From: USC Student Health, Office for Health Promotion Strategy, backbone for the USC Well-being Collective

Title: Focus Group Report: Covid-19: Return to Campus

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

Community engagement has proven to be critical in curbing the course of communicable disease outbreaks and previous pandemics (Gilmore, 2020). Recent research has confirmed that the "bottom up" approach of community engagement can be critical in COVID-19 prevention and response (Marston, Renedo, & Miles, 2020). In addition to the traditional biomedical and epidemiological intervention approaches, it is also important to involve communities in the decision-making processes of design, planning, and implementation of various interventions in order to improve population health outcomes and reduce risk for the community at large. As such, the purpose of this research was twofold: 1) to provide a platform for students to share their experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic, and their needs and concerns for a safe and inclusive return to campus (i.e., to engage in community engagement), and 2) to share these data with senior administrators at USC to help inform their decision-making processes as they plan for students' return to campus in the fall of 2021.

METHODOLOGY

With the aim of hearing directly from students, a qualitative approach was used to gather input on USC's return to campus plans. Eight focus groups were conducted via Zoom in March 2021. The research team from the Office for Health Promotion Strategy (OHPS) comprised 14 students and two professional staff. The students are a cohort of Community Health Organizers, a role designed to bring student voices to university decision-makers.

Undergraduate and graduate USC students were eligible to participate in the focus groups if they indicated they lived in the area surrounding the University Park Campus (UPC). Participants were recruited via an email database of students who indicated close proximity to UPC. The recruitment email included a link to an interest form where students signed up for a session date and time. Students were offered a $20 Amazon gift card upon completion of the focus group. Prior to the session, participants received confirmation and information to access the session via Zoom.

Focus group sessions were hosted by two Community Health Organizers (CHOs), with one facilitating and one note-taking. During the sessions, participants were asked to use pseudonyms to maintain anonymity. Each session was audio recorded after receiving verbal consent from all participants. CHOs used a moderator guide to structure the conversation. The moderator guide was created through an iterative process whereby OHPS staff and student CHOs explored research topics related to USC's return to campus plans. Ultimately, the research team decided to pursue the following topics: 1) what students perceive as a safe and inclusive return to campus,

2) what policies they are willing to support and 3) what resources they need from the university to facilitate a safe and inclusive return. Two example questions included: What is most important to you when considering the potential return to campus, and why? What can the university do to promote an equitable and inclusive return to campus? All members of the research team reviewed and edited the moderator guide prior to the first focus group to ensure the questions were clear, easily understood by students, and relevant to the identified research topics.

After the eight focus group sessions were conducted, audio recordings were transcribed. The research team utilized an inductive approach to code and analyze the data. All 14 CHOs performed an initial round of open coding. Simultaneously, the OHPS staff identified recurring global themes observed in the transcripts. CHOs compared open codes in pairs, then input open codes into the most appropriate global themes. Next, two CHOs identified axial codes and OHPS staff identified themes and assertions. Finally, four CHOs worked with OHPS staff to organize evidence to support each assertion.

FOCUS GROUP EXECUTIVE SUMMARY REPORT

Dates: 3/10/21, 3/15/21, 3/16/21 (3 sessions), 3/17/21, 3/19/21 (2 sessions)
Focus Group Facilitators: Joanne Lee, Ruben Romeo, Erela Datuowei, Ken Murakami, Hadiya Culbreath, Lana Bridi, Vibha Kodancha, Briseyda Mendoza-Aguayo, Baktazh Azizi, Zachary Dunn, Ayah Bany-Mohammed, Tracy Wong, Kay McGarrell, and Brandon Garcia
Report Authors: Zachary Dunn, Baktazh Azizi, Brandon Garcia, Ruben Romeo, Amanda Vanni, and Andrea Moore
Number of Participants: 41
Participant Description: Undergraduate and graduate students at USC

Demographic Breakdown:

