another chance.

Araujo pointed to the challenge of attending Austin Community College (ACC) fully online after she had already finished her senior year of high-school remotely, too. “It was definitely COVID,” she said.

Like Araujo, Franco had a difficult senior year of high-school. “It was so much harder to actually learn,” Franco said when the school was implementing safety procedures that affected her decision to continue her education with college “I wasn’t motivated to do school and I wasn’t in a good mental place because everyone was socially distancing and I couldn’t talk to [anyone] or go anywhere either.”

In the spring of 2020 many schools switched to an online and hybrid environment, a safety precaution taken due to the spread of COVID-19. Returning now to an in-person environment, enrollment numbers for some colleges are increasing, compared to previous years.

For example, The University of Texas at Austin reached a new record of total students enrolled. According to KXAN, an Austin based news station, the university counted 52,384 total students enrolled for the fall 2022 semester.

UT Austin is one of many schools that experienced a drop in enrollment during the pandemic, though KVUE, another local news station, reported that “enrollment only went down by a couple hundred students” in the 2020-2021 school year when COVID-19 changes began in the spring.

UT Austin first switched online in March 2021. Most colleges implemented an online and hybrid structure for the duration of 2020-2021 and left students struggling to adapt and continue their education.

Like UT Austin, Austin Community College also experienced a drop in enrollment. [Texas Higher Education Data](#) shows a 10 percent decline from 2020-2021.

Developing some sort of depression and anxiety became a normative for highschoolers and college students during COVID, according to Dr. Cynthia Franklin, a professor at UT Austin’s Steve Hicks School of Social Work, who focuses on mental health in schools and dropout prevention. This can make it harder for students to continue their education.

Especially with a transition from high-school to college, it’s crucial for colleges to offer different resources for their students to help.

“One of the biggest factors to dropout is the schools and they can’t create a sense of belonging to meet the needs of the students,” Dr. Franklin said.

Araujo pointed to the pressure she felt having to attend college right out of high-school , which added to her stress. At Austin Community College, she never wanted to be there but found The College of Health Care Professions attractive for several reasons: her interest in healthcare, their job placement, the program length, and the learning environment.

Franco made the decision to go back to school after evaluating her mental and physical health and coming to the conclusion that she was at a good point in her life and ready to continue.

“The transition has not been easy, but definitely not impossible to do and is much easier than it would have been one year ago,” Franco said. “The easiest part has been finding the help and resources to continue in school.”

Both agree the environment has been the best part of their college experience so far.

“Being around people again in a classroom setting and making learning just fun and interesting again [is my favorite]. I didn’t really get that at all during ACC,” Araujo said. “I didn’t get that much during high school, so for me to be in this adult setting where everyone wants to learn, everyone wants to be here, everyone wants to reach the end goal. It’s very nice to see that.”