

# Conducting Focus Groups in Times of Social Distancing

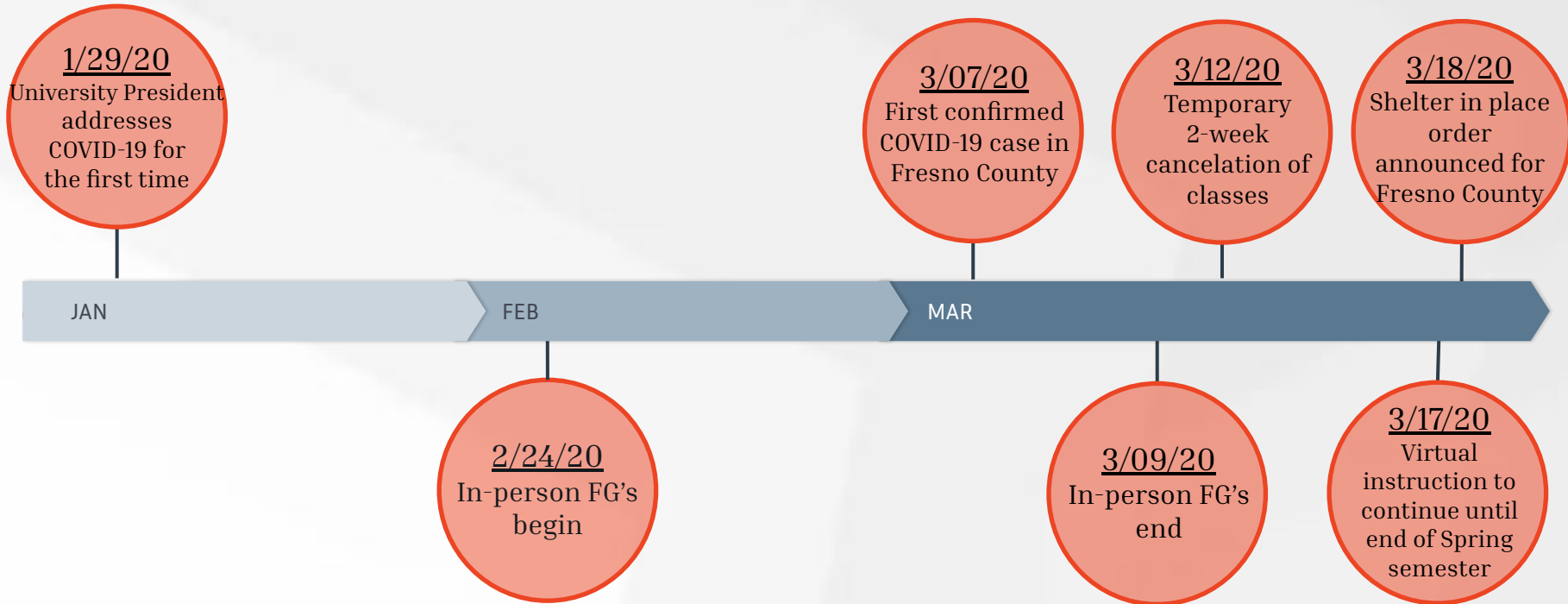
Alex Nottbohm; Research Analyst

