

# Undergraduate Students' Emotional and Mental Well-being During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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This project is a part of a larger ongoing NSF study investigating student and instructor perceptions around online spaces and institutional supports during the pandemic in 2020.

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# Background

- College students have reported increased stress and anxiety during the initial year of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 (Son et al., 2020; Aguilera-Hermida, 2020).
- Some of the challenges reported: Financial hardships, difficulties in concentrating in online classes, and lack of support/resources for online classes (Son et al., 2020; Aguilera-Hermida, 2020; Bregel, 2020).
- During the pandemic, minoritized students faced greater prevalence of poor mental health (Cheah et al., 2020; Murthy, 2022; Salerno, 2020)
- Understanding students' experiences and ways of coping during the pandemic can help institutions better support students' needs in times of crises.

# Research Questions

1- What were undergraduate students' emotional experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic in Fall 2020?



2- What coping mechanisms did students use for their emotional and mental well being during the COVID-19 pandemic in Fall 2020?

# Demographic Information

Sample: Eleven undergraduate students from a Hispanic-serving research institute in the southwest

*Demographic Characteristics of Fall 2020 Undergraduate Interview Participants*

Characteristic	<i>n</i>
<b>Total N</b>	11
1 <sup>st</sup> Generation	5
Student with a Disability	4
<i>Ethnicity<sup>a</sup></i>	
Hispanic or Latinx	6
White or Caucasian	3
Asian or Asian American	2
Black or African American	5
Native American	1
Multiple	1
<i>Gender</i>	
Woman	7
Man	2
Non-binary <sup>b</sup>	2
	<b><i>M (Median), SD</i></b>
Age	27.6 (20.5), 10.91

<sup>a</sup>Participants selected all identities that applied to them.

<sup>b</sup>Non-binary identities were collapsed to protect participant identity, but included: Genderqueer, Agender, Non-binary, Non-conforming, Two-spirit, Genderfluid, Questioning, and Intersex.

# Method

- Semi-structured interviews in Fall 2020
- Coding protocol: Adapted from Grounded Theory Analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1998): Open coding, Axial coding, Selective coding



# Open Coding

- Academic challenges- mentally not there
- Beginning Fall- emotional state (good)
- bored with classes
- COVID-related effects on mental health
- Depressed and stressed
- Depression and anxiety- personal and global news
- Doing something to stay busy- mental health
- Emotionally doing well because like online classes
- Emotions- affecting motivation and willingness to work
- Fall 2020- craved human interaction- affected mental health
- Fall 2020- emotionally recovering from Spring 2020
- Fall 2020- false hope of in-person classes- affected mental health
- Fall 2020- long and challenging
- Fall 2020- mental and physical effort to push through
- Fall 2020- mental health impacted
- Fall 2020- more tired
- Fall 2020- Personal struggles (health) with online classes- draining
- Fall 2020- physical health impacted due to stress
- Fall 2020- rough semester
- Fall 2020- Tiring, exhausted
- Fall 2020- worse than Spring (stopped caring)
- Fall- anxiety, stressful- lot going on
- Fall- felt more alone in the confusion involving figuring out online classes
- Fall- lost hope (compared to spring)
- Fall- mental health impacted
- Fall- Mental health- initially down but slowly built it up
- Fall- mentally draining

# Axial Coding

Name	Files	References
> ● Workload- Assignments or Class work	7	25
> ● Work	7	23
> ● Uncertainty	4	5
> ● Time management	8	15
> ● Shared sense of experiences (everyone's struggling)	5	15
> ● Reference to Emotions, Mental Health	11	68
> ● Priorities	5	5
> ● Organization and consistency	5	11
> ● Online classes- what worked	4	12
> ● Need for social interactions or communication	7	38
> ● Motivation	5	20
> ● Losing family members during COVID	2	2
> ● Living on your own- sense of independence	2	8
> ● Instructor practices	11	67
> ● Institution's practices	10	47
> ● Finances	6	19
> ● Fear of COVID exposure	5	8
> ● Family's presence-support	6	11
> ● Family responsibilities	5	10
> ● Expectations from Self and sense of self	9	19
> ● Coping	5	8
> ● Challenges with online format	9	35

# Example

- ✓ ● Reference to Emotions, Mental Health
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# Results

## Challenges

- Balancing work, academic, and personal life
  - Academic workload
  - Household and/or family responsibilities
  - Work responsibilities
- Lack of motivation
- Challenges of online class modality
  - Technological and internet connectivity problems
  - Communication with peers and professors
  - Physical exhaustion (being on desk for long hours)
- Uncertainty
- Finances
- COVID-related health concerns
- Lack of social interaction
  - Feelings of isolation

**Undergraduate Students'  
emotional and mental  
well-being**

## Symptoms reported:

- Depression
- Anxiety
- Stress
- Exhaustion/Tiredness
- Isolation

## Ways of Coping:

- Consistent Routine
  - Scheduling/Time management
- Self-care

## External Support

- Family
- Peers/Friends
  - Sense of shared experiences
- Work supervisor
  - Flexibility
- Instructor support
  - Leniency with deadlines
  - Open communication
- Institutional support
  - COVID screening
  - Financial aid/Scholarships
  - Free Food supplies
  - Technological support

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*“In in-person classes, it's very easy to get motivated just by going to class and seeing the professor, which was missing in online version”*

*“People don't say anything, they just mute and look at their phones, which is probably what pushed me into further isolation”*

*“I didn't feel like a part of the class. It's such an entirely different experience just sitting in class, raising your hand, answering questions, seeing professors in person”*

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*“I was talking with a couple of other classmates, and it seemed like they felt the same way. So, I kind of realized I wasn't alone in that.”*

*“...talking with my dad was hugely important because he helped me to put a lot of things into perspective when I wasn't feeling great.”*

*“Some professors were willing to give extensions...that was amazing, and just the help I needed at the time.”*

# Conclusion

- Social support for college students during a global crisis can help reduce feelings of isolation and foster feeling of belongingness.
- The coping strategies that students mentioned can also inform interventions at the institution-level that would cater to students' mental health needs now as they re-adjust to in-person classes on campus.
- Lived experiences of students during a time of crisis can help identify existing barriers and inequities at institutions of higher learning.

# Thank you!

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