Mitigating Online Learning Inequalities: Student Perceptions of the Transition to Remote Learning

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Online Learning Inequalities

The COVID-19 crisis provides an opportunity to **examine differential impacts, lessons learned, best practices, and practical strategies** for ensuring all students are able to benefit equally from digital learning and its web-enhanced features. Our goal is to mitigate the reproduction of educational inequalities within universities, as not all students are equally positioned when it comes to thriving in these newer online learning environments. We undertake an intersectional analysis (Crenshaw, 1989) and consider various student attributes including, gender, year level, domestic and international student status when examining the impact on students of the pivot to remote learning.

Methodology

This study was conducted between April and June of 2020, shortly after UBC transitioned to remote instruction. Fifty-seven instructors in **Chemistry, Civil Engineering, History, Political Science, and Psychology** participated in the study, yielding a **response rate of 54%**. Instructors were interviewed on Zoom and surveyed through Qualtrics. Concurrently 1,213 students were also surveyed through Qualtrics with a **response rate of 45.8%.**
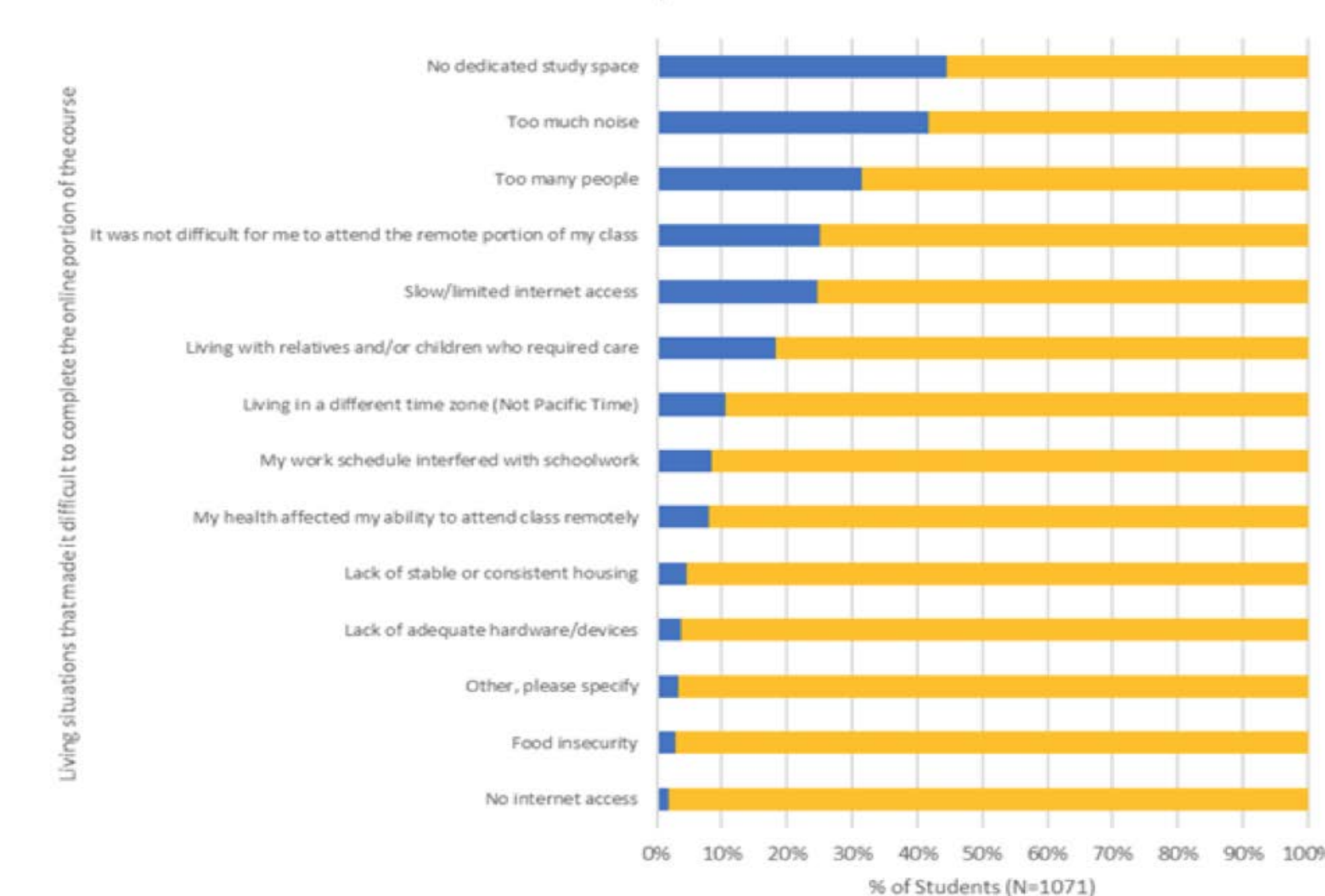
Student Demographics
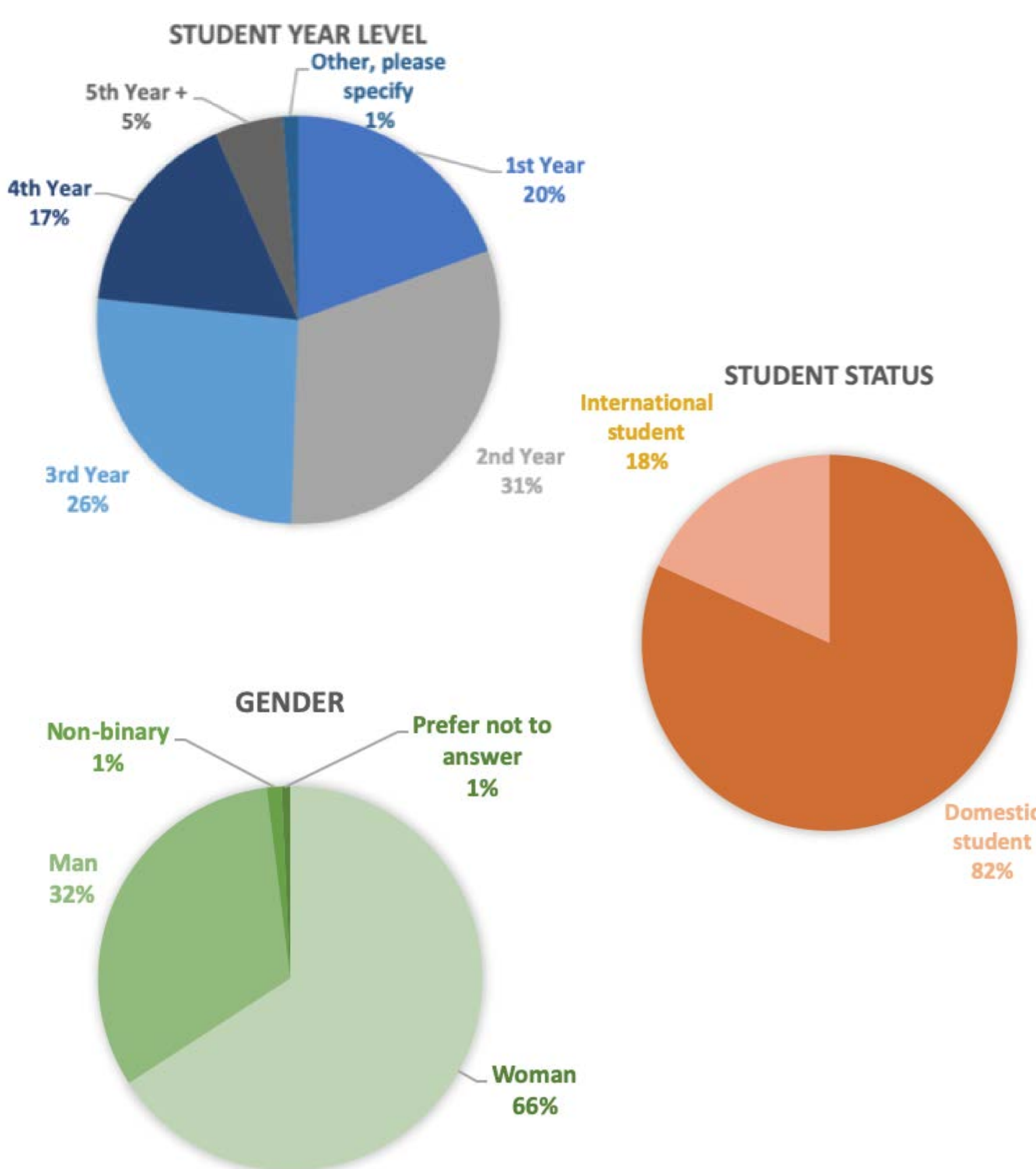
Student Perceptions of the Transition to Remote Instruction

