UC Berkeley
SERU Consortium Reports

Title

The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Undergraduate and Graduate Students with Emotional or Mental Health Concerns or Conditions

Permalink

https://escholarship.org/uc/item/83m75056

Authors

Horgos, Bonnie
M. Soria, Krista M
Chirikov, Igor
et al.

Publication Date

2020-08-19

SERU COVID-19 SURVEY

The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Undergraduate and Graduate Students with Emotional or Mental Health Concerns or Conditions

Bonnie Horgos, Krista M. Soria, Igor Chirikov, and Daniel Jones-White

The COVID-19 pandemic has negative impacts on students with emotional or mental health concerns or conditions who are enrolled at large public research universities, according to the Student Experience in the Research University (SERU) Consortium survey administered from May to July 2020 of 30,725 undergraduate students at nine universities and 15,346 graduate and professional students at ten universities. Approximately 40.3% of undergraduate respondents (n = 8,464) reported having an emotional or mental health concern or condition and 24.6% of graduate and professional students (n = 3,125) reported having an emotional or mental health concern or condition.

Students with emotional or mental health concerns or conditions (e.g., depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder) were more likely than students without emotional or mental health concerns or conditions to experience **financial hardships** during the pandemic, including lost wages from family members, lost wages from off-campus employment, and increased living and technology expenses. Furthermore, students with emotional or mental health concerns or conditions were also **less likely to live in safe environments free from abuse (physical, emotional, drug, or alcohol)** and **more likely to experience food and housing insecurity**.

The results of our study suggest that students with emotional or mental health concerns or conditions experienced more **challenges adapting to online instruction** compared to students without emotional or mental health concerns or conditions, including encountering obstacles related to lack of adequate study spaces and lack of technology necessary to complete online learning. Finally, students with emotional or mental health concerns or conditions were **less likely to agree that they feel like they belong on campus** and **less likely to agree that the campus supported them during the pandemic**.

Financial Hardships

In the survey, we asked students if they have experienced any financial hardships during the COVID-19 pandemic (Tables 1 and 2). We sorted Table 1 and Table 2 by the calculated differences between students with and without emotional or mental health concerns or conditions. Notably, *all* of the differences reported in financial hardships below are statistically significant ($p < .05$) between the students with emotional or mental health concerns or conditions and the students without emotional or mental health concerns or conditions.

Some of the more common financial hardships experienced by undergraduates with emotional or mental health concerns or conditions include the loss or reduction of income from other family members (46%), unexpected increases in living expenses (42%), loss or cancellation of an expected job or internship offer (39%), loss of income from off-campus employment (33%), and unexpected increases in spending for technology (24%) (Table 1).

Table 1

Financial Hardships Reported by Undergraduates With and Without Emotional or Mental Health Concerns or Conditions

	Undergraduates with Emotional or Mental Health Concerns or Conditions		Undergraduates without Emotional or Mental Health Concerns or Conditions		Difference Between Groups	Sig. ($p < .05$)
	n	%	*n*	%	%	
Loss or reduction of income of other family members	3861	46	6920	33	-13	*
Unexpected increases in living expenses	3550	42	6519	31	-11	*
Loss of wages from off-campus employment	2806	33	4974	24	-9	*
Unexpected increases in spending for technology	2035	24	3246	15	-9	*
Loss or cancellation of an expected job or internship offer	3317	39	6629	32	-8	*
Loss of wages from on-campus employment	1742	21	3554	17	-4	*
Other	396	5	670	3	-1	*
Loss or reduction of insurance coverage	266	3	352	2	-1	*
None	1134	13	5073	24	11	*

Note. * $p < .05$.

Some of the more common financial hardships experienced by graduate and professional students with emotional or mental health concerns or conditions include unexpected increases in living expenses (35%), unexpected increases in spending for technology (33%), the loss or reduction of income from other family members (27%), loss or cancellation of an expected job or internship offer (21%), and loss of income from off-campus employment (17%) (Table 2).

Table 2

Financial Hardships Reported by Graduate Students With and Without Emotional or Mental Health Concerns or Conditions

