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<div align="center">Hello Stranger, Will You be my Best Friend?</div>

Introduction

High school students spend most of their senior year thinking about one thing, college. From high pressure standardized testing, copious number of written application supplements, and endless debate as to what school to go to; all roads ultimately lead to attendance at a university. When the dust has settled, and the decision is made what's left is frequently unharnessed excitement and anticipation. When students theorize what their new lives at college may contain they often anticipate newfound freedoms, social opportunities, academic advancement, and uncharted independence; many students however do not place the nonsynonymous concept of loneliness upon their fantasized list. Although, it is increasingly easy to get lost in the allures of college life, many incoming students do not consider the prevalence of loneliness within the college community. For students at American universities, through the allures of media and the societal branding of college as "the time of your life", many students do not predict the prevalence of loneliness as a factor in the college transition.

This fall students across the nation moved into dorm rooms and began classes at universities going through all the routine formalities of beginning college they anticipated, but with one added element: loneliness. Chris, a first-year student and member of the track team at Stonehill College recalled "I [felt lonely] pretty much all of first semester; I didn't really feel like I fit in anywhere… I was prepared to feel lonely but not to this extent, I'd say it was worse than what I had anticipated" (Lanahan). Michaella a first year theater student at James Madison

University remembered, "I felt extremely lonely for the first few days because I felt this pressure to make friends really fast … I thought I would be fine when starting college because we had a week of orientation so when I didn't like buddy up with someone in the first few days, it was a weird sensation" (Craver)

Loneliness is growing more and more frequent in the human population as although emerging technologies have us more connected than ever, communities are disbanding, and individuals are becoming isolated. The last decade has been referred to as the "age of loneliness", as "it's estimated that one in five Americans suffers from persistent loneliness" (Gregoire). Loneliness is an epidemic that plagues a growing portion of the population, but is showing increasing frequency in young adults as result of trends in social habits. With the frequency of loneliness on the rise and college students falling within the prime age demographic to experience loneliness, how is loneliness impacting college campuses across the country and changing the "first year experience"?

The Growth of Loneliness in Young People

With ever-developing technology, new patterns of socialization, and changing cultural focuses, loneliness is on the rise. A 2010 study conducted by Brigham Young University predicted that "[loneliness] may be the next biggest public health issue on par with obesity and substance abuse", as "a recent review of studies indicates that loneliness increases [the] mortality risk by 26%" (Harris). Loneliness used to be an issue profiled as affecting mainly older generations**;** however**,** loneliness is becoming more and more prevalent in young adults. A study conducted in 2010 by the Mental Health Foundation found "loneliness to be a greater concern among young people than the elderly" (Gil). In the study conducted it was found that "the 18 to 34-year-olds surveyed were more likely to feel lonely often, to worry about feeling alone and to

feel depressed because of loneliness than the over-55s.". Loneliness is developing to become an issue that is not only more prevalent in everyday society, but an issue that is pervasive to young people.

Loneliness however is not an isolated issue, as the more individuals experiencing loneliness are introduced to a community, the more likely other members of the community are to become lonely. A study conducted in 2009 using sixty-one years of data collected routinely from 5,000 people in Framingham, Massachusetts shows "participants are 52% more likely to be lonely if someone they're directly connected to (such as a friend, neighbor, coworker or family member) is lonely. People who aren't lonely tend to then become lonelier if they're around people who are." (Beaton). This is impactful on college campuses as students live in an immersive community made up of their peers; if a culture of loneliness is cultivated on a college campus it then has a likelihood of growing through the student population.
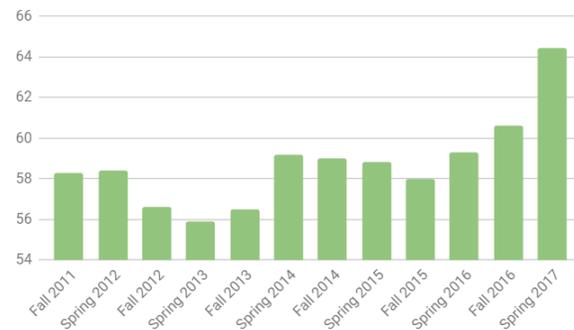
The Prevalence of Loneliness in College Students