Sixty-seven percent of students either strongly agree, agree, or somewhat agree that they felt overwhelmed by the transition to online learning.
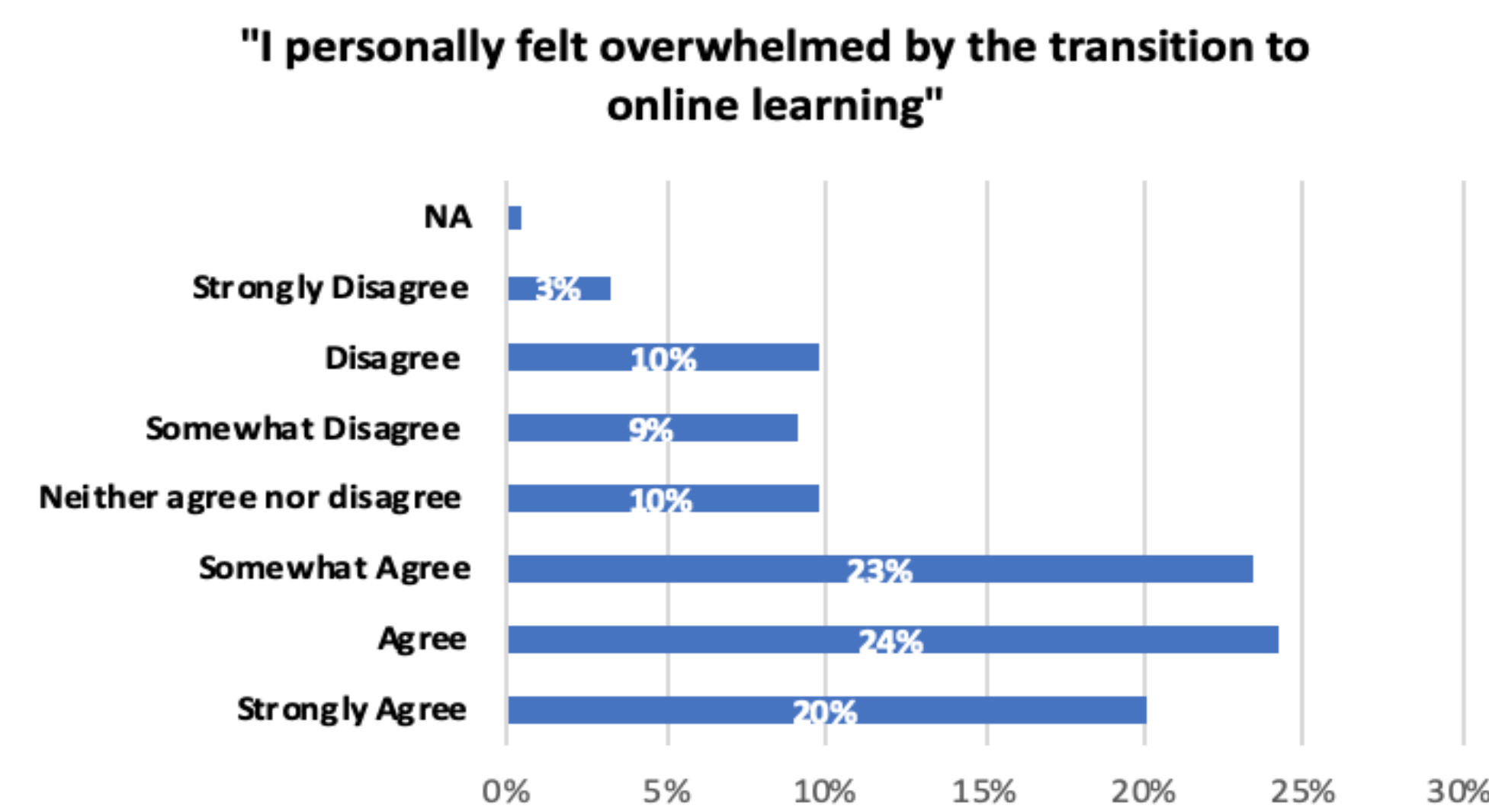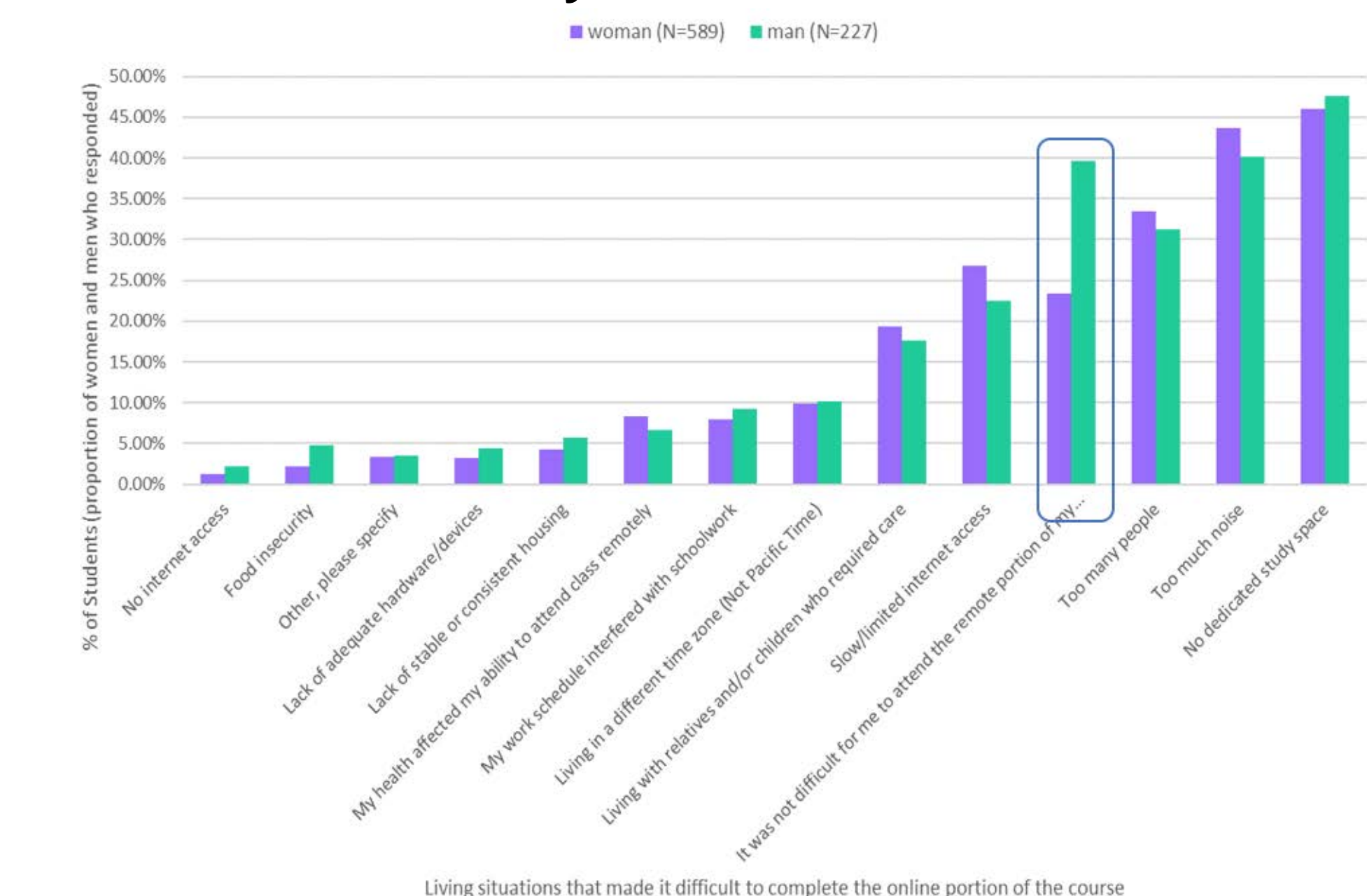

