

U-M student experiences during the Fall 2020 public health-informed semester

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INTRODUCTION

This report describes the findings from two data collections designed to support planning and decision-making for the Winter 2021 semester:

- 1) a survey of all degree-seeking students administered October 16-20
- 2) a set of five focus groups of undergraduate housing residents conducted October 13-15

I have organized the report to include a narrative summary of findings that is supported with statistical tables and data visualizations. Given the limited amount of time available to the decision-makers, I have kept the narrative brief, and have used visual aids such as sorting, color-coding, and conditional formatting to draw attention to the patterns found in the data. Focus groups findings are woven in where relevant.

The results are shown first for curricular constructs, then for co-curricular constructs. I disaggregated all results by degree level (undergraduate, Master's, doctoral, and professional), and for several of the curricular constructs I have further disaggregated by respondent college. I created regression models for many constructs in order to understand whether or how students are having differing experiences or have differing needs. Each model considers the relationships between a specific construct and a set of student characteristics. I describe the results as comparisons between students in traditionally underrepresented or marginalized populations and their peers - women compared to men, underrepresented race compared to majority race, first-generation compared to continuing-generation, and students with family incomes below the national median compared to those above the national median. I constructed the median income variable using the estimated family income ranges available in the University's Third Week Count dataset. The model type depends upon the shape of the relevant construct, as many are skewed or even linear. All regression assumptions were met and the determination of statistical significance is consistent with the standards of educational research. Again, in order to facilitate a quick read among decision-makers, I present regression results in narrative form without typical statistical values. I will generally describe patterns of results rather than individual results and will compare and contrast where appropriate. Only statistically-significant results will be presented.

With the exception of the hypothetical items for Winter 2020/21 plans, which were the last items on the survey, the results are shown in survey order and the stem and response options are provided verbatim.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

POTENTIAL WINTER 2021 PLANS AMONG ALL U-M STUDENTS

If the Winter 2021 semester is the same format as the Fall 2020 semester, at least 85% of each degree level intends to remain enrolled. Undergraduates are least certain, with 11% unsure of their plans. No more than 4% of any degree level intends to take semester off.

Uncertainty and intent to take the semester off increase if the Winter 2021 is fully remote, with 17% percent of undergraduates uncertain and 8% planning to take the semester off. Doctoral students intend to remain enrolled at nearly the same rate for either scenario - 92% for the same as Fall 2020 and 93% for remote.

These items include response options for remaining enrolled and living in university housing, remaining enrolled and living in A2 or a nearby community, and living elsewhere. Therefore, selecting 'not sure' could be interpreted as either 'not sure of enrollment decision' or 'remaining enrolled but not sure of living situation.' The focus group results provide insight for undergraduates, as those students intend to remain enrolled, but were uncertain of (and had great anxiety around) where they would live. The general sentiment was they would prefer not to go back to their permanent residences, which they described as distracting and not conducive to a positive learning environment.

Women have lower odds than men of taking the semester off in either Winter 2021 scenario. No other student characteristics affect the odds of not enrolling in Winter 2021.

POTENTIAL WINTER 2021 PLANS COMPARED TO FALL 2020 LIVING SITUATION

Considering the Fall 2020 living situation in conjunction with their Winter intentions, 21% of undergraduates who live in university housing either plan to move out of housing, take the semester off, or are unsure of what they will do if the Winter 2021 semester is the same as Fall 2020. If Winter 2021 is fully remote, taking the semester off increases by 6 percentage points and uncertainty increases by 14 points.

The differences between a public health-informed and a remote Winter 2021 semester are similar for Master's, doctoral, and professional students. For Master's and doctoral students, the proportion of students who live in housing and intend to remain enrolled drops by 7-8 points from a public health-informed Winter semester to a fully remote winter semester. For professional students it drops by 20 points.

In general, students who already live outside of A2 or nearby communities have the smallest differences between their plans for either format of the Winter semester.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

FALL 2020 IN-PERSON AND REMOTE ACADEMIC EXPERIENCES

Slightly more than half of **undergraduates** have a course that offers an in-person experience in Fall 2020. Among those students, two-thirds had a remote option and used it, and one-quarter had a remote option and did not use it. In-person experiences ranged from 28% for students enrolled in Public Health and 100% for students enrolled in Dental Hygiene. It is important to note that the in-person experiences could be in any college, and should not be assumed to be in the college in which each respondent is enrolled.

With the exception of Dental Hygiene and Nursing, both substantially enhanced by an in-person experience, at least half of students who had the option to attend an in-person session remotely did so.

Reasons for attending remotely rather than in person had similar patterns across colleges. The most influential reasons for doing so were concern for peer and instructors' health and concern for one's own health. The least influential reason by far was feeling pressured by others to avoid in-person courses. The survey results are very much in line with the undergraduate focus group results, particularly the low instances of feeling pressured to avoid the in-person experiences.