Amongst other pervasive issues found on college campuses, such as anxiety, depressions, and suicidal tendencies, the American College Health Association (ACHA) surveys college campuses to chart the growth of loneliness in college students. Twice yearly ACHA surveys approximately 100,000 students from 137 American universities on various health related topics. Amongst many other questions, students are asked if they have ever felt "very lonely" and if so how long ago they experienced the feeling. ACHA has been conducting this survey since Fall of 2011, spanning the course of twelve academic semesters

Students Who Have Felt Lonely in the Last Thirty Days
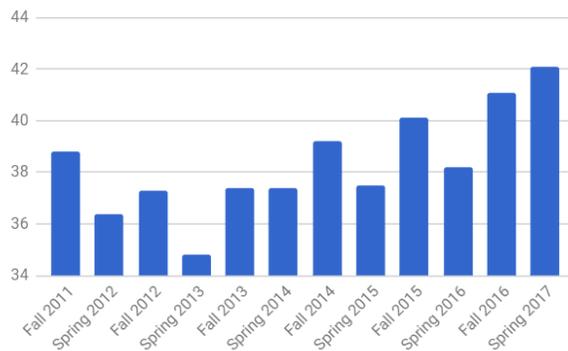
Students Who Have Felt Lonely in the Last Twelve Months

As seen in the data trends, the frequency of loneliness in college students has grown significantly in the last six years. The first chart shows the percent of students surveyed who have experienced a "very lonely" feeling anytime in the thirty days preceding the survey, whereas the second chart visualizes the percentage of students who have felt "very lonely" in the last twelve months. The most recent data collected shows that 42% of students (~42,000 students) have felt lonely in the last thirty days and 64% (~64,00 students) have felt lonely within the last twelve months.

The Frequency of Loneliness in First Year Students

When a first-year student steps onto a campus for the first time they essentially have a pristine blank slate, essentially opening themselves to the opportunity to represent themselves as they choose as they become immersed in a new environment surrounded by unfamiliar peers and new social situations. However, with this clean blank slate comes many downsides, such as the removal of a familiar support system they had at home, distance from family, and absence of familiar peers and friends. As result of the unique college transition that occurs during a
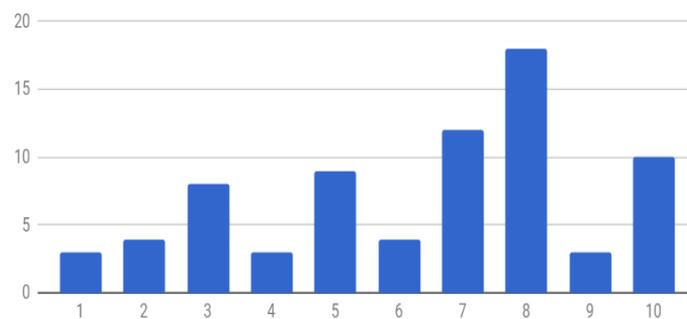
student's first year, first year students may be more prone to emotions of loneliness as they grapple with this transition. Many people often to associate the word "orientation" with the week long program students go through when beginning college. However the University of Miami's Department of Orientation and Commuter Student Involvement considers "orientation" to be a student's entire first year, as it takes a student a whole academic year to properly adjust to college life. This definition is revealing of just how long the college adjustments takes and how impactful a student's first year is.

To further explore the presence of loneliness in college students, I brought the discussion to my own college campus by surveying eighty-six first year students at the University of Miami on their personal experiences with loneliness.

