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Title
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Permalink
https://escholarship.org/uc/item/8d46b49s

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Publication Date
2020-12-10

Supplemental Material
https://escholarship.org/uc/item/8d46b49s#supplemental

Data Availability
The data associated with this publication are within the manuscript.
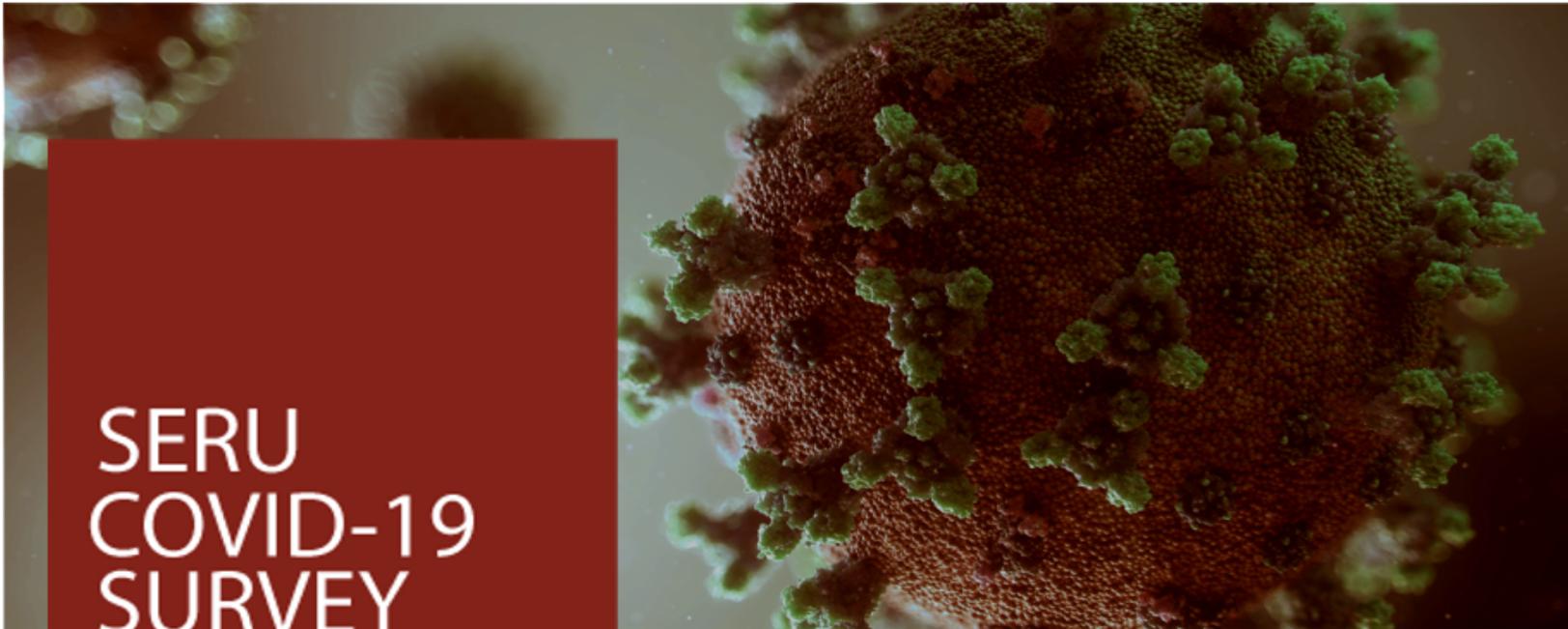
Obstacles That May Result in Delayed Degrees for Graduate and Professional Students during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Krista M. Soria, Bonnie Horgos, and Molly McAndrew

Graduate and professional students have reported significant hardships during the COVID-19 pandemic which they believe will negatively impact their ability to complete their degrees on-time, according to the Student Experience in the Research University (SERU) Consortium survey administered from May to July 2020 of 15,346 graduate and professional students at ten universities.

Specifically, 24% of graduate and professional students expected the pandemic to delay the semester or term they intend to graduate, 35% were uncertain if the pandemic would delay their graduation, and 41% did not expect the pandemic to delay their graduation.

The top three obstacles to graduate and professional students' degree completion include the lack of access to an appropriate study space or a distracting home environment (52%), inability to conduct research (43%), and inability to attend professional conferences (35%).

