

Views of Covid-19 Pandemic at UNM School of Engineering

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1 Introduction

To promote student success, improve working conditions, and increase faculty retention, the Inclusion and Climate Committee at the UNM School of Engineering (SOE) launched a survey of the Quality of Life in Engineering and Computing in spring 2020. We invited faculty, staff, and students to participate in the study, which consisted of three questionnaires: one for faculty, one for staff, and one for undergraduate and graduate students.¹

The survey covered a range of issues including assessment of the academic experience, perceptions of institutional climate and working conditions, and satisfaction with resources, among others. In addition, we asked three multi-part questions about attitudes about the Covid-19 pandemic.

This brief report analyzes only responses to questions about the pandemic. As we show below, SOE community members expressed considerable confidence in UNM's response to the pandemic, as well as the response of NM governor Michelle Lujan Grisham. The survey reveals respondents harbor major concerns about the pandemic's effects on the U.S. economy. Importantly, perceptions of threat and worry regarding Covid-19 and personal health differ significantly between faculty/staff and students.

2 About the survey

All faculty, staff, and students of the School of Engineering were invited to participate by messages sent to UNM email addresses. We contacted a total of 3,851 people, of whom 906 started the survey and 838 completed it. The total response rate was 24% and completion rate 22%. As Table 1 shows, response rates varied by group. The survey was deployed online via the Qualtrics platform and was in the field from April 14 to May 5, 2020.

¹The Inclusion and Climate Committee consists of José Manuel Cerrato, Eva Chi, Mala Htun, Manel Martinez Ramon, Melanie Moses, and Anil Prinja. We are grateful for helpful comments and suggestions from Jamie Druckman, Sophia Jordán Wallace, Alvin B. Tillery Jr., and Katie Clayton.

Table 1: Response Rates

	Contacted	Started Survey	Completed Survey	Response Rate	Completion Rate
Undergraduates	2712	524	479	19.32%	17.66%
Graduates	871	224	210	25.72%	24.11%
Faculty & Staff	268	158	149	58.96%	55.60%
Total	3851	906	838	23.53%	21.76%

We offered participants an incentive to complete the survey. At the end, they had the option to enter a lottery to receive one of 100 \$100-value gift cards offered by the SOE Dean’s office.

3 Views of the Covid-19 pandemic

We asked questions about the pandemic that mirrored national public opinion surveys. Questions about leadership responses and perceptions of threat were drawn primarily from the Pew Research Center’s [American Trends Panel](#). We added and modified questions and categories after consulting with national experts.

3.1 Leadership response

As Figure 1 shows, members of the SOE community feel confident that UNM faculty and leadership are doing a good job responding to the Covid-19 pandemic. People also express confidence in the responses of NM Governor Michelle Lujan Grisham, officials at the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), and UNM students, respectively.

By contrast, well over a majority of respondents are “not too” or “not at all” confident in the response of the U.S. population as a whole or the response of President Donald Trump.

With regard to perceptions of the response of elected officials, however, there are statistically significant differences ($p < 0.01$) between faculty and staff on the one hand and students on the other, as Figure 2 shows. 30% of students are “somewhat” or “very” confident in Trump’s response to the pandemic, compared to only 15% of faculty and staff. 92% of faculty and staff are “somewhat” or “very” confident in the response of Lujan Grisham, compared to 84% of students.

Gaps in views about our GOP president and Democratic governor likely reflect partisan preferences, which tend to differ nationally between university faculty and students. Studies have shown that conservative political opinions are rare among faculty members ([Abrams 2016](#); [Shields and Dunn Sr. 2016](#)).

