

## **Goodbye to All That: Starting College in a Pandemic**

When I think back on my first years of college at Thomas More University in Crestview Hills, Kentucky, I cannot separate them from the pandemic. My introduction to higher education was not lecture halls filled with students or crowded campus events—it was muted microphones, black Zoom screens, and the quiet of my room. What should have been the beginning of independence and exploration was instead shaped by distance, restrictions, and uncertainty. Those years formed my outlook on learning, responsibility, and community in ways I could not have predicted. Saying goodbye to that time is difficult because while it was filled with challenges, it also forced me to grow.

Most of my classes were online, but I did have a few in-person courses, including history and band. Even so, those experiences were far from what I expected. In history class, we sat spaced apart, everyone wearing masks, which made it harder to talk or even recognize people. The band was even more disappointing. That year, it felt like a waste of time. We spent hours rehearsing for marching band, yet we never marched. Instead, all of that effort led to a single showing, which made it difficult to feel motivated or proud of what we had done. What should have been an exciting part of my first year ended up reminding me how much the pandemic had taken away.

At the same time, the experience pushed me to become more self-reliant. In high school, structure was provided for me—bells rang, teachers checked in, and activities filled my time. In college, especially under pandemic conditions, there was no one to make sure I logged into class, finished an assignment, or stayed on top of deadlines. I had to hold myself accountable in a way I never had before. That pressure was frustrating at times, but it taught me the value of discipline. I learned that success in college depended not on being watched over but on finding the motivation to keep going, even in isolation.

The social side of college was also impacted. Making friends, joining clubs, and finding community—things I had expected to come naturally—were harder when gatherings were limited or moved online. Even when we were in person, masks and distancing made it harder to connect with people. It was easy to feel like I was missing out on the “real” college experience. But as time went on, I found ways to connect. Even small interactions, like chatting with someone in a breakout room or meeting one or two people safely in person, meant more than they might have otherwise. Those moments reminded me that community can exist even in difficult circumstances, and that it is worth the effort to seek it out.

Eventually, restrictions eased and classes shifted back toward in-person learning. Walking into a classroom after so long felt almost strange. The noise, the movement, and the energy were overwhelming compared to the quiet of learning at home. But with that return came a deeper appreciation. Things I might once have taken for granted—sitting with classmates, talking to professors after class, eating lunch on campus without masks—suddenly carried more weight. I learned to see those ordinary parts of college life as privileges, not guarantees.

Looking back, starting my college career at Thomas More University during the pandemic was not what I expected, but it shaped me. It forced me to become more responsible, it taught me to value community, and it gave me perspective on how quickly things can change. Saying goodbye to that period is complicated: I would never want to repeat it, but I also cannot deny what it taught me. As I continue my college journey beyond those first pandemic years, I carry those lessons with me—the importance of independence, the value of connection, and the ability to adapt when life does not go as planned.

## **Reflection**

### **Were you able to stick to your creative routine this week? If not, why?**

I was able to stick to my routine for the most part, but not perfectly. I had planned to spread out the writing over a few sessions, but I found myself doing most of it in one sitting instead. I've realized I tend to write best when I focus and complete it rather than dragging it out over several days.

### **What part of your creative routine worked for you this week in writing your personal creative essay?**

Taking time to think through my memories before I wrote worked well. I gave myself a quiet space to reflect on what it was really like starting college during the pandemic—wearing masks in class, dealing with online learning, and even the frustration of band that year. Letting those specific experiences come back to me first helped me write more clearly once I started.

### **Was there something that didn't work and you'd like to change or try for your next creative assignment?**

What didn't work was trying to force myself into a strict "creative" schedule. I found myself procrastinating when I told myself I had to write at certain times. What worked better was being flexible—choosing a moment when I actually felt ready and sitting down with focus. Next time, I'll set aside blocks of time, but won't pressure myself if the ideas aren't coming yet.

### **What was the most gratifying, inspiring part of this assignment?**

The most gratifying part of this assignment was realizing how much my first years of college shaped me, even though they were not what I expected. Writing about that time helped me see that the struggles—like online classes, masks, and the letdown of band—also taught me lessons about resilience, independence, and appreciation for normal experiences. It felt meaningful to acknowledge that growth.