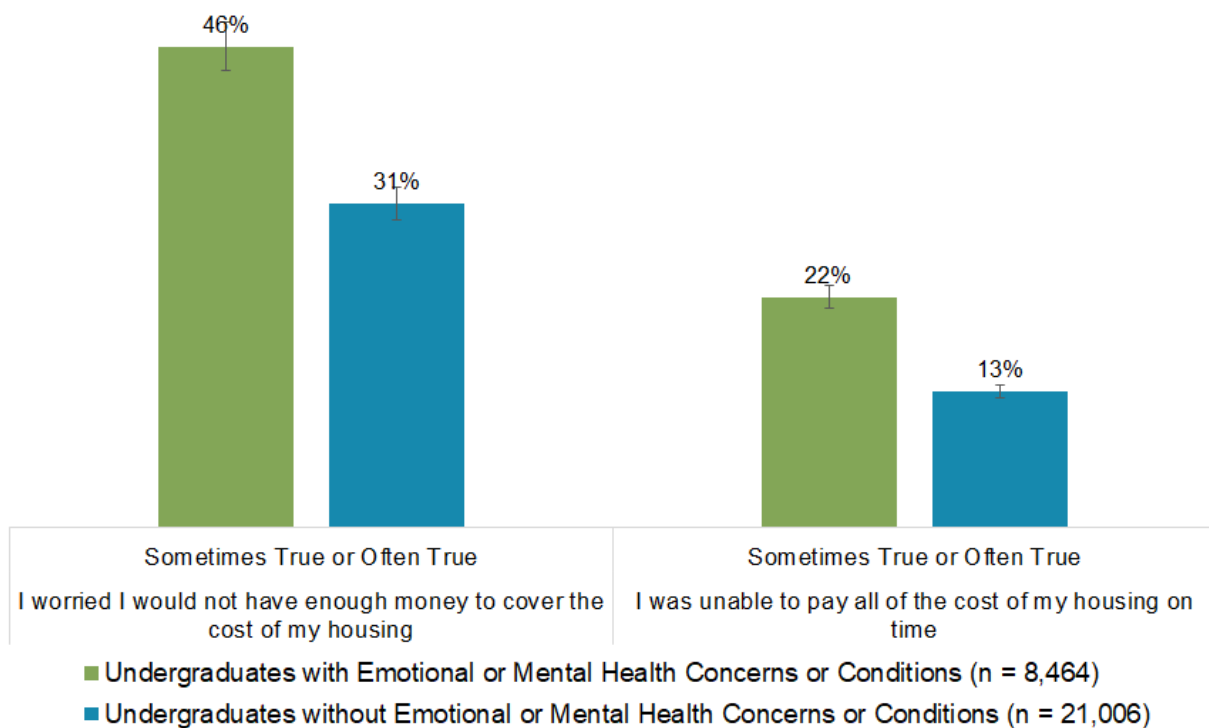|	Graduate Students with Emotional or Mental Health Concerns or Conditions		Graduate Students without Emotional or Mental Health Concerns or Conditions		Difference Between Groups	Sig. (*p* < .05)
	n	%	*n*	%	%	
Unexpected increases in living expenses	1359	35	2786	24	-11	*
Unexpected increases in spending for technology	1275	33	2581	22	-11	*
Loss or reduction of income of other family members	1039	27	2331	20	-7	*
Loss or cancellation of an expected job or internship offer	810	21	1806	16	-5	*
Loss of wages from off-campus employment	664	17	1465	13	-5	*
Other	304	8	620	5	-3	*
Loss of wages from on-campus employment	338	9	762	7	-2	*
Loss or reduction of insurance coverage	136	4	208	2	-2	*
None	1012	26	4683	40	14	*

Note. * *p* < .05.

Housing Insecurity

Similarly, there are also disparities in students' housing insecurity: students with emotional or mental health concerns or conditions were significantly ($p < .05$) more likely than students without emotional or mental health concerns or conditions to report that they were worried they would not have enough money to cover the cost of housing (Figure 5). In fact, 46% of undergraduate students with emotional or mental health concerns or conditions worried that they would not have enough money to cover the cost of housing and 22% were unable to pay all of the cost of their housing on time.
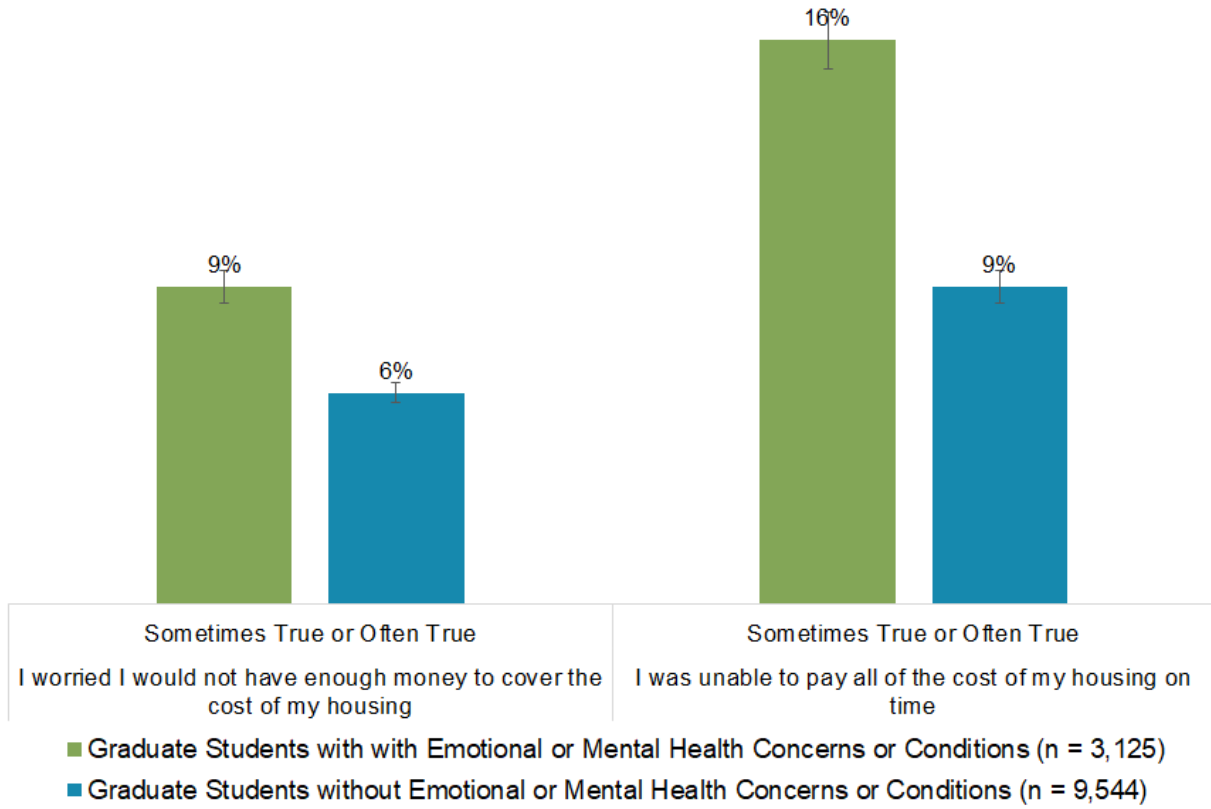
Figure 5

Undergraduate Students' Housing Insecurity During the Pandemic, by Disability Status

Additionally, 9% of graduate students with emotional or mental health concerns or conditions worried they would not have enough money to cover the cost of housing and 16% were unable to pay all of the cost of their housing on time (Figure 6).

