Responding to the COVID-19 crisis
Making a Change through your Stories
Interim brief 4: August 18-September 28, 2020
Representing your voices.

This interim brief is the fourth product in an effort to understand and improve the UGA College of Engineering’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic. To view previously published interim briefs, click here.

We would like to thank the students, staff, and faculty who contributed their stories to this study. In this report, we have worked hard to clearly represent your voices and do justice to the time you took to complete the survey and to the personal and emotional significance of your experiences.

In an effort to balance brevity with richness, this brief includes excerpts from 27 of the 71 stories submitted from August 18 to September 28. All of the stories that participants gave us permission to share are available here.

If you have any questions about this research, please email Dr. Nicola Sochacka sochacka@uga.edu.

This material is based on work supported by the National Science Foundation under grant 2028452. Any opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this material are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the National Science Foundation.
Executive summary

This interim brief describes how faculty, staff, and students in the College of Engineering at UGA are experiencing the COVID-19 pandemic. Below we highlight key findings and recommendations that emerged from quantitative and qualitative analyses of the data.

Key findings

- Seventy-one stories were collected at the beginning of the Fall semester from August 18 to September 28, 2020 (faculty = 30, staff = 10, undergraduate students = 30, graduate students = 1).

- Participants reported nearly three times as many negative stories (56%; extremely negative or negative) as positive stories (20%; extremely positive or positive). Twenty-four percent of participants’ stories were neutral.

- The majority of stories reported by both students and faculty were negative. This finding stands in contrast to the results from our investigations in the spring, where the majority of faculty stories were positive and the majority of undergraduate student stories were negative.

- The emotional tone of participants’ stories significantly correlated with participants’ perceptions of whether decision-makers are prioritizing economics or people. Specifically, stories about decision-makers prioritizing economics were more likely to be negative, while stories about decision-makers prioritizing people were more likely to be positive.

- A heatmap analysis revealed that, compared to investigations in the spring, there were more experiences of “struggle” in the college and perceptions that “people in positions of power are treating others with indifference and/or a lack of respect”.

- There was concerning evidence in the data of racism toward Asian/Asian Americans in the context of the larger public narrative around the pandemic’s origin in China.

Student experiences

- Student stories varied across the six-week data collection window. In the first five weeks, roughly equal numbers of participants expressed support for and opposition to the hybrid approach to teaching and learning.
  - Students who were supportive of the hybrid model expressed gratitude for the opportunity to “make new friends” and “find community” at UGA. They appreciated the efforts the college has taken to keep them safe and attributed face-to-face classes as helping them to “keep their sanity.”
○ Students who were not supportive of either the hybrid model or face-to-face activities reported feeling unsafe on campus and concerned that “the health of students is not getting taken seriously.” Some students described seeing people without masks, while others described having contracted COVID-19 and not getting the support they needed.

● In the last week of the six data-collection window, students were more uniformly frustrated with their learning experience. They expressed feeling unmotivated, confused about whether or not to come to class, and overwhelmed at having to learn in an asynchronous fashion. We note, however, that one student appreciated the self-paced approach to learning that the hybrid model affords.

● Students described how COVID-19 has impacted other aspects of their educational and professional experiences, such as career fairs, internships, and study abroad programs.

Faculty experiences

● Many faculty were highly critical of the decision to bring students back to campus, expressing concern for the health of the UGA and the greater Athens community.

● Other faculty discussed the benefits of face-to-face learning and described interactions they have had with students that confirm these benefits or strategies they are employing to facilitate the hybrid approach to teaching and learning.

Staff experiences

● Staff members expressed concerns for students’ mental health, particularly for first-year and transfer students who are not accustomed to college courses/life and have not yet developed strong social networks. Staff described their efforts to provide students with sufficient programming and resources to help them navigate these challenges.

● One staff member described students who are feeling shame if they test positive for COVID-19 because there is an emerging sentiment that students who test positive are not following appropriate protocols.

Recommendations

The overarching picture emerging from this study is diverse, with polarized views that include strong pushback to the uniform mandate for hybrid instruction. Evidence of an increasing sense of struggle and perceptions that decision-makers are not sufficiently taking into considering stakeholder needs and concerns may point to a developing breakdown of trust in our community.

Based on the above quantitative and qualitative analyses, we identify the following opportunity to address these concerning trends:
Explore a more flexible approach to decision-making that provides room for students, staff, and faculty to participate in evaluating risks and deciding how to most effectively and productively structure their activities.

In addition to this overarching opportunity, the following recommendations offer further ways to improve students, faculty, and staff experiences:

i. Acknowledge the massive effort it has taken for faculty and staff to prepare and implement hybrid and online activities

ii. Acknowledge the diverse experiences that are contributing to adverse student mental health outcomes, including:
   a. A sense of isolation due to taking classes online
   b. A sense of feeling unsafe on campus
   c. A sense of confusion and uncertainty that derives from receiving mixed messages about what is the “right” thing to do regarding class attendance

iii. Explore different ways to positively impact student mental health that are not necessarily bound to face-to-face teaching approaches

iv. Acknowledge and address the anti-Asian racism that has emerged during the COVID-19 pandemic

v. Clarify to students, staff, and faculty the legal ramifications of COVID-19 trainings and symptom reporting.

Finally, we offer the following list of suggestions that relate specifically to improving the hybrid teaching and learning experience:

vi. Provide more spaces on campus for students to participate in classes virtually

vii. Address difficulties associated with social distancing in instructional labs

viii. Provide more worked examples of engineering problems in pre-recorded videos

ix. Where possible in the hybrid model, keep attendance consistent, i.e., same students have the opportunity to come on the same days

We offer these findings and recommendations to the college to inform ongoing discussions and decision-making processes aimed at improving the experiences of students, staff, and faculty during these challenging times.

This interim brief was prepared by Nicola Sochacka and John Morelock. Aligned with the community-engaged spirit of the SenseMaker approach, critical feedback on various drafts of this report was provided by Racheida Lewis, Joachim Walther, Ben Fahrman, Beshoy Morkos, Andrew Jackson, Nathaniel Hunsu, Dominik May, John Brocato, Eliza Banu, Robert Baffour, and Stephan Durham (faculty); Christian Culloty, Jacob Hopkins, Devanshi Shah, Amy Brooks, and Victor Oje (undergraduate and graduate students).

