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### A second "Pandemic": How COVID-19 has impacted international student mental health in North Carolina

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A SECOND “PANDEMIC”:  
HOW COVID-19 HAS IMPACTED INTERNATIONAL STUDENT MENTAL HEALTH IN  
NORTH CAROLINA

Rachel Kerr  
PIM 80

A Capstone Paper submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a Master of  
International Education at SIT Graduate Institute in Brattleboro, Vermont, USA.

August 8<sup>th</sup>, 2022

Advisor, Dr. Sora H. Friedman

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Student Name: Rachel Kerr

Date: August 8, 2022

## **Dedication and Acknowledgements**

This research project would not be possible without the guidance of the many incredible and talented people who did countless edits, listened to me talk on and on about international student support, offered feedback, and challenged me to think and learn in new and different ways.

To Marley for listening to me, guiding me, and supporting me through it all.

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To my students, this is for you and because of you.

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To my participants – thank you for trusting me.

And lastly, to every international student, this project is dedicated to you and to your experiences.

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## **Abstract**

The international student experience through the COVID-19 pandemic in the United States is under-studied. To further the limited research, this study asks: how has COVID-19 affected the mental health of international students studying in North Carolina? The research used phenomenological design, a survey, and interviews using convenience sampling to primarily gather data from Warren Wilson College. The research uncovered five themes: (a) increased feelings of isolation, (b) decreased engagement and support, (c) academic struggles, (d) connection to family, and (e) stress over the July 2020 ICE regulations. To best support international students at Warren Wilson College, the research recommends intentional in-person connection and support. Furthermore, the research recommends that Warren Wilson College hire additional diverse mental health counselors with intercultural training to better support the international student population. The findings of this research add to the limited research on the international student experience during the COVID-19 pandemic. The results can be broadly helpful for those supporting international students who wish to understand their experience better and have an increased idea of what support their students may need. As an international student advisor in North Carolina, the results of this research have already informed how I support my own students through any mental health concerns.

## Introduction

Over the last two years, the world has been through massive changes as policies aimed at curbing the spread of COVID-19 have been implemented. For students at any level, the transition to virtual learning and back to in-person instruction has been filled with a myriad of emotional responses (DOE, 2021). While international students and their domestic counterparts battled similar concerns during the COVID-19 pandemic, the experiences of international students throughout the pandemic has had added complications. For international students, the pandemic brought increased issues related to emergency housing, visas, racism (especially toward students from Asian countries or of Asian descent) and concern for family and friends far away (Kim, 2021).

Increased research on the pandemic and its effects has emerged since March 2020. There is a considerable amount of research on virtual learning and the effects of the pandemic on students in general, but there is limited research on the effects of COVID-19 on international students in higher education in the United States. While the current research is valuable and can help guide educators as face-to-face instruction becomes standard again, international students have specific needs and challenges that in the current research are often not evaluated or understood. Not only are international student perspectives rarer in the current research, but international student experiences also often focus on what makes being international challenging instead of focusing on services and support for international students.

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought mental health to the forefront of student services in higher education across the country. Educators are grappling with how to support students as research is published describing the alarmingly high rates of mental health concerns among kindergarten through higher education students. International students in higher education have

unique mental health experiences that result in some differing responses to the COVID-19 pandemic (Kim, 2021).

At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020, when colleges and universities around the United States sent students home, international students remained on campus or were forced to find temporary housing off campus. For these students, traveling to their home countries was unrealistic because of soaring airfare costs and ever-changing travel restrictions. The international student experience throughout the pandemic, and particularly how their mental health has been impacted, is an important aspect of understanding the effects of the pandemic on higher education.

The global pandemic has changed the face of education both in the world and in the mountains of North Carolina. As the international student adviser at Warren Wilson College (WWC), I am constantly communicating with and supporting international students as they navigate the new frontier of college in a pandemic. In response to what I observed regarding the experiences of my students, this project investigated the impact the COVID-19 pandemic has had on the mental health of international students. This research adds to the limited research on the intersections between mental health, international students, and the COVID-19 and pandemic and fills a gap in the current knowledge and understanding of the international student experience.

Conversations around mental health and college students are becoming increasingly more frequent – but more research is needed on mental health in international education and especially on how this affects international students. International students are far from home and many of them are from cultures that view “help” or “therapy” very differently than in the United States. For some students, their home culture may view mental health concerns as a form of weakness,

decreasing their willingness to even discuss their own experiences and feelings (Mori, 2000). This said, the question remains; how has COVID-19 affected the mental health of international students studying in North Carolina? This question is especially pertinent right now as students continue to face challenges related to the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **Literature Review**

Research on international student mental health is primarily from before the COVID-19 pandemic. The overall literature is divided between three topics: first; increased mental health concerns among primary, secondary, and tertiary education in the United States for all students since COVID-19 regulations first came into effect in March of 2020, and second; mental health concerns among international students in the United States, mostly at the tertiary level from before the pandemic. Finally, a small pocket of research has begun to uncover the international student experience during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Center for Disease Control (CDC) defines mental health as, “our emotional, psychological, and social well-being. It affects how we think, feel, and act. It also helps determine how we handle stress, relate to others, and make healthy choices” (Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services, 2021, p. 4). For this project, the term “international student” refers to any student studying in the United States on a non-immigrant student visa.

### **Increased Mental Health Concerns Among Students**

In the fall of 2021, the U.S. Department of Education used new educational research to provide guidance for schools across the country as teachers and support staff worked to create some semblance of normalcy. Newspapers, social media, and academic journals continue to highlight concerning trends in student mental health across primary, secondary, and tertiary education (NPR, 2021). Parents, teachers, and school administrators alike are grappling with

these trends and working to adjust support for students. The line between mental and physical health is complicated as research contends that in-person instruction is preferential in some ways while virtual learning is still necessary in others. Over the Omicron variant's surge in the United States in the winter of 2022, school systems all over the country were forced to re-evaluate loosening pandemic protocols. Some colleges and universities in North Carolina took caution at the beginning of the spring 2022 semester and opted to begin the semester virtually with the plan to return to in-person instruction as case numbers began to decrease. For educators, the pandemic is an omnipresent aspect of teaching and for students it is an omnipresent aspect of learning. The pandemic, while historically still new, is no longer a new part of education.

