

The Pandemic's Toll on College Student Development

Insights from *College, Interrupted: A Study of Student Mental Health, Academic Resilience and Development in the Face of COVID-19 Disruptions**

Disruptions brought on by the Covid-19 pandemic have taken a toll on people across the globe. A recent study known as *College, Interrupted* suggests that students, especially those who were in their first year when the pandemic began, are additionally at risk for having important developmental tasks derailed. These students had entered a phase in which they were developing their identities and exploring crucial aspects of autonomy, competence, belonging, and achievement. The pandemic has interfered with that development, and large numbers of students report a continuing decline in psychological well-being and a growing sense of academic distress. The long-term effects on these students are not yet known, but *College, Interrupted* points to **potential emotional and developmental challenges for young people as they complete college** and move into a new phase of their lives.

Background

When college campuses nationwide closed in the spring of 2020, a team from Emory University, University of Kansas, Western Washington University, University of Utah, and University of Missouri began studying the direct and longitudinal impact of disruptions to college life for first-year (in AY 2019-2020) students. The study involved:

- Approximately 650 students from Emory University (n=85) and the universities of Kansas (n=243), Missouri (n=200), and Western Washington (n=105)
- Four waves of data: April 2020, July 2020, October/November 2020, May 2021
- Student reports of mental health, academic resilience and identity development, exposure to Covid-related stressors, and stories about their experiences during the pandemic

Key takeaways

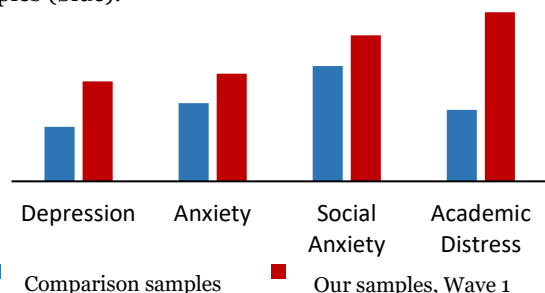
- Impact of the pandemic on student mental health and well-being has been lasting and sometimes escalating.
- Critical aspects of student academic and identity development have been derailed, with implications for their academic, personal and professional trajectories that are yet unknown.
- Students whose narratives about the pandemic referenced growth from lived events showed greater resilience.
- Students continue to need patience, support, and understanding in their classes and in outside activities.

Advice for Universities

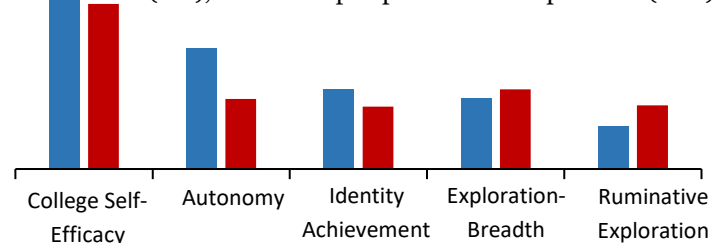
- Increase awareness of student functioning and student needs among faculty, staff and leaders.
- Emphasize learning experiences that support identity development (authentic assignments, problem-based learning, partnerships with career centers, alumni engagement)
- Create opportunities for students and the university community to make meaning of this experience (e.g., story corps)
- Reconsider institutional narratives, avoiding messages of “back to normal.”

What was the initial impact of the pandemic on students in Spring 2020?

Mental health concerns were elevated in Spring 2020 (red) compared with pre-pandemic comparison samples (blue).



Students **reported lower self-efficacy, autonomy and identity maturity, and increased identity exploration** in Spring 2020 (red), relative to pre-pandemic comparisons (blue).



