AUGUST 2020

**IMPACTS TO WELLNESS/
MENTAL HEALTH**

Pandemic Anxiety and the Desocialized College Student

COVID-19 has changed lives around the world, from the way people work, learn, teach, and deliver or receive healthcare. At HMC Architects, we are exploring the pandemic as an opportunity to learn, reinvent, and most importantly help our clients amid this crisis.

As part of this ongoing research effort, we are committed to sharing our findings with the industry on five main areas of Technology, Adaptability and Flexibility, Regulatory/ Budgetary/Institutional Impacts, Space Needs, Reduction, and Restructuring, and Impacts to Wellness/Mental Health. In this article, we discuss our findings on the impacts of the desocialized student's wellness and mental health, and how higher education can be proactive in addressing this vital need of their students.

METHOD
A group of representatives including higher education clients, students, contractors, and consultants was invited to participate in individual phone interviews to share their insight and understanding of short-term and long-term impacts of COVID-19 on facility design and operation for college campuses and universities. The interview discussions focused on the impacts of this pandemic on student's health and well-being.

BAD NEWS/GOOD NEWS
If you have contributed as a parent, employee, or consultant to a college campus, you likely were doing at least a decent job at supporting an engaging and enriched academic experience for students—until spring of 2020. We know this because quickly after the collegiate experience students signed up for was replaced with face masks and shelter-at-home orders, these same students started suffering more than ever from a lack of socialization, food and shelter security, and financial stability.

The following paper explores the context, fundamental stressors, and social climate inherent in supporting wellness and mental health in the COVID-19 era. Don't worry. It's not all grey clouds. There are some great findings we've discovered through this research that could improve how we as architects and planners consider mental health as a factor in design, and how together, we might leverage the positives during this exceptional period in our lives for mutual benefit.

DEVELOPMENTAL CONTEXT
We've all seen the images of young people crowding the beaches and bars, enjoying spring and summer break, as if the pandemic did not exist. At best, you're watching this from the comfort of your home because your employer

asked you to go home in February. At worst, your employer left you altogether and you have some extra time on your hands to immerse yourself in the wildly unpredictable news cycle. In either case or somewhere in the middle, these images are mildly infuriating. Why am I being socially conscious while others play? They're endangering people and extending the nuisance of this whole thing. Here are two points of reference to calm your rage:

1. Research indicates these Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)-ambivalent party scenes are not the norm. According to a survey by the Healthy Minds Network for Research on Adolescent and Young Adult Mental Health and the American College Health Association, about 60 percent say they have been "very closely" following recommendations for hygiene practices, and about 70 percent say they have been "very closely" following recommendations for physical and social distancing.[1]

2. Students need to understand the altruistic benefit of social distancing. Note we aren't talking about being better at isolation. That would deny who we are as humans. As primates, we have evolved to seek out socialization as a means of survival. Rebecca Renner describes the genetic paradox in her National Geographic article, "Why some people can't resist crowds despite the pandemic." She says, "During the

pandemic, the coronavirus has capitalized on our dependence on social interactions to spread the disease. But within that same evolutionary drive lies a possible key to making social distancing easier. As primates evolved into humans, they also developed a penchant for altruism and protecting one another."[2] Students need to understand the greater good benefit of being socially responsible, without giving up socialization altogether. Remember, their brains are still developing the part that allows them to make good decisions for themselves (executive function). Enter the role of the parent, professor, and professional to guide them.

THE STRESSORS

Students are struggling to balance home, work, friends, family, and school. This is a new paradigm that is stressing young and not-so-young alike. Understanding the underlying cause of anxiety and stress in college students will allow us to better understand how we might support them.

- According to the Healthy Minds Network survey, 66 percent of students report the pandemic has caused them more financial stress—a known predictor of student mental health.

- According to Thomas R. Insel, former director of the National Institute of Mental Health

"

Eighty percent of college students said that COVID-19 has had a negative effect on their mental health and 20 percent said their mental health has 'significantly worsened.'

"

(NIMH), "Because 75 percent of adults with a mental illness first began experiencing it before age 25, mental problems are 'the chronic disorders of the student-aged population.' The rates of depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and eating disorders in this population have been very high, and that was prior to January 2020."[3]

• According to Jorgelina Manna-Rea in her article regarding a University of South Florida (USF) study on COVID-19's impact on mental health, "In a survey of 2,000 participants conducted by nonprofit organization Active Minds, 80 percent of college students said that COVID-19 has had a negative effect on their mental health and 20 percent said their mental health has 'significantly worsened.' Of those who responded to Active Minds' survey, 80 percent said they experienced loneliness or isolation."[4]

This tells us two things: First, that two-thirds of students need financial assistance right now, and second, we need to be proactive in addressing mental health needs, because the issue is real.

