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White Paper

IMPACTS OF COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON MSU STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The COVID-19 pandemic has rattled healthcare systems, education, businesses, and individuals. The disruption to daily life due to the pandemic has had disproportionately negative impacts on individuals with disabilities, as access to healthcare and other specialized disability assistance was affected. College students with disabilities have seen their own unique and amplified set of challenges. Feelings of anxiety, depression, social isolation and uncertainty in this group are increasing from baselines that were often high to start. This white paper outlines the results of a survey of college students with disabilities at Michigan State University and the impacts they have experienced from the pandemic, as well as implications for practice.

The majority of MSU respondents (over 73%) found a negative impact to their learning due to the pandemic. Students discussed difficulties related to the sudden change to online coursework and its impact on their ability to stay organized and adjust to a new learning environment at home. The abrupt shift in class schedules, due dates, and expectations left some students feeling confused and unable to manage their education. In contrary, there were other students who enjoyed the transition, sharing positive impacts to their learning and personal life.

Similar to learning, over 71% of students reported negative impacts to their current and future employment due to the pandemic. Some students working for MSU and other businesses were laid off, and others lost internships and experienced disruption in their career search. Resulting financial strain impacted students' abilities to pay bills and forced others to rely on their families for support. For many, there was further confusion with unemployment benefits, leaving them feeling helpless, anxious, and depressed.

Physical health has also been impacted for some students, with 49% of respondents reporting some sort of negative impact. Disruption to daily routines, a more sedentary lifestyle spent in front of a computer, and postponement of medical appointments have especially impacted students with disabilities. Conversely, some students reported positive impacts, with more time to focus on healthy eating, exercise, and self-care.

Social relationships, both with family and friends, among students with disabilities have been impacted as well. Students reported fairly even positive and negative impacts to family relationships, 37% and 34%, respectively. Some students spoke of negative impacts due to familial financial strain or loss of loved ones. Other students saw family tension after being forced to live together again and share resources, where some contrarily found difficulty in the lack of physical interactions with family members. Friendships were strained for some due to lack of physical interactions, where other students found ways to safely engage with friend groups.

Perhaps the most significant area of negative impact is mental health. Over 78% of students with disabilities expressed new or worsening mental health concerns, including anxiety and depression. The confusing transition to online learning, losses of employment and/or loved ones, strain on social support, feeling of isolation, and fear of exposure to the virus left many students with their mental health on a substantial and fast downturn.

Overall, students with disabilities reported increased stress in multiple areas of life due to the COVID-19 pandemic. While some reported positive impacts to learning, employment, physical and mental health, and social relationships, the majority of students (78.4%) shared negative impacts and experiences. MSU educators and resources, including the [Resource Center for Persons with Disabilities \(RCPD\)](#), [Career Services Network \(CSN\)](#), and [Counseling and Psychiatric Services \(CAPS\)](#), must continue to bolster virtual services to support students during these unique and challenging times. While this study focused on students with disabilities, we must not forget intersectionality of BIPOC students and the disproportionate impact the pandemic has also had for this population. Educators, MSU departments, and community resources (e.g., [Michigan Rehabilitation Services](#), [Disability Network Capital Area](#)) must come together to address students' unique needs and impacts during this atypical and stressful year.

INTRODUCTION

Persons with disabilities have experienced a disproportionately negative impact by COVID-19, particularly for those with physical, psychiatric, developmental, or sensory disabilities. These individuals are at a greater risk of acute syndrome and morbidity and mortality due to their existing underlying health conditions (WHO, 2020a, 2020b). Compared to the general population, persons with disabilities tend to have higher incidence of COVID-19 hospitalizations and deaths (Kuper et al., 2020). Persons with disabilities are also less likely to be able to access health services and specialized supports related to their disabilities (Kruger, 2018), and the COVID-19 crisis has further exacerbated this disparity and inequity. Some individuals with disabilities are being excluded from the appropriate services and supports they fully deserve (Pellicano & Stears, 2020). Social distancing requirements, community center closures, and stay-at-home orders have severely limited not only the participation of individuals with disabilities in their communities but also their access to already scarce resources (e.g., healthcare services, specialized supports, therapies) provided under a strained and archaic behavioral health and education infrastructure. Mental health (e.g., anxiety and depression) exacerbation has also been seen among different disability groups due to lack of proper behavioral and psychosocial interventions. Increased feelings of social isolation, anxiety and depression have triggered behavioral and psychological challenges (Campion et al., 2020).

As the pandemic continues to bring uncertainties, similar impacts have also been seen in the college student population, especially students with disabilities. Financial challenges, health and safety concerns, lack of health care access, and caring for families affected by the pandemic have been affecting students (Shultz, 2020). In addition, the abrupt switch from in-person to online format, loss of employment and/or internships, and uncertainty about future careers have resulted in additional stress and worsening wellbeing. Students with disabilities have not only been facing every issue and challenge that their peers without disabilities face, they have also been encountering additional stress related to their disabilities. For example, some students with disabilities share anxiety and discomfort about confronting others for not practicing COVID-specific guidelines such as wearing face covering. Given the requirement of social distancing, college students with disabilities are also feeling isolated and distressed due to lack of social connections while trying to adjust and engage in online learning with reduced access to in-person educational supports. The sudden switch of course offering format has also raised many issues for students with disabilities, such as accessibility and accommodations. One study reveals that about two-thirds of instructors are unclear about how to design and deploy their course content in an accessible way in an online platform. Part of the reason being that instructors were tasked to convert their courses to remote learning format within an extremely short period of time and with minimal resources. This did not provide those who are inexperienced in online instruction with enough time and supports to develop and adapt their courses to adequately address accessibility issues (Zhang et al., 2020). Given all the rapid changes and uncertainties, college students with disabilities have experienced heightened stress about their learning outcomes and potential impacts on their career.

