

UAB THE UNIVERSITY OF
ALABAMA AT BIRMINGHAM.

The Graduate School / Office of Postdoctoral Education

Impact of COVID-19 and Racial Unrest on the Well-Being of Graduate Students and Postdoctoral Fellows

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About Birmingham, AL

- Founded in **1871**, then, one of the foremost industrial centers for iron and steel production
- Now a leading center for **health care** and **medical industries**
- Known for its role in the **Civil Rights Movement**



About UAB

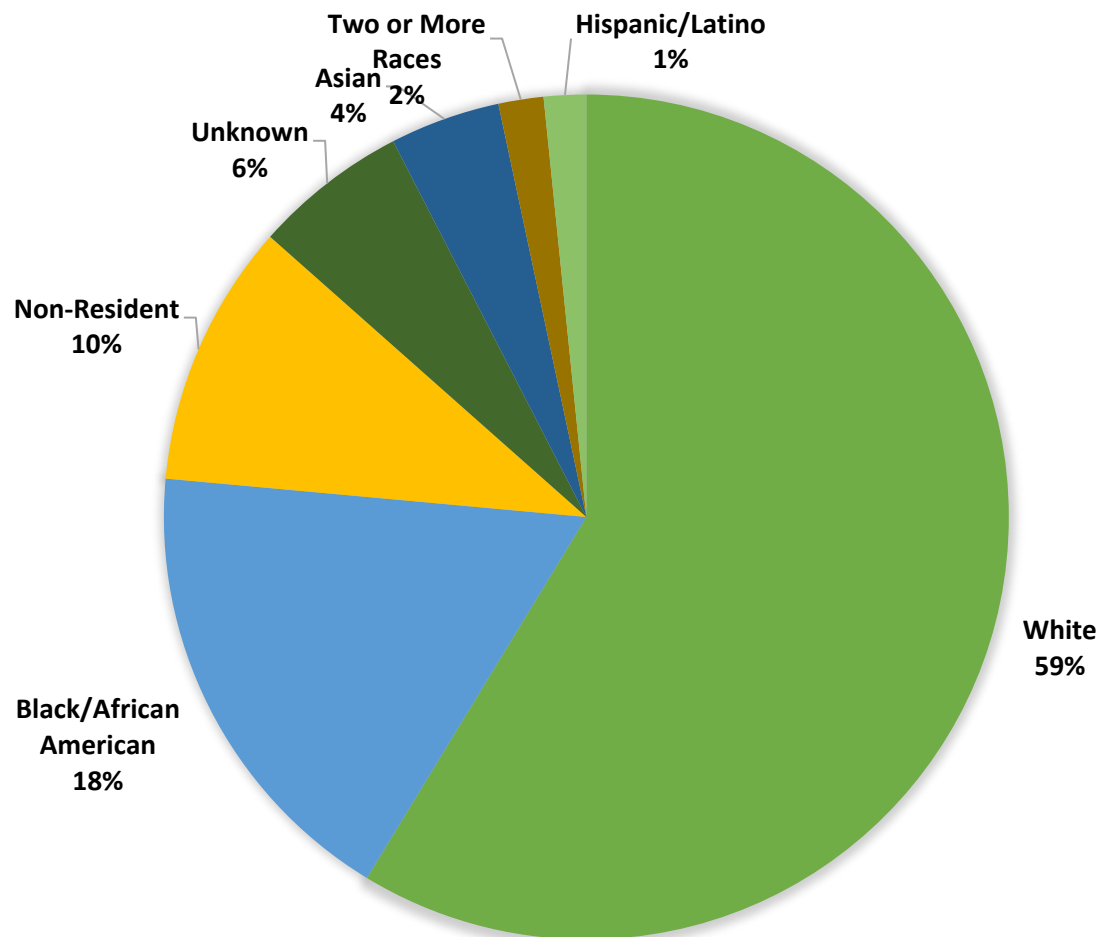
- Established in **1969**
- One of the **largest public academic medical centers** in the US
- In **top 10% of universities globally** for research and reputation per *U.S. News*
- Named five straight years as a **Diversity Champion** by *Insight Into Diversity*
- Named **America's #1 Best Large Employer** by Forbes in 2021



UAB Graduate Student & Postdoc Demographics



- Over 7,500 graduate students, including 1000 pre-doctoral students
- Approximately 300 postdoctoral scholars
- **>50% Female**