By mid-October 2021, discussions about the severity of the mental health crisis among American students of all ages were prevalent in news articles and on social media. The American Academy of Pediatrics argued that “This worsening crisis in child and adolescent mental health is inextricably tied to the stress brought on by COVID-19” (Shivaram, 2021). On October 12<sup>th</sup>, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill took a wellness day in observation of World Mental Health Day (2021). The University's Chancellor posted a message on the University website stating:

We are in the middle of a mental health crisis, both on our campus and across our nation, and we are aware that college-aged students carry an increased risk of suicide. This crisis has directly impacted members of our community – especially with the passing of two students on campus in the past month. As chancellor, a professor and a parent, my heart breaks for all those whose suffering goes unnoticed. (UNC, 2021)

The concern for student wellbeing is paramount and the understanding amongst doctors, parents, and teachers is that students in the United States, across primary, secondary, and tertiary education, are struggling in response to COVID-19.

Elmer, Mepham, and Stadtfeld (2020) proposed that the pandemic had negative effects on mental health for college students in Switzerland. They noted, “Exploratory analysis suggests that COVID-19 specific worries, isolation in social networks, lack of integration and emotional support, and physical isolation were associated with negative mental health trajectories” (Elmer, Mepham, & Stadtfeld, 2020, p. 1). Swiss research results are echoed in Wattick, Hagedon, and Olfert (2021) who linked increased levels of depression and anxiety in college students in the Appalachia region of the United States during the pandemic. While the experiences of college students in Switzerland may not be identical to the experiences of college students in the United States, the themes of isolation and concerns about health and safety appear to be common threads.

U.S. Education Secretary Cardona spoke about the fall 2021 Department of Education findings concerning how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected student mental health. The research found that prior to the pandemic 13 to 22 percent of students experienced mental health issues. At the time the Department of Education research was published, 80 percent of students indicated that they experienced some type of mental health issue. The vast majority of students indicated higher levels of depression and anxiety than their pre-pandemic peers (NPR, 2021). Cardona further described concerns that professionals working in schools do not have the training necessary to support students struggling with mental health issues. He argued, “what we need in this country is innovative practices that connect not only our K-12 institutions but our higher ed institutions to make sure that we're preparing the workforce that we need in our

schools” (NPR, 2021). Teachers and administrators need proper training to support any student struggling with mental health issues, especially in a time when many students are so clearly struggling.

Department of Education research highlights seven key challenges facing students with corresponding solutions and guidelines. The number one challenge they found is rising mental health concerns. The guidance begins by noting, “the mental health crisis for children and youth in the United States has reached a critical point. The pandemic has exacerbated already alarming trends in mental health” (Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services, 2021, p. 3). The research finds that “nearly 50% of college students experience moderate (23.8%) to severe (24%) psychological distress” (p. 9). Psychological distress is linked to feelings of social isolation, concerns for the welfare of loved ones and self, and in some cases mental health support. The pandemic has had a clear negative effect on the mental health of students on at least two continents.

### **International Students and Mental Health**

Research on the intersections of the COVID-19 pandemic, education, and mental health fills current educational conferences and morning headlines. The surge of research shows the affects the pandemic has had on students and teachers and parents; how test scores are down, how parents have trouble keeping up with online learning, how teachers are exhausted, and how students are struggling (NPR, 2021; Koo, 2021; Koo, Yao, & Gong, 2021). However, amongst all this research, there is little research that focuses on how the pandemic has affected international student mental health at the tertiary level.

International students accounted for 5.5 percent of higher education enrollment in the United States during the 2019 to 2020 academic year (Open Doors, 2022). Research on the

international student experience has gained prevalence over the years, however, international student mental health is one of the aspects of the international student experience that requires additional focus and research.

Studying away from their home culture, international students studying in the United States face the additional aspects of acculturation that can make the experience more difficult than their domestic peers and lead to increased potential for mental health concerns. Koo and Nyunt (2020) argue, “Overall, international students are more likely to report higher levels of stress and depression, lower levels of psychological well-being, and a lower quality of life compared to their domestic peers” (p. 44). Research indicates a few common themes that affect international student mental health differently than their domestic peers.

### ***Common Themes to International Student Mental Health***

The most common themes affecting international student mental health include language, academics, culture, and acculturation.

**Language.** Language is the most common theme affecting international student mental health (Williams, Case, & Roberts, 2018; Prieto-Welch, 2015; Koo & Nyunt, 2020; Mori, 2020). Most international students studying in the United States do not speak English at home. For these students, language is a constant stressor (Williams, Case, & Roberts, 2018) which affects all aspects of their experience both in and out of the classroom. Not only do these students have the added pressure of learning and living in their non-native language, but they also tend not to have access to mental health support in their native language (Mori, 2000). International students are working within a new culture and a new language where all the cultural and linguistic assumptions of that culture and language may be unfamiliar, hindering the support counselors or advisers can provide (Kim, Oh, & Mumbauer, 2019).

**Academics.** Academics is a common theme that affects the mental health of both domestic and international students. For international students, familial pressure to succeed and visa regulations related to academic progress have added impacts on stress (Mori, 2000). In the summer of 2020, the Trump administration changed temporary immigration regulations around virtual learning (Redden, 2020). The changes required international students to return to full-time in-person instruction or face violating their visa status. While that specific ruling was quickly overturned, the requirement created a significant amount of stress and confusion in an already stressful and confusing time.

Many international students are new to the American educational system (Prieto-Welch, 2015) and are not familiar with common aspects of upper-level courses which can often include much more student participation than upper-level courses in educational systems elsewhere. The participatory nature of many classes can be stressful both from an academic perspective and from a linguistic perspective.

**Culture.** Differences in cultural assumptions or taboos around mental health play a key role in how international students talk about, seek help, and deal with mental health concerns (Williams, Case, & Roberts, 2018; Mori, 2000). Cultural differences can hinder an international student from realizing that counseling services are available, make them feel less comfortable talking to a counselor, and even have concerns around the confidentiality of what they share.

Some international students, especially male students from high-context countries, which are cultures that are less direct and more communal (Tirmizi, 2008), come from cultures that have stigmas around mental health issues. These stigmas often correlate mental health concerns with weakness resulting in many students repressing any concerns (Kim, Oh, & Mumbauer, 2019). Williams, Case, & Roberts (2018) note, “research indicates that international students are

less likely to use counseling services than their domestic counterparts” (p.19). If international students are less likely to utilize the services available to them, they are not receiving the same support as domestic students even if the support is available.