Cory Cowan; Research Analyst

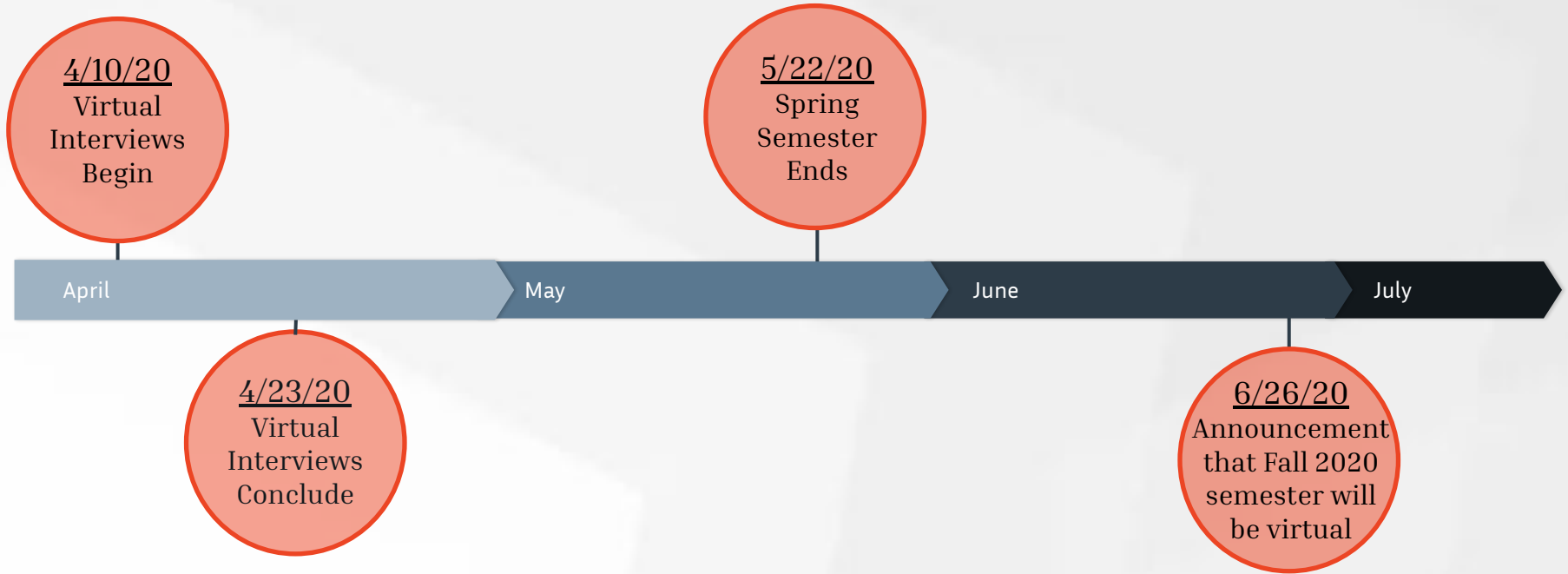
Giang Huynh; Graduate Student Research Assistant

