

**STUDENT LEARNING  
DURING AND POST-COVID-19  
RECOMMENDATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS**

**Prepared for**

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# Student Learning During and Post-COVID-19: Recommendations and Implications

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, universities were already grappling with a mental health crisis on their campuses<sup>1</sup>. COVID-19 only intensified the disparities and mental health issues among students struggling to access and use mental health services. It is well documented that roughly half of all lifetime mental health disorders cited in studies start during an individual's mid-teens and three-quarters by the mid-20s (college years)<sup>2</sup>. The 2020-21 social isolation from the pandemic increased students' exposure to risk factors associated with stressors, anxiety, depression, traumas, and other behavioral health disorders. For many students, particularly first-year university students, grieving the important rites of passage (i.e., graduation ceremonies, prom, walking on a university campus) have been detrimental to their transition into adult life and university life. Other negative consequences include loss of employment resulting in financial distress, poor living conditions, and food scarcity; loss of aspirations and future college and career plans; and the loss of human life or a loved one.

First-generation university students have been more deeply impacted by the pandemic than other students<sup>3</sup>. For many first-generation university students, having access to adequate resources and tools to ensure their academic success has been a major challenge. This is also known as the digital divide, or the inability of students to do schoolwork at home due to lack of internet or technology. Incoming first-generation students from low-income families are more likely

to delay college during the pandemic, when compared to their wealthier counterparts<sup>4</sup>. Additionally, first-year university students while at home during the pandemic, are tasked with fulfilling other family obligations, such as caring for or tutoring their younger siblings, running errands and, in some cases, working more than one job to help support their family. This type of cultural conflict puts a heavy burden on first-generation university students in having to prioritize family matters over their academics. Many students also are lacking privacy and having to compete with other family members for space and time for their coursework Zoom sessions. This concern is most evident among students who live in multi-generational households with overcrowded conditions that don't have distraction-free space.

Social emotional learning (SEL) has been extensively studied and found to enhance students' resilience<sup>5</sup>. It serves as a protective factor for psychological distress, anxiety, and overcoming trauma<sup>6</sup>. SEL provides a sense of belonging and connectedness with others associated with school engagement, academic achievement, and students' full participation in academic spaces<sup>7,8</sup>. When academic institutions reopen for in-person learning, students' SEL will be a priority for faculty and staff by integrating "check-ins" with students to help

1 Fruehwirth JC, Biswas S, Perreira KM. The Covid-19 pandemic and mental health of first-year college students: Examining the effect of Covid-19 stressors using longitudinal data. *PLOS ONE*. 2021 16(3): e0247999. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0247999>

2 Kessler RC, Amminger GP, Aguilar-Gaxiola S, Alonso J, Lee S, Ustun TB. Age of onset of mental disorders: a review of recent literature. *Current Opinion in Psychiatry*. 2007 Jul;20(4):359-64. doi: 10.1097/YCO.0b013e32816ebc8c. PMID: 17551351; PMCID: PMC1925038.

3 Soria KM, Horgos B, Chirikov I, Jones-White D. First-Generation Students' Experiences During the COVID-19 Pandemic. *UC Berkeley: Center for Studies in Higher Education*. 2020. Retrieved from <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/19d5c0ht>

4 University of California San Francisco. Going remote makes it harder for colleges to reach first-generation students. 2020. <https://firstgen.ucsf.edu/news/going-remote-makes-it-harder-colleges-reach-first-generation-students>

5 LaBelle, B. Positive Outcomes of a Social-Emotional Learning Program to Promote Student Resiliency and Address Mental Health. *Contemporary School Psychology* (2019). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40688-019-00263-y>

6 Moeller RW, Seehuus M, Peisch V. Emotional intelligence, belonging, and mental health in college students. *Frontiers in Psychology*. 2020. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.00093>

7 Freeman TM, Anderman LH, Jensen JM. Sense of belonging in college freshmen at the classroom and campus levels. *Journal of Experimental Education*. 2007, 75(3), 203-220. <https://doi.org/10.3200/JEXE.75.3.203-220>

8 The Pennsylvania State University. *School climate and social and emotional learning: The integration of two approaches*. Issue Brief. 2018.

them transition back into school life while at the same time minimizing additional stress and trauma. These “check-ins” or reconnecting with students also can benefit university faculty and staff as they transition back into school life.

## **METHODS**

In this brief study, a small group of faculty and staff from California State University, Dominguez Hills (CSUDH), came together to examine the immediate and future impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on university students. The group made recommendations for CSUDH and other universities and colleges to better support students, faculty, and staff in returning to in-person classrooms by fall 2021 or spring 2022. The focus group was interested in the experiences of university faculty and staff in navigating the pandemic while providing instruction and guidance to their students. A total of six people (two males and four females) participated in the study. All participants were from CSUDH, representing various student development and support programs on campus, including teaching, counseling, advising, and mentoring. The group met during a 60-minute Zoom session, and a semi-structured interview guide was used to stimulate conversation and obtain perceptions, reactions, and experiences associated with connecting and supporting students’ transition to remote learning and virtual academic activities during the pandemic. Questions included: “From a university student perspective, what can professors and staff do to make learning and access to support services less stressful and more meaningful?” And “When the university physically reopens, what do you want to see to increase your (and students’) confidence that returning to the campus is safe?” And “What are some cultural conflicts that are evident among students in meeting the demands of online learning and its lasting impact post-pandemic?”

