

# Graduate Student Safety and COVID19 Policy Adherence - December Survey Results

12/18/2020

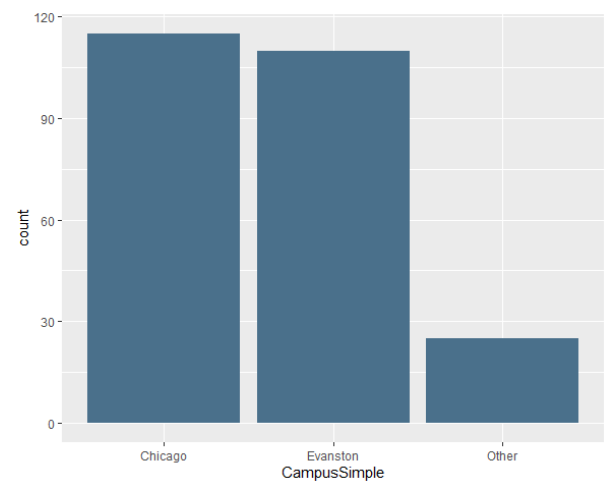
## Introduction

The goal of this document is to use data collected from the anonymous Dec 2020 survey conducted by the Chicago Graduate Student Association (CGSA) to better determine areas which students need additional support as a result of the COVID19 pandemic. This document was put together using numerical and written responses within the survey results and framed by the members of the COVID19 Committee.

Compared to the survey circulated from September through November, which received 168 responses with over 60% of responses coming from Chicago graduate workers, this survey received a more even distribution between the two campuses and a smaller proportion of responses from individuals working remotely or between both campuses.

## Methods and Data Collection.

The survey link was emailed to graduate students using the CGSA and GLAC listservs. A total of 252 responses were received from graduate students working on the Chicago (n=116), Evanston (n=110) or both (n=6) campuses or remotely (n=19). Our survey included questions regarding: Overall Comfort Level, Capacity Level Adherence, Mask Wearing and Social Distancing, Research Plan Adherence, Transportation to Campus, and Contact Tracing. Students were polled on a scale of 1-4, scale of 1-6 and optional short answers to elaborate responses were collected.