*Fresno State Office of Institutional Effectiveness*

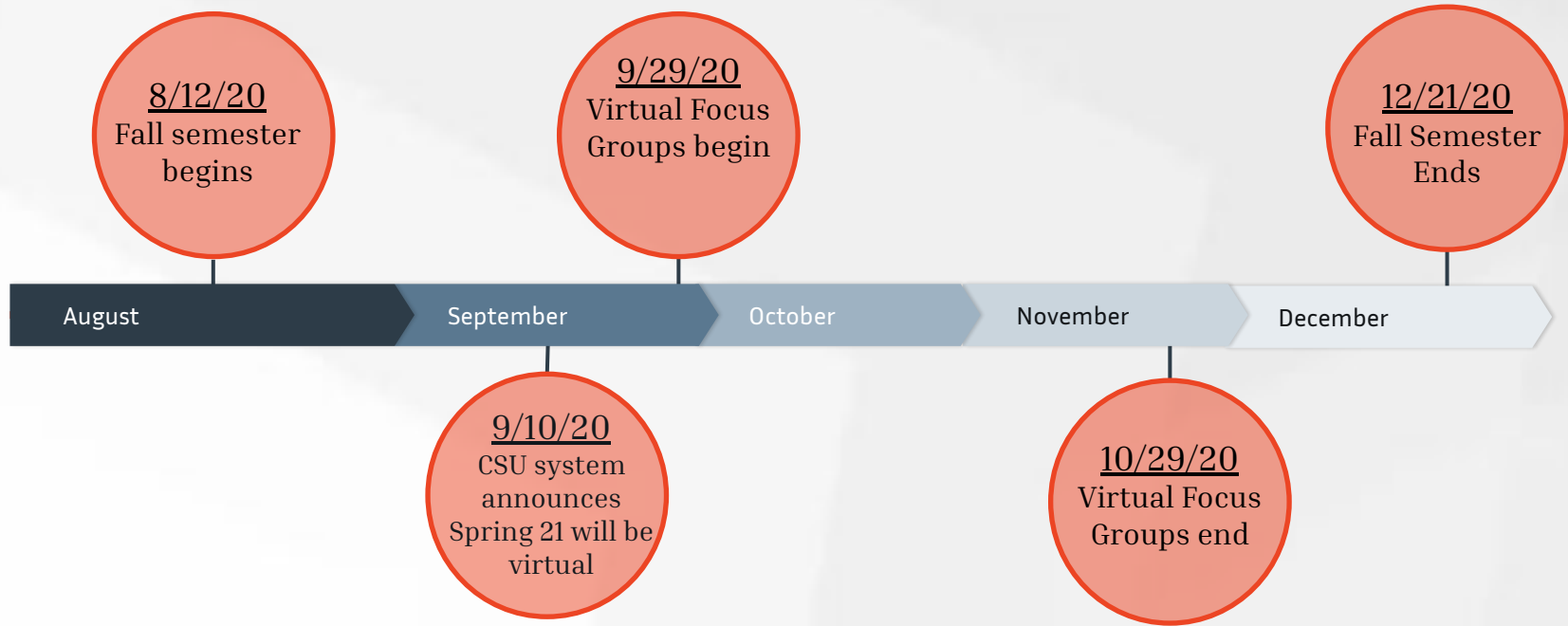
# COVID-19 Timeline at Fresno State



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# Pre-Pandemic Focus Groups

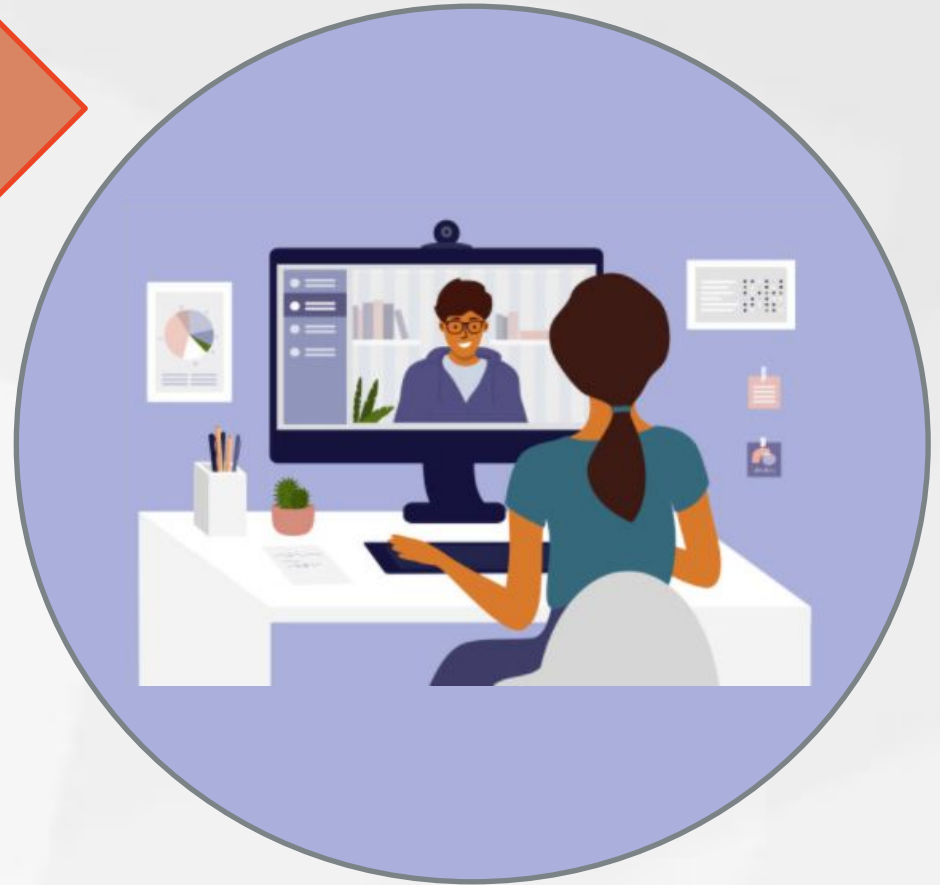


- Top Themes
