

CENTER FOR SOCIAL AND BEHAVIORAL SCIENCE

UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS

LAS Student Experiences and Needs Survey

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COVID-19 has dramatically transformed how the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign is able to fulfill its educational mission, leaving students uncertain about what the Fall 2020 experience will be. University administrators and faculty members alike are eager to better understand the greatest challenges students experienced in Spring 2020, as well as their needs and expectations for the Fall 2020 semester. To that end, the Center for Social and Behavioral Science is pleased to share the results of a recent survey of undergraduate students in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences (LAS), conducted by Associate Dean Barbara Hancin-Bhatt in collaboration with colleagues at the Center for Innovation in Teaching and Learning, Maryalice Wu, Dawn Owens, and Paige Cunningham. By examining the responses of more than 1600 LAS students, the present article showcases student concerns and highlights potential opportunities for engaging students successfully in a hybrid or fully online experience. The results suggest that the most important areas for faculty and administration to focus on are health and safety practices for COVID-19, student wellness, access to appropriate learning environments, and student engagement in virtual experiences that advance their leadership and professional development.

The present article outlines findings in the following areas:

1. Challenges from the Spring 2020 Term
2. Students' Fall 2020 Plans
3. Students Returning to Campus
4. Students Studying Remotely
5. Supporting Students Moving Forward

1. CHALLENGES FROM THE SPRING 2020 TERM

Students were first asked to indicate their greatest challenges from the Spring 2020 term (see Figure 1). This information is noteworthy in part because it may show what students perceive to be the most likely obstacles for the upcoming semester. Most students reported that staying positive and motivated to do online learning was their greatest challenge. It was evident the lack of a schedule may have contributed to the decreased motivation for some students. One student said:

"For me, I struggled with motivation to get work done, mainly because having in-person classes gave me a motive to do my work. Generally, just the abruptness of moving to online classes was also difficult to adjust to..."

A second and related concern was finding a learning environment that allowed them to focus. One student noted their struggle to find harmony in their new learning environment, "It's obviously

not the same as being in a classroom. I don't like having zero separations between my personal space and my schooling space and my workspace. There are many distractions that come along with studying at home." In retrospect, some students conveyed that moving home was not conducive to their focus on academics, but also their overall well-being. One student expressed, "I wish we weren't essentially forced to move back home. Some people don't have great home lives and school is their only escape, but that was taken away. Interestingly, concerns about access to technology were present in about 10% of the sample, but the greatest challenges reported by students are primarily about their own focus and motivation.



Figure 1. What were the greatest challenges you experienced in completing your Spring 2020 term? Check all that apply.

2. STUDENTS' FALL 2020 PLANS

We asked students what their plans were for the Fall 2020 school year. The majority of students (67.4%) indicated that they would be enrolled and on campus in the fall, while 7.3% indicated they would be enrolled and planned to be on campus if they were able to travel, and 17.0% indicated they would be enrolled but living remotely. Only 0.8% indicated they would not be enrolled for the fall, and 7.4% indicated that they were unsure of their current plans. In short, it appears that most students plan to be physically present on campus at the university this fall, with about 1 in 6 students planning to be exclusively remote learners. Given this knowledge, the university will need to provide appropriate support for both students who plan to return to campus, as well as those who intend to learn online and remotely. In the remainder of this discussion, we examine each group's concerns and

points of optimism for the Fall 2020 term. Interestingly, Illinois residents (44%) were more likely than non-Illinois residents (21%) and international/non-citizen students (24%) to have decided not to be on campus due to financial concerns related to COVID-19.

3. STUDENTS RETURNING TO CAMPUS

Students returning to campus expressed some concerns, as well as some points of optimism, as they looked forward to the Fall 2020 semester. Their responses provide insights into how we can best support their educational experience in light of extraordinary circumstances.