Student Living Situations Impacting Remote Learning

## Gendered Differences in Student Living Situations

Thirty-nine percent of students who identify as male indicated that it was **not difficult** for them to attend the remote portion of their class, compared to **23% of students who identify as female.**

## Impact on Domestic vs. International Students

Seventeen percent of domestic students indicated they engaged less with the learning material in their remote course (compared to face to face courses) while only **4% of international students** felt that way.

International students were more likely than domestic students to report that they did not feel successful as a student in their course.
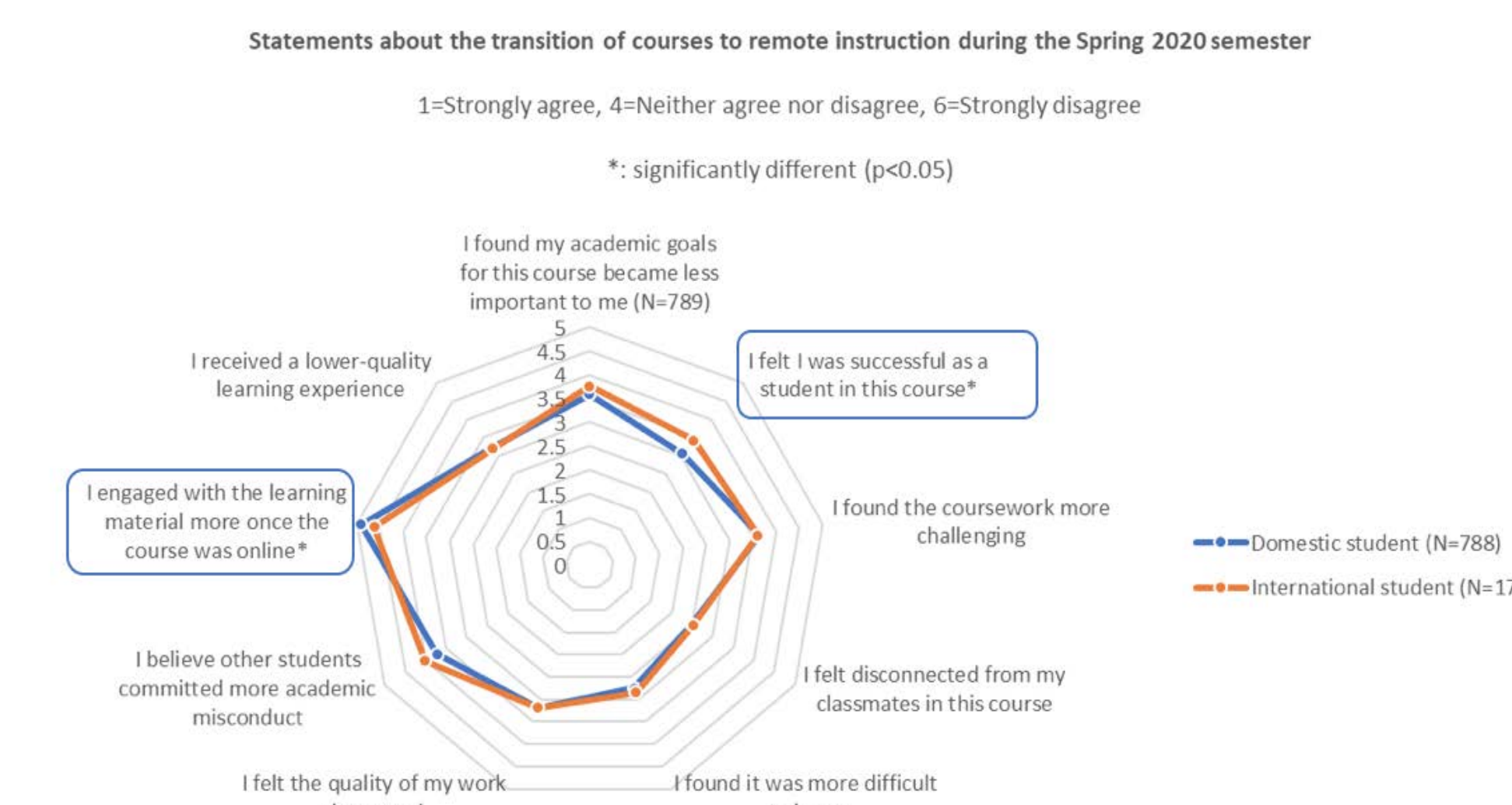
Student Financial Hardships