Figure 6

Graduate Students' Housing Insecurity During the Pandemic, by Disability Status
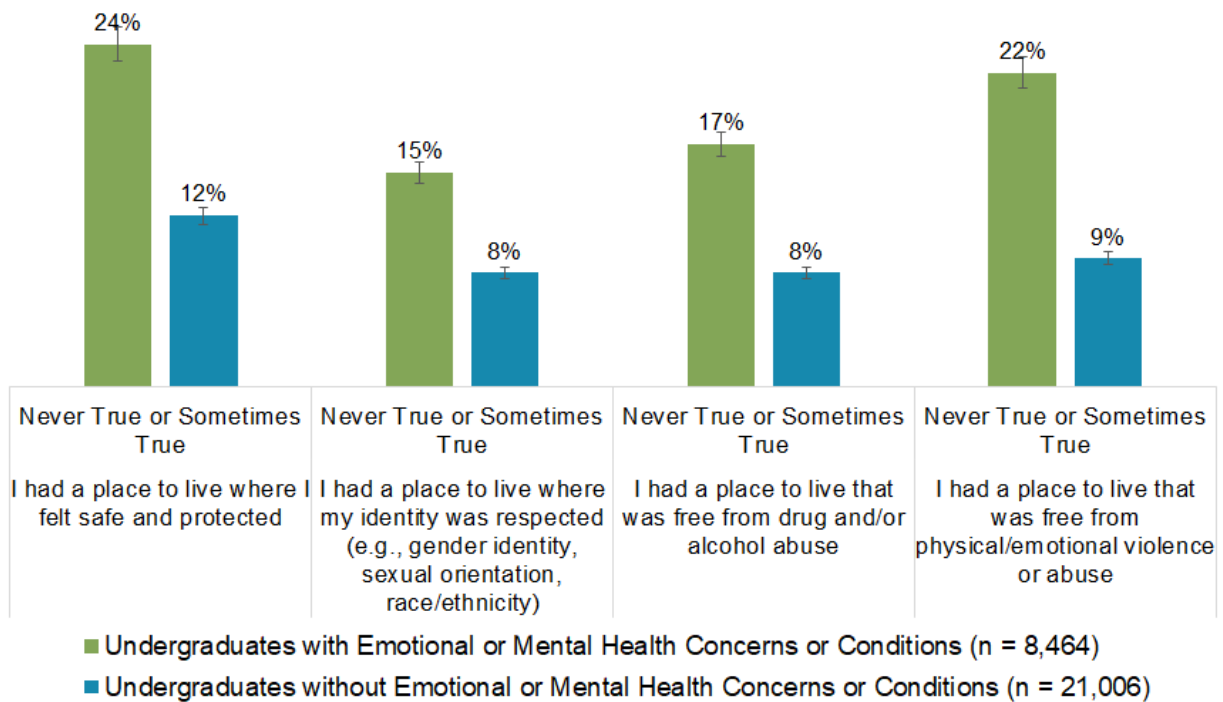
Housing Safety

Our survey results suggest that students with emotional or mental health concerns or conditions were significantly (p < .05) more likely than students without emotional or mental health concerns or conditions to live in places during the pandemic that were not as safe or free from physical or emotional violence or abuse or drug and/or alcohol abuse (Figure 1).

Specifically, undergraduate students with emotional or mental health concerns or conditions were twice as likely to indicate it was never or only sometimes true that they had a place to live where they felt safe and protected (24% compared to 12%; Figure 1). In addition, undergraduate students with emotional or mental health concerns or conditions were nearly twice as likely than their peers to report that it was never or only sometimes true that they had a place to live where their identity was respected, and more than twice than their peers as likely to report that it was never or only sometimes true that they had a place to live that was free from drug and/or alcohol abuse. Finally, undergraduate students with emotional or mental health concerns or conditions were nearly 2.5 times more likely to report that it was never or only sometimes true that they had a place to live that was free from physical/emotional violence or abuse.

Figure 1

Undergraduates' Safety During the Pandemic, by Disability Status

Never True or Sometimes True	Never True or Sometimes True	Never True or Sometimes True	Never True or Sometimes True
I had a place to live where I felt safe and protected	I had a place to live where my identity was respected (e.g., gender identity, sexual orientation, race/ethnicity)	I had a place to live that was free from drug and/or alcohol abuse	I had a place to live that was free from physical/emotional violence or abuse
Green 24% / Blue 12%	Green 15% / Blue 8%	Green 17% / Blue 8%	Green 22% / Blue 9%

■ Undergraduates with Emotional or Mental Health Concerns or Conditions (n = 8,464)
■ Undergraduates without Emotional or Mental Health Concerns or Conditions (n = 21,006)

Additionally, graduate students with emotional or mental health concerns or conditions were significantly ($p < .05$) more likely to indicate it was never or only sometimes true that they had a place to live where they felt safe and protected (Figure 2). Graduate students with emotional or mental health concerns or conditions were also significantly ($p < .05$) more likely to indicate it was never or only sometimes true that they had a place to live where their identity was respected (10%), had a place to live that was free from drug and/or alcohol abuse (9%), and had a place to live that was free from physical/emotional violence or abuse (16%).

