

Examining the Impact of the Pandemic on Students' Academic Performance and Emotional Health at a Research University in the Southern Region of the United States

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The coronavirus pandemic is a worldwide public health crisis that has affected the world population including college and university students psychologically, financially, socially, and academically. Additionally, this pandemic has cost many lives and yet this seems to be far from over. Making and distribution of more vaccines maybe key to halt this. The students in this study reported that they were not able to focus and learn as they wanted and their emotional health worsened during the pandemic. Colleges and universities should prepare students on ways to cope with the new learning environments and create infrastructures that support students' success.

Keywords: COVID-19, student success, mental health, diversity

INTRODUCTION

The coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic is a worldwide public health crisis that has affected every segment of the world population, especially the most vulnerable. Many have lost members of their family, their job, businesses, and/or their household and witnessed the loss of social activities. In the U.S., as of July 19, 2021, the pandemic has infected 191, 589, 191 people and has caused 4,110,307 deaths, according to Worldometers.info (2021).

The restrictive measures of the U.S. government to isolate and drive down the COVID-19 infections have precipitated a severe economic downturn. Lockdown measures and social distancing have led to business closures and subsequently unemployment. For instance, the current unemployment rate (6.3%) is much higher than the rate observed (3.5%) in February 2020 (Congressional Research Service Report, 2021). According to Janet Yellen, the U.S. Treasury Secretary, "these high rates of job loss threaten the wellbeing of workers and their families. They may create economic scars that last well beyond the end of the pandemic".

In addition, this pandemic has caused a major disruption in the daily operations of colleges and universities across the U.S. As a result, many students were forced to cancel their in-person classes to attend

online only instruction. Hence, they have experienced from minimal to no social activities. The changes in instructional delivery and social distancing have affected the students both educationally and psychologically. Many college students have developed academic frustrations due to constantly change in the instructional delivery and unclear instructional indicators and developed many mental health symptoms including loneliness, compromised motivation, sleep disturbance, anxiety, and depression (Tasso, Sahin, & Roman, 2021).

Therefore, the primary purpose of this study was to examine the impact of the pandemic on graduate students' academic performance and emotional health at a Research University in the Southern Region of the United States.

OBJECTIVES

1. To describe the impact of the pandemic on expectations of students enrolled in a graduate course level at a Research University in the southern Region of the U.S.,
2. To describe the impact of the pandemic on confidence of students enrolled in a graduate course level at a Research University in the southern Region of the U.S.,
3. To describe the impact of the pandemic on ability of students to focus and learn during a Fall semester at a Research University in the Southern Region of the U.S.,
4. To describe the impact of the pandemic on academic performance of students enrolled in a graduate course level at a Research University in the southern Region of the U.S.,
5. To describe the impact of the pandemic on emotional health of students enrolled in a graduate course level at a Research University in the southern Region of the U.S.

METHODS

Population & Sample

The target population of this study includes students enrolled at a research university in the southern region of the United States during the 2019-2020 academic year. A convenience sample of 21 graduate students in a selected course were selected from the target population. Of the sample, 19 (90.48%) students chose to participate in the study. The students were largely women representing 94.74% ($n = 18$) of the participants. Only 5.25 % ($n = 1$) of the respondents was men. In addition, the students in the study were White/Caucasian ($n = 14$, 73.68%) and African American ($n = 5$, 26.32%).

Instrumentation

The researchers created a 21 item-survey, which was informed by relevant literature, to measure impact of COVID-19 on students' learning and performance. Among these items included: "COVID-19 affects my academic performance in this class", "COVID-19 has affected my academic performance in other classes", "COVID-19 has affected my ability to learn this semester," COVID-19 has affected my ability to focus this semester", "COVID-19 has lowered my expectations this semester", "COVID-19 has affected my confidence in achieving my desired academic performance", and "COVID-19 has affected my emotional health". The researchers used a 7-point Likert-type scale (e.g., strongly disagree = 1, disagree = 2, somewhat disagree = 3, neither agree or nor disagree = 4, somewhat agree = 5, agree = 6, and strongly agree = 7) to measure each item of the survey. The internal consistency of the survey was very high (Cronbach's Alpha = .864).