We observed differences between the obstacles students experienced by students' academic factors (e.g., degree type, academic program), employment, and demographics (i.e., gender, social class, caregiving status, race/ethnicity, and disability). We highlight some of the large differences in students' obstacles by those academic factors, employment, and demographic characteristics below.

Obstacles to Degree Completion

In the gradSERU COVID-19 survey, graduate and professional students responded (yes or no) to the following item: "Which of the following factors, if any, have been an obstacle to your progress towards your graduate/professional degree during the COVID-19 pandemic?" The percentage of graduate and professional students who experienced each obstacle is shown below:

- Lack of access to an appropriate study space or distracting home environment (52%, n = 8,658)
- Inability to conduct research (43%, n = 7,111)
- Inability to attend professional conferences (35%, n = 5,896)
- Need to provide additional care for yourself or a family member (25%, n = 4,204)
- Inadequate access to faculty (21%, n = 3,565)
- Increased teaching workload associated with transitioning to online teaching (16%, n = 2,726)
- Inadequate access to quality advising (15%, n = 2,493)
- Inability to fulfill required clinical rotation, residency, or internship hours (13%, n = 2,175)
- Inability to schedule qualifying events (12%, n = 2,024)
- None of the above (12%, n = 1,974)
- Increased hours worked or obtained another job (12%, n = 1,917)
- Lack of access to administrative services (10%, n = 1,695)
- Other, please specify (9%, n = 1,456)
- Increased research workload (7%, n = 1,220)

Obstacles by Degree Type

In the survey, students responded to the question, "Do you expect the COVID-19 pandemic to delay the semester or term you intended to graduate?" The results suggest that research doctorate students were significantly more likely than research master's students, professional master's students, and professional doctorate students to report that they believed the pandemic would delay the term or semester they intended to graduate (Table 1).

Table 1

Projected Delays in Degree Completion for Graduate and Professional Students by Degree Type

	Research Master's		Professional Master's		Research Doctorate		Professional Doctorate	
	n	*%*	*n*	*%*	*n*	*%*	*n*	*%*
No	1773	50	572	56	2219	30	1188	55
Yes	547	16	143	30	2471	34	144	8
I don't know	1201	34	313	30	2661	36	659	34

We also analyzed differences in the types of obstacles students identified as delaying their degree progress by their degree level. While we observed statistically significant ($p < .05$) differences in the obstacles to degree completion within all degree types, we will report only the broad themes with the largest differences in groups.

The results suggest that students enrolled in research programs (master's or doctorate) were significantly more likely than students enrolled in professional programs to indicate that the inability to conduct research, increased teaching workload, increased research workload, and inability to attend professional conferences were obstacles to their degree completion (Table 2). By and large, research doctorate students also reported more obstacles than research master's students.

Furthermore, professional students (master's or doctorate) were significantly more likely than research students to report that the inability to fulfill required clinical rotation, residency, or internship hours was an obstacle to their degree completion. Research master's students were least likely to have reported any obstacles compared to all of their peers: 22% indicated that they experienced no obstacles to their degree completion.

Table 2

Obstacles to Degree Completion for Graduate and Professional Students by Degree Type

	Research Master's		Professional Master's		Research Doctorate		Professional Doctorate	
	n	*%*	*n*	*%*	*n*	*%*	*n*	*%*
Lack of access to an appropriate study space or distracting home environment	2316	49	570	40	4546	56	1188	54
Inability to conduct research	1439	30	230	16	4920	60	493	22
Inability to attend professional conferences	1161	24	242	17	3958	49	504	23
Need to provide additional care for yourself or a family member	1031	22	364	26	2271	28	505	23
Increased teaching workload associated with transitioning to online teaching	553	12	109	8	1930	24	126	6
Inadequate access to faculty	983	21	211	15	1852	23	504	23
Inadequate access to quality advising	698	15	165	12	1335	16	279	13
Inability to schedule qualifying events	476	10	119	8	949	12	464	21
Lack of access to administrative services	448	9	102	7	899	11	236	11
Increased research workload	267	6	54	4	851	10	44	2
Increased hours worked or obtained another job	641	14	227	16	834	10	198	9
Other, please specify	376	8	113	8	785	10	177	8
None of the above	823	17	312	22	563	7	254	12
Inability to fulfill required clinical rotation, residency, or internship hours	729	15	286	20	328	4	816	37

Academic Majors

We grouped the students' degree programs into broad academic areas by CIP code. The results suggest that STEM students (33%) were significantly more likely than all other students to report that the pandemic has delayed their expected term/semester they would like to graduate (Table 3).