  - Navigating the path to graduation
  - Financial Security
- No major COVID-19 related concerns

**What word(s) come to mind when you think about March  
2020?**

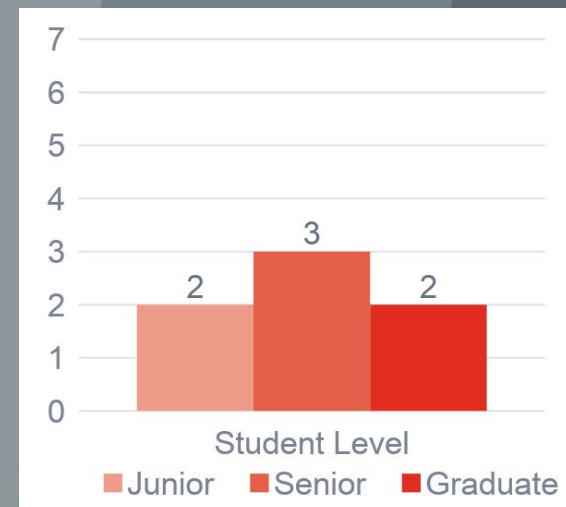
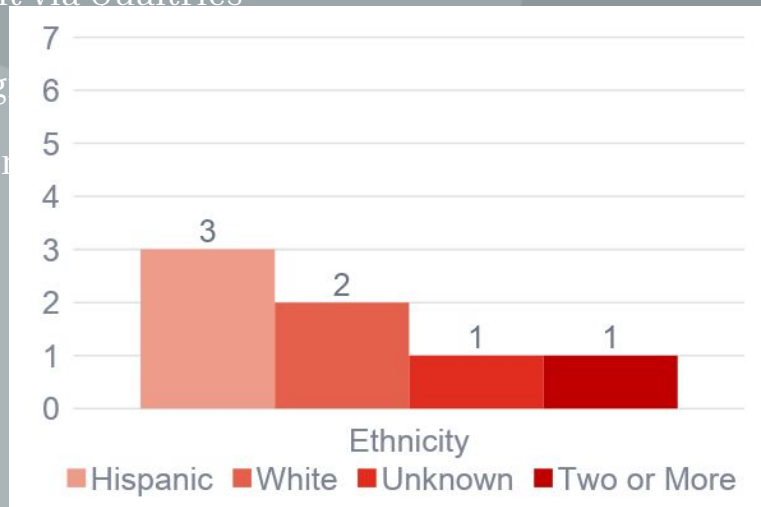
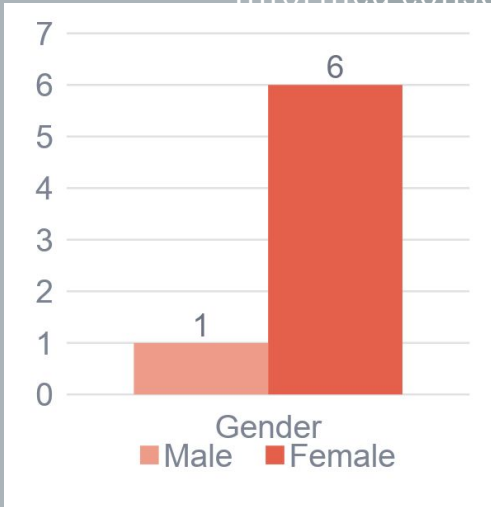
# Interviews