DATA ANALYSIS

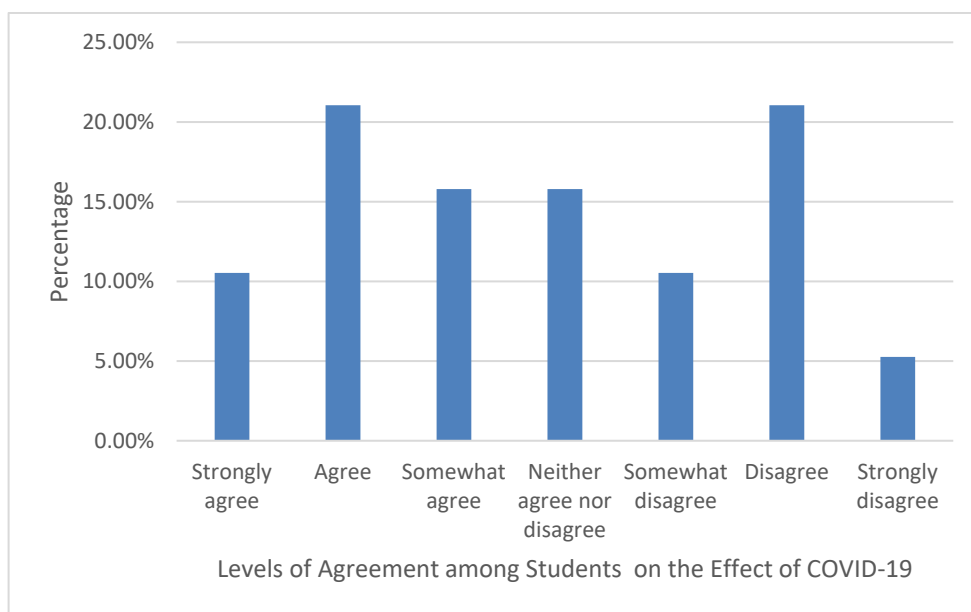
The survey data were downloaded from Qualtrics into an excel sheet and were imported in SPSS version 27 for analyses. The data were analyzed using descriptive statistics including measures of central tendency and variability and measures of association.

RESULTS

There were 19 students who participated in the study. The results for each variable investigated are reported below.

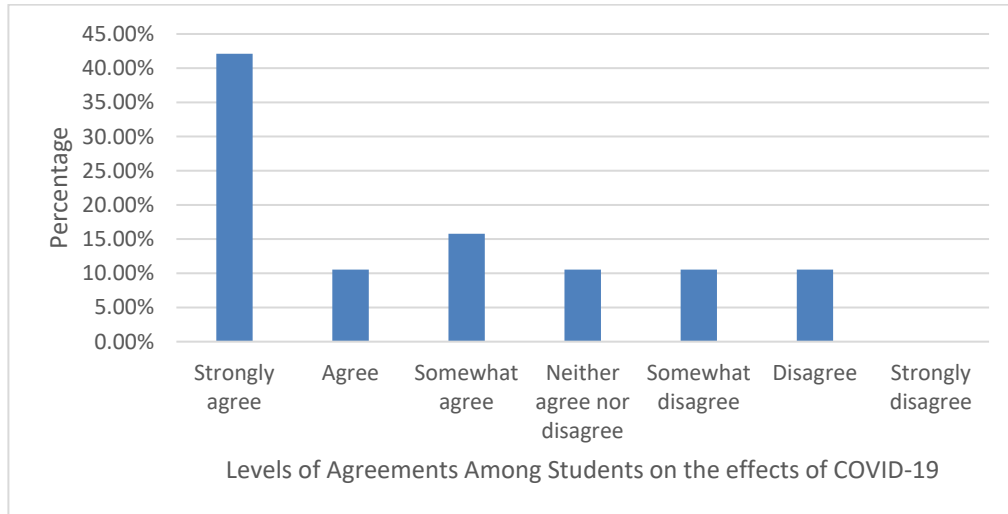
Examining the expectations of the students of a graduate level course at a Research University in the southern region o/f the United States who participated in the study during the Fall semester of 2020, the data revealed that, of 19 students who responded to the survey, 47.37% strongly or somewhat agreed and 31.58% strongly or somewhat disagreed that the COVID-19 pandemic had lowered their expectation this semester (see Figure 1). The survey response of the students had a mean score of 3.79 ($SD = 1.82$) and ranged from one to seven.