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At Any Point During Your First Year of College Did You Feel Lonely?
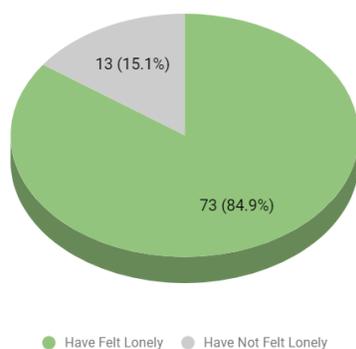
If You Have Felt Lonely, Rate the Feeling on a Scale of 1 to 10

The first chart visualizes the answers given for the question "At any point during your first year of college did you feel lonely?". Of the 86 students surveyed 73 (84.9%) said they had experienced loneliness during their first year of college and 13 (15.1%) reported they had not. Of the students who reported they had experienced loneliness in their first year of college, they

were then asked to rate that feeling on a scale of 1 to 10 where 1 is a feeling of slight loneliness

and 10 is the loneliest they have ever felt. The second chart visualizes student's ratings of their

loneliness on a scale of 1 to 10 with the average rating being 6.4. Of the students surveyed 11.6%

of students said that at some point during their first year of college they were the loneliest they

had been their entire life.
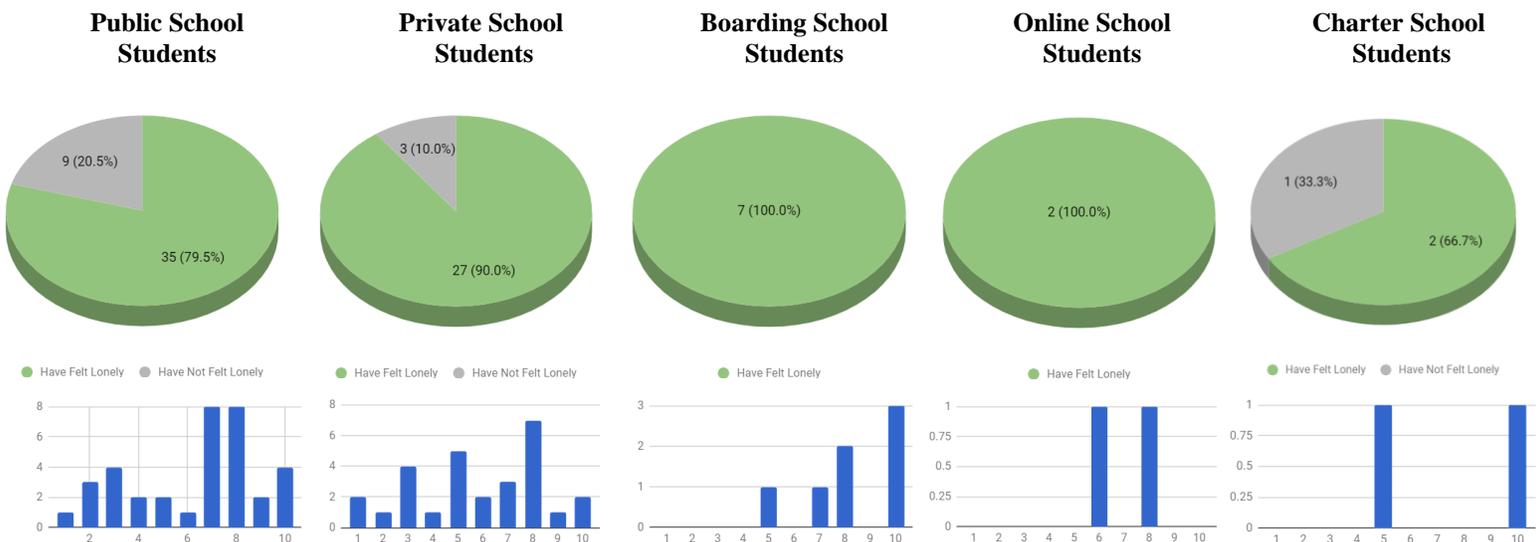
To further segment the results, the responses were then separated according to what type

of high school the student went to to see if the student's style of prior education impacted their

college transition experiences. On average students who went to public schools rated their

loneliness at a 6.3, private schools 6, boarding schools 8.2, online schools 8.2, and charter

schools 7.5. Despite the style of high school education, the majority of students still experienced

times of loneliness. I had hypothesized that students from boarding schools may be less likely to

experience loneliness as they had already underwent a similar transition in high school, however

boarding school students were just as likely to feel lonely.