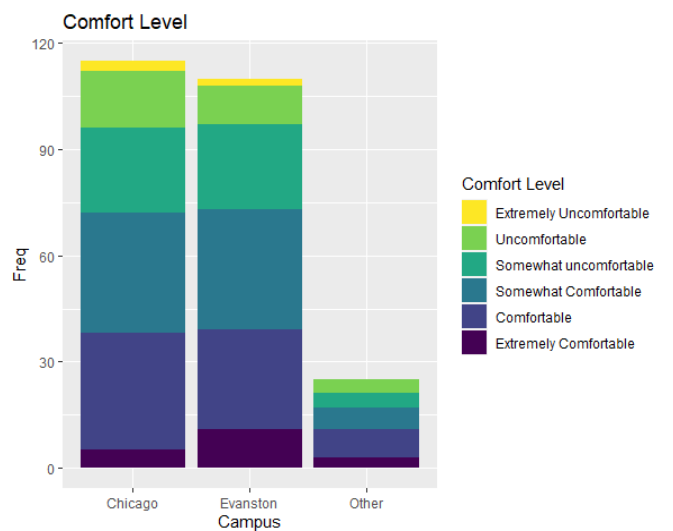
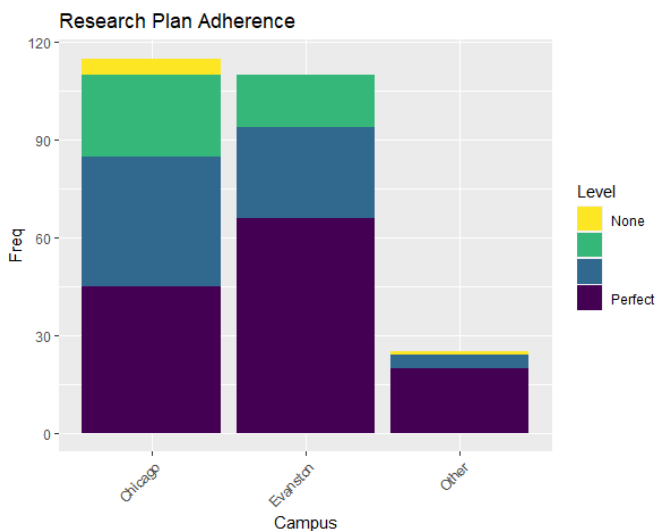
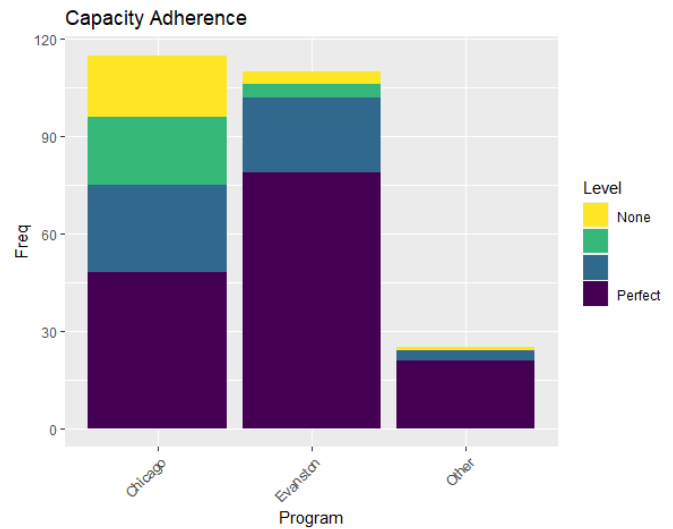
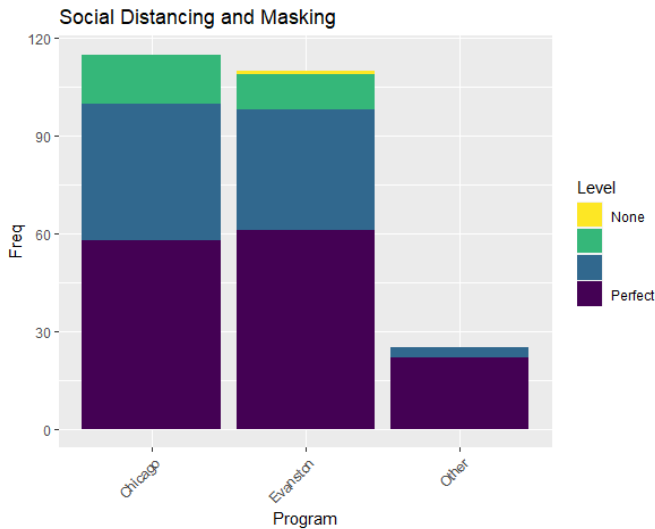


## Social distancing and mask-wearing are similar between campuses, however adherence to lab COVID-19 research plans and capacity limits are significantly decreased on Chicago campus.

We asked students how closely their lab group was adhering to various safety policies. **86% (Chicago) and 89% (Evanston) of students responded that their lab was following social distancing and mask-wearing** at a level of 3 or 4 on a scale of 1-4, with 4 being perfect adherence to policy.

Regarding lab capacity, **34% of Chicago students compared to just 7% of Evanston students report that their lab is not following university guidelines for <65% capacity. Additionally, 26% of Chicago students report low adherence to the lab's research safety plans compared to 14% of Evanston students.** There are significantly more Chicago students reporting low adherence to capacity limits and safety protocols.

