



**Loneliness & College Students:
A Needs Assessment Regarding
Georgetown Student Experiences
in a Post-Virtual World**

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Abstract

The educational adjustments to the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g., distance learning and Zoom) have led to instances of loneliness and isolation among college students, especially at residential campuses such as Georgetown University. Such social disengagement can have a significant impact on a student's transition to campus and can have a lasting effect on the rest of their college life. This needs assessment (performed in the Spring of 2022) explores the impact of loneliness among students, including themes such as mental health issues, loss of campus engagement, and problems with relationship-building. Pre-pandemic data on the social experiences of high-risk populations on college campuses are included to highlight how the post-virtual environment may have exacerbated varying pre-existing levels of loneliness. This data provides background for the needs assessment of the post-virtual world, as the core focus of this paper is solely post-virtual education/post-pandemic student experiences. We hypothesized that student and faculty interviews conducted at Georgetown University, and scholarly analysis of literature, would indicate the need for improved social support in the college setting. Students reported a lack of connection and increased mental health challenges due to the virtual environment of education during the COVID-19 pandemic. From the research, we determined that an app to address student loneliness (Nod), opportunities to engage with faculty, spaces of well-being on campus, and quality and accessible mental health resources are recommended to combat student loneliness. The negative impacts of the pandemic are still affecting college students today. Thus, it is necessary to identify ways to mitigate increased loneliness and isolation.

Keywords: loneliness, college, COVID-19, virtual

1. Understanding and Describing Loneliness Among College Students

1.1 Scope of the Problem

Loneliness and social isolation describe a co-related phenomenon that was exacerbated by quarantine, isolation, and social distancing due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Loneliness is defined as a subjective experience where one feels alone. Social isolation refers to an objective condition where one's experiences are restricted by their social environments and interactions.¹ At

Georgetown University, like many other colleges across the nation, the public health crisis led to shifts in the learning and residential living environment. Classes at Georgetown remained virtual for both Fall 2020 and Spring 2021 semesters, with a limited number of students residing on campus and in neighboring communities.

According to the Student Mental Health Survey conducted by Active Minds (2020), student well-being was impacted by the pandemic with a significant amount of college students (34.46%)

stating that their mental health worsened and 77.76% reporting that they felt lonely or isolated overall; this result was statistically significant when compared to high school students (76.00%).² Although more recent studies on student loneliness that detail post-virtual attitudes are yet to be published, researchers theorize that loneliness will be a prevalent downstream effect of the pandemic in young people (ages 18-30 years).³ Brain development in the surveyed population is typically not fully complete; they experience “disenfranchised grief” regarding the loss of “normal life and experiences” from the pre-pandemic period.³ Based on pre-pandemic data, certain high risk populations, discussed next, are predicted to have experienced increased risk of student loneliness during pandemic-prompted virtual learning.

1.2 High Risk Populations

1.2.1 First Generation Low-Income (FGLI) Students

In The Belonging Study (2019), FGLI students at Georgetown reported feeling “inferior” and “not welcome on campus because they did not fit the Georgetown stereotype.”⁴ FGLI students face unique challenges both in fostering personal relationships and within academic settings. These challenges may intensify fears of non-belonging and lead to social isolation.⁵

1.2.2 Students of Underrepresented Racial Minorities

In the February 2020 Cultural Climate Survey, conducted before the instructional environment transitioned to the virtual space, levels of belongingness at Georgetown differed significantly by racial and ethnic group: 74.9% of White undergraduates stated that they felt like they belonged at Georgetown compared to 57.5% of Hispanic/Latino students and 47.0% of Black students.⁶ An external source found that underrepresented minority students reported a lower sense of belonging and were subject to higher levels of stigma and discrimination over the course of the

pandemic.⁷ While data has not since been collected on belonging at Georgetown, it is predicted that the differences from the 2020 survey would remain or worsen after virtual education.

1.2.3 LGBTQ+ Youth

LGBTQ+ students uniquely deal with establishing identity and navigating campus life during their time in college. Research shows that LGBTQ+ youth have higher levels of perceived loneliness related to expected rejection from peers and community members, as well as sexual stigmas.⁸

1.3 Related Issues

Loneliness is related to mental health issues, loss of (campus) engagement, and problems with relationship-building among college students. Alongside loneliness, 88.80% of college students in the 2020 Active Minds survey stated that they experience stress or anxiety. In another interview survey of college-aged students, pandemic-related mental health concerns such as increased stress and anxiety led to poor sleeping habits (86%), decreased social interactions (86%), and uncertainty about academic performance (82%).⁹ Loneliness creates cyclic effects, where well-being gradually decreases, and a person becomes more isolated.