COVID-19 at UAB – Summer 2020



Racial Unrest - Summer 2020



US - JUNE 24-30, 2020: Mental Health, Substance Abuse, and Suicidal Ideation

40%

of U.S. adults reported
struggling with
MENTAL HEALTH or
SUBSTANCE ABUSE

31%
ANXIETY/
DEPRESSION

26%
TRAUMA/
STRESS
RELATED
DISORDERS

13%
STARTED or
INCREASED
SUBSTANCE
ABUSE

11%
CONSIDERED
SUICIDE

CDC MMR Weekly / 69(32);1049–1057

Study Hypothesis & Objective

Hypothesis

- **Concurrent events** of the COVID pandemic and on-going racial unrest **uniquely impacted** graduate students and postdoctoral fellows

Objective

- Understand how these **co-occurring events impacted the mental health** of these trainees with intent to provide and **improve wellness resources**

Campus-Wide Survey

- Anonymous survey administered to grad students and postdoctoral fellows during the **summer of 2020**
- Participants were asked to assess impacts of **co-occurring events** on:
 - mental health
 - academic success
 - research productivity
- Designed as a **parallel convergent mixed methods** study, collecting / analyzing data in tandem

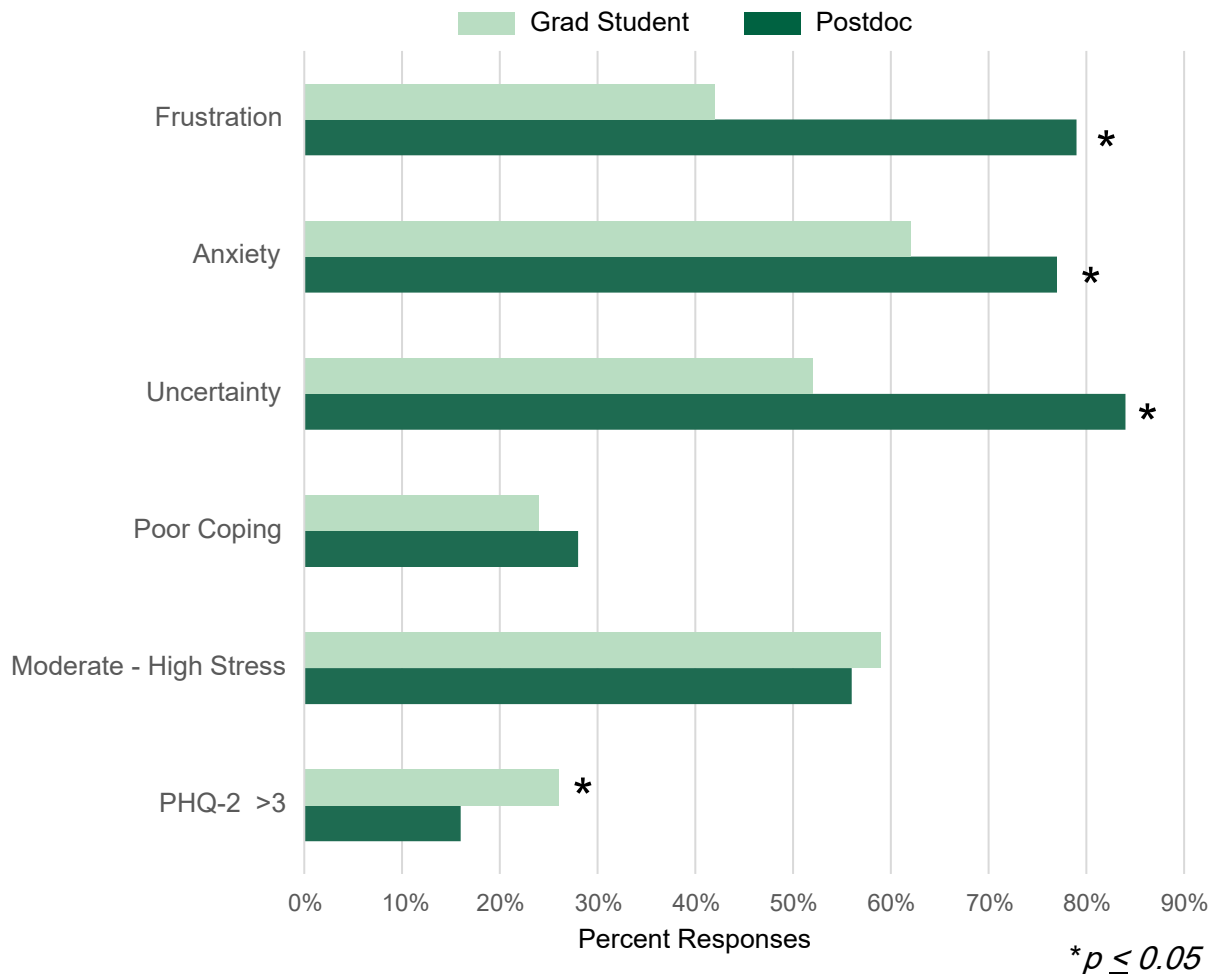


Study Participant Demographics: Grad Students & Postdocs

	Grad Students	Postdocs
# respondents	624	43
Female	71%	66%
Black / AA	18%	7%
Asian	18%	24%
White	54%	66%
2 or more races	4%	2%
US Citizen	77%	69%
Research-intensive	40%	82%

