

The Effect of Mental Health on Academic Trajectories during the COVID-19 Pandemic

By Gabriela Goodman, under the guidance of Dr. Jane Fruehwirth

Motivation

- COVID-19 led to spikes in anxiety/depression due to COVID-related stressors such as increased financial strain, health concerns, and social isolation
- Because students from disadvantaged backgrounds disproportionately faced COVID-related stressors, effects of mental illness on academic trajectories could exacerbate inequalities in higher education
- Evidence about the far-reaching consequences of students' mental health challenges can help motivate university responses

Data

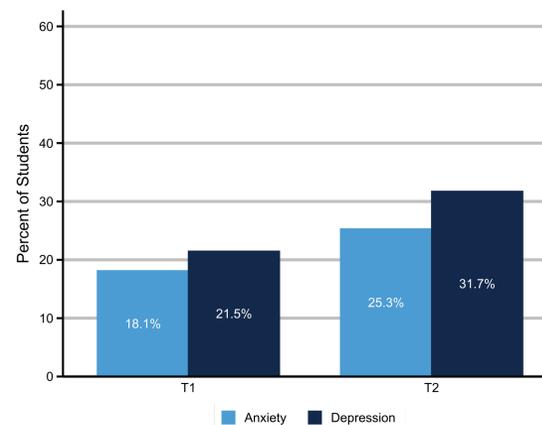
- Used two web-based Qualtrics surveys that were administered to first-year students at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill over two different data-collection periods, one from October 2019 to February 2020 (T1) and the other during Summer 2020 (T2)
- Linked survey data to administrative records
- Sample is 1,113 students representative of the UNC Class of 2023

Theoretical Model

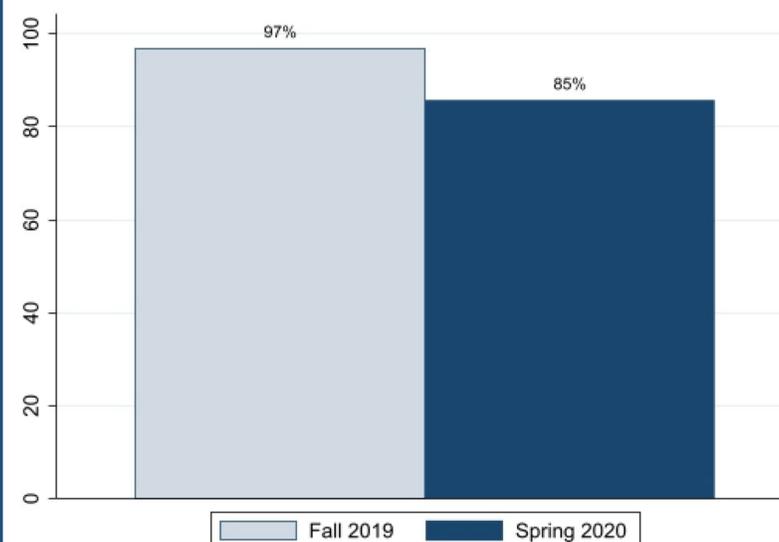
- Stress Process Model: each experience is a source of stressors and the accumulation of stressors in a person's life causes hardships
- Achievement Production Function: inputs such as mental health impact achievement

Summary Statistics

Anxiety and depression increased between pre-pandemic period (T1) and Summer 2020 of the pandemic (T2).



The average % of attempted hours students were able to complete dropped by ~12% between Fall 2019 and Spring 2020.



Key Findings

- ~45% of UNC students in the study's survey sample failed, withdrew, or took an incomplete for at least one of their credit hours in Spring 2020
- ~40% of students surveyed in Summer 2020 showed at least moderate depression **and/or** anxiety symptoms, compared to ~29% of students surveyed prior to the pandemic

Based on regression analysis controlling for other factors..

- Developing depression during the pandemic decreased students' percentage of attempted credit hours completed by an average of 31.4 percentage points
- Anxiety did not affect course credit hours completed

Implications

- COVID-19 intensified the mental health crisis within universities, specifically UNC-Chapel Hill
- Depression impacts academic trajectories more than anxiety
- Universities should be encouraged to provide more robust mental health support
- There is a need for further research on the connection between mental health and academic achievement
- Further questions about methods to support students experiencing anxiety and/or depression should be explored by researchers



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