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Adapting to Online Instruction: Disparities Among Graduate and Professional Students

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gradSERU
COVID-19
SURVEY

Adapting to Online Instruction: Disparities Among Graduate and Professional Students

Evidence from the gradSERU COVID-19 Survey

June 21, 2020

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Nearly two-thirds of graduate and professional students enrolled at five large, public research universities reported that they were able to adapt to online instruction “well” or “very well” according to the Graduate Student Experience in the Research University (gradSERU) COVID-19 survey of 7,690 graduate and professional students (Figure 1). Preliminary survey results suggest that 24% of students adapted “very well” to the transition to remote learning while 42% of students adapted “well” to the transition to online learning implemented during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Additionally, approximately one-third (34%) of graduate and professional students indicated that they adapted only “slightly well” or “not at all well” to the transition to remote instruction implemented by their universities. Although many students adapted well to online instruction, the data suggest that students from low-income or working-class backgrounds and students with disabilities did not adapt as easily to online instruction.

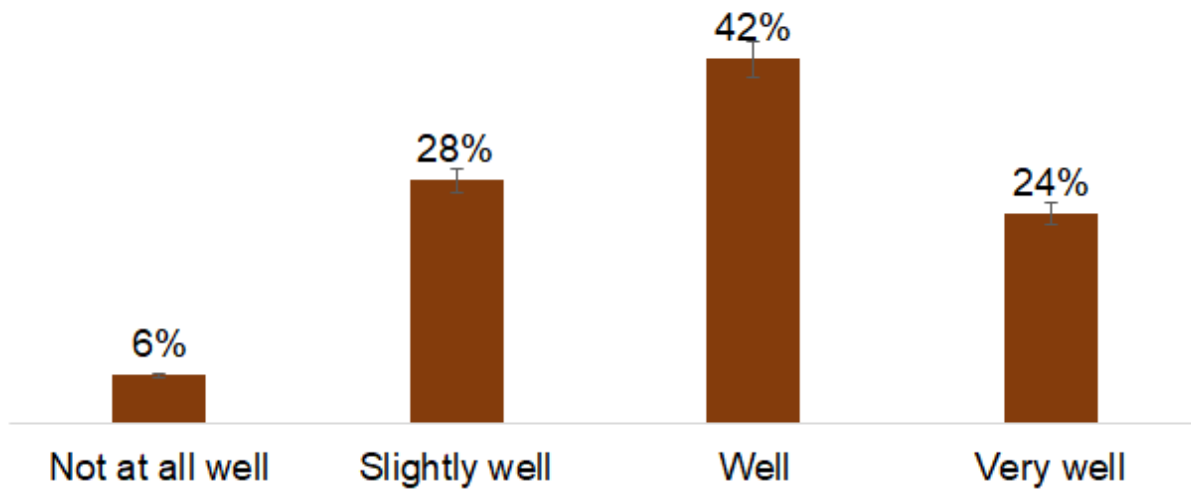


Figure 1. Graduate and professional students' ability to adapt to online instruction during the COVID-19 pandemic. Responses to the question, "How well were you able to adapt to the new online instruction implemented by your university in response to the COVID-19 pandemic?"

Disparities in Adapting to Online Instruction

The results of the survey also indicated some disparities in students' ability to adapt successfully to online instruction. Students who had never taken an online course—43% of the sample—were less likely to report success in their ability to adapt to online instruction (Figure 2) as were students from low-income, poor, or working-class backgrounds (Figure 3).

