

How Students at a University in Florida Experienced and Coped with COVID-related Restrictions

Peter R. Reuter, Bridget L. Forster & Bethany J. Kruger

Florida Gulf Coast University USA

Acknowledgments: *We would like to thank members of the FGCU Student Success Council for their support in collecting data for this research. Many thanks to Dr. Mitch Cordova, Vice President for Student Success & Enrollment Management, and Dr. Charles Gunnels, Director Office of Scholarly Innovations & Student Research, for their feedback and suggestions during the design stage of the Student Perception of FGCU COVID Response survey.*

Abstract: *Colleges and universities worldwide were forced to introduce COVID-related restrictions and to transition to mainly distance (online) teaching and learning for Academic Year 2020/2021. There were questions as to how students would cope with these massive changes and how many would develop mental and emotional health issues with an impact on their personal well-being and academic progress. The current research used two anonymous student surveys to shed light on how students at a university in Florida experienced living and studying under COVID restrictions. The results indicate that the approach chosen by our university was overall appreciated by students and may have helped most of them to cope well under unprecedented circumstances. Students gave the university an overall positive rating for how it handled the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, and they were equally satisfied with the teaching overall and faculty's efforts to help them stay on track academically. Students also understood that the situation was unusual and very challenging for faculty and administration. However, respondents also felt that faculty and the institution in general were far less concerned with their mental and emotional well-being, and that not enough efforts had been made to proactively identify and connect with students who struggled with mental or emotional health issues. On a positive note, our study did not find an increase in depression and suicidal ideation. The results reported could be used to evaluate and improve mental health outreach at universities regardless of whether or not COVID-related restrictions will stay or be a thing of the past.*

Key Words: COVID-19, academic performance, mental health, emotional well-being, coping with COVID-19, college students, university students

INTRODUCTION

After a slow start in November and December 2019, the spread of SARS-CoV-2 accelerated in early 2020. Once the World Health Organization (WHO) had declared COVID-19 a pandemic on March 11, 2020, many countries instituted public or national emergencies and started to restrict travel to and from their territory (World Health Organization, 2021). Within a few days, colleges and universities around the world were forced to either shut down temporarily or to transition to remote learning. In the United States (US), where COVID-19 had been declared a national emergency on March 13, 2020, more than 1,300 colleges and universities in all 50 states canceled in-person classes, closed their dorms and campuses, and switched to online-only instruction (BBC News, 2020; NCSL, 2021).

This sudden and unexpected change impacted millions of college and university students worldwide. When campuses and dorms closed, students were forced to move back home or to find alternative accommodations; others experienced a downturn in their own or their family's economic situation. Additionally, the switch to remote teaching called for a level of hardware, software, and internet connectivity many students were not prepared for, and therefore, created substantial challenges and struggles for many (Aucejo, French, Araya, & Zafar, 2020; Gillis & Krull, 2020). Published studies from a number of countries reported that during this first stage of the pandemic students experienced high levels of stress and increased levels of anxiety and depression (Essadek & Rabeyron, 2020; Kaparounaki, Patsali, Mousa, Papadopoulou, Papadopoulou, & Fountoulakis, 2020; Kecojevic, Basch, Sullivan & Davi, 2020; Wang, Hegde, Son, Keller, Smith, & Sasangohar, 2020). Faculty also struggled with the impact of pandemic-related restrictions on their personal and professional lives; many had to go from in-person teaching to online teaching with no training and often no or only scant support from their institutions (Daniel, 2020; Lederman, 2020; Villanueva, Behmke, Morris, Simmons, Anfuso, Woodbridge, & Guo, 2020; Teng & Wu, 2021).

In many ways, the United States was a mirror image of what happened around the world once the early stage of the pandemic had passed. Some states imposed extended lockdowns that included closure of schools and universities, other states decided to open up everything as soon as possible (Treisman, 2020). By the beginning of the Fall semester 2020, one-quarter of colleges and universities in the US went back to fully or mostly in-person instruction, one-fifth used a hybrid model with in-person and online instruction, and most of the rest went with fully or mostly online instruction (NCSL, 2021). According to the College Crisis Initiative @ Davidson College (2021), one-third of tracked colleges and universities used fully or mostly in-person instruction in Spring 2021, forty percent fully or mostly online instruction, and one-fifth a hybrid model.