Figure 2

Graduate Students' Safety During the Pandemic, by Disability Status

■ Graduate Students with with Emotional or Mental Health Concerns or Conditions (n = 3,125)
■ Graduate Students without Emotional or Mental Health Concerns or Conditions (n = 9,544)
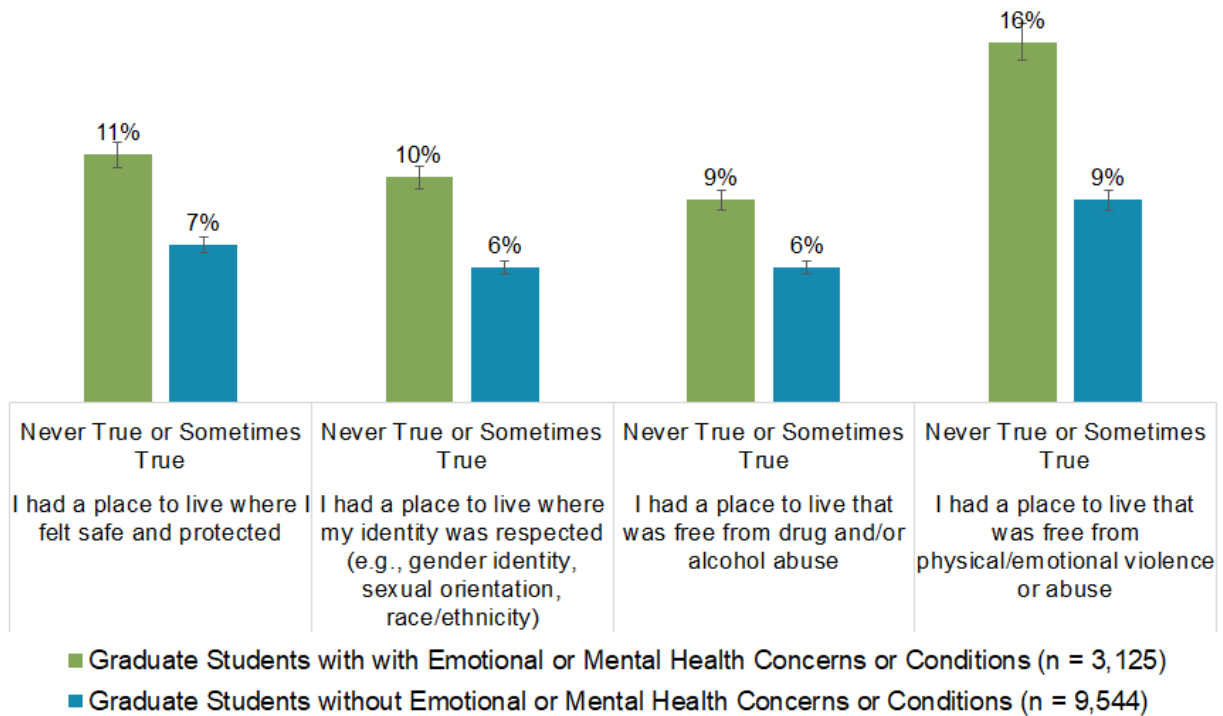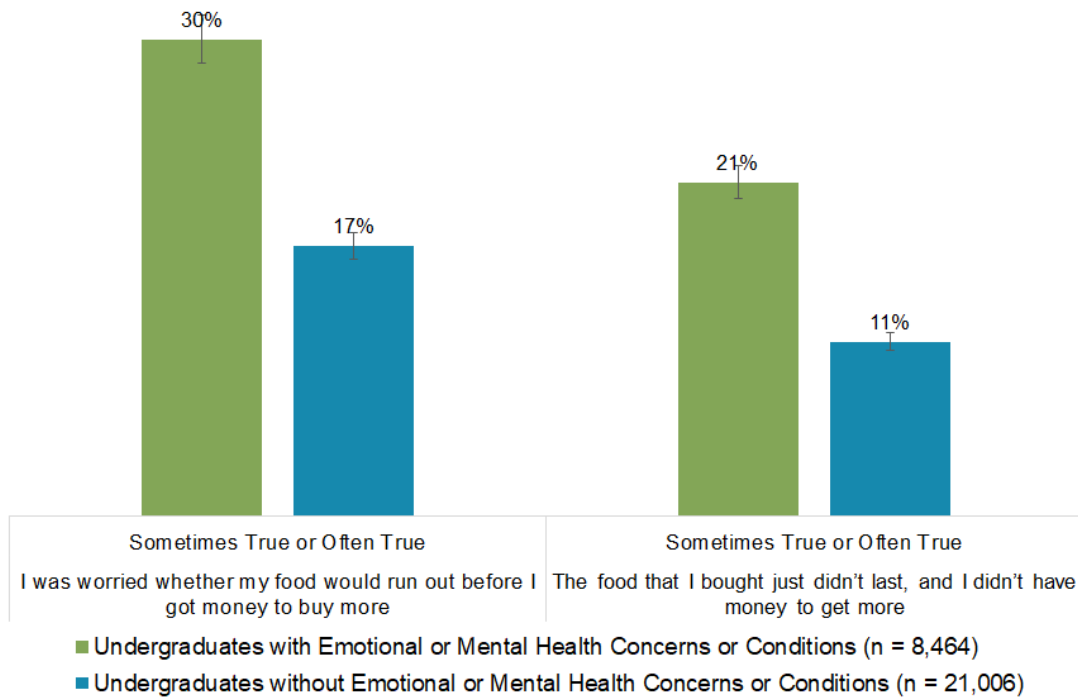
Food Insecurity

Our survey results suggest that students with emotional or mental health concerns or conditions were significantly ($p < .05$) more likely than students without emotional or mental health concerns or conditions to experience food insecurity during the pandemic (Figure 3). Thirty percent of undergraduate students with emotional or mental health concerns or conditions reported that it was sometimes true or often true that they were worried their food would run out before they had money to buy more food. Additionally, 21% of undergraduate students with emotional or mental health concerns or conditions reported that the food they bought did not last and they did not have money to purchase more food.