FIGURE 1
BELIEFS OF THE STUDENTS IN THE STUDY OF THE EFFECT OF COVID-19 ON LOWERING THEIR EXPECTATIONS DURING 2020 FALL SEMESTER



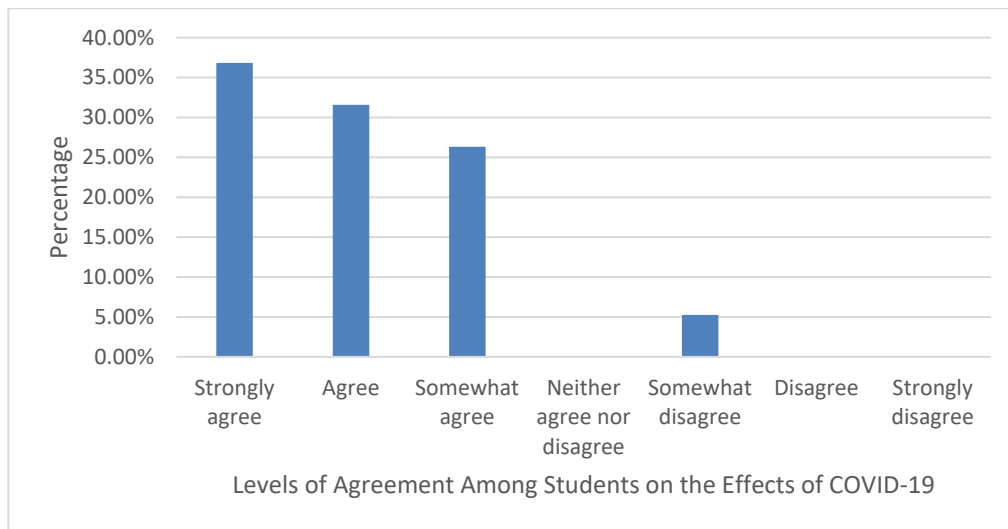
The confidence of the students in the course was also examined. That data suggests that of the 19 students who participated in the study, 68.43% strongly or somewhat agreed and 21.06% strongly or somewhat disagreed that COVID 19 had affected their confidence in achieving their desired academic performance (see Figure 2). The mean score of the responses of the study participants was 2.68 ($SD = 1.78$) and the scores ranged from one to six.

FIGURE 2
BELIEFS OF THE STUDENTS IN THE STUDY OF THE EFFECTS OF COVID 19 ON THEIR
CONFIDENCE TO ACHIEVE THEIR DESIRED ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE
DURING 2020 FALL SEMESTER



Another variable of interest was whether or not the students in the course were able to focus during the COVID 19 pandemic. The data shows that, of the 19 graduate students who participated in the study, 94.74% strongly or somewhat agreed and 5.26% strongly or somewhat disagreed that COVID 19 had affected their ability to focus during the semester (see Figure 3). The responses of the study participants had a mean score of 2.05 ($SD = 1.05$) and the scores ranged from one to five.

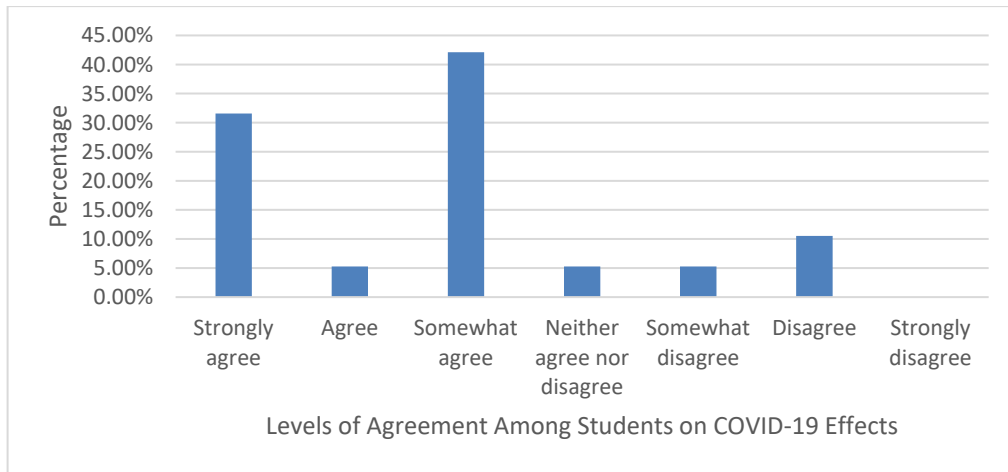
FIGURE 3
BELIEFS OF THE STUDENTS IN THE STUDY OF EFFECT OF THE PANDEMIC ON THEIR
ABILITY TO FOCUS DURING 2020 FALL SEMESTER