Due to its location in Southwest Florida, Florida Gulf Coast University (FGCU) is no stranger to dealing with the impact of natural disasters. For example, after hurricane Irma hit Southwest Florida on September 10, 2017 as a category 3 hurricane, FGCU had to close and suspend all teaching activities (National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, 2017). Yet, when the school reopened 11 days later, only a small percentage of students and faculty were still impeded in their ability to teach or learn as before. The COVID-19 pandemic, on the other hand, developed much slower but had a considerably stronger and more prolonged effect on the functioning of our institution. Instead of short-term management of an extreme event, administration, faculty, staff, and students had to react to and cope with a situation with no predictable time table, course of events, or outcome. As a member of the State University System (SUS) of Florida, our university's options on how to proceed were framed by decisions made by

the Governor, the Board of Governors (BOG) of the SUS, and our sister institutions within the SUS. Florida only went into a 30 day stay-at-home order in April 2020, with Phase 1 reopening already taking effect by mid-May for all counties (Ron DeSantis, 2020). Phase 2, which included restaurants operating at 50%, gyms at full capacity with social distancing in place, and gatherings expanded to a 50 person limit was put in place by mid-June. Beginning in September, phase 3 removed many of the restrictions left from phase 2, and also allowed non-essential travel as well as full capacity at gyms and recreation centers without social distancing enforced.

The SUS Blueprint for Reopening Campuses for Fall Semester 2020 focused on promoting a healthy campus and community environment while still offering a successful academic program delivery (University System of Florida, 2020). FGCU's plan for the Fall semester 2020 was finalized in early June, and new guidelines took effect soon after (Florida Gulf Coast University, 2020a). Many of the restrictions introduced did have an impact on students, including a mask requirement everywhere on campus and social distancing of six feet enforced. The guidelines included restrictions and limitations on intramural sports, group events, and meetings (capped at 50% capacity); indoor and outdoor recreational spaces were closed. The COVID-19 plan for Spring and Summer 2021 was an extension of the plan for Fall 2020 (Florida Gulf Coast University, 2020b).

The use of a daily app to report symptoms of or potential exposure to COVID-19 was an important part of the institution's strategy to keep faculty, staff, and students safe (Florida Gulf Coast University, 2020c). Only people who received a green checkmark after answering the questions were allowed to come to campus. Faculty, staff, and students who tested positive for COVID-19 had to quarantine for 10 days. Anyone who had been in close contact with a person who tested positive for COVID-19 had to quarantine for a period of 14 days after the initial contact.

One of the more significant measures adopted was a change to course delivery formats. For Fall 2020 and Spring 2021, FGCU offered four types of classes: 1) traditional in-person instruction in a classroom setting on or off campus, 2) online synchronous classes using different web platforms, 3) online asynchronous classes with pre-recorded videos, voice-over presentations, etc., 4) hybrid classes with some in-person teaching as well as online (synchronous or asynchronous) instruction (Florida Gulf Coast University, 2020d). Subsequently, slightly more than 50% of classes offered were online classes (28% online asynchronous, 24% online synchronous), approximately 45% of classes were taught in the classroom, and less than 4% were scheduled as hybrid classes. Forty percent of on-campus classes used a so-called blendflex model in which instructors assigned students to groups that would rotate between on-campus meetings and online synchronous or asynchronous instruction. This approach was mostly used for courses with lab components that made it necessary for students to come to campus for at least part of the course. These courses could, of course, also be considered to be hybrid courses.

Going into Fall semester 2020, maybe the biggest question or worry on administrators' and faculty minds was how students would cope with these massive changes to their life on and off campus. No one knew for sure whether there would be unprecedented numbers of students dropping out during the term, how many would fail to earn passing grades, or how many would develop mental and emotional health issues with an impact on their personal well-being and academic progress. While the university could keep track of grades and withdrawal rates by keeping an eye on data collected via the learning management system (LMS) and the Registrar's Office, collecting soft data on students' emotional state, for example, was a more complex issue. Two of us (Reuter & Forster) had initiated a research project exploring the relationship between student health behavior and academic success in Spring 2018 that had already yielded interesting

results (Reuter, Forster, & Brister, 2020; Reuter & Forster, 2021). For Academic Year 2020/2021 the survey was amended with questions exploring students' mental and emotional health. Reuter and Kruger created a new survey to gather student feedback on the institution's response to COVID. This article will use data from both surveys to shed light on how students experienced living and studying under COVID restrictions, and how they coped with the strain put on their mental and emotional well-being.

METHODS

The data for this article were collected using two anonymous online surveys between November 2020 and April 2021. Both surveys were approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB), and both contained online survey consent language. Participation was of course voluntary, and participants were able to choose which questions they wanted to answer or not, to skip any section of the survey, or to close the survey without answering any question at all. Participants did not receive any compensation or benefits from the university nor from us.

The first survey (Student Health Behavior and Academic Success) consisted of five groups of questions around health and wellness; the survey was described before (Reuter & Forster, 2021). The survey version used during Academic Year 2020/2021 contained added questions to capture the effect COVID-related restrictions had on students' mental and emotional health. We randomly selected classes that are taken by students from different colleges and majors, such as 'Biology with lab I', and invited students via email to participate in our survey. Of approximately 5,500 students invited overall, 546 submitted a complete or partially complete response; i.e., the response rate was about 10%.

