

# RESEARCH BRIEF

HIGHER EDUCATION RESEARCH INSTITUTE AT UCLA



## 2021 Your First College Year Survey

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Developed by the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) and the Policy Center on the First Year of College in 2000, the Your First College Year Survey (YFCY) is administered annually through the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) at the University of California, Los Angeles. The YFCY was the first national survey specifically designed to measure student development and capture experiences throughout the first year of college. The 2021 YFCY research brief highlights the experiences of 2,441 first-time, full-time students from nine institutions across the United States.

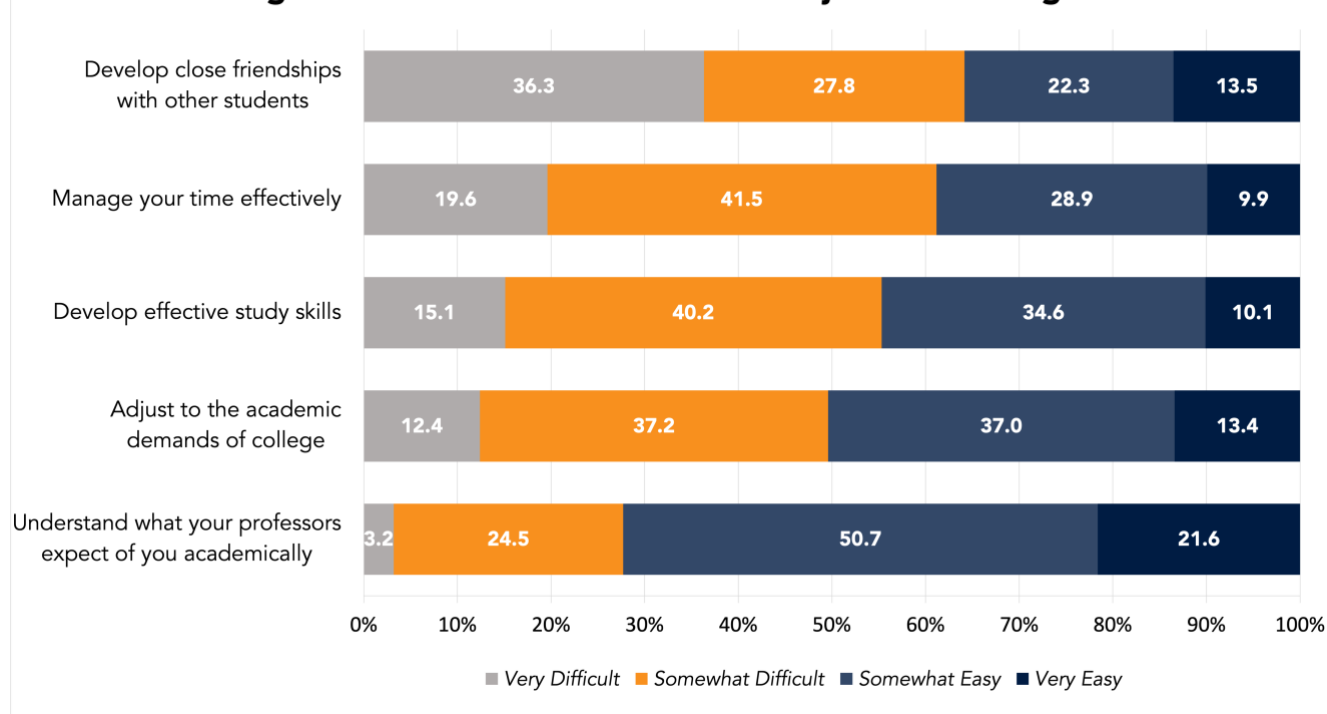
### TRANSITION TO COLLEGE

The first year of college is a time for students to develop new habits and skills as they transition from secondary to post-secondary education. Overall, students had the most challenges in developing close friendships with their peers with 64.1% of survey respondents indicating they found this to be *somewhat/very difficult*. In comparison to the 2019 and 2020 YFCY data, only 32.6% and 38.7% of students, respectively, found it *somewhat/very difficult* to develop close friendships. Given that this percentage nearly doubled over the past two years, this finding illuminates the impact that the COVID-19 pandemic had on students' ability to connect with peers at their

schools. Most students (72.3%) found it *somewhat/very easy* to understand what their professors expected of them academically, but nearly half of students (49.6%) still found it *somewhat/very difficult* to adjust to the academic demands of college. Figure 1 shows the ease with which students adjusted to various aspects of college.