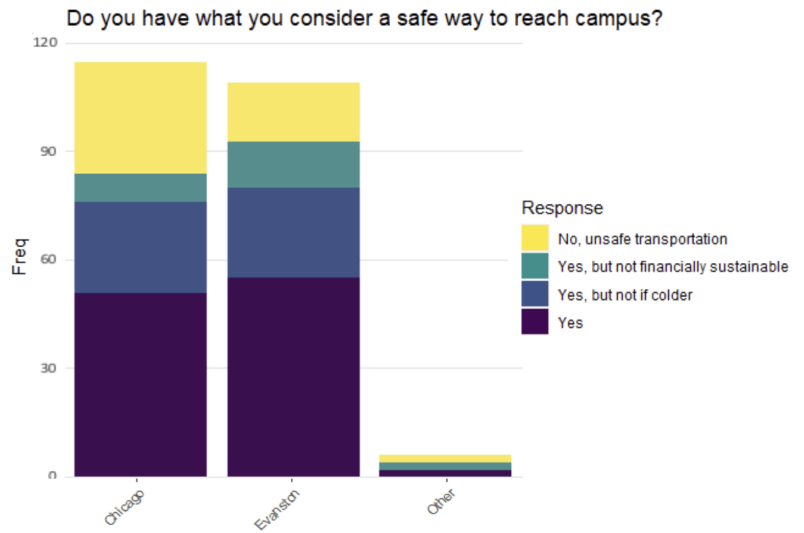
Despite these differences, there is no great difference between graduate students' level of comfort to be at work between the two campuses. **38% and 34% of graduate students on the Chicago and Evanston campuses respectively indicate they feel uncomfortable at work.** According to these data, there may be differences between campuses on specific policies that may increase adherence to capacity limits and research plans. Compared to the previous survey conducted in Sept-Nov 2020, there is no appreciable difference in responses for these questions.



## Securing safe, affordable and reliable transportation to and from campus remains an ongoing challenge for graduate students.

In addition to the increased risk of working on campus, students also risk contracting COVID-19 when taking unsafe methods of transportation. Many students report that they are currently taking unsafe or unsustainable methods of transportation to travel to campus. 44% and 50% of Chicago and Evanston students respectively report that they have safe transportation to campus. This leaves **56% and 50% of students who are either taking unsafe transportation (such as CTA buses and trains), financially unsustainable methods (personal vehicle with parking permit), or methods that will not be available in colder weather (biking or walking long distances).**

Many students respond that they feel unsafe taking public transportation and have had experiences where their bus or train car is over capacity or where they observe individuals who are not masked. Additionally, students who typically rely on public transportation to arrive on campus are now forced to use alternative commuting methods that are not financially sustainable. For example, parking permits for the Chicago campus are an unexpected expense for students, and while the cost of an annual permit may be comparable to 4 quarters of the student activity fee for the U-Pass, there are additional expenses associated with driving a personal vehicle that increase the financial burden on these students.

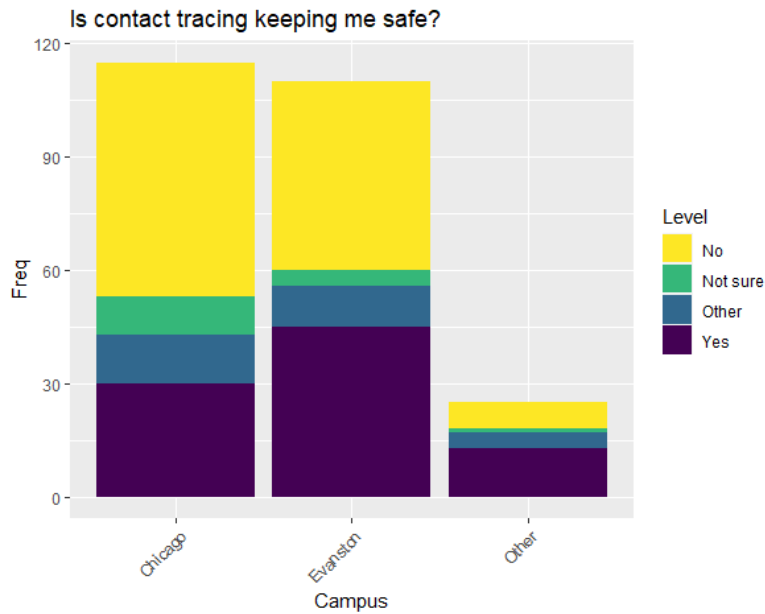


## Contact tracing policies remain a mystery to many students, and many students are unsatisfied with current implementation of protocols.

