

Impact of COVID on Students' High School and Postsecondary Experiences

Key Takeaways and Implications:

- On average, students in the 2020 and 2021 cohorts reported mostly negative high school experiences during the pandemic, although some students reported positive high school experiences.
- Students who graduated high school in 2019 were also highly impacted by COVID, particularly in their postsecondary experiences, and should be a population that receives increasing attention.
- Students see a range of potential long-term impacts from the pandemic.

Context and Study Overview: The COVID-19 pandemic caused significant changes in students' lives. This study uses an online survey with responses received from 459 individuals who graduated from a North Carolina high school in 2018, 2019, 2020, or 2021 to understand students' perceptions of the impact of COVID-19 on their high school and postsecondary experiences. Although the survey respondents are not representative of the state population, their data provide insights into the different ways in which students may have responded to the pandemic. The survey included open-ended questions, and we had follow-up interviews with four students to supplement the survey data.

Impact on High School Experiences

- On average, students in the 2020 and 2021 high school graduation cohorts reported lower ratings for their last year in high school than students in the 2018 and 2019 cohorts.
- Approximately a third to a half of respondents in the 2020 and 2021 cohorts reported *mostly negative* high school experiences during COVID. However, approximately a fifth reported *mostly positive experiences* during COVID.
- Many students shared through open-ended survey responses how the pandemic disrupted their high school experiences, including struggles coming from the shift to online learning, missing significant milestones like prom and graduation, and missing in-person learning, supports, and extra-curricular activities.

"COVID negatively impacted my academic drive and desire to pursue an education. I was always very disciplined and driven to do well academically growing up, but during COVID all of that seemed to change. The switch to online classes, the lack of communication regarding the IB curriculum, and the overall isolation from my peers created an environment that I despised."—Student in 2020 cohort

"Since I was already struggling academically due to severe anxiety and depression, doing schoolwork from home was so much easier, so I was able to be more productive and improve my grades."—Student in 2020 cohort

- Some students reported feeling less academically motivated and prepared and more socially isolated, anxious, or depressed. However, others reported feeling more resilient as a result of going through the pandemic or using it as an opportunity to reflect on their values and goals.

Impact on Postsecondary Transition and College Experiences

- Survey respondents in the 2020 cohort were less likely to immediately enroll in college and more likely to go to work than in the other cohorts. Students in the 2020 cohort were significantly more likely to report the following factors as being influential in their decision to attend postsecondary education: 1) not wanting to take college courses online; and 2) being afraid of getting sick.
- Students in the 2021 cohort were most likely to report that the desire to participate in extracurricular activities and sports affected their postsecondary enrollment decisions.
- Students in the 2019 high school graduation cohort (who would have been in their first year of college) reported the lowest overall rating for their college experience. They also reported the lowest mental health and were more likely to change their major because of COVID.

Long-term Impacts of COVID

- When asked about the long-term impacts of COVID, approximately one-third to one half of students reported mostly negative long-term impacts of COVID on most factors with the highest percentage of students reporting negative impacts on *academic achievement, mental and emotional health, and financial stability*. The 2019 and 2020 cohorts reported more negative impacts on professional networking.

“We will be more stressed, less educated, and less socially connected/competent due to the massive disruption in our development.”—Student in 2018 cohort

“I think the pandemic will have long-term impacts on everyone. It has taught us the importance of resilience, adaptability, and staying connected even when physically apart. It has also accelerated the use of technology in our daily lives.”—Student in 2019 cohort

- However, approximately 40% of students across all cohorts reported somewhat positive impacts on health/lifestyle choices and on personal growth and development.

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