The second survey (Student Perception of FGCU COVID Response) focused mainly on how the changes affected students' academic life and success. The survey was primarily designed to collect data for the FGCU Student Success Council (SCC); Reuter is a member of the SCC. An email invitation to participate was sent to all FGCU students (approximately 15,000) in November 2020 and April 2021. The response rate was rather low at about 3% (946 responses overall).

DATA ANALYSIS

Data are presented as a percentage of the total participant pool, or a portion of this pool, for questions with categorical answers. For questions with quantitative answers, data are presented as means with standard deviation. Sample sizes vary for different analyses due to the voluntary nature of the survey and are, therefore, indicated in the results and discussion of results below.

RESULTS

DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS OF RESPONDENTS

We report results from both surveys, although most of the data relating to how COVID restrictions affected students academically came from the FGCU COVID Feedback Survey. Because the surveys targeted different student populations, the demographic characteristics of the respondents differ (Table 1). The Student Health Behavior Survey was originally designed to collect data from undergraduate students and, accordingly, email invitations to participate were sent to students enrolled in undergraduate level courses. We stayed with this protocol for 2020/2021 to enable us to compare data collected during the pre-COVID period with data collected during the COVID pandemic. A longitudinal study of the impact of COVID-19 restrictions on

students' health behavior, mental health and emotional well-being based on these data was published in December 2021 (Reuter, Forster, & Kruger, 2021).

Table 1.
Demographic characteristics of respondents from both surveys

	FGCU COVID Feedback Survey	Student Health Behavior Survey*
Number of respondents age ≥18	940	538
Age (mean ± std. dev; range; median)	23.5 ± 7.7; 18-63; 21	20.6 ± 4.8; 18-65; 19
Biological sex		
Female	83.2%	83.1%
Male	16.7%	16.9%
Transitioning m2f female	0.1%	--
Race/ethnicity**		
Caucasian/White	73.4%	62.1%
Hispanic	16.2%	16.0%
African-American/Black	5.5%	4.6%
Asian	3.3%	0.9%
Non-Hispanic	--	1.1%
Native American	0.5%	0.2%
Other or more than one race/ethnicity	0.3%	14.7%
No information	0.7%	0.4%
Study level		
Freshman	18.7%	31.0%
Sophomore	13.2%	31.4%
Junior	27.5%	22.1%
Senior	22.2%	12.5%
Second/non-degree seeking, dual enrollment	3.0%	1.9%
Graduate student	15.0%	--
No information	0.4%	1.1%
Living arrangements		
At home	31.6%	31.6%
On campus	30.2%	36.2%
Off campus	37.8%	27.5%
No information	0.4%	4.7%
COVID testing		
Students tested for COVID	38.2%	44.9%
Students testing positive for COVID	3.9%	6.0%
Students having to quarantine***	20.3%	24.9%

*only students taking undergraduate level classes were invited to participate

** the FGCU COVID feedback survey did not allow respondents to select more than one option

***includes students having to quarantine because of a positive COVID test and students having to quarantine because of close contact with a COVID-positive person

The FGCU COVID Feedback Survey was intended to collect data from a representative sample of FGCU students. While the response rate was low at 3%, the demographic characteristics of the respondents reflect the FGCU study body fairly well (Florida Gulf Coast University, 2021). The biggest difference between the respondents of both surveys and the overall student body is the proportion of female and male students; FGCU has 52% female and 48% male students, whereas both studies had more than 80% female respondents. After excluding responses that indicated an age of less than 18 years, we were left with 940 responses for the FGCU COVID Feedback Survey and 538 responses for the Student Health Behavior Survey.

FEEDBACK ON TEACHING

Eight hundred sixty-three respondents of the FGCU COVID Feedback Survey provided information on the type of classes they were taking (Table 2). Half of respondents were enrolled in at least one face-2-face (in-person) class and six in ten took at least one class with online asynchronous or synchronous instruction. Three out of ten respondents took a hybrid class with an online asynchronous or synchronous component. Overall, nine out of ten respondents were enrolled in at least one course with the opportunity for direct live interaction with the instructor (face-2-face in-person, online synchronous, hybrid).

When asked to give an overall assessment of teaching on a scale from 1-10 with 1 being the lowest score, respondents gave an average rating of 6.7 with a standard deviation of ± 2.6 and a median score of 7 (Table 2). The assessment of the different instruction modalities yielded the highest average rating and median for face-2-face (in-person) courses with online asynchronous courses having the lowest average rating and median.

