Accessible Education Survey Results and Discussion Spring 2020

Report Written: June 3-6, 2020
Survey Conducted: April 29- June 3, 2020

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Purpose

The survey referenced in this report was created to clarify how the abrupt shift to online learning as a result of the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic has impacted students who have utilized resources from the Williams College Office of Accessible Education. A link to the survey was provided to all students registered with the Office of Accessible Education on the date of its dissemination, April 29, 2020. The survey remained available to this population until June 3, 2020. All responses remained anonymous. The questions provided to respondents elicited data from responses that included a combination of ranking, multiple-choice, and written statements. In total, 110 students completed the survey. Not all questions were answered by every student.

Demographics

An approximate number of total students that utilized the Office of Accessible Education (Spring 2020): 188
Total number of students who participated: 110

25.2% identified as the class of 2023
35.9% identified as the class of 2022
15.5% identified as the class of 2021
15.5% identified as the class of 2020
7.8% identified as off-cycle/alternative timeline
Total population: 103
Utilization
47.6% identified that they had utilized the office less than a year
25.2% identified that they had utilized the office between 1-2 years
16.5% identified that they had utilized the office between 2-3 years
8.7% identified that they had utilized the office between 3-4 years
1.9% identified that they had utilized the office for more than 4 years
Total population: 103
Diversity of Population
To better understand the diversity of the student population served by OAE during the Spring 2020 semester, a question was created to allow students to check off any minoritized/underrepresented populations that they identify with. In this question, students could choose multiple identities.

- 44.9% identified as a low-income student
- 73.1% identified as a financial aid student
- 16.7% identified as an international student
- 28.2% identified as a first-generation student
- 56.4% identified as a student of color
- 53.8% identified as an LGBTQ+ student
- 1.3% identified as a non-traditional student
- 1.3% identified as a student with a disability

Total population: 78
Consideration of the demographic data

The data suggests that first-years and sophomores make up a significant segment of the population served by OAE. Although not representative of the total population, it suggests that a sizable number of first-years and sophomores were also more inclined to respond to the survey. Whether this is due to older students having more considerations related to coursework, employment or impending graduation is unclear. More analysis however should be done to better understand the longitudinal experience of students with OAE.

The 78 of 110 responses identified with one or more minoritized/underrepresented populations. Given that ~71% identify with one or more of these populations, it is important to keep in mind that the Office is an essential resource to students who are minoritized or feel marginalized on campus. The majority of students identified as being on financial aid, students of color, and LGBTQ+. More research should be done to understand unique problems that may be facing these specific populations in the request and receipt of accommodations and how the Office can work to address them. It is also worth noting that many students served by OAE may be more vulnerable to drastic shifts in the structure and support provided by the College.
Remote Learning
This section of the survey was composed of multiple-choice, short answer, and numerical ranking questions. An explanation of the data will follow along with a summary and suggestion for future plans.

Question 1:
How satisfied do you feel about the quality of work you are producing in your courses (scale of 1-5)?
15.5% (1) Dissatisfied
24.5% (2) Somewhat Dissatisfied
17.5% (3) Neutral
26.2% (4) Somewhat Satisfied
16.5% (5) Satisfied
Total: 103

The majority of responses, 42.7 %, felt that the quality of work they were producing in their courses was somewhat satisfied to satisfied. It should be noted that 40% of students felt somewhat dissatisfied to dissatisfied with their work. Absent corresponding data from
a “typical” semester it is impossible to assert with any reliability if the 40% figure is a significant departure from the norm. A number this high should be noted and given some consideration should online learning continue in subsequent semesters. Given the preponderance of first and second year students in this survey this number could also reflect the disruption to necessary work routines. It is not uncommon for OAE students to rely heavily on routine in the management of diagnosed conditions.

**Question 2:**
What factors, if any, have negatively impacted your performance in your courses?

- 61.2% Academic Pressures
- 23.3% Financial Pressures
- 54.4% Domestic Responsibilities/Pressures
- 78.6% Physical and Mental Health
- 67% Time Management
- 1% Recent Death of a Family Member
- 1% Inadequate Internet Service
- 1% Pass/Fail

Total 103

**Factors that Negatively Impacted Academic Performance**

![Bar Chart](Image)
Students were given the option to select more than one category and identify through a “fill-in-the-blank” option any other factors that were relevant to them. The majority felt that academic pressure and physical and mental health were significant factors that negatively impacted their performance. In the survey, “academic pressure” (was identified to include, but not limited to: communicating with faculty, faculty relationship, and/or workload. Additional data would need to be collected to better understand why for some students, faculty and student relationships are not working well. 78.6% of students identified that their physical and mental health deteriorated while being home during the pandemic. This is a clear suggestion that students were impacted by circumscribed access to health and wellness services. Real consideration about ongoing access to treatment as a key variable in student achievement during continued online learning should be given. Other data collected, indicated the difficulties of navigating a Williams online education from home.

