

UToledo Fall 2020 Student Needs Assessment

Summary of Results and Best Practice Recommendations

Fall 2020

Prepared by Denise Bartell, Associate Vice Provost for Student Success

Sample Characteristics

- 3,771 students completed the survey between September 10th and 17th 2020
- 2,894 are undergraduates
- 15.3% are URM (minoritized students of color) and 15.7% are Pell-awarded (lower income)

Snapshot of Student Needs

- Only 81.8% of students report having all the **technology they need** to be successful in their classes this fall. 90.1% report having reliable access to **computers**, and only 71.9% report reliable **internet** access. In addition, students are reporting difficulties with the logistical challenges associated with navigating different course modalities, including back-to-back classes that shift from face to face to online, modalities that are different from what was designated in Banner, radically disparate expectations from one class to the next and changing expectations within classes.

Student Experiences in Fall Courses

- 70.5% of students feel that their **instructors are providing reasonable flexibilities** given COVID, and 66.3% feel that **instructors are working to make their courses engaging** for students.
- But only 34.5% of students report **feeling a sense of community** in their classes this fall.
- 47.5% of students report **currently struggling to be successful in one or more courses** this semester. This number increases to 58.2% for lower income students.

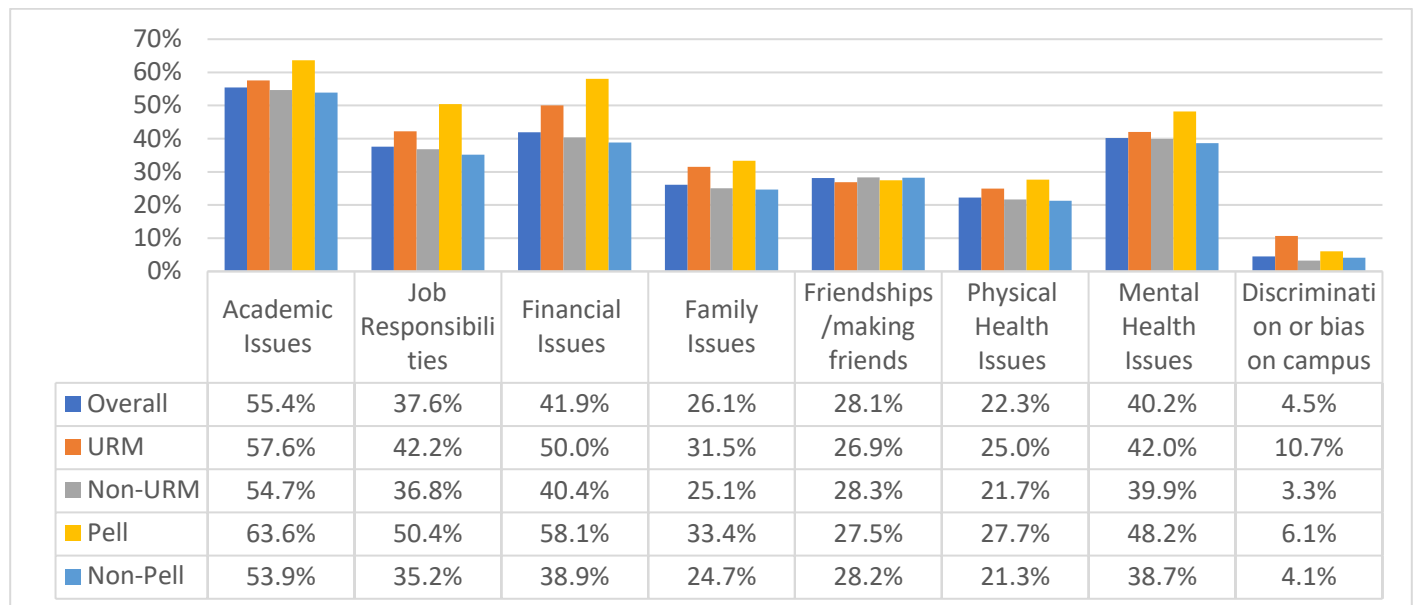
Most Common Challenges Reported by Students Thus Far in the Fall Semester

1. Almost half of students surveyed are **concerned about their success** in at least one class right now. A sizable percentage report **lacking access to technology** needed for their online coursework.
2. Students are reporting high levels of **social disconnectedness** in their classes, and high **loneliness and isolation** in general.
3. Students continue to report **struggling to “teach the material to themselves”** and **navigating many different technology platforms**, sometimes within one class. Some report frustration with instructor **lack of responsiveness to questions** via email and **availability for virtual office hours**. Only a small majority report that their **instructors have been helpful** in their learning this semester.
4. Many students report confusion over **lack of clarity or changing expectations in courses**, and concern over **lack of active engagement** in their courses.
5. A significant percentage of students report dealing with serious **family-related issues** (illness, job loss, eviction, caregiving). A large percentage also report serious stress associated with **financial issues** and **mental and physical health issues**.
6. **Lower income students** report higher levels of stress and anxiety in almost all areas, greater struggle to be successful academically given current circumstances, and lower levels of institutional and faculty support.

- Only 53.8% of our students report that they have **found instructors to be helpful or very helpful** this fall, and only 46% report that **staff** have been helpful or very helpful. These numbers drop to 47.2% and 37.2%, respectively, for lower income students.

The Cognitive Bandwidth Tax of Stress, Anxiety and Basic Need Insecurity

- Our students are continuing to report high levels of stress and anxiety this fall. Academic and financial issues continue to be serious stressors for many of our students. We have also seen a sizable increase, since spring 2020, in the number of students reporting stress and anxiety over mental health issues, family issues, and friendships/making friends. These results mirror student responses on open-ended questions about the challenges they're facing this semester. A significant number of these responses mention mental health issues, feelings of isolation and loneliness, and family-related challenges with the COVID situation.