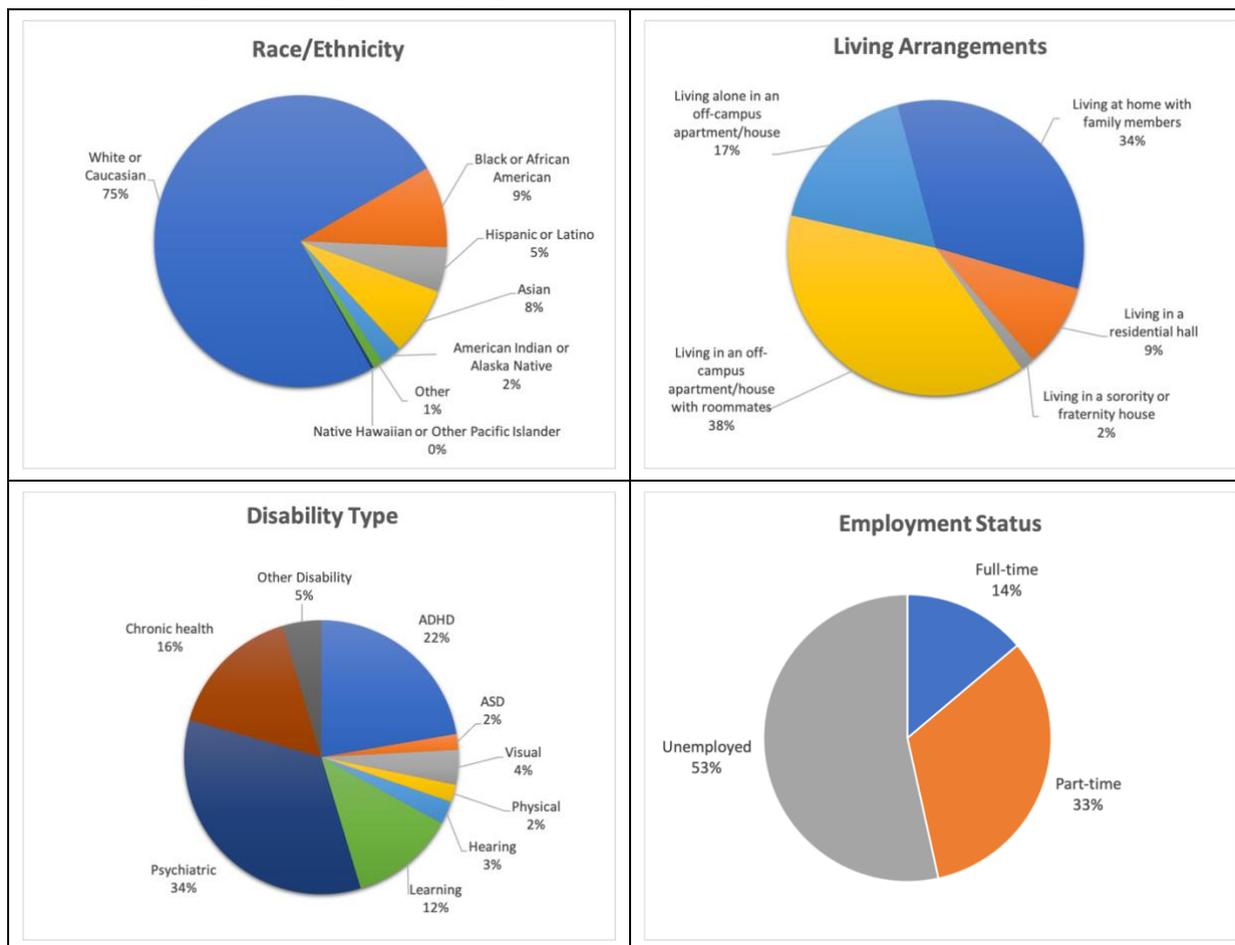
As COVID-19 continues to spread, the impacts on college students with disabilities will continue to be amplified resulting in psychological distress and feelings of hopelessness, anxiety and depression, especially for those with pre-existing mental health conditions (Cao et al., 2020). This could lead to poor quality of life for some students. Thus, it is important to better understand the impacts of the pandemic that college students with disabilities are experiencing in various aspects of their life (i.e., learning, employment, physical and mental health, and social relationships). Having a thorough understanding of these impacts and students' concerns can inform the university, academic departments, faculty and staff, as well as disability specialists to better respond to and address the unmet critical needs of students with disabilities. The purpose of this white paper is to share the findings of a recent study conducted to explore the impacts of COVID-19 on students with disabilities at Michigan State University. The results of the study provide important insights and recommendations on the development of effective interventions and strategies and implementation of individualized supports and resources to help college students with disabilities combat the pandemic.

