

## Recommendations for University Personnel to Improve Student Support Post-COVID

Christopher Esposito   CEPARE Rapid Research Brief   February 2024

Many universities are committed to supporting their undergraduate students<sup>1</sup>. However, changes brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic require higher education institutions to modify how they support current and incoming students, who are increasingly diverse in terms of race, socioeconomic status, and disability status and enter institutions with unique challenges exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic (Hamlin & Barney, 2022). It is important that higher education staff recognize and support these students' needs. The purpose of this brief is to describe the students entering institutions of higher education today, better understand the landscape of academic and nonacademic engagement for prospective and current university students, and describe best practices for ensuring success for these students.

### Demographic Characteristics UConn Students

The University of Connecticut (UConn) student body is quite diverse across a number of dimensions including race, socioeconomic status, and disability status. In fall 2022, NCES (n.d.) reported that 18,983 undergraduates were enrolled at UConn. The ethnic/racial breakdown of these students was 13% Asian, 7% Black or African American, 15% Hispanic/Latino, 51% White, 4% two or more races, 1% race/ethnicity unknown, and 9% U.S. nonresident.

**Psychological symptom screening measures should be routinely administered to help staff understand the mental health needs of students – and to help students understand their own needs (Wang et al., 2022).**

<sup>1</sup>For example, as enshrined in the University of Connecticut's (UConn) mission statement (n.d.), the university is committed to "embracing diversity and cultivating leadership, integrity, and engaging citizenship in its students, faculty, staff, and alumni. Indeed, UConn has made efforts to engage its diverse student body and promoting inclusivity, as it houses a variety of centers/office on campus that are specifically focused on generating diversity awareness and inclusivity. Some of these centers/offices include the Center for Students with Disabilities, the Center for Access and Postsecondary Success, Office for Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Justice, and the Office of Student Health and Wellness.

Of the students who entered UConn in fall 2023, 62% were Connecticut residents, 36% were the first in their family to attend college, and 46% were identified as ethnic/racial minoritized (UConn Undergraduate Admissions, n.d.). According to the UConn Center for Students with Disabilities, in fall 2023, 20% of UConn students reported having a disability, although the actual number of those who had a disability was around 30% (Buckley, 2023). Students' reasons for underreporting their disability needs to the University might include, "fear of stigma, belief they can 'do it' themselves now that they are in college, and other social reasons," (Buckley, 2023). The breakdown of those who reported a disability were: 39% with a psychological disability, 26% with chronic health conditions, 23% with ADHD, 18% with a visual disability, 10% with a learning or cognitive disability, 10% with a neurological disability, 9% with a physical disability, 4% with autism, and 1% who are Deaf or hard of hearing.

## Prospective UConn Students

In fall 2021 – the year with the most up-to-date statistics on nationwide public-school student characteristics – 49.4 million students enrolled in public elementary and secondary education (NCES, 2023). The ethnic/racial breakdown for these students was 5% Asian, 15% Black or African American, 29% Hispanic/Latino, 1% American Indian/Alaska Native, 5% two or more races, and 45% White. In 2021, 15% of public-school students received special education services for having a disability (NCES, 2023b). In fall 2021, the median percentage of school-age students in the United States who were identified as low-income was 15% (U.S. Census Bureau, 2022). According to NCES (2023b), of those who received special education services, the breakdown of disability type included: 32% specific learning disability, 19% speech or language impairment, 15% other health impairment, 12% autism, 7% developmental delay, 6% intellectual disability, 5% emotional disturbance, 2% multiple disabilities, and 1% hearing impairment

Connecticut high school students who are preparing for the transition to college, including UConn, are becoming increasingly diverse by race, socioeconomic status, and disability. According to The Condition on Education in Connecticut Report, 17% of Connecticut high school students have disabilities, 41% are low-income, and 51% are racially/ethnically minoritized (Russell-Tucker, 2022). More specifically, according to CT Data (n.d.), the racial/ethnic makeup of Connecticut high school students in 2021 was: 5% Asian, 13% Black or African American, 29% Hispanic or Latino of any race, 4% two or More Races, and 49% White.