1.4 Subjective Experiences & Key Stakeholder Perspectives

Focus groups are the chosen method of data collection in qualitative health research and allow for the exploration of group dynamics, as well as individual attitudes. Therefore, a focus group was conducted in 2022 to collect specific experiences from key Georgetown stakeholders.¹⁰ The focus group consisted of six students (sophomores, juniors, and seniors), one staff member/community director, and two members of the Georgetown undergraduate faculty.¹⁰ All of the undergraduate schools at the time were represented and the focus group was diverse in gender and race.¹⁰

Upper class students in the focus group agreed that they felt involved in campus life post-virtual education but had “0% of a connection” to Georgetown during the virtual year.¹¹ Disconnection may have been worse for students who did not live in D.C. or did not attend the Summer Hilltop Immersion Program (SHIP). Students in the focus group said that they “can’t imagine what it felt like to not have the opportunity to be here.”¹¹ Engagement, mental health, and relationship-building were reported to be negatively impacted by pandemic-related loneliness. A student reported, “My mental health was pretty bad because of how disconnected from everything I felt.”¹¹

Students in the focus group felt limited support from Georgetown University’s administration, as they were “impersonal” and “did not try to foster connection.”¹¹ Support from faculty was also reported to be inconsistent: “some are very understanding and some are so indifferent to student struggles.”¹¹ Students found it harder to build relationships and connect outside of academic settings. Professors had similar views to students on this problem. One professor stated, “mental health issues were incredibly exacerbated due to the stress at the height of the pandemic, which we are still experiencing.”¹¹ Another professor sensed the lack of community, especially among the class of 2024, and found it hard to connect with students over Zoom. A community director saw students’ isolation from other students and their families, and despite very intentional communication and check-ins, recognized that students were tired and lonely.¹¹

While leaders on campus tried to connect with students and create spaces for them to interact, there was a lack of infrastructure to actively meet the needs of students.¹¹ Students wished Georgetown had provided support groups and resources in the virtual environment.¹¹ Today, they wish professors and administration would talk more openly about mental health, be more flexible with virtual options, and seek more opportunities to connect through social events.¹¹ A junior stated

that COVID-19 had a “huge impact on mental health and the impacts are still there.”¹¹

1.5 Attitudes, Values, and Behaviors of the Community

To identify ways to mitigate increased social isolation caused by the pandemic, it is important to acknowledge pre-existing causes of these negative feelings. Stress culture and club culture were threats to student engagement before the transition to virtual education and remain threats after the transition back to in-person education. Georgetown is notorious for its workload and emphasis on stress culture.^{11,12} It is not uncommon to hear students talking about how late they stayed at the library or how little they have eaten so they could study.¹² These unhealthy decisions are typically spoken of as if they are feats to be proud of.¹² Georgetown University also hosts a unique campus environment compared to other colleges across the country due to the heightened presence of clubs. Student clubs at Georgetown have an intense application process. Many are pre-professional and include an interview process with a low acceptance rate.¹³ The issue with a dominant and competitive club culture is that these organizations direct most students’ social lives. Club culture enables the isolation of students from having social events to attend.^{11,14} The Georgetown Student Health Services website states the importance of forming new relationships to combat student loneliness.¹⁵ However, the intense club culture only amplifies the stress culture because some students lack social outlets. These harmful behaviors at Georgetown, mixed with the mental health struggles that have arisen from the COVID-19 pandemic, have resulted in increased medical leaves of absence, an issue that has also afflicted other institutions such as Dartmouth University and The University of Pennsylvania.¹⁶

2. Resources, Programs, and Policies Available in Georgetown to Address Loneliness

Georgetown has two resources to address loneliness and related struggles through Student Health Services: Counseling & Psychiatric

Services (CAPS) and HoyaWell. CAPS's goal is to help students "develop greater self-understanding, identify and solve problems, and improve academic performance through the alleviation of psychological, emotional, and cognitive barriers."¹⁷ CAPS provides free psychological and psychiatric services including triage, individual therapy, group therapy, psychiatry, workshops, outreach, and consultations. HoyaWell is a "24/7/365" free virtual mental health service for students. HoyaWell was implemented in January 2021 because many Georgetown students did not have access to CAPS, as they were not located in the DC area.¹⁸