Please direct any questions about this study or the methods used to Nicola Sochacka at sochacka@uga.edu.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Executive summary</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goals of this study</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methods</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional tone of the stories</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experiences of anti-Asian racism in the time of COVID-19</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceptions that decision-makers are prioritizing people over economics</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>An overall shift towards more struggle and relational difficulties with “people in positions of power”</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recommendations</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusions</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a dramatic impact on higher education in the United States and around the world. In an effort to balance pandemic-related risks with the benefits of face-to-face teaching, the University of Georgia has mandated a primarily hybrid, or Hyflex, instructional approach for the Fall 2020 and Spring 2021 semesters. In this model, students rotate between attending socially distanced, in-person classes and participating online through platforms such as Zoom. While a small number of classes at UGA are offered fully online, the University System of Georgia (USG) has and continues to emphasize the importance of maintaining face-to-face interactions between faculty and students (see also the USG resolution released on October 13, 2020).

Thus far, the impacts of this approach on documented COVID-19 infection rates at UGA have been mixed. Despite efforts to stem the spread of the virus through social distancing, testing, and personal protective equipment, as of October 13, 2020, UGA had more documented positive COVID-19 cases than any other university in the United States, making it imperative to study how the pandemic has impacted different groups within the university. That said, reported infection rates have dramatically decreased over the past four weeks.¹

The findings presented in this brief describe how faculty, staff, and students in the College of Engineering at UGA are experiencing this particularly challenging period of time, with a focus on the first 6 weeks of the Fall semester from August 18 to September 28, 2020.

Goals of this study

The three goals of this study are as follows:

1. Explore how students, staff, and faculty in the College of Engineering (CENGR) at UGA are experiencing the evolving COVID-19 crisis
2. Identify opportunities to amplify positive experiences and dampen negative experiences
3. Engage the CENGR community in a conversation around the findings from this research

¹ UGA saw the highest number of COVID-19 cases in Week 4 of the Fall semester (8/31-9/6: 1,490 cases). Case counts for Weeks 4 to 7 decreased to 446 (9/7-13), 170 (9/14-20), 65 (9/21-27), and 65 (9/28-10/4), respectively. More information of these counts is available here.
Methods

Data for this brief were collected using the SenseMaker approach. SenseMaker is designed to gain insight into social systems, in our case the College of Engineering at the University of Georgia. More information on the SenseMaker approach is available [here](#).

Invitations to participate in the study were emailed to all undergraduate and graduate students, faculty, and staff in our college. The study was also advertised on the College of Engineering’s various social media platforms including Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. Students were further notified of the study through two student-led GroupMe accounts.

Seventy-one stories were collected from August 18 to September 28, 2020 (faculty = 30, staff = 10, undergraduate students = 30, graduate students = 1). Faculty had the highest response rate (33%) and undergraduate students had the lowest (1%). The response rate for staff was 26% and for graduate students was 2%.

The qualitative data for this study comprise these 71 stories and their titles, which were both written by the participants. After sharing their stories, participants answered a series of questions about their experiences, such as how they felt about their experience on a scale of extremely negative to extremely positive. Participants’ responses to these questions comprise the quantitative data for the study. A summary of the survey is available [here](#).

We conducted a series of qualitative and quantitative analyses to explore patterns in the dataset. Of note, we found that there were no statistically significant differences between student, staff, and faculty responses.

We present insights from these quantitative and qualitative analyses in the following four sections, which describe the following:

1. **The emotional tone of the stories.** In particular, we examine variation in the types of experiences students, staff, and faculty identified as positive or negative.
2. **How the COVID-19 pandemic has led to increased racism toward Asian and Asian American members of our community.**
3. **How perceptions of what decision-makers are prioritizing are impacting student, staff, and faculty experiences.**
4. **A shift in the fall to more experiences of struggle and perceptions of being treated with indifference and/or a lack of respect by those in positions of power.**

---

2 Size of groups in the College of Engineering at UGA: Faculty = 90; Staff = 38; Graduate students = 47; and Undergraduate students = 2,415.
3 We note that participants were not restricted from submitting multiple stories and so these response rates are approximate.
4 We received one response from one graduate student.
Emotional tone of the stories

In response to the question, “How do you feel about your story?,” participants reported nearly three times as many negative stories as positive stories (56% extremely negative or negative; 20% extremely positive or positive). Twenty-four percent of participants described their stories as neutral.

The majority of stories reported by undergraduate students and faculty were negative (see Table 1). Undergraduate students reported a higher proportion of negative stories (63%) than faculty (53%). Staff stories were evenly split between neutral (40%) and negative (40%; the remaining 20% were positive). We only received one story from a graduate student. This story was negative.

These findings stand in contrast to the results from our investigations in the spring, where the majority of faculty stories were positive and the majority of undergraduate student stories were negative. It is important to note that, due to the timing of this data collection (i.e., the first six weeks of classes), responses may have been influenced by the ramp up to hybrid teaching and learning approaches.

Table 1. Number of stories reported as positive, neutral, or negative
*One person equals two stories.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Students</th>
<th>Staff</th>
<th>Faculty</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Extremely Positive</td>
<td>![Image]</td>
<td>![Image]</td>
<td>![Image]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>![Image]</td>
<td>![Image]</td>
<td>![Image]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>![Image]</td>
<td>![Image]</td>
<td>![Image]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>![Image]</td>
<td>![Image]</td>
<td>![Image]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extremely Negative</td>
<td>![Image]</td>
<td>![Image]</td>
<td>![Image]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

There was some variation in the types of experiences students, staff, and faculty identified as positive, neutral, or negative. For example, while some students reported feeling scared when they attended face-to-face classes, others wished that more of their classes were offered in the hybrid format — students coded both of these types of stories as negative.
To examine this complexity in the data, we conducted two basic thematic analyses of participants’ stories. In the first analysis, we qualitatively coded all stories (from students, staff, and faculty) into one of the following six categories:

1. Support hybrid model because of confidence in measures taken or concern for students’ mental health
2. Support hybrid model because of confidence in instructional quality
3. Oppose hybrid model because of health concerns and/or doubts that measures taken are effective
4. Oppose hybrid model because of instructional quality concerns
5. Mixed: Stories coded as “mixed” expressed support and opposition to the hybrid model
6. Neutral: These stories did not express a view on the hybrid approach

The results of this analysis are summarized in Figure 1 and detailed in Table 2.