Question 3:
What factors, if any, have positively impacted your performance in your courses?
77.7% Academic Support
16.5% Financial Support
18.4% Domestic Support
8.7% Physical and Mental Health Support
18.4% Time Management Skills
1% Talking with Friends Regularly
9% None
Total 103
The survey defined academic support as relationships with faculty and academic accommodations. This response may suggest the utility for students in being provided with supports such as extensions and additional time on exams while learning online. It may also reinforce the key role that sustained relationships between faculty and students play in a remote learning environment and specifically for students who receive support from OAE. When creating an online learning environment faculty may want to consider ways that engagement with critical student supports and one on one time with students can be incorporated.

**Question 4:**
How satisfied do you feel about the transition to online platforms (including the communication process)?

18.4% (1) Dissatisfied
32% (2) Somewhat dissatisfied
28.3% (3) Neutral
15.5% (4) Somewhat satisfied
5.8% (5) Satisfied
Total 103
This question was created to understand the transition from in-person learning environments and remote learning platforms. Was the information communicated in a timely and organized fashion? Did students feel satisfied with the information provided to them? 50.2% of students identified that they felt dissatisfied to somewhat dissatisfied with the transition to remote learning. All involved with the rapid dissolution of the traditional learning environment in early March 2020 would agree that little about the transition was ideal. What may be suggested however is that some faculty provided more clarity about the transition than others. This could indicate that students were not adequately apprised about how remote learning would occur in some classes or were overwhelmed by information from some.

*Question 5 and 6:*
What is your preferred online communication platform or method for synchronous learning with faculty & classmates? (Zoom, Google Meet, etc.)
What is your preferred method of disseminating classroom material and course information asynchronously? (Glow, E-mail, Audio and/or Video for lectures, Audio and/or Video supplements, PowerPoint, Google Drive)

*Exact data could not be calculated for questions 5 and 6.

Students were allowed to respond to the question as a short answer. The responses to the questions depended on the type of class being taught. Students who referenced larger lecture/discussion classes preferred Zoom over Google Hangout because of the gallery feature and speed of the platform. Students largely indicated that Google Meet often lagged in audio and visuals. For centralizing information students overwhelmingly preferred Glow and Email as platforms to communicate course work. Glow was slightly more preferred because it offered a more centralized place of deadlines and information. Finally, the majority of students cited that video lectures and PowerPoint audio lectures were their preferred way of learning materials. This could be due to the flexibility these files offer. If a student is in a different time zone or has domestic responsibility they can start the lecture later or return to it.

**Question 7:**
How have online formats impacted your comprehension of the material?
61.2% Negatively
35% Neutral
3.9% Positively
Total 103
Responses to this question suggest a general dissatisfaction with online learning. As noted earlier, the abrupt nature of the transition was obviously not ideal and did not provide faculty with more than a few weeks prior support or guidance. Concerns about comprehension are of particular concern for OAE students who manage diagnosis that foreground concerns regarding attention deficit, anxiety and depression. 61.2% of OAE students identified that the online format had negatively impacted their comprehension of material. This number suggests that strong recommendations to faculty are warranted highlighting best practices in course structure and management.

**Question 8:**
Allowed students to elaborate on the response to Question 7. Many of the expanded responses cited the lack of peer-to-peer discussion and structured class time as significant impediments to comprehension. Health issues also figured prominently as a variable with some students noting personal experience with the COVID-19 virus (either being diagnosed themselves or having to care for family members). Others noted the overuse of technology leading to physical complications (e.i. migraines and/or eyes strain). The responses in Question 8 identify specific challenges and suggest how important ancillary
features of the academic experience (peer to peer interaction and discussion) may be for students who choose Williams College.

**Question 9:**
How has your academic workload volume changed?
27.2% Increased workload
37.8% Similar workload
35% Decreased workload
Total 103
Across the board there seems to be an even response for the three options.

**Question 10:**
Have expectations of academic work in the online environment been generally realistic?

*A glitch occurred with this question that allowed students to write a response*

The majority of students responded with a yes. This may suggest that the majority of students polled identified the modified workload as realistic. Some specifically identified
this as due to the flexible deadlines and pass/fail system. Although many answered yes, there was a significant portion that identified inconsistencies in academic workload across different divisions. Division III courses were most identified as being unrealistic.