IMPACT ON ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE

Of 869 participants who responded to the question “*Do you think your grades this semester will be different from what they would have been without the changes to teaching caused by Covid-19?*”, 52.5% selected the option “*They will be about the same*”, 13.9% expected their grades to be better than they would have been without the changes, and 33.6% braced themselves for grades not as good as under normal circumstances.

Students who indicated that they expected their grades not to be as good were asked to expand on what they thought were the main factors responsible for their grades being lower. Of 271 respondents, 118 (43.5%) pointed to struggling with online classes as the main reason. Thirty percent of respondents complained that instructors were not prepared well enough for online teaching, did not put enough effort into class preparation, or were not understanding how difficult the situation was for their students. Respondents also complained about the workload being too much with too many assignments and instructors not being flexible with submission deadlines. Other issues raised were the number of different platforms used for online lectures, and instructors not being familiar enough with the technology. Yet, some students showed understanding for how difficult the situation was for their instructors; one respondent wrote “*Tough to communicate with teachers who also need to try and communicate with other students in a timely manner over the internet. Not the teacher’s fault, just not easy to get timely responses communication wise*”.

Table 2.

Breakdown of classes taken by respondents by instruction modality, overall assessment of teaching, and assessment of the different instruction modalities on a scale from 1-10.

	FGCU COVID Feedback Survey
Classes taken (n = 863)	
Face-2-face (in-person)	50.8%
Online asynchronous (pre-recorded)	59.1%
Online synchronous (live lecture)	69.5%
Hybrid class with online asynchronous component	32.7%
Hybrid class with online synchronous component	28.5%
Overall assessment of teaching* (n = 862; mean ± std. dev; median)	6.7 ± 2.6; 7
Assessment of face-2-face (in-person) classes** (n = 394; mean ± std. dev; median)	7.8 ± 2.3; 8
Assessment of online asynchronous classes*** (n = 216; mean ± std. dev; median)	6.1 ± 2.8; 6
Assessment of online synchronous classes**** (n = 543; mean ± std. dev; median)	6.5 ± 2.9; 7
Assessment of hybrid classes with asynchronous component***** (n = 211; mean ± std. dev; median)	6.4 ± 2.5; 7
Assessment of hybrid classes with synchronous component***** (n = 186; mean ± std. dev; median)	6.7 ± 2.3; 7

*What is your overall assessment of the teaching this semester on a scale from 1-10? (1= terrible; 5-6 = okay; 10 = awesome)

** What is your assessment of the face-2-face (in-person) course(s) you are taking this semester on a scale from 1-10? (1= terrible; 5-6 = okay; 10 = awesome)

*** What is your assessment of the online asynchronous (pre-recorded) course(s) you are taking this semester on a scale from 1-10? (1= terrible; 5-6 = okay; 10 = awesome)

**** What is your assessment of the online synchronous (live lecture) course(s) you are taking this semester on a scale from 1-10? (1= terrible; 5-6 = okay; 10 = awesome)

***** What is your assessment of the hybrid [face-2-face and online asynchronous] course(s) you are taking this semester on a scale from 1-10? (1= terrible; 5-6 = okay; 10 = awesome)

***** What is your assessment of the hybrid [face-2-face and online synchronous] course(s) you are taking this semester on a scale from 1-10? (1= terrible; 5-6 = okay; 10 = awesome)

Among the students who expected their grades to be lower (n = 292), almost half (48.6%) worried that this may affect their ability to graduate, get admitted to access-restricted programs/graduate school or find a job after graduation. Two-thirds of these students expected to fail at least one class (40.1%) or were not sure about it (23.6%). Nonetheless, three-quarters (77.1%) felt they were still on track to graduate on time (compared with 87.7% for all respondents). Of the sixty-six students worried about currently not being on track for timely graduation, two-thirds were confident about being able to catch up over the next one to two semesters.

INTERACTION WITH INSTRUCTORS

As mentioned above, some respondents expressed that a lack of communication or interaction with instructors had contributed to them earning lower grades. When asked how easy or difficult it was to interact with their instructors outside the classroom or online sessions compared to previous semesters, 40.1% of respondents (298 of 731) selected 'harder', 50.8% (371 of 731 respondents) selected 'similar', and 9.2% (67 of 731 respondents) selected 'easier'. Among the respondents who expected their grades to be lower, two-thirds (65.1%) said it had been harder to interact with their instructors and less than three percent (2.7%) had found it easier.

Yet, almost nine out of ten respondents (87.2%; 756 of 867 respondents) confirmed that they had indeed been able to communicate with their instructors when needed. The proportion of respondents who said they had not been able to communicate with their instructors when needed was almost twice as high for the respondents who expected their grades to be lower than for all respondents (21.4% vs. 12.8%).