Figure 1. Overview of results from a qualitative analysis of participant support for or opposition to the hybrid teaching model.
Table 2. Coding counts that provide an overall picture of opposition to or support for the hybrid teaching model.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Totals</th>
<th>Students</th>
<th>Staff</th>
<th>Faculty</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Supp. health concerns</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supp. instruct. quality</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opp. health concerns</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opp. instruct. quality</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixed</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The coding counts summarized in Figure 1 and detailed in Table 2 suggest that almost equal numbers of students who responded to the survey were supportive or expressed concerns regarding the hybrid model. We note that students expressed stronger feelings for or against the hybrid model at the beginning of the semester and more mixed feelings in the last week of the 6-week survey window (week 6 of the semester).

Staff also conveyed mixed views on the hybrid model with a slight preference for the hybrid model based on student mental health concerns. In contrast, faculty were most concerned about the potential health impacts of the hybrid model on our college community and on the broader Athens community. We note that the stories we coded as neutral mostly spoke to non-instructional experiences, such as changes to staff positions that have resulted from moving many day-to-day activities online.

In response to feedback from colleagues on the presentation of the above findings, we compared the findings from our first thematic qualitative analysis to participants’ own evaluations of their stories as positive, neutral, or negative (see Figure 2). We found that more positive stories were associated with support of the hybrid model and more negative stories were associated with questioning the safety and/or effectiveness of the hybrid model (see Figure 2).
Figure 2. Results from the qualitative analysis of community support for or opposition to the hybrid teaching model against participants’ own evaluation of their experiences as positive, neutral or negative.

We ask readers to refrain from extrapolating the distributions in Figures 1 and 2 and Table 2 to all students, staff, and faculty in our college. In our view, the value of these findings lies in, first, how they show the different types of experiences our students, staff, and faculty are having and, second, how these findings suggest that we cannot claim or presume that most students are in favor of or against the hybrid model.

In the second thematic analysis, we sought to identify the breadth of experiences and concerns that led students, staff, and faculty to identify their stories as positive or negative. For example, we coded the story on the next page that is entitled “Lack of Masks” as i) “Concern that some students are choosing to ignore safety protocols and gather in large groups or not wear masks around others,” ii) “Perception that UGA is not doing enough to enforce safety protocols and punish offenders,” and iii) “Fear of contracting COVID-19.”

See pg. 7 for survey response rates.
Example student experience (extremely negative)

Lack of Masks (participants provided the titles for their stories)

“I went to get surveillance tested today to ensure that I'm not an asymptomatic carrier, and I saw about 1 in every 10 students wasn't wearing a mask. I'm worried that when in-person classes start, professors won't ask mask-less students to leave the class, and I'll sacrifice my health for the sake of my education.”

Codes:
- Concern that some students are choosing to ignore safety protocols and gather in large groups or not wear masks around others
- Perception that UGA is not doing enough to enforce safety protocols and punish offenders
- Fear of contracting COVID-19

Table 3 presents the results of this analysis for experiences that participants coded as positive or negative.

Table 3. Breadth of experiences and concerns that led students, staff, and faculty to identify their stories as positive or negative.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Positive</th>
<th>Negative</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Students</strong></td>
<td><strong>Fear of contracting COVID-19</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Safety protocols improve public health &amp; safety on campus</td>
<td>• Don't feel safe on campus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Most peers following safety protocols on campus</td>
<td>• Fear of unknown health consequences of COVID-19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Opportunities to interact with people and attend class in-person are important to the undergraduate experience</td>
<td>• Have been infected with COVID-19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Face-to-face learning is important for mental health</td>
<td>• Lack of support for infected students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Stronger connections with hybrid instructors and students compared to online classes</td>
<td>• Concern that some students are choosing to ignore safety protocols and gather in large groups or not wear masks around others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Better grades in hybrid classes</td>
<td>• Concern that student behavior in Greek Life and off-campus poses the greatest risk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Perception that UGA is not doing enough to enforce safety protocols and punish offenders</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Hybrid experience is “underwhelming”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Implementation of hybrid and online activities (classes, career fairs) has not been smooth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Trying to keep up with hybrid rotation schedules across classes is complicated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Differing messages from faculty about whether or not choosing to attend fully online is okay</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Better ability to self-regulate with online learning</strong></td>
<td><strong>Difficulty learning in “flipped” setting without instructors working through problems</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Restrictions on social gatherings provide a chance to reconnect with home-based hobbies</strong></td>
<td><strong>Fewer opportunities for socialization take a toll on mental health</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Frustration that some instructors do not answer emails</strong></td>
<td><strong>Difficulties social distancing in labs</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Fewer opportunities for socialization take a toll on mental health</strong></td>
<td><strong>Lack of motivation for large, online classes</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Zoom fatigue</strong></td>
<td><strong>Concern about the cost of predominantly online learning</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Concerns that student health was not taken seriously in UGA’s decision-making</strong></td>
<td><strong>Questions about the effectiveness of UGA and USG mandates</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Concern about legal ramifications of COVID-19 training modules</strong></td>
<td><strong>Complications with housing contracts</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Uncertainty around if or when students will be “sent home” again like in Spring</strong></td>
<td><strong>Frustration around changes to study abroad plans</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Reduced opportunities for internships and other résumé-boosters</strong></td>
<td><strong>Racism toward Asians/Asian-Americans is more prevalent due to public discourse around COVID-19</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| **Nice to be able to still interact with people in-person** | **Hybrid learning offers a return to normalcy after the Spring** |
| **More time to spend with family** | **Happy the university did not force online learning** |
| **Chance to slow down and improve self-care practices** | **Students prefer in-person learning** |

| **Significantly increased workload and expansion of work scope** | **Concern for the immediate health of students, staff, and faculty** |
| **Work-life balance upset by telework and children attending school virtually** | **Concern for long-term health effects of COVID-19** |
| **Perception that UGA has lost its sense of purpose** | **High student infection rates put the rest of the Athens community at risk** |
| **Perception that the pandemic has been politicized at UGA** | **Need to decide what to do when students ask to attend class remotely when they don’t have an official health-related exception** |
| **Perception that colleagues are unnecessarily exaggerating the danger of the pandemic** | |
We offer examples from both thematic qualitative analyses below - for students, faculty, and staff, we provide examples of stories that we coded as supportive of, opposed to, and “mixed,” with respect to the hybrid teaching model. We also include each participant’s own evaluation of how they evaluated their story on a scale of extremely positive to extremely negative, as well as the date they completed the survey. We have bolded particularly relevant passages.

