

Editorial Who Knew?

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Who knew? When I wrote my fall 2020 editorial, the Covid-19 death toll in the United States (U.S.) was 208,054 and was estimated to exceed 400,000. I wrote of the grief of our nation and the world amidst so many lives lost. Without knowing much, I speculated about the pandemic's impact on our faculty, staff, students, and families. Many of whom have suffered and died from the coronavirus. But I knew little when compared with the true impact of this disease on our academic communities. Six months later, the true toll of the pandemic is still to be revealed.

As the U.S. death toll rises, we are witnessing an accompanying and alarming toll on the psychological and mental health of students because of the virus. The rising mental health challenges currently subsuming our campuses are symptoms of underlying pre-pandemic mental health issues. A survey by the Center for Collegiate Mental Health (2020) revealed that anxiety was the most prevalent issue among respondents. Pre-existing mental health conditions have been heightened by the isolation and loneliness inherent with the social distancing requirements. Accompanying health stressors and concerns of the pandemic have added strain to pre-existing mental health issues. The steep increase in mental health challenges rampant within our academic communities likely surprises no readers who have witnessed this disturbing trend. In a survey of 195 college students with an average age of 20.7 years, Son, Hegde, Smith, Wang, and Sasangohar (2020) reported that 71% had increased stress and anxiety in response to the Covid-19 Pandemic.

When I last wrote, no vaccines were approved, and we had no timeline for recovery. Frustrated and helpless, I encouraged us to do what we could to promote the health and safety of our campuses. The picture of resiliency and bravery was apparent throughout the nation. As many of our authors write in this issue, the Covid-19 impact was great, but our response was greater. To say that we've lived a lifetime in the past year and that we've moved mountains to do so, doesn't capture the daily struggles, hard work, shame, and resilience that framed our world. We rose to the occasion with every challenge, developing new and innovative ways to deliver our education throughout the pandemic. Soon we will begin to see some return to normalcy. Herd immunity is within reach. Until then, I remind us all to Recognize changes in behavior that may indicate declining mental health. Respond with care, concern and action. And Refer those at risk for further evaluation and intervention. There are those among us, particularly our students, who have little reserves left. Some have experienced great loss during this pandemic, and others are approaching desperation. Our actions during this time will make all the difference.

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