

Findings from UW's COVID-19 Climate Student Survey

Executive Summary

The ASUW/GPSS administered a survey to all UW students (graduate, professional, undergraduate, and certificate) during the third week of spring quarter 2020 to understand how the COVID-19 climate was impacting students' experience. The survey findings indicate that respondents struggled the most with mental health and other personal issues. Emotional or physical burnout impacted 74% of the survey respondents and 37% were affected by reduced access to physical and/or mental healthcare. Over half of the respondents (52%) experienced a loss of community and 25% were living in a city they didn't intend to. Personal issues (cited by 83% of students) were mentioned considerably more than technical (60%) and academic issues (59%); personal issues were also more disruptive than tech and academic issues.

The most prevalent technical issue students faced was internet connectivity, impacting 54% of all students and 90% of students who expressed a tech issue. This issue also had a strong impact on students' ratings of the severity of the disruption of technical issues. The most prevalent academic issues were mandatory online class-time attendance (26%) and assignments due the first week (16%), though these issues were not predictive of the degree of severity of the disruption.

Analysis of the write-in data revealed that undergraduates were overwhelmingly concerned about their mental health, their learning and academic performance, and preparing for employment alongside the usual student concerns of getting into majors or necessary courses. Concerns regarding the price, quality, and ability to receive and pay for their education also surfaced.

Graduate students were more concerned with the job market, financial worries, delayed graduation or another important milestone, and their ability to complete coursework, though they also frequently mentioned concerns about mental health. Over half (53%) of the 575 PhD students reported anticipating a need for more time or funds to finish their research.

UW COVID-19 Climate Student Survey

The ASUW/GPSS administered a survey to all UW students (graduate, professional, undergraduate, and certificate) during the third week of spring quarter 2020 to understand how the COVID-19 climate was impacting students' experience. The survey asked students about technical, academic, and personal issues they were experiencing since the move to remote instruction and the level of disruption they felt in regard to each of these issues overall. In addition, the survey asked students about time or funding needed to complete their research as a result of COVID restrictions, and about their academic engagement compared to previous quarters. A final open-ended question asked students how they thought their spring quarter experience might impact their future.

Demographic information collected included campus (UW-B; UW-S; UW-T), degree level (undergraduate; Masters; Doctorate/Professional; Non-degree/Certificate), and identification with specific groups (international student; commuter; first-generation; parent of a child under 18; caregiver to a family member over 18).

Sample

- 3588 responses, 98% of responses were from Seattle (only UW-S findings reported here)
- 57% of respondents were undergraduates

Findings

Technical issues

Students were asked "Since the move to remote instruction this quarter, have you experienced any of the following **technical** issues? Please check all that apply." Six options were presented.

Table 1: Percentage of respondents reporting each technical issue

Issue	All survey respondents (%)	Of those who selected at least one issue (%)
<i>Internet Connectivity</i>	53.6	89.5
<i>Zoom Bombing</i>	9.9	16.5
<i>Limited Access To A Computer</i>	7.7	12.9
<i>Two-factor Authentication</i>	6.1	10.2
<i>Disability Related Accessibility Issues With Online Materials</i>	4.3	7.2
<i>Accessing Online Materials Outside Of The U.S.</i>	3.2	5.4

- Sixty percent of students selected at least one technical challenge.
- The most prevalent technical issue was “internet connectivity,” impacting 53.6% of all students.
- The second most prevalent issue, “Zoom bombing,” was reported by considerably fewer respondents (9.9% of students). Seventy percent of those reporting Zoom bombings as an issue were undergrads.

Level of disruption

- Of the students who selected at least one technical issue, 19.5% felt these issues were very disruptive, 71.9% somewhat disruptive, and 7.7% not at all disruptive; 0.9% selected N/A.
 - In addition to being the most prevalent, “internet connectivity” was also the most significant issue in determining the level of disruption for all students.
 - While “Zoom bombing” was a prevalent issue, it was the second least disruptive issue, the lowest being “two-factor authentication.”
 - Students who experienced two-factor authentication issues along with “disability-related accessibility issues with online materials,” however, found the combined effect to be highly disruptive (19 survey respondents reported at least both).

Academic issues

Students were asked “Since the move to remote instruction this quarter, have you experienced any of the following **academic** issues? Please check all that apply.” Eight options were presented.