We selected these examples based on their ability to illustrate each category’s presence in the data. We note that all participants’ stories in this section are shared in their entirety. We further note that all participants’ stories are available here. We map the first two stories to the relevant qualitative codes in Table 3.
Example student experience (support hybrid model because of confidence in measures taken or concern for student mental health, positive, Sep. 11)

**Engineering Department Appreciation**

“I appreciate the dedication the Engineering department has had to make sure all classes are at least in a hybrid format or in-person during this time. As of now, my only classes that meet face-to-face at any time are my engineering courses. **Each week, I look forward to getting out of my dorm hall to go to these classes.** I would say that this has definitely helped with keeping my sanity with everything going on! Additionally, **I have made much stronger connections with both the professors of these classes and my fellow students than I have with my online classes!** Lastly, **my grades in these classes are much better than with my strictly online classes.** Again, I deeply appreciate the efforts being made to help me continue my higher education! Thank you!”

**Codes:**
- Face-to-face learning is important for mental health
- Stronger connections with hybrid instructors and students compared to online classes
- Better grades in hybrid classes

Example student experience (oppose hybrid model because of health concerns and/or doubts that measures taken are effective, negative, Sep. 3)

**The tragedies of UGA**

“So far it's been tragic. Even though in person would be a great option I genuinely feel like the health of students is not getting taken seriously. I also feel like the school is unprepared for online classes in terms of workload, mental health and so much more.”

**Codes:**
- Implementation of hybrid and online activities (classes, career fairs) has not been smooth
- Fewer opportunities for socialization take a toll on mental health
- Concerns that student health was not taken seriously in UGA's decision-making

Example student experience (negative, mixed, Aug. 20)

**Disappointment in How People Really Respond to Guidelines**

“I was just biking around UGA campus a few days ago, and it was impossible to not see just how blatantly students and others were completely disregarding UGA's social distancing and mask guidelines. There was a massive (hundreds) gathering outside of South Deck, where people stood and sat in close groups, many of which didn't have a mask, just there as if the virus was just some made-up joke. It's people like that who I
seem to see everywhere that make me lose faith in UGA's ability to operate safely during this pandemic. It just seems like people don't care.”

Example faculty experience (positive, supportive of the hybrid approach because of instructional quality concerns, Sep. 11)

Doing okay
“I feel a little guilty, honestly, about how the pandemic has affected others, when it really hasn't been bad at all for me. I'm more efficient, more productive, and generally pretty satisfied with my job. Teaching, maybe, is a bit harder than before, but I'm figuring it out. At some level, I'm developing better connections with students because I'm giving them a lot of opportunity to connect with me online one-on-one. I never really did that before Covid, and it's working pretty well.”

Example faculty experience (negative, opposed to hybrid model due to health concerns, Sep. 12)

What about grad students in the classroom
“This time has been stressful in many ways, and it is difficult to not have all the answers when students want and need information. In planning for class, I requested an accommodation. During discussion with my chair and the dean, the resolution for one of my classes was the hybrid model, where instead of me being in the classroom, the TA assigned to the class would be present in the classroom for in-person days, while I was present over Zoom. When discussing this with the TA, he asked what happens if I test positive or get sick. How awful that I had no response for him, and it appears that no one has given thought to that. My concern for my own safety prompted the accommodation request, but what can grad students do? It is not fair that the presumed risk that comes with in-person instruction is just being shifted to grad student TAs who have no real option to say no or pushback in this case, all to give an appearance that in-person instruction is happening.”

Example faculty experience (neutral in emotional tone, mixed, Sep. 14)

UGA is not an island
“There are no right answers to this problem. UGA has to keep face to face instruction an option for financial reasons, but must keep faculty and their families safe. I believe UGA has done a good job keeping us safe in-class and on-campus, but I fear we have unleashed holy hell on our local communities.”

Example staff experience (positive, supportive of the hybrid approach because of health concerns, Sep. 16)
The [name of unit in the college] struggles for COVID-19

“Since the COVID-19 crisis, the things that I have experienced since I manage the [unit in the college] is not being able to communicate with the students like I was before the crisis, or interact with them at a personal level. We had to start to tele-communicate from our homes instead of in our offices from March until the start of the Fall Semester. **It was hard to begin with not being able to do the job I was hired for on the level I was used to doing, and having to use virtual means to contact faculty, staff, and students. Missing the social interaction with my students.** When returning to campus we went with a flexible schedule so we all weren't in the office at same time. We had to stand 6 feet apart, wear masks, which can be difficult at times to breathe through them, and sometimes hard to understand when speaking through them. Using hand sanitizer and using all safety measures to keep yourself and the ones around you safe and healthy. Attending Zoom meetings instead of in person meetings. **Things have been different but it is nice to get back on campus and have some interaction with people.”**

**Example staff experience (neutral, mixed, Sep. 14)**

**Concern for Mental Health of Students**

“As conversations surround the physical well-being of the campus community, my concern for students’ mental well-being continues to grow. I feel for students who are transitioning to UGA either as first-year students or transfer students. **A time that can already be stressful and difficult enough is compounded by a new learning environment for both students and faculty.** I worry about these students and all of our students getting engaged in activities, meeting their peers, and maintaining their mental health. Additionally, there has been a recent sentiment of students feeling shame if they test positive for COVID-19. The narrative in the campus community is that students will test positive for the virus if they don't follow proper protocol and are misbehaving. This adds another layer of stress to students who may be unable to attend class in person during their required isolation time and having to communicate that with faculty, roommates, etc. As a staff member in the college I hope that we are providing proper channels of support for our student population.”

We finish this section with one of the most recent student stories, which demonstrates the mixed experiences students are having with the hybrid model.