*College, Interrupted Research team:

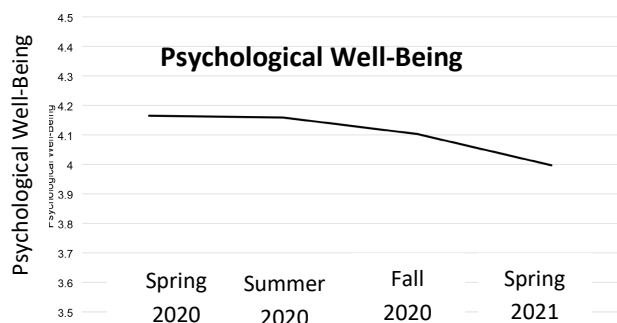
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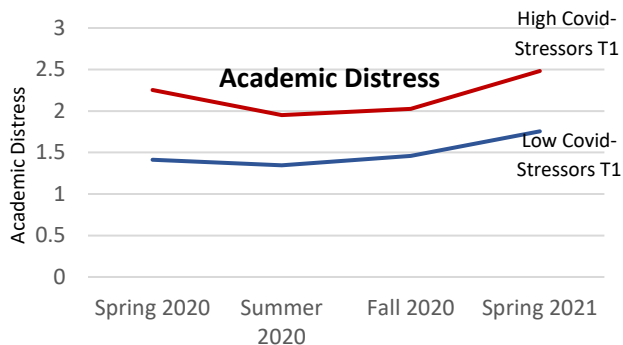
How did students' adjustment change over time?

Mental Health and Well-Being

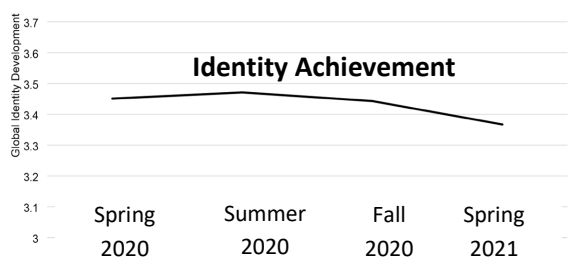
Decrements in mental health and well-being either remained stable (depression, social anxiety, autonomy) or worsened across the year (psychological well-being, generalized anxiety.)



Academic Resilience. Academic distress and college self-efficacy also showed escalating negative impacts over the year, particularly for students who experienced high numbers of Covid-related stressors.



Identity Exploration and Development stalled over time.



References

Booker, J. et al., (In Press). Early Impacts of College, Interrupted: Considering First-Year Students' Narratives about COVID and Reports of Adjustment during College Shutdowns. *Psychological Science*.

Greenhoot, A.F. et al. (2022, January). *Student Stories from the Pandemic: How Research Informs Institutional Response*. Association of American Colleges & Universities Annual Meeting, Washington, DC.

This study is registered at <https://osf.io/>

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Common themes in student narratives

- Academic distress; lack of motivation
- Loss of efficacy and academic confidence
- Loss of autonomy/control
- Social disruption, loneliness
- Goal and activity disruption; loss of formative experiences, stalled decision making and identity formation

Example excerpts from narratives

...I find myself with absolutely no motivation, constantly finding the easiest way to complete assignments and overall learning hardly anything...

...is this really the career I want? The coronavirus took away every future life I thought I knew...

...This is the most pivotal and influential portion of my college career and I am going to miss out on a lot of the experiences that will define my education.

...I can't see into the future because I'm currently stuck in who I am today. Which terrifies me somewhat.

Risk and Protective Factors

Not all students are struggling. We found no differences according to structural vulnerability (low-income or 1st-generation) or across universities. The main factors that predict student responses are the nature of their Covid experiences and the narratives they construct about them.

Higher Covid stress in Spring 2020 related to poorer outcomes on just about every measure, and put students particularly at risk for worsening academic adjustment across the year.

'Growth' in narratives (*new knowledge, attitudes, strengths*) in Spring 2020 predicted better adjustment on almost all measures: mental health and well-being, academic resilience, and identity development.

Sample characteristics (T1)

- Mean age=18.75 years (18-42), ~99% traditional college age
- Oversampled for "structurally vulnerable" students: 32.6% low-income; 21.4% 1st generation in college
- 71% female, 27% male, 2% nonbinary
- Ethnically and racially diverse: 66% White; 7.4% Asian; 7.4% Black/African American; 5.5% Latinx; 10.5% Multiracial; 2.3% South Asian; 0.6% Middle Eastern; 0.3% Native American/ Alaskan Native
- Reported average of 16.9 Covid stressors at T1; modest decreases over time (T2=15.7, T3=16.0, T4=16.0)