The most significant concern among students was for health and safety, with 69% of the respondents expressing concern and noticeable differences across the various racial/ethnic groups (see Table 1). Survey comments included requests for greater access to mental health resources:

"Returning to campus in the Fall WILL be different and WILL impact different students in different ways. Please be aware of this and be intentional about the well-being of your students. Make sure students can easily access counselors (virtually). Higher standards for mental health resources on our campus have been requested continuously (it is not new), but this should be a high priority, especially now."

Social distancing was the next most chosen concern, both compliance with social distancing, as well as the limitations social distancing will create for student engagement opportunities. In their comments, students were vocal in their concerns for exposure to COVID-19 due to a lack of social distancing compliance. One student expressed fear of "students that choose not to abide by the social

distance guidelines endangering the students and faculty that are following policies and procedures that are in place.” These data re-affirm previous analyses suggesting that controlling COVID-19 through social distancing and isolation may be especially challenging in college populations (Steinberg, 2020).

In addition to health concerns and social distancing, students are concerned about the difficulty of taking courses online, which makes sense given their greatest challenge in Spring 2020 was staying positive and motivated to do online learning. Approximately 40% of students were also concerned about the financial impacts of COVID-19.

There are many minor differences about the various concerns among racial-ethnic groups. Perhaps most notably, and reflecting real differences in lived experiences during COVID-19 (Czeisler et al., 2020), whites reported less concern for health and safety than most other races (56% vs. 72%-85%). Students who identify as an underrepresented minority (URM; African American/Black or Hispanic) were particularly candid regarding financial concerns, especially regarding tuition, rigid housing agreements, and the provision of basic necessities for students. They shared their experiences with financial hardships: “The best way to support me is to help me financially. A reduced cost of tuition or the ability for COVID related grants/scholarships would go a long way in supporting students.”

		Health and safety concerns due to COVID-19	Non-COVID health and safety concerns	Social distancing limiting opportunities for student organizations, events, etc.	The difficulty of taking courses online	Financial concerns due to COVID-19	Social distancing concerns in face-to-face classes and hallway spaces	Something else	Nothing worries me
Sex	Female	74%	3%	64%	60%	43%	62%	8%	1%
	Male	63%	3%	55%	46%	35%	56%	7%	4%
Race	Asian	81%	4%	63%	51%	38%	71%	6%	1%
	Black/African American	73%	0%	66%	55%	55%	63%	9%	0%
	Hispanic	72%	4%	60%	57%	54%	66%	9%	2%
	International	85%	3%	48%	41%	40%	64%	2%	1%
	Multi-Race	77%	9%	60%	54%	39%	66%	3%	0%
	White	56%	2%	60%	50%	30%	49%	9%	4%
Class	Sophomore	67%	1%	62%	58%	36%	59%	7%	4%
	Junior	68%	3%	61%	55%	38%	57%	7%	3%
	Senior	70%	3%	59%	49%	39%	61%	8%	1%
Total		69%	3%	60%	53%	39%	59%	8%	2%

Table 1: What concerns you most about being on campus this Fall? Check all that apply.

We also explored what students returning to campus were most looking forward to in the 2020 Fall semester (see Figure 2). They reported being most optimistic about returning to the academic learning environment, being with their friends again, and gaining access to educational support resources. One student even expressed looking forward to “being in an environment that shares the same ambition and goals as myself.”

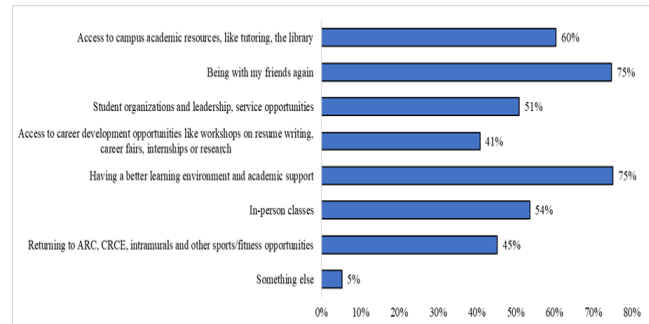


Figure 2: What are you most looking forward to in returning to campus for Fall 2020? Check all that apply.