- The number of URM students reporting significant stress or anxiety from discrimination or bias on campus increased by over 50% from spring 2020, growing to 10.7% this fall.
- 4.4% of students report lack of basic access to food and 3% to safe housing. 24.1% report lack of access to care for mental health needs and 11.3% to care for physical health needs. These kinds of basic needs insecurities and high levels of stress and anxiety tax students' cognitive and emotional abilities to focus on course content, persist in the face of challenges, and maintain motivation to learn.
- Overall, lower income students report significantly higher levels of struggle in their courses, lower access to needed technology, lower levels of flexibility and support from faculty and staff, and significantly higher levels of stress and anxiety than all other students surveyed. The strain associated with the COVID pandemic and the learning environment this fall appears to be having a particularly strong negative impact on our students in situations of economic precarity.

Best Practice Recommendations for Supporting Student Success Given Current Needs

Be Clear About Your Expectations, Keep a Consistent Schedule, and Build In Reminders

- Stress affects memory. In times when cognitive bandwidth is stressed, we all need more reminders about due dates, more review of previous content, etc. So build them into your weekly Blackboard announcements, enter due dates and reminders into the [Blackboard Course Calendar](#), and spend time reviewing content during synchronous sessions.
- Create a routine, reliable weekly schedule for your students, with similar types of assignments due the same time each week. Create a course calendar for your students and refer to it each week. Set students up to be successful using the structure and routines of your class.
- Be transparent in your expectations of students. Provide clear, detailed instructions for all assignments, review them with the class, provide annotated examples of what good work looks like, and explain why you're asking students to do what you are. Understanding the why promotes motivation and persistence.

Create Opportunities for Connection

- If teaching asynchronously, make frequent, strategic and highly visible appearances online. Get in the habit of posting weekly messages to your class in Blackboard – with announcements, tips for how to approach the next course section, words of encouragement, memes, etc. Respond to a subset of all discussion posts.
- Provide more opportunities for students to engage with each other during synchronous classes (face to face or virtual). Conduct discussions in stable small groups to give students a chance to get to know each other. Provide online forums for students to study or work through problems together, and incentives for participating, using Blackboard [Discussions](#) or [Collaborate Ultra Sessions](#). Include asynchronous options so students with more complicated lives can participate too.

Support Focused Attention and Engaging Class Experiences

- Review the ideas included in this brief article on [how to make online breakout rooms less boring](#). The suggestion to set up a shared document so that groups can make their work visible to the entire class is particularly helpful, which you can do using the [Wiki tool](#) or the [Blog tool](#) in Blackboard. There is also a helpful set of resources on [teaching effectively with Zoom](#) (which are applicable across different platforms).
- Use [Blackboard Polls](#) to check for understanding and engage students during class.

Acknowledge the Challenges Facing Students Right Now

- Err on the side of kindness and flexibility; Give students the benefit of the doubt.
- Assume every student is working under stress and anxiety levels commensurate with a full-time job.
- Understand the stress and uncertainty inherent in navigating multiple courses with varying modalities and significant variability in expectations and course experiences. Normalize the experience of finding the current situation difficult and upsetting.

- Convey compassion and understanding for students' concerns and challenges.
- Reassure students that these are highly unusual times and that college leadership, staff, and instructors are working to support students' success.
- Connect students to campus resources that can help them manage stressors and meet basic needs (See below).
- Provide students with this [helpful guide](#), developed by the HOPE Center for College, Community and Justice, that provides students with advice on everything from how to reduce their utility bills and advocate for themselves if they owe money on student loans to national resources for mental health or insurance needs.

Additional Resources to Support Student Wellbeing and Access to Basic Needs

UToledo Center for Success Coaching videos on stress management, netiquette, time management, etc.:

<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCgmWglJJ11tF2i5Nu1mEXbA/videos>

UToledo Learning Enhancement Center E-Tutoring – The LEC is currently offering online tutoring assistance for writing as well as their regular repertoire of course subjects: <https://www.utoledo.edu/success/lec/>

Assistance with access to a computer – Contact the UToledo IT Help Desk at 419.530.2400 or ITHELPDESK@utoledo.edu or <https://ithelp.utoledo.edu>

Assistance with Blackboard – See the student guides: <http://utlv.screenstepslive.com/s/student> or Contact the UToledo Online Helpdesk at 419.530.8835 or UTDL@utoledo.edu or chat live at <https://www.utoledo.edu/dl/>

Rocket Aid and Rocket to Rocket Emergency Grants: <https://www.utoledo.edu/studentaffairs/rockettorocket/>

UToledo Campus Food Pantry - The food pantry is open and continuing to provide support for all current UToledo students: <https://www.utoledo.edu/studentaffairs/food-pantry/>

UToledo Counseling Center – the Counseling Center is conducting phone and virtual support services to current UToledo students: <https://www.utoledo.edu/studentaffairs/counseling/>

Office of Success Coaching – Success Coaches are continuing to provide guidance and support for all undergraduate students. Contact them at 419.530.1250 or successcoach@utoledo.edu or <https://www.utoledo.edu/successcoach/>

Additional Resources to Support Equitable and Responsive Learning Environments

[Communication Guide on Responding to Students in Times of Uncertainty](#). College Transition Collaborative.

Ryan, K., Logel, C., 2020. [COVID-19 Response: Communicating in Times of Uncertainty](#). College Transition Collaborative.

UToledo University Teaching Center [Teacher to Teacher Website](#) - links, guides, and locally-made solutions provided by UToledo faculty members.

Guidance for developing [Accessible Remote Content for Students with Disabilities](#).

Additional UToledo [Resources for Remote Learning](#) and [Faculty Resources for Student Success](#).