Figure 3

Undergraduates' Food Insecurity During the Pandemic, by Disability Status

Legend:
- Undergraduates with Emotional or Mental Health Concerns or Conditions (n = 8,464)
- Undergraduates without Emotional or Mental Health Concerns or Conditions (n = 21,006)

Categories:
- Sometimes True or Often True — I was worried whether my food would run out before I got money to buy more: 30%, 17%
- Sometimes True or Often True — The food that I bought just didn't last, and I didn't have money to get more: 21%, 11%

Additionally, the results suggest that 25% of graduate students with emotional or mental health concerns or conditions reported that it was sometimes true or often true that they were worried their food would run out before they had money to buy more food while 14% of graduate students with emotional or mental health concerns or conditions reported that the food they bought did not last and they did not have money to purchase more food (Figure 4).

Figure 4

Graduate Students' Food Insecurity During the Pandemic, by Disability Status

Sometimes True or Often True	Sometimes True or Often True
I was worried whether my food would run out before I got money to buy more	The food that I bought just didn't last, and I didn't have money to get more

■ Graduate Students with with Emotional or Mental Health Concerns or Conditions (n = 3,125)
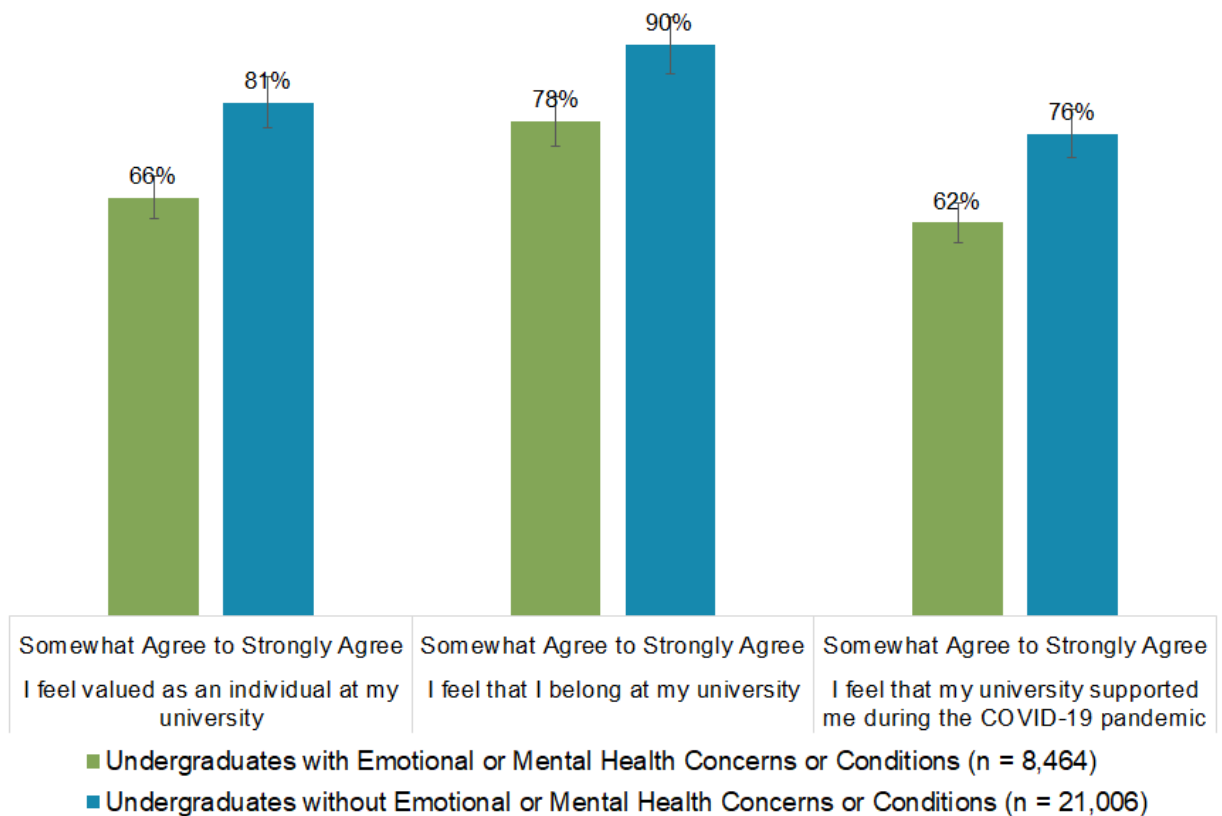■ Graduate Students without Emotional or Mental Health Concerns or Conditions (n = 9,544)
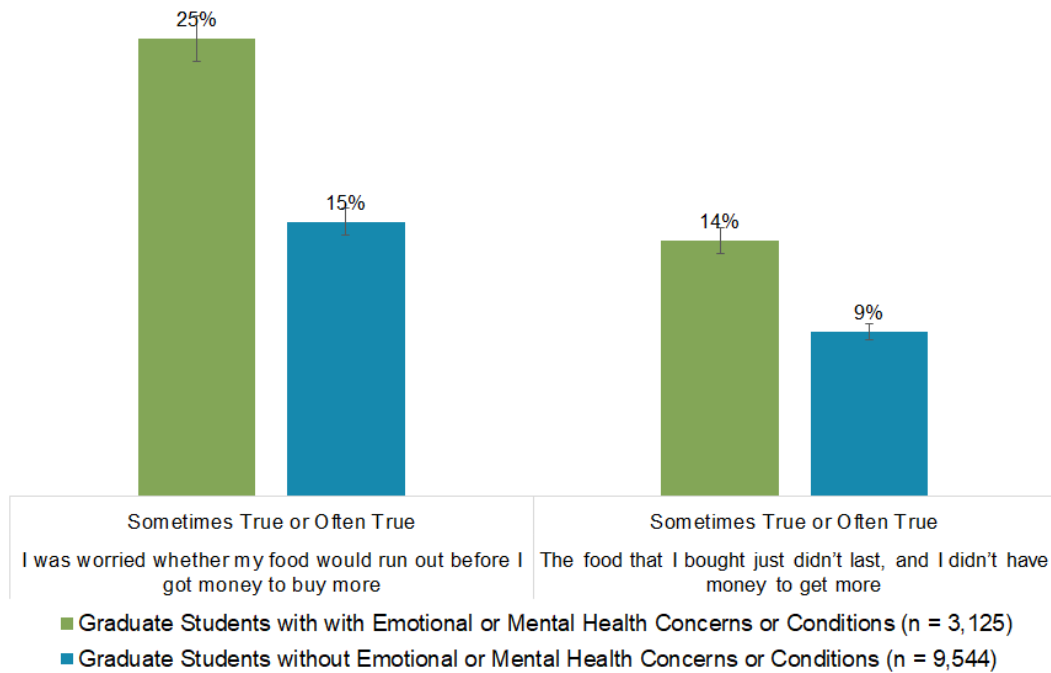
Belonging and Support