		Count	Percent**
Race/Ethnicity	Asian/Asian American	23	56.10%
	Caucasian or White	12	29.27%
	Hispanic or Latino/a/x or Chicano/a/x	6	14.63%
	Middle Eastern, North African, Arab/Arab American	2	4.88%
	African/African American/Black	2	4.88%
Gender Identity	Woman	26	63.41%
	Man	14	34.15%
	Genderqueer/Gender Non-conforming	1	2.44%
Degree Program	Bachelor's	21	51.22%

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USC Student Health - Office for Health Promotion Strategy, Backbone for the USC Well-being Collective at hpstrategy@usc.edu

	Master's	12	29.27%
	Other Professional Doctorate	1	2.44%
	PhD	8	19.51%
International/Domestic	International	15	36.59%
	Domestic	26	63.41%

*N = 41 total participants

**Sums of category percentages may exceed 100.00% due to participants' ability to select multiple responses

15 academic schools and divisions were represented, including Dornsife College of Letters, Arts and Sciences (14 students), Viterbi School of Engineering (10), Marshall School of Business (9), School of Cinematic Arts (5), Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism (5), School of Dramatic Arts (3), Herman Ostrow School of Dentistry (2), Roski School of Art and Design (2), Thornton School of Music (2), Price School of Public Policy (1), Rossier School of Education (1), Leventhal School of Accounting (1), Iovine and Young Academy (1), Keck School of Medicine (1), and School of Pharmacy (1).

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What does a safe and inclusive return to campus look like?
2. What policies and procedures are students willing to support to ensure a safe and inclusive return for all student populations?
3. What do students need from the university in order to support a safe and inclusive return to campus?

FINDINGS

Assertion #1: While students are excited to return to campus, many expressed support for a cautious reopening with continued public health measures in place.

Mixed Feelings of Excitement and Anxiety
Students described mixed feelings of excitement and anxiety with the return to campus. Many discussed how much they missed the positive energy of campus life and the intimacy of in-person gatherings. As Broccolini shared, "I just want to be able to walk around campus and feel a part of a community that's not just through Zoom." Many echoed this sentiment, detailing how difficult it has been to stay connected to the campus community while attending school remotely. Students such as Pineapple felt like their social lives were negatively impacted, stating "for the past year, I don't think I had any social life" and several students felt they were not

having the "college experience." These students' sentiments reflect the difficulty in maintaining social wellbeing and a sense of collegiate community in a virtual setting.

Students were enthusiastic about resuming in-person academic studies and career preparation. As Sweet Potato said,

> *I find that Zoom is great and I'm grateful for this technology, but it's not the same at all as far as developing relationships with your professors, which I think was one of the most important things to me at school, and something that I really valued.*

The students indicated that in-person classes sparked not only closer relationships with faculty, but also deeper conversations and connections with peers.

In addition to a reduction in academic engagement, the virtual environment affected the academic progress of a broad range of students, from art students that missed out on in-person projects to graduate and undergraduate students unable to gain lab experience. First-year undergrad Grapefruit shared, "My professors would always talk about how like, 'Oh, if we were in person we would have done…' They talk about so many fun things we could have done with our art projects." While efforts have been made to accommodate students of all disciplines, it is clearly difficult to replicate the in-person USC academic experience. Parallel to advancing academic progress, students were excited to return to campus for career opportunities. One student emphasized the importance of in-person activity for her job prospects, stating, "My industry specifically is completely reliant on the people that you know, so when we can't be together, we can't get work...we're all just itching to get back in-person" (Strawberry). The students' voices highlight the varying academic and career needs of students, which can potentially guide future reopening policies, such as consideration for students in certain majors.