- April 10<sup>th</sup> to April 23<sup>rd</sup>
- Why interviews instead of FGs?
  - Unsure of technical difficulties
  - Unsure of trauma for students (job loss or sick self / family / friends)



# Interviews - Methodology

- Recruitment
  - Email invite to a sample of students
    - Pick a time between Monday – Friday, 8 am to 5 pm
    - Need access to internet and microphone, webcam (optional)
  - Informed consent via Qualtrics

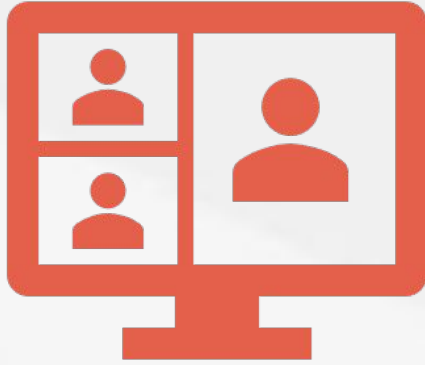




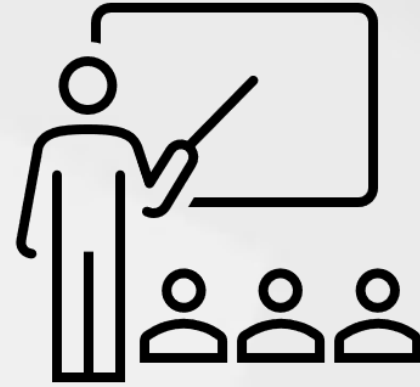
# Interviews - Methodology

- Interview
  - Conducted via Zoom - Recorded session
- Questions
  - Challenges faced so far
  - Communication from university, professors, and peers
  - COVID-19's impact on day-to-day life
  - Opinion about the transition to virtual instruction
  - Community or support during transition
  - Open-ended final question (standard for our focus group sessions)

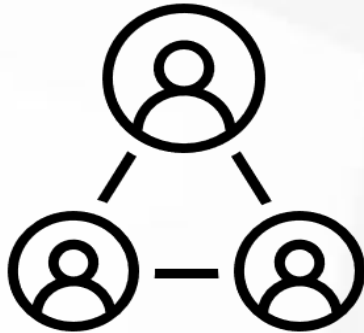
# Themes



Learning Virtually



Experiences with Faculty



Resources



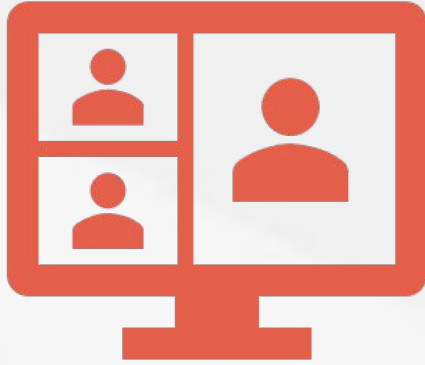
University Communication

# Learning Virtually

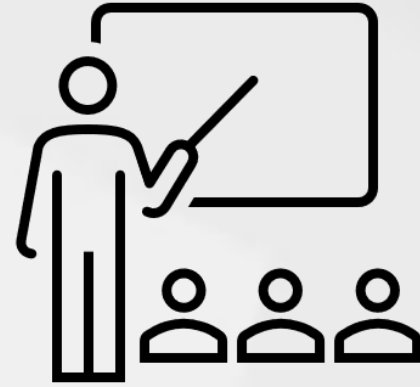


*"It's different [having] that interaction online versus having [interactions] in-person because online, you either have technical problems, you're cutting in and out... I feel like some of my peers that usually would be talking and sharing, I see them sharing, but it's not as much as they would when we were in class, so I feel like that's a bit of a downfall."*