Students with emotional or mental health concerns or conditions were significantly ($p < .05$) less likely than students without emotional or mental health concerns or conditions to somewhat-to-strongly agree that they feel valued as individuals at their universities, that they feel like they belong at their universities, and that their universities supported them during the COVID-19 pandemic (Figure 7).

Only slightly more than half of undergraduate students with emotional or mental health concerns or conditions felt valued as an individual at their university during the COVID-19 pandemic (66%), and only slightly more than half of undergraduate students felt that their university supported them during the COVID-19 pandemic (62%). Those figures compare to over 80% and 76% of students without emotional or mental health concerns or conditions, respectively.

Figure 7

Undergraduates' Belonging and Feelings of Support During the COVID-19 Pandemic, by Disability Status

Graduate students with emotional or mental health concerns or conditions also struggled with feelings of belonging and support at their universities. Notably, 65% of graduate students of students with emotional or mental health concerns or conditions reported feeling valued as an individual at their universities compared to 83% of their peers. Additionally, 74% of students with emotional or mental health concerns or conditions felt a sense of belonging at their universities compared to 87% of their peers. Finally, 67% of students with emotional or mental health concerns or conditions reported that their universities supported them during the COVID-19 pandemic compared to 81% of their peers (Figure 8).

Figure 8

Graduate Students' Belonging and Feelings of Support During the COVID-19 Pandemic, by Disability Status

| Somewhat Agree to Strongly Agree | Somewhat Agree to Strongly Agree | Somewhat Agree to Strongly Agree |
| I feel valued as an individual at my university | I feel that I belong at my university | I feel that my university supported me during the COVID-19 pandemic |

■ Graduate Students with with Emotional or Mental Health Concerns or Conditions (n = 3,125)
■ Graduate Students without Emotional or Mental Health Concerns or Conditions (n = 9,544)
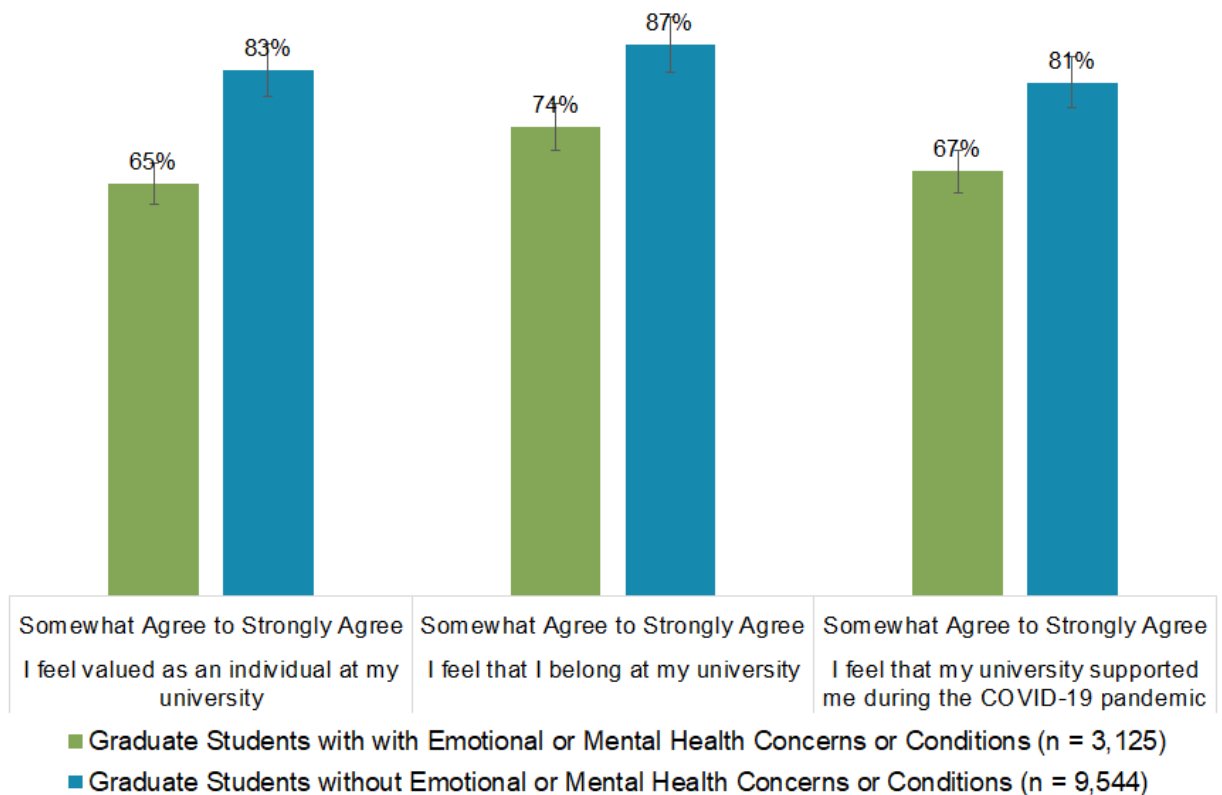
Adapting to Online Instruction

Students with emotional or mental health concerns or conditions did not adapt as well to online instruction during the COVID-19 pandemic compared to their peers (Tables 3 and 4). We sorted the tables by the differences between students with emotional or mental health concerns or conditions and those without those concerns or conditions. Notably, *all* of the differences reported in the obstacles to transitioning to online education below are statistically significant ($p < .05$) between the students with emotional or mental health concerns or conditions and the students without emotional or mental health concerns or conditions.