In addition, Student Health Services' website lists the Center for Personal Development and the Campus Ministry as resources for Georgetown students that may experience "loneliness or homesickness."¹⁵ The "Mental Health, Wellness and Health Care Resources" page on Georgetown University's website lists paid resources: Teledoc, Open Path Collective, Ayana Therapy, and Talkspace. Tips include topics such as How to Cope in the Time of COVID-19, Student Guide to Zoom, and Student Checklist for Remote Learning.¹⁹ Student Health Insurance also partners with HealthiestYou to provide 24/7 telehealth services for mental health nationwide.

It is important to note that Georgetown University has programs focused on the high-risk populations previously discussed (First Generation Low-Income (FGLI) students, students of underrepresented racial minorities, and LGBTQ+ youth). However, the benefits of specific risk factor-related programs were not measured or focused on in this needs-assessment. Despite any potential positive impacts on students, there remained an overall feeling of loneliness and isolation by the general student body, as expressed by the focus group.¹¹

3. Gaps in Policy and Resources to Address Loneliness at Georgetown

There is a notion that colleges advocate for mental health awareness but do not build adequate infrastructure to meet the health needs of students empowered to seek out resources.²⁰ This gap exists on Georgetown University's campus.

Students cite week to month-long waitlists to receive support from CAPS.²¹ Students are also being referred to outside providers and therapists when demonstrating the need or desire for long-term mental health counseling.²¹ A survey by *The Georgetown Voice*, a student newspaper, found that due to these challenges, only 4.2 percent of respondents use CAPS services on a regular basis.²² The survey also discovered that 70% of respondents described their experiences with CAPS as unsatisfactory.²² Students believe "one of the most widespread sentiments about CAPS is that they're understaffed and overbooked, so students aren't able to access services when it's not a 'crisis' or sometimes even when it is one."²² The new service HoyaWell was also met with mixed to negative reception due to long delays, sessions being cut short, and an occasional inability to find a therapist through the program.²³ These issues pose not only economic barriers, but also place LGBTQ+ students and students of color at greater risk of not receiving mental health support.²¹ In addition, CAPS has halted previous services such as the CAPS Grief Support Group, leading to confusion and frustration among students.²⁴ One student who was frustrated over the end of this group stated, "Being a student at an elite university is difficult already, but combining that with processing grief without finding peers to talk to has made this even harder."²⁴ The student body has clearly voiced their concerns regarding the poor quality of mental health services, with activism arising from groups such as the Georgetown University Student Association (GUSA) and Black Survivors Coalition. There remains a need for improved quality of mental health services.²⁵

The Georgetown University community has also lost many of the traditions and programs that used to connect members from various groups on campus. For example, programs such as platED

(shared dinners between students and faculty/staff within on-campus residential spaces)²⁶ and Moveable Feast (meals to foster reflective conversations with students and faculty)²⁷ have been on pause since 2018 and 2020, respectively. These programs allowed students and faculty to engage in meaningful conversations around social justice topics or academic interests over social meals. Loss of such programs and virtual/hybrid class environments make it difficult for students to engage in face-to-face interactions with their peers and professors outside of class.¹¹

4. Programs, Strategies, Policies Implemented Previously to Address Loneliness

Loneliness resulting from virtual learning is not an issue exclusive to Georgetown. Georgetown can examine other campuses and associated research studies to find ways to effectively improve mental health and social engagement.

Nod is an app specifically developed to address the increased prevalence of loneliness amongst college students due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Hopelab, the researchers and developers of the app, conducted a study at the University of Oregon to assess Nod's efficacy and feasibility on a college campus. Nod provided great benefit to students that arrived on campus with elevated levels of loneliness and depression. The app protected against low social support and a reduced sense of belonging.²⁸

A study using data from the National Survey of Student Engagement found that providing high-impact practices to first-year students helped develop a stronger sense of institutional acceptance, especially for minorities. These high-impact practices included internships, learning communities, and undergraduate research. Such practices force students to work and interact with other students and faculty.²⁹

A Gallup poll found that increased faculty engagement was linked to a better student experience. However, the study also found that the faculty themselves needed to feel supported with

necessary resources to heighten their engagement.³⁰

5. Recommendations for the Georgetown University Community

To combat the impacts of virtual learning and subsequent loneliness among college students, several strategies may be implemented within the Georgetown community.