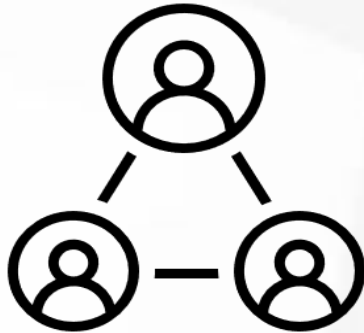
# Themes



Learning Virtually



Experiences with Faculty



Resources



University Communication

# University Communication



*“Even though things develop[ed] so fast, I’m glad they told us as soon as they knew what was happening and didn’t wait. But it’s just with my professors it’s been a little harder. Some of them are really on top of it. And then some of them I’ve basically heard nothing from.”*

*"I think the thing that was hard for me is that it kind of just happened all of a sudden. I went on a conference trip... and I was on the trip when I got the email that school would be transitioning online. So I didn't know my last day was my last day... And I worked on campus too and so my job was deemed nonessential. So it's like to not have class, to not have graduation, to not have a job on the same week, it's a lot."*

# Disseminating student concerns

- Presentation to Academic Affairs Leadership Team
- Provided handout of themes and quotes
  - Recommendations:
    - Zoom trainings for students
    - Virtual space for student-to-student interactions

# Focus Groups

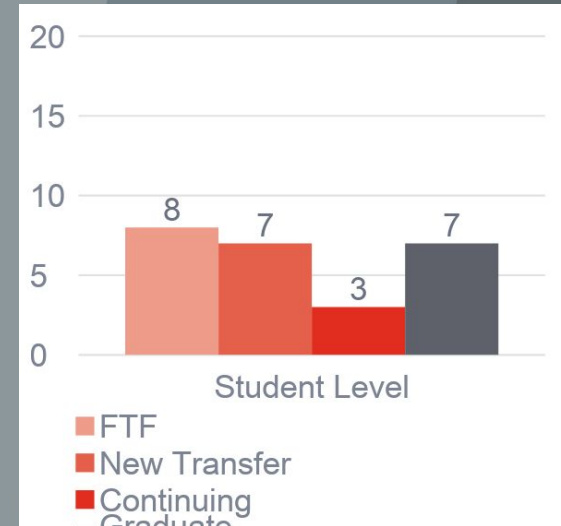
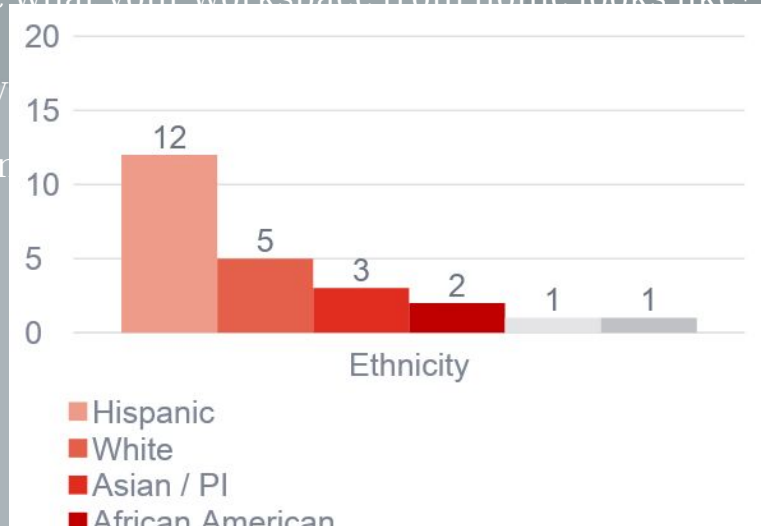
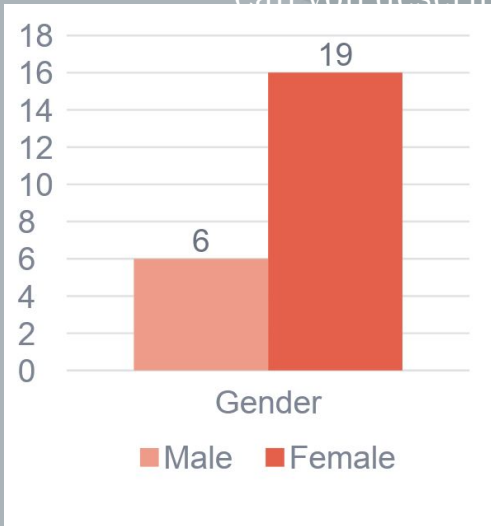
- September 29<sup>th</sup> to October 29<sup>th</sup>
- Why Focus Groups?
  - Felt discussing in groups could lead to more student engagement
  - Less concerns about vulnerability
  - Wanted more student responses