Some of the biggest differences between undergraduate students with emotional or mental health concerns or conditions and those without emotional or mental health concerns or conditions included a lack of access to an appropriate study space amid a distracting home environment, inability to learn effectively in an online format, lack of clear expectations for online learning from instructor(s), inability to attend classes at their scheduled online meeting time, and lack of access to technology necessary for online learning. Overall, undergraduate students with emotional or mental health concerns or conditions were most likely to cite lack of motivation for online learning (82%), inability to learn effectively in an online format (70%), and lack of interaction/communication with other students (70%) as obstacles (Table 3).

Table 3

Undergraduates' Obstacles to Transitioning to Online Education, by Disability Status

	Undergraduates with Emotional or Mental Health Concerns or Conditions		Undergraduates without Emotional or Mental Health Concerns or Conditions		Difference Between Groups	Sig. ($p < .05$)
	n	%	n	%	%	
Lack of access to an appropriate study space or distracting home environment	5721	68	10854	52	-16	*
Inability to learn effectively in an online format	5916	70	12459	59	-11	*
Lack of clear expectations for online learning from instructor(s)	3956	47	7843	37	-9	*
Inability to attend classes at their scheduled online meeting time	2023	24	3332	16	-8	*
Lack of access to technology necessary for online learning	1811	21	2878	14	-8	*
Lack of motivation for online learning	6958	82	15846	75	-7	*
Course content that is not appropriate for online learning	4136	49	8900	42	-6	*
Inability to access learning support services	1689	20	2976	14	-6	*
Lack of interaction/communication with other students	5961	70	13723	65	-5	*
Lack of familiarity with technical tools necessary for online learning	1441	17	2602	12	-5	*
Lack of access to academic advising	1905	23	3949	19	-4	*
Lack of access to your instructor(s)	2614	31	5745	27	-4	*
Other	805	10	1299	6	-3	*
Instances of bullying or harassment in your online classes	91	1	162	1	0	*
None	149	2	892	4	2	*

Note. * $p < .05$.

Some of the largest differences between graduate students with emotional or mental health concerns or conditions and those without emotional or mental health concerns or conditions included a lack of access to an appropriate study space or distracting home environment, lack of motivation for online learning, inability to learn effectively in an online format, lack of interaction/communication with other students, and lack of clear expectations for online learning from instructor(s).

Overall, graduate students with emotional or mental health concerns or conditions were most likely to cite the following obstacles to transition to online learning: lack of motivation for online learning (68%), lack of interaction/communication with other students (62%), and lack of access to an appropriate study space or distracting home environment (56%).

Table 4

Graduate Students' Obstacles to Transitioning to Online Education, by Disability Status

	Graduate Students with Emotional or Mental Health Concerns or Conditions		Graduate Students without Emotional or Mental Health Concerns or Conditions		Difference Between Groups	Sig. ($p < .05$)
	n	%	*n*	%	%	
Lack of access to an appropriate study space or distracting home environment	1743	56	3843	40	-16	*
Lack of motivation for online learning	2121	68	4998	52	-16	*
Inability to learn effectively in an online format	1491	48	3354	35	-13	*
Lack of interaction/communication with other students	1923	62	4999	52	-9	*
Lack of clear expectations for online learning from instructor(s)	909	29	1971	21	-8	*
Course content that is not appropriate for online learning	1063	34	2505	26	-8	*
Lack of access to technology necessary for online learning	591	19	1082	11	-8	*
Lack of access to your instructor(s)	639	20	1528	16	-4	*
Lack of access to academic advising	358	11	768	8	-3	*
Other, please specify:	431	14	1001	10	-3	*
Lack of familiarity with technical tools necessary for online learning	310	10	650	7	-3	*
Inability to access learning support services	275	9	559	6	-3	*
Inability to attend classes at their scheduled online meeting time	235	8	507	5	-2	*
Instances of bullying or harassment in your online classes	22	1	32	0	0	*
None of the above	200	6	1346	14	8	*

Note. * $p < .05$.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The results of our study suggest that students with emotional or mental health concerns or conditions reported experiencing significantly more challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic than students without emotional or mental health concerns or conditions. Specifically, students with emotional or mental health concerns or conditions experienced more financial difficulties, food and housing insecurities, and challenges adapting to online learning. Below, we offer some recommendations for institutions.

Increase and Promote Mental Health Resources
Our research has found that the COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on students' mental health; for more information, read our policy brief *Undergraduate and Graduate Students' Mental Health During the COVID-19 Pandemic*. For students with preexisting emotional or mental health concerns or conditions, the pandemic may have further exacerbated these concerns or conditions. Unfortunately, the pandemic may have impacted students' abilities to access mental health resources, such as initial barriers to telecounseling services for students who had relocated to a different state during the pandemic.

We recommend that institutions proactively invest in expanding virtual mental health resources, such as telecounseling and teletherapy. Additionally, campuses should increase communications with students to ensure awareness of mental health resources. We recommend that institutions regularly share existing services via email. In addition to increased promotion of services, we recommend that administrators work to reduce barriers by offering appointments at various times of the day and increasing counseling staff to reduce waitlists.