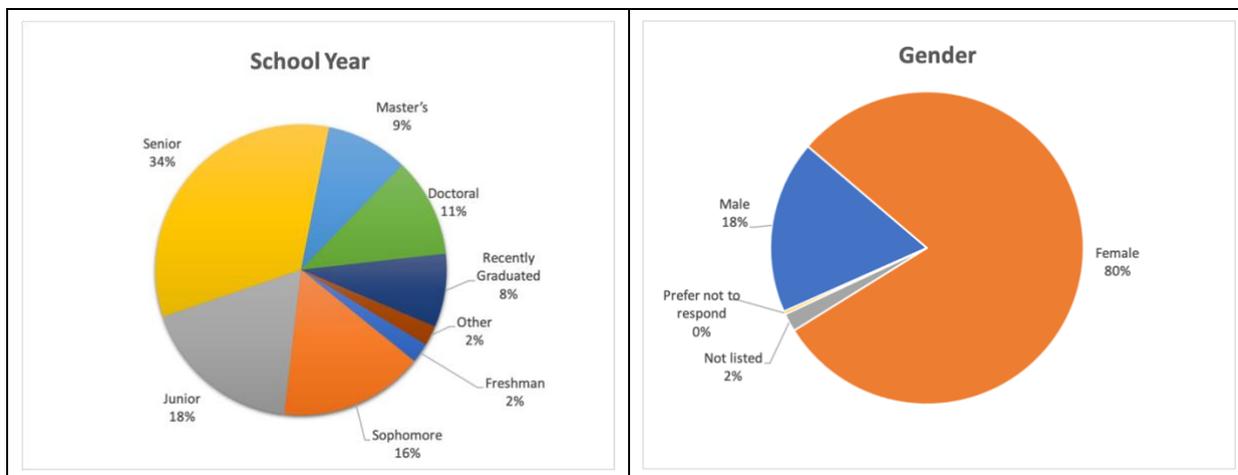
METHOD

Participants

A total of 318 college students with disabilities at Michigan State University participated in the study. The inclusion criteria of this study required that students must be age 18 or above and registered with the university disability office (Resource Center for Persons with Disabilities; RCPD). See charts below for participant demographics and disability characteristics. The majority of participants were female (79.9%), Caucasian (81.1%), with mean age of 23.33 ($SD = 6.37$). The sample composed of participants with various disability types, including psychiatric disabilities (51.3%), attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD; 33.6%), chronic health conditions (24.2%), learning disabilities (18.6%), visual impairments (6.2%), mobility disabilities (5.0%), deaf/hard of hearing (4.1%), brain injury (3.1%), physical disabilities (3.1%), autism spectrum disorder (2.8%), and other types of disabilities (6.9%). In terms of employment status, 13.8% were employed full-time, 32.7% part-time, and 53.5% were unemployed. The participants consisted of undergraduate freshman (2.2%), sophomores (16.0%), juniors (17.9%), seniors (33.3%), master's level graduates (9.1%), doctoral level graduates (11.0%), and students who recently graduated (8.2%). For living arrangement status, 38.4% of the participants were living in an off-campus apartment/house with roommates, 33.6% were living at home with family members, 17.3% at own/other's home/apartment, 9.1% in a residential hall, and 1.5% in a Fraternity/Sorority house.

Charts below depicts participant demographics and disability characteristics ($N = 318$)





Procedures

A survey was disseminated between May and June 2020 to 2,443 students with disabilities who are registered with RCPD. Data was collected via the web-based survey site Qualtrics. Three reminders were sent (one week apart) before the closing of the survey. Participants were asked to read and endorse the informed consent prior to starting the subsequent survey. In addition to demographic type questions, participants were also asked to rate their perceived impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on their learning, employment, physical health, mental health, and family and friend relationships as well as provide qualitative comments to further describe those impacts. There were 318 participants who completed the survey with usable data. Upon survey completion, participants were given the opportunity to enter a drawing to win a \$20 gift card as incentive. Participation in the study was completely voluntary and would not affect receiving services from RCPD. All information obtained from participants was kept confidential.

Measure

This white paper used data from a survey that was sent to all RCPD registrants annually. Survey items included demographic information (e.g., age, gender, race/ethnicity, disability types, previous and current employment status, school year, living arrangement, transportation support, domestic vs. international status) and ratings of perceived impacts of COVID-19 on various aspects of life (i.e., learning, employment, physical and mental health, and relationships with family and friends) using a 5-point Likert-type scale, ranging from 1= “*very large negative impact*” to 5 = “*very large positive impact*”. At the conclusion of the survey, there was an open-ended question asking: “*Please describe how COVID-19 has impacted you in the different aspects, including: academic learning, employment, health, relationships etc. and how RCPD can better support you.*” The question was incorporated into the survey to provide participants the opportunity to include any additional information about their specific experience and perceived impacts amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics were computed regarding participants’ age, gender, race/ethnicity, disability types, previous and current employment status, school year, living arrangement, transportation support, and whether they were from Michigan or other states or international. Means and standard deviations of ratings regarding perceived COVID impacts were calculated. Additionally, participants’ qualitative comments were analyzed using thematic analysis. Manual coding was used to analyze respondents’ qualitative comments to the open-ended question into the six broad categories of academic learning, employment, physical and mental health, relationships with family, and friend relationships impacts. We also coded relevant comments about RCPD supportiveness into two broad categories of how RCPD was supportive and what more RCPD could do to support students. We constructed codes and themes which reflected these patterns often using students’ verbatim words as labels for the codes and themes, which allowed us to get a deeper understanding of how COVID-19 has influenced various aspects of students’ lives.

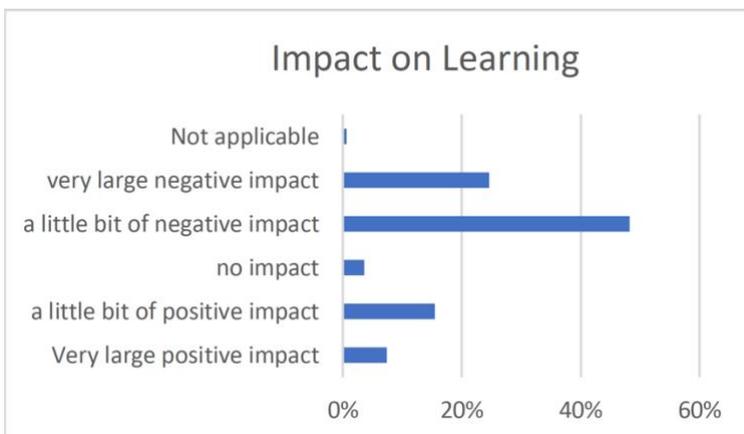
FINDINGS

Impacts to Learning

The majority of respondents (95%) indicated impacts to their academic learning as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, whereas 4% of them indicated no impact. The abrupt shift from in-person to online learning created confusion in how courses were to be completed, disrupted routines, and created challenges for some students to find appropriate study space and necessary infrastructure for online courses. With little notice to prepare, students were tasked with acclimating to an entirely new learning structure. Students and faculty alike had to adjust to the changing and unprecedented campus climate. Students returned home in the middle of the spring semester, further disrupting their routines; many without their belongings from their dorm or apartment.

About 73% respondents reported negative impacts to their academic learning as a result of the pandemic (25% noted very large negative impact and 48% indicated a little bit of negative impact). One student with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and premenstrual dysphoric disorder (PMDD), an undergraduate student in the College of Communication Arts & Sciences, commented *“With the switch to online classes, I felt like it was hard to keep track of what assignments/quizzes were due on that day. I even missed one quiz. Also, I realized that just looking at the syllabus can be unreliable because I’ve had professors who change due dates but do not update the syllabus. During in person classes, my professors would always remind us what was due next, and this made it a lot easier to stay on top on things...”* This abrupt disruption created barriers and concerns for students completing their courses. *“COVID-19 has negatively impacted my academic learning by pushing all of the courses online, which made learning the material extremely difficult to manage and accomplish”* stated an undergraduate student in the College of Natural Sciences with a chronic health condition. Another undergraduate student with ADHD and learning disabilities from the Eli Broad College of Business noted, *“Transferring online made my education felt very unmanageable and felt almost impossible.”*