**Higher education institutions, including UConn, should consider adapting to better support rising populations of students who identify as low-income, students of color, or those with disabilities.**

Considering these student characteristics, it can be anticipated that the percentages of students who are identified as low-income, students of color, and disabled applying to and entering UConn will rise in the coming years. This will require UConn to meet the needs of an increasingly diverse student body. Although UConn houses a variety of centers and offices that prioritize meeting the needs of learners from underrepresented backgrounds through initiatives and programs, higher education institutions, including UConn, should consider adapting to better support these students (Hamlin & Barney, 2022; Scott & Aquino, 2020).

**The COVID-19 pandemic created additional barriers related to the transition into college for students. These barriers fall under two primary categories: academic and socioemotional (Akin & Burress, 2022).**

### **Academic and Nonacademic Preparedness for College for Incoming UConn Students**

The COVID-19 pandemic created additional barriers related to the transition into college for students. These barriers fall under two primary categories: academic and socioemotional (Akin & Burress, 2022). These two categories are interrelated as research suggests the shift to online learning negatively impacted the mental health of students. For example, Atlam and colleagues (2022) administered a survey to 1,766 college students and found that 80% of respondents reported that online learning negatively impacted their mental health. Additionally, over 70% of the respondents agreed that digital learning materials had a noticeably negative effect on their grades (Atlam et al., 2022). As a result, a variety of factors have led to delays in students' learning, and therefore, hampered their performance in college.

### **Academic Challenges**

Students' study skills and academic engagement has declined in recent years (Kwakye & Kibort-Crocker, 2021). The pandemic created a drastic lag in students' academic progress; half of public-school students are currently behind a grade level in reading and math, compared to just 36% of students being at this level prior to the pandemic (IES, n.d.). This is the largest drop in reading and math scores since 1990 (Lucariello, 2023).

Moreover, the 2022 High School Survey of Student Engagement revealed that nearly 40% of high school students report not giving their maximum effort in school, and that over 80% of students report being bored in class and not finding the material interesting (Stringer, 2022). Although Stringer (2022) noted that over 90% of students attend school because they want to graduate and go to

college, the Condition of Education in Connecticut Report revealed that Connecticut high school student four-year graduation rates dropped from 88% to 83% between 2019 and 2021 (Russell-Tucker, 2022). Additionally, the report revealed that the gap in graduation rates between White students and Black/African American students has worsened from about 10% in 2019 to 12% in 2021. The report also showed that the college enrollment rates for Connecticut high school students have declined for the past few years, with approximately 66% of students from the class of 2021 enrolling in college, despite more students completing college-and-career readiness courses while in high school than ever before (85% in 2021 compared to 80% in 2019). Notably, this decline in college enrollment is not limited to Connecticut students, as it is observed nationwide (National Student Clearinghouse, 2022).

## **Socioemotional Challenges**

The long-term shift to remote learning contributed to heightened social anxiety in students, thus hampering their social skill development and relationship building (Ni & Jia, 2023). Input from school social workers, teachers, counselors, and administrators who completed The State of Student Mental Health Survey in 2022 supported this claim, as over 80% of respondents indicated adolescent stress was worse in that year compared to previous years. These educators noted there were more frequent acts of disrespect towards educators and worsening academic performance (Lucariello, 2023). In fact, the number of students in high school facing mental health challenges (i.e., persistent sadness or hopelessness, suicidal thoughts or behaviors) is the highest it has been in the past 10 years (CDC, n.d.). More than 40% of high school students reported feeling so sad or hopeless that they could not engage in their regular activities for at least two weeks, and nearly 25% of students had a suicide plan. Unfortunately, nearly two-thirds of those who completed The State of Student Mental Health Survey reported lacking the tools to support students' mental health concerns, and over 80% of respondents indicated that they lacked the means to provide adequate help (Lucariello, 2023).

