

Study gauges social responsibility in slowing COVID-19 spread

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Uncertainty and anxiety generated by the COVID-19 pandemic motivated social psychologist Evelyn Vázquez at the University of California, Riverside, to collaborate with UCR Healthy Campus on a study to identify safety measures and public health messaging that reduce the spread of the coronavirus within campus communities.

Working with Ann Cheney, an associate professor in the Department of Social Medicine, Population, and Public Health at the UC Riverside School of Medicine, Vázquez and the UCR Healthy Campus research team conducted nine focus groups at UCR with a variety of stakeholders including 42 students, 41 staff members, and 30 faculty. The UCR Healthy Campus group works to elevate [health](#) and well-being on [campus](#).

Last September, participants took part in a 90-minute session to discuss their beliefs about the COVID-19 pandemic, the mental health burden linked to the stress and uncertainty of the pandemic, challenges with adhering to [public health](#) measures, and the abrupt shift to working or studying from home, which for some also involved raising children and caring for others.

Vázquez, a postdoctoral researcher at the medical school, led the project's research design, data analysis, and data interpretation. Researchers asked focus group participants open-ended questions related to COVID-19 on topics including risk-reduction measures such as face coverings, and recommendations for a [safe return](#) to campus.

"Ours was a [qualitative study](#), allowing us to get a deeper understanding of why people behave in certain ways, what their core values are, and how culture may be informing their behaviors," said Vázquez, who received her doctoral degree in education in 2019 from the UCR Graduate School of Education. "Qualitative methods are ideal for exploring shared ideas and community-based strategies to promote public health responses."

All participants expressed concern about the risk of contracting COVID-19 based on other people's behaviors in [public spaces](#), with the lack of mask wearing and social distancing constituting a main source of discomfort. Private home spaces were another source of perceived risk.

"Participants discussed how difficult it was being in these private spaces with friends, family, and housemates who did not wear masks or were skeptical of their use," Vázquez said. "Several participants thought younger generations saw themselves as less vulnerable to COVID-19."

Misinformation spread by social media and news outlets came up in the focus groups. Participants expressed concern that some people felt face coverings compromised breathing and would forgo wearing masks or wear them improperly. The ways personal freedom outweighed shared responsibility to protect others came up in discussions as well. Participants also weighed the stress of balancing social and emotional needs against the risk of contracting COVID-19.

"Unless safety measures were successfully implemented, participants said they refused to return to campus," Vázquez said.

According to the study, which appears in the journal *Health Education and Behavior*, participants: Indicated need for transparent messaging, regulations, and enforcement of precautions for community members' safety and comfort.

- Encouraged partnerships with the county public health department for COVID-19 education and resources.
- Suggested several structural interventions, such as free rapid COVID-19 testing, sanitation materials, cleaning supplies, increased indoor ventilation, and outdoor seating.
- Suggested flexible class policies to allow students to meet their academic needs; and flexible schedules for staff and faculty to accommodate their child care and/or caretaking responsibilities.
- Suggested a top-down approach to promote public health safety measures and institutional policies implemented across campus.
- Suggested a ground-up approach to widely adopt and adhere to [public health measures](#).

- Emphasized strict adherence to mask wearing and consequences for those who do not follow guidelines.
- Recommended workshops and training on COVID-19 safety information for the campus community regardless of sociocultural and political differences.
- Recommended the university provide information on how vulnerable populations on campus could be supported.
- Advocated to support the mental health needs of staff and faculty members.
- Discussed the need to "redesign the entire campus," including classroom and offices.

"Public research universities such as UCR can generate and spread knowledge through research and education and are well positioned to address community health needs in this pandemic," Cheney said. "As our study participants recommend, a combination of top-down and ground-up solutions focused on community building and school spirit could be effective for adopting COVID-19 [safety measures](#)."

The research was conducted before the emergency approval of COVID-19 vaccines. With the public now having widespread access to these vaccines, the research team is considering a new set of focus group discussions about returning to campus.

Vázquez and Cheney were joined in the study by Julie Chobdee and Niloufar Nasrollahzadeh. Chobdee, who served as a wellness program coordinator at UCR when the study was conducted, now works at the University of Southern California; Nasrollahzadeh is a former graduate student who worked for UCR Healthy Campus.

The title of the research paper is "Personal Freedom and Social Responsibility in Slowing the Spread of COVID-19: A Rapid Qualitative Study."

More information: Evelyn Vázquez et al, Personal Freedom and Social Responsibility in Slowing the Spread of COVID-19: A Rapid Qualitative Study, *Health Education & Behavior* (2021). [DOI: 10.1177/10901981211033241](https://doi.org/10.1177/10901981211033241)

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