**The Effects of Social Expectations on College Students**

Many students spend most of high school looking forward to what many perceive to be the light at the end of the tunnel, or more commonly referred to as college. Through siblings, friends, movies, and media before even stepping foot on a college campus students begin to build expectations for what college may be like. For today's youth "college isn't sold to teenagers as just any place or passage. It's a gaudily painted promise. The time of their lives!" (Bruni) creating an idealized set of expectations for what the college experience may be like. However, "the disparity between myth and reality stuns many of them, and various facets of youth today... frames admission to college as the *end* of all worry" (Bruni). This idealized expectation-raising version of the college experience ignores many realities of what college is actually like and could be a contributing factor to the growth of loneliness.

No individual student's expectations for college are exactly the same and are subject to be impacted by a variety of factors. Where some students may have older siblings or friends who have given them a glimpse into what life at college is like, other students may rely more heavily on media. Either way, before even stepping foot on a college campus as an enrolled student, every student has some variety of preconceived expectations for what college will be like. Greg, a current freshman at the University of Miami in the business school recalled he believed college would be "a lot of parties, social interaction, stuff like that; stuff you really couldn't do at home" (Zaroogian). Whereas Lea a current freshman from the Caribbean Islands studying at the Frost School of Music remembered "movies made me think there would be a lot of partying and a lot of social events, but then counsellors brought me to think I would work a lot and wouldn't really see people" (Enrode). Ellie a freshman at the school of architecture expressed that "From what it seem[ed] [college] was very social. You are constantly interacting with people… everyone

seemed to be surrounded by people at all times" (Kramer). Every student has their own unique

notion of what college will be like without personally having a first-hand experience, however

how accurate are these notions and does college meet the expectations set up for students?

To further understand how student's expectations for college impact their loneliness once

arriving at college, the eighty-six students were asked to assign a rating as to whether or not

college met their preconceived expectations. The rating was given on a scale of 1-10 with 1

being "Was below my expectations" and 10 being "exceeded my expectations". The results can

be roughly grouped where 1-4 represents students whose expectations were not met, 5-6

represents students whose expectations were satisfied, and 7-10 represents students whose

expectations were exceeded.

**Expectation Rating of Students Who Have Experienced Loneliness**
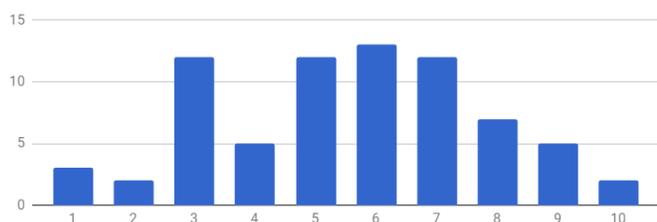
Expectation Rating of Students Who Have Not Experienced Loneliness
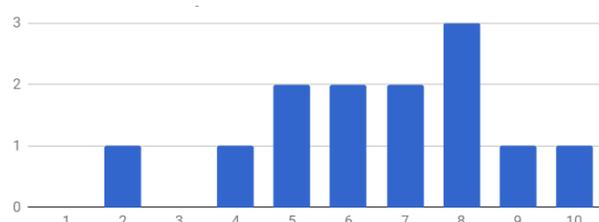
Students who had reported feeling lonely at some point during their first year on average

rated the extent to which college met their expectations at a 4.4, whereas students who did not

report feeling lonely rated it at a 6.5. On average students who did not report feeling lonely in

college reported that college exceeded their expectations, whereas students who did experience

loneliness on average found that college did not meet their expectations.

To further understand what elements of college did not meet student's expectations,

students were asked to list elements of college they found to be below expectation.