Respondents were also asked to rate how much they thought their instructors cared for students' academic success and their mental/emotional well-being (scale 1-10; 1= they don't care at all; 5-6 = some care, some don't; 10= they really show they care). The average rating for how much instructors cared for their students' academic success was 7.1 with a standard deviation of ± 2.6 and a median of 8 ($n = 870$); for how they cared for their students' mental/emotional well-being the average rating was 6.3 with a standard deviation of ± 2.9 and a median of 7 ($n = 869$).

Again, the average scores awarded by students who expected their grades to be lower were lower with an average score of 5.6 (± 2.6 ; median = 6; $n = 291$) for how much instructors cared for their students' academic success, and an average score of 4.7 (± 2.8 ; median = 5; $n = 291$) for much instructors cared for their students' mental/emotional well-being.

IMPACT ON STUDENTS' MENTAL AND EMOTIONAL WELL-BEING

Data on the mental and emotional well-being of students were collected via the Student Health Behavior Survey (Table 3). One-quarter of respondents indicated not feeling safe on campus during COVID and three-quarters said that they had craved human interaction over the previous six months. More than half of respondents felt that their mental/emotional health had been negatively affected by the lack of social events or the switch to online teaching. A majority of respondents also expressed feeling less connected to their peers and less motivated in their studies than in previous semesters.

Almost half of respondents stated that they had suffered from strong feelings of sadness and hopelessness, and one in eight reported having seriously considered attempting suicide. Thankfully, only 1.2% of respondents went ahead and attempted suicide according to the data collected.

LOOKING FORWARD

Participants in the FGCU COVID Feedback Survey gave the university an average rating of 6.7 ± 2.6 and a median rating of 7 on a scale from 1-10 with 1 being the lowest score for how it had handled the challenges posed by the COVID pandemic (*"What is your overall assessment of how FGCU handled the challenges caused by the Covid-19 pandemic this semester on a scale from 1-10?"*). Almost half of respondents (45.5%) selected a score of ≥ 8 and only one in eight respondents (13.0%) chose a rating of ≤ 3 . Still, we were naturally curious as to how students were looking into the future and what lessons they thought the university could learn from the last year to better serve and support its students going forward.

Table 3

Questions exploring how COVID-related changes affected the emotional and mental health of students with answer options (Student Health Behavior Survey).

Questions and answer options	Responses
Do you feel safe on campus this semester? Yes No	n = 514 24.7% 75.3%
During the past 6 months have you felt yourself craving human interaction? Yes No	n = 519 76.7% 23.3%
Do you think the lack of social events this semester has affected your mental/emotional health? Yes No	n = 518 54.4% 45.6%
Has going to mostly virtual teaching affected your mental/emotional health? Yes No	n = 517 55.7% 44.3%
In comparison to previous semesters, do you find yourself more or less connected to your peers?*	n = 355
More	6.2%
About the same	21.4%
Less	72.4%
How motivated do you feel in your classes this semester compared with previous semesters?*	n = 355
More	7.6%
About the same	25.6%
Less	66.8%
During the past 12 months, did you ever feel so sad or hopeless almost every day for two weeks or more in a row that you stopped doing some usual activities? Yes No	n = 502 44.6% 55.4%
During the past 12 months, did you ever seriously consider attempting suicide? Yes No	n = 491 12.2% 87.8%

Did you actually attempt suicide?	n = 491
Yes	1.2%
No	98.8%

*only students enrolled at FGCU during the previous semester were asked to respond

Almost two-thirds of respondents reported being open to taking online synchronous (65.7%; 117 of 178 responses) or asynchronous courses (63.5%; 115 of 181 responses) in future semesters. The main reasons why they would be open to taking such courses brought forward were the convenience of being able to take them from home, the ability to accommodate their work schedule, and having the freedom to watch pre-recorded lectures or recordings of live lectures as often as needed and when it fits their study schedule. Conversely, respondents who did not want to take online-only classes again expressed strong opinions on the negative aspects. For example, one respondent opined *“This environment has been destructive in (sic) my academic performance”*, while one deadpanned *“Zoom is my mortal enemy”*. Another one wrote *“I have spent the last four semesters (Spring 2020 through present) in fully online courses, some synchronous some asynchronous. I do not feel that I have retained more than 20% of the information I have been taught. I need the structure and the quality of face to face lectures and the opportunity to collaborate with my peers”*. Some also felt that having to go on campus helped them with their attitude and motivation (*“Getting ready, driving all the way to school, I know where my head is supposed to be. I have more motivation to actually do well in the class”*).