Table 2: Percentage of respondents reporting each academic issue

Issue	All survey respondents (%)	Of those who selected at least one issue (%)
<i>Mandatory Online Class-time Attendance</i>	33.4	56.8
<i>First Week Assignments Due</i>	25.7	43.6
<i>Change in Number of Hours Enrolled This Quarter</i>	15.8	26.8
<i>Inability to Connect with Instructors for Support</i>	12.1	20.5
<i>Increased Time Until Graduation</i>	9.6	16.3
<i>Inability to Connect with TAs for Support</i>	8.9	15.1
<i>Delayed Professional Licensure or Certification</i>	2.5	4.3
<i>Postponed Comprehensive Exams or Doctoral Defense</i>	0.5	0.8

- Fifty-nine percent of students selected at least one academic issue.
- The most common academic issues were mandatory online class-time attendance (33.4%) and having assignments due the first week (25.7%).

Level of disruption

- Of the students who selected at least one academic issue, 31.4% felt these issues were very disruptive, 51.4% somewhat disruptive, and 15.9% not at all disruptive; 1.3% selected N/A.
 - “Increased time until graduation” and “delayed professional licensure or certification” had the strongest impact on the severity of the disruption for all students.
 - For undergraduates, an “inability to connect with instructors” and “...with TAs” had the second strongest impact on the severity of disruption.
 - While “mandatory online class-time attendance” and “having assignments due the first week” were the most common academic issues, they were the two least influential in predicting the magnitude of disruption.
 - Students who reported “delays in professional licensure or certification” and “postponed comprehensive exams or doctoral defense” experienced the greatest level of disruption.

Personal issues

Students were asked “Since the move to remote instruction this quarter, have you experienced any of the following **personal** issues? Please check all that apply.” Twelve options were presented (see Table 3).

- Eighty-three percent of survey respondents reported experiencing at least one personal issue – considerably more than those who cited technical (60%) and academic (59%) issues. This may be the result of additional options; however, as noted below, personal issues were considerably more disruptive.

Table 3: Percentage of respondents reporting each personal issue

Issue	All survey respondents (%)	Of those who selected at least one issue (%)
<i>Emotional or Physical Burnout</i>	73.6	88.8
<i>Loss of Community</i>	51.9	62.6

<i>Reduced Access to Physical and/or Mental Healthcare</i>	37.4	45.2
<i>Loss of Income</i>	28.6	34.5
<i>Change of Home Location as a Result Of Covid-19</i>	24.9	30.1
<i>Job Loss</i>	18.6	22.5
<i>Housing Insecurity</i>	12.2	14.7
<i>Food Insecurity</i>	9.1	10.9
<i>Increased Parenting Responsibilities for a Minor</i>	7.6	9.1
<i>Increased Care-giving Responsibilities for an Adult Family Member</i>	7.1	8.6
<i>A Change in Financial Aid Amount</i>	7.1	8.6
<i>Xenophobia in A UW Course</i>	1.8	2.2

The top three categories of personal issues included:

- **Physical and mental health:** Nearly three-quarters of respondents (73.6%) cited “emotional or physical burnout” as an issue, and 37.4% selected “reduced access to physical and/or mental healthcare.”
- **Financial instability:** Over a quarter of respondents reported “loss of income” (28.6%) and similar financial concerns: “job loss” (18.7%); “housing insecurity” (12.2%); “food insecurity” (9.1%); and “a change in financial aid amount” (7.1%).
- **Changed social circumstances** due to quarantine and stay-at-home orders: Over half of students (51.8%) reported “loss of community”; 24.9% reported “living in a different city than intended this quarter as a result of COVID-19”; 7.5% reported “increased parenting responsibilities for a child under 18”; and 7.1% reported “increased care-giving responsibilities for a family member over 18.”

Level of disruption

- Of the students who selected at least one personal issue, 57.0% felt these issues were very disruptive, 39.0% somewhat disruptive, and 3.1% not at all disruptive; 0.9% selected N/A. Personal issues were much more disruptive than technical and academic issues.

Additional items

The survey included two additional questions addressing academic issues:

- Nearly 73% of respondents indicated that they were less academically engaged in their courses this quarter.

- Nearly 53% of the 575 PhD students reported that they “anticipated needing more time or funds to complete their research” as a result of the move to remote instruction.

Qualitative Data Analysis

The survey also asked students an open-ended question, “**How do you think your experience at UW this quarter will impact your personal, professional, and academic future?**”

- There were 770 write-in responses to this question from graduate or professional students, and 1008 responses from undergraduate or certificate students.