Additionally, many students reported looking forward to academic resources that were unavailable to them remotely during the spring semester, such as study spaces in the libraries and face-to-face tutoring and advising.

4. STUDENTS STUDYING REMOTELY

The 17% of students who indicated they were enrolling and living remotely were asked to specify their reasons for not returning to campus this fall and to identify what they will miss by not being on campus. Almost 90% of respondents indicated that health and safety concerns due to COVID-19 were a primary reason they were not returning to campus. The next most chosen reason, by 40% of respondents, was concern that social distancing would limit their student experience. Nearly 30% of students mentioned financial concerns as a primary reason they decided to enroll and live remotely (see Figure 3).

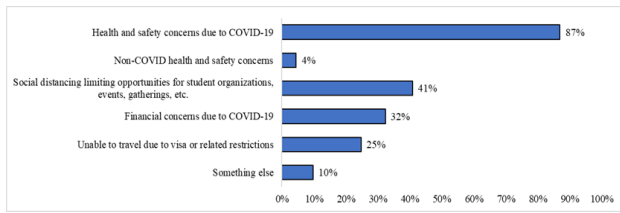


Figure 3: What are the main reasons you have decided not to be on campus this Fall? Check all that apply.

Generally speaking, prospective remote students reported that they would miss the very same things that returning-to-campus students were looking forward to, including being among their friends and having access to academic support such as faculty, campus services, and the general academic environment (see Table 2). Interestingly, sophomores seemed to generally miss more about their college experience than other groups across categories. There were only minor differences between men and women in what they expressed they would miss most about on-campus life. There are a few statistically significant differences between racial and ethnic groups on what they would miss. For example, more domestic Asian students report missing their friends than international students, and domestic White (non-Hispanic) students were less likely to report missing their friends than domestic Asian students.

		Access to campus academic resources, like tutoring, the library technology internet access, face-to-face meetings with advisors and faculty		Being with my friends again		Access to career development opportunities like workshops on resume writing, career fairs, internships or research		Having a better learning environment and academic support		Returning to AIC, CRCE intramurals and other sports/fitness opportunities		Something else		I won't miss anything about being on campus.	
		57%	54%	40%	47%	50%	38%	31%	31%	3%	0%				
Sex	Female	57%	54%	40%	47%	50%	38%	31%	31%	3%	0%				
	Male	49%	60%	35%	31%	54%	46%	47%	3%	5%					
Race	Asian	43%	80%	50%	36%	46%	37%	39%	1%	4%					
	Black/African American	63%	40%	39%	38%	39%	25%	39%	0%	0%					
	Hispanic	48%	62%	38%	48%	65%	37%	66%	3%	0%					
	International	54%	49%	29%	37%	52%	45%	36%	4%	0%					
	Multi-Race	72%	43%	43%	20%	63%	85%	58%	0%	0%					
	White	59%	54%	39%	39%	52%	43%	37%	4%	8%					
Class	Sophomore	64%	67%	54%	50%	62%	60%	47%	2%	5%					
	Junior	55%	56%	34%	38%	53%	49%	39%	2%	7%					
	Senior	48%	54%	34%	35%	48%	32%	40%	5%	0%					
Total		53%	57%	37%	38%	52%	43%	40%	3%	0%					

Table 2. What do you think you will miss most by not returning to campus for Fall? Check all that apply.

The in-depth analysis offers insight as to how the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign can better support remote learners, perhaps by creating services or conducting outreach that

touches on areas students feel they are lacking. While the university may not be able to physically connect remote students and on-campus students, providing more systemic means through which students can connect to each other, for example, by encouraging more courses to move to group-based learning to foster interpersonal connections, may help bridge this gap (Salanova et al., 2003).