Furthermore, there are many areas of disparities in the different types of obstacles to degree completion experienced by students from different academic programs. For instance, the inability to conduct research was primarily a problem encountered by STEM (58%) students; arts, humanities, communication, and design students (59%); and industry, manufacturing, and construction students (50%).

Table 3

Projected Delays in Degree Completion for Graduate and Professional Students by Academic Program

	STEM		Arts, Humanities, Communication, and Design		Business		Health Sciences		Industry, Manufacturing, and Construction		Education		Law, Security, and Public Administration		Social and Behavioral Sciences	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
No	1536	32	547	32	487	62	1172	48	244	39	352	47	690	65	525	38
Yes	1577	33	458	27	107	14	340	14	156	25	148	20	65	6	390	28
I don't know	1708	35	681	40	187	24	912	38	218	35	243	33	308	29	482	35

Table 4

Obstacles to Degree Completion for Graduate and Professional Students by Academic Program

	STEM		Arts, Humanities, Comm., & Design		Business		Health Sciences		Industry, Manufact., & Construction		Education		Law, Security, & Public Admin.		Social & Behavioral Sciences	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Inability to conduct research	3204	58	1185	59	128	12	776	27	374	50	273	28	235	17	762	48
Lack of access to an appropriate study space or distracting home environment	2878	52	1155	58	454	43	1407	49	413	56	454	47	735	54	937	59
Inability to attend professional conferences	2051	37	936	47	256	24	798	28	289	39	340	35	263	19	795	50
Inadequate access to faculty	1203	22	541	27	185	17	523	18	187	25	139	14	317	23	403	26
Need to provide additional care for yourself or a family member	1127	20	608	30	226	21	691	24	187	25	357	37	395	29	487	31
Inadequate access to quality advising	936	17	337	17	119	11	318	11	125	17	114	12	195	14	289	18
Increased teaching workload associated with transitioning to online teaching	783	14	744	37	56	5	244	8	114	15	191	20	79	6	435	28
Inability to schedule qualifying events	601	11	289	14	72	7	560	19	69	9	91	9	138	10	160	10
None of the above	551	10	139	7	306	29	332	12	69	9	137	14	238	17	123	8
Lack of access to administrative services	533	10	252	13	65	6	310	11	79	11	96	10	124	9	183	12
Increased research workload	532	10	185	9	38	4	102	4	78	11	40	4	51	4	171	11
Increased hours worked or obtained another job	414	7	308	15	147	14	351	12	83	11	177	18	158	12	210	13
Other, please specify	375	7	262	13	80	8	229	8	88	12	117	12	101	7	168	11
Inability to fulfill required clinical rotation, residency, or internship hours	191	3	46	2	45	4	1246	43	37	5	119	12	276	20	187	12

Employment

We examined differences in students' obstacles to degree completion by the employment positions they held during the survey administration. The results suggest that research assistants (RAs) and teaching assistants (TAs) were most likely to be impacted by the inability to conduct research (63% and 57% respectively) and the inability to attend professional conferences (47% each).

Students who had a residency or internship were most likely to be impacted by the inability to fulfill required clinical rotation, residency, or internship hours (19% and 27%, respectively). Students who were employed in other positions outside of their universities were most likely to experience either increased hours worked or obtained another job (27%).