Faculty play a major role in improving the mental health and engagement of college students. As seen in a study that identified support systems for students at a baccalaureate nursing school in Southern California, significant instructor support was cited as a major factor in easing student anxiety over schoolwork. It was difficult for students to adapt to the rigor of college courses when transitioning from virtual to in-person classes. This results in high stress levels and a lowered ability to focus on engagements and extracurriculars outside of classes; stronger faculty-student relationships can tackle this issue.³¹ At Georgetown specifically, a revival of programs such as platED or Moveable Feast or the implementation of new but similar programs would provide students an opportunity to not only meet different faculty members, but also other students.

As previously mentioned, Nod is an app that provides college students the opportunity to build connections with fellow peers that may also have trouble building a social circle. To mitigate feelings of loneliness and isolation, Georgetown University should establish a partnership with the Nod platform and request a demo for undergraduates.

A study conducted at McMaster University demonstrated that activities such as listening to music or watching movies during lockdown had a significant positive impact on students' well-being. These activities showed benefits for participants' mental health.³² Movie screenings and music performances are excellent ways to immerse students in campus life. It is essential to have campus activities to combat loneliness and low

student engagement, but designated spaces for these activities must also be created.

Student interview responses inspire the recommendation for a non-academic, inclusive space at Georgetown University. Ideally, this space would mitigate feelings of isolation on Georgetown University's campus and foster community in an inviting and inclusive setting. This gathering spot would act as a comfortable setting that students could attend alone to socialize. To combat the club culture at Georgetown University, this would be a non-club/organization event space, to avoid domination by large groups of students. Comfortable seating, food and drink, calming music, and collaborative activities would be available to maximize student well-being. Spaces on campus, such as the basement of Healy Hall, have the potential to be transformed into such a space.¹¹

Lastly, university administration could improve the quality and accessibility of mental health resources. Data suggests that many students are not adequately supported by CAPS or HoyaWell.²¹⁻²⁵ Increased funding could solve the understaffed and overbooked problems of these resources and more successfully meet the needs of students. Funding for mental health services should be prioritized at the highest levels of decision making at Georgetown University. A cross-sectional study conducted found that students who employed positive emotional expression as a way of coping transitioned to virtual education more easily. In addition to increased funding and staffing, CAPS and HoyaWell could more effectively improve student mental health by employing effective promotion strategies geared towards coping with the effects of the pandemic.

6. Conclusion

On the college campus, distance learning has negatively impacted the social engagement of students. With a lack of recreational student spaces and poorly sustained mental health resources,

students struggle to navigate campus social life. Social connection is key to a general sense of well-being. Therefore, it is recommended that there is a re-implementation of student spaces curated for socializing, an application providing social support for those with elevated feelings of depression, improved mental health resources, and a greater emphasis on student-faculty relationships. The struggles of students at Georgetown rooted from virtual education are highly applicable across the country and the insights gained from this needs assessment could benefit other universities looking to better understanding the needs of their students. The long-term impacts of COVID-19 and the virtual learning environment are yet to fully be discovered, but the need to address the current negative social implications is critical.

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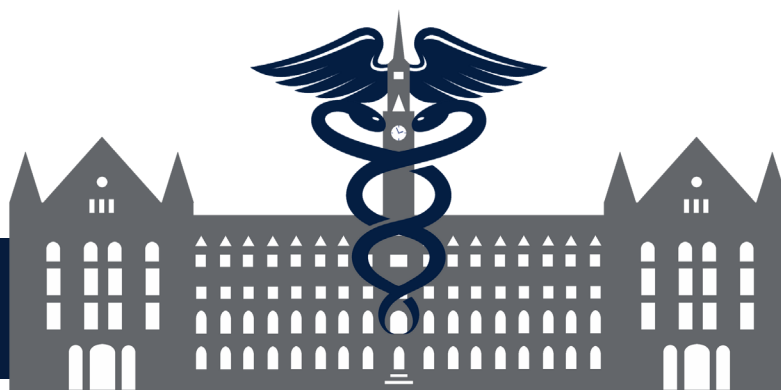
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