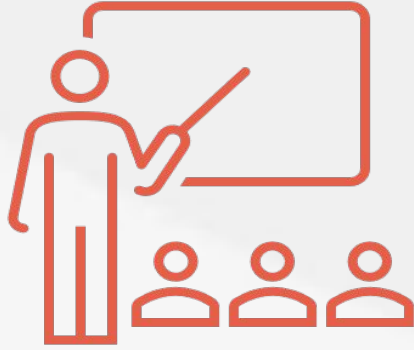


# Focus Groups - Methodology

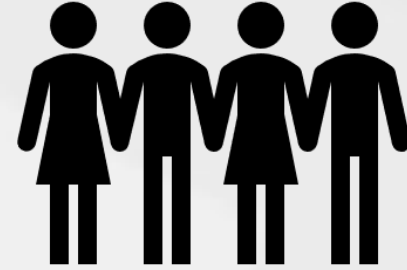
- Methodology Changes
  - Informed Consent
  - Student Sign up process via Qualtrics
- Question Additions
  - Can you describe what your workspace from home looks like?



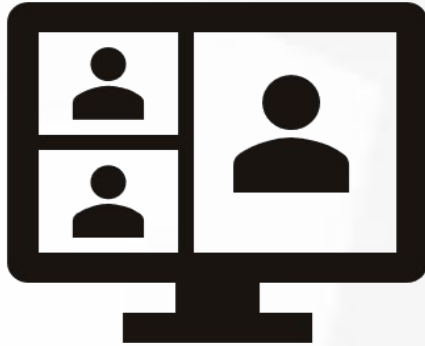
# Themes



Experiences with Faculty



Experiences with Students



Learning Virtually / Learning Environment



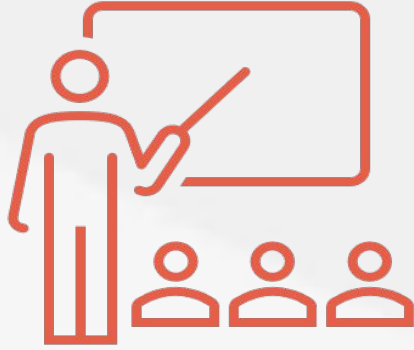
Physical and Mental Health

# Experiences with Students

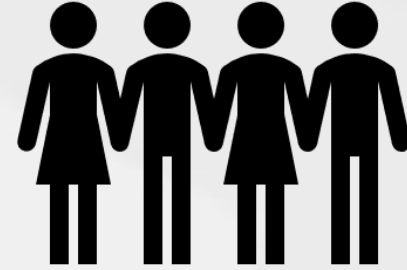
*It feels weird just emailing students you don't know if it's just a general class that's not your major and you haven't taken classes with these people. It's a little harder to approach them.*



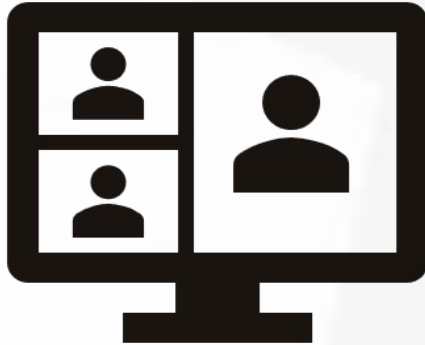
# Themes



Experiences with Faculty



Experiences with Students



Learning Virtually / Learning Environment



Physical and Mental Health

# Physical / Mental Health



*For me especially, it's just been horrible... I was looking forward to college to actually get to meet new people and all that. But instead I've kind of being locked at home, and it's taken a toll on me, I'll say that. I've just been not motivated. I don't know, I sleep like half the day now, and I'm just kind of moping around all day and it kind of sucks.*