One year into the pandemic, 93.7% of students, unsurprisingly, reported taking a course exclusively online. One in ten (11.8%) students felt *very satisfied* with the functionality of the online learning platform. Just over two-fifths of students (42.3%) felt *satisfied*, 26.5% felt *neutral*, and 19.1% felt *dissatisfied* or *very dissatisfied*. Despite many students reporting feeling satisfied with the functionality of the online

Figure 1. Ease with which students adjusted to college



learning platform, the data suggests that learning virtually was not ideal. Nearly half (49.9%) of all students *frequently* felt bored in class. Moreover, 41.9% of students indicated that finding an appropriate space to attend classes remotely was *at least somewhat a source of stress* for them. Additionally, 78.4% of students recognized that their ability to concentrate on course assignments was *at least somewhat a source of stress*. Approximately three in five (61.1%) students found the task of effective time management to be *somewhat/very difficult* and 55.3% of students found that it was *somewhat/very difficult* to develop effective study skills.

Given the challenges of remote learning, students were resilient, nonetheless, and did their best to remain engaged. Almost three in four (71.3%) students studied with other students, while more than four in five (83.2%) students posted on a course-related online discussion board. Additionally, 41.8% of students *frequently* felt that their contributions in class were valued and 35.9% of students *frequently* felt that faculty provided them with feedback that helped them assess their progress in class. As students and faculty found ways to make learning meaningful over remote platforms, the findings suggest that students were generally satisfied with their online learning experiences despite the additional challenges and stress the pandemic added to their first year. Aside from academics, the pandemic also impacted students outside of the (virtual) classroom.

### HOW STUDENTS SPENT THEIR TIME

The YFCY survey asks students to share how they spend their time outside of school to gain a fuller understanding of their experiences within and beyond their academic commitments. Overall, studying and preparing for class took up a significant amount of time throughout the week. Many students (77.9%) reported having spent at least an average of six hours per week studying or working on homework. Approximately one in four students (26.7%) indicated that they spent more than 16 hours per week on studying/homework.

Beyond preparing for class, some students found time for extracurricular activities. Exercising and playing sports were the most common activities with 69.4% of students spending at least an hour of their time on these activities during the week. Approximately 37.5% of students spent at least one hour per week participating in clubs and other student-led groups. However, nearly half (48.4%) of students indicated that they did not participate in any student clubs/groups during their first year. Over one-third (34.2%) spent their time performing volunteer work. A small portion of students (16.8%) had campus jobs (some remote) with 24.1% of students working off-campus. About one in three (33.4%) students reported feeling *at least occasionally* stressed about their job responsibilities interfering with their schoolwork. Additionally, one in four (25.1%) students reported that they *occasionally* contributed money to help support their families. Not to be overlooked, 6.9% of

students indicated they *frequently* helped support their families with monetary contributions. In addition, over one-third (37.0%) of students spent at least one hour per week performing household/childcare duties.

Despite school, work, and familial commitments, some students still found time to unwind. Related to wellness, 20.6% of students spent at least one hour per week meditating and

participating in mindfulness activities. Many students (77.4%) indicated that they watched at least three hours of videos on platforms such as Netflix and YouTube per week. Although some students had the privilege to dedicate more time towards self-care and extracurricular activities, other

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students did not. In response to an open-ended question about COVID-19 related stressors, one student stated, “...as the caretaker for [my father] I have had to be isolated from almost all social activities.” This student’s experience illustrates how some students may have additional concerns regarding the well-being of others. Managing familial responsibilities on top of transitioning to college and learning virtually may have major implications for student health and how they manage stress. It is imperative that colleges and universities be mindful of all the additional commitments students must manage, particularly as it relates to financial and family obligations.

### COVID-19 AND MENTAL HEALTH

Considering the drastic and stressful changes elicited by the pandemic, several new items were added to the 2021 YFCY survey about the impact of COVID on various stress factors to gather better insight as to how students were feeling. A large proportion of student respondents (81.8%) felt that their mental health was *at least somewhat* a source of their stress over the past year. When disaggregated by gender, over half of the men (55.1%, n=527) felt that their mental health was *at least somewhat* a source of stress, compared to 85.8% of women (n=1,297). Although a smaller proportion of students identified as genderqueer/gender non-conforming students (n=18) and non-binary students (n=39) within the sample, it is notable that all students within these sub-groups identified their mental health as being *at least somewhat* a source of stress in their first year of college. Further, roughly three in four students (74.8%) expressed that the health of loved ones was *at least somewhat* a source of stress.

Nearly two in five (39.6%) students stated that access to health services was *at least somewhat* a source of stress. With consideration to race, Latina/o/x students reported the highest levels of stress when asked about access to health services (56%, n=130), followed by Black students (47.5%, n=97), Asian/Pacific Islander students (40%, n=214), multiracial students (40.3%, n=134), and white students (33.5%, n=325). This finding has important implications about equity issues

related to healthcare access and is particularly important considering how the pandemic has disproportionately impacted minoritized groups.