A substantial number of students who responded to the question *“What do you think the main lessons are FGCU can learn from this situation to support students better in their learning?”* (n = 218 responses overall) recommend flexibility on the side of administration and faculty (*“Flexibility is king and electronic access opens many doors of opportunity for students and the university”*). They advocated for more online courses (*“Online options are extremely helpful for students who may have extenuating circumstances or that preference to learning”*; *“Online and hybrid courses are a wonderful option for working students who are parents, like me”*). Respondents also expected faculty to make more efforts to be available online and in person, and to communicate better and in a more timely manner (*“Professors need to be more available”*; *“Professors need to be more approachable out of the class”*; *“Providing alternatives to in-person office hours, and flexibility from faculty”*).

The majority of the 200 responses to the question *“What do you think the main lessons are FGCU can learn from this situation to better support the physical, mental, and emotional health of students?”* focused on support for students’ mental health. Many respondents felt that the university had not done enough to actively identify and support students struggling with mental health problems during the COVID pandemic. The overall tendency is very well reflected by responses such as *“There needs to be better emotional support at this school. Just saying FGCU offers CAPS [Counseling and Psychological Services, the authors] isn't enough and sending students to CAPS also isn't the best”* or *“Try to reach out to students and really understand we have suffered a lot of loss recently. Loss of graduation, loss of traveling to seeing family and friends, or worst loss of family to the virus. It feels like the school expects us to be mentally prepared like we were pre-COVID, but we simply aren't”*. Respondents also felt FGCU and its faculty needed to *“listen to students and understand their individual needs”* better. Likewise, there were calls for breaking up the semester by giving students more breaks to regain their mental health (*“Mental health days”*; *“Mental health breaks in general would be great”*; *“Students need breaks”*).

Whether it's study days, or mental health breaks, or holiday breaks"). There were also pleas for faculty to be more understanding of students' situation ("Flexibility and understanding is always important. Just because we're all going through hell right now doesn't mean that some students aren't always going through hell. Every accommodation and favor a teacher has done this last year should be available in Fall"; "I think they need to understand that we are not robots. We cannot just push and power through whatever").

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The results of our study indicate that the approach chosen by our university was overall appreciated by students and may have helped most of them to cope well under unprecedented circumstances. Most students were satisfied with the teaching overall and faculty efforts to help them stay on track academically. Students also reported being able to communicate with faculty when needed, although forty percent found it harder to interact with their instructors outside the classroom or online sessions compared to previous semesters. Still, students also understood that the situation was unusual and very challenging for faculty and administration.

On the downside, students were less complimentary about their online learning experience, especially in courses with asynchronous components. Students also felt that faculty were less concerned with their mental and emotional well-being than their academic success. Some students, especially those who struggled academically, did not feel that faculty were supportive enough, and also indicated that their communication with faculty was not sufficient at times.

Although the restrictions our students had to endure were rather minimal compared with universities in other US states or countries around the world, one can understand that there was an overall effect on students' mental and emotional health. While our study did not find an increase in depression and suicidal ideation, there is evidence of a negative effect on the students' emotional well-being. Even though we do not have pre-COVID data to compare with, we do not think three-quarters of respondents craved human interaction pre-COVID. Our university is not known as a 'party school', still there would have not been many complaints about a lack of social events before the pandemic either (Niche.com, 2022). As a matter of fact, preliminary results from 256 responses collected during Fall semester 2021 show that almost half of respondents (45.5%) expressed that having social events again had a positive effect on their mental/emotional health, while even more (55.3%) felt that going back to mainly in-classroom teaching accomplished the same.

Respondents in our survey, nonetheless, were not more worried about their safety on campus during COVID than pre-COVID. Data from the American College Health Association Nation College Health Assessment III (2020) collected prior to COVID show that one in seven male students and one in four female students did not feel safe on campus during daytime hours; one in two male and four in five female students did not feel safe on campus at night. Our study did not confirm the results of Munsell, O'Malley & Mackey (2020) who reported that students at a liberal arts college in the Southwestern United States were struggling to stay hopeful and keep up a positive attitude. However, their study collected data during the initial stage of the COVID pandemic toward the end of Spring semester 2020, whereas our study started to collect data nine months into pandemic-related restrictions.

Even though Florida, just like the rest of the US, went through another wave of COVID cases caused by a new virus variant in late summer/early fall 2021 (Delta variant), most pandemic-related restrictions became a thing of the past at FGCU and other institutions of the Florida SUS. In its *Letter to Students Fall 2021*, the BOG of the Florida SUS strongly recommended students

should get vaccinated before the beginning of the semester (State University System of Florida, 2021). On the other hand, Florida made it illegal to ask students, faculty, or staff about their vaccination status or to require them to get vaccinated (DeSantis, 2021). Therefore, the known vaccination rate of 57% for FGCU students enrolled in classes for Fall semester 2021 was based on information voluntarily self-reported into the FGCU Student Health Services Portal or data shared through an online immunization data system for health providers and schools (Florida Gulf Coast University, 2022). A preliminary analysis of data collected during Fall semester 2021 via the Student Health Behavior Survey ($n = 256$) indicates that the true vaccination rate of students may have been closer to 80%.

