

QSS Honors Program Experience 2021-2022

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“Alpha Delta Omicron: How the Pandemic Influenced Drinking Behaviors Among Dartmouth Students”

What I Did and What I Learned

For my QSS thesis, I studied the effect that COVID-19 lockdowns had on drinking habits among Dartmouth students upon their return to campus in fall of 2021. This is a challenge because while isolation may lead to drinking, it is also possible that individuals who drink more are more likely to isolate. In order to study a causal effect of isolation on drinking, I used instrumental variables analysis. While many studies had analyzed the effect that the pandemic had on drinking during periods of quarantine, there were no studies to my knowledge that analyzed the effect of drinking during the period of time when college students were returning to campus. I collected information by sending a survey to Dartmouth students graduating in 2022 or 2023. I was most interested in capturing the change in drinking before and after the pandemic at Dartmouth, so I only interviewed students who experienced “normal” campus life before students were sent home in March 2020.

To predict the causal effect of drinking on isolation, I used state-level data that tracked how locked down each state was during the first three months of the pandemic based on how many people were staying home during this time. Then, based on how locked down a certain state was, I predicted how isolated an individual living in that state would feel using an isolation index. I subsequently predicted the drinking levels for each individual based on that predicted value of isolation. I estimated three models in my thesis: OLS regression, linear probability model (LPM), and two-stage-least-squares instrumental variables. My models controlled for gender, Greek affiliation, class year, race, history of family alcoholism, and whether or not a respondent was a legacy or first-generation student.

I found early evidence that pandemic-era isolation could lead to future increases in drinking once college students returned to campus. Using instrumental variables analysis, I found a causal link that students in my sample who were in more locked down states felt more isolated during the pandemic and were more likely to classify as problem drinkers in fall 2021. This study provides evidence that there may be a severe and potentially long-lasting impact from isolation on the mental and physical well-being of the college-aged population. Many college students are consuming alcohol at dangerous levels after being quarantined, and policies could direct resources towards preventive measures for hazardous college drinking and provide help to those who are struggling. Future studies should continue to analyze the effects of the pandemic on drinking to help combat the detrimental effects of binge drinking on both individual and societal health.

Why I Did It/Advice

I wrote a thesis because it felt like the perfect way to culminate my educational experience at Dartmouth. I chose the QSS major for its interdisciplinary course load, and writing a thesis

allowed me to combine all of the different skills I learned throughout college. It was also an incredibly rewarding experience to work on one project over the course of the year. The terms at Dartmouth go by quickly and I always wished I had more time to focus on one assignment. Writing a thesis allowed me to work diligently over a longer period of time, where I could take my time while working hard on granularity and precision.

Below are some pointers I have for anyone who chooses to pursue a QSS thesis:

- Make sure you choose a topic you care about.
 - You will be working on this thesis over the course of a year, and you want the topic to be something that intrigues you and makes you excited to work on it.
- Create an Excel spreadsheet with deadlines.
 - I created an Excel spreadsheet and gave myself deadlines for when I wanted to complete tasks or finish drafts of certain sections of the thesis. This was extremely helpful in making sure I didn't fall behind. A thesis is a daunting project and breaking it up into sections makes it a lot more manageable.
- Have weekly meetings with your advisor.
 - Staying in close contact with your advisor is imperative. Some meetings might be really short in which you just give a quick update on what you completed during that week, but it is important to stay on the same page.
- Don't be afraid to reach out to other experts on your topic.
 - Throughout the year I reached out to many different professors and experts for help with my thesis. It is helpful to have these conversations and learn from people who have already studied topics related to your own.
- Talk to the other QSS thesis students.
 - A lot of the help I received was from my peers. Talking to people who are undergoing the same writing process as you is both comforting and helpful.
- Apply for funding ahead of time if you think you'll need it.
 - I applied for funding through Ethics Institute at Dartmouth and was able to offer gift cards to survey participants. I believe that this contributed to my high response rate.

If you have any questions regarding my thesis or writing a QSS thesis in general, I would be more than happy to discuss and answer questions. My phone number is 914-355-0546 and my email is lilyfsteckel@gmail.com. Please do not hesitate to reach out!