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Student Accessibility and
Educational Opportunity
Student Affairs

SAEO Student COVID-19 Survey Summary

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Note: The author requests that the information contained in this summary not be shared in any public forum without express permission. For additional information, please contact Ian Kunkes (ibkunkes@vcu.edu)

Overview – At the close of the spring 2020 semester, the Student Accessibility and Educational Opportunity (SAEO) office at Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) administered a survey to all students who utilized accommodations during the 2019/20 academic year to collect information about their experience transitioning to remote/virtual learning following the COVID-19 outbreak. The survey was developed with six focal areas in mind: 1) changing accommodation needs; 2) accessing academic support services online; 3) faculty support; 4) barriers to online courses; 5) receiving approved accommodations, and 6) potential unexpected benefit of online learning.

1,250 students were invited to participate in the survey. 119 students responded, resulting in a 10% response rate. Below is a summary of the survey results and some broad recommendations.

It is important to emphasize that this survey was designed and administered to capture the student experience during the first semester of the COVID-19 pandemic. Additional efforts are now underway to conduct a follow-up which would capture a more comprehensive picture of the experience throughout the pandemic.

Summary of Key Findings

1) Changing Accommodation Needs - 41.2% of the respondents felt their needs for accommodations had changed due to the shift online. Three specific areas of concern emerged from students' comments:

- Need for increased exam time due to distracting home environments
- Greater flexibility with assignments due to difficulty managing workloads and deadlines
- Increased opportunities for asynchronous learning due to an inability to use a computer for prolonged periods

Many of the nearly 60% of students who did not feel their accommodation needs had changed reported that they required increased assistance implementing their previously approved accommodations in this new learning environment.



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2) Faculty Support – 78% of the survey respondents felt they were able to effectively work with their instructors to ensure their needs were met, whether through implementing accommodations or making informal arrangements. However, 22% indicated this was a struggle. Common areas of concern included:

- Instructors not being responsive to outreach
- Instructors not providing approved accommodations
- Instructors not allowing sufficient time for testing accommodations.

3) Barriers to Online Course – Students were asked to identify specific aspects of their online course where they have experienced barriers. The following reflects the percentage of students who reported experiencing difficulties in each respective area:

- Accessing course materials (22%)
- Synchronous instruction and discussion (18%)
- Taking quizzes and exams (14%)
- Asynchronous lectures and recorded material (13%)
- Discussion boards (12%),

Reasons shared from students' comments mostly fell into two categories: internet issues and inconsistency in both the format of courses and approach to instruction.

4) Receiving Approved Accommodations – The majority of the students (84%) reported no issues with working out their approved accommodation virtually. Of the 16% who indicated having issues, the challenges were mostly relating to accommodations for testing.

5) Benefits of Virtual/Remote Learning – This was one of the most surprising outcomes. Over 50% of respondents indicated that the transition to virtual/remote courses had unexpected benefits to their learning. Three specific themes emerged in students' responses:

- Ability to learn in a reduced distraction environment
- Increased flexibility for students to access courses at optimal times
- Reduced overall stress



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Action Items/Recommendations

Increase Faculty Training – One of the themes that consistently emerged in students’ responses was frustrations with select faculty whom they felt neglected accommodations and/or did not factor accessibility into the re-design of their course. This was also reported to SAEO staff throughout the final month of the spring semester. An increased focus on both the requirement and practicality of implementing accommodations will be necessary. Additionally, SAEO will offer additional sessions of the “Creating an Accessible Virtual Classroom” workshop and create additional training opportunities, as appropriate.

Increased Flexibility with Course Design/Requirements – Lack of flexibility with course requirements and expectations was the area students cited as their biggest barrier to success. Conversely, when flexibility was offered, it served as one of the most significant benefits to their student success. As we plan for summer and fall offerings, proactively and intentionally building flexibility into course design and requirements such as attendance, deadlines, and assignment types could help facilitate improved student participation and success. Both SAEO and the ALT Lab offer training on Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles, which may be beneficial for instructors.

Additional hybrid/online offerings – Half of the students surveyed reported finding unexpected benefits to hybrid classes or virtual/remote learning. Many felt the increased flexibility and independence was fostering a greater level of success and making it so they no longer required accommodations to participate. While formal data on outcomes is not available at this time, it was clear that this was an optimal setting for many students. Increased availability of courses in various modalities should be emphasized moving forward.