Women are more influenced to attend remotely than men by all reasons related to health, concern for potentially triggering a university shutdown, and concern the university does not have enough safety measures in place.

Students of underrepresented races are more influenced to attend remotely than students of majority races by concern for peer, instructor, and family health, concern for potentially triggering a university shutdown, and concern the university does not have enough safety measures in place.

First-generation students more influenced to attend remotely than continuing-generation students by the convenience of the remote option, concern for family health, and concern the university does not have enough safety measures in place.

Students with family incomes below the national median are more influenced to attend remotely than students with family incomes above the national median by concern for their own health, concern for family health, and concern the university does not have enough safety measures in place.

Nearly 60% of **Master's students** have a course that offers an in-person experience in Fall 2020. Among those students, 81% had a remote option and used it, and 16% had a remote option and did not use it. In-person experiences ranged from 22% for students enrolled in Education and Information and 89% in Public Policy.

With the exception of Music, Theatre, and Dance, substantially enhanced by an in-person experience, at least 60% of students who had the option to attend an in-person session remotely did so.

The pattern of reasons for attending remotely rather than in person are similar across colleges and similar to undergraduate students.

Women are more influenced to attend remotely than men by all reasons related to health, concern for potentially triggering a university shutdown, and concern the university does not have enough safety measures in place.

Students of underrepresented races are more influenced to attend remotely than students of majority races by concern the university does not have enough safety measures in place.

Students with family incomes below the national median are more influenced to intend remotely than students with family incomes above the national median by concern for potentially triggering a university shutdown and concern the university does not have enough safety measures in place.

Only one-quarter of **doctoral students** have a course that offers an in-person experience, but 82% had a remote option that they used. In-person experiences ranged from 6% for students enrolled in Education to 45% for students enrolled in Kinesiology. Most colleges had too few respondents to allow for individual analysis.

Women are more influenced to attend remotely than men by concern for their own, peer and instructor health, concern for potentially triggering a university shutdown, and concern the university does not have enough safety measures in place.

Students with family incomes below the national median are more influenced to attend remotely than students with family incomes above the national median by pressure from others to avoid in-person courses.

Three-quarters of **professional students** have a course that offers an in-person experience in Fall 2020. Among those students, two-thirds had a remote option and used it, and 14% had a remote option and did not use it. At least two-thirds of students in each college had a course with an in-person experience. Unlike other degree levels, it is reasonable to assume that in-person courses for professional students are in their schools.

Women are more influenced to attend remotely than men by all reasons related to health, concern for potentially triggering a university shutdown, and concern the university does not have enough safety measures in place.

Students of underrepresented races are more influenced to attend remotely than students of majority races by concern for family health, and less influenced by concern the university does not have enough safety measures in place.

Students with family incomes below the national median are less influenced than students with family incomes above the national median by concern for their own health and concern for potentially triggering a university shutdown.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

PERCEPTION OF FALL 2020 ACADEMIC WORKLOAD

Nearly three-quarters of **undergraduates** report their workload is more than what they expected or experienced in the past, with 24% indicating it is the same and 5% indicating it is less. The patterns are similar across respondent colleges with students enrolled in Education and Public Policy reporting the largest gaps and students enrolled in Information reporting the smallest gap.

Women, students of underrepresented races, and first-generation students are more likely to report their current workload is more than expected or experienced than men, students of majority races, and continuing-generation students.

There was broad agreement in the undergraduate focus groups that the workload is far more than they expected and that they are struggling under its weight. Student comments centered around two themes - 1) that the sum of the synchronous and asynchronous content they are required to watch is greater than the total in-class hours described by the course schedule, and 2) among upperclass students, the number and difficulty of assignments per course is more than what they had experienced in the past.

Three-quarters of **Master's students** report their workload is more than what they expected or experienced in the past, with 14% indicating it is the same and 12% indicating it is less. The patterns are similar across respondent colleges with students enrolled in Information and Public Health and Medicine reporting the largest gaps and students enrolled in Kinesiology and the Business reporting the smallest gap.

Students of underrepresented races are more likely to report their current workload is more than expected or experienced than students of majority races.

Doctoral students are different, with 42% reporting a higher workload and 48% reporting the same level of workload, with a high among students enrolled in Music, Theatre, and Dance, and a low among students enrolled in Public Health and Environment and Sustainability.

Professional student patterns are closer to undergraduates and Master's students, with 59% reporting a higher workload and one-third reporting the same level of workload. Dentistry students are unique as 27% of them report a lesser workload than expected or experienced in the past.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

PERCEPTION OF FALL 2020 CONNECTION WITH REMOTE INSTRUCTORS

The dominant response among **undergraduates** about how well they've connected with remote instructors is 'a little.' Connection is strongest among students enrolled in Education and Public Policy and least strong among students enrolled in Information.

