

Still on Campus

Chinese students who remain on American college campuses during the pandemic adjust to quieter lives.

By

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[Muzi Li](#)

[Northern Arizona University](#)'s grounds are quieter these days, but campus life isn't a whole lot different for Muzi Li.

The finance major from Nanjing, China, is studying at Northern Arizona University through a dual degree program with China's Yangzhou University.

When NAU shifted courses online in March in response to the coronavirus pandemic, Li opted to stay at NAU rather than return to China. She concluded that the risk of infection would be greater if she were to travel by air and that if she went home she would have to deal with poor internet connectivity through a virtual private network, which would complicate her accessing classes remotely. She also feared she might not be able to return to the U.S. to finish her program.



“In the long term, it is a better choice for me to stay at NAU,” Li said via email. “In fact, for most Chinese students at NAU, the practice of switching to online teaching did not have much impact on our life. Since most Chinese students usually cook their own meals in the dorm instead of going to the school’s restaurant often, perhaps the only difference is that there is no need to take the school bus to the classroom every day.”

With her American roommate gone, she adds, “I’m enjoying my rare time alone! And her desk is being used by me as a kitchen!”

Thousands of international students stayed in the U.S. after their campuses largely shut down in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. In many cases they might not have had good options to go home: at the time U.S. campuses canceled in-person instruction, China was at the epicenter of the coronavirus outbreak, and air travel to and from China had largely been suspended. As the focus of the pandemic has shifted from China to the U.S., many Chinese students remain on U.S. campuses, living in the dorms like Li.

Terry Brown, vice president for academic innovation and transformation at the American Association of State Colleges and Universities, said the majority of Chinese students enrolled across AASCU institutions through a formal partnership program coordinated by the association remain on their campuses. She said before classes went online, there were about 1,500 students enrolled through [1+2+1 dual degree programs](#), which let students start and end their programs at a Chinese university and take their middle two years at an AASCU member institution such as NAU. About 1,200 of those students stayed.

“We’ve now organized regular webinars with Chinese families,” Brown said.

“The first virtual meeting there were 4,000 people were on the call to ask their questions and to make sure that their children were being cared for. The second meeting we had about 1,500. That told me that people got answers that they wanted,” Brown said.

Brown said families asked “very fundamental questions” about the care of the students. They wanted to know what the students were eating and what kinds of resources were available to support their physical and mental health.

“I think that everyone agrees that the students are better off where they are than if they were to take a long flight home, or to be in any transit, or to be anywhere else from where they are. They’re very safe, and that’s how they feel,” she said.

Daniel Wubah, the president of [Millersville University](#), an AASCU member institution in Pennsylvania, said the university has 21 Chinese exchange students who remain on campus, along with other international students and some domestic students without good alternative housing options. Wubah said students have been separated into private suites to allow for social distancing and that their meal plans were converted into accounts to let them purchase food at local stores. Wubah said Millersville is arranging off-campus housing for the students for the summer.

“As soon as we decided to go online, the first thing the international program services [office] did was to reach out to these students to discuss with them the impact on immigration status, their housing, as well as their health and well-being,” Wubah said. Advisers are doing daily Zoom sessions with students enrolled in the intensive English program, he added.

"With this kind of isolation, it's a bit unusual," he said. "We are checking on their emotional well-being, how they are adjusting to not being able to go out and mingle with other people. It's a way of keeping contact with them to make sure that they don't feel isolated."

Bruce F. Wang, the director of Asian academic engagement at NAU, said the university has advised students not to go back to China right now in part because they may have difficulty returning.

"We're assuring students NAU remains fully operational in the summer. They can stay in the dorms, and summer classes are available," he said. "We assure them that we're here, we're helping them. They don't have to feel that they are stranded here. They still can take summer classes and make progress."

Xinzhu Xiang, a sophomore at NAU studying biomedical science, plans to enroll in summer classes. She mostly stays in her dorm room, venturing out for food once every three weeks.

"I spend most of the time on my assignments, so I don't feel very lonely," said Xiang, who is enrolled in a dual degree program with Huaqiao University, in southeastern China.

"Mostly, I just stay in the dorm and study and have my online courses," she said. "It is comfortable for me."