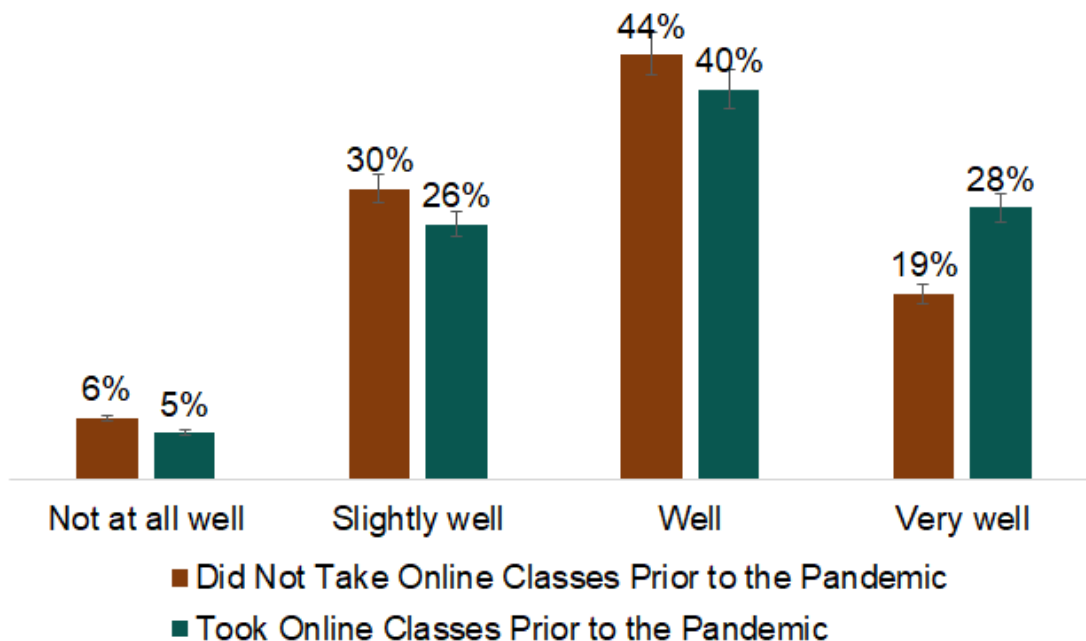


Figure 2. Graduate and professional students' ability to adapt to online instruction during the COVID-19 pandemic by prior online learning experience.

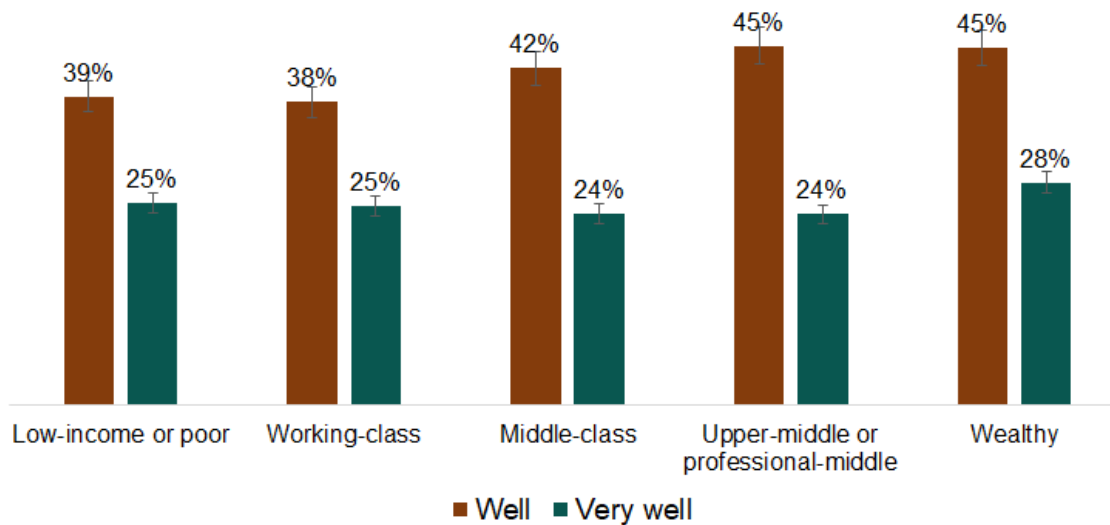


Figure 3. Graduate and professional students' ability to adapt to online instruction during the COVID-19 pandemic by their social class background.

Graduate and professional students with a learning disability, mental health disorder or disability, and cognitive or neurological disability also struggled with the transition to online learning compared to their peers who do not have those disabilities. In our sample, 2.3% of graduate and professional students identified as having a learning disability or condition (e.g., dyslexia, speech disorder), 4.5% identified as having a neurodevelopmental or cognitive disability or condition (e.g., autism, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder, brain injury), and 23.2% identified as having an emotional or mental health concern or condition (e.g., depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder).

Only 54% of students with a learning disability or condition adapted well to online instruction compared to 67% of their peers who do not have a learning disability or condition. Only 54% of students with an emotional or mental health concern or condition and 53% of students with a neurodevelopmental or cognitive disability or condition adapted well to online instruction compared to 70% of students without a mental health concern or condition and 67% of students without a neurodevelopmental or cognitive disability or condition.

