

Study examines how working moms in distance education navigate distractions and achieve academic success

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Credit: University of Maine

A significant percentage of college students in the United States are parents. According to studies, about 20% of undergraduate students and more than a third of graduate students are raising children under the age of 18, with mothers accounting for more than half of both populations.

To get a better understanding of the experiences of these students, researchers at the University of Maine College of Education and Human Development published an article in the *Journal of Computing in Higher Education* that features [case studies](#) of six academically high-achieving working moms enrolled in distance education courses during the COVID-19 pandemic. Their findings suggest that effective course design, making use of prior knowledge, scaffolding instruction and encouraging social presence can mitigate distractions and reduce the cognitive load of working mothers who are [college students](#).

All four of the study's authors are working moms and three of them are graduate students. Lead author Anne Fensie is the mother of three teenagers, two with special needs. She's an adjunct professor of computer science at the University of Maine at Augusta and a doctoral student in higher education at the University of Maine.

"My first attempt at doctoral studies when my children were younger was not successful," she says. "I struggled with mental health at the time. With the help of my family, I have since structured my home environment to safeguard my work time, though there continue to be distractions. I did my master's program in a hybrid format and I'm able to do much of my doctoral studies remotely."

Co-author Teri St. Pierre has three children under 18. She's an assistant professor of mathematics and director of Early College at the University of Maine at Presque Isle, as well as a doctoral student in higher education at UMaine.

"I earned one graduate degree live and one entirely online," St. Pierre says. "I've been able to structure my role of 'student' in the home somewhat with a home office and external support. As a night owl, I'm able to work late in the evening when my husband and children are not a distraction."

Jennifer Jain, another co-author, is the mother of a teenager and a young adult, who both live at home with her, her husband and a puppy. An interdisciplinary Ph.D. student, who also works part-time as a research assistant at the UMaine Center on Aging, Jain has also worked as a university lecturer and a recreational therapist in mental health. She delayed her doctoral studies due to her husband's career and is now navigating family, work and school.

"Finding time to do schoolwork is a challenge," Jain says. "I tend to juggle work and school in the mornings, when there are fewer distractions. I had less time in the afternoons, when there were more distractions. In the evening hours, when there are no distractions, I often fall asleep at the computer."

Fensie, St. Pierre, Jain and the study's fourth author, UMaine associate professor of curriculum, assessment and instruction Asli Sezen-Barrie, say their own experiences helped them identify with the challenges and distractions faced by the participants in their research.

They interviewed faculty members who taught the distance courses that the student participants were enrolled in, as well as the working mom students themselves. The students also used Zoom to record their study sessions for at least a half-hour once a week during the study period. The researchers also conducted weekly phone or Zoom check-ins with the students to debrief their study sessions and to clarify what the researchers had observed.

After analyzing the interviews and study observations, the researchers wrote case studies for the six working moms who participated in the project. Each case study discusses the challenges, supports and strategies the working moms experienced as they took part in distance education courses.

For example, Rebecca, a 35–44-year-old woman in an undergraduate business program, who was enrolled in a finance course during the study, worked full-time, had three school-aged children, and shared household responsibilities with her husband. With no [private space](#) in her house to do schoolwork, Rebecca "scheduled time based on the type of task and the level of distractions she could handle." If she really needed to concentrate—studying for an exam, for example—she would sometimes work in her car.

The study took place during the COVID-19 pandemic, which participants reported having both positive and negative impacts on their lives at home and school. One working mom said the pandemic encouraged her to go back to school full-time. Others said it made it hard to manage time and maintain focus on their schoolwork.

An overarching theme drawn from the interviews and case studies was the need for effective course design to support distance learners, especially those who are parents. The authors identify specific strategies that distance learning faculty and students can use to reduce the cognitive demands and distractions that can hamper learning. For example, they discuss the importance of encouraging social presence in their online classes. One participant who was part of an online social work program talked about how "the small group that I formed within my cohort has been a godsend."

Other strategies include scaffolding instruction, or breaking down complex learning concepts into smaller, more manageable tasks, and using students' prior knowledge, as well as relevant and authentic learning activities.

Though the study focused on high-achieving students, the researchers argue that the strategies "could be beneficial for all adult learners in distance education."

More information: Anne Fensie et al, Engaged learning during distraction: a case study of successful working moms in distance education, *Journal of Computing in Higher Education* (2023). [DOI: 10.1007/s12528-023-09359-0](https://doi.org/10.1007/s12528-023-09359-0)

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