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.

**Motivation**

**Summary Statistics**

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

**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.

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.

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

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.