The survey data also show that students' overall assessment of the teaching efforts remained the same with an average rating of 6.8 vs. 6.7 for academic year 2020/2021. Likewise, respondents' average rating for how much instructors cared for their students' academic success was unchanged at 7.1 compared with academic year 2020/2021.

Looking at the suggestions for what faculty and the institution can learn from this period to support students better in their learning as well as their physical, mental, and emotional health, it is apparent that even though FGCU is a smaller university with a 22:1 student-to-faculty ratio, students still felt like they were not being seen and treated as individuals by faculty. This continued in Fall 2021; the average rating for how much instructors cared for their students' mental/emotional well-being was down to 5.7 compared with an average of 6.3 for academic year 2020/2021. Students also lamented the lack of a proactive approach by the university and counseling services as well as efforts to identify and connect with students who struggled with mental or emotional health issues. While some of this maybe be specific to FGCU, it is still important for other institutions to evaluate their efforts critically. It is tempting to focus on tangible metrics, such as passing rates and student retention rates, and to use them as proof of providing a nurturing learning environment. However, students who feel neglected by the university or their faculty, like the survey respondents who said it had been harder to interact with their instructors, are easily overlooked with such an approach.

The main limitations of our study were participant selection, reliance on self-reported data, and a lack of pre-COVID data to compare with. Even though students from all colleges across the university were invited to participate, the overall response rate was low and we received 80% of responses from female students, whereas the FGCU student body has only about 52% female students (Florida Gulf Coast University, 2021). Additionally, we cannot rule out that students may have participated more than once during the same or subsequent semesters or in both surveys. Not having data from before COVID-related restrictions were enacted limits our ability to appraise the value of some of the data collected. For example, we do not know how students would have rated teaching efforts overall and the different teaching modalities specifically pre-COVID.

The impact of this pandemic will undoubtedly be long-lasting and, thus, offer a fertile ground for further research. We have continued to collect data to document how our students cope with the current situation, and to see how they react regardless of whether there will be new restrictions or a return to no restrictions. Another interesting aspect will be how incoming freshmen, who spent the better part of their last two years of high school living and learning under COVID pandemic restrictions, adapt to and cope with the challenges of 'normal' college life and learning. Will they purely survive or learn how to thrive without a predictable time table or course of events?

REFERENCES

- American College Health Association. (2020). American College Health Association-National College Health Assessment III: Reference Group Executive Summary Fall 2020. Silver Spring, MD: American College Health Association. Retrieved from https://www.acha.org/documents/ncha/NCHA-III_Fall_2020_Reference_Group_Executive_Summary.pdf
- Aucejo, E. M., French, J., Araya, M. P. U., & Zafar, B. (2020). The impact of COVID-19 on student experiences and expectations: Evidence from a survey, *Journal of Public Economics*, Volume 191, 2020, 104271. doi: 10.1016/j.jpubeco.2020.104271.
- BBC News. (2020). *Coronavirus: US travel ban on 26 countries comes into force*. Retrieved from <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-51883728>.
- Daniel, S.J. (2020). Education and the COVID-19 pandemic. *Prospects* 49, 91–96 (2020). doi: 10.1007/s11125-020-09464-3
- DeSantis R. (2020). 2020 Executive Orders. Retrieved from <https://www.flgov.com/2020-executive-orders>
- DeSantis R. (2021). Executive order number 21-81. Retrieved from https://www.flgov.com/wp-content/uploads/orders/2021/EO_21-81.pdf
- Essadek, A., & Rabeyron, T. (2020) Mental health of French students during the Covid-19 pandemic, *Journal of Affective Disorders*, Volume 277, 2020, Pages 392-393, ISSN 0165-0327, doi: 10.1016/j.jad.2020.08.042
- Florida Gulf Coast University. (2020a). Fall 2020 COVID-19 Plan. Retrieved from <https://www.fgcu.edu/coronaupdate/files/bot-approved-fgcu-fall-2020-covid19-plan-060920-ada.pdf>
- Florida Gulf Coast University. (2020b). Spring and Summer 2021 COVID-19 Plan. Retrieved from <https://www.fgcu.edu/coronaupdate/files/spring-summer-2021-covid-19-plan-bot-approved121020-ada.pdf>
- Florida Gulf Coast University. (2020c). Health Screening App. Retrieved from <https://www.fgcu.edu/screeningapp/>.
- Florida Gulf Coast University. (2020d) Course Delivery Flexibility for Students. Retrieved from <https://www.fgcu.edu/recordsandregistration/coursedelivery.aspx>.
- Florida Gulf Coast University. (2021). About FGCU. Fast facts. Retrieved from <https://www.fgcu.edu/about/fastfacts>. Accessed June 21, 2021
- Florida Gulf Coast University. (2022). FGCU COVID-19 Cases. Retrieved from <https://www.fgcu.edu/coronaupdate/fgcucases#2021FGCUCaseArchive>. Accessed January 16, 2022
- Gillis, A., & Krull, L. M. (2020). COVID-19 Remote Learning Transition in Spring 2020: Class Structures, Student Perceptions, and Inequality in College Courses. *Teaching Sociology*. 2020;48(4):283-299. doi: 10.1177/0092055X20954263.
- Kaparounaki, C. K., Patsali, M. E., Mousa, D. V., Papadopoulou, E. V. K., Papadopoulou, K. K., & Fountoulakis, K. N. (2020). University students' mental health amidst the COVID-19 quarantine in Greece *Psychiatry Research* 290 (2020) 113111. doi: 10.1016/J.PSYCHRES.2020.113111
- Kecojevic, A., Basch, C. H., Sullivan, M., & Davi, N. K. (2020). The impact of the COVID-19 epidemic on mental health of undergraduate students in New Jersey, cross-sectional study. *PLoS ONE* 15(9): e0239696. doi: 10.1371/journal.pone.0239696

