

Lap dogs are welcome in the virtual classroom.

TIME IS WELLNESS

Pitt Med student Vi Nguyen sits at her kitchen table in April. Clear of setting pieces, the table overlooks a south-facing window; sunlight streams into the kitchen. The room doubles as her classroom. Nguyen, who will start her second year in the fall, arranges a laptop, notebooks, and extra fine-tipped pens in pink, blue, and orange on the table's surface. She's ready to take in the day's lessons.

Like many of her fellow med students, Nguyen rarely attends class in person. She takes advantage of a program initiated 10 years ago by John Mahoney, Pitt Med's associate dean for education (until this June). In an effort to accommodate individual learning styles and to promote student wellness, Pitt Med changed how it approached coursework by making lecture attendance optional and offering downloadable live recordings (colloquially referred to as podcasts) of lectures synced with professors' slide decks. Nguyen appreciates the autonomy to choose when and how she learns.

"Every time I do go [to lecture], I am reminded that I have a relatively short attention span for passive intake of information," she says. "So it is more fruitful for me to listen to the podcast. I am able to notice when my mind is drifting and pause [the lecture] and then rewind if I need to." Some students finish an entire semester without once attending a class lecture in person. While this may make med school sound lonely, students get to know each other in weekly small group sessions, labs, and study groups.

Michelle Zhang is also just finishing her first year at Pitt Med. When reviewing lectures on her laptop, if she is already familiar with the subject, Zhang listens to the podcast a little faster than its normal speed. She'll reduce an hour lecture to 40 minutes. Zhang says that extra 20 minutes can add up and give a student more time to socialize, exercise, or sleep.

Melissa McNeil, MD/MPH and vice chair of education for the Department of Medicine, notes that faculty members have tailored their teaching styles so that their lectures are approachable to students learning in person and via a remote location. Accommodating students who learn better at places like the kitchen table appears to be paying off.

"Wellness is multifactorial, and there are so many stressors on our students," McNeil says. "This is one thing that was easy for us to do and hugely appreciated by the students."

—Nichole Faina

Photography by Cami Mesa