

Original Paper

Student Perceptions of COVID-19 on Mental Health and
Academic Success: A Comparison between University and
Community College Students

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Received: March 3, 2021

Accepted: March 12, 2021

Online Published: March 14, 2021

doi:10.22158/assc.v3n2p16

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.22158/assc.v3n2p16>

Abstract

Very little evidence addresses college students' perceptions of mental health and supportive services available to assist them with being academically successful since the COVID-19 pandemic began. This is also true for comparing community college students and university students. This study examines the concepts of how COVID-19 has impacted overall student-perceptions of their mental health. Data on perceptions was collected from both community college and university students. A total of 932 students completed a survey regarding their views of mental health, academic success and supportive services Relationships between perceived mental health and supportive services rendered significant findings. Perceived differences between perceived mental health and supportive services were also significantly significant in the data. Recommendations for future research is also explored.

Keywords

mental health, academic success, COVID-19 pandemic, university student, community college

1. Introduction

The Corona Virus 2019 (COVID-19) was deemed to have caused a pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO) in 2020. Many colleges began to shift to remote learning. This included higher-educational faculty who may not have had any experience with remote teaching, which created additional challenges. This also created the largest conversion to remote learning in the history of

higher education (Faize & Nawaz, 2020). While online education continues to grow, 84% of college students were attending face-to-face courses prior to the COVID-19 pandemic (Gould, 2020). The shift to remote learning occurred rapidly, triggering some challenges. Some faculty were required to use both synchronous and/or asynchronous teaching methods. As students worked to adjust to new expectations, many also struggled with additional life stressors, including balancing employment or loss of employment. Additional stressors include obtaining adequate childcare, as well as personal illness and/or caring for an ill loved one. These factors caused unequal opportunities among students (Gillis & Krull, 2020). Many colleges selected to hold courses virtually only. This caused a shift for many students regarding housing, on-campus supports and interrupting daily routines that assisted students with success (Hadler, 2020).

Early research identified inequalities among students from various backgrounds and access to resources. This was particularly challenging for students dependent upon university and public spaces available to use to complete their work as more places were required to shut down. Higher levels of stress and anxiety were reported, triggering difficulty completing academic responsibilities, particularly for students with low-income and students of color. While not all colleges were completely virtual, social distancing guidelines were put in place, triggering an overall decrease in social interactions and increased isolation. Prior to the pandemic, college students tended to have higher rates of feelings of loneliness, anxiety, and depression. The restrictions related to COVID-19 have contributed to worsening symptoms (Hadler, 2020). Challenges related to online learning exist as there are many online learning management systems being utilized, with many faculty using them for the first time. Additional challenges included technological issues (i.e.: poor internet connection and equipment, poor audio and video quality, rural areas with fewer resources, etc.). A lack of technological understanding of both faculty and students existed as well. These challenges are correlated with overall decreased student-satisfaction (Faize & Nawaz, 2020).

New college students struggled with having to shift from living independently on campus to moving back home with their parents. While this can be seen as a positive support, it was also a stressor for many students/young adults wanting to experience their independence (Gould, 2020). One study reported 71% of students reported an increase in stress, anxiety, and depressive symptoms. Triggers for these symptoms included fears about their own, as well as their loved ones' health. Additional reported triggers included decreased concentration, sleep, and social interactions. Furthermore, fear related to academic performance and the use of unhealthy coping skills were also reported (Son, Hegde, Smith, Wang, & Sasangohar, 2020). Students also reported a decrease in physical activity and an increase in sedentary activities, such as smartphone usage (Huckins, DaSilva, Wang, Hedlund, Rogers, Subigya, Wu, Obuchi, Murphy, Meyer, Wagner, Holtzheimer, & Campbell, n.d.). Some universities even provided food pantries to students, with increased access during the COVID-19 pandemic. This is especially important when considering that on-campus dining services may have been limited due to the pandemic (Chloe, 2020).