The percent of students who held various employment positions is as follows:
- RA: Worked in a research lab, as a university researcher, or as a research assistant (30%, *n* = 4,822)
- TA: Taught classes at the university or was a teaching assistant (25%, *n* = 4,111)
- Paid @ Univ.: Had other paid employment at your university (16%, *n* = 2,508)
- Paid @ Other: Had paid employment outside of your university (18%, *n* = 2,974)
- Residency: Had a residency (2%, *n* = 347)
- Internship: Had a internship (11%, *n* = 1,847)

Table 5

Obstacles to Degree Completion for Graduate and Professional Students by Employment

	RA		TA		Paid @ Univ.		Paid @ Other		Residency		Internship	
	n	%	*n*	%	*n*	%	*n*	%	*n*	%	*n*	%
Inability to conduct research	2997	63	2356	57	994	40	796	27	145	42	450	25
Lack of access to an appropriate study space or distracting home environment	2790	58	2380	58	1426	58	1434	49	158	46	965	53
Inability to attend professional conferences	2275	47	1921	47	994	40	860	29	110	32	560	31
Need to provide additional care for yourself or a family member	1195	25	1162	28	748	30	864	30	81	23	460	25
Inadequate access to faculty	1127	24	1057	26	571	23	588	20	68	20	398	22
Inadequate access to quality advising	800	17	715	17	391	16	391	13	59	17	265	15
Increased teaching workload associated with transitioning to online teaching	781	16	2076	51	414	17	416	14	34	10	182	10
Increased research workload	632	13	393	10	194	8	142	5	30	9	111	6
Lack of access to administrative services	580	12	474	12	272	11	264	9	42	12	216	12
Inability to schedule qualifying events	560	12	482	12	286	12	312	11	58	17	218	12
Increased hours worked or obtained another job	442	9	531	13	452	18	800	27	39	11	281	15
Other, please specify	397	8	391	10	273	11	283	10	23	7	133	7
Inability to fulfill required clinical rotation, residency, or internship hours	334	7	206	5	268	11	512	17	64	19	495	27
None of the above	300	6	272	7	264	11	472	16	49	14	221	12

Gender

There were also significant differences in the reported obstacles to degree completion by students' gender. In particular, nonbinary or transgender students were significantly more likely than cisgender females and males to experience the following obstacles: the lack of access to an appropriate study space or distracting home environment, inability to conduct research, inability to attend professional conferences, inadequate access to faculty, need to provide additional care for yourself or a family member, or increased hours worked or obtaining another job (Figure 1).

Figure 1

Obstacles to Degree Completion for Graduate and Professional Students by Gender Identity