We asked students with disabilities to provide feedback about how their disability or condition affected their experiences after their institution moved to online instruction. Common themes in students' responses included

- feeling overwhelmed by the sudden transition to online instruction
- physical limitations associated with increased computer tasks
- increased disruptions and distractions in the home environment, lack of adequate study spaces that were quiet and distraction-free, and struggles paying attention in lengthy online lectures (especially among students who self-reported that they had attention deficit disorder)
- increased anxiety, stress, and depression
- concerns for health, especially among students who are immunocompromised

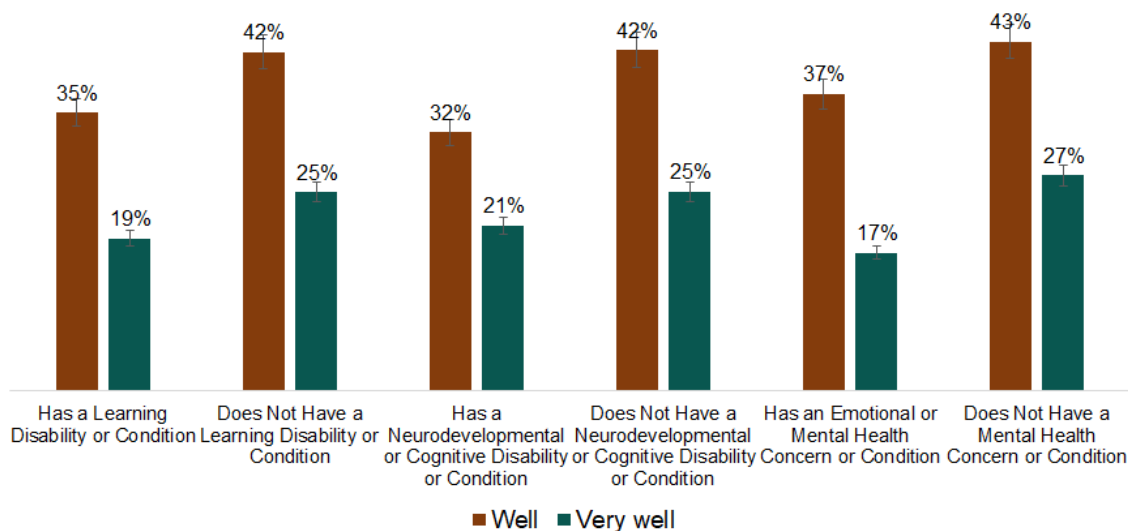


Figure 4. Graduate and professional students' ability to adapt to online instruction during the COVID-19 pandemic by their disability or non-disability status.

Conclusions

Institutional leaders should be mindful of the ways in which the pandemic has had a disparate impact upon students from lower social class backgrounds and students with disabilities. In particular, higher education administrators, faculty, and staff should be cognizant of the challenges encountered by marginalized and disenfranchised students and seek to improve students' ongoing transition to remote learning, especially if campuses will continue to employ online education in the fall 2020 semester.

Students from lower social class backgrounds may lack the social capital, cultural capital, and economic capital to navigate online learning environments while students with disabilities may encounter challenges receiving accommodations in online classes. Therefore, faculty should employ universal instructional design principles in their online courses to ensure that students from a wide variety of abilities and backgrounds have access to course materials and opportunities for learning, seek open source class materials to ensure affordability of textbooks and software for all students, and connect students to emergency grant funding or other institutional resources to ensure students can access the technology required to successfully complete online courses.

About the gradSERU COVID-19 Survey

The Student Experience in the Research University (SERU) Consortium is currently administering a special survey on the impact of COVID-19 on student experience at 10 U.S. public research universities. The gradSERU COVID-19 Survey assesses five areas to better understand undergraduates, graduates, and professional students' experiences during the global pandemic: 1) students' transition to remote instruction, 2) the financial impact of COVID-19 for students, 3) students' health and wellbeing during the pandemic, 4) students' belonging and engagement, and 5) students' future plans. You can access the full survey instrument [here](#).

Sample

The survey was a census survey administered to graduate and professional students at five large, public research universities. The data collection started in May and is still ongoing at most universities. The report uses data from 7,690 graduate and professional students who completed the survey as of June 11, 2020. The response rate as of June 11, 2020 was 9-22% at the respective institutions.

About the SERU Consortium

The Student Experience in the Research University (SERU) Consortium is an academic and policy research collaboration based at Center for Studies in Higher Education at the University of California – Berkeley (CSHE) working in partnership with the University of Minnesota and partner institutions. More information about the gradSERU survey is available at www.gradseru.org.

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