Women are more able to connect with remote instructors than men, and students whose family income is below the national median are more able to connect with remote instructors than students whose family income is above the national median.

The majority of focus group participants, especially the first-year students, described great difficulty getting to know instructors in the remote setting. While they expect this for larger courses, their experience in smaller courses was surprising to them. They perceive both technical challenges and lack of effort on the part of the instructors as the source of their lack of connection. Office hours are a particular disappointment to them, as they describe limited hours and many students logging on at the same time. Many students described this lack of connection as the thing that bothers them the most about this semester. Upperclass students were also concerned about missing the opportunity to cultivate faculty who could serve as future references for scholarships, internships, graduate school, etc..

Master's student experiences are a bit better, as their dominant response is 'somewhat.' Connection is strongest among students enrolled in Nursing and least strong among students enrolled in Public Health, Business, and Environment and Sustainability.

Doctoral student experiences are similar to Master's students, with a dominant response of 'somewhat.' Connection is strongest among students enrolled in Environment and Sustainability and least strong in Architecture and Urban Planning.

Students of underrepresented races are more able to connect with remote instructors than students of majority races.

Professional students' dominant response is split between 'a little' and 'somewhat.' Connection is strongest among students enrolled in Nursing and least strong in students enrolled in Medicine.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

PERCEPTION OF FALL 2020 TECHNOLOGICAL ACCESS TO REMOTE COURSES

In general, students in all degree levels have little difficulty accessing their remote courses due to internet connectivity or lack of needed technology.

Among undergraduates, women and first-generation students are more likely to report difficulty in accessing their remote courses than men and continuing-generation students.

Undergraduates in the focus groups did not indicate much difficulty with remote course access. They did, however describe technology as a barrier to success during their remote exams in STEM and language courses. When taking exams in-person and using blue books, they can easily and quickly write equations or non-English text. On remote exams, however, they report running out of time because they need to search for and type in symbols, Greek letters, superscripts, subscripts, and diacritical marks to properly format their work.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

COMPARISON OF FALL 2020 REMOTE AND IN-PERSON ACADEMIC EXPERIENCES

Eighty-three percent of **undergraduates** indicate the in-person experience is better than the remote experience. With the exception of Dental Hygiene, the patterns are very similar across all colleges.

First-generation students and students with family incomes below the national median are less likely to indicate in-person is better than continuing-generation students and students with family incomes above the national median.

Undergraduates were exceedingly clear in the focus groups that they do not enjoy remote learning. They describe lack of ability to concentrate, difficulty retaining material, and great concern that they will not be prepared for subsequent courses that depend upon the content they are currently learning. At the same time, they report overall poor engagement, for example, they frequently watch their courses while lying on their beds with their cameras off. They realize they are not actively engaging, but they also say they are having great difficulty finding the needed motivation. They are aware that the Winter semester will have at least as much remote learning as the Fall and they are extremely concerned about the effect of a full academic year of remote learning on their overall education.

Master's, doctoral, and professional students also have the majority reporting that in-person is better than remote, but there are larger percentages reporting in-person and remote are the same or remote is better than in-person.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

FALL 2020 USE OF ACADEMIC RESOURCES AND WINTER 2021 DESIRES

As expected, **undergraduates** are accessing remote resources at greater rates than in-person resources. Greater percentages of them are interested in, but unable to find, in-person and remote research experiences. For Winter 2021, their greatest desires are opening study spaces and the libraries.

The need for additional study spaces were brought up at each of the five focus group sessions. As most students have roommates, and most of the common spaces in residence halls are closed, students are looking for quiet, non-distracting places they can go to attend class, study, or take an exam. While they appreciated the canopies throughout campus, they found them unsuitable for much of their work because of the noise from nearby traffic or passersby.

Master's students are also accessing remote resources at greater rates than in-person resources, and greater percentages of them are interested in finding remote research experiences and remote employment. For Winter 2021, their greatest desires are opening study spaces and the libraries, along with employment.

Doctoral students are generally able to access what they need in Fall 2020, and in Winter 2021, their greatest desire is research experiences.

Professional students are also generally able to access what they need in Fall 2020, and in Winter 2021, their greatest desires are opening libraries and study spaces.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

FALL 2020 CONCERN ABOUT CO-CURRICULAR EXPERIENCES AND WINTER 2021 DESIRES

The level of comfort **undergraduates** feel attending in-person activities and events or accessing support or resources is almost evenly distributed across the four response options.

