

Will US college students' lives be forever transformed by COVID-19?

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A team of researchers at Columbia University Vagelos College of Physicians and Surgeons and New York State Psychiatric Institute have embarked on the largest, most comprehensive longitudinal study of how U.S. college students are being impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic—and how they are seizing the moment to redefine their futures.

The study will reach thousands of institutions ranging from [community colleges](#) to major research universities and is one of the largest representative samples of college students ever attempted, with the potential to include millions of students.

The investigators will examine how COVID-19 has impacted students' and families' lives across multiple domains including health, finances, and housing and will ask about how students' immediate and long-term plans have changed. The researchers also seek to understand how these life changes may be affecting students' [mental health](#), substance use, and decision-making.

"Our research team views these students, not as victims of COVID-19, but as proactive change agents of higher education and broader society who are playing a transformative role in the country's reconfiguration following the pandemic," says Larkin McReynolds, Ph.D., MPH, assistant professor of psychiatry at Columbia's Vagelos College of Physicians and Surgeons (VP&S) and one of the study's principal investigators. "We believe that, ultimately, society will recognize these students, based on their responses to the pandemic, as the next Greatest Generation."

Two unique aspects of the study are the evaluation of students' decision-making styles and their values orientation, using sophisticated measures of these domains. This study aims to identify the decision-making styles that are most predictive of effective and successful outcomes, both individually and societally.

The researchers plan to follow these students into their futures and to examine the evolution of their perspectives, behaviors, and innovative responses to the emerging post-COVID-19 world. They hope that the knowledge gained from this study will significantly inform academic, institutional, and public policy.

The Pandemic Puts Colleges, Undergraduates in a Unique Position

COVID-19 has impacted all sectors of society and most aspects of individuals' lives, with unfortunate disparities along economic and racial lines. Roughly 15 million undergraduate students had their lives turned upside down last spring. Students continue to live in suspended uncertainty regarding their immediate personal, educational (including visa status), and economic (including loans and scholarship) plans.

"From the perspective of college students, COVID-19 has caught them at a most pivotal

moment in their personal, interpersonal, educational, and pre-professional development," says Christina Hoven, DrPH, MPH, professor of epidemiology and psychiatry at Columbia and a principal investigator of the study. "For most, it has disrupted the well-worn and expected trajectories from adolescence to adulthood, from dependence to social responsibility and leadership. Therefore, it is critically important to understand the impact and consequences of the pandemic on U.S. college students, because the pandemic's impacts will not only affect the students personally but the future of our nation."

McReynolds has studied substance use and mental health in justice-involved youth for decades. As an educator, she became concerned that even her most well-prepared graduate students were hitting personal and academic road bumps as a result of the pandemic. "I realized that if my master's students were having trouble focusing because of the pandemic, imagine what might be going on with the much larger and younger undergraduate [student](#) population. I am concerned that for some the long-term impact on their studies, careers, and lives could be substantial. And that does not bode well for our country and its future," says McReynolds, who is also an assistant professor of epidemiology at Columbia University Mailman School of Public Health and New York State Psychiatric Institute.

"Society has empowered colleges and universities to not only educate our youth but to serve as locus parentis," McReynolds adds. "These institutions are, in part, responsible for facilitating the final phase of student development into adulthood, ushering the next generation through this transformative milestone. They are entrusted with the responsibility of providing the nation with a well-educated and skilled workforce, as well as future leaders. Unfortunately, the current crisis has untethered students from these institutions. Almost every [college](#) and university in America is understandably struggling, without adequate information regarding their students' current lives, needs, and academic plans."

The current study will address those underappreciated and understudied issues.

Study to Explore How Agency and Decision Making Define Students' Futures

A hallmark of the COVID-19 pandemic is the overwhelming uncertainty it generates, and yet everyone must make decisions. This study will include an examination of students' decision-making style, tolerance for uncertainty, and values orientation. This data will be vital to understanding their current behaviors and how those decisions will impact colleges and society. In the long term, this data has the potential to paint a developmental picture of individual growth through adversity.

An examination of student decision-making will also deepen the understanding of their patterns of substance use and mental health. Lawrence Amsel MD, MPH, an assistant professor of psychiatry at VP&S and a principal investigator of this study, explains, "Over the last 30 years there has been an explosion of research on decision-making and its application to health and mental health. Not only do we have a better understanding of when people make good and bad decisions, but behavioral economics and behavioral medicine have developed ways of helping individuals make better decisions and are currently helping to present people with better decision architecture. This is an unprecedented opportunity to study how decision-making plays out in COVID-19, at such a crucial moment in students' lives and how some students in this generation are now creating our collective future, while others will need help."

Trauma and Resilience Among College Students

In the early months of the pandemic, recognizing this crisis within a crisis, McReynolds called on her colleagues in the Global Psychiatric Epidemiology Group at Columbia University and New York Psychiatric Institute to help her design and execute a study that would fill these knowledge gaps. The group, led by Hoven, has conducted seminal research with individuals directly exposed to 9/11 as children. Members of the group recently edited a book, "An International Perspective on Disasters and Children's Mental Health," and realized that much of this research viewed those exposed to disasters as victims, but neglected the longitudinal

possibilities for empowerment and how this may relate to health and resilience across the life course.

"As thoroughly as we studied children and adolescents exposed to 9/11, and in spite of having a large representative school sample, we were unable to longitudinally assess how that traumatic event affected the life-course choices and vocational trajectories of that generation," says Hoven. "This study provides an opportunity to obtain a baseline assessment and then to stay the course over time to fully understand the transformations that these young people will experience, decisions they make, and how the outcomes of these decisions will be reflected in their lives and in our society."

With the research team in place, McReynolds obtained unprecedented cooperation from key national higher education and student organizations, including the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AACU), the National Education Association, National Collegiate Athletic Association, and the Jed Foundation. The broad reach of cooperating organizations makes this study unique, providing the study with a range of potentially vulnerable groups such as international students and scholarship athletes. Early in the pandemic, the AACU agreed to encourage their ~1,100 member colleges, whose collective student bodies constitute approximately 60% of U.S. undergraduate students, to join the study and invite students to participate.

More information: The survey is titled, "National COVID-19 Higher Ed Student Impact Study."

Provided by Columbia University Irving Medical Center

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