

Study on the Benefits of ESAs for Students

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Abstract:

In recent years, emotional support animals have become more common on college campuses. However, the research on this topic has mainly focused on the new policies colleges have to implement. This study researches the effects emotional support animals have on their owner. This study consisted of an anonymous survey with the requirements that the participant is a Cal Poly Pomona student over the age of 18 who owns a prescribed ESA. The survey first asks the owner to provide specific background information such as how long they have had their ESA. Then the survey gives the owners different scenarios in which they indicate if it applies to their experiences. These questions were scaled from strongly disagree to strongly agree to gauge if owning an ESA actually benefits the college student. The scaled question section is split into possible positive and negative experiences they have had. This section also includes questions regarding the students' perceived well-being of the animal. To assess whether an ESA benefits the student, the study compares the positive responses and negative responses to these scaled questions. The results indicate that students feel ESAs are more beneficial than they are a hindrance. In regard to the animals' well-being, the results show that a majority of students feel their ESA is being well taken care of; however there is common concern for the affordability of veterinary care.

Background:

Recently in America, there has been a rise in diagnosed mental illnesses. For some individuals that struggle with mental or emotional conditions, owning a dog or other animal is critical to their ability to function on a daily basis. These animals that help individuals with mental conditions are emotional support animals (ESAs) and they provide support for their owner through companionship and help ease symptoms of their condition (Gibeault, 2021). While all pets can offer companionship to their owner, to legally be considered an ESA, the pet must be prescribed by a licensed mental health professional. Emotional support animals are not considered service animals and they do not receive the same public accommodations that service animals do. The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) defines service animals as "dogs that are individually trained to do work or perform tasks for people with disabilities," (ADA, 2020). The ADA also clearly states that animals that "simply provide emotional comfort do not qualify as service animals," (ADA, 2020). Therefore, the key difference between a service dog and an ESA is whether the animal has been trained to perform a specific task related to the owner's disability.