## **Physical Challenges**

In addition to effects on socioemotional health, students also experienced negative impacts on their physical health. The pandemic led to decreases in physical activity and overall wellbeing, and worsened eating habits and increased obesity for adolescents (Bozzola et al., 2023). Specifically, adolescents who completed an online survey were found to be 88% less likely to participate in the minimum recommended amount of physical activity recommended during the pandemic (Arundell et al., 2022), and obesity rates increased over the pandemic (13% to 16%, according to Bozzola et al., 2023). These changes in dietary habits and activity levels may be related to mental health, as some students opted to eat less healthy foods to alleviate stress (Michael et al., 2023). In part due to these physical challenges, there has been an influx of students with chronic health issues attending college. As of 2023, 30% of college students reported that they have been treated for a chronic health condition compared to 22% in 2010 (American College Health Association 2020; 2023).

## Experiences of College Students

Academic and socioemotional challenges are not limited to prospective college students. In fact, a survey of 823 college students revealed that over 50% agreed the pandemic decreased their confidence in their ability to succeed in college and their career (Hamlin & Barney, 2022). The impact on student academic performance appeared to be related to income, as lower-income students encountered greater challenges with online learning. It is estimated that their GPAs decreased by 5% during this shift, and they were 35% more likely than students from higher-income families to exercise flexible grading and pass/fail options compared to higher income students. They also reported a heightened use of incompletes and greater concerns about maintaining financial aid during this time (Rodriguez-Planas, 2022).

Regarding socioemotional competency, over 80% of students who completed the survey conducted by Hamlin and Barney (2022) indicated that the pandemic led them to experience increased rates of stress, changed the way they socialize with friends, and decreased their likelihood to attend social events. About 40% of respondents also reported that they gained more than 10 pounds because of the pandemic, had trouble sleeping, and exercised less. These findings indicate that students attending UConn and other colleges experience challenges related to academic performance as well as mental and physical health. In short, a significant number of students currently attending UConn – and more who will be attending the university in coming years –will likely require additional supports to address their academic and nonacademic needs.

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### What Can UConn Do to Help These Students?

To meet the needs of current and incoming UConn students, UConn staff and faculty can work to adjust how they support students by aligning their practices with what is recommended in the literature. Below are a number of recommendations for how staff and faculty can increase campus-wide awareness of students' individualized needs.

#### Recommendations for Staff

- Diversity initiatives should strive to address the needs of all groups who are underrepresented on campus and be crafted by diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) committees that are made up of change agents and campus leaders who are passionate about the work, including students themselves (Kolluru et al., 2023). When inviting students to participate in these committees, it is critical to engage them in all discussions and listen to their insights, as they are the ones who require the support (McLeod, 2023).

- Data on students' mental health needs should be routinely collected to help staff and students address these needs (Wang et al., 2022). One of the most prevalent anxiety symptoms exhibited by college students post-COVID, time pressure, can be alleviated through staff-led time management training sessions (Wei et al., 2022).
- Increasing mental health services staff and offering services both remotely and in-person (Siddik et al., 2024), as well as expanding the times of day when the services are offered, can help improve access to psychological services for students. This may require some staff to complete training to conduct telemental health services. For example, the City University of New York allocated funds to offer an eight-hour course and exam to certify their staff to provide such services (Salimi et al., 2023). Additionally, staff should organize events and initiatives to promote healthy lifestyles, decrease social media use, and discuss the value of prioritizing one's mental health (Siddik et al., 2024).
- Pre-college orientations and ongoing mentoring can serve as effective avenues to support the individualized needs of students from diverse (i.e., by race, socioeconomic status, and disability status) backgrounds as well as avenues to advertise services available to support students at UConn. For example, UConn offers the CAPS College Program to underrepresented students, which provides current UConn students with a variety of services, including peer mentoring, which has shown to improve the academic and nonacademic success in college for mentees and mentors (Trujillo et al., 2015; Venegas-Muggli et al., 2023).