## **KEY FINDINGS**

### **THEME 1: COVID-19 adjustments in learning, teaching, and support services delivered remotely.**

The COVID pandemic has resulted in students, faculty, and staff abruptly making significant adjustments in obtaining and delivering instruction and services by moving from in-person interactions to using a virtual platform. The adjustment has and continues to have an impact on students’ academic performance, social connections, and their mental well-being. The pandemic also has affected faculty and staff in supporting student development, and their personal agency to keep students from dropping out is diminishing.

- Students do not have access to resources (i.e., laptops, desktops, Internet, tutor labs) and learning environments (i.e., safe spaces) that are distraction-free and necessary to feel they are full participants of school life.
- Remote learning for incoming freshmen grieving loss of normalcy (e.g., no graduation ceremony, no subsequent post-graduation celebration with extended family and friends, no participation in community life) is causing more stress to an already stressful life event.
- Students are having to prioritize between school and home/family obligations, and it is disrupting balance and flow of their school/academic responsibilities.
- Students are struggling to meet academic standards and are falling behind and feeling helpless. Students’ school priorities are changing due to economic and family hardships.
- Students are resenting school and faculty. They are growing increasingly frustrated with meeting expectations and feeling ignored.

- Students' low motivation is impacting their self-efficacy, academic performance and their social and emotional well-being. Issues with imposter syndrome are becoming more evident as students start to self-doubt their merit and worthiness.
- Students are struggling with isolation and lack of social contact. The increasing loneliness, hopelessness, and helplessness among students and potentially faculty and staff is strongly associated with depression.
- Students are in crises and the longer they remain in trauma, the more severe their trajectory to a mental health disorder.
- Faculty and staff are experiencing frustration and feeling overwhelmed with not being able to connect with students in meaningful ways to deliver instruction and services that are equitable and tailored to the needs of already underserved students.
- Transfer students will finish their university education post-pandemic with little or no one-to-one contact with professors. They fail to establish meaningful student-professor relationships that would have given them guidance (e.g., advice, letters of recommendation, long-term mentorship). A concerted effort is needed to reach out to students who may be grieving the loss of traditional graduation activities and ceremonies, and the sense of stability that professors and teachers are known to provide during their face-to-face interactions.

University faculty and staff also are experiencing difficulty and stress during the pandemic. One university staff member summed up her pandemic experience this way, "The overall experience during this pandemic has been overwhelming and stressful. I have this feeling of being behind. [Collectively]...there is a feeling of helplessness [and hopelessness]." Another staff member expressed her own struggles with advising and helping her students

make decisions based on what is best for them versus what is required of her position:

"I have to do a lot of reflection about how I talk to my students, what do I advise them to do because I want them to do well, but I'm also afraid of guiding their decision-making and them not returning to school...it's been very, very difficult to make decisions on the ways that I talk to my students...are we really helping our students, because I have a lot of students frustrated with remote learning...I'm trying to convince them to stick with it, but I'm questioning whether I should be convincing them at all."

***"I have this feeling of being behind. [Collectively]...there is a feeling of helplessness [and hopelessness]."***

The impact of imposter syndrome on students' self-efficacy also has surfaced as a symptom of the pandemic. A staff member said, "When talking about imposter syndrome, I'm thinking about our incoming students and their need to belong...getting them connected to campus life and feel a sense of belonging will be a critical aspect of the reopening strategy." Another university staff member expressed the value of a university campus as a contextual protective factor that helps first-generation low-income university students to thrive in a supportive environment where they can discover and leverage their personal strengths and assets to overcome risk factors to their mental well-being:

"[As] first-generation [students from] low-income backgrounds, not being able to escape those environments...[and] experience the higher education world, meaning being present in our campus... these types of connections not only in the classroom, but the whole [academic]

environment is something that as a first-generation student, our communities need to be more represented on our campus.”

*“...getting them connected to campus life and feel a sense of belonging will be a critical aspect of the reopening strategy.”*

Staff who work directly with students highlighted students not having privacy to attend legal consultations or their psychological service sessions: “Our students don’t have the privacy to meet with a psychologist. They don’t have the privacy to go through their legal consultations, they don’t have the privacy to talk to us as their advisors.” With regard to the abrupt switch from in-person to virtual learning, and students not having the resources and tools to achieve in their schoolwork, one university staff member stated:

“...because of the [virtual] format and how fast it happened, I don’t think there was any real time for students to be fully engaged... to ensure when they come into the [virtual] forum, they really understand what this [type of] learning means...some of the students... had to borrow a computer...from a friend, or they utilized their cell phone...and it is very, very hard to learn on their own.”