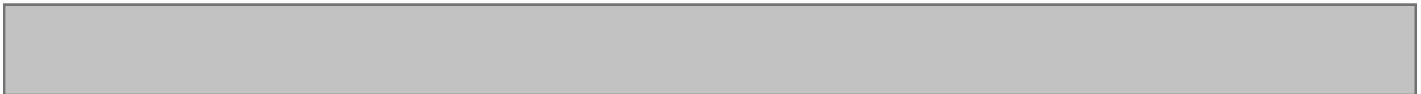
Overall, many students are not satisfied with the contact tracing policies in place at Northwestern University. **53% of Chicago students and 45% of Evanston students surveyed responded that they do not think that the current contact tracing protocol is keeping students safe.** Students elaborated with several reasons for these responses:

- Lack of transparency about policies.
  - Those without first-hand experience with NU contact tracing do not know anything about the process and they do not have any confidence in its effectiveness.
  - Some individuals criticize that there is no public information about the policies. One student states, “By all accounts no one can tell if it even exists”.
  - Many hear about COVID-19 cases, both confirmed and unconfirmed, through word of mouth in the NU community, while hearing nothing from official Northwestern contact tracing channels.
- Dissatisfaction with the 15 minute threshold for contact tracing.
- Concern about increasing contact time between individuals through shared lab spaces and equipment.
  - Students working in shared lab spaces (such as the Simpson Querrey Biomedical Research Building on the Chicago campus) share that there have been cases on their floor, but that they were never notified nor alerted.

- Underreporting and failure to notify relevant individuals for contact tracing, even when they share the same lab space as someone with COVID-19 exposure.
- Insufficient accessibility of COVID-19 tests for contact tracing.
  - One student reports they were not able to receive a COVID-19 test for contact tracing on the Chicago campus, as it was only available in Evanston.
  - One student reports to have been directed to downtown immediate care, which had many other community members waiting for testing and therefore increased their exposure risk.
- Symptom tracker app usage is not adequate.
  - Multiple students based in different buildings on both NU campuses report that they personally are not being asked to show the symptom tracker app screen when entering the research building.
  - People who have had positive COVID-19 cases in their own lab were not required to isolate, but were encouraged to continue work and to simply track their symptoms using the app.



A few students also reported that their individual lab groups followed more strict guidelines than the university, which increased their confidence in coming to work on campus with their lab members.



## **Survey conclusions and recommendations moving forward to increase graduate student research safety.**

This month, we again surveyed capacity and research plan adherence. We also added questions about transportation and contact tracing, which are concerns that have been brought to the COVID-19 Committee's attention by other students and organizations within the NU community. While we did not observe any significant changes between the two survey responses, we did gain additional information about student experiences in transportation and contact tracing. NU policy for contact tracing and isolation following a known COVID-19 case is not well defined and explicitly made aware to research workers. Many students hear of an occurrence of a COVID-19 case on their floor or in the immediate vicinity of their lab space, but are never contacted by Northwestern and only hear about it through peers and coworkers. Additionally, those with experience being contacted for tracing felt the members of the contact tracing team were not being strict enough with guidelines to isolate and get tested. This culminates in a marked distrust in the system and policies set in place.

Similar to the previous survey, there are students who convey that their own labs or departments have identified that the university policies are not adequate and enforce their separate policies for both contact tracing and isolation policy. Below we provide some suggestions for ways to improve the policies at Northwestern driven by student responses and graduate student survey data:

### **To improve capacity and safety protocol adherence:**

- Open conversation between the two campuses to consistently and equitably implement safety measures across all of Northwestern.
  - Improve capacity signage on the Chicago campus
  - Re-emphasize to department chairs and PIs the COVID-19 safety protocols and associated consequences for exceeding capacity limits
- Reevaluate enforcement policy for labs which are not complying - reporting townhall may increase noncompliance reporting.

### **To improve unsafe transportation burden:**

- Equitably provide subsidies or discounts for parking permits, especially for the Chicago campus.
- Increase intercampus shuttle frequency and extend hours of operation to account for wider spread of lab shifts and which will also enable researchers to maintain lab capacity limits.
- Incorporate external shuttle as a safer alternative transportation to CTA for students and researchers, especially those on Chicago campus with fewer affordable transportation options.

### **To improve contact tracing policies:**

- Increase transparency about protocols for who is contacted and when testing and self-isolation is required.
- Reassess testing availability to campus workers on both NU campuses.
- Increase stringency for individuals notified by contact tracing.

These reported data reflect graduate student concerns and we hope that these suggestions will not only improve student safety but also improve research safety at Northwestern as a whole.