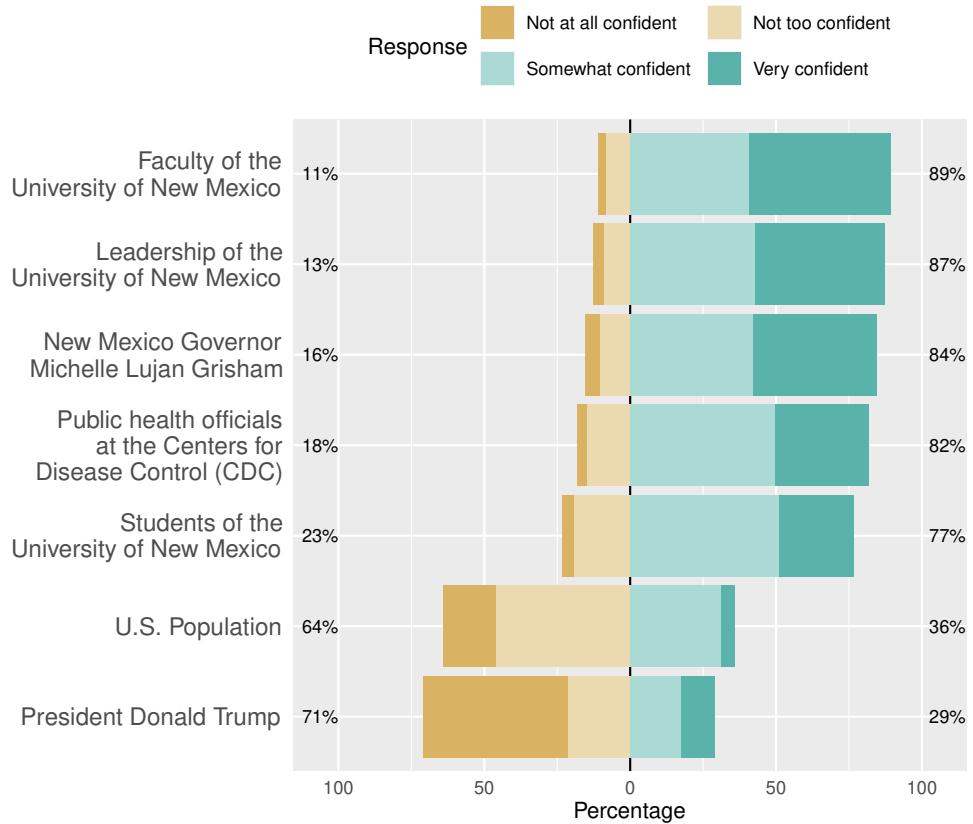


Figure 1: Responses to the question: "How confident are you that each is doing a good job responding to the Covid-19 (novel coronavirus) pandemic?"

3.2 Perception of threat

The SOE community sees the Covid-19 pandemic as a major threat to multiple dimensions of our lives. Figure 3 shows that a large share (82%) of respondents view the pandemic as a "major" or "extremely major" threat to the U.S. economy. 71% see the pandemic as a major threat to the health of the U.S. population, 65% to the nation's stability, and 56% to daily life in our community.

3.3 Worry about Covid-19

As Figure 4 shows, a majority of respondents report worrying "frequently" or "occasionally" about several aspects of the Covid-19 pandemic, such as the economic recession and the capacity of local hospitals.