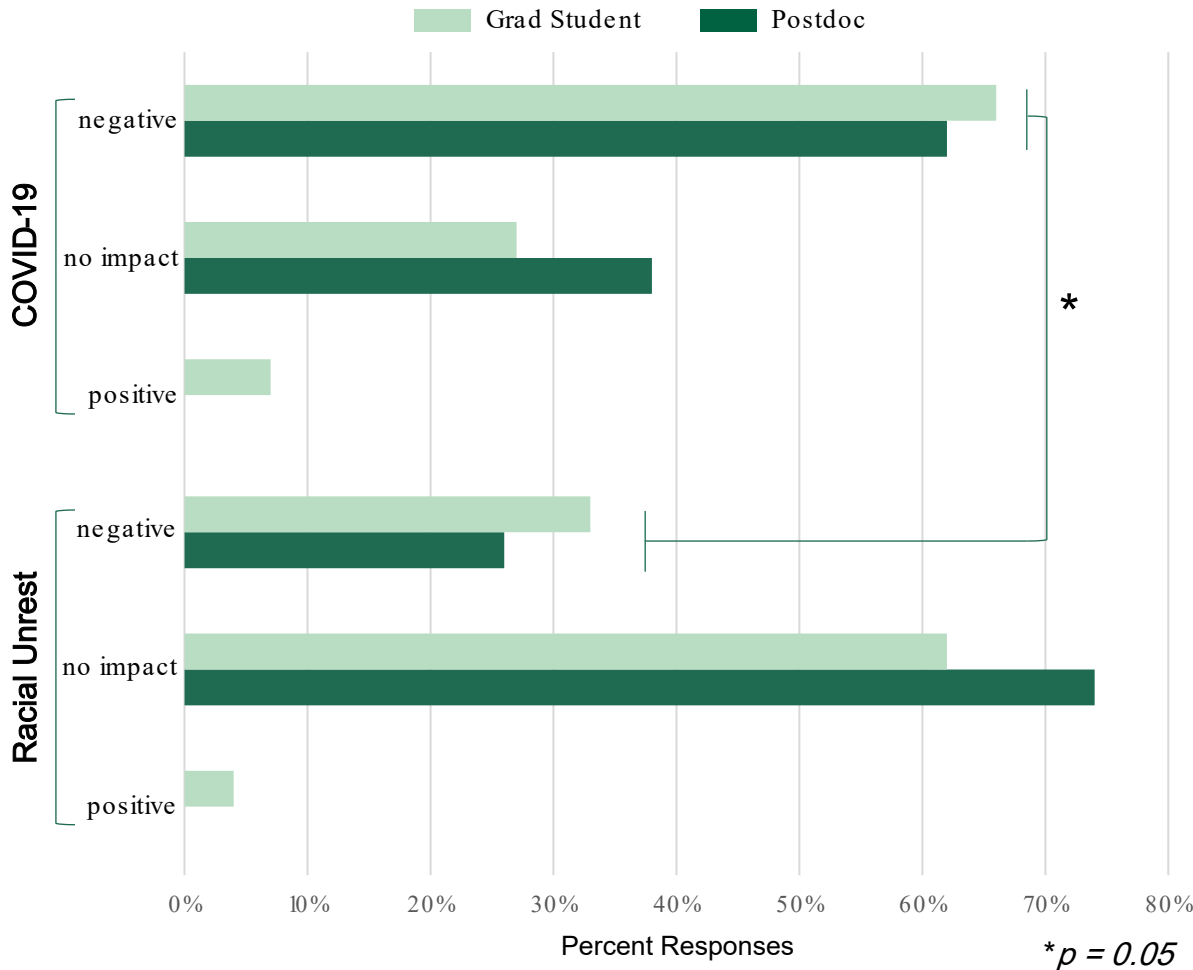


Overall State of Well-Being



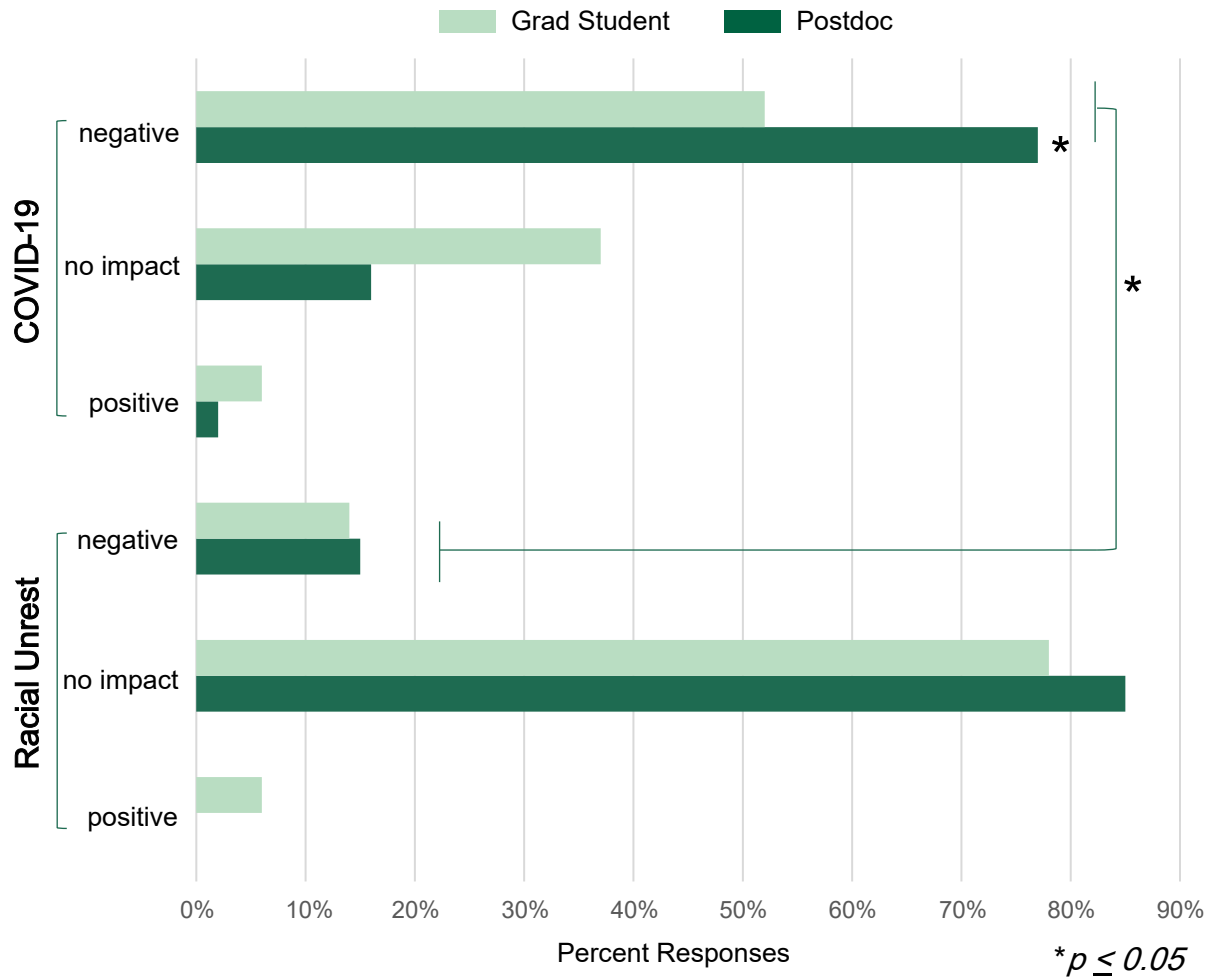
“Have mercy with expectations, deadlines, and coursework. Yes, we are in grad school, but we are also in a pandemic and extreme societal unrest.”