Continuing to provide mental health services through colleges was important, as well as ensuring that students received reliable information regarding COVID-19. This was to assist students with decreasing anxiety and increasing feelings of safety. Furthermore, linking students to community resources was recommended for assisting students as well (Chloe, 2020). Faculty needed to consider additional stressors of students and to attempt to adjust learning provisions appropriately; for example, not requiring additional assignments or “surprise assignments” that may produce undo stress (Gould, 2020). Students with disabilities expressed concern that their accommodations would be upheld in an online learning environment. Many student support offices reported increased reports from students needing accommodations and report increased efforts to work with faculty and students to ensure accommodations are met (Gould, 2020).

Certain factors are correlated with higher student satisfaction and online learning: faculty appropriately addressing student issues and faculty promoting, as well as fostering student-interaction (Faize & Nawaz, 2020). Due to the previously mentioned factors, it is important that faculty develop and maintain a strong connection that includes prompt and regular communication with students. Providing clear learning objectives and an organized course was correlated with student success and satisfaction. Faculty education on the learning management system is important to best assist students with online learning (Gillis & Krull, 2020).

There are some key differences in community colleges versus four-year universities. Students attending four-year universities tended to spend more time preparing their assignments in comparison with community college students. Levels of student participation are similar between community college students and four-year university students. Collaborative, academic work was significantly lower in community college students with 21 percent of community college students reporting collaborative work projects and 58 percent of four-year university students. Student-faculty interaction was consistent between both types of learning institutions. This is despite four-year university students having increased access to faculty on-campus. 70 percent of community college students reported feeling adequately supported on-campus, which is comparable to 72 percent of four-year university students reporting the same (Education Source, 2006). Community colleges tend to serve low-income, part-time, minority and first-generation college students. Approximately one-third of community college students are first-generation college students, while minority students make up approximately one-half of students enrolled in community colleges. It is argued that due to these factors, community colleges must provide increased resources and support to attending students. Increased support-services are correlated with student success in community colleges. Considering this information, community colleges do not receive increased funding based on student population and fiscal need (Kolbe & Baker, 2019). Early research identified inequalities among students from various backgrounds and access to resources. This was particularly challenging for students dependent upon university and public spaces to complete their work as more places were required to shut down. Higher levels of stress and anxiety were reported, triggering difficulty completing academic responsibilities particularly for students with

low-income and students of color (Gillis & Krull, 2020). These issues will further be explored as community colleges and universities are compared regarding supports and effects of COVID-19.

2. Method

2.1 Procedure

The purpose of this study was to examine the concepts of how COVID-19 has impacted overall student-perceptions of their mental health. Using an online self-report survey, this study measured the effect of COVID-19 on the perception of mental health of college students at a four-year university and a community college in the southern United States. After developing a survey and obtaining IRB approval, the researchers used Survey Monkey to create a link to be shared with participants. Using an email listserv provided by the university, each student received an email invitation with a description of the study, consent form, and a link to the survey. Clicking on the link opened the survey through Survey Monkey where they proceeded to the 3-item survey with Likert-scale statements regarding their mental health during COVID-19. The first question on the survey was an agreement to consent to the study, and the second question was where students identified whether they were a community college student or a university student. Lastly, students completed the Likert-scale statements section. Data collected had no personal identifiers and was completely anonymous and confidential.

We hypothesized community college students would report lower rates than four-year university students' mental health being negatively impacted by COVID-19. We also predicted community college students would have fewer difficulties completing due to COVID-19 and feel more supported in comparison to four-year university students.

2.1.1 Research Design

An online self-report survey was used in an independent samples t-test to compare four-year university and community college students' perceptions of the impact of the COVID-19 global pandemic on their overall mental health. This data was used to provide comparative analyses about the intersectionality between mental health and the COVID-19 crisis.

2.1.2 Testing Instrument

The survey consisted of 4 questions, the first one indicating if they were currently attending a four-year university or community college. The remaining three questions were Likert scale questions created by the authors regarding their perceptions of how COVID19 has impacted them. The choices for the Likert Scale responses were: 1) not at all; 2) a little bit; 3) no change; 4) somewhat; and 5) extremely. The questions asked on the survey were:

- 1) I feel like my mental health has been negatively impacted by COVID-19.
- 2) I feel that COVID-19 related mental health difficulties have caused problems with completing assignments.
- 3) I feel as though there are adequate supports at my learning institution to assist me to overcome barriers related to my mental health and COVID-19 and be academically successful.