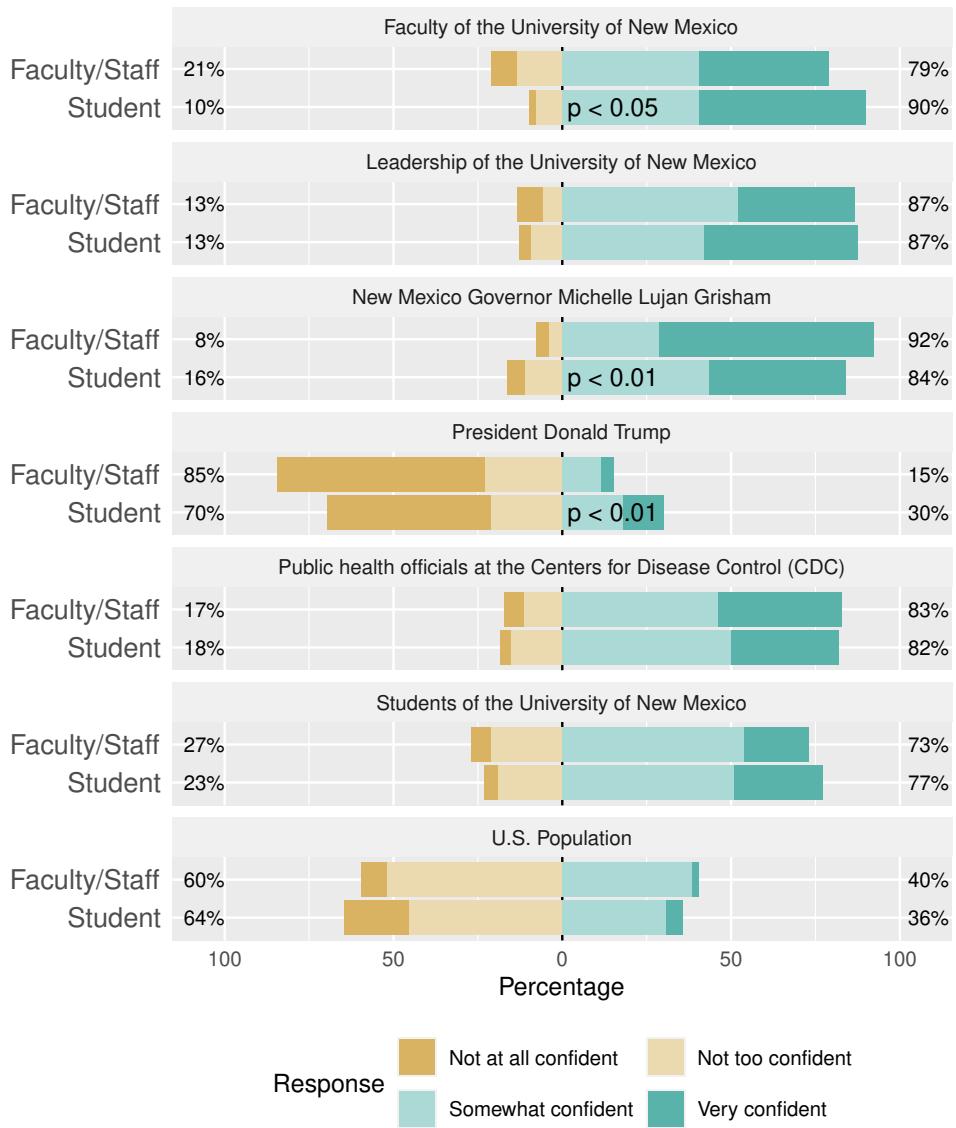


Figure 2: Responses to the question: "How confident are you that each is doing a good job responding to the Covid-19 (novel coronavirus) pandemic?" by Faculty/Staff versus Students

Differences between faculty/staff and students are statistically significant when it comes to worry about infection or death from the novel coronavirus. As Figure 5 shows, 78% of faculty and staff, but only 60% of students, worry "frequently" or "occasionally" about getting infected with the novel coronavirus ($p < 0.01$). 52% of faculty and staff, but only 27% of students, worry "frequently" or "occasionally" about dying from Covid-19 ($p < 0.05$). 73% of students report worrying "rarely," "very rarely," or "never" of death from Covid-19.