When students were asked, "Did you ever consider abandoning your academic studies in the past term because of financial hardship?" **16% indicated that they did consider abandoning their studies.**
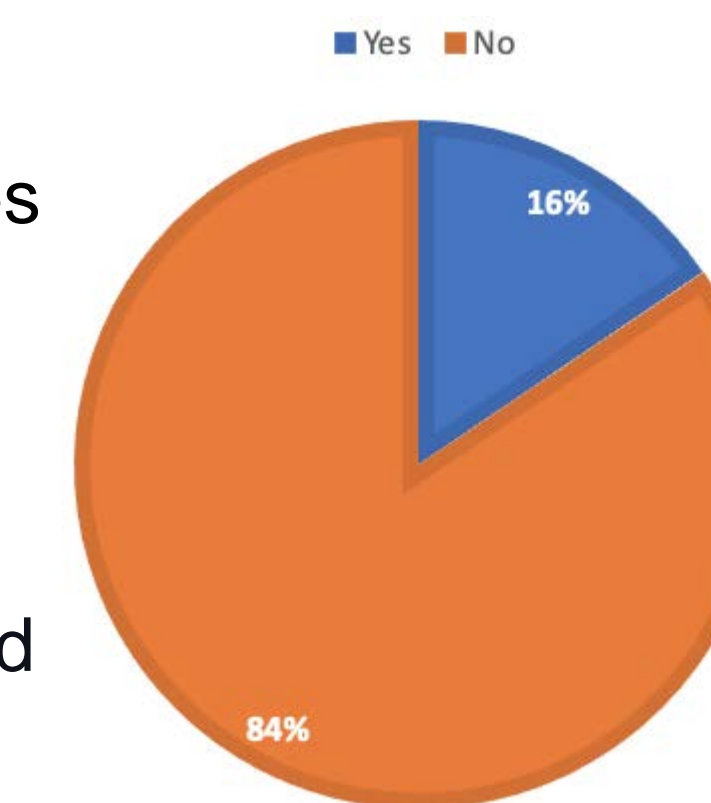
Twenty-nine percent of students who had previously taken out student loans to help fund their university studies **reported that they needed to increase their loan amount due to the Covid-19 crisis.**

Student Reported Challenges to Remote Learning

"*Being disconnected from others and not feeling like there's any social interaction during the course.*"

"*Feeling of isolation.*"

- Feeling **socially disconnected**/alone/isolated
- **Time zone** differences
- Lack of communication with peers
- Everything was harder (e.g., **technology issues**, **personal struggles**, etc.)
- **Disability negatively impacted learning**
- Experiencing **mental health challenges**
- **Stress** from doing self-study/self-teaching with course material

Student Suggestions for Instructors

"*More sympathetic on how difficult the transition for students was.*"

"*Have more accessible office hours.*"

"*Paced the material slower because there was a lot of change happening at once it was hard to keep up and the whole thing weighed on mental health.*"

"*More support.*"

- Demonstrate **more consideration/ empathy/ sympathy** to students
- **Increase communication** and clarify expectations in a virtual learning environment
- **Host Zoom calls/meetings** to answer questions
- **Take into account time zone differences**
- **Address internet/bandwidth issues** to facilitate smoother instruction

Supporting a Diverse Student Body

Not all students are equally positioned when it comes to online learning. Analyzing various student attributes allows us to examine the unique circumstances that shape one's experience of online learning.

The transition to remote learning presented various challenges. Students experienced mental health concerns, difficult living conditions not conducive for remote learning and financial hardships. The degree to which one experiences the latter challenges is influenced by a multitude of factors.

Taking an intersectional approach allows us to better understand how to support students and mitigate educational inequalities by examining gender disparities in living situations and understanding how international and domestic student status alters one's experience with online learning.

References

Crenshaw, K. (1989). Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory and antiracist policies. *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, *1*, 139-167.

Acknowledgements