The students' perceived ability to learn during the pandemic was also examined in this study. The data indicates that, of the 19 Students who participated in the study, 78.95% strongly or somewhat agreed and 15.79% strongly or somewhat disagreed that COVID 19 affected their abilities to learn this semester in this

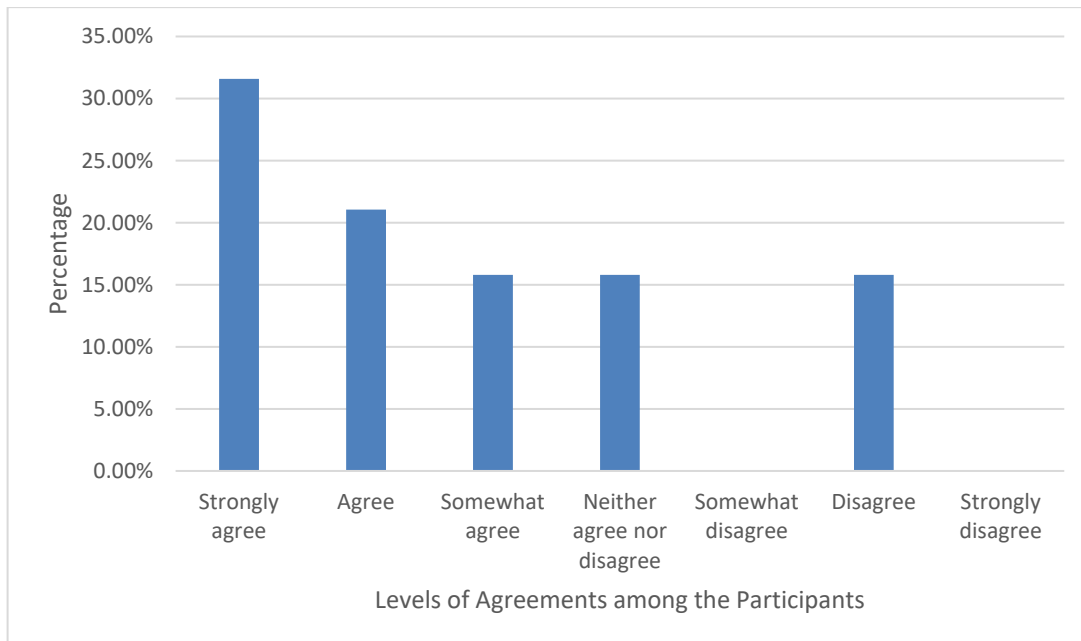
course. The mean score of the responses of the participants in the study was 2.79 ($SD = 1.58$) (See Figure 4) and the scores varied from one to six.

FIGURE 4
BELIEFS OF THE STUDENTS IN THE STUDY OF EFFECT OF THE PANDEMIC ON THEIR ABILITY TO LEARN DURING 2020 FALL SEMESTER



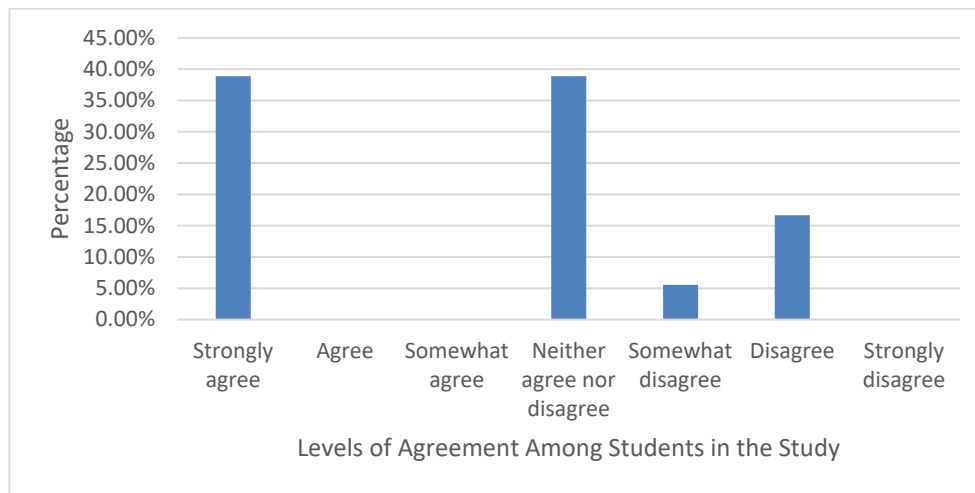
The perceived academic performance of the students in the course was another variable of interest of this study. Examining the data of the study, it was found that, of 19 students who participated in the study, 38.89% strongly or somewhat agreed and 22.23% strongly or somewhat disagreed that COVID 19 had affected my academic performance in this class (see Figure 5). The mean score of the response of the study participants was 2.79 ($SD = 1.73$) and the scores ranged from one to six.