The research team reviewed all responses and generated a coding scheme using the constant comparative method to identify the sentiment and significant themes in student responses. The team further reduced the 22 codes to nine code categories to assist in greater intercoder reliability and efficiency of human coding.

Table 4. Sentiment and significant theme descriptions

Code	Description: Response describes...
Negative	One or more negative impacts
Neutral	Little or no impact; uncertainty about impact
Positive	One or more positive impacts
Performance	Concern about academic performance
Quality	Quality of remote learning or online instruction relative to in-person
Delay/Loss	Delay in major milestone (exams, graduation) or loss of opportunity for learning/career (e.g., internship, research)
Campus	Difficulty connecting with or accessing resources normally associated with campus life (faculty/TAs; classmates; professional network; libraries, career center, research labs, etc.)
Jobs/Finances	Concern about current or future job market, funding, or finances
Stress	Mental or physical stress; competing responsibilities

Of the 770 write-in responses from graduate or professional students, and the 1008 responses from undergraduate or certificate students, the team randomly selected 100 responses from each group

and coded the sample using the nine broad categories. Each response was coded for sentiment (negative, neutral, positive) and further coded if other themes were present.

Sentiment

The proportion of responses coded negative, neutral, and positive were similar across both graduate/professional students and undergraduate/certificate students (see Table 5).

- Nearly three quarters of responses sampled from each group were coded as “negative.”

Table 5. Sentiment percentage summary

	Negative	Neutral	Positive
Graduate/ Professional	73%	23%	4%
Undergraduate/ Certificate	74%	21%	5%
Total combined	73.5%	22%	4.5%

Note: Percentage listed is of a randomly drawn sample of 100 responses for each group, 200 in total

“**Neutral**” responses were those in which students said they expected their spring quarter experience to have little or no impact on their personal, professional, or academic future, or that they were unsure of what impact it would have. Examples include:

It won't. I'm still graduating.

I think this does not impact so much to my future.

I'm honestly not sure. I hope it's just a bump in the road, and things will be back to normal soon.

“**Positive**” responses included those in which students mentioned benefits gained from their experience:

I think this experience has taught me to be more of a self-starter and has helped me learn better ways to study and teach myself.

I wish that all quarters could have the amount of courses available online.

It has given me the chance to be on track with my academics, as well as still having time to care for myself. If anything, quarantine has brought out the best in me and I feel great about myself.

While some neutral or positive responses were also coded for a significant theme (for example, if a student commented that they were experiencing much less stress due to remote learning), most of the themes appeared in a statement about negative impact.

Differences in Significant Themes

As shown in Table 6, two significant themes emerged from over a third of graduate/professional student responses and from over a third of undergraduate/certificate student responses.

Table 6. Significant themes percentage summary

	Performance	Quality	Delay/Loss	Campus	Jobs	Stress
Graduate/ Profession	18%	19%	36%	21%	37%	28%
Undergrad/ Certificate	39%	25%	29%	26%	20%	38%
Total combined	28.5%	22%	32.5%	23.5%	28.5%	33%

Note: Percentage listed is of a randomly drawn sample of 100 responses for each group, 200 in total

Among the graduate/professional students, **worry about the current or future job market or about finances** was the most frequently occurring significant theme, appearing in 37% of sample responses.

I'm graduating in June (if everything goes right) and I feel so unprepared to try to find a job in this world. I'm just overall worried about my future. What happens when I graduate into hiring freezes and uncertainty?

I'm worried that it will be hard to get a job - I've never interviewed for a job before and doing it all virtually is scary. Also seeing that the job market is pretty bad right now is worrisome as well.

I also worry constantly about money and how I will ever get a job to pay the bills again.

[I]f this continues and my husband cannot find a job or get unemployment soon, we may have to move and leave UW and I won't be able to finish my PhD.

Nearly equal in frequency for this group (36%) were mentions of a **delay in completing a major milestone, or missing out on important career opportunities**:

The COVID pandemic has unfortunately forced me to push back me PhD general exam for the foreseeable future because many of the data gathering techniques (especially focus groups) I use are not feasible at the present time.

I'm extremely worried about my access to critical hands on skills related to my degree and my future practice as a clinician. I'm worried about fieldwork opportunities and any push back in graduate date that may produce more financial burden.

I was anticipating travelling to Peru during summer for my research and to work in my country. I made arrangements for staying (paid reservations) and I would get some income that would allow me to continue my PhD. Right now everything is canceled...