Additionally, 74.4% of students expressed that social isolation was *at least somewhat* a source of stress. By gender, women (78.9%, n=1191) were more likely to report coping with social isolation to be *at least somewhat* a source of stress than men (63.6%, n=464). Many non-binary students (92.5%, n=37) and genderqueer/gender non-conforming (81%, n=17) students reported even higher stress levels caused by social isolation. Within the open-ended question asking students if they wished to clarify on their COVID-stressor responses, several mentioned the impact of social isolation; as one student stated, “[My] mental health during COVID-19 has gone down the drain. Isolation from others/lack of face-to-face interaction has caused me to become very depressed at times.”

In addition to the previously mentioned stressors, finances also impacted some students. Many student respondents reported that some COVID stressor items were *not at all* a source of stress, such as, the ability to pay rent (64.9%), ability to pay other bills (56.1%), and having access to funds to purchase necessities (54.4%).

Over the past year, 33.7% of students primarily lived at home with family and 52.5% of students lived in first-year housing or a residence hall. Many students were likely not the primary party responsible for regular monthly payments of rent, bills, and other necessities. When analyzing the qualitative data, it is apparent that some of the responses contrast with what the quantitative data portrays and illuminate that there are other stressors not captured with the newly added COVID survey items. Within the open-ended responses, many students indicated they were stressed about responsibilities related to their families’ ability to make ends meet. As one student states, “For the areas concerning, ability to pay rent/other bills and fund to purchase basic necessities, I am not concerned about my own ability to do so, but rather my family’s ability to do so.” These findings suggest that for some students, stressors from the pandemic not only impacted their health but also raised the concern they have for others, specifically for their families and loved ones.

## STUDENT SUPPORT SERVICES

Student support services can offer crucial guidance and resources to meet the needs of students in- and outside of the classroom amidst the ongoing pandemic. While managing commitments within and beyond their classes, some students still took advantage of the support services offered at their respective schools. Specific to academics and financial planning,

74.1% of first-year students reported utilizing academic advising services and 38.2% used financial aid advising services. Students also used services to hone in on their academic skills, particularly utilizing the campus writing center (38.5%), study skills advising (32.6%), and career services (30.1%). Concerning support for physical and mental well-being, students were more likely to have used student health services (39.0%) in comparison to student psychological services (19.7%).

Despite many students reporting challenges to their emotional well-being throughout the year, the majority of students did not utilize the psychological services at their schools. Over one-third (34.9%) of students (n=815) rated their emotional health as *below average/lowest 10%*. Similarly, 35.5% of students (n=829) rated their emotional health as being

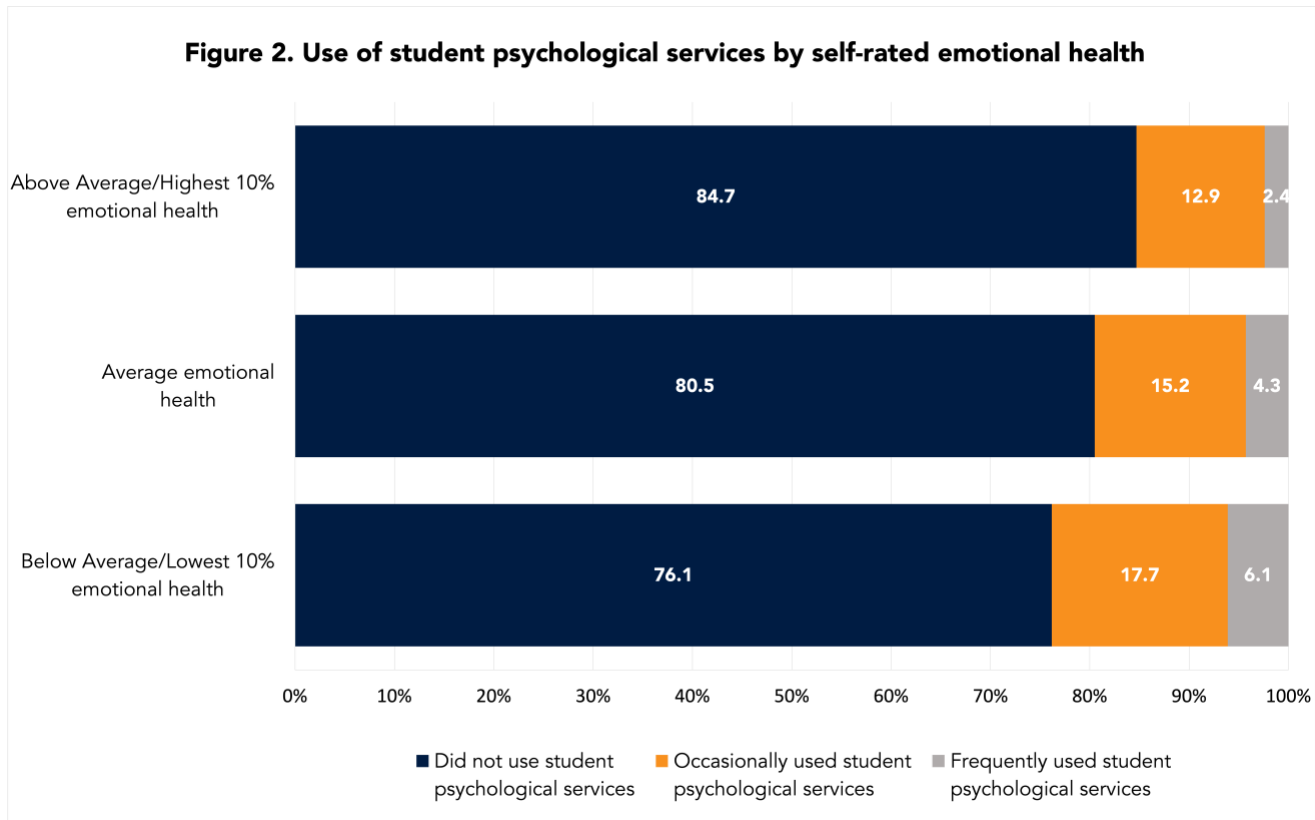
*average*. Moreover, 29.7% of students (n=694) indicated their emotional health was *above average/highest 10%*. With respect to gender, 26.0% of men indicated their emotional health was *below-average/lowest 10%*, followed by 37.7% of women, 61.9% of genderqueer/gender non-conforming students, and 68.3% of gender non-binary students.

