Advice and Resources for First-Generation and/or Lower-Income Students for Navigating the Penn Remote Learning Experience

Dear Penn First-Generation and/or Lower-Income Community,

On behalf of the faculty and staff of the University of Pennsylvania, I would like to take a moment to emphasize that we received and acknowledge the many concerns raised about Penn’s response to the COVID-19 crisis. In recent weeks, we collaborated with our partners across the academic, student support, financial, and technology realms of Penn to collect as many of your concerns as possible. To such ends, Penn First Plus now shares the following document, which attempts to cover as much ground as possible in addressing the issues you might be facing:

- Difficult study environment at home
- Familial earning and other expectations
- Course technology needs
- Issues with faculty accommodating structural barriers to course participation
- Course materials
- Academic progress concerns
- Ongoing financial matters

We acknowledge that this document is not all-encompassing and will require update and revision, which is why it is being stored as a live file so that P1P can provide the latest information as it becomes available. Should you feel as though something is missing or needs updating, please contact pennfirstplus@upenn.edu.

Thank you,

Marc A. Lo, Ph.D.

Executive Director, Penn First Plus
My home is too crowded to focus in or I do not have space private enough.

My family environment is full of fun and/or burdensome distractions.

I am embarrassed to have my home seen on-camera.

In preparing for this crisis, the Online Learning Initiative and Weingarten Learning Resources Center developed initial strategies for participating in courses remotely, which addresses concerns that all students might experience.

Concurrently, Penn understands that particularly for some first-generation and/or lower-income students, your home environment may be particularly different from the academic community in you have grown accustomed to studying.

Try having a conversation with your family to map out the when’s and where’s of family activity, as to identify the times when the space you prefer to study in will be available. Ask your family to stick to that schedule. Weingarten posted some helpful tools to support this type of scheduling.

Alternatively, try finding a remote space where you can safely practice social distancing while still having the room and internet access you need to study in peace.

Use your budget for internet utilities for a wireless hotspot that allows you to settle in someplace other than your home environment.

If possible, using headphones and/or exploring inexpensive options for microphone headsets may help keep distractions at bay.

Online video conference software allows for private messaging of instructors and classmates when there is a concern you need to address but do not wish to broadcast to the rest of the class.

For courses using Zoom, you may also be able to blur and/or replace the background of your home.

My family is going to expect me to work when I go home – I won’t be able to dedicate as much time to my coursework.

Have an honest conversation with your family about the amount of time you need to dedicate on specific days to coursework. This will help protect the time you would normally dedicate to classes.

For the first few weeks, your schedule will be in flux, and you will need to adapt to having different extra-curriculars and a different social life than you had on-campus. Your advisors and mentors, and Weingarten Learning Resources Center will still be
available to help you think through how to best structure your time to ensure academic success and a balance of your life outside the classroom.

*My home situation cannot be addressed by having discussions about time and space.*

Any student expressing complex, developing, and/or ongoing needs in light of depopulating campus and converting to remote instruction should contact Student Intervention Services directly at vpul-sisteam@pobox.upenn.edu.

*One or more of my course faculty will not be understanding nor accommodating my unique situation.*

All faculty were instructed by their Deans as well as the Provost’s Office to provide alternatives to class engagement where it was clear that internet bandwidth, time zone, and other structural (or personal) issues with your study environment would create a significant disadvantage for students. Please contact your school’s academic advising office or Penn First Plus for support in working with specific faculty.

*I forgot some of my course materials on-campus and cannot afford to procure an additional copy of the text.*

Several publishers have come to open-access agreements in light of the current crisis. Please review Penn Libraries’ website to determine if an e-copy is available.

Alternatively, ask if your faculty member can provide scanned copies (friends from class may also be able to help) or alternative readings to address the same content.

*While on-campus, I was relying on campus resources for course technology, and cannot afford to purchase a new computer or other device necessary to complete my studies.*

First, try to determine if the issue can be repaired or addressed with IT support. Penn has established a new service to support students with technology issues during this period of remote instruction.

If you do not have a laptop or other technology needed for remote learning, please contact Student Intervention Services at vpul-sisteam@pobox.upenn.edu or Penn First Plus at pennfirstplus@upenn.edu.

*My internet at home is too slow to support video streaming.*

Consider turning off your side of the video stream and participating via audio-only — this can conserve bandwidth. Also consider coming to an arrangement with family members about how many devices can be streaming at a given time, ideally with priority given to members who are still in school and/or meeting work requirements (entertainment can wait).
Where possible – and doing so without violating local stay-at-home orders – identify locations near home that may have higher speed and/or more reliable internet. This may include extended family or friends’ homes, or – depending on local policies – cafes and libraries that remain open and are conducive to current social distancing guidelines.

If you are a highly aided undergraduate who was required to relocate from on-campus housing, you may still request consideration for internet funding support by emailing sfs.ha@pobox.upenn.edu or pennfirstplus@upenn.edu.

Depending on availability of service provider and local policies, your household may also qualify for one of the free and/or reduced-cost internet packages highlighted on this page. Please visit the Internet Service Provider COVID-19 Response section of the ISC website.

Lastly, all faculty have been encouraged by the Office of the Provost to ensure that classes are asynchronous and designed with forms of engagement in course activities that accommodate the plurality of time zones and internet capabilities of students. Please reach out to any faculty member with concerns about their remote course’s design and notify your academic advisor of this barrier to your academic success.

I am still concerned about my ability to make academic progress this semester.

Please refer to your academic advisor and/or school’s advising office.

College of Arts and Sciences
College COVID-19 Response

Wharton School of Business
Wharton Undergraduate COVID-19 FAQ

School of Engineering and Applied Sciences
Penn Engineering Undergraduate COVID-19 Information

School of Nursing
School of Nursing COVID-19 FAQ

I am still in Philadelphia and did not qualify for the COVID-19 funding support. What resources are available to me?

For internet subsidy, please review the Internet Service Provider COVID-19 Response section of the ISC website. Note that some of these offers require documentation of public assistance. We are clarifying that information in the coming days.
Because housing is factored into all financial aid budgets, students with concerns about affording rent should refer back to their aid package and the budgeting they conducted at the start of the academic year. Please contact Financial Wellness at Penn for further support with budgeting and/or your Financial Aid advisor via sfsmail@pobox.upenn.edu or (if you are highly aided) sfs.ha@pobox.upenn.edu.

For food, Penn Dining is still honoring meal plans, and boxed meals are available to pick up on campus at the following locations.

Lastly, beginning Monday, March 30, any Philadelphia resident can pick up a box of food (one box per household) on Mondays and Thursdays between 10AM and Noon at one of the following locations. No ID will be required, and boxes will last up to five days.

I am a highly aided student who was required to leave my on-campus housing assignment. I also did not apply for COVID-19 funding support by the deadline. What are my options?

Contact the highly aided advisors via sfs.ha@pobox.upenn.edu with the details of your situation. They will review your concerns with the COVID-19 response team.

I have concerns about my work-study, other on-campus employment, or financial aid that were not answered here.

Please refer to the Finance/Financial Aid/Work Study Section of the Penn COVID-19 Student FAQ.