**THEME 2: Recommendations for creating balance among students, faculty, and staff through a coordinated interdisciplinary strategic response across all departments.**

An “all hands-on deck” approach combined with community engagement will be needed to manage messages, practices, experiences, and actions that will inspire confidence that returning to in-person learning is safe and that

resources for student success are accessible, available, appropriate, and affordable.

- At every level, create clear guidelines for teaching, advising, and transitioning (virtual to in-person) efforts. When students are allowed back on campus, safeguards and safety procedures need to be clearly outlined and communicated to students, faculty, and staff.
- Involve and engage university students in a series of conversations to explore community- and school-based solutions and strategies to mount a strategic response to assure students have what they need to succeed until schools reopen.
- Co-design the response with the student communities most impacted by COVID to prioritize solutions and strategies that will lead to opportunities and the advancement of communities.
- Require a coordinated effort at the university focusing on early identification, early intervention and, ultimately, prevention to ensure that students struggling with COVID-related trauma are receiving appropriate and adequate treatments.
- Integrate students, faculty, advisors, and staff with lived experiences of overcoming crises to serve as models of recovery.
- Leverage students’ cultures and communities toward a long-term investment on strengthening resilience at levels across the university and community.
- Reach out to parents at the beginning of the fall semester with a message in their preferred language, highlighting the safety measures implemented by the university to ensure the safety of their students. Recruit key members (e.g., faculty, staff, and students) from the university, who mirror the composition of the community, to deliver the message to parents.



A consensus was made among the focus group participants in mitigating stress and trauma to university students already struggling with anxiety and mental health issues. “Clear communications and signage guiding students to safe spaces throughout the campus where they can connect will be needed,” said one university staff member. A consensus also was made in reaching out to parents or guardians of students to inform them about the changes and precautions being taken to ensure the safety of their children. One staff member emphasized the importance of increasing parents’ confidence, “Trying to make the parents feel confident that the university is going to do a good job [in reopening] ...I think is going to take some doing...there’s the message, then there is the delivery of the message.” This is an important finding, because it means aligning or tailoring a message in a way that is culturally and linguistically appropriate for the community the school is intending to serve. One strategy offered by a staff member was storytelling, “I try to use my story and experiences to share with students...convey to them that they deserve to be here on campus.”

Faculty and staff also play an important role during the reopening of a university and recognizing the importance of trust. “Having students come to my office and just talk about life’s problems even though I am not a psychologist or therapist...I listen and think what I can do for them as their professor...I miss that interaction,” said one faculty member. He added:

“In the past, I would meet with a student in my office to offer comments on essay content and style in a comfortable and reassuring setting. Now, I must do this via detailed emails with no immediate feedback. Imagine teaching a person to drive by having her read a book than by getting behind the steering wheel with her.

“Last spring and fall, I had many students who previously had been with me live [in-person]. I knew them, their faces, personalities, situations, and struggles. This is now less the case this semester with a wave of unfamiliar students. Will this compound in the fall [and spring]?”

“Physical detachment is affecting my perceived level of effectiveness; I fear that I may be doing a substandard job in teaching and reaching students. In the past, I would leave a classroom feeling that I could have done a better effort in presenting. This could be natural because I have high standards of myself, but it seems that this is more frequent now in the new pedagogy.

“Distance or remoteness from my students has dulled my mentoring or advising abilities (academic, career, and emotional). In the past, I would accompany a student to the administration building if there was a problem with financial aid, records, etc. I knew the staff there; I had personal contacts [for a warm handoff]. This practice of modeling a behavior also enabled a student to be a more self-reliant problem-solver. I miss walking with students.”

***“...even though I am not a psychologist or therapist...I listen and think what I can do for them as their professor...I miss that interaction,”***



This is important because, similar to a university campus seen as a protective factor, the above quotes highlight faculty-student interactions also as a protective factor for students and faculty. One university staff member agrees with this assessment and adds that students’ main requests during counseling

sessions is “being able to socialize with their friends [and professors] ...and having more events where they see each other.”

### **THEME 3: Policy implications for a successful transition back to in-person learning and teaching.**

As academic institutions are gearing up to reopen their campuses, the main questions remain, “What protocols need to be in place to safely reopen? How to increase student’s level of confidence that they will be safe returning to the classroom?” The following five key implications may help answer these main questions:

- While many students experience significant challenges with remote learning, some students thrived in remote learning. These newfound preferences need to be considered when reopening.
- Going to campus gave students vital time away from stressed-filled contexts or situations. At the present, some students don’t have the necessary mental break. More needs to be done around more human

connection that may or may not include technology.

- Learning how inequities exacerbated during the pandemic may continue to be an issue to address when reopening. Many students from low-income families will remain unserved or underserved in their access to resources and opportunities.
- Providing training or professional development for professors on unintentionally transmitting frustrations or diminished morale in distance teaching, which may continue in a hybrid and/or in-person setting. Finding a common ground between what teaching was pre-COVID, what teaching is during COVID, and what it needs to be post-COVID.
- Implementing and administering a short survey for first-year university students addressing these four overarching questions when returning to campus: (1) Who am I in post-COVID? (2) Where am I after a life-changing event? (3) What do I and others need to succeed? And (4) Where am I going, and will I be supported?