SCREENS FINALLY REVEAL HOW MUCH THEY HIDE
With the increased reliance on technology to provide our basic services and socialization, we know even less about what we don't know. There's an inherent opacity to technology that impacts the wellness of students – the screen. It's a lot easier for a professor to gauge engagement by reading the micro-muscular movements in a student's face than by tracking their Zoom attendance. It is simply more difficult to gauge mental health online. While some suggest improved communication between professors and students, are professors leveraging this opportunity to check in on student's true well-being outside of the academic coursework? Compounding the disconnect is a reported decline in health clinic usage.

The screen has revealed to some that distance learning does not work. Many in our survey reported inconsistent learning outcomes

using online instruction. Zoom, and other online platforms, require new social norms in the virtual classroom to solve for distractions and uncourteous behavior, and require those instructing to shift from business-as-usual, sage-on-the-stage to more adept methods in this new-ish medium.

Students who are driven (through internal or external motivation) and have the means to persist will find a way to show up to class online. While the funny superimposed background might appear to paint a rosy picture, let's not forget for some the world one foot to the left of the screen could be as lonely as an Antonioni film. Food and housing insecurities have increased while mental health has decreased since the spring.

SPRING'S SOCIAL PARALLAX
As we reached out to dozens of institutions and design professionals to gather this information, the U.S. started an historic movement for social equity. From observation, social protests were not an excuse to get out, but rather a need to exercise the altruistic DNA we all have inside. Social equity trumped viral exposure in a way we've never seen before. It made us look at the context of COVID-19's impact on our mental health through a different lens. The social protests unintentionally offered a moment of mental health reprieve to those who felt compelled to speak up. While the cause of the protests wasn't positive, the optimist in us might see speaking up as a cathartic act to those in need of getting out to scream a little.

NOW FOR THE BRIGHT SIDE. WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?
1. Financial stress leads to mental health decline. Food and housing security are connected to this. Extending or enhancing aid and providing access to food and shelter will alleviate other pressures on the student.

2. It's the perfect time to help. Three out of four people who will have mental health issues later in life will start to experience this in their college years. Proactivity now will forever improve each person's life and serve the

> ❝ The proactive steps we take to better understand and offer assistance in the elements of student's lives that promote wellness will benefit us now, and when we return to the new version of normal. ❞

greater good. Think of it like contributing to your 401(k) in your twenties instead of your fifties.

3. Teaching students to look for strategies to find balance in all aspects of their life will help each individual aspect of their life. Think yoga, religion, communing with nature, talking with a friend, etc. A summarized Deion Sanders quote might help to convey the need for balance: "Look good, feel good, play good." Each are connected and influence the other.[5]

Thankfully, our data set revealed that in some instances, student services are being met as well or better than before. We also discovered that drop rates are holding steady.

COVID-19's impact to this generation is real and profound. The long-term impact of a desocialized student is less known but must be met with socially responsible options that focus on altruistic benefits. In normal times, this is a profoundly tricky time in one's development. Students need to socialize to help them cope with what is going on. As architects and planners, we have long advocated for engagement to promote academic and personal success. What happens when the campus environment can no longer provide the emotional and physical armature for one's college experience? The proactive steps we take to better understand and offer assistance in the elements of student's lives that promote wellness will benefit us now, and when we return to the new version of normal.

REFERENCES
1. Excerpts from survey by the Healthy Minds Network for Research on Adolescent and Young Adult Mental Health and the American College Health Association https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2020/07/13/survey-finds-higher-prevalence-depression-among-students-and-difficulties-accessing

2. Rebecca Renner quotes: https://www.nationalgeographic.com/science/2020/06/why-people-cannot-resist-crowds-socializing-despite-the-coronavirus-pandemic-cvd/#close

3. Thomas Insel Quotes: https://www.usnews.com/education/best-colleges/articles/how-college-students-are-managing-coronavirus-stress

4. Jorgelina Manna-Rea's article on May 28, 2020: USF study investigates Covid-19 effects on mental health: http://www.usforacle.com/2020/05/28/usf-study-investigates-covid-19-effects-on-mental-health/

5. Deion Sanders, Twitter post on 1/29/12: https://twitter.com/DeionSanders/status/163676101669945344

For additional questions, contact:

Ken Salyer
Higher Education Practice Leader
ken.salyer@hmcarchitects.com

James Sink
Design Principal
james.sink@hmcarchitects.com