FIGURE 5
PERCEIVED ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE OF STUDENTS IN THIS CLASS DURING THE PANDEMIC



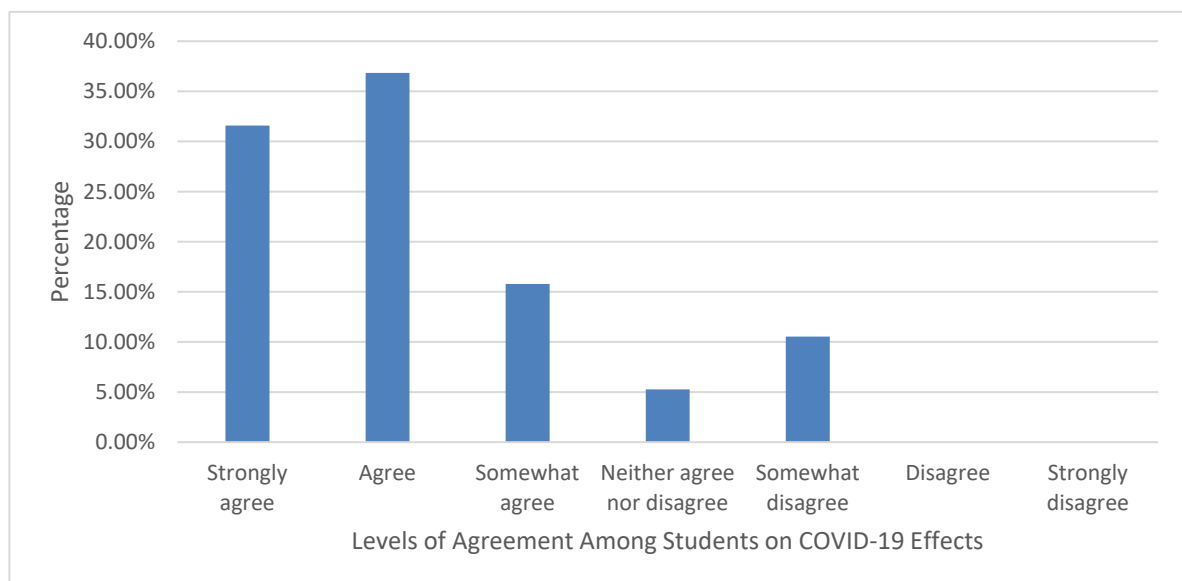
Additionally, the data indicates that 47.37% and 31.58% of the participants strongly or somewhat agreed and strongly or somewhat disagreed respectively that COVID 19 had affected their academic performance in other classes. The mean of the responses of the participants in the study was 3.22 ($SD = 1.90$) while the scores ranged from one to six (see Table 6).

FIGURE 6
PERCEIVED ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE OF STUDENTS IN OTHER CLASSES DURING THE PANDEMIC



The effects of the pandemic on the emotional health of the students in the study was also examined. The data revealed that of the 19 students who participated in the study, 84.21% strongly or somewhat agreed and strongly or somewhat 10.53% disagreed that COVID-19 had affected their emotional health (see Figure 7). The responses of the study participants had a mean of 3.22 ($SD = 1.90$).

FIGURE 7
BELIEFS OF THE STUDENTS IN THE STUDY OF EFFECT OF THE PANDEMIC ON THEIR EMOTIONAL HEALTH DURING 2020 FALL SEMESTER.



In addition, the relationships among the different variables of interest of this study were investigated. Examining the responses of the students in the study, the data show that the students who were not able to focus due to the pandemic had lower level of confidence, ($r = .770, p < .001, N = 19$), lower level of expectations ($r = .033, p = .892, N = 19$), greater level of difficulty to learn ($r = .738, p < .001, N = 19$), lower level of perceived academic performance ($r = .687, p = .001, N = 19$) including in this class ($r = .671, p = .002, N = 19$) and other classes ($r = .684, p = .002; N = 18$), and greater level of emotional health problems ($r = .616, p = .005, N = 19$).