Frequency of Students Who Expressed Dissatisfaction with Various Facets of College Life
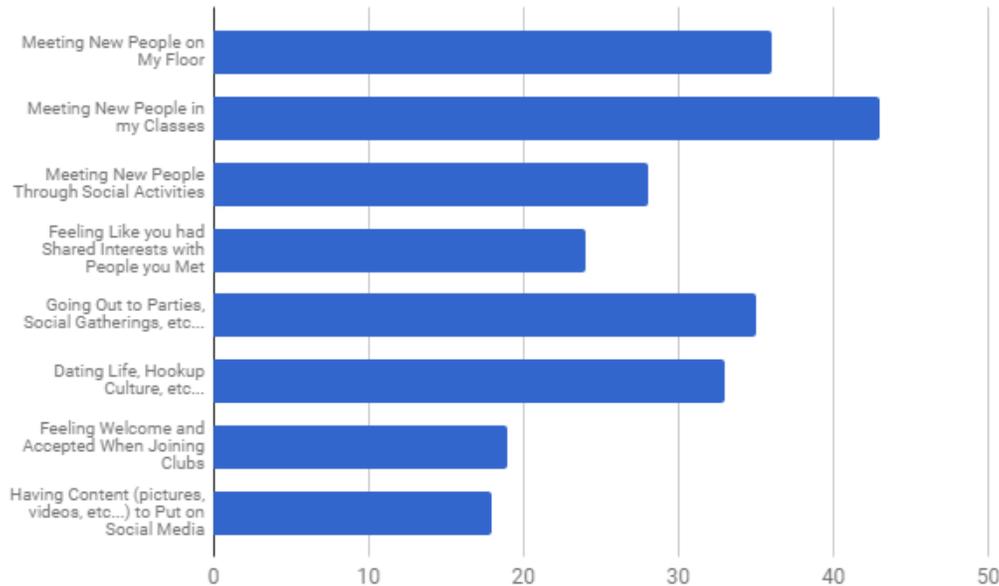
50% of students selected "Meeting New People in my Classes", 42% selected "Meeting New People on My Floor", 41% selected "Going Out to Parties, Social Gatherings, etc…", and 38% selected "Dating Life, Hookup Culture, etc…". Partying and dating are two facets of college that are commonly misrepresented to students previous to coming to college, which is reflected in the frequency of students who expressed their dissatisfaction by listing it in the chart above. The frequency of students who chose "Meeting New People on my Floor" and "Meeting New People in my Classes" was very surprising. This trend in the data expresses that students were most dissatisfied with the lack of opportunities to meet and build relationships with their peers.

To further understand why students were dissatisfied with certain elements of college, I interviewed two first year students at the University of Miami to find out why they were dissatisfied with different facets of college life. Greg who expressed being dissatisfied with meeting people stated "I found the whole social scene to not be very dynamic. You expect to be meeting people left and right and making new friends, especially close connections because a lot of people are used to that from high school" (Zaroogian). Many students have an expectation that making friends will occur quickly and it will be easy to fill the voids left from close high school relationships cultivated over several years. Greg further reflected on this recalling "when you start college you have to start over, almost reinvent yourself and re-establish who you are. As you meet people it happens slowly, things evolve socially a lot slower than I expected. It happened eventually, but it was not as rapid or immediate as I expected"

Ellie who expressed dissatisfaction with party culture recalled "Any time there was anything going on I was like oh my god I need to be at that. Even if I was too tired or had other things going on, or I was sick I didn't really care I felt like I had to make it to that" (Kramer). Ellie found herself dissatisfied with the types of social interactions going on and expressed that she was just looking to meet people, however due to party culture that often involved crowded and alcoholic situations. "Once I became more comfortable with myself and understood that I don't actually like going to parties, I don't actually like being drunk, and I don't like that kind of attention" (Kramer).

The Effects of Social Media Use on College Students

For today's college students it is almost unheard of to not be an active user of popular social media platforms such as Instagram, Snapchat, Facebook, and Twitter. Of the eighty-six first-year students interviewed at the University of Miami, only two reported not using any of the

before mentioned social media platforms. Sharing pictures, writing posts, and taking snaps are all ways students stay in touch in college, however these methods intended to bring individuals closer together could be succeeding in pushing them further apart. Social media can easily be used to glamorize an individual's everyday activities, resulting in spoon feeding a user's audience an edited glimpse into the viewer's life. Many students use "Facebook and Instagram to perform pantomimes of uninterrupted fun and unalloyed fabulousness" (Bruni) and create a falsely communicated message to their audience of what their college experience is truly like.