Though students shared feelings of excitement about the return to campus, many also expressed anxiety that their peers would not comply with public health guidelines, creating an unsafe campus environment. Students reported that their classmates engaged in risky behaviors, such as going to parties and large social gatherings, without consideration for others. Grapefruit said, "even though their friends tell them not to, even though their friends criticize them in person telling them to stop partying so much, they still would go on every weekend, going out around partying." This sentiment was echoed by several students that were also disappointed by their peers' disregard for COVID-19 health precautions, and these responses underscore the concern students have for the actions of their peers. Many students felt that it would be up to the student body to hold each other accountable, as Avocado and Sweet Potato shared, "It is really up to us to go back to normalcy" and "addressing that stigma of being very strict about mask wearing and distancing, and trying to change the student culture about that," respectively. The focus group participants recognized that maintaining adherence to social distancing and other guidelines would be challenging, and that students should lead by example to encourage other students to create a safe campus environment. In addition to concerns about their peers' compliance with safety measures, students voiced concern about the safety of the surrounding community members. As Cherry said, "Privileged students are moving into USC, but what community are they actually affecting? They're affecting the black and brown community around

them." Cherry's thoughts and those of other focus group members suggest that students want to not only protect their fellow classmates, but the community as a whole.

Students also expressed apprehension about the transition to in-person learning, as many have become accustomed to online learning. One such student shared, "One thing I'm hesitant about returning to campus is the transition from online to in person. I don't remember which is easier, which is harder at this point, and I feel maybe at home, I'm able to do more" (Carrot). This statement highlights the difficulty some students may experience when resuming in-person activities on campus and the diverse sentiments of the student population. While many students are eager to get back to campus, a proportion of the student body is worried about the transition and additional resources might be necessary to help students manage the wide range of academic and experiential changes that will take place as we begin to emerge from the pandemic.

Support for Continued Safety Measures

Although students expressed optimism toward an in-person reopening of the USC campus, continued support for public health measures became notable thematic elements in many responses. Focus group participants highlighted the importance of a variety of safety measures toward infection control, including vaccination against COVID-19, mandatory weekly testing, contact tracing for positive cases, mask wearing, providing students with personal protective equipment (PPE), and social distancing, reflecting a collective desire for a cautious approach regarding on-campus activities. During a focus group session, one participant noted that: "My main concern is that everybody should get vaccinated before returning to campus and when the campus [is] open, still everybody should wear the mask and take precautions about the COVID spread" (Spinach). Another student echoed similar concerns regarding on-campus safety, calling for "blanket mandatory testing at least once a week… Right now, it's about twice a week, but [for] everybody who has access to campus, I think that's a policy that should continue" (Sweet Potato). Based on participants' responses, there is compelling evidence to suggest that students would support the institution of both preventive and protective measures in order to mitigate disease transmission and facilitate a safe return to the university.

While focus group respondents were generally supportive of USC-initiated safety policies and procedures, there were numerous questions raised regarding the consistency, clarity, and continuity of COVID-related communications from the university. Students felt messaging from USC frequently and unexpectedly changed, with one student noting that:

> *I haven't really felt like the university has been entirely upfront and honest and that's made it quite challenging for me to fully buy into the plans that are being made. I think that they could do a better job of being transparent in terms of their decision making processes, when they're going to do things and why. I personally would be a lot more willing to support them and follow all of those things to the T (Wombat).*

Perhaps due to continually evolving updates from local, state, and national public health agencies surrounding the pandemic, students perceived university messaging as inconsistent and unpredictable, with one participant emphasizing that "clear communication is important, because I feel like over the past year, it's kind of been not super clear and kind of keeps changing, and the university says things, but then they don't follow up on it" (Lettuce). Students indicated

messaging from the university should provide frequent COVID-19 information and updates, safety reminders, clarification of expectations and enforcement regarding campus behaviors, resources available to students, and clear return plans for fall semester 2021. These responses underscore the significance of straightforward and transparent communications in fostering student assurance and creating an environment that promotes collaborative safety efforts within the USC community when in-person academic activities resume.