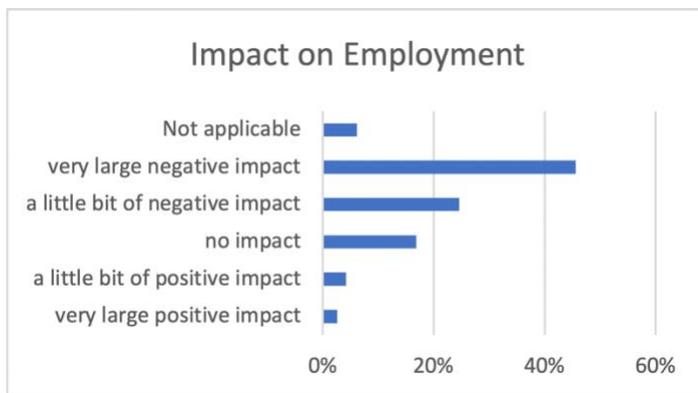
While a majority (73%) reported little to very large negative impacts on their learning, nearly a quarter of the respondents felt there was positive or very large positive impacts on their learning, 15% and 8% respectively. Some students reported feeling more comfortable with their learning environment after moving to remote learning. A graduate student in the College of Veterinary Medicine with ADHD, chronic health conditions and psychiatric disabilities commented, *“I can attend lectures in the comfort of my home and with my family. I am receiving more support and love than ever before.”* The shift from in-person to online format has also been positive for students facing disabilities that cause disruptions to structured class schedules, such as an undergraduate student with a chronic health condition from the College of Social Science who noted, *“It has made classes and school more accessible for me as someone with a chronic illness and cannot assume I will feel good or symptom-free. It has helped because even if I am having a flare-up, I can still attend class from home and not have to miss as I normally may if I have a flare.”* Some other students highlighted the value in remote learning. A graduate student in the College of Social Science with ADHD, psychiatric disabilities and a chronic health condition pointed out, *“Online classes, for example, have been great for me, so I signed up for more this summer. I had the impression that online classes wouldn’t allow me to ‘get my money’s worth,’ but the amount of flexibility and freedom it gives back to me I’d say is worth more than money.”*



Impacts to Employment

Over 70% of respondents reported the pandemic has impacted their employment. While some students reported temporary work stoppage, increased work hours, or no impact to work, most students who commented about employment reported layoffs, workplace closures, inability to find work, cancelation or delay of summer work plans. About 72% indicated negative impact on employment due to the pandemic (47% reported a very large negative impact and 25% noted a little bit of negative impact). However, there were a small percentage (7%) of respondents who indicated somewhat positive impacts on their employment, and 16% reported no impact at all. A graduate student with ADHD, learning and psychiatric disabilities in the College of Veterinary Medicine reported *“I am able to work more to pay my bills.”*

Many students rely on on-campus employment while in school. With the abrupt closure of campus, students were suddenly laid off. One of these students, an undergraduate student with ADHD in Communication Arts and Sciences who was laid off from a departmental help desk said, *“I wish there could have been further guidance on possible online jobs that unemployed students could look into so that they were staying safe but also keeping up an income.”* Many students in the community suddenly found themselves without employment. An undergraduate student with ADHD and a chronic health condition in the College of Social Science who was working for Emergency Medical Services said, *“I was laid off during COVID from EMS because they couldn’t afford to keep contingent and part time employees during this time. They want me to return when things have calmed down.”* Another graduate student from the College of Social Science mentioned, *“At one of the organizations that I work, the organization altered how we delivered services to our clients. They shrunk therapy groups size and had sessions run by more staff members.”* Seniors who were nearing graduation reported difficulties in job search with less responsiveness from employers to their inquiries or applications. An undergraduate student with learning disability in the College of Nursing said, *“COVID lead to a hiring freeze in many hospitals which made it difficult to find nursing jobs. I eventually found a job though.”*



Some students have been impacted financially and cannot pay bills as a result of job loss while others have had to rely on their family for financial support. Students have filed for unemployment relief, but some have been unable to qualify, leaving them feeling frustrated like an undergraduate student from the College of Natural Sciences with a psychiatric disability, who lost their job of two and half years and was denied unemployment assistance because their employer under-reported their income. *“I have been waiting on them to review my protest [appeal] in which I*

submitted two W2s and 39 pay stubs for over 1.5 months,” she says. *“I had to take 13 credits just to get a big enough refund to pay my bills and continue partially supporting my mom.”*

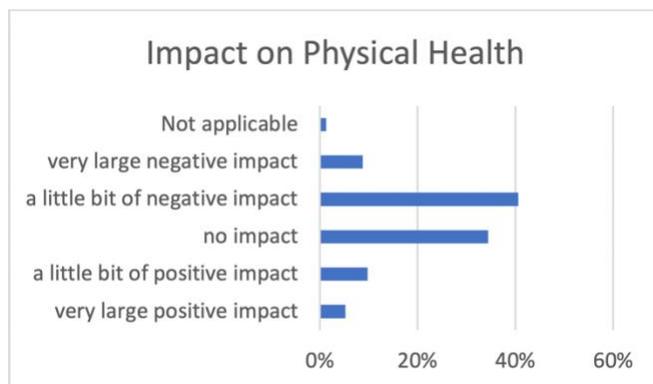
For some students with disabilities, their health conditions make this situation even more difficult, like an undergraduate student from the College of Social Science who noted, *“I lost my job temporarily due to COVID and wasn’t receiving unemployment assistance and it was questionable to find a new job because [sic] due to preexisting health conditions making me at a higher risk for contracting the more serious symptoms the virus causes.”* Also, the loss of employment and income has had a negative impact on students’ health and well-being. An undergraduate student with psychiatric disabilities reported, *“COVID-19 has taken away my ability to work for the time being. While I receive Federal Pandemic Unemployment Assistance, it isn’t enough for me to be financially secure. This causes stress that makes it more difficult to handle my disability, and therefore makes it more difficult to take actions to work on things that are important, like my studies, and maintaining my physical health. The lack of control over the situation and the feelings of helplessness that come from not being able to work contribute negatively to anxiety and depression.”*

Impacts to Physical Health

The shift to remote learning meant a change to students' daily activities, including no longer moving from one building to another for classes, cafeterias, visiting friends, and participating in club or group activities. Respondents to the survey were asked about the pandemic's impact on their physical health given this shift and the Stay Home, Stay Safe executive order. About two-thirds (65%) of respondents indicated impacts to their physical health.