Although social media intends to bring people closer together, the edited nature of media can provoke feelings of jealousy and dissatisfaction. A 2013 study by the University of Michigan's social psychologist Ethan Kross, monitored social media use in eighty-two participants in relation with how satisfied they felt with their life. The study found that the more the participants checked Facebook in a given amount of time, consequently the worse they felt about their life. To counteract these feelings of loneliness the researchers than had the participants engage in different forms of communication. The study found that communications with others through technology (texting, phone call, etc..) did not improve satisfaction, whereas satisfaction improved over time when participants could engage in face-to-face interactions. (Kross)

To understand how first year students at the University of Miami were affected by social media. Students were asked to report whether they felt like they were missing out when viewing other student's social media. The results were then segmented by whether the student had ever experienced loneliness to further understand the data.

Students Who
Experienced Loneliness

Students Who Did Not
Experience Loneliness

31 (42.5%) 42 (57.5%)

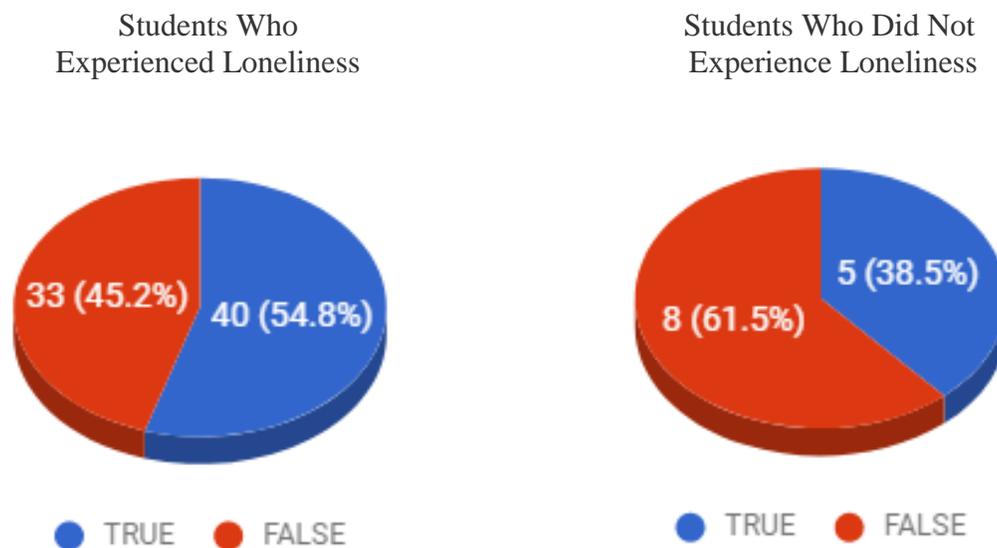● TRUE ● FALSE

5 (38.5%)
8 (61.5%)

● TRUE ● FALSE
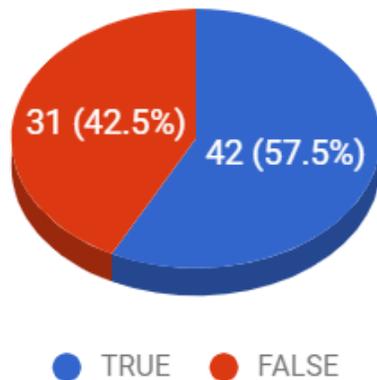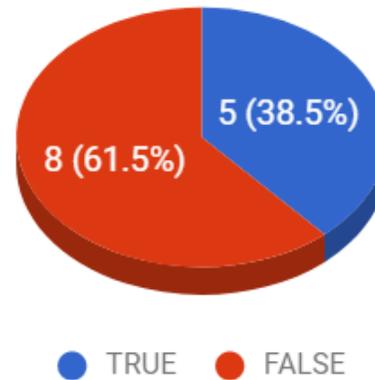
Of those students who had experienced loneliness during their first year of college forty-two (57.5%) students reported that they had felt like they were missing out when viewing other student's social media. However, students who did not report feeling lonely were less likely to feel like they were missing out, as only 5 (38.5%) students reported feeling like they were missing out when viewing social media.

