

# Medical Student Perceptions of Virtual Learning Communities in the Pre-Clinical Curriculum During COVID

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## ABSTRACT

**Background:** Disruption to medical education resulting from COVID-19 has provided medical schools a unique opportunity to investigate virtual platforms to deliver their curricula.<sup>1,2</sup> For small group discussion pedagogy, transitioning from in-person to virtual learning communities was a challenge requiring the development of a virtual space in which to engage learners.

**Method:** The focus of this study was to obtain student perceptions of virtual compared to in-person small group sessions within our learning community. A student survey was used at the end of a 9-week online course.

**Results:** A majority of students felt the virtual method was equivalent or better than in-person sessions.

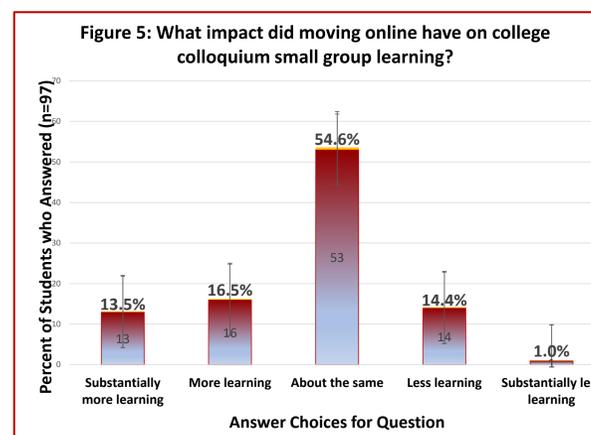
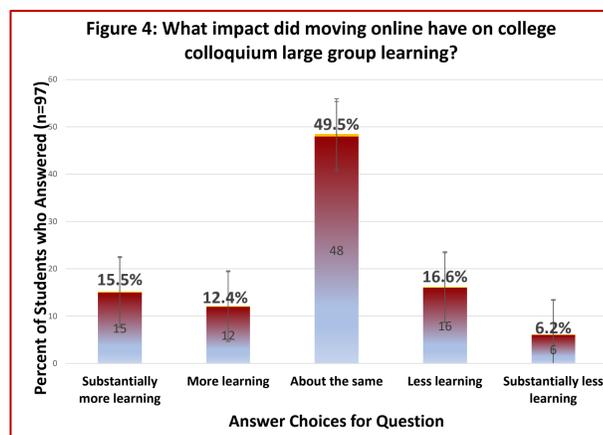
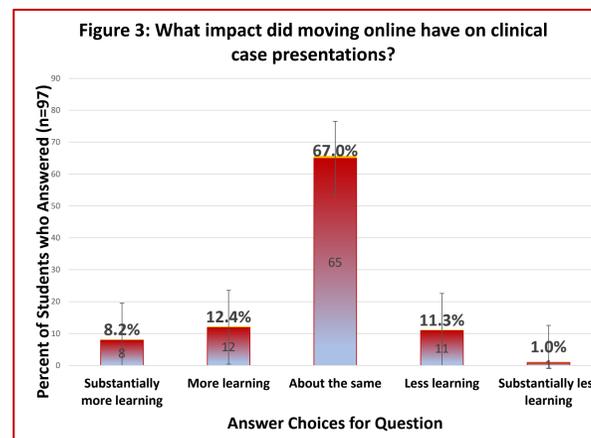
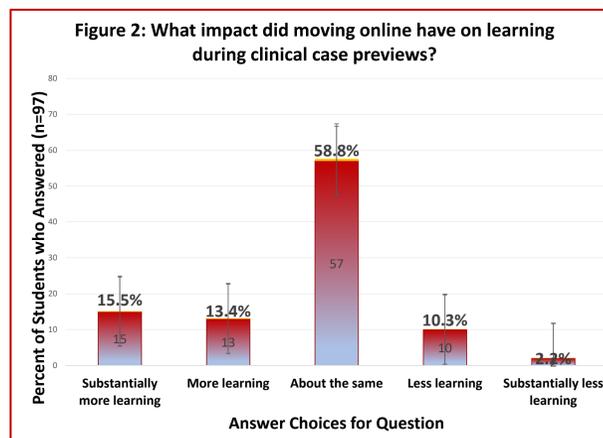
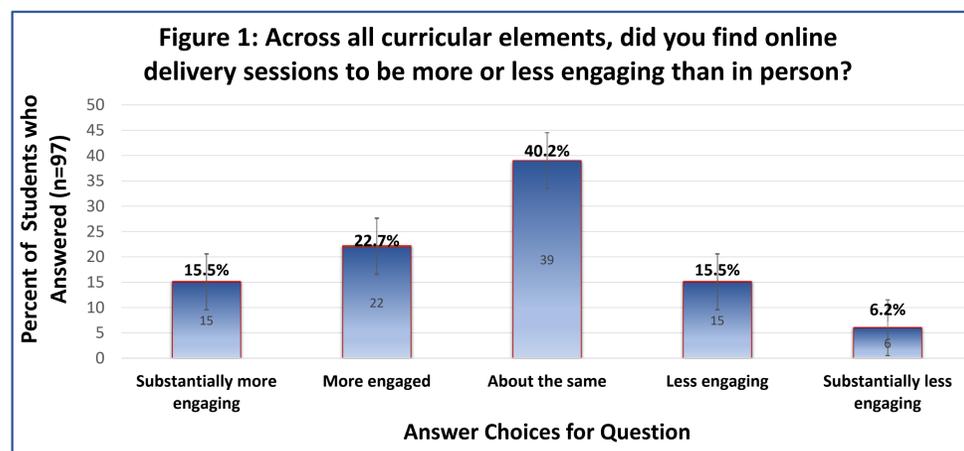
## BACKGROUND