5. SUPPORT STUDENTS MOVING FORWARD

The findings of this study suggest multiple ways that University faculty and administration can positively impact the student experience in Fall 2020, regardless of where the students are located. First, most students are concerned about the virus and expressed appreciation for timely, concise communications. One student explicitly stated,

“Be more direct and explicit with the plans. Safety is the top priority, so the clearer the expectations are, the better our adaptations will be.”

The university should continue and perhaps expand its communications around health and safety precautions, expectations, and successes in testing and mitigation of the COVID-19 on campus. Creating mask-wearing and social distancing campaigns that students can relate to, get motivated about, can also help them hold their peers accountable to safe living practices. In fact, some students declared their support for ensuring non-compliance is dealt with firmly:

“Enforce wearing masks and implementing consequences for those who don't take the crisis and the health of others seriously.”

Regarding their concerns about online learning, students want to stay motivated and positive about their courses, yet that was the greatest challenge reported about their Spring 2020 experience. Overwhelmingly, students expressed requests for leniency, accommodations, and understanding from their professors and teaching assistants, especially since online learning was not their intended college path, and many are still learning how to learn online. Some wanted academic deadlines adjusted as they were in the spring, given that online learning is a different experience and not all courses have been designed with online learning principles in mind. One student expressed the struggles they faced in the spring semester,

“Understand that we are going through a hard time. It’s a tough time and in the spring, many professors were not empathetic at all towards their students. I heard many stories of professors often blaming students for not turning in work correctly even though some students had to get a job to support their family, many (like me) don’t have access to a printer, and many didn’t have internet access.”

Likely due to the challenges of being a 100% online learner and limitations on social interactions and concerns about COVID-19, students are asking for greater access to mental health resources.

“Please make mental health resources more widely available (online mental health counseling hours, for example). Online learning is still a new experience for a lot of us and times in our country only seemed to have gotten worse since COVID, so I urge you to try to put your students’ mental health first as well as their physical health.”

Many students advocated that mental health should be a high priority, especially now.

Students returning to campus expressed their hope for adequate study spaces on campus, usually citing that the learning environment mattered a great deal for their success. Study spaces are also a concern for students whose class schedule requires them to be online for one class and then in person for a class soon after. Some students returning to campus indicated that they are looking forward to in-person interactions with their professors, advisors, and tutors, even expressing gratitude that the university is offering them a hybrid option. Students learning remotely also expressed their interest in peer-to-peer and student-faculty interactive activities to help them feel connected to the Illinois community, including virtual office hours, informal class or major meetings, and social gatherings.

Finally, all students, regardless of where they are located, indicated they want to resume their leadership, community service, and career development during the fall semester. The seniors expressed anxiousness about not gaining valuable experiences they need to be ready for the job market. Setting up virtual career workshops, virtual internships, virtual alumni networking events, virtual global learning, and virtual service projects will, no doubt, be embraced by the students.

Overall, the survey results indicate that students are looking forward to enrolling again, and they anticipate a more positive experience than they had in the second half of the spring semester. The tremendous investment the university has made in developing appropriate on-campus safety measures and in the summer online teaching academy will certainly address some students’ greatest concerns for Fall 2020. Yet, there are more aspects of the student experience to address, especially in ensuring they stay engaged and growing through wellness programs, academic support options, and engagement programs designed for the Fall 2020 hybrid or completely virtual experience.

METHODOLOGY

Spring-enrolled LAS undergraduate students who had not graduated by August 2020 (n= 9,142) were asked to take part in an online survey from 7/17/2020 to 7/28/2020. Students were sent an initial survey invitation plus up to two reminders. 1,667 students (60.0% female, 40.0% white, 18.7% Asian, 5.9% Black/African American, 11.7% Hispanic, 19.0% "international") responded to this survey resulting in a 18% response rate. A post-stratification non-response weight was created to represent the overall LAS undergraduate student population (who were in the sampling frame) based on sex, race/international status, and class standing. Weighted figures are presented in this report.

REFERENCES

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