**Acculturation.** According to Prieto-Welch (2015) students from cultures that are most like the United States have an easier time assimilating to U.S. dominant culture. However, the most effective way to ward off culture-related isolation is to either interact with more Americans and adhere to American culture as closely as possible, or to remain deeply connected to their home culture.

International student mental health concerns relate to the important cultural and practical differences between their experience and the average domestic students’ experience. In a time when isolation and loneliness are negatively affecting the mental health of domestic students, it is crucial to understand the international student experience (Prieto-Welch, 2015). For administrators and teachers who work with international students, supporting and understanding their needs and experiences is crucial.

The literature (Prieto-Welch, 2015; Williams, Case, & Roberts, 2018; Mori, 2000; Kim, Oh, & Mumbauer, 2019) discusses multiple reasons why and how international students may struggle with mental health and offers suggestions for how to support them. In some cases, international students are not provided the necessary mental health support they need, exacerbating underlying mental health concerns. Koo (2020) argues that “conducting appropriate and culturally sensitive assessments is critical to understanding international students’ mental health” (p. 51). Without research that digs deeper into the international student experience, mental health concerns will continue to be viewed through the same culturally limited lens. Instead, institutions and individuals who work with international students can, and should,

continue efforts to have better culturally informed mental health support by working to understand their mental health more accurately.

### **The International Student Pandemic Experience**

The current research on how the COVID-19 pandemic has, and is, affecting international student mental health is limited. However, those few researchers who have begun to explore the international student experience through the pandemic have found common themes including racism toward international students, future career and visa concerns, and pandemic-related mental health concerns.

Racism, predominantly against Asian students throughout the pandemic greatly affected international students' experiences. New crime statistics from New York City and San Francisco, report much higher anti-Asian hate crimes since the beginning of the pandemic (Yam, 2021, Timsit, 2022). Anti-Asian hate crimes rose by 361 percent in New York City while in San Francisco anti-Asian hate crimes rose at a staggering 567 percent. These statistics are representative of a general anti-Asian racist attitude in the United States since the beginning of the pandemic.

In a 2021 study, American researchers Koo, Yao, and Gong found that most of their participants were eager to leave the United States at the beginning of the pandemic because of their concerns over racist remarks and the threat of racially motivated violence. Participants in that study agreed that "they felt relieved when campus closures and stay-at-home orders were announced and implemented in March 2020, believing that this would prevent physical threats and verbal incidents related to racism and discrimination against international students on campus" (Koo, Yao, & Gong, 2021, p. 8). Even as students endured the difficulty of quarantine

and stay at home orders, the very real threat of racist acts resulted in a more nuanced and complicated reaction to isolation.

However, even for students for whom isolation was a partial relief, the reality of the pandemic carried additional worry. Koo (2021) noted that international students on temporary educational visas were unclear if the pandemic would make it difficult to renew their visas or maintain legal visa status in the United States. The lack of clarity around visa issues and racist comments from classmates resulted in many international students feeling both unwelcome in the United States and unsupported.

Not only were international students concerned about the validity of their visas, but they were also concerned with how likely they were to be able to get a job post-graduation. Koo (2021) notes, “One of international students’ biggest concerns related to COVID-19 that impacted their well-being and mental distress was the limited job market in the United States” (p. 8). As the United States job market stalled at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, international students were concerned that they would not be able to compete for the limited jobs available.

As students faced racism, visa complications, and a limited job market, they also faced the isolation and loneliness of physical distancing, virtual learning, and stay at home orders that were affecting their domestic peers. Koo (2021) found that most international students “reported that loneliness due to limited social interaction and social support was one of the most negative impacts on their mental health during COVID-19” (p. 7). The continuation of virtual learning through the spring and summer of 2020 and for some students through the spring 2022 semester has had a hugely negative affect on their mental health. Usual support systems of friends,

professors, and international student advisers all became virtual and for many students those virtual means of support were not enough to stem the loneliness.

**ICE Regulations.** A major concern for many international students at the beginning of the pandemic was linked to visa guidance and flexibility (Koo, 2021). On March 12<sup>th</sup>, 2020, the Student and Exchange Visitor Program (SEVP), a program within the United States Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) which provides student visas, broadcast a message to their users. The message contained brief updates on F-1 student visa regulations due to COVID-19. Before the broadcast message in March 2020, F-1 student visa holders could only take a few credits of online coursework per semester, so students and administrators alike were anxiously awaiting updates to the policy. The broadcast message said:

SEVP is committed to remaining flexible in allowing schools to make temporary procedural adaptations so nonimmigrant students can continue to make normal forward progress in their program of study. They can temporarily engage in distance-learning, either from within the U.S. or outside the country, in light of COVID-19. SEVP will provide updated guidance as the scope and length of this situation becomes more clear. (NAFSA, 2020)

The guidance was welcomed by students and supporting faculty and administrators because it allowed international students on F-1 visas to transition to online learning without risking their visa status. However, SEVP noted, “This temporary provision is only in effect for the duration of the emergency” (ICE, 2020). The temporary nature of the policy was an opening for new restrictive policies to be implemented by the Trump administration in July of 2020, claiming that the emergency was over, which automatically reversed the March 2020 policy. The reversal of the March 2020 policy meant that international students would no longer be allowed

to take a full course load of virtual classes and remain in the United States legally. The guidance did not include any flexibility for students who attended institutions that planned to reopen in the fall for online only education.

These rapid, confusing, and complicated messages from SEVP added additional stress to international students who were already struggling with isolation, potential time differences, and the Internet troubles of online learning (Koo, 2021; Jordan & Hartocollis, 2020). After multiple universities sued the Trump administration over the July 2020 SEVP guidance and successfully reversed the policy, international students were able to remain in the United States and continue their learning no matter how their institutions chose to offer instruction in the fall semester (Jordan & Hartocollis, 2020). Since the Trump administration rescinded the July 2020 SEVP guidance, the original March 2020 policy has remained in effect. International students can physically reside in the United States while taking up to a full course load online. As of May 2022, there is no indication that the flexibility of online instruction will change. The confusing and stressful changes in visa regulations were just an additional stressor for international students.