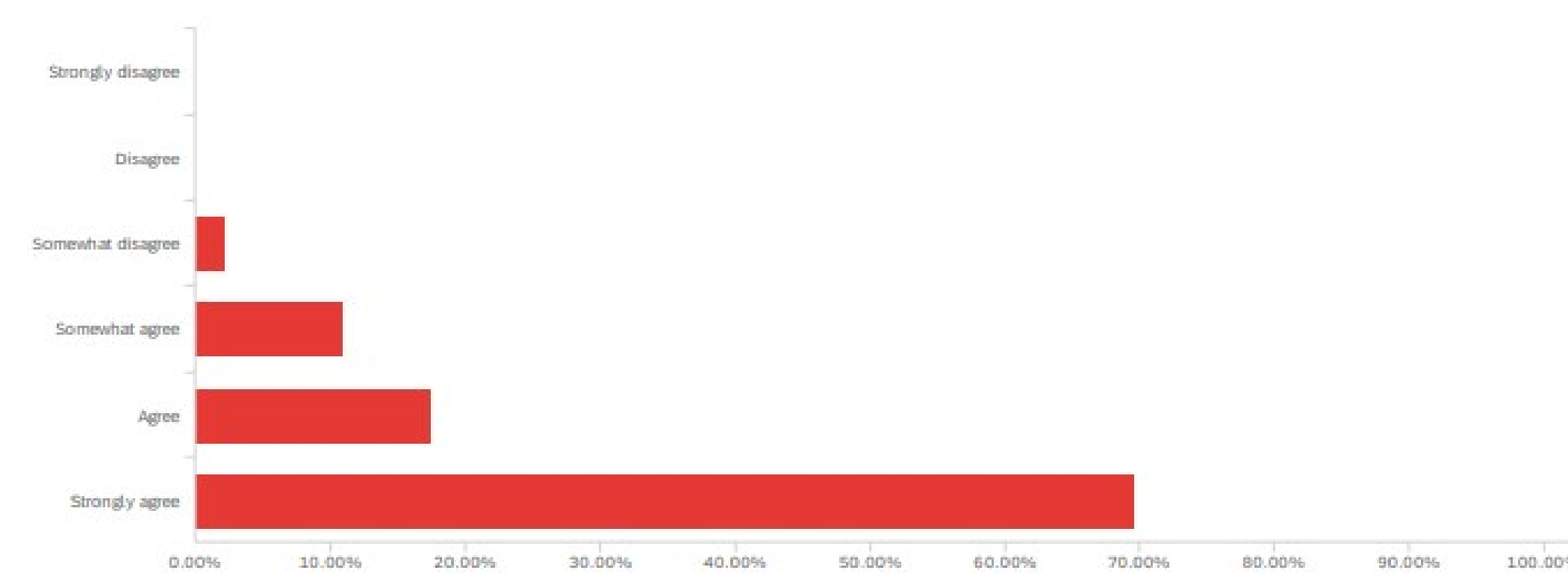
Although emotional service animals do not receive the same accommodations as service dogs, like being allowed in restaurants, owners of ESAs are still provided certain accommodations under federal law. Some of these accommodations are provided by the Fair Housing Act (FHA) which is a federal law that states, "people cannot be discriminated against due to disability when obtaining housing," (US Department of Housing and Urban Development). This law essentially waives pet bans or restrictions for those with a prescribed ESA and ensures they are not charged a pet deposit (Gibeault, 2021). The FHA also "prohibits discriminatory practices when buying, selling, renting, or leasing dwellings that are owned or funded by the federal government," (US Department of Housing and Urban Development). Universities specifically are subject to section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Fair Housing Act of 1969 (Salminen et al, 2018). Section 504 "requires reasonable accommodations to allow those with disabilities to participate in federally funded programs or benefits as long as they are otherwise capable of functioning in the environment," (Salminen et al, 2018). Emotional service animals are considered a reasonable accommodation under both section 504 and the FHA (Salminen et al, 2018). Cal Poly Pomona follows both section 504 and the FHA stating, "The right to have an ESA in and around University Housing facilities is based upon establishing that the use of the animal is a reasonable and necessary accommodation," (Cal Poly Pomona, 2024). At Cal Poly Pomona, to register an ESA, a student must register with the Disability Resource Center (DRC) and have their mental health professional fill out the required form. After all the forms are complete, if the DRC approves the ESA, they will notify University Housing Services or the University Village of the accommodation (Cal Poly Pomona, 2024). Currently, there are 93 students who are approved through the DRC to have an ESA in on-campus housing (Cal Poly Pomona DRC, 2024).

As mentioned before, mental illness diagnoses have been **increasing**. In 2016, the National Alliance of Mental Illnesses reported that 1 in 5 adults in America were suffering from some form of mental illness (Salminen et al, 2018). They also reported that chronic mental illnesses begin at a young age with 50% of those with chronic issues displaying symptoms as early as age 14 and 75% displaying symptoms by age 24 (Salminen, et al, 2018). In 2016, 61% of students at 139 colleges across the United States sought out counseling for anxiety, creating a ratio of 1,737 students to 1 counselor (Emotional Support Animals are Becoming More Common on College Campuses, 2019). A national survey reported that approximately 25% of college students had been diagnosed with or had sought treatment for a psychological disorder (Goodman-Wilson & Highfill, 2019). The survey also found that 56.9% of college students had been experiencing overwhelming anxiety for the last 12 months and 34.5% of students surveyed were feeling "so depressed it was difficult to function" (Goodman-Wilson & Highfill, 2019). The COVID-19 pandemic supported this upward trend in mental health diagnoses. In a 2020 study of nearly 2000 college students, approximately 80% had reported the pandemic negatively impacted their mental health in some way (Reagan, 2022). There have not been many studies on ESAs, with the first peer reviewed scientific study of the benefits of ESAs being published in the *Human-Animal Interaction Bulletin* in June 2021 (Weinshenker, 2021). This study placed shelter animals with adults (not college students) who had mental illnesses described in the article as Major Depression or Bipolar Disorder (Weinshenker, 2021). After one year, the researcher found "a statistically significant decline in depression, anxiety, and loneliness using standardized rating scales," (Weinshenker, 2021). Researchers also found trends in increased oxytocin and decreases in cortisol; however, these results did not reach statistical significance (Weinshenker, 2021). Due to this lack of research, there has been some negative media attention on ESAs. For example, comments on a New York Times article on ESAs included: "life can be hard, but it's easier now for the majority of us than it has ever been. Grow a spine and face life without pharmaceuticals or furry crutches" and "our nation is raising a generation of over-coddled weaklings who are going to get eaten in the real world," (Salminen et al, 2018).