The relationships between the level of confidence of the students in the study and the other variables of interest were also computed. The data revealed that the students who reported that their confidence was affected by the pandemic had greater level of difficulty to learn ($r = .728, p < .001, N = 19$); lower perceived level of academic performance ($r = .676, p = .001, N = 19$) including in this class ($r = .797, p < .001, N = 19$) and other classes ($r = .802, p < .001, N = 18$), and poorer emotional health ($r = .582, p = .009; N = 19$).

The relationships between the students' ability to learn and the other variables of interest were also examined. Looking at the data, it was found that the students who reported that their ability to learn during the semester was affected by the pandemic had lower perceived level of academic performance ($r = .710, p = .001, N = 19$) including this course ($r = .812, p < .001, N = 19$) and other courses ($r = .702, p = .001; N = 18$), and poorer emotional health ($r = .616, p = .005, N = 19$).

The relationships between the students' emotional health and the other variables of investigation were also analyzed. The data suggests that the students who reported that their emotional health was affected by the pandemic had lower perceived level of academic performance ($r = .850, p < .001, N = 19$) including in the program development course ($r = .778, p < .001; N = 19$) and other courses ($r = .521, p = .027, N = 18$).

The data were further examined to uncover additional significant relationships among the variables of interest. The analysis revealed that the relationships between the students' expectations did not correlate with any other variable of interest of the study, $p < .05$.

DISCUSSION & CONCLUSIONS

A high number of graduate students enrolled during the 2020 fall semester at a Research University in the southern region of the United States, agreed that the COVID-19 pandemic affected their academic year in terms of expectations, ability to focus, learn, and perform well. This might be explained by the fact that the graduate students who were enrolled in the course did not have the opportunity to interact physically with their instructor. The institution abruptly moved all its courses fully online and this might have negatively affected students' cognitive adjustment to a new environment of learning.

In fact, as the pandemic has exacerbated the racial and ethnic inequality in the U.S., colleges and universities should take additional measures that address racial and ethnic gap in enrollment and help minority students to be successful in the classroom environment and on campus at large. Minority students make up only 19% of the student population in the country. The pandemic can further increase the racial and ethnic gap in enrollment and dropout rate of minority students. Around 41% of minority students reported that they may not attend colleges and 64% reported that the pandemic affected their college plans. According to Hanson (2021), almost half of college students who dropped out had parents who did not finish college. The same author also reported that minority students had higher dropout rates in 2021 compared to other groups. Many minority students do not have enough money to cater for materials that aid students to be successful in the classroom and out of the classroom such as a reliable internet, a personal laptop or computer, and a personal space to study.

In addition, the findings of this study also suggest that the pandemic has affected the emotional wellbeing of the study students. The pandemic has forced many academic institutions to switch abruptly to virtual education. The change in modes of instructional delivery and the loss of social activities have created a mental health crisis in the country. A great number of college students in the U.S. suffer from mental health concerns including anxiety, depression, suicidal ideation, and substance abuse. Mental health has been deteriorating among the U.S. College students during the pandemic, according to Image America (2020). Yet many colleges and universities do not have appropriate on-site psychiatric facilities to treat

mental illness. According to Eisenber, Goldrick-Rab, Lipson, & Broton (2016), only 8% of community colleges and 58% of four-year colleges and universities have appropriate on-site psychiatric facilities in the U.S.

College students have experienced overwhelming anxiety, especially the minority students who have greater financial constraints and are often denied mental health services in Higher Education. In addition, many academic institutions that educate minority and low-income students who face multiple risk factor for poor mental health are not well equipped while the severity and complexity of mental health concerns of students has increased. It is critically important to invest in college and universities' mental health centers in a manner consistent with the demands.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Colleges and universities should find ways to prepare students on ways to cope up with new learning environments that might abruptly occur due to the pandemic or other causes. Academic institutions need to prepare their faculty and staff for the new normal and create a supporting and safe learning environment for student success.

Colleges and universities should make mental-health services available to students while intensifying their diversity and inclusion efforts to combat systemic racism and microaggressions. Mental health centers should be welcoming spaces for everyone regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation. Colleges and universities should seek to provide culturally responsive mental-health care to students.

The authors of this study acclaim that additional research be conducted by the university to further examine the findings using a larger sample size. These studies may take quantitative and/or qualitative form (s). The latter may allow the researchers to gather more in depth data and information on the effects of the pandemic on students. These studies may be piloted with students in a virtual environment to maximize their level of comfort, so that they can explain in real time how COVID-19 affects them. The researchers recommend that the results of the studies be utilized by the University to assess and revise procedures on how to prepare students for the new normal or post-pandemic situations.

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