While more research is starting to be published on the international student experience during the COVID-19 pandemic, there are still a lot of unknowns. This research aims to utilize the knowledge from previous research on mental health, the COVID-19 pandemic, and international students to further understand the international student experience now and during the pandemic.

## Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework within which this research is situated in is Schlossberg's (1981) transition theory and Stanford's (1966) challenge and support theory. These two theories together provide a framework to understand the effects of change on mental health.

Transition theory (Schlossberg, 1981) states that transitions in life, whether good or bad, expected or unexpected, result in an emotional response. Schlossberg (2011) notes that in times of change, a person's sense of self can be muddled because defining aspects of their identity have changed. Over the course of the pandemic, the lives of students changed dramatically. The changes that all college students in the United States experienced were exacerbated for international students by the additional challenges of being unable to travel to their home countries or families, and in many cases, having nowhere to go when campuses closed. For international students, some aspects of identity shifted during the pandemic as many students transitioned from very social lives to isolation. Transition theory can serve as a lens through which to understand some of the emotional responses to change and situates the effects of the pandemic on international students as a response to a transition.

In the case of this research, the transition is particularly complicated because the pandemic is not over. Even more than two years after the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic schools in the United States are continuing to make changes to the format of their education (i.e., in-person, online, or hybrid) without a clear end in sight. Transition theory offers some helpful explanations to understand the emotional reaction to a transition. However, the theory does not offer clarity on the emotional reaction within a never-ending transition. Transition theory is broadly helpful to explain the transition from the "normal" before the pandemic to the ever-changing uncertainty now.

The theory of challenge and support states that “students need an optimal balance of challenge and support for development to occur” (Jones & Abes, 2017, p. 145). Stanford (1967) posits that students require a balance between challenge and support for maximum growth. Throughout the pandemic, international students have faced increasing challenges while support changed when international student advisers began to work from home. The pandemic increased challenges for students while at the same time limited the ability for international student advisers to offer the same kind of support in their new virtual roles.

In the case of this research, challenge and support theory offers a lens through which to understand how the support offered to international students affected their own response to the challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic. Because the pandemic continues to effect the way that international student and scholars service offices (ISSS) can provide support, the theory can help to uncover what kind of support students need. That said, challenge and support theory is not a perfect example of support needed in trying times. As many ISSS offices have seen a decrease in funding and staffing, the level of support needed has grown, creating an unequal need for support and an additional challenge of providing it well (Redden, 2020). Challenge and support theory alongside transition theory creates a framework to understand the international student experience during the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **Research Design**

The research question for this project, how COVID-19 has affected the mental health of international students studying in North Carolina, was explored with qualitative phenomenological approaches with some quantitative approaches as well. Phenomenological design seeks to, “explore, describe, and analyze the meaning of individual lived experience” through how participants may remember, judge, feel, or even talk about the experience with

others (Marshall & Rossman, 2016, p. 17). Because this research was designed around the current events of the COVID-19 pandemic, phenomenological approaches were well suited to uncover the individual lived experiences of the participants.

Phenomenological approaches analyze qualitative findings through the assumption that there is an essence to the phenomenon that is shared by participants. In the case of this study, the COVID-19 pandemic was the common phenomenon that each of the participants experienced and are still experiencing.

## **Participant and Sampling Methods**

### ***Participant population***

The seven total participants were international students at two institutions of higher education in North Carolina including Warren Wilson College (WWC) in Asheville, North Carolina. Pseudonyms were used for each participant.

### ***Sampling methods***

Convenience sampling was chosen because of the connections the researcher had as the international student adviser at WWC, and as a professional in international education in North Carolina. An email invitation was sent out to international students at WWC to complete the survey and gather interview interest. To include students at other colleges, an email was sent out to the North Carolina international education listserv (NCAIE) to ask international student advisers if they would be willing to send out the survey to their students. Additionally, a targeted email to the researcher's connections at four different international offices in North Carolina was sent out directly to encourage colleagues to share the survey with their students.

Interview participants were chosen from the survey respondents who indicated interest in being interviewed. Interviewees were chosen with convenience sampling as well because of

limited responses. A total of seven students completed surveys (see Appendix A for survey questions). Of those respondents, three indicated they would be willing to be interviewed and two scheduled an interview upon follow-up (see Appendix B for interview questions).

### **Credibility**

For credibility member checking, collaboration, and peer debriefing were implemented. Member checking was utilized during and following the interviews to ensure that the researcher understood the meaning of what the interviewee stated. After transcribing the interviews, these transcriptions were sent to participants for further member-checking.

### **Ethics and Researcher Positionality**

#### *Ethics*

As an employee of WWC interviewing my own students about their mental health, it was crucial that this study had some separation from the institution for confidentiality. Thus, all data collection took place on servers that are not affiliated with WWC and WWC students were made aware that they were under no obligation to participate because of my position. However, because of my position at WWC, any WWC student who chose to participate was reminded that I am a Title IX mandatory reporter and should they disclose anything related to Title IX, I could not uphold confidentiality. For any participant, any suicidal ideation or intent to harm others was also an exception to confidentiality.

Because of the sensitive nature of the research, participants received copies of the interview questions prior to their interview and could at any time ask to stop the interview or skip a question. Before beginning the interview, the participants were reminded that they could skip a question or stop at any time. They were also reminded that the research is focused on a

sensitive topic and talking about how the COVID-19 pandemic affected their mental health may bring up difficult emotions.

### ***Researcher positionality***

As an international student adviser to most of the participant pool, I am familiar with certain aspects of their mental health and overall response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Because of this I needed to be careful to focus on the results of the research and not on my prior knowledge. To do this, the questions for the survey and interview remained the same for each participant. Any additional questions in the interview were to clarify a response or simply to ask a participant to expand on their response and were not individualized.

Because there is a power dynamic between me and the international students at WWC, students were made aware that they were in no way required to participate in the research and their decision to participate or not was confidential and would not change our professional relationship. If a participant chose to skip a question or stop the interview or survey, neither their visa status nor their relationship with me or their international student advisor were impacted.

### **Limitations**

The main limitation for the study was the limited response rate. Seven total survey responses and two interviews was far from the initial goal of 15 to 20 survey responses and 7 to 10 interviews. Of the responses, six of the surveys and the two interviews were from Warren Wilson College. Because of the limited number of responses, and most of the responses from WWC, this research has limited scope. Additionally, because most participants were students at WWC, WWC's response to the pandemic, virtual learning options, and general support provided played a larger role in the results than initially planned.