About half of the respondents indicated negative impacts on their physical health as a result of the pandemic (9% noted a very large negative impact and 40% noted a little bit of negative impact). Impacts on their physical health were partly because of delaying medical care unrelated to COVID-19. An undergraduate student with a chronic health condition in the College of Agriculture and Natural Resources indicated, *"I have put off critical medical infusions because they will make me even more immunocompromised during this time."* A graduate student in the College of Natural Science with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), mobility, psychiatric, and peripheral neuropathy and dysautonomia shared, *"The negative impacts to my health have been that I have been unable to receive in-person health care in a timely way. I was receiving IV infusions at home that had to cease because of the danger of letting a stranger into my house. I'm at risk for complications from COVID-19, so the fear of the virus has impacted my mental health a little."* Other students have been exposed to or contracted COVID-19 and provided commentary about the experience. A College of Veterinary Medicine student with ADHD, a chronic health condition and psychiatric disabilities explained that *"physical recovery from COVID has been slow – energy is still way down."* Some shared that the negative impacts to their physical health were due to a more sedentary lifestyle and necessary changes to daily routines and medical care. An undergraduate student in the College of Nursing with learning and psychiatric disabilities stated, *"I have trouble getting up and out of bed to do stuff because there is nothing to do since I am unemployed so I've gained some weight and my mental health has declined."* Another undergraduate student from the College of Engineering with ADHD and learning disabilities noted, *"I'm not allowed to get a job at the grocery store I would usually work at because my parents are paranoid about COVID-19... I spend most of my time in my room doing nothing probably gaining weight."*

Conversely, about 15% of respondents have reported positive impacts to their physical health during the pandemic (10% noted a little bit of positive impact and 5% reported a very large positive impact). Students indicated that the added time available to them allowed for better self-care, including more conscientious food choices and more time to exercise. A graduate student in the College of Human Medicine with ADHD, learning and psychiatric disabilities and a chronic health condition noted, *"I am able to work*

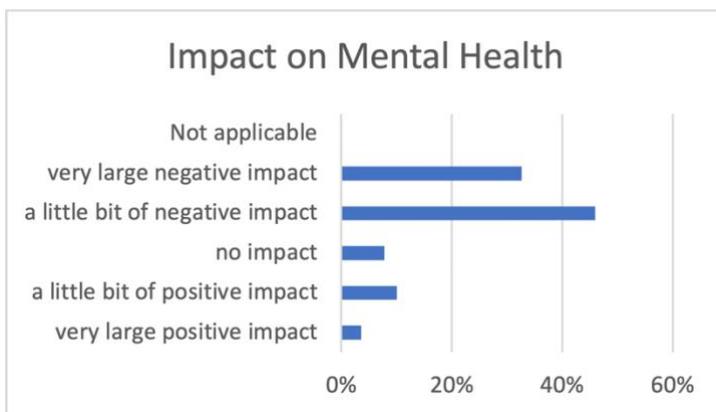


out more, eat healthy, spend time actually meal prepping." An undergraduate student with ADHD and psychiatric disabilities noted positively impacted health because *"I have more time to work out and take care of myself."* One-third of students indicated no impact on their physical health (34%) from the COVID-19 pandemic, with one student from the College of Natural Science, an undergraduate student with psychiatric disabilities noting, *"My physical health hasn't changed much."*

Impacts to Mental Health

A significant number (92%) of respondents indicated impacts to their mental health due to the pandemic, expressing concerns about new or worsening mental health issues as a result of COVID-19 and the shifting environments it has wrought. The shift to remote learning and concerns about academic success, isolation and loss of social structures, loss of or changes to employment, as well as health concerns for themselves and family members have contributed to the increase in negative mental health. However, not all students reported negative impacts. There was a small portion (14%) of respondents who indicated somewhat positive impacts to their mental health, whereas 8% felt no impact at all. A graduate student in the School of Social work with ADHD, chronic health and psychiatric disabilities reported, *“The quarantine has been informative and maybe transformative in some ways, because it’s showed me just how happy and at peace I can feel when I am in control of my surroundings (I live alone). For me, it’s helped me better understand what kind of life I want to create for myself, even if it doesn’t look like other peoples’. [sic] It’s showed me areas of my life that I was trying to “tough out” because that’s how everyone else was doing it. I also realized how much FOMO (fear of missing out) and shame I was burdening myself with when it came to comparing myself with others – socially, academically, etc.”*

About 78% of students indicated the pandemic having negative impacts to their mental health (34% reported a very large negative impact and 45% noted a little bit of negative impact). Concerns about exposure to COVID-19 have led some students feeling isolated beyond the remote learning and social distancing expected. An undergraduate student in Lyman Briggs College with a chronic health condition, learning and psychiatric disabilities said, *“Since I work as a first responder as an emergency medical technician on an ambulance in COVID-19 hotspots, I have not been able to go home to Texas or be with anyone outside of work due to my extensive exposure by having COVID-19 positive patients. Being alone for several months has had a negative impact on my mental health, which in turn affects my physical health as it aggravates my chronic condition. My roommates moved out because they didn’t want to be around me due to my job, so I’ve been stuck.”* Students have also reported feeling isolated because of racial stereotypes tied to the pandemic, with one recently graduated student in the College of Arts and Letters with ADHD and psychiatric disabilities stated, *“COVID-19 made my already isolated life more isolated. I’ve experienced a great deal of micro-aggressions and harassment in public, which has further isolated me from the public, exercising, being around certain friend groups who have dismissed the experiences.”* Uncertainty about the future fuels additional concerns, such as those outlined by a undergraduate student in Nursing with learning disabilities noted, *“I am struggling with the uncertainty surrounding COVID and the unknown of what a new normal will look like in the world.”*