Impact on Academic Progress



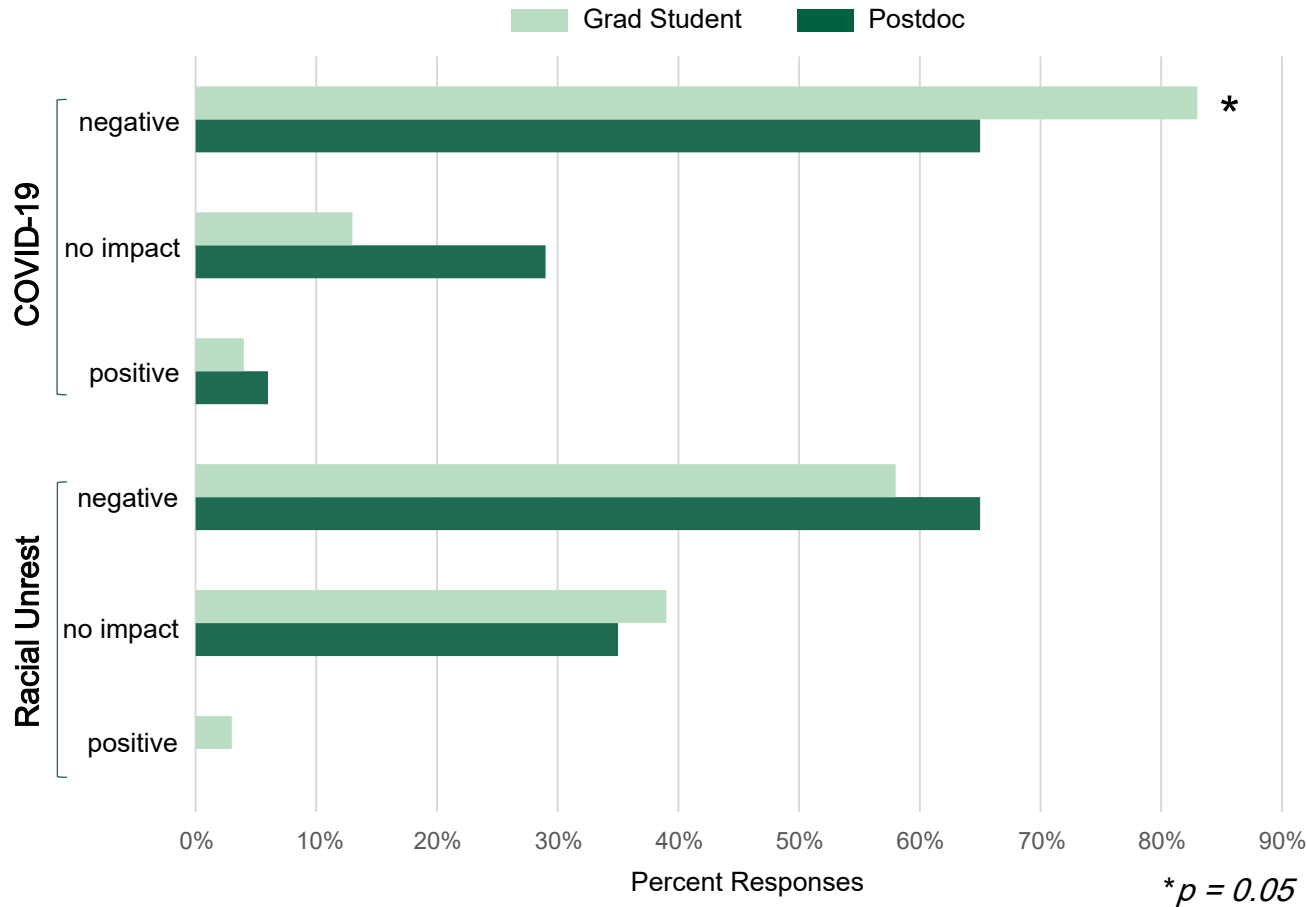
*“Acknowledgement
of how hard it is to
be a mom and work
and go to school.
Tell us we are going
to be OK.”*