*Question 11:*
How satisfied are you with the time and flexibility provided to complete coursework, projects, and assessments?
6.8% (1) Dissatisfied
14.6% (2) Somewhat dissatisfied
21.4% (3) Neutral
35.9% (4) Somewhat satisfied
17.5% (5) Satisfied
4% other answers
Total 103

This question was designed to get a better understanding of how flexible timelines provided by faculty were viewed. 53.4% of students identified that they were somewhat satisfied to satisfied with the time and flexibility given to complete coursework. Given
previous answers it can be assumed that students responded positively when given more time to complete their work or have alternative timelines.

**Question 12:**
What new obstacles or benefits, if any, have resulted from working in a remote learning environment?

An beneficial outcome of the campus-wide utilization of online learning may be an enhanced proficiency and capacity. For students with temporary impairments or chronic illnesses that require time outside the classroom, clear options that have been exercised en masse now exist. Other identified benefits include:

a. recorded lecture material creates more effective consumption and comprehension of lecture materials and comprehension
b. audio and visual presentations allow students to go back and listen to material to review for exams or develop papers..

If there is a continuation of campus-wide online learning the majority of OAE students cited a potential obstacle in the lack of structure in many courses. There is every expectation that online learning in upcoming semesters will benefit from additional time for planning and preparation. This does not mitigate the additional concerns expressed by respondents in this section regarding:

a. the need for a continuation of student organizations,
b. the inability to disengage from school while working from home or
   c. the absence of a designated work space.
   d. the lack of IWS services for students who rely heavily on these services (including inability to get medications).
   e. the physical toll of remote learning has caused eye strain, migraines, and carpal tunnel for some students.

**Conclusion:**

The survey was created to better understand how students served by OAE felt about the remote learning environment necessitated by the COVID-19 pandemic. While hardly ideal, the experience served to foreground concerns and areas of emphasis to guide our
support for students should online learning continue in the fall and subsequent semesters. Students served by OAE represent the diversity of our undergraduate population. They share the common trait of benefiting from strategic alterations to an established structure. The shift to online learning led to disruptions in established instructional methods and subsequently the carefully honed or developing strategies of learning essential for many OAE students. Transitioning to remote learning, meant the end of in-person discussions that provide specific cues and context. Differences in home life, time zone, and distance affected students’ ongoing or burgeoning relationships with each other and faculty. Many OAE students struggled with motivation while at home or while residing at one of the many waystations that served as temporary residences. The absence of structured days, the inability to separate home and school, inadequate space to do homework, the trauma of the COVID-19….all were variables cited in the survey by students.

In addition to the clear importance of continued data collection by OAE the following recommendations may be made based on data collected:

1. **Flexible Deadlines**-students in the survey responded well to the prospect of flexible deadlines for assignments.
2. **Flexible Assignments**-providing a diversity of ways in which an assignment can be completed may also be useful. A narrated power point may demonstrate content knowledge as effectively as a short paper but might also benefit a student who is struggling with a chronic health issue or an environment in which sustained time to write is limited.
3. **Clear notification structure**-respondents to the survey indicated that the combination of email and Glow could quickly become overwhelming due to the amount of notifications. A centralized location where the timelines and assignments could be found would help give more structure.
4. **Record lectures**-respondents also responded positively to recorded audio and video lectures. These lectures offered students the chance to go back and relisten to portions that they did not understand. This mode of learning could also be useful in hybrid in-person/online classes. Recording of lectures offers students with learning disabilities the chance to revisit segments of lectures. Other beneficiaries include students for whom English is a second language, students who struggle with the accent of a professor as well as students who experience an acute health issue or who don’t have access to uninterrupted class time.
5. **Synchronous learning should be used strategically**-respondents cited having difficulty concentrating in long online discussion courses. A number of students
who manage needs stemming from specific diagnosis may find it particularly challenging to manage hours of online, interactive screen time. While many respondents identified a preference for Zoom over Google Meet because of certain features and quality of the video stream, synchronous engagement should supplement asynchronous offerings. Focusing on the quality of synchronous interaction rather than quantity would be the recommended rule.

6. **Health focused course structure**—respondents consistently linked their negative experience with remote learning to poor mental and physical health. Health resources should ideally be available to students online in a manner approximating the in-person experience. Whether this occurs or not, the organization of courses can be key to addressing potential health issues. Course structures that frontload assignments—providing students with time to catch up—are recommended. Strategic rather than ubiquitous use of synchronous instruction is recommended to lessen screen time responsibilities. As noted above, flexible deadlines also provide students with opportunities to manage acute or chronic health issues.

*This survey was developed and disseminated through the work of the Neurodiversity Group of the Williams College Office of Accessible Education. The Neurodiversity Group consists of Maria Heredia ‘20, Hamza Mankor ‘22 and Vanessa Gurrola-Mariscal ‘22. Maria Heredia ‘20 served as the Inaugural Chairperson of the Group and led this research project.*