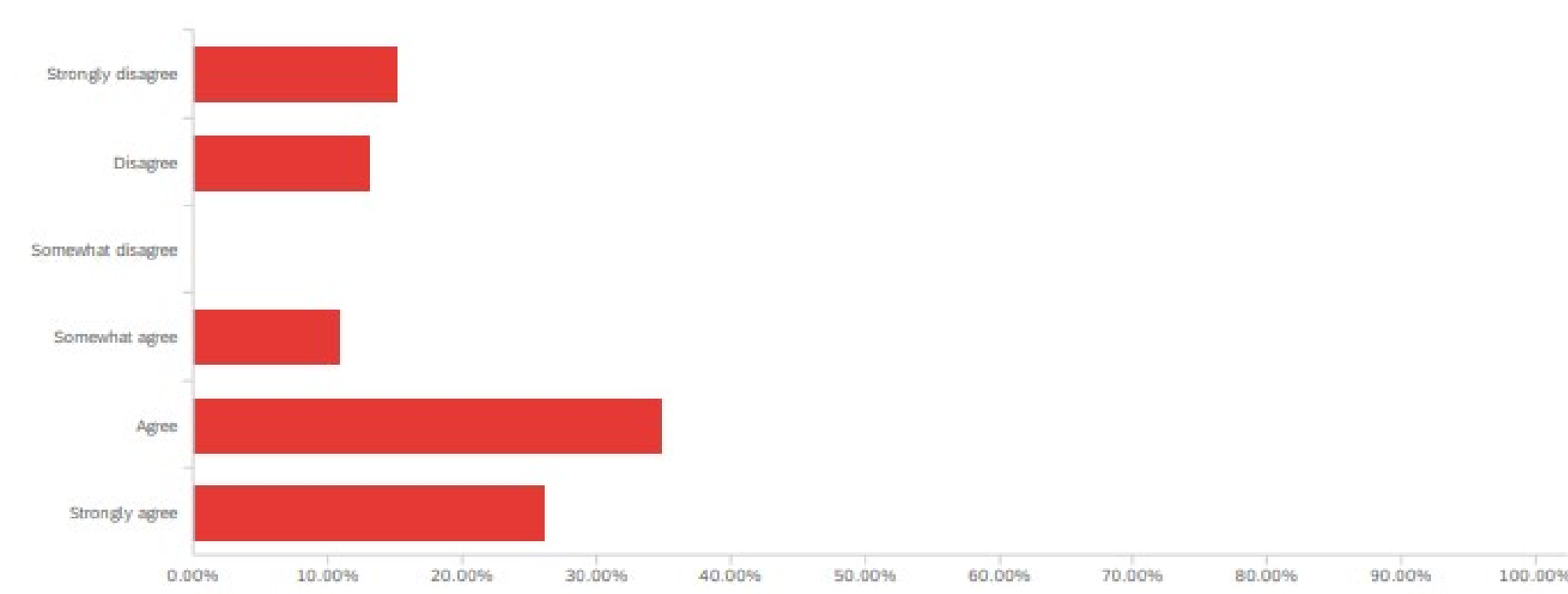
Methods:

This study consisted of an anonymous survey with 32 required questions, 1 optional question, and 1 optional space to leave any comments about what it was like owning an ESA. The survey had the requirement that participants were a Cal Poly Pomona student over the age of 18 and owned a prescribed ESA. The survey was split into two major sections. The first section included the informed consent form and 5 questions that collected background information on each participant. This background information included whether the student had ever lived on campus with their ESA, how long they had owned an ESA, what species their ESA was, and whether they had been prescribed their ESA while in college. Section 2 of the survey included different scenarios that the participants had to indicate if it applied their experience owning an ESA. These scenarios included both positive and negative experiences that the participant may have faced since getting their ESA. This section also included questions that gathered information on the participants perceived wellbeing of the animal. These questions in the second section were scaled from strongly disagree to strongly agree to gauge if owning an ESA benefitted the student. Participants were not asked to disclose their diagnoses that lead to being prescribed an ESA. After creating the survey and getting IRB approval, posters that had a QR code for the survey were put throughout Cal Poly Pomona's campus. The survey was also distributed throughout the Kellogg Honors College and through the DRC. In order to assess whether the ESA benefitted college students, the number of positive and negative responses from the scaled questions were compared.