Another important limitation of the study was the subjective and personal nature of mental health. Because mental health is so personal and can be difficult to discuss, it was possible that fewer potential participants completed the survey or indicated that they wanted to be interviewed. It was also possible that those who self-selected to be interviewed felt more comfortable talking about their mental health, felt more comfortable with me, or have had stronger mental health reactions to the COVID-19 pandemic. It was also possible that my position as a mandatory Title IX reporter may have made some students feel that they could not share their experience in this context or those who have had a particularly difficult time during the COVID-19 pandemic simply did not feel comfortable sharing their experience in any context. These aspects of the subjective and personal nature of mental health may have been compounded because of the higher number of participants from WWC.

### **Findings**

c. The themes discussed here reflect commonalities between the participants. However, each participant also discussed topics that are wholly unique to their experience exposing the truly individual nature of mental health. The themes uncovered as they relate to the research question, how COVID-19 has affected the mental health of international students studying in North Carolina, are as follows:

- Isolation
- Lack of engagement in community
- Impact on academics
- Connection to home
- ICE regulations

## Presentation of Data

A total of seven international students in North Carolina responded to the survey. Two of the survey respondents participated in follow-up interviews. Participants were from one public university and one private university in North Carolina. Since completing survey questions was not required, some participants chose not to respond to certain questions. However, participants who responded to the survey question, “where is home for you” listed these places as home: Brazil, Burundi, Nepal, Turkey, and Zimbabwe (two). Of the seven responses, 100 percent indicated that they transitioned to online only or hybrid learning at some point during the pandemic.

*Table 1: Participants*

Pseudonym	Home Country
Tomás	Brazil
Teddy	Zimbabwe
Myra	Zimbabwe
Aisha	Turkey
Thierry	Burundi
Mahima	Nepal

## Isolation

Six participants indicated that the COVID-19 pandemic caused them to feel isolated. For these students, the isolation resulted from the reduction of in-person interactions because of online only or hybrid learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Teddy, from Zimbabwe noted in both the interview and echoed in the survey, “The isolation was really hard” (personal

communication, April 7, 2022). Teddy went on to describe that he used to be outgoing and extroverted. Prior to the pandemic Teddy liked meeting new people and was excited to create community at his new university. However, because of the pandemic and the transition to online learning, the isolation made that difficult. As one of the few students still living on campus, Teddy was even more isolated in the rural location of his university.

Teddy explained how the isolation of the pandemic was not just hard at the time, but has changed who he is:

Well before that [the pandemic] the idea of being isolated was unknown. It affected me and it changed me to become someone who I wasn't before. Like just like what I told you I used to be someone who likes to interact with people, but because of staying for almost a year or so in isolation alone, just interacting with [people on the] Internet, it changed me a little bit and I'm not feeling comfortable with that [being with people] which is something I wasn't uncomfortable with before. (personal communication, April 7, 2022)

Teddy's experience of isolation resulted in him becoming more introverted and less enthusiastic about socialization. Because Teddy first began his studies in North Carolina in 2019, his experience of isolation during the pandemic has encompassed most of his education.

Myra, who began her studies in the United States in 2018 from Zimbabwe, noted that while staying in on-campus housing was not bad "the isolation made the experience worse." Teddy and Myra were among the few students remaining in on-campus housing after their universities moved to online only education. With faculty and staff working from home, campuses were especially quiet.

Aisha from Turkey noted that the pandemic affected her social life in similar ways. “I became more asocial. I used to go out with a couple of friends but covid stopped it.” Teddy added:

The pandemic affected me mentally because usually I’m a social person and during [the] pandemic I had time to just sit back and it [sic] reflect on my life but it also affected me a lot because I was in my head most of the time and didn’t have anyone to talk to. (personal communication, April 7, 2022)

The isolation of the pandemic resulted in many students indicating that it negatively affected their social life. Teddy continued, “the pandemic affected my social life a lot. It brought depression, stress, and anxiety in my life [more] than ever.” For Teddy, the isolation and lack of social life meant an increase in mental health concerns.

For Tomás, a student from Brazil, the social media platforms that he was already using to communicate with friends and family was a convenient way to stay in touch with everyone during periods of physical isolation. Tomás noted that his “social life was not bad with discord and other apps that I could use to talk to friends and family!” Tomás continued:

Like since we have Internet these days everything is so easy, you know? So like me and my friends would set up like meetings on discord, like with our faces. So [that] was a lot of fun. (personal communication, April 1, 2022)

Even though Tomás was able to use digital platforms to mitigate feelings of isolation and stay connected to his friends and family, he still noted, “communication with friends and family was a little bit tough” (personal communication, April 1, 2022).

Each participant mentioned the isolation of the pandemic no matter how it felt to them personally. For these students the isolation was a catalyst for increased stress and depression.

Isolation meant a lack of social life and a lack of communal support for them. However, for Tomás, the isolation did not lead to less social life and instead was an opportunity to engage with his community through digital means even if it was not perfect.

### **Engagement and Support**

Through the isolation of the pandemic, engagement and support were essential. In March of 2020 when many universities closed their doors to in-person instruction, international students were left with a difficult decision: should they travel home or stay in the United States? For some students, the option to travel home was impossible and for others the ability to stay was tenuous. One of the universities represented in the research offered some form of emergency housing to on-campus students who could not leave and did not have another place to go. Of the participants in this study, three lived in on-campus housing prior to March of 2020 and two of them were able to remain in on-campus housing while the third noted that they had to move off campus. Three participants lived off campus already.

The theme of engagement and support was prevalent in the two interviews and by two of the survey respondents. For Teddy, Tomás, and Myra engagement was different and at times difficult. Nonetheless, they all felt supported by their institutions and their communities. However, for Aisha, the lack of engagement and support influenced her feelings of isolation.

Tomás had the unique experience of studying abroad at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic and was not enrolled at his U.S. university in March of 2020. He described the university abroad and the culture abroad as supportive and concerned for his health and safety. “They were always wearing masks and stuff, which made me feel way more safe” (personal communication, April 1, 2022). For Tomás, the fact that his host university abroad was culturally

concerned about health and safety made him feel supported and allowed him to be more engaged in the community.