**Example student experience (neutral, mixed, Sep. 28)**

**The struggles and benefits of zoom university.**

“As a second-year engineering student here at UGA, I have had a pretty crazy semester so far with some positives and some negatives. Some positives I've found from this experience is **the ability to work on what I need to work on more when I need to.**
Since the classes have all been online, some lectures being recorded and posted, I have found that some days in which I have a test I've been able to study more for the test and be less stressed once test time comes around. I have also found that I have been able to maintain a much healthier sleep schedule. Some big negatives I have found, however, include a big lack of motivation in some classes. These classes are the ones that are all online, with all online lectures that the teachers provide us. One big class for me, for example, is [name of course outside of the college]. The teacher in [name of course outside of the college] I have found to be very unreliable in responding to emails, rather unorganized, making it hard to keep track of what needs to be done, and worst of all his way of teaching us is all through random youtube videos. With a class so disengaged, sloppy, and unorganized I have found it extremely difficult to stay on top of my work and stay motivated to want to do the work for the class. The class in general has been very unenjoyable and a weak excuse for a class, something I believe would never have happened had there been in-person classes. Also, the experience of sitting in my room all day, after hours of zoom classes, is entirely exhausting, unmotivating, unenjoyable, and overall unhealthy. I will say, however, that my statics teacher, Benjamin Fahrman, has done an excellent job at keeping us motivated and engaged this semester.

Experiences of anti-Asian racism in the time of COVID-19

There was disturbing evidence of racism toward Asians/Asian Americans in the data — a trend that has been exacerbated nationwide due to rhetoric around COVID-19 and its origins (for more information, see here and here). We saw this racism from both sides. Some stories documented experiences of racism in our college while others used terms that could be interpreted as racist.

We urge our students, staff, and faculty to be aware of the unproductive and oftentimes hurtful dynamics that can occur when White privilege intersects with minority experiences. In this case, White privilege might be understood as the privilege of not having to worry that someone is treating you differently because you look Asian. White privilege shields white people from having life experiences like the one presented below.

Example student story (negative)

Survivor

“It's difficult being an engineering student. It's difficult being an engineering student during this COVID-19 pandemic. It's difficult being an /Asian-American/ engineering student during this COVID-19 pandemic. I think every engineering student can or will at some point be able to sympathize with the struggles of learning fluid mechanics and strength of materials. Readjusting to online classes and university life under social distancing has been difficult too. Those are bad enough, but it's worse when racist, anti-Asian rhetoric so dominates the public discourse about
COVID-19, even that between political leaders. So much worse. Being Asian-American at UGA has always been uncomfortable for me. I've had some run-ins with people saying racist jokes behind my back, and I could always count the number of fellow Asian-American students in my class on one hand. But now it's more than just uncomfortable, it's almost unbearable. It's so difficult now. I think about the stories of Asian students attacked by angry classmates and wonder if I will be the next one, if I will find myself among their number. I wonder if the next person I see will go on a tirade about how Asians are the cause of the pandemic and should be detained, deported, and exterminated at any cost. Sometimes, I'm afraid to just venture out of my dorm room, and barring times when it is mandatory I go out to attend class, I've taken to trying to go out only during the night, when most people are asleep and the shadows and baggy clothes can cloak my skin color. More than ever, I feel like I have to prove something. I feel like I have to prove that maybe not all Asians are bad, that maybe Asian-Americans have something of use, that maybe Asians shouldn't be all killed off, or at least this particular one shouldn't. I feel like I have to prove that I am worthy of even existing. I feel like I have to represent all Asians and Asians-Americans--rather than just myself. What's worse is, I am specifically a [name of country removed] -American, yet I am lumped in with the Chinese anyways and am targeted by anti-Chinese rhetoric. It's not merely it's factually and logically incorrect, it's that it almost feels like an offense to my family, not just myself. Hundreds of years ago, my ancestors fought against the Chinese conquerors who demanded tribute or death. Decades ago, my father escaped from [name of country removed] to China, during the brutal crackdowns preceding Tiananmen Square. He told me stories about swimming under bridges to escape government checkpoints and the horrors and police brutality he saw at the detention camps. I recall one incident where he recounted a hunger strike to a family friend, who got rather squeamish about the idea and suggested hunger strikes might be an affront to God. My father, normally a calm, religious sort, became visibly annoyed and impatient that man took more offense at the hunger strikes than the abuse that made them desperate enough to do hunger strikes in the first place. At this point, in some Hollywood story, I'd probably be on an inspirational spiel about how I faced my fears and how I directed them to something noble and uplifting and how I defeated racism through love and hard work and how you can too. But that's not what's happening. I still fear for my life. I still haven't found a solution to the problems I'm facing. I still am fighting through racism. I don't live in some Hollywood story, and honestly I'm not sure I want to. Hollywood stories have heroes and villains, rogues and nobles. I'm not a hero or a villain or any of those. I'm just trying to be a survivor."
Perceptions that decision-makers are prioritizing people over economics

In this section, and in the one that follows, we dig deeper into potential explanations for why nearly three times as many participants coded their stories as negative compared to positive, and the faculty shift toward negative experiences.

We conducted linear modelling to identify statistically significant correlations between emotional tone and other variables on which participants rated their stories (i.e., triads and dyads). We found that emotional tone was significantly correlated with participants’ perceptions of whether decision-makers prioritized economics or people. More specifically, stories about decision-makers prioritizing economics were more likely to be negative, while stories about decision-makers prioritizing people were more likely to be positive.

This pattern in the data can be seen in Figure 3 below, which shows responses to the triad that asked participants to respond to the following prompt: “Decision-makers in this story seemed to prioritize... People, Economics, Personal Beliefs.” We break up these responses according to the emotional tone of the story. Note the shift away from People and towards Economics as the emotional tone goes from Extremely Positive to Extremely Negative.

---

6 For more details on triads, we refer readers to pg. 11 of our first interim brief, available [here](here).
Figure 3. Triad data for response to the prompt: “Decision-makers in this story seemed to prioritize...”, filtered by emotional tone and position in the college.

Green dots represent undergraduate students, light blue dots represent graduate students, red dots represent staff members, dark blue dots represent faculty members.

Below we present examples of negative stories associated with the economics corner of the triad and positive stories associated with the people corner of the triad below. We have bolded particularly relevant passages. Participants’ stories are shared in their entirety.

Example student story (97/100 on the Economics corner, extremely negative)

Close the school down

“Got covid after the first week of classes. Professors haven’t helped, behind in all classes. Don’t feel safe on campus.”