Staff and faculty can also play a significant role in promoting these resources; we recommend that faculty embed mental health modules in their learning management software programs, provide contact information for mental health resources in their syllabi, and frequently email students to share information about how to access mental health services on campus. Finally, colleges and universities should regularly share and promote existing resources with students to increase awareness.

Reduce Financial Barriers for Students with Emotional or Mental Health Concerns or Conditions
Some of the financial barriers faced by students with emotional or mental health concerns or conditions included loss or reduction of income from other family members, unexpected increases in living expenses, loss of income from off-campus employment, unexpected increases in spending for technology, and loss or cancellation of an expected job or internship offer. To address these financial barriers, we recommend that institutions increase employment opportunities for students with emotional or mental health concerns or conditions. Additionally, we recommend that career development offices assist students to locate alternative internship or employment positions, especially if they lost those expected positions because of the economic fallout associated with the pandemic.

Some of the biggest financial disparities between students with emotional or mental health concerns or conditions and those without emotional or mental health concerns or conditions were loss of income from family members unexpected increases in living expenses. We recommend that institutions mitigate these disparities by ensuring that these students have

additional financial support from the university such as grants, fellowships, or scholarships. Additionally, financial aid offices should work with students to help them obtain outside funding, such as scholarships for students with emotional or mental health concerns or conditions.

Reduce Food and Housing Insecurity and Improve Safety

Our research suggests students with emotional or mental health concerns or conditions were significantly more likely than students without emotional or mental health concerns or conditions to live in places during the pandemic that were not as safe or free from physical or emotional violence or abuse, or drug and/or alcohol abuse. Furthermore, students with emotional or mental health concerns or conditions were significantly more likely to indicate that it was never or only sometimes true that they lived in a place where their identity was respected and where they felt safe and respected. Finally, students with emotional or mental health concerns or conditions were more likely to experience food insecurity during the pandemic.

To address these issues, we recommend that institutions provide additional support for students with emotional or mental health concerns or conditions to find safe and secure housing, such as by providing emergency housing services, including temporary housing options in local apartments or hotels. In addition, campuses should readily communicate additional housing-related resources to assist students. For instance, colleges and universities can partner with off-campus resources to help students navigate housing issues, such as evictions or inflexible landlords.

Furthermore, we recommend that institutions address food insecurity by expanding nutritional support services and food pantries. These services should offer socially distanced pickup options for students in accessible locations that students may frequently attend. We also recommend that institutions partner with local organizations addressing food insecurities to ensure that students with emotional or mental health concerns or conditions are receiving adequate support.

Provide Support for Successfully Transitioning to Online Learning

Students with emotional or mental health concerns or conditions did not adapt as well to online instruction during the COVID-19 pandemic compared to students without emotional or mental health concerns or conditions. Some of the largest concerns included a lack of access to an appropriate study space or distracting home environment, inability to learn effectively in an online format, lack of clear expectations for online learning from instructor(s), inability to attend classes at their scheduled online meeting time, and lack of access to technology necessary for online learning.

To address these issues, we recommend that faculty and academic advisors proactively support students with emotional or mental health concerns or conditions. As these students reported environments that may not be conducive to virtual learning, faculty and staff should ensure that students are receiving adequate accommodations, such as deadline extensions and extended test-taking times. Furthermore, faculty and academic advisors should also plan for potential impacts upon students' engagement in classes, achievement, and overall well-being. This includes recognizing that drops in students' engagement or achievement could be connected to the students' emotional or mental health concerns or conditions.

Finally, we recommend that faculty and academic advisors exercise compassion for students with emotional or mental health concerns or conditions as they navigate the fall 2020 semester. In addition to grappling with concerns such as lack of access to mental health resources, food, secure housing, and reliable study spaces, these students are dealing with a rapidly changing landscape in higher education. During the COVID-19 pandemic, being a student takes on new meaning, particularly when dealing with emotional or mental health concerns or conditions.

About the SERU COVID-19 Survey

The Student Experience in the Research University (SERU) Consortium administered a special survey on the impact of COVID-19 on student experience at nine U.S. public research universities. The SERU 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 on students, 3) students' health and wellbeing during the pandemic, 4) students' belonging and engagement, and 5) students' future plans.

Sample

The survey was a census survey administered from May 18 to July 20, 2020 to undergraduate, graduate, and professional students at large, public research universities. The report uses data from 30,725 undergraduate students and 15,346 graduate and professional students. The response rate was 14-41% at the respective institutions. You can review more about the full sample here.

Methodology

All of the items we report in this research brief are categorical; therefore, we utilized Pearson's chi-square test to determine whether there is a statistically significant difference between the expected and observed frequencies of students' responses. We utilized the common probability level of $p < .05$, which serves as an a priori statement of the probability of an event occurring as extreme or more extreme than the one observed if the null hypothesis is true.

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 is available at https://cshe.berkeley.edu/seru.

Contact Information

Krista M. Soria, PhD, Assistant Director for Research and Strategic Partnerships, SERU Consortium, and Director for Student Affairs Assessment, University of Minnesota.
ksoria@umn.edu

Suggested APA Citation

Horgos, B., Soria, K. M., Chirikov, I., & Jones-White, D. (2020). *The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on students with emotional or mental health concerns or conditions*. SERU Consortium, University of California - Berkeley and University of Minnesota.

References

Chirikov, I., Soria, K. M., Horgos, B., & Jones-White, D. (2020). *Undergraduate and graduate students' mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic.* SERU Consortium, University of California - Berkeley and University of Minnesota.
https://cshe.berkeley.edu/seru-covid-survey-reports