Students in each of the underrepresented or traditionally marginalized populations (women, underrepresented races, first-generation, and below median income) feel lesser comfort than their peers who are men, majority races, continuing-generation, and above median income.

The items measuring the influences on comfort level were the same as for attending remote courses instead of in-person courses, and the results were very similar. The most influential reasons for their comfort level are concern about peer, staff/facilitators, and own health, and the least influential reason by far was feeling pressured by others to avoid in-person experiences. Again, these results are very much in line with the undergraduate focus group results, particularly the low instances of feeling pressure to avoid the in-person experiences.

Half of undergraduates believe it is 'very' important that there be stronger enforcement of safety measures in Winter 2021. This was a very emotional topic during the focus groups, as many students described seeing multiple situations in which safety measures were not followed but ResStaff or professional staff did nothing to enforce them.

Sixty-two percent believe it is 'not at all' important that they have in-person dining on campus. This is the one area in which the focus group results and the survey results do not align. Students in the focus groups, particularly the first-year students, expressed a definite desire to have a place to eat with friends once the weather becomes colder.

The level of comfort **Master's students** feel attending in-person activities and events or accessing support or resources is almost evenly distributed across the four response options.

Women and students of underrepresented races feel lesser comfort than their peers who are men and students of majority races.

As with undergraduates, the most influential reasons for their comfort level are concern about peer, staff/facilitators, and own health, and the least influential reason by far was feeling pressured by others to avoid in-person experiences.

More than half of them believe it is 'very' important that there be stronger enforcement of safety measures in Winter 2021 and 60% believe it is 'not at all' important that they have in-person dining on campus.

Doctoral students' level of comfort is very different than the other degree levels, with more than half indicating 'not at all' and only 8% indicating 'very.' It is possible that those who are GSI's are considering their instructional activities within this section.

Women and students of underrepresented races feel lesser comfort than their peers who are men and students of majority races.

As with undergraduates and Master's students, the most influential reasons for their comfort level are concern about peer, staff/facilitators, and own health, and the least influential reason by far was feeling pressured by others to avoid in-person experiences.

Nearly three-quarters believe it is 'very' important that there be stronger enforcement of safety measures in Winter 2021 and 71% believe it is 'not at all' important that they have in-person dining on campus.

The level of comfort **professional students** feel attending in-person activities and events or accessing support or resources is almost evenly distributed across the four response options.

Women feel lesser comfort than men.

As with all other degree levels, the most influential reasons for their comfort level are concern about peer, staff/facilitators, and own health, and the least influential reason by far was feeling pressured by others to avoid in-person experiences.

Half believe it is 'very' important that there be stronger enforcement of safety measures in Winter 2021 and 62% believe it is 'not at all' important that they have in-person dining on campus.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

FALL 2020 WELL-BEING AND BELONGING

Undergraduate students are very concerned about several facets of their well-being, most notably their mental/emotional well-being and their social well-being.

Women have greater concern than men about all six facets of their well-being. Students of underrepresented races have greater concern than students of majority races about the spiritual, intellectual, and financial well-being. First-generation students have greater concern than continuing-generation students about their physical, spiritual, and financial well-being. Students with family incomes below the national median have greater concern than students with family incomes above the national median about their mental/emotional, spiritual, intellectual, and financial well-being.

Students in the focus groups described many ways in which their well-being is challenged - they are not sleeping enough or well, they have little motivation to exercise, they are feeling extreme stress, they are lonely and feeling isolated, and they are not eating well. One student summed it up by saying, "we're just done," despite the term being barely half over.

The belonging results are mixed, such that students feel like they belong and are part of the U-M community much more than they feel valued as an individual at U-M.

Women feel more a part of the community than men, and students of underrepresented races and first-generation students feel less a part of the community and less like they belong than students of majority races and continuing-generation students.

Belonging was also brought up by the students at the focus groups, specifically the idea of feeling valued. Students very pointedly connected the format of the semester as the university leadership not valuing them, and the way their remote courses were taught as some instructors not valuing them.

Master's students are also very concerned about several facets of their well-being, most notably their mental/emotional well-being and their social well-being.

The difference in belonging results is less stark than for undergraduates, although they still feel less valued than they feel they belong or are part of the community.

Doctoral students are also very concerned about several facets of their well-being, most notably their mental/emotional well-being and their physical well-being.

The belonging results are more similar to those of undergraduates, with a large gap between the feeling of being valued and the feeling they belong or are part of the community.

First-generation students feel less like they belong than continuing-generation students.

Professional students are also very concerned about several facets of their well-being, most notably their mental/emotional well-being and their social well-being.

Their belonging results are nearly identical to those of doctoral students, such that their feeling of being valued is lesser than their feeling they belong or are part of the community.

First-generation students feel more valued as individuals than continuing generation students.