Tomás noted that the time difference between his host country, home country, and North Carolina made feeling engaged difficult at first. Even though his host university abroad had a lock-down in March of 2020 for a month, he was still able to find community, noting that “I made some friends there and things were a little bit easier” (personal communication, April 1, 2022). Making new connections and being able to do so in a supportive and safe environment allowed Tomás to find in-person engagement and support.

Unlike Tomás, Teddy was at his university in North Carolina for the entirety of the COVID-19 pandemic. Teddy found that through lack of in-person social engagement, his personality changed. “I’m now a completely different person when it comes to whether you are an outgoing person or not” (personal communication, April 7, 2022). Teddy went on to say:

I can now read and study for two hours but after that I can just go into my room inside to watch a movie. Even when some other people might invite me to some party, like some gathering, I’m having this social anxiety like trying to push them back, trying to isolate myself from others. I wasn’t like this before the pandemic. (personal communication, April 7, 2022)

Through the isolation of the pandemic, Teddy became more introverted. Even now that socializing in-person is normalized on his home campus again, Teddy prefers to spend most of his time alone.

Because of this personality shift, Teddy has been working with a therapist to combat depression and anxiety brought on by the pandemic. One goal Teddy has is engaging with people more. “I set myself a goal where I, each and every day almost, I try my best at having dinner or

lunch with someone I don't know” (personal communication, April 7, 2022). Teddy has been able to meet new people to engage with in the cafeteria but still feels inclined towards solitude during his free time.

Teddy has found support through his campus by engaging with new people and leaning on the people he trusts. Teddy argued:

To be honest, I learned that I am a people person. In the sense that I need people. That is the one thing I learned like I cannot do things without the help of the people. That is the big lesson I learned. When I was isolated, things were a little bit hard, but when I tried to find out the ways of again of connecting with other people, things changed. So, I learned that I need people. People should be always besides me. (personal communication, April 7, 2022).

Teddy went on to say, “People are my greatest strength. It is the powerful weapon I can have in my life” (personal communication, April 7, 2022).

Myra, an undergraduate student from Zimbabwe, mostly felt supported by her university but noted in the survey several times that there just was not much community on campus when courses were online. Specifically, she explained that there was, “less engagement outside of the classroom.” Myra went on to indicate that classroom engagement was limited too but made it clear that the real lack of engagement was outside the classroom in the campus community. The minimal engagement in community resulted in feelings of loneliness and isolation for Myra and made it difficult for her to make friends.

Unfortunately, not everyone was able to find support within their communities. In the survey, Aisha noted, “My school did not supported [sic] us at all. They never cared about us.” Aisha went on to explain:

I do not get paid during the summer, so I generally go back home to save money. I was not able to go to [sic] home for summer 2020 and I have a very hard time paying my rent and food. My school did not support us.

Aisha continued by explaining that her university, “has been doing terrible about supporting International Grad Students. They were careless about us. This made me hate my school and leave.” The lack of support or thoughtful engagement resulted in Aisha choosing to leave her university. She admitted in the survey that the way the university treated her, “made my mental health worse.”

Good support and engagement with community made aspects of the pandemic better for Teddy and Tomás. They were able to work through more difficult times because they had the support of their institutions, advisors, friends, and family. For Aisha, and in some cases for Myra, the lack of support and engagement resulted in worse mental health and isolation. For Aisha this culminated in a decision to leave her school. In the case of these four participants, extra support was necessary and good in part because the challenge of the pandemic was so great.

### **Academic Success**

Academic success is a crucial aspect of the student experience. For international students, academic success can be tied, through visa or scholarship requirements, to their ability to remain enrolled in their college or university in the United States. Over the course of the pandemic, students had to adjust to new learning styles with very little time to acclimate.

Of the participants, five of the seven participants (71 percent) indicated that their grades suffered because of the pandemic. The other two participants, or 29 percent, did not mention their grades or academics during the survey or interview. The 71 percent that did highlight their

grades and academic repercussions focused on the sudden transition to online learning that required them to learn new technological skills along with their coursework and the general reality of falling grades since March of 2020.

Tomás noted in the survey that, “My GPA has dropped” since the beginning of the pandemic. He explained in the interview that it was the online format combined with the general isolation and lack of scheduled time that influenced his grades. Tomás continued, “I just want to be in my classroom. It sucks to have online stuff” (personal communication, April 1, 2022).

Mahima, an undergraduate student from Nepal, noted that the transition to online learning was difficult because it was an “adjustment to a new learning method.” For these five students, the adjustment to online learning was less than easy.

Thierry from Burundi also faced the difficulties of online learning. In the survey he said, “my academic performance has gotten [sic] down.” Thierry found the transition to online learning compounded by the isolation and lack of engagement he experienced throughout the pandemic. For him, the isolation and lack of in-person engagement outside of the classroom made it especially difficult to feel focused for online learning. Myra added that the most notable part of her pandemic experience was the “frustrating lack of practical hands-on classroom experience.” Thierry and Myra had trouble adjusting to the new format for learning – not just because it was online, but more so because of the level of engagement which made it not accessible in the same way.

In the survey, Teddy summed up the experience of transitioning to online learning well by combining several factors:

The transition was kind [of] shocking and hard. Besides that, it demanded a lot of self-driven attitude towards school. To makes things worse I was not familiar with computers, so it took a lot of energy for me to catch up with the class.

Transitioning to online learning was not the only aspect of the change in academics that resulted in lower grades or a steeper learning curve. The use of technology, lack of engagement in the classroom, and general isolation brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic were all factors for these students.

### **Connection to Home**

Even for students who were far away from home, the connection to their family and community in their home country was a profound aspect of the pandemic. For three participants, the realities of the COVID-19 pandemic brought family and friends to the forefront of their focus. Their connection to loved ones far away influenced how safe or isolated they felt. Of these three participants, two have not been able to visit home since they originally arrived in the United States prior to the pandemic. Tomás was able to see his family during the pandemic and completed a virtual semester from his home country. For him, the connection to family and home filled him with gratitude.

Tomás began his interview by noting how privileged he feels he is. He was able to see his family and home country during the pandemic and never felt out of touch with his loved ones. More so, he felt lucky that his family had not suffered greatly. He spoke with relief, “Luckily none of my friends or my family passed away, so for me that’s a huge win” (personal communication, April 1, 2022).