- Lederman, D. (2020). How teaching changed in the (forced) shift to remote learning. *Inside Higher Education*. Retrieved from <https://www.insidehighered.com/digitallearning/article/2020/04/22/how-professors-changed-their-teaching-springs-shift-remote>
- Munsell, S. E., O'Malley, L. & Mackey, C. (2020). Coping with COVID. *Educational Research: Theory and Practice*, 31(3), 101-109.
- National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. (2017). Hurricane Irma Local Report/Summary. Retrieved from <https://www.weather.gov/mfl/hurricaneirma>
- NCSL National Conference of State Legislatures. (2021). Higher Education Responses to coronavirus (COVID-19). Retrieved from <https://www.ncsl.org/research/education/higher-education-responses-to-coronavirus-covid-19.aspx>.
- Niche.com (2022) 2022 Top Party Schools in Florida. Retrieved from <https://www.niche.com/colleges/search/top-party-schools/s/florida/>
- Reuter, P.R., & Forster, B.L. (2021) Student health behavior and academic performance. *PeerJ* 9:e11107 doi: 10.7717/peerj.11107
- Reuter, P.R., Forster, B.L., & Brister, S.R. (2020). The Influence of Eating Habits on the Academic Performance of University Students. *The Journal of American College Health*. doi: 10.1080/07448481.2020.1715986
- Reuter, P.R., Forster, B.L., & Kruger, B.J. (2021). A longitudinal study of the impact of COVID-19 restrictions on students' health behavior, mental health and emotional well-being. *PeerJ* 9:e12528 doi: 10.7717/peerj.12528
- State University System of Florida. (2021). Letter to Students Fall 2021. Retrieved from <https://www.flbog.edu/2021/07/27/19399/>
- Teng, M. F., & Wu, J. G. (2021) Tea or tears: online teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic, *Journal of Education for Teaching*, 47:2, 290-292, doi: 10.1080/02607476.2021.1886834
- The College Crisis Initiative @ Davidson College. (2021). Dashboard. Retrieved from <https://collegecrisis.shinyapps.io/dashboard/>. Accessed June 24, 2021
- Treisman R. (2020) How is each state responding to COVID-19? National Public Radio (npr.) Retrieved from <https://www.npr.org/2020/03/12/815200313/what-governors-are-doing-to-tackle-spreading-coronavirus>
- University System of Florida. (2020). Blueprint for Reopening Campuses. Retrieved from <https://www.flbog.edu/the-state-university-system-of-florida-blueprint-for-reopening-campuses-fall-semester-2020/>
- Villanueva, O., Behmke, D. A., Morris, J. D., Simmons, R., Anfuso, C., Woodbridge, C. M., & Guo, Y. (2020). Adapting to the COVID-19 Online Transition: Reflections in a General Chemistry Sequence Taught by Multiple Instructors with Diverse Pedagogies. *Journal of Chemical Education* 2020 97 (9), 2458-2465. doi: 10.1021/acs.jchemed.0c00752
- Wang, X., Hegde, S., Son, C., Keller, B., Smith, A., & Sasangohar, F. (2020) Investigating Mental Health of US College Students During the COVID-19 Pandemic: Cross-Sectional Survey Study. *Journal of Medical Internet Research*. 2020 Sep 17;22(9):e22817. doi: 10.2196/22817
- World Health Organization. (2021). Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) Timeline: WHO's COVID-19 response. Retrieved from <https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/interactive-timeline#!>