Legend: Nonbinary or transgender (n = 235) Cisgender female (n = 9,511) Cisgender male (n = 6,072)
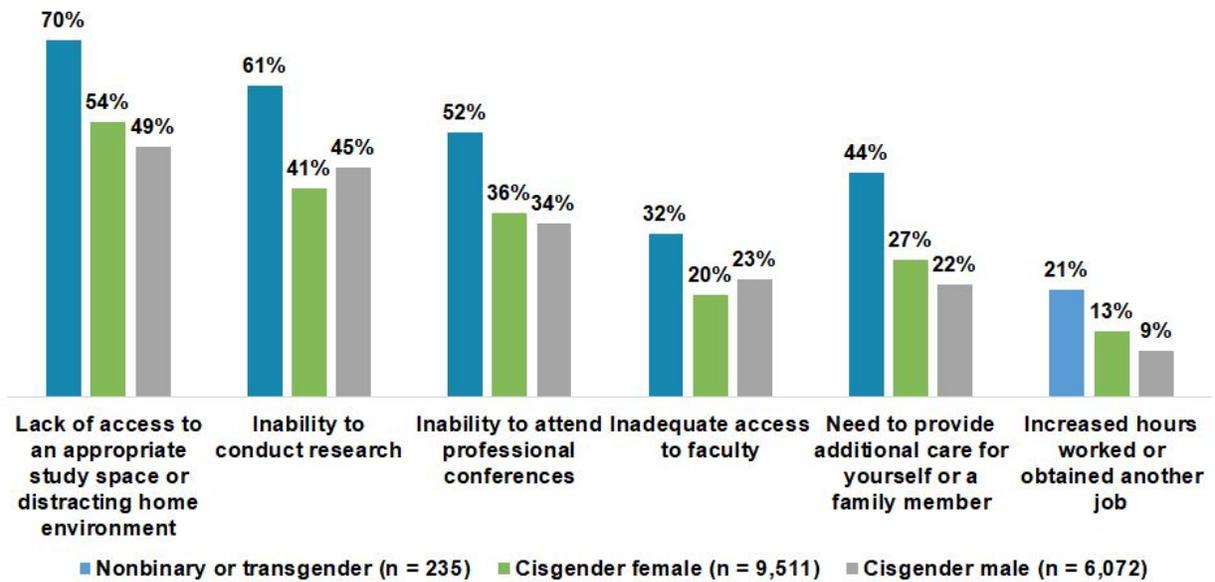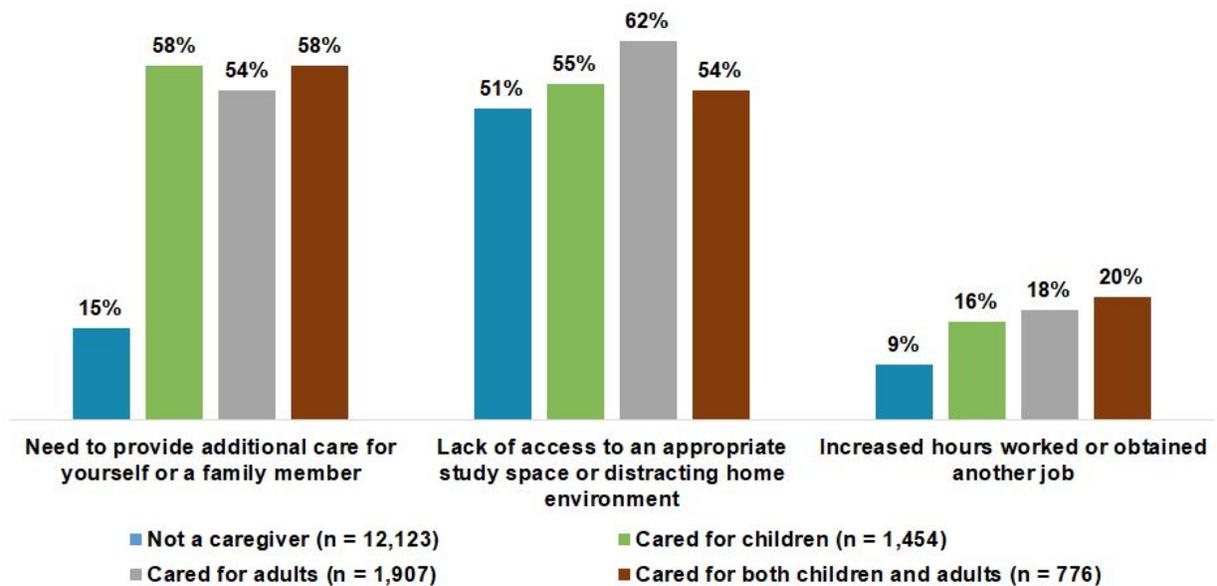
Caregivers

Graduate and professional students who were caregivers to adults, children, and both adults/children reported higher levels of needing to provide additional care for themselves or a family member, a lack of access to an appropriate study space amid a distracting home environment, and increasing the hours work or obtaining another job compared to students who were not caregivers (Figure 2).

Figure 2

Obstacles to Degree Completion for Graduate and Professional Students by Caregiver Status