2.1.3 Participants

Participants for this study were college age students from two higher education institutions in the southern United States. The total response number was 940. Eight respondents skipped questions and were not used. Of those respondents, (N=932) a total of 789 were four-year university students and 143 were community college students. They were recruited through an email sent to the students' email accounts.

2.1.4 Data Analysis

In order to determine if there was a difference between the two populations, data was analyzed using SPSS Statistics for Windows Version 27.0 (IBM Corp., 2020). Descriptive statistics and an independent samples t-test were analyzed. Additionally, Welch's test was used to account for the sample size difference. A total of 932 responses were included for analysis. Eight respondents skipped questions, and those were not used in the data analysis.

3. Result

There was a statistically significant difference between the four-year university and community college students on all three questions. Community college (M=3.34, SD=1.24) and four-year university students (M=3.60, SD=1.15) had different perceptions of mental health being affected by COVID-19 $t(928)=2.45, p=0.014$. Community college (M=2.99, SD=1.46) and four-year university college students (M=3.37, SD=1.36) also differed if they felt as though they were having difficulty completing assignments due to COVID19 $t(929)=3.11, p=0.002$. The greatest significant difference between community college (M=3.39, SD=1.26) and four-year university students (M=3.04, SD=1.6) was regarding whether they felt as though they had adequate support at their learning institution $t(925)=3.29, p=.001$. In order to account for the unequal sample sizes and the possibility of a Type I error, a Welch's test was also used. This type of test is considered to account for unequal variances and sample sizes (Derrick, Toher, & White, 2016). This test yielded significant results as well at the $p < 0.05$ level. For the three questions, $p=0.02, p=0.003, \text{ and } p=0.002$ on the Welch test.

To surmise, our hypotheses were found to be correct as four-year university students reported having greater difficulty with mental health and completing assignments during the COVID-19 pandemic. Also, university students reported higher lower rates of adequate support services at their institution.

Table 1. Group Statistics

Group Statistics						
		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	
I attend a ...						
I feel like my mental	Community	143	3.3427	1.23963	.10366	

health has been negatively impacted by COVID-19.	College Four-Year University	787	3.6023	1.15057	.04101
I feel that COVID-19 related mental health experiences have caused difficulty with completing assignments.	Community College Four-Year University	143	2.9860	1.45827	.12195
I feel as though there are adequate supports at my learning institution to assist me to overcome barriers related to my mental health and COVID-19 and be academically successful.	Community College Four-Year University	141	3.3901	1.25796	.10594
		786	3.0369	1.15980	.04137

Table 2. Independent Samples Test

				Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means
I feel like my mental health has been negatively impacted by COVID-19.	Equal variances assumed	variances	1.540	.215		-2.452
	Equal variances not assumed					-2.329
I feel that COVID-19 related mental health experiences have	Equal variances assumed	variances	1.286	.257		-3.105
	Equal variances not assumed					-2.959

caused difficulty with assumed completing assignments.

I feel as though there are adequate supports at my learning institution to assist me to overcome barriers related to my mental health and COVID-19 and be academically successful.	Equal variances assumed	6.416	.011	3.286
	Equal variances not assumed			3.105

Table 3. Robust Tests of Equality of Means

		Statistic ^a	df1	df2	Sig.
I feel like my mental health has been negatively impacted by COVID-19.	Welch	5.424	1	189.097	.021
	Brown-Forsythe	5.424	1	189.097	.021
I feel that COVID-19 related mental health experiences have caused difficulty with completing assignments.	Welch	8.758	1	189.543	.003
	Brown-Forsythe	8.758	1	189.543	.003
I feel as though there are adequate supports at my learning institution to assist me to overcome barriers related to my mental health and COVID-19 and be academically successful.	Welch	9.643	1	185.183	.002
	Brown-Forsythe	9.643	1	185.183	.002