Figure 2 shows how often students utilized the

psychological services at their school disaggregated by students’ self-rated emotional health. Students with a *below-average/lowest 10%* self-rating for emotional health accounted for the largest proportion who utilized the psychological services at their school. Approximately 6.1% made frequent use of the psychological services at their schools and 17.7% made occasional use of these services. Colleges and universities can utilize The Freshman Survey (TFS) in conjunction with the YFCY to examine students’ self-ratings of their emotional health before and after the first year. Further research may aid institutions in understanding if students gave themselves a lower mental-health rating prior to or after seeking guidance and support from psychological services.

Throughout the pandemic, many student support service offices juggled the challenges associated with offering in-person, hybrid, and virtual resources. Although these methods of delivering programming and services may have helped some students gain access to student support services, other students did not make use of such programs or resources. Due to the virtual nature of online or hybrid schooling, many first-year students may have had less awareness of the student support services previously available in person at their school. As campuses navigate transitioning back to being in-person and/or offering hybrid options, careful consideration should be given to outreach efforts that help connect students with services to support their academic success and personal well-being.

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**CONCLUSION**

The first year of college can bring about many new challenges and changes for students. This year, students adjusted to the new rigors of college under the evolving circumstances of a global pandemic. During this time, many students took at least one class online. Despite students reporting a general sense of satisfaction with the functionality of online learning platforms, the experience of remote learning was complicated by external factors related to the pandemic. Students had difficulty connecting with their peers and social isolation was difficult to manage. Moreover, many students expressed concerns about their emotional health. Outside of the classroom, some students remained involved in extracurricular activities and found time for self-care. Meanwhile, other students had financial concerns and obligations to their household.

Student support services can assist with students’ academic progress and enhance personal well-being, as well as provide guidance on managing finances. While academic advising services were utilized by many students, other offices such as student health services were less utilized. Given how some students were frequently stressed and rated their emotional wellbeing as below average or lowest 10%, many did not utilize the student psychological services at their schools. As colleges and universities continue striving for a new normal under conditions created by the pandemic, outreach to

students who have struggled beyond the expected transitions of the first year is crucial. Administrators, faculty, and staff must be creative and innovative in addressing student needs, specifically as it relates to their mental health.



**The Higher Education Research Institute (HERI)** is one of the premier research and policy organizations on postsecondary education in the country. Housed in the School of Education & Information Studies at the University of California, Los Angeles, the institute is an interdisciplinary center for research, evaluation, information, policy studies, and research training in postsecondary education. HERI administers the national Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) surveys, including the CIRP Freshman Survey, Your First College Year survey, Diverse Learning Environments survey, College Senior Survey, Staff Climate Survey, and the triennial HERI Faculty Survey. CIRP has collected data on over 15 million college students from more than 1,900 colleges and universities since 1966.