Student Perceptions of the Institutional Response to an Untimely COVID-Driven Semester Disruption

Bryan M. Dewsbury 1 and Zoe Mermin 2
1 University of Rhode Island, Kingston, RI 02881, USA
2 Princeton University, Princeton, NJ 08544, USA
Email: dewsbury@uri.edu, zm7637@princeton.edu

Abstract—COVID19 caused institutions of higher education in the United States to rapidly shift from mostly Face-to-Face (F2F) to remote learning in the middle of Spring 2020. We deployed a survey to 91 students from six unique campuses inquiring about their perception of how the university handled the transition both in terms of the logistics and care for their person. The survey also asked about students’ concerns both during the transition process and for the future semesters. Our respondents indicated general disappointment with the ways in which the transition process was handled, and identified academic concerns and the severance of relationships as the key things they were concerned about for future semesters. Students’ responses suggest that social connection and sense of belonging are critical predictors that determine the degree to which they engage their respective institutions. Though our survey questions were focused on concerns related to the pandemic, the responses still serve as a timely reminder for institutions to greater consider the ways in which they may need to focus on the non-cognitive aspects of the higher education experience.

Index Terms—COVID19, social connection, higher education, F2F, remote learning

I. INTRODUCTION

In the Spring 2020, a pandemic fueled by a previously unseen strain of the coronavirus (henceforth referred to as COVID19) resulted in a seismic pivot from institutions of higher education around the world. In the United States, universities and colleges, most of whom primarily offered face-to-face (F2F) instruction, had to figure out how to quickly change their educational model to offer remote learning (Kyne and Thompson 2020) [1]. The logistical and technical challenges associated with this transition included the more immediate concern of keeping faculty, staff and students COVID19 free, while remaining in compliance with evolving federal guidelines for social behavior. Since the last pandemic of this magnitude occurred in 1918 (Trilla et al. 2008) [2], dealing with COVID19 was practically new territory for everyone, and in particular institutions of higher education. What made the process even more challenging is that the faculty, staff and students of these institutions come from very different spaces on the socioeconomic and technological spectrum. Any effective institutional response would have to be mindful of how the members of their community with the greatest challenges on either of these fronts fare during the institutional transition process. Let us examine these two areas in a bit more detail as they have a context that precedes, but was seriously exacerbated the impacts of COVID19.

The structure of college campuses often masks the socioeconomic disparities that exist among its student participants. The federal and private loan system, the availability of scholarships, and other forms of financial aid make access to higher education more of a reality for students with less resources (Tierney and Venegas 2009) [3]. This is a mostly welcome improvement in higher education as it pertains to access for students. Once on campus, all students, privileged or otherwise, are likely to engage in conventional college behavior of attending class, enjoying the campus’ amenities, and hopefully cultivating their personal growth in the process. Most faculty and staff, except for those directly involved in equity work, may not have a natural sense of which students on their campus experience resource distress that has only been alleviated through institutional intervention. Without this sensitivity, simply viewing optics of the college campus might suggest to the onlooker that it is a powerful equalizing force. Well-organized resources can be marshaled in service of equity goals so that all students are ready to engage in their academic and social journey fully and completely. Some argue that generating this level of equity is a crucial mission of higher education (Brennan and Naidoo 2008) [4]. The equalizing platform of college campuses however also causes many faculty, staff and administrators to forget that socioeconomic disparities do in fact exist. In so doing, they often do not pay enough attention to ongoing critical programs that are necessary for the alleviation of resource scarcity, improvement of social belonging, and other contingencies typical of individuals from this socioeconomic category. The advent of COVID19 brought these disparities starkly into view. Virtually one hundred percent of colleges and universities immediately transitioned to remote learning, and wherever possible
emptied their residence halls. This created a few problems. While some students were able to seamlessly navigate back to well-resourced homes, a significant percentage were not as fortunate (Murphy et al. 2020) [5]. For this subgroup, the availability of regular meals, high speed wireless internet, and the absence of household tensions were luxuries that they would lose the minute they left the campus. In fact, in cases where universities had resources to allow this group to remain, their presence on campus as a collective during the early days of the transition was a reminder of how important the physical amenities of colleges and universities are for individuals seeking economic mobility (Owens et al. 2020) [6]. Additionally, COVID19 for this group presented challenges not only for their schooling, but for the ways in which the resulting pandemic exposed other members of their family as ‘essential workers’, and the likelihood to contract the virus for health disparities-related reasons (Rogers et al. 2020) [7].