*I definitely feel more isolated because you can't go out, you can't meet with your friends, and stuff like that. You can't stay involved in community things. And then, also, there's protests and stuff like that. And I would like to be a part of that. But, at the same time, I just want to take care of my health.*

# Dissemination for Student Concerns

- Presented to Academic Affairs Leadership Team
  - Used focus group findings to contextualize additional quantitative findings from Fall 2020 survey responses
  - Provided handout of common themes and quotes
- Recommendations
  - Virtual space for connections: with professors and students
  - Increased Mental Health Services
    - Alegria Mental Health Taskforce
    - Virtual Activities / Events promoting sense of community

# What challenges do you think we encountered running virtual Focus Groups?

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# Challenge 1: Access to non-traditional student groups

- **In-Person**

- Hard to gather responses from students not on campus very often

- **Virtually**

- Students can participate with fewer time commitments
- No traveling to campus, can perform other duties at home

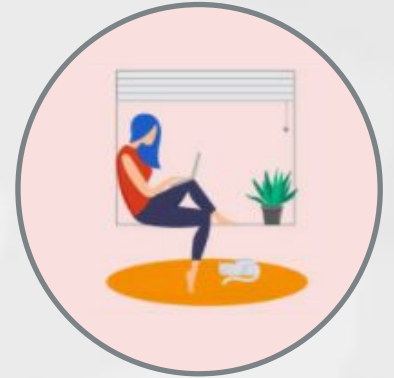
# Challenge 2: Building rapport and comfort

- **In-Person**

- Coming to a physical location can be intimidating

- **Virtually**

- Participate in the comfort of their own home



# Challenge 3: Transcription

- **In-Person**
  - Recording a video and audio of the session
  - Hard to find a way to capture every student's face for accurate speaker ID's
  - Makes students nervous
- **Virtually**
  - Easy to tell who's talking
  - Free auto-transcriptions with institution Zoom account

# Conclusion

- Virtual Focus Groups can improve in-person qualitative data collection challenges
- Helped us identify pain points to recommend additional student supports to key campus administrators
- Repeated collection helped to identify change in student attitudes and needs



# Methodology Recommendations

- Use Qualtrics to embed informed consent into sign up process; set sign up limits on timeslots
- Send reminder emails shortly before start of focus group with zoom links
- Include open question(s)
- Flexibility and understanding with students, zoom, at home distractions
- Provide incentives that are easily accessible in a virtual format / quick redemption

# Thank You!

Questions? Contact:

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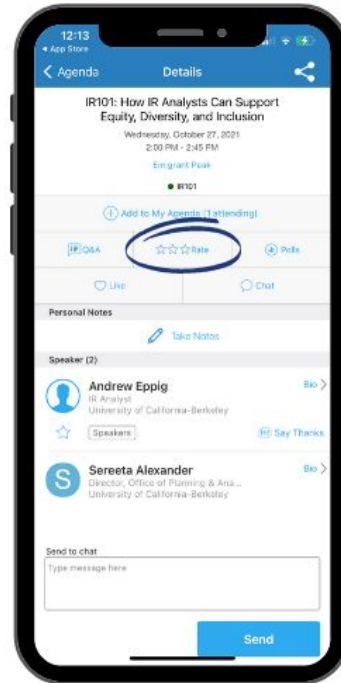
# REMINDER: COMPLETE YOUR SESSION EVALUATIONS



## OPTION 01

### Home - Feedback

- Navigate to the **Home** page
- Click on **Feedback**
- Select **Session Feedback**
- Select the name of the session that you attended



## OPTION 02

### Agenda - Session

- Navigate to **Agenda** on the bottom menu
- Select session name
- Click ☆☆☆ **Rate**