However, Tomás' sense of appreciation was not shared by Thierry and Teddy. Thierry found that the isolation of the pandemic gave him too much time to sit alone and hyper fixate on his family and home. In the survey he remembered:

Even problems that were going on at home affected me still even though I'm not even there anymore. I kinda shut myself off from everyone because I couldn't talk to my family about what was going on here and I couldn't talk to my friends about what was going on at home so it was hard to manage especially when I didn't have anyone to talk to who would understand.

Thierry was, and is, caught between his world at home in Burundi and his world at his university in North Carolina. His reality, identity, and experience in both places were and are different and therefore he was the only one who could bridge that divide. Thierry's unique circumstances added to feelings of isolation and complicated his connection to home.

When asked what emotions come up for Teddy when he thinks about the pandemic, he was quick to respond:

The most simple one is fear. Fear in the sense that first of all it was a pandemic, it was the something that was affecting the whole world so I was thinking about my country like thinking that there is no good health system. So I was afraid, like if my parents or if my relatives got this disease, are they going to survive? That was the fear, I guess, like being afraid of my family not being able to get what they need if they got the pandemic.

(personal communication, April 7, 2022)

Teddy continued by explaining his relationship with his family and how it has been hard to live so far away from them. The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the distance between him and his

relatives. It also threw into harsh reality the increased access to medical care and vaccinations in North Carolina compared to the lack of access his family was familiar with in Zimbabwe.

Tomás' understanding of his privilege during the pandemic is powerful. He shared in the interview:

I feel that I'm in a place of privilege during the pandemic, because I know that a lot of people couldn't work, and because they couldn't work, they were like going through very tough life situations, you know, but through my privilege and where I was just thinking about myself and not others. I thought it was not that bad. I stayed in touch with friends and family. (personal communication, April 1, 2022)

The pandemic made these three participants think of home and family and friends. For Tomás it brought him the realization that he had so much privilege even in a difficult time. For Teddy and Thierry, the complicated realities of home and their relationships with family and friends at home brought additional fear and complication to their experience of the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **ICE Regulations**

Two participants directly mentioned the Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) regulations in the summer of the 2020 that caused significant concern throughout U.S. schools (Jordan & Hartocollis, 2020). As noted previously, these regulations restricted international students' ability to take online classes for international students. For international students, the restrictions were concerning. International students at universities that only had online course options would no longer be able to maintain their visa status in the United States and would have to leave the country.

Mahima directly noted the regulations when asked in the survey how the COVID-19 pandemic had affected her. “Stress over ICE changing policies for international students during the starting [sic] of the covid pandemic.” Teddy went into more detail explaining:

There was a time where it was suggested that if an international student was taking all their classes online, you should go home so that one was really tricky for me, because if I were to go home, it means I will not be able to continue my education. It’s because we do not have strong Internet at home. (personal communication, April 7, 2022)

The temporary decision to restrict online course options for international students brought fear and complication to Mahima and impossibility to Teddy. Teddy continued:

I was afraid when those kind of decisions were starting to be made. So I was like, how is it going to be tomorrow? Am I going to be still here? Am I going to be able to continue my education? So I was kind of afraid of that too. (personal communication, April 7, 2022)

The ICE restrictive regulations were promptly overturned and by the beginning of the fall 2020 semester the March 2020 guidance allowing online learning was in place again. Since then, the March 2020 guidance has continued. However, for Mahima and Teddy just one week of uncertainty brought so much fear that it stayed with them nearly two years later.

### **Conclusions**

This research and its findings join a limited but growing body of research on the international student experience through the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings have demonstrated that the COVID-19 pandemic affected international student mental health in North Carolina in five common ways. First, the pandemic increased feelings of isolation for the participants. Second, the participants felt that there was a decrease in engagement and support

because of virtual learning. Third, participants found that their grades and academic focus suffered during the pandemic. Fourth, during the COVID-19 pandemic, participants found that they focused on their family and friends in their home country, particularly on their health and safety. And fifth, the ICE regulations in the spring and summer of 2020 brought considerable stress to several participants.

### **Discussion of Findings**

Research on mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic tends to focus on the rates at which various mental health issues are rising, how support for mental health is needed, and how there is not a clear end in sight. Issues like isolation, concern for family and home, academic struggles, and less engagement and support are prevalent in research on mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic. (Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services, 2021). Research on international students tells a similar tale by pinpointing all the ways that the international students experiences at U.S. schools are more difficult than for U.S. citizens. However, while it is true that international students face different and increased barriers during their time as students in the United States, it is also true that international students struggled through the COVID-19 pandemic with their American counterparts. In general, this research mirrors previous research on international student mental health during the pandemic (Koo, Yao, & Gong, 2021; Koo, 2021). The international student experience is clearly differentiated by the concern over ICE regulations and an increased concern for family and friends. Given these parallels, the findings match pre-research assumptions.

Schlossberg's (1981) transition theory and Stanford's (1967) challenge and support theory broadly offered lenses through which to analyze this research. Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, and still today, international students at Warren Wilson College are experiencing

transitions. These students experienced multiple oscillating transitions such as the transition to online learning and virtual community and now the transition back to in-person learning and in-person community. Both changes resulted, in part, in international students reevaluating themselves. Tomás realized that the extra time in his day because of virtual learning was beneficial to his overall mental health while Teddy learned that the transition to virtual learning changed who he was by making him more introverted. For each of them, the transition to isolation and virtual learning and then back to community and in-person learning was difficult and complicated especially given that the COVID-19 pandemic is not over, and additional transitions could be likely in the future.

Transition theory offers a lens through which to view the complications of change and on-going transitions. As the participants navigated the transitions of the COVID-19 pandemic, they required additional support in a time in which support could be hard to come by. For many international students at Warren Wilson College, and especially noticeable for those who remained in on-campus housing, the level of in-person support was minimal. Through all the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, this research and its findings have shown that in-person support is crucial and necessary perhaps especially when it is least accessible.

### ***Individualized Experiences***

While these five conclusions reflect the similarities between participants, one of the most notable findings was the individualized nature of the responses. Each participant, whether a survey respondent or an interviewee, spoke about personal experiences through the pandemic that were not shared by any of the other participants. While this may be in part because of the small number of participants, it speaks to the individualized nature of mental health. For Tomás, the pandemic allowed him to have more time to focus on exactly what he wanted to focus on. He

mentioned in the interview that he really valued the extra time he had to himself because of isolation but also because he no longer had any commute to school. He felt that his privilege, in large part because of the health of his family and friends, allowed him to feel safe enjoying certain aspects of the pandemic like the extra time he had to just slow down. Tomás' ability to turn isolation into a positive was unique to his experience.