Learning communities are common among medical schools and represent purposefully formed groups of students who are actively engaged in learning from each other.<sup>3</sup> How this is structured varies significantly from school to school. At our school, the learning community consists of six colleges that are each comprised of two M1 and two M2 teams. Each team is further divided into two groups. Core college faculty assigned to a team facilitate small-group case-based clinical reasoning discussions as well as a course on health systems, public health, and evidence-based care. Mandated stay-at-home orders and social distancing resulted in a rapid disruption to the in-person learning community. A new virtual space needed to be established for conducting our small group activities.

## METHODS

Within two weeks of interruption to the usual in-person college team sessions, our institution implemented an entirely virtual curriculum including small classrooms through Microsoft Teams. Invites were sent for all small group sessions at the appropriate time to simulate a normal weekly schedule for the remaining nine weeks of the M1 school year. To evaluate the change to the virtual platform, students completed an end-of-course assessment to compare their perception of the virtual experience to the in-person setting across several curricular elements.

## RESULTS



## ANALYSIS

**Figure 1** shows 78.4% of students (n=97) felt online delivery of the general curriculum was equivalent or better than in-person. **Figures 2 and 3** show that 87% of students felt that the online clinical case previews and presentations in the small group setting were equivalent or better in terms of learning than in-person sessions. **Figures 4 and 5** pertain to the college colloquium sessions where students learn about health care systems, public health, and evidence-based care. For the large group sessions and small groups discussions 77.4% and 84.6% of students, respectively, thought the learning was equivalent or better than in-person. Preliminary data shows that a considerable majority of students felt that the learning experience using virtual methods within the learning communities was equivalent or better than in-person sessions.

## CONCLUSIONS

Learning communities can conduct virtual small group sessions that provide a similar, or even better, experience compared to in-person small group learning sessions.

## IMPLICATIONS

Being forced to conduct all aspects of our curriculum in a virtual platform enabled us to communicate, interact, teach, and learn in a new space. This disruption to the customary learning communities also allowed us to obtain valuable information on a potential hybrid educational delivery model that may benefit our entire medical school program.

## REFERENCES

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