Assertion #2: **Students need additional mental health support as they transition back to campus and cope with the past years' traumatic events.**

Focus group participants asserted that students need additional mental health support from the university in order to have a safe and inclusive transition to campus and cope with the traumatic events of the past year. In the focus group sessions, students described feelings of increased sadness and loneliness during the online semester. For example, one participant mentioned,

> *I think it comes to just the university being mindful for the way the pandemic has affected the students. Even if, best-case scenario, if things are completely back to normal, people are happy to be on campus again and whatnot, this still just happened and we'll still be just recovering from it in all sorts of ways, emotionally, financially. Some people will be grieving and whatnot. It's going to still hang over it. And everyone's going to need the room for a little extra breathing room to deal with that (Cabbage).*

Many students expressed feeling overwhelmed with the rapidly changing circumstances of the pandemic. In some cases, students were balancing academic responsibilities with taking care of family members at home. Others were taking on additional hours at work to help support their family. Regardless of students' personal circumstances, they expressed the need for the university to recognize the trauma students have experienced over the last year. This could point to a need for the university to be mindful of how they communicate with students and set expectations with the return to campus.

Given the increased feelings of sadness and loneliness experienced by students, many participants indicated a greater need for mental health resources in the coming year, and that there would be a need to raise awareness and access to on-campus mental health services. As one participant mentioned,

> *It's going to be really frustrating if we all come back in the fall and everybody is going to probably need a therapist, because this has been really weird and traumatic. And if we all come back, and I go to Engemann and they say, 'Oh, we don't have any appointments.' I'm going to be really [expletive] pissed, obviously. Oh, sorry. But I'd be really upset (Brussels Sprouts).*

This student's sentiment reflects their concern about the university's ability to provide sufficient mental health services on campus, given the anticipated rise in demand.

Other students described the importance of co-creating mental health policies with students. A few students brought up USC's implementation of wellness days as an example of a policy that was created without enough student input. Students shared that the wellness days did not achieve their intended purpose, as many professors assigned work, leaving many students frustrated. As Sweet Potato shared,

> *While I think that the wellness days are much needed, I have heard so many stories of students still being assigned a lot of work on these days, and there not being clear expectations for professors about what a wellness day should mean (Sweet Potato).*

Many students expressed their desire for their professors to be more understanding and provide more leniency during the transition. In particular, some students expressed that not every professor granted a grace period for missed academic work due to students with COVID. Additionally, some professors considered mental health as a valid excuse, while others did not. This highlights the demand for professors to understand that students will "need the room for a little extra breathing room to deal with" issues brought about during the pandemic. These students' sentiments reflect the importance of integrating students in the decision-making process for student policy, as well as the need for faculty to support students and adhere to policies in support of student wellbeing.

Assertion #3: Specialized attention and resources are needed to support students who have been disproportionately impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic and who face uncertainty and additional challenges with the return to campus.

Focus group participants described a need for specialized attention and resources from the university for students who have been disproportionately impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic and who may face additional challenges in the return to campus. The student groups identified include students facing financial difficulty, incoming second-year students, international students, and students with disabilities. Students advocated for the university to recognize the impact of the pandemic on these groups, and provide appropriate and tailored support including financial, experiential, informational, and instructional.

Many students articulated a desire for the university to be cognizant of students' financial situations and a need for increased financial support as the pandemic continues and amidst the transition back to campus. Of particular note, students suggested that the university take into consideration circumstances that certain students or student groups may be facing, and respond flexibly. As Spinach said, "I think the university should consider the financial condition of the students because, due to the pandemic, a lot of families have been harmed badly." As suggested by this student, the pandemic likely had varying levels of implications for students from different families and in different circumstances. In particular, some students are struggling with being

able to meet their basic needs. The most prominent concern students highlighted was the ability to pay for rent. One student shared:

> *I'm also really concerned about money, because part of my rent is paid with the amount of money USC gives me...But just in case, I'm trying to get a job, but there's also COVID still going on… a pandemic. So I don't want to possibly make my housemates be at risk because of my issues...Yeah. So, the financial aspect of next fall semester is kind of concerning to me (Grapefruit).*

Due to uncertainty regarding financial aid, this student articulated the challenge of balancing their personal economic well-being (i.e., trying to get a job) with potentially affecting the health and welfare of the students they live with. Although this is one example of one student's situation, it warrants consideration that students will be facing a variety of unique and challenging circumstances, including varying levels of financial uncertainty, in their return to campus this fall.