Legend:
- Not a caregiver (n = 12,123)
- Cared for children (n = 1,454)
- Cared for adults (n = 1,907)
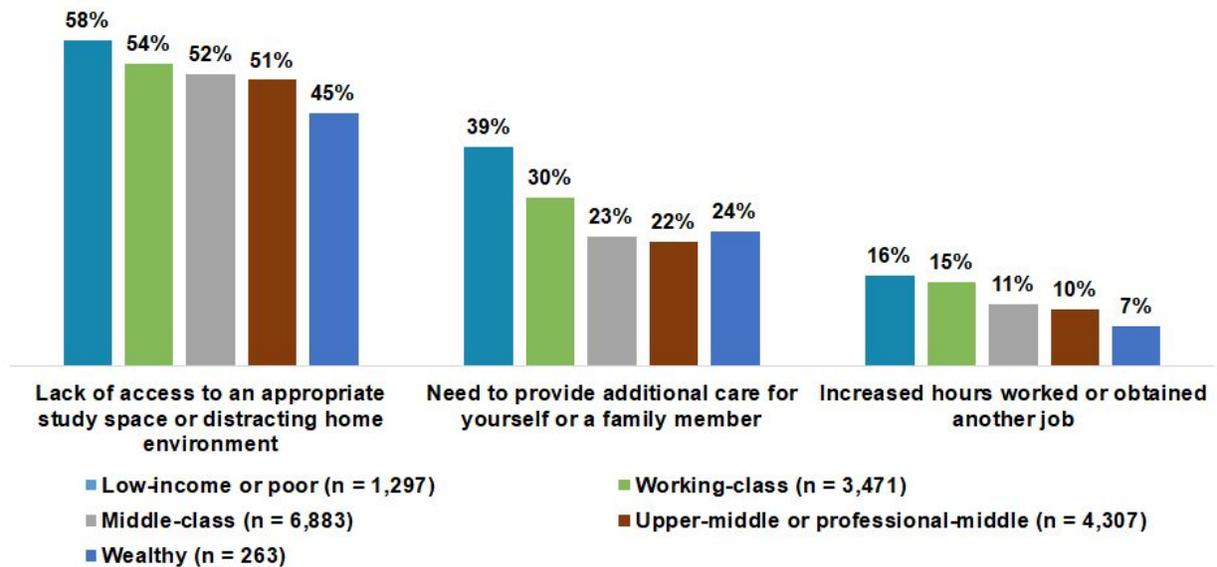- Cared for both children and adults (n = 776)

Social Class

Similar to caregivers, students from low-income/poor and working-class backgrounds were more likely than their peers from middle/upper-class backgrounds to report higher levels of needing to provide additional care for themselves or a family member, a lack of access to an appropriate study space amid a distracting home environment, and increasing the hours work or obtaining another job compared to students who were not caregivers (Figure 3).

Figure 3

Obstacles to Degree Completion for Graduate and Professional Students by Social Class

Legend:
- Low-income or poor (n = 1,297)
- Working-class (n = 3,471)
- Middle-class (n = 6,883)
- Upper-middle or professional-middle (n = 4,307)
- Wealthy (n = 263)

Categories:
- Lack of access to an appropriate study space or distracting home environment: 58%, 54%, 52%, 51%, 45%
- Need to provide additional care for yourself or a family member: 39%, 30%, 23%, 22%, 24%
- Increased hours worked or obtained another job: 16%, 15%, 11%, 10%, 7%
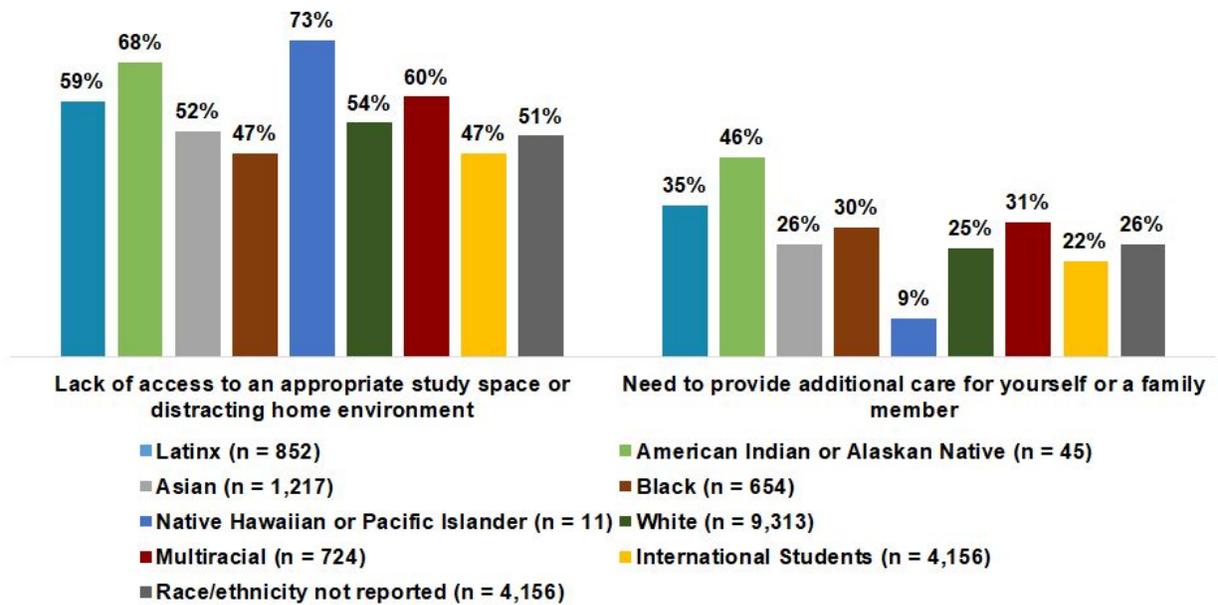
Race and Ethnicity