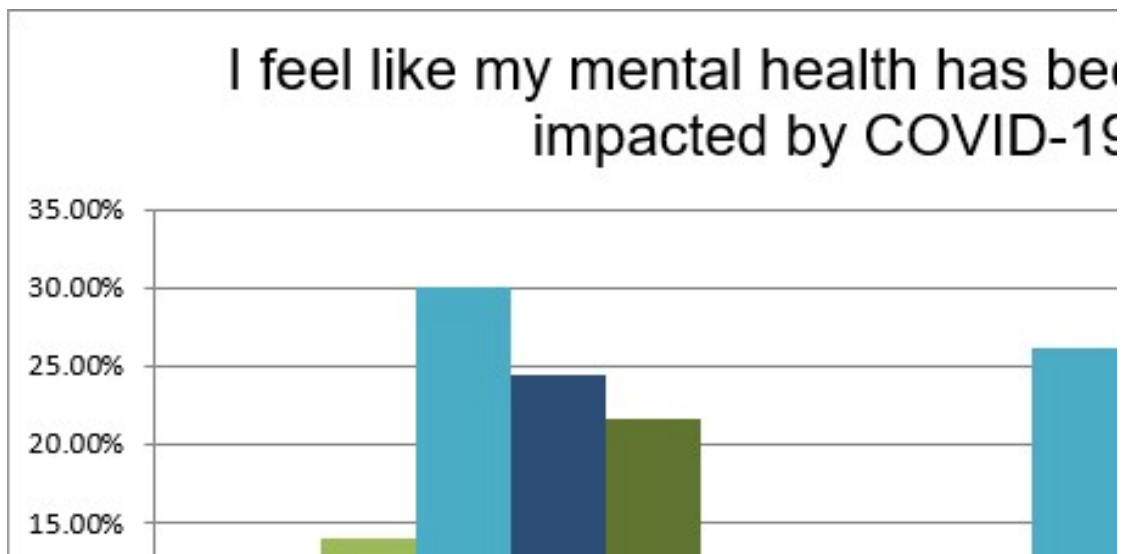


Figure 1. Institutional Differences of Student Reports of COVID Impact on Mental Health