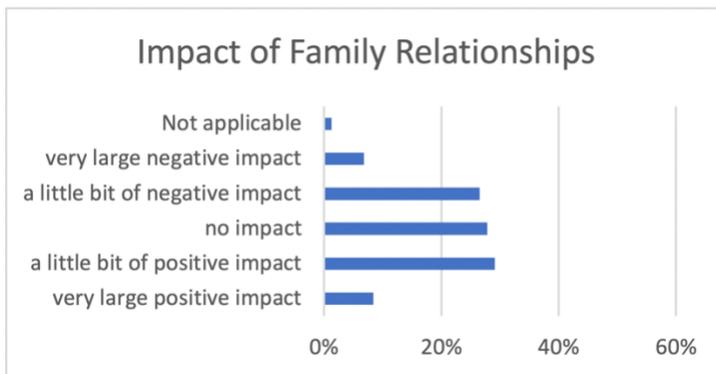


An undergraduate student in the College of Natural Science with psychiatric disabilities commented, *“Some of my classes, such as my physics lab were extremely difficult online. My work closed for about a month, then reopened at the beginning of May. My relationships have been about the same. My physical health hasn’t changed much but my mental health has gotten worse overall because of increased anxiety and depression.”* Students reported angst over remote learning and loss of social

connections. An undergraduate student in the College of Agriculture and Natural Resources with brain injury and a chronic health condition reported *“COVID-19 really cut into my social life, employment, and mental health. My job down at MSU was canceled since it was a research lab and the cut all research due to it. And social distancing and isolation leads to depleted social interactions/mental health.”*

Impacts to Family Relationships

Approximately 71% of respondents indicated some impact to their relationships with family as a result of the pandemic, with 34% reported negative impacts whereas 37% reported positive impacts. Many students commented about family relationships being strained by the COVID-19 situation and having to live closely together with their families again, resulting in more tension due to frequent arguments. A student in Education with visual impairment and a chronic health condition shared, *“COVID has pushed the limits of family relationships. We have been cramped in a small space and patience is thinning. Most times are great, but in moments where we are tested, I think our patience is limited. Most of my friends feel similar.”* For some students, their family relationships were not healthy and having to interact during the pandemic has been stressful. One student, an undergraduate student in Arts and Letters with ADHD, a chronic health condition, psychiatric, and other disabilities remarked, *“I run away from home and back to East Lansing because of a poor relationship with my mother”*. A few students also mentioned losing loved ones to COVID-19. Moreover, some students mentioned that they are either unable to see their family members at all or only see them occasionally. An undergraduate student with learning disabilities from Communication arts and Sciences noted, *“Relationships (family) are extremely limited due to my parents unable to accept modern technology. Phone calls are nice, but it would be nice to see them.”*



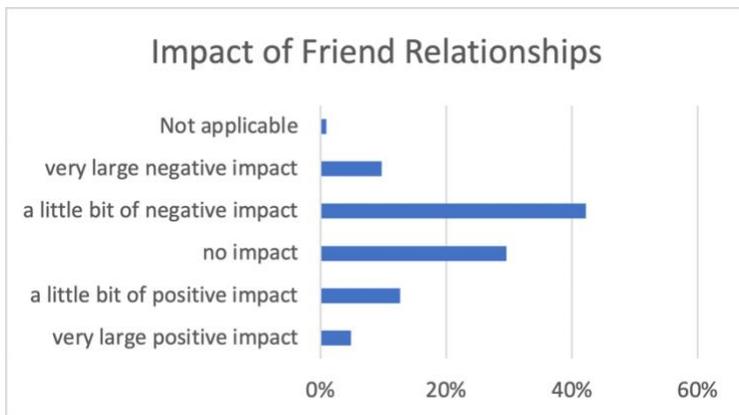
Some students noted that their parents' job loss put financial strain on their family. A graduate student in Osteopathic Medicine with psychiatric disabilities said, *“One parent is not able to find a job because of it and the other was laid off. I am unable to apply for a loan to cover my tuition for the next year as both of my potential cosigners (my parents) are not working, and the lender I was relying on is not accepting new applications due to COVID-19.”* A graduate student in

Engineering with ADHD and a chronic health condition stated, *“The worst was that my dad lost his job, and he is the primary source of income for the family. Thankfully, my sister and I do not rely on our parents financially, but we lost our health insurance.”*

Many students shared spending time with their family in positive ways. An undergraduate student with psychiatric disabilities in the College of Social Science mentioned, *“My health, relationships and everything else actually improved... My relationships with others were strengthened because I spent more time with my loved ones since many of life's distractions were eliminated during this time.”* Students also indicated the need to care for elderly members of their family. While students enjoyed the type of opportunities, they expressed concerns it would impact their availability for other responsibilities. An undergraduate student with learning disabilities from the College of Social Science said, *“I get to help out with my grandma and spend more time with my family. I think it's hard to manage being home taking care of my grandma and going to school.”*

Impacts to Friend Relationships

Over two-thirds of respondents indicated that the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted their relationships with friends. More than half of respondents (52%) reported negative impact to relationships with friends (42% noted a little bit of impact and 10% indicated a very large negative impact). Some students mentioned connecting with friends, but most students expressed the difficulty of making connections and missing their friend social group and support network. For many students, moving away from campus and the requirement of social distancing has made staying connected with friends challenging. An undergraduate student with learning disabilities from the College of Communication Arts and Sciences said, *“Relationships have been hard too because I finally made one friend this past semester and COVID-19 took it away by not being able to see and do things with one another.”* Another student, an undergraduate with a visual impairment from the College of Social Science, mentioned, *“The thing I miss most that has been stripped from me due to Coronavirus is the community that I was part of on campus. When I was on campus, I had a routine to my days. I was outside a lot. The people that I knew push me to be better. All of this made me a healthy and engaged human.”* For many, connecting virtually does not lessen the longing for physical connection with friends.



Some students, however, are intentionally trying to maintain their connections with friends while practicing social distancing. An undergraduate student with learning disabilities from the College of Communication Arts and Sciences said, *“Relationships (friends) are strained due to remote operations. However, we are now doing nightly walks together while maintaining 2 meters apart.”* An undergraduate student from the College of Engineering who has hard of hearing and ADHD also mentioned, *“I’m working on*

being intentional and reaching out to friends for communication now that most of us are now in our hometowns instead of on campus and that has helped a bit.”