The techno sphere presented its own challenges some of which related to resources, but also highlighted how inconsistently penetrant technological sophistication is in US households. First, many students for economic and/or location reasons, did not have access to high-speed internet. In fact, among developed countries the US lags by a considerable distance behind others in terms of the percentage of the population that can access high speed internet (Frieden 2005) [8]. Compounding this problem is the fact that universities and colleges are not the only institutions who went remote. This meant that suddenly, entire families were suddenly ensconced in their homes all needing to be online for work or school. Even in situations where there were moderate internet speeds, the strain on the bandwidth made this an unworkable scenario. Additionally, limited resources and space at home meant that computers, electrical outlets and physical spaces had to be shared among family members (Team and Manderson 2020) [9]. Remote learning typically meant that all communication, course materials and other forms of engagement was now virtual, meaning that transitioning for this group created serious impediments. Second, not all students or faculty were sufficiently comfortable in the virtual environment to fully transfer all their in-person activities to this space. Universities had to provide support in many cases to assist some technophobic faculty to transition their courses to remote learning. This included crash courses on different pedagogies that were more appropriate for remote instruction and assessment. Students, who perhaps were used to, up until this point, using virtual environments as an addendum to F2F instruction now had to rely on it fully for their classes. Depending on whether the course was administered synchronously or asynchronously, students may have suddenly had to collate a bevy of academic materials and organize it into a semblance of a meaningful educational experience.

The reaction of higher education was considered exemplary by most in the public sphere (Crawford et al. 2020) [10], in terms of how quickly it logistically responded to the pandemic, and how that transition incorporated some care and empathy for its members. Much of that commentary was based on an external examination of the processes, but not enough was heard from the voices of the students impacted most by the transition. In this paper we report the results of a survey, specifically structured to understand a) how students were impacted by the transition process, b) the specifics of the transition process in terms of their learning experience, c) their perception of how their institutions responded to their personal needs and d) the ways in which the experience may inform their decision to enroll or not in the subsequent semester. While the survey was not originally conceived to specifically quantify the experiences of marginalized students, many of its component questions identify navigational contingencies common among this population. We believe that this information will provide a useful context for key stakeholders seeking to codify the impacts of the pandemic on higher education, prepare for future potentially similar scenarios, and more deeply understand the inequity that underwrote the higher education space well before COVID19 became a factor.

II. METHODS

A. The Survey Process

This study was approved by the University of Rhode Island’s Institutional Review Board (#16025480). We used a survey with permission created by the Higher Education Data Consortium (HEDS) specially constructed to determine the impact of the pandemic-related institutional transition to remote learning (© 2020 Higher Education Data Sharing Consortium). The authors made no additions to the survey questions. The survey asks basic demographic information from participants followed by several questions about the institutional response to the remote learning transition. The first group of questions asks respondents to rate the institutional response to the rapid transition. These questions focused on whether the students felt that their needs were appropriately attended to as policies pertaining to remote learning were considered. Responses to these questions were on a Likert scale. The next set of questions were open responses asking the students to identify the different communication media used by instructors during the remote learning process, and which of those tools worked or did not work for them. Students were also asked what they wished their institution did differently in terms of communicating elements of the transition process. More personal questions asked students about their concerns as they pertain to returning to campus in the Fall of 2020, and the reasons for not returning should that have been their choice. Students were also asked about the degree to which they felt a sense of connection to the institution they attended.

The survey was distributed to instructors in May 2020 using several academic listservs and the broader professional network of instructors connected to first author Dewsbury. The main listserv used for survey distribution belonged to the Society for the Advancement
of Biology Education Research (SABER). The survey was also sent to faculty with whom first author Dewsbury has worked with previously on faculty development programs. Therefore, the faculty who ultimately distributed the survey to their students where mostly STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Math) faculty, but from a diverse array of institutions. It was difficult to estimate the return rate on the surveys, because of the diffuse nature of the distribution process. In total, 91 students responded to the survey.

B. Data Analysis

Questions that asked respondents to identify single category responses were quantified and graphed by the category it represented. We did not subdivide the respondents by school due to the relatively small number of respondents. For single category questions, percentage respondents were calculated based on the number of participants who chose a particular Likert category for each question.