Among undergraduate and certificate students, nearly 40% of sample responses included **concerns about performance and stress**. Undergraduates were deeply concerned about the impact spring quarter would have on their grades and GPA.

The sudden change in classes has resulted in a major drop in my performance academically, I fear my GPA will drop substantially.

The online classes have severely hindered my learning...Exams and homework for me have been filled with issues and technical difficulties and it's been really rough trying to manage coursework and stay on top of grades.

I'm worried my grades will suffer and if I don't get into LSJ this quarter then they will look at these grades and not accept me again even though I have been doing really well in school before this.

In addition, 38% of undergraduate responses included mention of the **mental, emotional, and physical stress** students were experiencing as a result of COVID-19 restrictions.

Classes are online, reading is online, group projects are online, homework is online. Mental and physical fatigue coupled with the stress of the quarantine and separation from my cohort are taking a serious toll on my mental, emotional, physical, and academic health.

It has been very difficult to focus due to the inherent stress of the situation, and I feel quite lonely and considerably less supported.

I think if we have to stay online I may drop out. As an essential worker, I'm under too much stress to also handle school right now.

Even though the team's analysis found differences in which significant themes were most prevalent in graduate/professional student responses and responses from undergraduate/ certificate students, common themes included stress and delay/loss; stress appeared as a significant theme in 28% of graduate responses and delay/loss appeared in 29% of undergraduate responses. Overall, the majority of students surveyed in the third week of the quarter appeared to be experiencing and/or expecting negative impacts as a result of restrictions in place due to COVID-19.

Bi-gram Analysis

The research team conducted an additional analysis on the open-ended question, “**How do you think your experience at UW this quarter will impact your personal, professional, and academic future?**”

Terms were collected through finding N-grams, which are all collections of “N” sequential words in a sentence modeled by their frequency in a set of sentences, where more frequent sequences are more common. For example, “I love Husky football” is broken down into:

- Unigrams: “I”, “love”, “Husky”, “football”
- Bigrams: “I love”, “love Husky”, “Husky football”
- Trigrams: “I love Husky”, “love Husky football”

The summaries provided below were subject to our interpretation of the calculated bi-grams.

- **Undergraduate responses (N = 992):**
 - The top seven most common bigrams were:
 - Mental health
 - Last quarter
 - Academic future
 - Impact future
 - Next year
 - Grad school
 - Get major

Looking at the most common terms, it appears that undergraduates were overwhelmingly concerned about their mental health, as well as future coursework, their ability to retain information from this quarter, and preparing for employment alongside “normal” student concerns like getting into majors or necessary courses.

- **Graduate student responses (N = 764):**
 - The top seven most common bigrams were:
 - Job market
 - Last quarter
 - Find job
 - Mental health
 - Next year
 - Online class
 - Delay graduation

Graduate students appear more concerned with the job market, delayed graduation, and their ability to complete coursework, even though they also frequently mention concerns for mental health.

The research team conducted the same analysis on a final, catch-all question that appeared at the end of the survey, “**Is there anything else about your student experience this quarter that you would like to share with your student government representatives?**”

- 1084 students responded to this question
- **Undergraduate responses (N = 604):**
 - The top seven most common bigrams were:
 - Pass fail
 - Mental health
 - Financial aid
 - Lose job
 - Fall quarter
 - Quality education
 - International student

In response to this question, undergrads appeared to express concerns about mental health to a similar degree as the previous question, alongside concerns regarding the cost, quality, and ability to receive and/or pay for their education. Other common concerns included financial aid, paying general expenses, and losing job opportunities.

- **Graduate responses (N = 480):**
 - The top seven most common bigrams were:
 - Online class
 - Mental health
 - Faculty staff
 - Online course
 - International student
 - Full time
 - Access resource

Graduate students appeared concerned about online courses and the associated (limited) capacity for interaction with faculty and staff. It seems that these students were concerned with the amount of time spent online and whether the expectations of group work, additional coursework, and additional tuition were worth committing to.

Conclusions

Each of our analyses on the data from the UW COVID-19 Climate Student Survey supports similar conclusions: At least as reported at the start of spring quarter 2020, UW students were experiencing significant disruptions in academic, professional, and personal aspects of their lives. It may be difficult to parse them separately; the write-in responses suggested that stress in one area often produced stress in another. We do not know at this time if the concerns survey respondents reported in May have increased or decreased, or if new ones have taken their place. Additional assessment is needed to understand what supports are successful in reducing the disruption students experience as a result of remote instruction and restrictions in place due to COVID-19.