### ***Limited Response Rate***

While these findings offer insights into the lived experiences of international students in North Carolina during the COVID-19 pandemic, the findings are also limited. Initially, this study was intended to include approximately 15 survey responses and 7 to 10 interviews. However, while the results do not have the scope initially intended, the results still add to the research on international student mental health during the pandemic.

### **Practical Applicability**

This research adds to the limited research on the international student experience during the COVID-19 pandemic. These findings provide a starting point for learning about international students anywhere and for those who provide support to those students. As an international student advisor in North Carolina, I personally work with and support the international students at my institution every day. This support can range from helping with visa paperwork or reminding students about summer housing options on campus to sitting and talking with a student through something difficult. In my own experience, the COVID-19 pandemic changed the way I offered support because I was working from the safety of my dining room table. Instead of meeting in person with students and focusing on programming with large groups of students, I met with students virtually and planned smaller outdoor gatherings. More notably, because I was no longer in my office or on campus, I did not see students as they went about

their daily routines nor was I accessible for a quick drop-in. Because of this, I knew less about my students and built fewer familiar relationships.

For me and for Warren Wilson College, this research is important because it sheds a light on the experience of our international students through the COVID-19 pandemic and can help us understand how to best support them. As previously stated, the importance of in-person support is highlighted in the findings. For students at WWC, the lack of in-person support either from international student advisors, professors, or other areas of support on campus resulted in feelings of isolation, poor grades, and a lack of engagement in the community. While in-person support has returned at WWC, it is important for the staff and faculty who support international students to understand how isolating the COVID-19 pandemic was and to continue to promote and plan in-person meetings, check-ins, and programming.

Additionally, Warren Wilson College should consider hiring more mental health counselors trained in intercultural counseling to accurately be prepared to support international students. Because of the difficulties throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, increased support in the aftermath is increasingly important.

International students at WWC are still struggling with anxiety around visa issues, concern for family far away, and fear that their world could be so dramatically changed once again. International students, whenever they are comfortable, should utilize the services and support offered to them by their universities including mental health support. Teddy mentioned in the interview that mental health support is not a common or accepted part of his home culture, however he found that working with a campus therapist through the pandemic allowed him to feel supported and to work through his emotions around the COVID-19 pandemic. Counselors who specialize in intercultural counseling can add to the support systems already in place to help

guide students through difficult transitions including the transition back to in-person education. Additionally, whenever possible, institutions should work to hire diverse counselors who can share various and differing identities with the student population. For international students, bilingual support is incredibly helpful and often necessary.

To other international student advisors and their institutions, this research may help explain the experience of some students during the COVID-19 pandemic and perhaps offer some guidance to them. Through these findings, the power of in-person connection and support is clear. Considering possible broader implications of the research; international student advisors, institutions of higher education in North Carolina, and the organizations that work with, and support, international students may benefit from the findings of this research.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

This research is just a beginning to the amount of scholarship needed on international students, the COVID-19 pandemic, and mental health. To fully understand the issues that are unique to international students, and to learn how to properly support them, there is additional research needed.

The current research on international student mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic just scratches the surface of the realities of their experiences and does very little to learn what support is supportive and what students need from their support systems. Future research on this topic should focus on both the general experience of students, and on the support they felt they needed and the support that was most effective during these difficult times.

In the future, research on support during challenging times would benefit both the participants and other students and allow those who support them to learn how best to offer that support. This research did not have the scope to include international student advisors as

participants. In future research, including advisors and others who support international students will offer interesting background and perspective on the support that was offered along with their students' reaction to that support.

Without research that digs deeper into the international student experience and their support systems, mental health concerns will continue to be viewed through a culturally limited lens that does not include the realities of the COVID-19 pandemic. Future research needs to continue to analyze the international student experience especially as it pertains to mental health support so that it can offer recommendations for updated culturally informed mental health support.

As the COVID-19 pandemic fades into an ever-present background, the realities of virtual learning may fade from students' memories. However, there is an incredible amount of knowledge that can help inform and prepare international student support systems for how to offer the best support in the future.

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## Appendix

### Appendix A: Survey Questions

1. Did you transition to online learning during the pandemic?  
Yes/No  
Please explain the transition to hybrid/online learning.
2. Did you live on campus?  
Yes/No  
Did you remain in on-campus housing if your institution moved to online only?  
If yes, what was your experience like?  
If no, where did you go?
3. How has the pandemic affected you?
4. When did you last travel to your home country?
5. Is there anything else about your experience with the pandemic that you'd like to share?
6. What type of institution did you attend?  
Public/Private/community college
7. When did you first attend school in the United States?
8. Did you attend more than one college or university in the United States?
9. Did you attend high school in the United States?
10. Where is home to you?
11. Where is your passport from?

## Appendix B: Interview Questions

1. How would you describe how the pandemic has affected your life?
2. When you think about the pandemic, what emotions come up?
  - a. What do those emotions mean to you?
3. What are some changes to your life, if any, since March 2020?
4. What was your mental health like before the pandemic? (For example, did you often feel stressed or anxious? Or did you usually feel happy and content?)
  - a. What was your mental health like during the pandemic? (For example, did you feel more stressed or happier than before?)
  - b. What is your mental health like now? (For example, are you about the same as during the pandemic? Or are you more stressed or more content?)
5. Based on how things were before the pandemic, how do you feel things are now?
  - a. Would you like things to be how they were before the pandemic?
  - b. What would it take for things to feel how they did before the pandemic?
6. What restrictions are in place, if any, at your institution due to COVID-19?
  - a. How have those restrictions affected your life?
  - b. What do you think about the restrictions?
7. Have you learned anything about yourself during the pandemic? If so, what have you learned?
8. What does mental health awareness mean to you? What does it mean in your home culture?
  - a. In your home culture, are there ways to express stress that are different from what you have experienced here in the US? If so, please explain them.
  - b. In your home culture, are there ways to deal with stress that are different from what you have experienced here in the US? If so, please explain them.
9. Is there anything else about your experience that you would like to share?