In fact, not all students reported negative impacts to their relationships with friends as a result of the pandemic. There was a small portion (14%) of respondents who indicated somewhat positive impacts on to their friendships (12% reported a little bit of positive impact and 5% reported a very large positive impact); whereas 30% of respondents indicated no impact to their relationships with friends at all. An undergraduate student in the College of Social Science with ADHD and psychiatric disabilities indicated, *“I was able to talk to my family and friends more often because of COVID because they were able to help with my financial troubles.”*

DISCUSSION

This study explored the experiences of college students with disabilities at MSU during the COVID-19 pandemic. Respondents provided feedback on the impacts of COVID-19 on their academic learning, employment, physical and mental health, and relationships with family and friends. Similar to other research, our study found that many students are experiencing heightened stress in multiple aspects of their lives due to the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic (Shanes, 2020) which is affecting their overall wellbeing.

While some responses were positive toward online learning, with several students commenting that they appreciated the flexibility and ability to work at their own pace, this study found that the majority of the students experienced difficulties and high level of stress with online learning. Comments from students centered around difficulty with focus during classes, inability to take effective notes, and challenges with keeping up with the course content. The switch to online learning was abrupt and many students felt that faculty were not prepared to offer their courses in a remote learning format. A recent graduate from the College of Arts and Letters with a psychiatric disability reported, *“My professors had little assistance with transitions and some courses remained the same with little leniency.”* Other students reported that they experienced changes in accessibility once classes moved online, with an undergraduate student from the College of Arts and Letters with a learning disability commenting that *“The move from lecture based coursework to reading based coursework created accessibility challenges due to readings not being compatible with my screen reader.”* Many students also noted a lack of access to their professors with remote learning, which resulted in fewer opportunities to ask questions and get clarification on assignments. Given the emergency transition to online learning, it is not surprising that faculty were not fully prepared for online teaching or for supporting students with disabilities in a remote learning environment.

In addition, changes in daily routines and support systems were noted as one of the major concerns expressed by students with disabilities which led to increased stress during the COVID-19 pandemic. Many students had to move back to their family home, which resulted in a loss of space and privacy as well as difficulty with completing coursework. Also, many students with disabilities rely on public transportation and inaccessibility due to shutdowns, as well as fear of exposure to the virus may have led to increased isolation. Other noted challenges were troubles staying focused in their new environment and loss of interest with the switch from the in-person to online learning format. In addition, some students stated that they did not have the tools needed for their academics, such as Internet connection and access to resources like the library or tutoring. Another major concern shared by many students was the loss of opportunities such as internships, jobs, and plans to study abroad. Students expressed worries about the outlook for future prospects of employment, housing, and schooling. The situation experienced by many students could be summed by the following quote shared by a graduate student from the College of Communication Arts and Sciences with a psychiatric disability: *“The current state of the world weighs heavily on my mind, and it is hard to focus. I find that the symptoms from my disorders are flaring as well, possibly due to the interaction between the change in routine, less contact from socially distanced family and friends, and the distress from the pandemic/uncertainty. Even with the support of my doctors and therapists, this crisis has greatly impacted my work.”*

Finally, the survey revealed that the majority of respondents reported a negative impact on their mental health due to COVID-19. Social isolation and loneliness paired with uncertainty about the duration of the pandemic and long-term impacts are contributing factors to the heightened stress and increased mental health concerns which are affecting their overall quality of life. As the pandemic continues, as well as after it is over, there will certainly be need for more resources to help students with disabilities manage their mental health conditions (Knopf, 2020). Access to services through Telehealth will be important and college students will likely turn to their campus counseling and psychiatric services offices for supports. An increased need for academic accommodations will also be anticipated. It will be helpful for campus disability services offices to increase their efforts in reaching out to students with disabilities to offer supports and resources to help them get through these challenging times.

IMPLICATION FOR RESEARCH AND PRACTICES

Leveraging resources within MSU

Resource Center for Persons with Disabilities (RCPD). The findings of the study highlight the need for college students with disabilities to maintain connection with their campus disability services office. MSU's RCPD was able to virtually engage with students from the onset of the university's switch to online learning in the spring of 2020. Maintaining these connections will be valuable in addressing students' needs throughout the remote learning experience. Equally important will be continued fostering of relationships between RCPD staff and faculty in different colleges and departments across campus to encourage greater disability understanding and implementation of academic accommodations. This study also shows the need for students with disabilities to maintain connections with each other. One way RCPD has addressed some of the feedback is with the creation of virtual support groups/communities. Many students reported having a difficult time with adjusting to online classes and are experiencing negative effects of the isolation endured during remote learning. The RCPD community groups have since been created in response to this feedback, linking RCPD students with their peers who are facing similar hardships. The groups provide an outlet for sharing experiences and building a community. RCPD has also worked to address feedback from this survey which showed that there is a gap between the needs of undergraduate students with disabilities and graduate students with disabilities. The initial phase of community groups has three sessions for undergraduate students and two sessions for graduate students in order to focus on the specific needs and concerns of each group. It will be important for the RCPD staff to continue reaching out to assess the needs of students with disabilities as well as provide individualized services to ensure that all students feel supported and heard throughout their educational experience. Furthermore, RCPD has been a key partner and worked actively and creatively to help in cross-unit approaches to ensure increasing accessibility awareness for faculty and helping faculty develop online content with accessible features. For instance, RCPD launched the **Braille Technology Advantage** program, which provides a refreshable Braille display to each incoming student who relies on Braille for access to reduce delays in accessible media availability. RCPD staff is committed to providing a range of new programs and fortifying existing programs in light of the challenges students face.

Career Service Network (CSN). Michigan State University employs approximately 18,000 students every year. On-campus employment assists students in meeting financial needs and provides opportunities for key learning and development necessary to succeed in the workplace after graduation. In addition, understanding how to prepare for, search for and secure post-graduate employment or enroll in graduate school is often overlooked by students until they are about to graduate. Remote career services are offered through virtual means including advising, networking events, workshops, employer panels, virtual site visits, mentoring, and career fairs. It is important to make sure those interactions are accessible, and that staff are properly trained to accommodate specific disability related needs for virtual connections. MSU's CSN has utilized recruiting software for career fairs, information sessions, online chats, and networking with employers. CSN plays a very important role in collaborating with employers to connect students with appropriate opportunities and provide virtual employer panels, interviews, and job shadowing experiences. Up to this point, 184 students registered with RCPD have participated in virtual career fairs. RCPD and CSN will continue to work together to help students prepare for this new platform, including identifying those students who participate/want to participate in virtual services like career fairs and asking if and how their experience can be improved or made more accessible.