Graduate students in particular voiced concern about how to sustain their basic needs and pay rent given insufficient financial support from the university, in addition to a lack of support systems outside the university. In this specific population, students noted a significant difference in the amount of financial resources provided by the university and that many graduate students do not have financial support from their families. Subsequently, participants reported feeling significantly less supported by the university [in comparison to undergraduates] due to this confluence of factors. One graduate student participant mentioned:

> *USC could just acknowledge that even though we are staying home, we need a little bit more help than the credit that was given to us. We do need the extra financial assistance, and, for a lot of people, that's going to mean relocating back to Los Angeles and having to find an apartment, that is having to work with the post-pandemic budget now that's even less than what we had beforehand"* (Strawberry).

Strawberry shared this sentiment after discussing their frustration over additional COVID-19 aid only being available to undergraduate students. This sentiment highlights the financial disparities that the graduate student population may encounter post-pandemic, and may struggle to manage as they return to campus. Whether perceived or real, the lack of financial support reported by graduate students may continue to foster a sense of isolation and perceived lack of support from the university.

In addition to the concerns about financial conditions and the need for university support and resources, three additional student subpopulations may face additional challenges in the return to campus due to the disproportionate impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Those groups

include incoming second-year students, international students, and students with disabilities. Participants described the need for tailored support and resources from the university for these student groups due to the unique circumstances and challenges that these students face.

Incoming second-year students raised concerns about the transition to an in-person campus setting amid not having any prior in-person college experience. As Lettuce shared,

I think, as a freshman and someone who hasn't really had that university experience or been on campus, that would also be a concern, because I don't know what that transition will be like, and also just trying to balance having kind of freshmen, or I guess now sophomore activities and welcome events, so that we can get to know other people and get to know the university, but still making it safe and accessible would be a concern.

This group of students expressed uncertainty and worry over the transition to the in-person college experience, in particular because their first year was virtual, while also navigating safety concerns in the midst of the pandemic. As suggested by the student's conflicting wording around being a "freshman, or I guess now sophomore," it is likely many rising sophomores will be adjusting and potentially grappling with their identity as an incoming student in the transition from virtual to in-person learning. It is possible that many rising second-year students will similarly struggle to find a balance in acclimating to campus and trying to connect with peers, while also managing safety concerns. A second-year-specific welcome experience and guidance to manage the unrealized expectations of this group's freshman year, while keeping in mind safety concerns, could help this group in navigating their return to campus.

International students shared concerns over university communications regarding vaccinations and their return to campus. One student shared, "I'm currently living in India... I'm … confused because we have vaccine [sic] here in India available as well, and we have vaccine [sic] available in USC as well. So I'm not sure if Indian vaccines are approved in the US" (Okra). In this case, the student shares uncertainty over whether the vaccine from their country will be accepted or approved for return to the United States and to USC. Although communication is not explicitly mentioned, it is clear that this student is unaware of the requirements for international students to return to campus, which is in turn causing confusion. When expanding further to the topic of vaccine distribution and outreach, another student expressed:

We need to include international students as well and ...giving them that option that you're taking the vaccine and you're safe... I'm an international student and I was so scared to take the vaccine because what if something happened to me or anything. So, ... [the university] needs to make sure [international students are] going to be fine and they have the support of the university if anything happened (Broccoli).

This student describes two needs. First, they are indicating that the university needs to include international students in vaccine distribution efforts (once they are on campus), and second, that they need to communicate the safety of the vaccine and that appropriate support services are available in the case that students experience adverse effects. A related concern that emerged was flexibility and dedicated support for international students' return to campus. Carrot suggested that international students receive "extra time to come back to campus" or that the university offer a range of return dates so that international students have "an option to choose." Another student advocated that it's "very important to find space for [international students] to live on campus because … that would help in transitioning back to school" (Potato). These students' comments highlight the unique circumstances that international students may face in their return to campus and suggest that additional resources and support may be warranted. Overall, it is important that the university provide flexible return to campus options, and address uncertainty and provide ample reassurance surrounding vaccine availability, requirements, and safety as international students plan for their return to the U.S. and to campus.