We also observed some of the biggest differences between students based upon their race/ethnicity to be in the areas of needing to provide additional care for themselves or a family member and lacking access to an appropriate study space or distracting home environment (Figure 4). Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander students (73%), American Indian or Alaskan Native students (68%), and multiracial students (60%) reported the highest levels of lacking access to an appropriate study space. Additionally, American Indian or Alaskan Native (46%), Latinx (35%), and multiracial students (31%) reported the highest rates of needing to provide additional care for themselves or a family member.

Figure 4

Obstacles to Degree Completion for Graduate and Professional Students by Race/Ethnicity

Lack of access to an appropriate study space or distracting home environment: 59%, 68%, 52%, 47%, 73%, 54%, 60%, 47%, 51%

Need to provide additional care for yourself or a family member: 35%, 46%, 26%, 30%, 9%, 25%, 31%, 22%, 26%

- ■ Latinx (n = 852)
- ■ American Indian or Alaskan Native (n = 45)
- ■ Asian (n = 1,217)
- ■ Black (n = 654)
- ■ Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander (n = 11)
- ■ White (n = 9,313)
- ■ Multiracial (n = 724)
- ■ International Students (n = 4,156)
- ■ Race/ethnicity not reported (n = 4,156)

Disability

While we observed that graduate and professional students with physical, learning, neurodevelopmental, or cognitive disabilities reported significantly more obstacles to degree completion compared to students without disabilities, we only present the largest areas of differences below (Figure 5). Students with physical, learning, neurodevelopmental, or cognitive disabilities were significantly more likely than students without disabilities to experience the following obstacles to degree completion:

- the lack of an appropriate study space
- the inability to attend professional conferences
- the need to provide additional care for oneself or a family member
- inadequate access to faculty
- inadequate access to quality advising

Figure 5

Obstacles to Degree Completion for Graduate and Professional Students by Disability
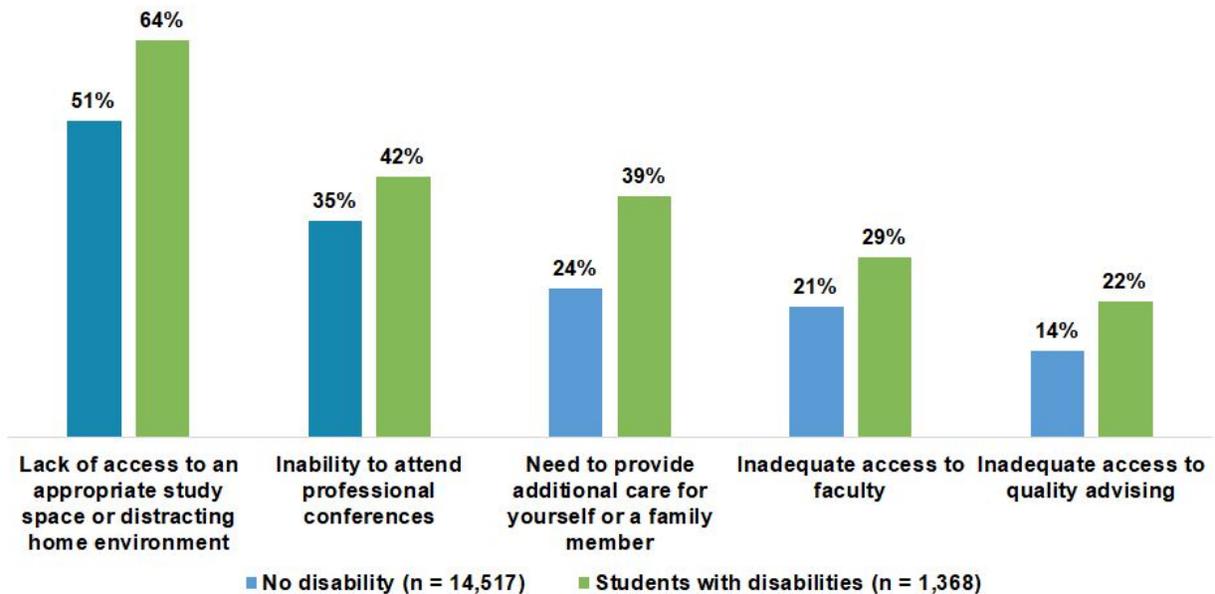
Conclusions