## **Recommendations for Faculty**

- Faculty should work alongside diverse (i.e., by race, socioeconomic status, and disability status) learners in their courses to increase accessibility of course content, as students themselves can express their unique needs and inform faculty how to best modify course content to convey information (Gillespie-Lynch et al., 2017; Zhao & Watterston, 2021). This collaboration can be achieved through creating welcoming environments by starting class with icebreakers and promoting student discussion through class presentations (Gillespie-Lynch et al., 2017). Additionally, faculty can gather input from students at several points during a semester by initiating open dialogues with students and administering feedback surveys to students regarding their unique learning needs and the course itself (Gillespie-Lynch et al., 2017).
- Course curricula should be redesigned to address the learning delays, changes, and gaps resulting from the pandemic. This can be achieved by weaving flexibility into the structure of a course in the following ways: 1) learning outcomes should be refined to prioritize the teaching and learning of only essential information, 2) methods of completing assignments should be flexible (e.g., essay, presentation, short film) to allow students to demonstrate their knowledge however they feel is best for them (Zhao & Watterston, 2021).

- Faculty identities (e.g., race, socioeconomic status, and disability status) should mirror the makeup of the student body. In this way, these faculty can better relate to the needs of students, serve as role models for them, and improve their sense of belonging (Martinez-Acosta & Favero, 2018).
- Faculty should be aware of students' exacerbated difficulties stemming from the pandemic, such as math and reading delays as well as heightened mental and physical health concerns. They should exercise compassion while also maintaining high expectations for students. When applicable, as they listen to the concerns of their students, they should use their expertise to alleviate their students' stress and anxiety (Hamlin & Barney, 2022). Faculty should also provide individualized attention and support to students, as needed, by demonstrating that they are available to meet beyond lecture hours and providing individualized feedback on assignments. Teaching assistants should be available, as needed, to assist faculty to ensure that individualized feedback and support is feasible.
- Faculty should restructure courses to steer away from assessing memorization of content, and instead, move towards outcome- and project-based learning that evaluates students' understanding of the course's learning outcomes (Rasli et al., 2022). This shift prioritizes ensuring that students leave a course equipped with tangible knowledge and skills that prepare them for the workforce.
- Truncated courses (around seven- or eight-weeks long), similar to a course administered in the summer term, should be offered for students who are interested in taking fewer classes each semester, rather than exclusively offering the typical 15-week-long courses (Hamlin & Barney, 2022). This can appeal to students who are still lagging academically due to their learning difficulties. Also, consider offering more online and hybrid courses, given that some students preferred these formats of learning (Hamlin & Barney, 2022). To ensure that faculty are equipped to make these modifications to their courses, faculty should be connected with instructional designers with expertise in the faculty's respective field as well as instructional technology personnel (Gonzales & Griffin, 2020).
- Create training opportunities for faculty to address students' academic and nonacademic concerns related to lingering issues caused by the pandemic (Hamlin & Barney, 2022). Three key training topics stemming from the pandemic are: a) how to use technology to improve the accessibility of course content (Hamlin & Barney, 2022), b) what are the signs of common mental health concerns experienced by students and how can faculty support them to succeed (Hamlin & Barney, 2022), and c) what DEI is and how to talk about it and how to infuse it into curriculum, pedagogy, and interactions with students (Martinez-Acosta & Favero, 2018). Hamlin and Barney also suggested administering assessments to faculty to capture the severity of their concerns related to students' difficulties and working with faculty to address their concerns and meet students' needs.

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## **Conclusion**

The makeup of UConn's student body is changing significantly as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. This change requires the university's staff and faculty to adjust their practices to support their students. It is recommended that the practices outlined above, which are supported by the literature, are considered when striving to help these students along their college journeys.



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## Author Biography

Christopher Esposito is a full-time doctoral student in the Educational Psychology program with a concentration in Special Education at the University of Connecticut. He recently received his MA in Higher Education and Student Affairs from New York University and previously received his BS in Psychology from Stony Brook University. He worked in the field of college access and advising for three years, as well as the field of autism research for four years. Currently, he works as a graduate assistant on two projects related to college and career readiness, and his research interests include examining and improving the postsecondary outcomes for individuals with disabilities, particularly those with autism. He can be reached at [christopher.m.esposito@uconn.edu](mailto:christopher.m.esposito@uconn.edu).