Impact on Research Productivity



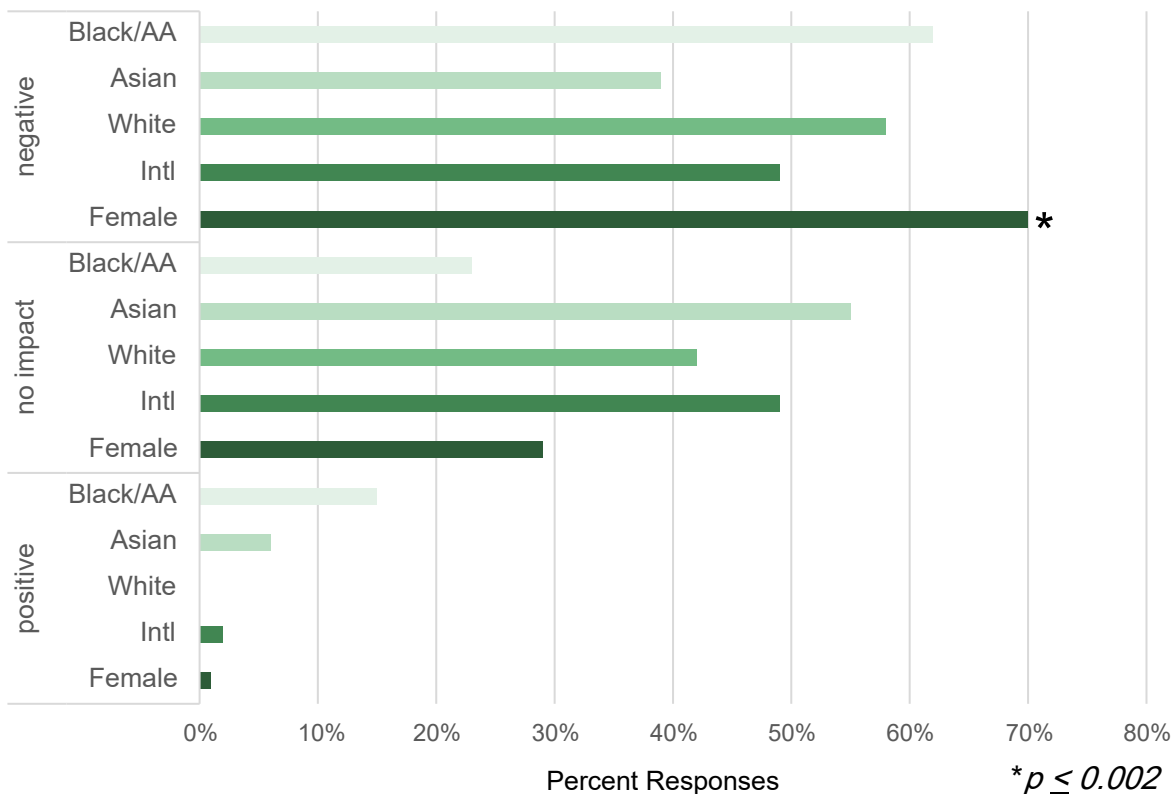
“All of my projects are 100% stopped. This will create large gaps in my CV and in my ability to move on and get jobs.”

Impact on Mental Health



“I feel like anxiety is at an all-time high for most students. It makes it difficult to keep organized... students are trying their best.”

Impact of Racial Unrest on Mental Health of UR Graduate Students



“I get very disturbed and upset when I read about the injustices inflicted upon people of color. I will sometimes have to stop working and go to the bathroom to cry ...”

Major Findings

- Postdocs exhibited significantly higher levels of frustration, anxiety, and uncertainty as compared with graduate students; however, **graduate students exhibited more significant depressive symptoms** .
- While COVID-19 had a greater impact on the academic success and research productivity of both groups versus racial unrest, **postdocs' research productivity was more significantly and negatively impacted** .
- COVID-19 and racial unrest had a significant negative impact on the mental health of both groups; however, **female graduate students were more significantly impacted by the events of surrounding racial unrest** than other UR graduate students.

