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The New Normal: a Follow-Up Survey of Trainee and Faculty Perceptions of Remote Didactic Learning During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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To the Editor:

In February 2021, we reported on perceptions of remote learning versus in-person learning among faculty and trainees at our institution at a time point in the summer of 2020 approximately 3 months after the start of the COVID-19 pandemic [1]. We found that both trainees and faculty perceived in-person learning more favorably than remote learning across most of the domains we surveyed. Despite this, clear majorities of both trainees (84%) and faculty (88%) felt that at least some lectures should continue to be offered in a remote format even once in-person instruction became possible again.

In the summer of 2021, in light of relaxed social distancing requirements and the availability of an effective vaccine, we began to offer hybrid lectures where the faculty member presented their lecture on campus, while residents could choose to attend in-person or join remotely via Zoom. We then surveyed our faculty and trainees at a time point approximately 3 months after the transition to hybrid lectures. This survey consisted of two parts: first, a repeat of our previous survey gauging how faculty and trainee attitudes towards remote learning had changed since the summer 2020 survey and, second, an additional survey focusing on the effects that the hybrid format had on perceptions of both remote and in-person learning. Survey items for the follow-up survey were developed by program leadership and trainees knowledgeable about the program's educational curriculum. Our study protocol was reviewed by our institution's IRB and granted exempt status, and data collection was anonymous.

The response rate was 68% ($n=50/73$) among trainees and 44% ($n=51/116$) among faculty. Response rates from the four class years of the Adult Training Program were largely consistent between classes (PGY-1: $n=10/15$; PGY-2: $n=11/15$; PGY-3: $n=11/15$; PGY-4: $10/12$). The response rate from the Child Program Trainees was 50% ($n=8/16$, PGY-4: $n=1$, PGY-5: $n=5$, PGY-6: $n=6$). In comparison with our previous survey, trainee attitudes towards remote learning became more polarized, with 65% preferring in-person (+15% from the previous survey), 23% preferring remote (+11%), and only 13% having no preference (−26%). In contrast, faculty attitudes towards remote learning remained largely static, with 81% preferring in-person (−1%), 6% preferring remote (−4%), and 13% having no preference (+5%).

The new survey questions on hybrid learning revealed a gap between trainee and faculty attitudes, as 65% of trainees found simultaneous in-person and remote learning an acceptable format while only 28% of faculty reported the same. Because hybrid learning allows both in-person and remote attendance, we attempted to study whether remote learners had any impact on in-person learners and vice versa. Most trainees felt that the presence of virtual learners had no impact on their in-person learning and that in-person learners had no impact on their experience as remote learners. In contrast, far fewer faculty felt the remote learners had no impact on the classroom, with a notable proportion of respondents feeling negatively impacted by the presence of remote learners in terms of their ability to focus on teaching the material (35%), engagement with learners (39%), and quality of discussion (44%).

In general, our findings are consistent with the idea that, one year into the pandemic, trainees are more certain than ever about their learning preferences, with the direction of this preference being split between those who preferred remote and those who preferred in-person learning. However, the overall trainee preference is still towards in-person learning, with roughly two-thirds preferring this. While trainee attitudes became more polarized, faculty opinion remained largely the same, with over four-fifths reporting a preference for in-person lectures. With clear

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majorities of both trainees and faculty preferring in-person didactics, we made the choice to return exclusively in-person learning in the summer of 2022. This is not a permanent decision, and various factors (including fluctuations in the COVID-19 pandemic and ongoing feedback from both trainees and faculty) may inform changes moving forward. If a return to hybrid learning does occur, it may come as a relief to know that most trainees do not feel that the presence of remote learners detracts from their experience, even if faculty do not necessarily feel similarly. It should be noted that these conclusions are derived from data at a single institution, a relatively large community of 73 trainees across two programs at a large metropolitan academic center, and may not be generalizable to all programs.

Declarations

Disclosure Manuscripts that are authored by a member of the Editorial Board undergo the same editorial review process applied to all manuscripts, including double anonymous review.

Reference

1. Heldt JP, Agrawal A, Loeb R, Richards MC, Castillo EG, DeBonis K. We're not sure we like it but we still want more: trainee and faculty perceptions of remote learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Acad Psychiatry*. 2021;45(5):598–602.

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