None of the staff stories had a rating of more than 50 on the Economics corner of this triad.
Example faculty story (98/100 on the Economics corner, extremely negative)

Disappointed and embarrassed

“Students feel left out of the decision making process. Whether they agree with UGA trying to ‘return to normal’ or not, many feel like decisions were made without their concerns taken into considerations. As a professor I feel like I have to mediate between the students and administration to try to find a solution to their problems but am concerned with questioning the decisions of superiors (and their superiors). Ultimately, I am very disappointed in how UGA leadership has handled the situation and am frankly embarrassed to say I’m affiliated with the school at the moment. I feel very dishonest recruiting people or telling them to come here when I feel like they are not valued. If I were a high school student or undergraduate looking at graduate school right now I would steer clear of UGA. Furthermore, the decisions of the university (and USG as a whole) do not consider the community impacts of their decisions and it seems like most of this was based on money and football.”

Example student story (70/100 on the People corner, positive)

COVID: Developing Story

“COVID-19 is a fast developing subject that is constantly getting new information. It is important to stay up to date about the latest COVID and take measures to protect yourself from the spread of COVID, such as social distancing and wearing a mask. Encourage others to read up on how they can protect themselves from COVID and keep themselves and others safe.”

Example staff story (95/100 on the People corner, neutral)

How Do I Do My Job Effectively?

“My experience is one of discouragement and challenges. My role in the college is travel heavy and people facing so eliminating that has me struggling to come up with alternative methods in order to be successful because I’ve only known one way to be successful prior. I also miss the personal touch and relationship aspect as an extrovert. That is not to imply we aren’t trying new things and being agile and innovative which has been challenging and fun in its own way, but the agility we have implemented although perceived well hasn’t yielded tangible results my role is expected to produce necessarily. I also have noticed the consistent virtual meetings create a fatigue I’m not used to. It is not uncommon for me to drive to Atlanta and have 5 different meetings in a day all over the city. I find myself more tired and fatigued from a day of 5 zoom meetings never leaving my office than I would’ve been driving all over Atlanta meeting different people. Uncertain of the root reason behind this, but I suspect I get a burst of energy from changes of settings and individuals rather than the same office and same screen. Lastly, in an attempt to never project my feelings about COVID-19 onto my constituents I find myself challenged on what to say. It is very obvious
that everyone feels differently about this virus, how it has impacted them personally and how people should behave or handle it. Knowing that and never wanting to offend or project negativity, I struggle to find the appropriate words often so the empathy piece is difficult. I believe I've navigated it good enough, but want to do better because COVID-19 has impacted literally everyone but to different degrees and everyone's reaction has been different. I summarize that to say, I have accepted this is here with us for a while so
I am constantly thinking of creative ways to do my job to the best of my ability under the new guidelines so that has been unique to navigate and sometimes fun and challenging. Also, there are individuals I have grown closer to by having vulnerable conversations with as business as usual is no longer a thing.”

Example faculty story (73 on the People corner, neutral)

Hybrid teaching — more humanitarian, as long as we remain safe?

“Hybrid teaching demands more work from the faculty (e.g., ensuring that remote and in-person students are effectively learning/communicating and have the technology support to follow the class pace). It's definitely more challenging for remote students joining online and brings a fairness question (between in-person and online cohorts). I am exhausted from working with students that have tested positive and are self-quarantining. So, why run a hybrid class if it involves twice as much work for the faculty and may not benefit some for our students? I opened this question for discussion with a group of students who joined my class in person. Simply put: My students told me not staring at another online lecture or a computer monitor is great; Walking out of their room and seeing the instructor and friends is nice and good for mental health although he/she may not be interacting as much as they did before the pandemic. The discussion closed my question on hybrid teaching, and I felt that it is more humanitarian to allow teaching hybrid, as long as we can all stay safe. The (student) discussion struck me as I could sense what my students went through last semester and are going through this semester.”
An overall shift towards more struggle and relational difficulties with “people in positions of power”

As we described in the methods section of this brief, SenseMaker, the method we use in this research, is designed to gain insight into social systems. These insights are gained by combining “first-hand narratives with the statistical authority of quantitative data” (Van der Merwe et al., 2019, p. 3). For instance, above we presented findings from a statistical analysis of one of the triads in our SenseMaker survey alongside examples of participants’ stories that illustrated the correlations we identified.

In this section, we similarly present the findings from a heatmap analysis that enables us to see trends in the college that are developing at a systems level, i.e., across all participants’ experiences. Once again, we will use first-hand narratives to illustrate these trends.

In our second interim brief, we used a heatmap to explore how to amplify more desirable experiences and dampen less desirable experiences at a systems level. More specifically, we examined opportunities to shift from stories of high “Struggle” and low “Praise by those in Power” to low struggle and high praise by those in power. For more details on creating heatmaps, we refer readers to pg. 12 of our second interim brief.

Below, we share a recreation of the heatmap we generated in our second interim brief (Figure 4) and compare it to the same heatmap for the 71 stories collected from August 18 to September 28 (Figure 5).

The colored dots on both heatmaps show participants’ responses to the question “How do you feel about your experience?” (see the key under the figures).

---

Green dots indicate extremely positive experiences, light blue dots indicate positive experiences, red dots indicate neutral experiences, dark blue dots indicate negative experiences, and orange dots indicate extremely negative experiences.
Figure 5. Heatmap (or XY plot) of struggle against praise by those in power (August 18 to September 28, 2020; image credit to Ben Fahrman)

Green dots indicate extremely positive experiences, light blue dots indicate positive experiences, red dots indicate neutral experiences, dark blue dots indicate negative experiences, and orange dots indicate extremely negative experiences.

Comparing these two heatmaps, we can see a developing trend toward more stories of high struggle and low praise by those in power.

As we described above, heatmaps are used to identify opportunities to amplify more desirable experiences and dampen less desirable experiences at a systems level. To this end, we examined the nature of the nine participant responses in the low struggle/high praise quadrant in Figure 5 and identified four types of stories: i) stories that expressed support and appreciation for UGA’s COVID-19 response (5 of 9); ii) stories that highlighted challenges associated with the mandated hybrid approach (2 of 9); iii) one story that
described impacts of COVID-19 on extra-curricular educational activities (1 of 9); and iv) one story that reported facts about COVID-19 infections on campus. We determined that the latter three types of stories do not lend themselves to amplification, i.e., it is arguably not desirable to amplify challenges associated with the hybrid model.

