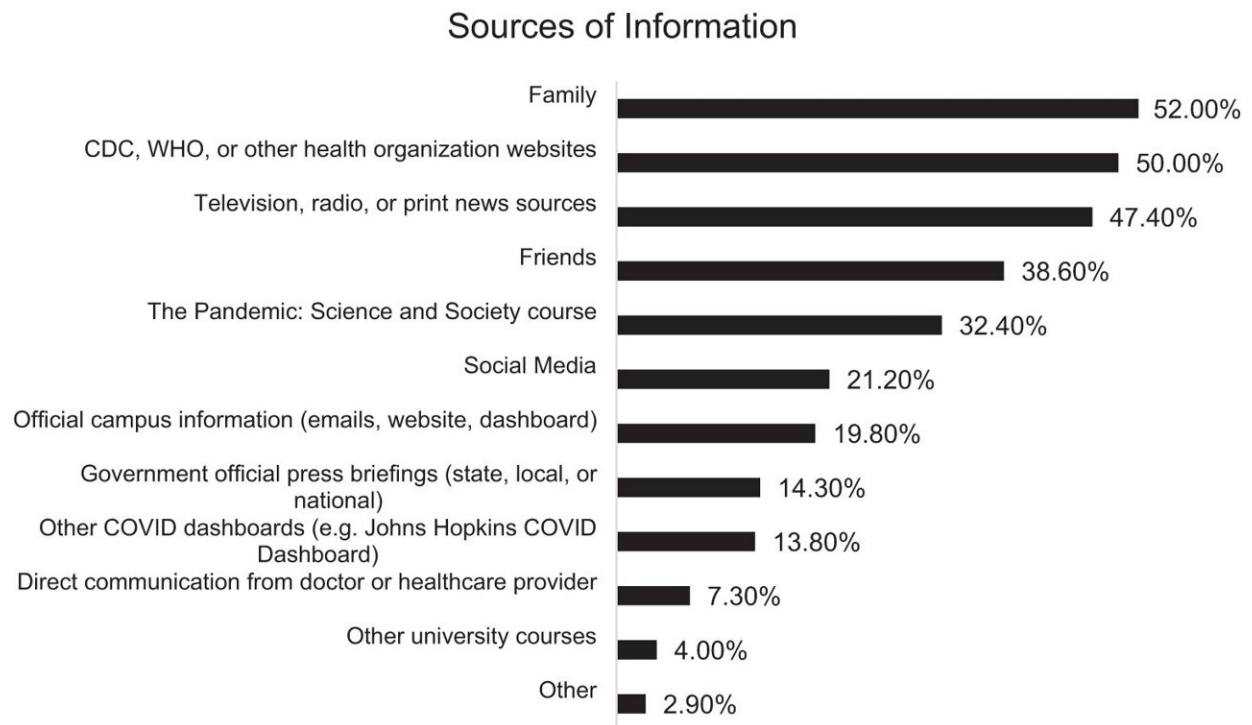


# Pandemic course improved COVID-19 knowledge, study finds

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The number of respondents who chose each of the categories as a top three source of information that influenced their behavior during the Fall 2020 semester. Credit: *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications* (2024). DOI: 10.1057/s41599-023-02461-9

Early in the COVID-19 pandemic, more than 1,300 students enrolled in a three-week summer immersion course, "The Pandemic: Science and

Society," at Washington University in St. Louis. The innovative course envisioned by Feng Sheng Hu, the Richard G. Engelsmann Dean of Arts & Sciences, brought together experts from across WashU and around the country.

A new study [published](#) in the journal *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications* examines the course's impact and implications for effective public health messaging for [university students](#) going forward.

Reviewing data submitted three months after the course concluded, researchers found a person's preferred information sources made a difference in their level of knowledge, risk perception and protective behaviors. People with higher COVID knowledge practiced more protective behaviors during the fall 2020 semester.

"We can emphasize the need for protective behaviors without causing a feeling of dread," said Krista Milich, an assistant professor of biological anthropology in Arts & Sciences who designed and taught the COVID-19 course. The pandemic course used such an approach to encourage safety behaviors while reiterating that those behaviors can make a difference.

"The course also created a sense of community during a time when many people were feeling isolated," Milich said.

The course was free to all full-time WashU students and ran from Aug. 17 to Sept. 4, 2020. Students from all WashU schools participated in online lectures and discussion boards, completed quizzes and created a piece of communication—either a video, an infographic, a letter to the editor or a work of art—about the virus. Students shared their work on social media using the hashtag #COVIDcourse.

The new study analyzed data from nearly 1,000 anonymous

questionnaires. The majority of respondents were WashU students (83%). About half of the respondents took the course, and another 26% had some exposure to course content, either by watching lectures online or hearing from others who attended.

Respondents said their top sources of COVID-19 information were family (52%), official health organization websites (50%), [news media](#) (47.4%), friends (38.6%) and the pandemic course (32.4%). Of these, health organizations and the course were associated with higher levels of COVID knowledge, more accurate risk perception and stronger protective behaviors.

"In our study, those who relied on [social media](#) had lower COVID knowledge scores and personal safety scores than those who relied on official sources," Milich said. Using friends or family as a primary source of information was also associated with lower COVID knowledge.

While the new analysis focuses on implications for future public health communication, the results indirectly point to a second success: WashU administrators largely achieved their goals for the course. Hu and other leaders hoped an immersive, interdisciplinary course would positively influence personal behaviors and improve compliance with recommended safety steps.

"I'm so pleased to see the positive impact the pandemic course had on our students and campus community," Hu said. "This course showcases two hallmarks of Arts & Sciences—collaboration and creativity—and I hope it can serve as a model for other universities seeking to improve public health knowledge on campus."

The benefits of such a course are wide-reaching, Milich said. A university practicing safer behaviors can ultimately protect the larger

community by preventing spillovers that could affect vulnerable individuals in the area.

"Our study illustrates how universities can design a curriculum to impact the behaviors of students during a pandemic, which will likely have positive impacts on the surrounding community," Milich said.

"Providing reliable and accessible public health information may be an important way to reduce harm during future global health crises."

**More information:** Krista M. Milich et al, Effective public health messaging for university students: lessons learned to increase adherence to safety guidelines during a pandemic, *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications* (2024). [DOI: 10.1057/s41599-023-02461-9](https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-023-02461-9)

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