Students with disabilities were identified as the third student population that experienced a disproportionate impact due to COVID-19. Students with disabilities expressed difficulties with the previous format of in-person classroom settings, and advocated for additional university support for their needs in the transition back to campus. One student shared:

> *I've heard from students with disabilities, having the option to do classroom mode is huge for some people with disabilities, because it's not always possible to get to class, or get to a workspace. So just keeping those options open for people to make it accessible to have an education, I feel is also very important (Brussels Sprouts).*

This student identifies the need for more accessible or hybrid classroom and out-of-classroom options for students with disabilities. In addition to providing easier access to students with mobility issues, online classes also provide a variety of accessibility features such as closed captioning and recordings. Given that students have a spectrum of varying needs, providing hybrid options and/or working accommodations, with particular focus on students with disabilities, could help not only those students but other students as well in the transition back to on-campus learning and activities. A proactive approach to accessibility and providing accommodations to students with disabilities could positively impact the transition back to campus for a group of students that traditionally faces significant and systemic academic barriers.

Overall, students have faced and will continue to navigate several stressors and obstacles that emerged due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the virtual setting. This research suggests that additional financial support and resources may be warranted for students struggling with basic

needs and for graduate students, as well as tailored support for incoming second-year students, international students, and students with disabilities. In particular, students from these groups highlighted the need for support and resources related to second-year students' acclimation to in-person experiences, international students' uncertainty with traveling and transitioning to the United States, and in-class and out-of-class accommodations for students with disabilities. These students' reflections indicate that such support and resources should be flexible and considerate of the nuanced needs of students disproportionately impacted by the pandemic and who may face additional challenges as USC returns to in-person learning.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Mental Health
1. In collaboration with student leaders, develop methods for raising awareness of campus mental health resources.
2. Expand and invest in campus mental health resources to support students who have faced grief and trauma from last year.
    o Provide student circles or group counseling specific to the topic of COVID-19 stressors or trauma
3. Equip staff and faculty members with sustainable practices to support students' well-being.
    o Encourage faculty members to follow wellness day guidelines
    o Educate and train faculty and staff to understand and respond to student mental health challenges and trauma due to COVID-19
4. Offer small and socially distant events on campus to foster social connections and community among students.

Tailored Support for Students
5. Partner with relevant campus departments and student groups to identify methods to best support students in the return to campus. Suggested focus areas and constituents include:
    o Accessibility: USC Office of Student Accessibility Services, USG Student Assembly for Accessibility, GSG Committee on Institutional Access and Inclusivity
    o International Student Concerns: USC Office of International Services, USG International Student Assembly, GSG International Students Concerns Committee
6. Expand and increase the visibility of resources available to traditionally marginalized students.
    o Target advertising/campaigns to increase awareness of resources
7. Implement hybrid classroom options amid transition.

Communication and Engagement
8. Create clear and consistent communications for students that focus on COVID information, public health guidelines and recommendations, expectations from students, enforcements for violations/infractions, and timetables for return to campus plans.
    o Include communication on approved vaccinations and USC policies regarding vaccinations in one place
    o Conduct additional outreach to international students in the distribution of this information
9. Facilitate bi-directional communication between students and administrators to develop policies and resources as students transition back to campus.

      o   Example: town halls, focus groups, open forums

Public Health Measures

10. Continue to implement evidence-based public health measures to prevent and mitigate disease transmission among the student population.
    - Offer and promote COVID-19 vaccinations to students and faculty
    - Provide PPE to students (i.e. masks, hand sanitizing stations)
    - Continue mandatory testing requirements and contact tracing
    - Promote safe gathering practices with small sizes and social distancing
11. Engage with student leaders to foster a culture of collective student responsibility and safety surrounding COVID-19.
    - Disseminate safety messages, health guidelines, recommendations, and practices to RSOs, student government, and other student leadership groups
    - Promote collective efforts and accountability for the student community as opposed to fear-based messaging