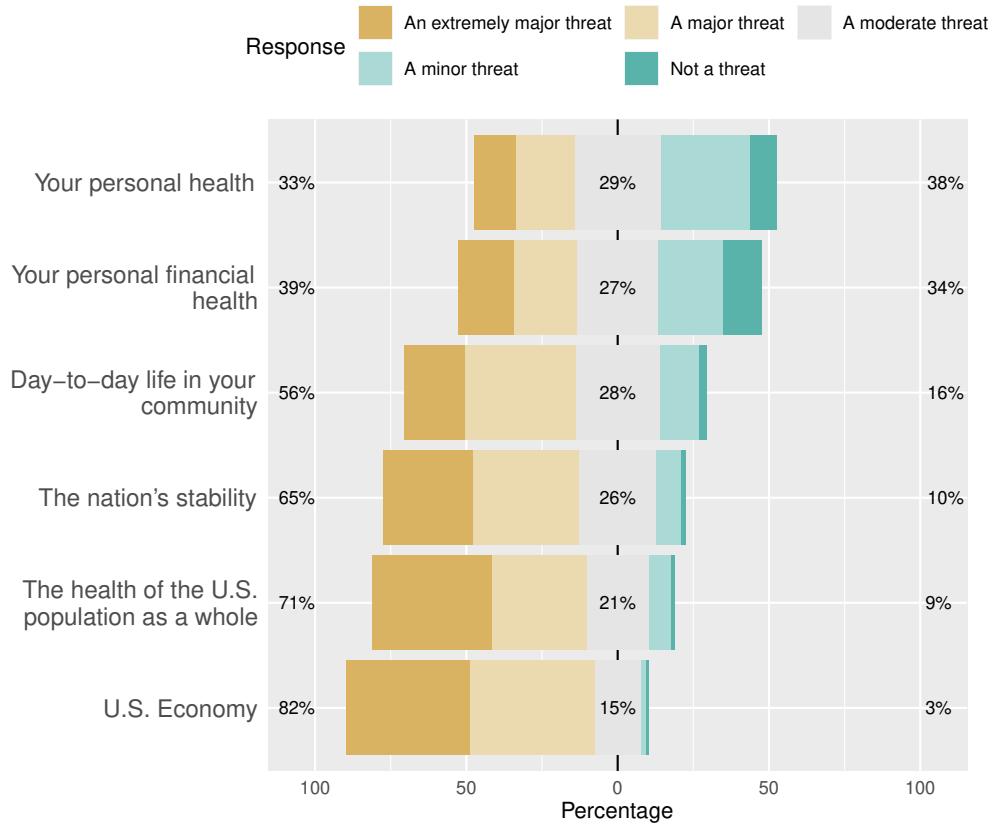


Figure 3: Responses to the question: "How much of a threat is the Covid-19 (novel coronavirus) pandemic for each of the following?"

4 Conclusion

This brief report shows that the SOE community has a great deal of confidence in the response of UNM faculty, UNM leadership, and New Mexico's governor to the Covid-19 pandemic. SOE community members see the pandemic as a major threat to the U.S. economy and express considerable concern about the economic recession and the effect on local hospitals.

There are some important differences between faculty/staff and students when it comes to perceptions of personal risk from the novel coronavirus. Overall, students are less likely than faculty to express worry about personal infection and death from Covid-19.

Student views will be important to take into account as UNM reopens for a hybrid fall semester. Since a large share of students express little worry about personal infection or death from the pandemic, they may be less inclined to observe public health mandates intended to curb disease spread. It will therefore be essential to stress the importance of

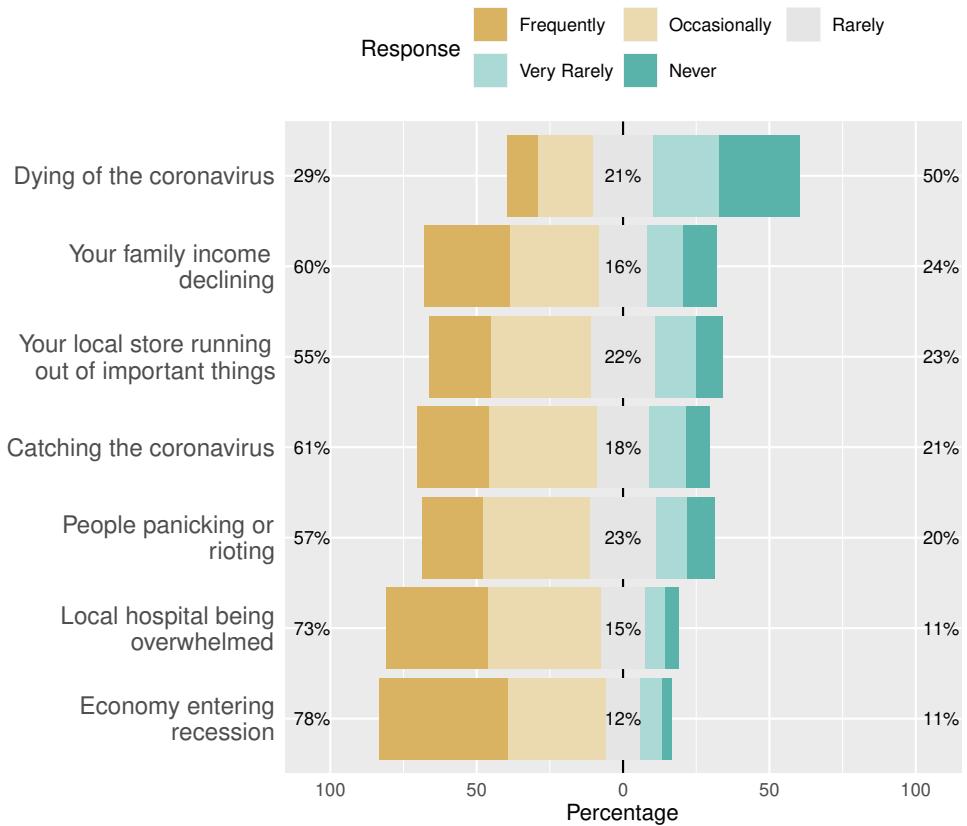


Figure 4: *"Responses to the question: How often do you find yourself worrying about the following recently?"*

behavior that protect the health of others, especially older and more vulnerable members of the SOE and broader UNM communities.

