

## IINSPIRE Alliance COVID-19 Survey

### University of Iowa

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### Background: COVID-19 & Social Distancing

Beginning mid-March 2020, colleges and universities nationwide moved classes online and implemented social distancing policies to contain the spread of COVID-19 on campuses. Given this drastic change in the school community, our research team initiated a survey that aimed to understand LSAMP IINSPIRE Alliance's program director and LSAMP student experiences during an extended period of social distancing.

### Online Survey

**Participants.** A total of 9 directors and 15 students (excluded data of 3 directors and 4 students as they submitted blanks) responded to the survey with valid data. Years in the IINSPIRE program showed an average of 8.05 years for directors (ranges 3-11 years), and 1 year 5 months for students (ranges 1month-4years). Directors' and students' institutions include Doane University, Grinnell College, Iowa State University, Kirkwood Community College, Little Priest Tribal College, University of Northern Iowa, and Wartburg College.

**Survey Questionnaire.** We created two versions of the survey; one for IINSPIRE program directors and another for current IINSPIRE students. Survey questions for the program directors included: 1) Since social distancing measures were put in place, what have you been doing (or anticipate doing) to create a sense of belongingness for your campus among students in the LSAMP program? 2) What are some challenges you have experienced with respect to social distancing and administering your campus LSAMP programming? 3) What are some unexpected benefits you have experienced with respect to social distancing and administering your campus LSAMP programming? Survey questions for students included: 1) Since social distancing measures were put in place, what have you been doing (or anticipate doing) to connect with (students, faculty, staff, etc.) in your LSAMP program? 2) What are some challenges you have experienced with respect to social distancing and connecting with (students, faculty, staff, etc.) your campus LSAMP program? 3) What are some unexpected benefits you have experienced with respect to social distancing and connecting with (students, faculty, staff, etc.) your campus LSAMP program?

**Data Collection & Analysis.** Data was collected May-July 2020 via Qualtrics survey. We used thematic analysis to identify themes from the survey responses. After familiarizing with the data and generating the initial codes, two graduate student researchers and a counseling psychology faculty member cross-reviewed the themes, which enhanced validity.

### Preliminary Findings

We included as many themes as possible to understand varied experiences, which are shown in the table below.

**Table.** *Topics and Themes from Program Directors & Students*

	Program Directors	Students
<b>(Directors)</b> <b>Efforts to create sense of belongingness</b> <b>(Students)</b> <b>Experiences of being connected with others</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>regular/minimal virtual check-ins (or zoom meeting)</li> <li>virtual undergraduate summer research program</li> <li>student led small group discussion for community building</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>virtual communication (zoom, email, text, social media, phone calls, facetime)</li> <li>regular zoom meetings and email</li> <li>community building</li> <li>zoom meeting for research group</li> <li>zoom based discussion</li> <li>efforts to stay connected</li> <li>online learning</li> <li>no experience due to stressors at home</li> </ul>
<b>Challenges</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>uncertainty</li> <li>absence of in-person check-ins</li> <li>lack of in-person contact</li> <li>limited availability due to adjustment to new class format</li> <li>time zone challenges</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>absence of/being different from in-person contact</li> <li>difficulty making new connections with students</li> <li>difficulty getting to know others virtually</li> <li>limited social contact in a virtual setting</li> <li>lack of communication</li> <li>lack of availability from students/faculty</li> <li>lack of timely response</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• loose connections among student and general population</li> <li>• general fatigue and being overwhelmed, disinterest in zoom</li> <li>• time management</li> <li>• students' overburdened responsibilities</li> <li>• difficulty encouraging virtual engagement</li> <li>• poorer quality of interaction due to distractibility in a virtual setting</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• flexible schedule</li> <li>• time management</li> <li>• difficulty staying productive</li> <li>• no challenges</li> </ul>
<b>Unexpected benefits</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• zoom familiarity</li> <li>• student proactivity in communication</li> <li>• finding online academic resources</li> <li>• identify student technology needs</li> <li>• innovative in finding ways for student research and communication</li> <li>• collaboration between alliance institutions</li> <li>• availability of virtual programs to all alliance institutions</li> <li>• development and success of a virtual undergraduate mentored research program</li> <li>• virtual research, networking opportunities, and skill building in summer undergraduate research program</li> <li>• no benefits acknowledged</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• expanded connections</li> <li>• flexibility with social connections</li> <li>• increased communication skills</li> <li>• solidarity with students of color</li> <li>• flexible schedule</li> <li>• additional time for studies</li> <li>• autonomy in research</li> <li>• newfound responsibility</li> <li>• utilization of resources at home office</li> <li>• virtual programming</li> <li>• access to and knowledge attainment from workshops</li> <li>• no perceived benefits</li> </ul>

## Discussion

Overlapping themes emerged from students' and program directors' responses. Both students and directors indicated an absence of in-person contact and loose or limited connection among students was a challenge. In addition, students mentioned a lack of availability and timely response from faculty and students, which also aligns with program directors' report that they have limited availability due to adjustment to a virtual format. In terms of quality of communication in a virtual setting, students mentioned difficulty get to know other people and directors also reported poorer quality of communication. challenges of encouraging virtual engagement. Meanwhile, new ways of being connected to others contributed to students' increased communication skills as shown as directors' response that their students present proactivity in communication. Lastly, both students and directors presented their satisfaction on virtual programming which includes workshops and research programs.

There were also instances where themes contradict or diverge between students and directors. First, students reported using more varied uses of virtual communication platforms than program directors. Students reported using text, phone calls, and other modalities (facetime) rather than zoom meetings as ways to be connected with others. Importantly, students perceive online learning as a part of connecting with others in the LSAMP program. Additionally, it was also noteworthy that several themes of challenges and benefits contradict each other (e.g. difficulty making connections as a challenge vs. expanded connections as a benefit). Lastly, while directors mentioned students' overburdened responsibility as a challenge, some students reported newfound responsibility as their unexpected benefits from social distancing.

## Implications

This research yields several implications for LSAMP programming in a virtual setting.

- Virtual meetings can be more beneficial than directors might consider. Although program directors found it challenging to foster student engagement and quality interaction in a virtual setting, students reported they found virtual community-building beneficial as a way to connect to others. Students reported virtual discussion was a chance to build solidarity with students of color. Thus, providing virtual events for community building can be a way to further encourage a sense of belongingness among students.
- The students who completed the survey reported virtual workshops and research programs were useful in attaining more knowledge. In terms of workshop topics, it might be useful to consider how the pandemic has influenced students' degree completion and future career. It may also be helpful for program directors to help students see some of the perceived challenges (increased flexibility) can be benefits (e.g. develop autonomy).
- Providing academic and mental health resources might also be beneficial. Given students' perceived challenge in staying productive and managing time, sharing resources and tips for time management, scheduling for academic success as well as sending out mental health resources can support students who struggle with anxiety or other pandemic related mental health issues.