Due to the nature of social media, it is incredibly easy to curate pictures and posts to reflect exactly how an individual would like to be seen. In today's digital age it is common knowledge that what you see on social media is not necessarily true, however despite this knowledge social media can still get the best of us. Anneka a freshman at the University of Miami, and a regular user of social media, recalled "people definitely portray the best parts of their life on social media and you can make it seem like you're constantly having fun and constantly have friends" (Pariano). Despite knowing that social media can often project falsities of what someone's life is actually like Anneka continued "when you're watching it and you're not in the situation it looks like it's so much fun when maybe it isn't, so if you're alone in your

[dorm] or whatever it's easy to go on social media and you feel like you're missing out because people are just showing the best parts" (Pariano).

Students were then asked report whether they felt the need to make their social media portray that they were having a good time at college. The data was again segmented by students who reported experiencing loneliness and students who did not.

Students Who
Experienced Loneliness

Students Who Did Not
Experience Loneliness

33 (45.2%)   40 (54.8%)

● TRUE   ● FALSE

5 (38.5%)

8 (61.5%)

● TRUE   ● FALSE

Of the students who reported feeling lonely, 40 (54.8%) reported feeling a need to make their social media portray they were having a good time in college, whereas of the students who reported not feeling lonely, only 5 (38.5%) identified with the statement.

The data collected from the two questions above visualizes the cyclical cycle of students feeling like they are missing out from exposure to social media, feeling a desire to make their own social media reflect they are having a good time, and then consequently cause other students to feel like they are missing out furthering the cycle. Students who reported feeling lonely were more likely to feel negative emotions from social media as well as more likely to feel a desire to represent themselves as "having a good time" on their own social media.

Stigmas Towards Loneliness and Detrimental Effects

Although loneliness is a prevalent issue on college campuses, many students do not feel comfortable talking about their loneliness with others or feel that sensations of loneliness were shameful. The medical director of the Jed Foundation, Victor Schwartz, stated "while [students] expected that academics and finances would be sources of stress, many students were lonely and thought this was sort of unique to them, because no one talked about it." (Qtd. in Bruni). Many students do not feel comfortable expressing their loneliness to others as they feel it is "abnormal" or places them in the social minority.

To further understand who students felt comfortable confiding in about their loneliness, the eighty-six students surveyed were asked to select which groups they would talk to about experiences of loneliness.

Frequency of Students Who Felt Comfortable Telling Various Parties About Being Lonely
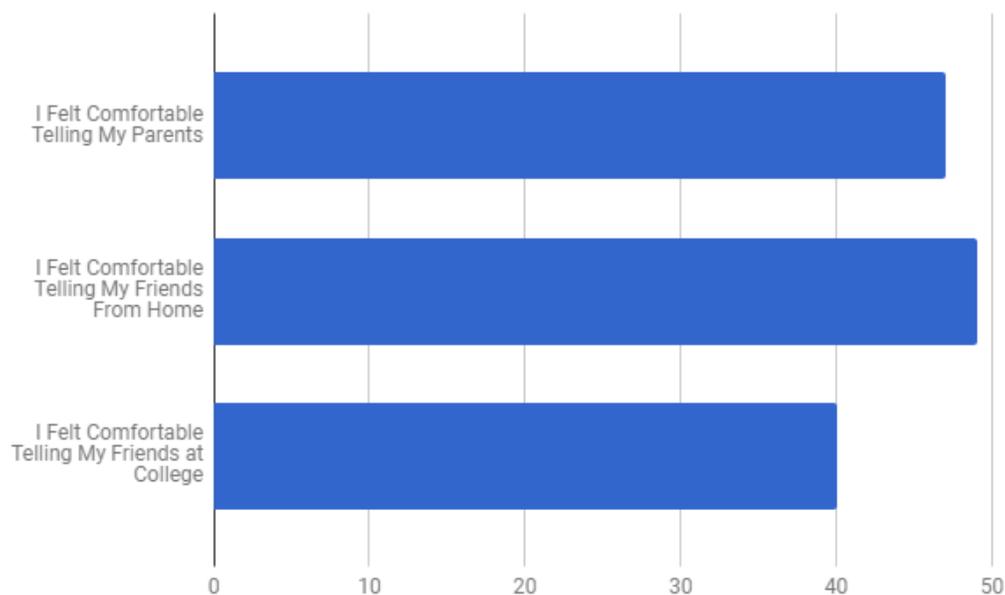
Of the students surveyed 64% of lonely students felt comfortable telling their parents, 67% felt comfortable telling their friends from home, and 55% felt comfortable telling their friends at college. Of the students surveyed, nine students (12.3%) did not feel comfortable telling anyone.