Results of our survey, though not representative of all of UNM or the state of New Mexico, imply that, though the pandemic has induced considerable anxiety in multiple areas, people believe that local leaders are taking the right approach to combat its damaging effects.

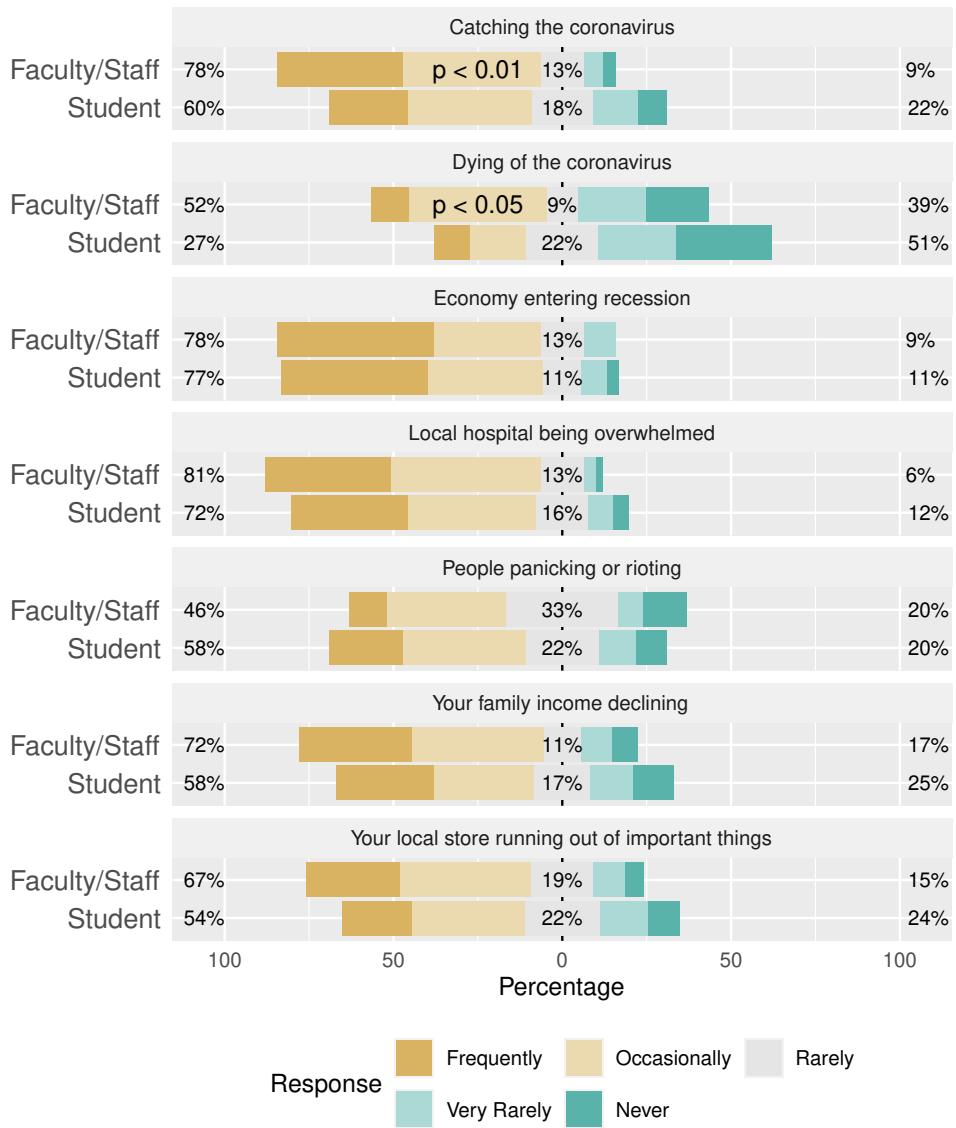


Figure 5: "Responses to the question: How often do you find yourself worrying about the following recently?" by Faculty/Staff versus Students

References

Abrams, S. (2016). There Are Conservative Professors. Just Not in These States. July 1. <https://nyti.ms/2rfW7wd>.

Shields, J. A. and J. M. Dunn Sr. (2016). *Passing on the Right: Conservative Professors in the Progressive University*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.