Counseling and Psychiatric Services (CAPS). According to the study, students with disabilities have reported negative experiences with remote learning due to motivation and other mental health challenges. CAPS will be an essential partner when it comes to providing virtual mental health counseling or telehealth. As remote learning becomes mainstream, many students with disabilities have found it difficult to leave their homes, therefore, telehealth is vital to maintaining consistent mental health. Having a regularly scheduled counselor to communicate with and/or participating in group therapy sessions will likely help to alleviate the symptoms of isolation and provide coping strategies and psychosocial support so students can maintain balance and success within their academic goals.

[TRIO Student Support Services](#). This study uncovered extensive academic, relationship, and employment-related difficulties for students with disabilities during the pandemic. TRIO supports MSU students in these areas and more. TRIO works with students with disabilities, first generation students, and students meeting specific income criteria, and provides academic, personal, and professional support. Students benefit from peer and professional coaching, class and scheduling support, and professional development including financial literacy, graduate school preparation, community service, and leadership training. TRIO will continue to be a vital resource during and after the COVID-19 pandemic to assist students in navigating university resources and connecting with friends and mentors across campus.

Leveraging Resources outside MSU

[Michigan Rehabilitation Services \(MRS\)](#). Michigan Rehabilitation Services (MRS) is a state agency providing vocational rehabilitation services to individuals with disabilities. MSU Careers Collaborative is a partnership with the RCPD, MRS and CSN which offers both individualized and group career support services to students with disabilities. During the pandemic, MRS has been able to provide MSU Careers Collaborative students with virtual job shadowing experiences to allow the opportunity to begin engaging in the exploration phase of the career search. The MRS counselor has also maintained communication with students via email, phone, and virtual appointments to assist with resume development, interview preparation and employer contact.

[Disability Network Capital Area \(DNCap\)](#). The DNCap is part of a statewide network of Centers for Independent Living which provide services and support to individuals with disabilities. They offer assistance with transportation, employment, assistive technology, housing, and financial needs. Providing students with disabilities with knowledge about these available services and supports would be helpful while students are completing their academic programs as well as once they are beginning their careers.

Implications for Educators

Providing infrastructure and resources to faculty regarding online remote teaching and learning is vital to ensure positive educational outcomes for students. It is important that educators be trained on delivering course content virtually and have the resources they need to successfully present coursework using technology. MSU has provided support to educators through the [MSU's Keep Teaching initiative](#), which offers training and guidance on best practices for teaching remotely. In addition, the [Summer Online Instruction Readiness for Educational Excellence \(SOIREE\)](#) program was offered to help faculty to be more equipped and competent in course design, online instruction delivery and evaluation of learning outcomes and satisfaction. MSU has worked quickly to help faculty adapt to teaching during the global pandemic. However, even with the work being done to streamline teaching practices, students are still burdened with different learning platforms they are expected to use and inconsistent expectations across programs and classes. Continued training for faculty will help mitigate these concerns. It would be helpful to provide professional development for faculty on universal design for learning and accessibility which can be used in course design and delivery. While this study reflects the experiences of some students with disabilities who are currently registered with RCPD, many more students with and without disabilities may be experiencing differential impacts to their learning and other aspects of their lives because of the unprecedented nature of the pandemic testing the limits of personal coping strategies. Incorporating universal design principles in their courses may be one way faculty can prevent and remove barriers and maximize learning opportunities for all students. Students with disabilities will benefit from ongoing collaboration between RCPD staff and academic units and faculty to ensure that academic accommodations are being implemented and students are fully supported.

Implications for BIPOC Community

The results of this study are in line with other research that people of color have been greatly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic (Gaynor and Wilson, 2020). Students of color make up approximately 26.3% of the student population at MSU. Given the disproportional impact of COVID-19 on students of color, it is imperative to cultivate an environment of awareness and support through various resources and programs at MSU. To address issues of equity and diversity, all faculty and staff are required to participate in

training and advocacy to understand and create a positive campus culture for people of color. For instance, the program, [Diversity Equity and Inclusion \(DEI\) Foundations at MSU](#), introduces our campus community to core DEI principles. Specifically, it provides education and development learning for our students, faculty, staff and administrators to further individual's knowledge and baseline understanding of how each of us can work together toward an equitable and inclusive university for ourselves and future generations of Spartans. The [Office of Inclusion and Intercultural Initiatives \(OIII\)](#) also offers additional training and educational opportunities for students, faculty, and staff to increase their knowledge of diversity and inclusion to create a more welcoming campus. OIII provides numerous resources on their website, including an [Anti-Racist Resource List](#) and an [Understanding Implicit Bias Certification Program](#).

In addition, there are other programs on campus specifically designed to support and promote inclusion and cross-cultural education. One resource is the [Office of Cultural & Academic Transitions \(OCAT\)](#). OCAT began in Spring of 1969 and provides services and events surrounding cultural identity, educational opportunities, and cross-cultural student connections. During this time of social isolation, providing supports for students of color on campus to connect with other students of color is vital to support mental wellbeing. Another resource is the [Office for International Students and Scholars \(OISS\)](#), which provides student support services for international students, helping those students adjust to academics, social life, and culture at MSU. The [Multicultural Unity Center \(MOSAIC\)](#) offers support for faculty, staff, and students to "engage across differences." MOSAIC provides courses to educate individuals on history, social relations and society, learning experiences to create diverse dialogue, and partnership with other intercultural programs on campus. All these campus resources and many others will continue to be vital in supporting students of color and ensuring there is equitable access to the tools needed for academic success.

CONCLUSION

In sum, this study reveals that the majority of MSU students with disabilities have been negatively impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Many students' support needs were identified, ranging from academic to mental health to vocational supports. Educators, mental health professionals, and students all play an important role in moving towards a more inclusive and supportive environment for all. Interdisciplinary and interagency collaboration among department/units across campus (e.g., [RCPD](#), [CSN](#), [CAPS](#)) and outside MSU (e.g., [MRS](#), [DNCap](#)) are key to provide a continuum of services and supports critical for students with disabilities to successfully navigate these challenging situations. Offering additional trainings and resources related to remote learning for faculty and students will be helpful to meet students' educational needs. Lastly, there is an urgent need for self-advocacy training amongst students with disabilities as well as disability awareness training amongst educators and other campus employees.

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