Many students feel subconscious speaking about feeling lonely and as result do not feel comfortable bringing it to the attention to all members of their previously established support system. This is concerning as the "estrangement can be a gateway to binge drinking and other self-destructive behavior. And it's as likely to derail their ambitions as almost anything else." (Bruni). Due to the perceivably "commonplace" nature of loneliness, loneliness is often not perceived as a legitimate health issue or at times can be brushed off as a situational emotion that individuals will grow out of as their environments change. It is important to take loneliness seriously as severity of loneliness has shown a close relationship with a variety of mental and physical health issues. Loneliness has shown a strong correlation with the development of mental health issues such as, "stress, depression, paranoia, anxiety, addiction, cognitive decline and is a known factor in suicide" (Gil). Loneliness can also produce detriments to physical health such as, elevated cortisol and chronic inflammation (Kluger).

Combating Loneliness

Although loneliness is a prevalent issue in college students, young people are finding ways to combat loneliness and speak out to allow others to understand how they feel. Since publicly talking about or expressing loneliness is not often deemed acceptable, it is difficult for students to identify peers with similar experiences or understand that they are not alone. Earlier this year a video was made by Cornell freshman Emory Bergman called "My College Transition" that detailed her experiences with loneliness and gained national attention. As

described by Cornell University, "the project was to depict a "transformation." Emery created a

video about her college transition and its impact on her throughout her first few months at

Cornell. She highlights how she entered into college with really high expectations, and how

social media played into her frustration". ("My College Transition"). Bergman's video served as

a call to action to acknowledge the prevalence of first year loneliness and to debunk myths

involving expectations and media.
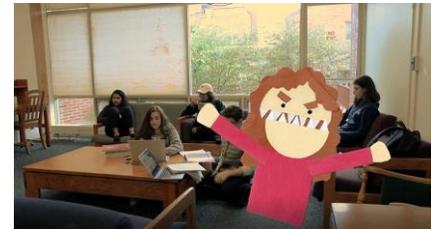
Images from Emory Bergman's "My College Transition"

Beyond speaking out about loneliness, forward thinking students are finding little things

throughout their day to do to promote social interaction and combat loneliness. Arnold, a first-

year business student at the University of Miami elaborated on a simple strategy he created to

meet more people and feel more connected.

> "I try not to use my phone in the elevator to break the awkwardness and meet
>
> people. We live in the same building, and we're trapped in this box for a bit, so we might
>
> as well talk to each other, right? I don't understand people who just stare at their phones
>
> and ignore the people in the elevator. I know you don't have a signal... there's literally no
>
> reason you can't just say hi or something. Most of the time when I do talk to someone it
>
> is a friendly interaction and ends with a smile. Everyone in this building is here for the

same reason as me, and that is to meet people and connect. If I am being put in an

elevator with someone else with nothing else to do other than talk, I'm going to say

something." (Freeman)

Little efforts such as this create methods for pushing back against loneliness and

promoting socialization. However, efforts such as this are often not made unless an individual

has an active understanding of their loneliness and is proactive in taking the first steps to go out

of their way to reach out to others.

Conclusion

Every fall roughly 20.4 million students begin a new chapter in their life by attending a

college or university. Although to many dreams of what college life may be like dance with

images of independence, academics, and partying many do not properly account for the impacts

of loneliness on first year students. Students not only are not properly prepared for the impacts of

loneliness, but often are unaware of how common the feeling is and how to isolate its impacts on

their lives. The lonely college student is not an anomaly, but rather comprises of a growing

population of the college demographic. It is not abnormal to be lonely and consequently it should

not be abnormal to talk about it; to bridge the gap between isolated strangers and mutually

understand that it is ok to feel lonely.

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