Q18 - My ESA helps me get out of bed in the mornings.



Q31 - I worry about being able to afford veterinary care for my ESA.



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Data Analysis:

The general findings of this study show that most participants felt their ESA was more beneficial to them than a hindrance. The survey collected responses from 46 anonymous participants. A majority of participants agreed that the positive scenarios applied to their situation. Out of 46 participants, approximately 30 participants (67%) strongly agreed that their ESA helped improve their mental health, with only 1 participant strongly disagreeing. This trend continued with 67% of participants also strongly agreeing that their ESA helped ease symptoms of their psychological disorder and gave them the motivation to maintain a routine. Participants also reported that owning an ESA helped improve their social life, with over 50% saying their ESA made them less anxious to interact with others. The survey also showed that ESAs gave support and comfort that students sometimes lacked, with 36 participants (78%) strongly agreeing to this scenario. 32 participants strongly agreed that their ESA helped them get out of bed in the mornings. The overwhelming majority also agreed to some degree that their ESA made college less stressful (52% strongly agree, 13% agree, 30% somewhat agree). 83% , or 38 participants, also strongly agreed that owning an ESA eased the loneliness they felt.

The second part of the survey also included possible negative scenarios the participants may have faced while owning an ESA. These scenarios provided more variation of answers from participants compared to the positive scenarios. For example, a majority of participants were not embarrassed to have an ESA (50% strongly disagreed & 20% disagreed). Most participants also had not been harassed because of their ESA, with only about 4 people facing rude comments about their ESA. The majority of participants also felt that their ESA did not restrict them going out (30% strongly disagreed, 26% disagreed, and 15% somewhat disagreed). When considering whether their ESA had added more stress to their life, participants left varied answers. This scenario had 41% of participants strongly disagree with this scenario; however, the next highest scoring category was somewhat agreed with 26% of the responses. When considering the ESA's welfare, most participants responded that they did not have trouble maintaining their animal's needs (28% strongly disagreed and 41% disagreed). However, a common concern amongst participants was being worried about being able to afford veterinary care for their ESA. 26% of participants strongly agreed that they worried about veterinary care costs and 34% simply agreed.

Participants were also given the option to list any advantages or disadvantages they had experienced having an ESA as a student. Out of the 46 total participants, 27 students left responses. Out of these 27 participants, only 12 of them included disadvantages. One student wrote that their cat helps them go back to sleep when they wake up from stress induced nightmares. Another participant wrote that their ESA calms their anxiety and panic attacks and helps them get out of the house more. A couple students mentioned that their ESA "gave them a reason to keep going". Another participant stated that their ESA gave them a reason to go outside and help her meet new people on campus. A couple of students also expressed that their ESA even helps their friends who come over and hang out. Some students even admitted that without their ESA they would not have even gone to college or they were close to dropping out before they adopted their ESA. Participants said that their ESA helps ground them when they need it. Overall, participants listed similar disadvantages. These included worries about affording veterinary care, caring for a sick animal, and feeling guilty for leaving them to go to class or work. Another common disadvantage listed was having to schedule classes in ways that you can still have time to care for the ESA. However, almost every participant that listed a disadvantage said they either didn't mind it or that "the advantages outweighed the disadvantages."

Conclusion:

Overall, the data from this survey supports the idea that emotional support animals benefit students. However, since there have not been many studies done into this, this conclusion may not apply to a larger, more general population. To truly understand all the benefits ESAs provide to students more research must be conducted. With the continued increase in ESAs hopefully more studies will be created to truly explore this amazing human-animal connection.

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