The first type of story presents both opportunities and challenges for amplification. In terms of opportunities, one of these stories pointed to the benefits that “getting out of [a] dorm hall” has on mental health (see full story on pp. 14-15 and at the link above). Another participant expressed gratitude to the college for making tele-working possible (“thanks to technology and professionalism of the individuals involved”). These two opportunities deserve further consideration. How can we amplify activities that have positive impacts on students’ mental health? And, how can we amplify the provision of technology and professional support that facilitate tele-working?

In terms of challenges, we argue that it is more difficult to amplify a particular stance on UGA’s COVID-19 response, especially in light of other views in the dataset on UGA’s handling of the pandemic. Two examples of stances that we deemed to be challenging to amplify are provided below.

**Example student story from Figure 5 (x: 55, y: 4, extremely positive)**

*Stay strong dawgs!!*

“The COVID-19 crisis has affected all of us in many ways. It has definitely impacted many lives of college students like myself. The measures UGA took were completely necessary. We cannot put our lives on hold, we have to keep on moving. As my dad always tells me, time waits for no man. We will have storms along the way in our lives, but we just have to get through them. We will see better and even brighter days ahead!”

**Example faculty story from Figure 5 (x: 79, y: 1, extremely positive)**

*Students Want to be in the Classroom*

“I’m very pleased the university has provided an environment that enables students to attend classes in-person, albeit in a limited capacity. Safety protocols established by the administration are clear and have been happily adhered to by faculty and students. The reason this was the right choice is that that steps toward ‘normalcy’ must start at some point because of a lagging public response to return to normal life. Indeed, returning to a fully normal classroom setting will not happen overnight. So, I am glad the university did not force online-only learning. Despite the rhetoric, students overwhelmingly prefer to be in the classroom interacting with their peers and with professors. The idea that online education provides the same level of training and support as in-person learning is misguided and the COVID crisis has largely solidified this fact.”

All nine low struggle/high praise stories are available [here](#). The titles of these stories are also provided below.
Another way to analyze a heatmap is to identify less desirable experiences that can be dampened. To this end, we qualitatively analyzed the 30 stories in the high struggle/low praise quadrant of Figure 5.

The most prominent theme in this qualitative data analysis was “Questioning USG/UGA handling of the pandemic.” For example, one student stated, “I've been very concerned about the recent COVID virus on campus. Based on reports from my professors and fellow students, there seems to be a general confusion as to why we're still on campus at the moment.”

In line with our prior discussion of the perception that decision-makers are prioritizing economics over people, another student commented:

“Universities are reopening in an attempt to take in as much money as they can before inevitably having to shut down because of a rise in cases on campuses, and all anyone in my age group seems to care about is whether we get a football season or not....Young people who haven't lost family to the virus... consider themselves invincible because it's unlikely that they'll die from the virus [if they] continue to socialize and gather in large groups.”

The perception that some students are acting like they are invincible was prevalent in the dataset. For instance, after describing having observed “just how blatantly students and others were completely disregarding UGA's social distancing and mask guidelines,” one student commented, “It's people like that who I seem to see everywhere that make me lose faith in UGA's ability to operate safely during this pandemic. It just seems like people don't care.”

Faculty stories attributed less blame to students and more directly critiqued the decision-makers who created the conditions for these students’ concerns. For example, one faculty member expressed feeling “very disappointed in how UGA leadership has handled the situation and [being] frankly embarrassed to say [they are] affiliated with the school at
the moment.” Another faculty member highlighted inconsistencies between UGA’s pandemic response and that of UGA’s peer institutions:

“I am often reminded of other issues where frequent references to our peer and aspirational institutions are used to drive decisions, typically in ways that work for the university. In the context of a national picture of many institutions who have gone to online learning or offer choices to faculty and students, UGA stands out at the moment as the university in the US (and thereby perhaps in the world) with the most COVID cases. The reference to peer and aspirational institutions is in CENGR frequently used to tighten the thumbscrews of, for example faculty, to ‘encourage’ increases in grant or expenditure activity despite a lack of infrastructure and resources that colleagues at those universities take for granted. The current disregard of the sensible decisions at other universities brings up a sad sense of UGA taking the role as a national leader in providing an inadequate, careless, and cynical COVID response…”

Faculty members also expressed concern for the level of responsibility placed on students:

“We are about three full weeks into the fall semester and almost everyday I receive a notice that one of my students has either tested positive for Covid-19 or has come into contact with someone who has tested positive for COVID. I am worried about the students. While there are great measures that have been put into place to keep them safe on-campus and inside their classrooms, I am worried about the students activities outside the classroom. Are they exercising good judgement? I would think that some are. Although some guidance has been provided, for the most part, it seems to be left up to the students when to return to the classroom. If judgement is in question for some students, should they have so much power to decide when to return? I am also worried about students returning to the classroom too early. I wish there was more caution being administered. I feel like, what can I do? Perhaps, I am feeling a little helpless to help them.”

One faculty member observed the difficulties faculty have in discussing such concerns with their superiors:

“There is a climate of fear in our college. In faculty meetings and get togethers, the [a leader in the college] does not talk about the rapidly increasing cases and people are afraid to ask questions. The authoritarian ways in which the administration has handled this crisis has made people fear for their jobs if they speak out.”

Along these lines, another faculty member expressed being “furious” (the title of their story) and described how faculty members have had to make USG’s fundamentally flawed approach work as best they can. This faculty member did not grant permission for us to share direct excerpts from their story.

The sentiments of fear, fury, and a lack of trust in leadership were also reflected in two stories—one from a student and one from a faculty member—who questioned the intent and effectiveness of UGA’s DawgCheck App. These two participants, neither of whom gave
us permission to share direct quotes, noted the lack of transparency on student participation in the DawgCheck program and the potential for DawgCheck responses to be used against students and faculty in the event of legal actions.

In parallel to what appears to be a developing sense of distrust and disenchantment in USG/UGA leadership, some stories did identify specific negative experiences that could lend themselves to “dampening.” We caution, however, against addressing these points and neglecting the more prevalent theme of faculty and students questioning the mandates that have created these challenges.