While the graduate and professional students indicated several reasons for possible delays in completing their degree programs, the most common obstacles encountered by all students included

- the lack of an appropriate study space
- the inability to conduct research
- the inability to attend professional conferences
- an inadequate access to faculty
- the need to provide additional care for oneself or a family member

We observed several differences between students' obstacles by their degree level, academic program, and employment experiences. Most of those differences are between students' inability to conduct research, the lack of access to an adequate study space, and the inability to attend professional conferences.

Our analyses also suggest that some of the biggest areas in which we see disparities between students' obstacles by their demographics include the lack of access to an adequate study space and needing to provide additional care to oneself or others. In almost all cases, students from marginalized and minoritized backgrounds were more likely to experience those two obstacles compared to majority students.

Recommendations

For graduate and professional students who are experiencing a lack of access to an appropriate study space, university leaders should provide safe but accessible on-campus locations for students who need a physical space to complete their studies. In the case of long-distance learners, institutional representatives should try to connect students with resources in their community that could provide an adequate studying space or create a less distracting home environment.

For the students who are unable conduct their research, institutions should provide flexibility, if possible, on the research components students need to complete their graduate and professional degree. Once research laboratories and facilities reopen on campus, graduate students should be granted additional access in order to accelerate their research.

If students are unable to attend professional conferences, institutional leaders, faculty, and staff can help to connect students to alternative virtual meetings for professional development and presentation opportunities and provide funding for students to attend. Students use conferences to find future career opportunities; therefore, career development professionals and faculty should create connections between students and their own professional networks in lieu of the normal networking experiences.

Additionally, faculty need to be readily available and virtually accessible for students. If possible, opportunities to meet with professors should be held at irregular hours, given the diversity of student time zones during remote learning and the fact that many graduate students must now provide additional care to others during the pandemic.

Finally, classes should be offered asynchronously for those students who are providing care to others during the pandemic. Institutions should provide more resources such as mental health services and food/housing opportunities for students who indicated a heightened need to take care of themselves or others during this time. University representatives should also be prepared for individuals who need a combination of interventions in order to remain on-track for finishing their graduate and professional degrees.

About the SERU COVID-19 Survey

The Student Experience in the Research University (SERU) Consortium administered a special survey on the impact of COVID-19 on student experience at ten U.S. public research universities. The SERU COVID-19 Survey assesses five areas to better understand undergraduates, graduates, and professional students' experiences during the global pandemic: 1) students' transition to remote instruction, 2) the financial impact of COVID-19 on students, 3) students' health and wellbeing during the pandemic, 4) students' belonging and engagement, and 5) students' future plans. You can access the full survey instrument here.

Sample

The survey was a census survey administered from May 18 to July 20, 2020 to graduate and professional students at ten large, public research universities. The response rate was 14-41% at the respective institutions. More information about the demographic composition of the samples is available here.

Methodology

All of the items we report in this research brief are categorical; therefore, we utilized Pearson's chi-square test to determine whether there is a statistically significant difference between the expected and observed frequencies of students' responses. We utilized the common probability level of $p < .05$, which serves as an a priori statement of the probability of an event occurring as extreme or more extreme than the one observed if the null hypothesis is true.

About the SERU Consortium

The Student Experience in the Research University (SERU) Consortium is an academic and policy research collaboration based at Center for Studies in Higher Education at the University of California – Berkeley (CSHE) working in partnership with the University of Minnesota and partner institutions. More information is available at https://cshe.berkeley.edu/seru.

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Suggested APA Citation

Soria, K. M., Horgos, B., & McAndrew, M. (2021). *Obstacles resulting in delayed degrees for graduate and professional students during the COVID-19 pandemic*. SERU Consortium, University of California - Berkeley and University of Minnesota.