Mental Health Areas to Address

Clear
Communication

Academic
Support

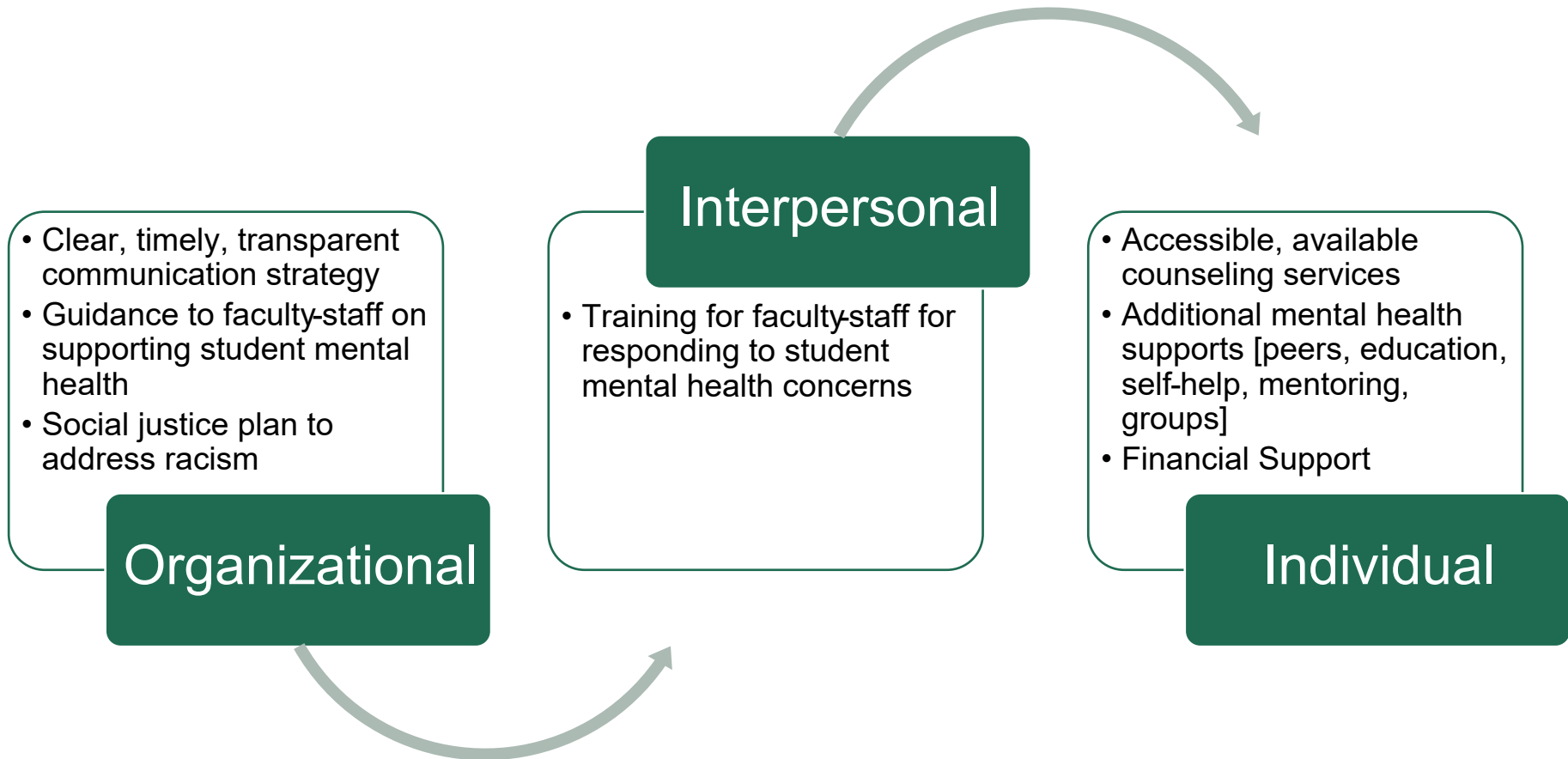
Mental Health
Support

COVID-19
Safety

Social Injustices

Financial
Support

Recommendations



Study Limitations & Future Work

- **Limited enrollment during Summer 2020** may explain the skewed student participation, which was comprised largely of white females.
- Because the combined effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and racial injustice in society have not been resolved, future work will evaluate the **long-term impact of these events on trainees' mental health and well-being**.



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Questions?

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