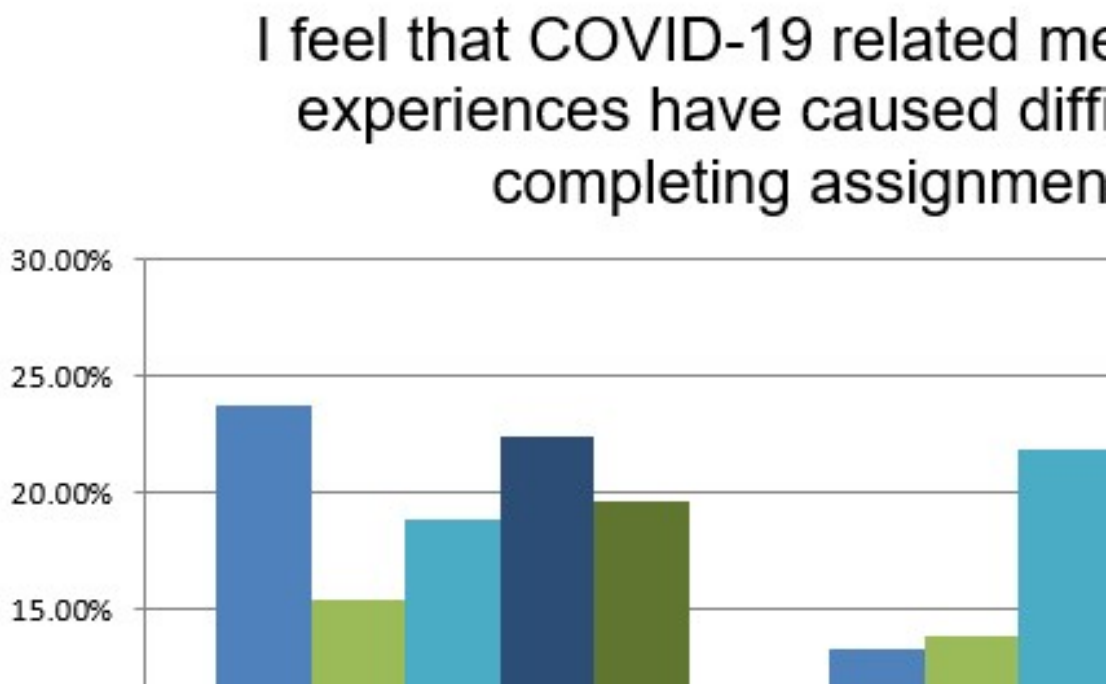


Figure 2. Institutional Differences of Student Reports of COVID Impact on Assignment Completion

I feel as though there are adequate supports from my learning institution to assist me with barriers related to my mental health during COVID-19 and be academically successful

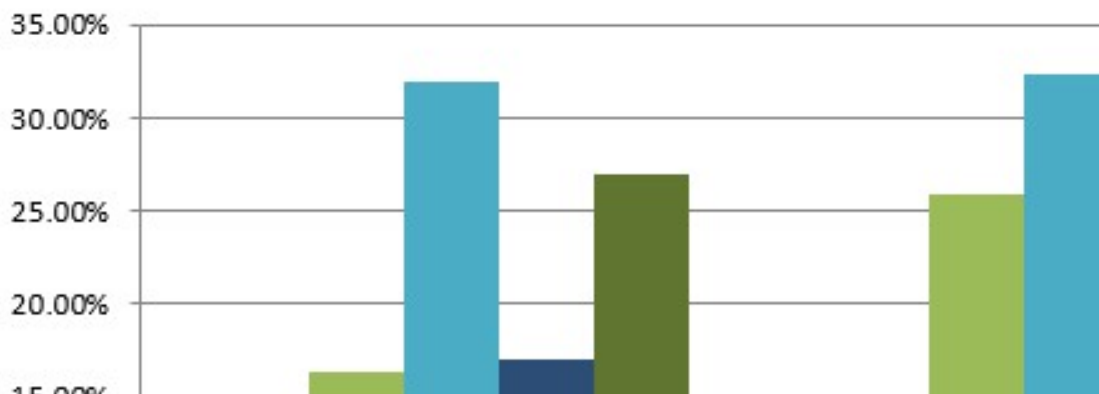


Figure 3. Institutional Comparison of Student Reports Regarding Academic Supports

4. Discussion

As previously mentioned, our hypotheses were correct regarding university students struggling more with mental health and assignment completion. Community college students reported higher rates of adequate support from their higher education institution. Approximately 25% responded that they felt extremely, adequately supported versus less than 15% of university students feeling extremely, adequately supported. Further information regarding student success and satisfaction regarding faculty practice and parental support is needed (Faize & Nawaz, 2020). The current study demonstrated students from a community college felt more supported than those from the four-year university. Further studies could contribute information regarding specific supports that students found to be significantly helpful during the pandemic. Few studies exploring the impact of COVID-19 on college students' mental health exist. Approximately 30% of community-college students in this study reported no change in their mental health due to the COVID-19 pandemic compared with approximately 25% of university students reporting no change in their mental health due to the pandemic. Future studies could contribute to the literature by analyzing students' perceptions of mental health and specific stressors. This could assist with better serving students struggling with mental health. Larger sample sizes from various higher educational institutions are recommended. Gillis and Krull's (2020) particular study was conducted at an elite flagship university; thus, results from higher educational institutions with a more diverse student base are recommended (Gillis & Krull, 2020). Additionally, the studies that exist tend to only provide information on larger universities (Son et al., 2020). Both higher ed institutions for this study were diverse in several ways. Both are in smaller, rural communities which added additional

stressors for students already struggling with limited resources. Also, the community college in this study offers four-year programs in partnership with other universities. It is important to note that community college students for this study reported feeling more supported; thus, further studies that explore how increased support and smaller institutions are beneficial with overcoming these barriers. In conclusion, while COVID-19 has been a landmark, historical event, understanding how students are affected can assist should future complications arise as higher educational institutions continue to adapt to meet the needs of their students.

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