One student noted the lack of spaces on campus to attend classes virtually:

“Us students signed up for classes in April, and most students try to get back-to-back courses since that is usually the most ideal for in-person instruction. The issue now is with each class having a different rotation schedule between in-person and online. Basically, students have to stay on campus more or less all day because they cannot make it to their apartments from an in-person class to an online class 20 minutes later, or vice versa. It wouldn’t be so bad if there were enough chairs and tables and study rooms available on campus. However, due to social distancing guidelines, this is no longer the case.”

Another student described the difficulty of social distancing in labs:

“As an engineering student and a teaching assistant working in the laboratory, I am nervous and agitated. Despite my willingness to assist students in the lab, I wonder how possible social distancing can exist in a laboratory especially when it seems I have to be in close contact with the students to assist them in their lab problems.”

One student commented on the mixed messages that are being communicated to students regarding attendance for face-to-face instruction:

“This semester has been extremely confusing regarding when to come to hybrid classes. Two of my hybrid classes have suggested we not attend or seriously consider not attending for our safety. Another class I am in led by a high level faculty member suggested not coming on our hybrid days was unprofessional and disrespectful. The conflicting options regarding hybrid models make me feel uneasy about when I should attend. I also find it confusing when to go to class, when a class is consistent in its hybrid days I am fine, but some classes rotate so that people can have different in class experiences, the result in that class is that almost no one attends.”

Finally, one student asked that faculty provide more worked examples in video recordings:

“I am overwhelmed by this semester. When you major in anything engineering, you take the challenge. You know it’s going to be difficult and you know it's something you have to work hard for. Well this semester has been a challenge inside a challenge. I have struggled learning because of these “flipped” classes. I learn so much better having
professors work out problems and nobody has since this semester started. I would love to see more prerecorded videos of problems that can better our learning as students.”

See here for full text accounts of these stories. The titles of these 30 stories are also provided below.

**Story titles in top, left-hand corner of Figure 5**

- Finding community amidst COVID
- Furious
- Disappointment in How People Really Respond to Guidelines
- Inevitable shift to online learning
- Agitation to perform teaching assistant duties
- Confusion
- [Story title omitted - not appropriate for publication]
- Close the school down
- Conflicting Priorities
- Protecting Students Amidst Rising Cases
- What about grad students in the classroom)
- COVID-19 Unclothes Bad Leaders
- Fear and Higher Purpose
- Climate of fear
- Selfish children
- Stop Partying, Please.

- The First Few Days in New Normal and what it means to me.
- Classes and the potential chaos
- Hard to find the words
- Woah, we’re halfway there :/
- Disappointed and embarrassed
- Survivor
- Two behaviors!
- Is hybrid learning in the best interest of our students?
- fall surprise
- I am overwhelmed.
- New Normal
- I’m my own advocate
- Peer and Aspirational Institutions - UGA as national leader (in COVID cases)
- Poor Quality of Work

**Recommendations**

The stories collected in the fall dataset indicate that our community is working hard to overcome the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. As part of this process, students, staff, and faculty are asking questions, evaluating risks, and experimenting with a diverse range of ways to effectively facilitate and structure teaching, learning, research, advising, and a range of other activities in the college.

Despite these efforts, participants' stories point to an overarching sense of worry, anxiety, anger, frustration, and feeling overwhelmed. While there is no doubt that, if safety could be assured, many students, staff, and faculty would prefer face-to-face interactions, the data indicate significant push-back against USG/UGA’s mandates to enforce face-to-face activities, especially when compared to the more flexible and cautious approaches that other universities in the U.S. are adopting.
In order to address this push-back, and the break-down of trust that seems to be developing as a result (see Figures 3, 4, and 5), as well as to take into account the mental health impacts of the COVID-19 crisis on students, staff, and faculty, we recommend that our college explore ways to increase the level of agency that students and faculty have over the mode(s) of instruction that best fit their learning goals and risk tolerance. A core part of this exploration would be to open up lines of communication that make room for differing views that students, staff, and faculty are taking on, for example, USG/UGA mandates, the meaning of the infection numbers and the associated risk they constitute, and the affordances and limitations of online learning. As one student who reviewed this interim brief stated:

“[There needs to be] an avenue for students to voice their concerns. The only thing that currently exists is the DAWG Check, and that reads as more of a COVID liability check. Either through advisors/teachers/or a separate student outreach program. A feeling of do-as-your-told/ tell us if you have symptoms is the current atmosphere.”

Based on the above qualitative and quantitative analyses, we offer the following overarching recommendation to our college:

Explore a more flexible approach to decision-making that provides room for students, staff, and faculty to participate in evaluating risks and deciding how to most effectively and productively structure their activities.

In addition to this overarching recommendation, we recommend that the college:

i. Acknowledge the massive effort it has taken faculty and staff to prepare and implement hybrid and online activities
ii. Acknowledge the diverse experiences that are contributing to adverse student mental health outcomes, including:
   a. A sense of isolation due to taking classes online
   b. A sense of feeling unsafe on campus
   c. A sense of confusion and uncertainty that derives from receiving mixed messages about what is the “right” thing to do regarding class attendance
iii. Explore different ways to positively impact student mental health that are not necessarily bound to face-to-face teaching approaches
iv. Acknowledge and address the anti-Asian racism that has emerged during the COVID-19 pandemic
v. Clarify to students, staff, and faculty the legal ramifications of COVID-19 training and symptom reporting.

Finally, we offer the following list of suggestions that relate specifically to improving hybrid teaching and learning experiences:

vi. Provide more spaces on campus for students to participate in classes virtually
vii. Address difficulties associated with social distancing in instructional labs
viii. Provide more worked examples of engineering problems in pre-recorded videos
ix. Where possible, keep hybrid class attendance consistent, i.e., to minimize the variability in students' week-to-week schedule plannings

Conclusions

The findings in this report point to two concerning trends in how students, staff, and faculty in the College of Engineering at UGA are experiencing the COVID-19 pandemic.

First, the overarching negative sentiment expressed in this dataset, combined with the diversity of views on and experiences of teaching and learning, may point to limitations of USG/UGA's mandate for hybrid instruction.

Second, the shift toward more experiences of struggle and low praise by those in positions of power, combined with a perception that decision-makers are prioritizing economics over people, may point to a developing breakdown of trust in our community.

We offer the above recommendations as potential ways to address these concerning trends.