Free response questions were qualitatively analyzed using an iterative coding process. Both authors read a subset of the responses assigning a code or codes that captured the essence of each short response. The authors then compared their codes and clarified any disagreements until there was full agreement. Because of the short length of the responses we ensured that there was 100% agreement between the authors. One author (Mermin) completed the coding of the remaining responses. Due to the nature of the questions, most free responses were single words or very short phrases. The nature of the survey questions meant that some responses (like software type) could in theory be a subcategory of other codes (like video instruction). Since these were written free responses, we made no attempts to parse or extrapolate meaning from the words respondents used, instead we chose to quantify them as is. The frequency of the codes was calculated for each question and graphed.

III. RESULTS

Of the respondents, 21 identified as male, 62 as female, 2 as non-binary, 1 as queer and 5 had no response. Sixty-eight students identified as white, 9 as Black or African American, 7 as Asian, 6 as non-white Hispanic and 1 as Native American.

Surveyed students were generally dissatisfied with the institutional response to the COVID-related pivot both in terms of the students’ individual physical wellbeing, and the ways in which logistical challenges were addressed. The dissatisfaction was practically equal whether the students were responding about the institutional response or what they perceived as the level of care and concern shown by faculty. On all questions pertaining to the institutional or faculty response more than 70% of respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed that a good job was done to protect the students, adapting, or showing the appropriate level of care or concern for the students (Table I).

With respect to the more specific aspects of the transition, students were less disagreeable but not significantly more satisfied with the institutional response. Less than 20% of the students were satisfied or moderately satisfied with the information provided about the ongoing response, and specific to the transitioning of their classes (Table I). Respondents were more neutral in their view of the ways in which the institution provided information specific to their finances.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE I. STUDENTS’ PERCEPTIONS ON INSTITUTIONAL RESPONSE TO COVID AND THEIR PERSONAL CONCERNS ABOUT COVID SPREAD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall, the staff and administration at [Institution Name] have done a good job protecting students from the negative health consequences of COVID-19.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall, the staff and administration at [Institution Name] have done a good job helping students adapt to the changes at the institution brought on by the spread of COVID-19.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall, staff and administration at [Institution Name] have shown care and concern for me as they respond to the spread of COVID-19.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall, faculty at [Institution Name] have shown care and concern for me as they make changes in their courses in response to COVID-19.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I know whom to contact if I have questions about how changes at [Institution Name] in response to COVID-19.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
19 will affect my educational plans.

Please indicate your level of satisfaction with your institution about the following:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Very satisfied</th>
<th>Generally Satisfied</th>
<th>Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied</th>
<th>Generally dissatisfied</th>
<th>Dissatisfied</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The support you are getting from [Institution Name] to help you transition to taking your classes online</td>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>12.1</td>
<td>16.5</td>
<td>45.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The communication you are getting from [Institution Name] about its ongoing responses to COVID-19</td>
<td>6.6</td>
<td>7.7</td>
<td>14.3</td>
<td>39.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The information you are getting about how changes at [Institution Name] in response to COVID-19 will impact your ability to pay for college (e.g., financial aid, student loans, campus jobs)</td>
<td>11.1</td>
<td>20.0</td>
<td>24.4</td>
<td>31.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Students were significantly more worried about the COVID-related impacts on their social relationships and academic performance than their personal wellbeing and health. Only around 20% of students indicated that they were not worried of the COVID-related impacts on doing academics online and their ability to form and maintain friendships. Most students however (around 70%) had absolutely no concern about their ability to eat every day or have somewhere to sleep at night. A more even spread of students had concerns about the institutional changes impacting their ability to pay their bills as well as accessing and using technology successfully (Table 1).
Student responses pertaining to the technology that they found to be effective ranged from the naming of very specific video conferencing software to generally referring to digital methods as the means of instruction. As the response was open-ended, it was not possible to deduce how much of the responses were alluding to the virtual environment and the percentage that was still F2F (Fig. 1). Ten students did indicate that F2F was the most effective indicating that some institutions were not in a virtual environment at the time of the survey. Most
students (20) credited interactivity as the reason why the particular method that they indicated was effective. Other reasons included the flexibility associated with them and the degree to which it mimicked F2F instruction. Students who indicated dissatisfaction with their virtual learning also identified mostly the video tools as being primarily ineffective (Fig. 1). Here, the most popular reasons for their ineffectiveness lay primarily in their lack of interactivity, student issues accessing technology, and the increased probability of being distracted because of having to log on remotely.

At the time of the survey, students reported that their biggest concern was whether or not campus would re-open in the Fall of 2020 (Fig. 2). They also cited the decision to re-open as the biggest factor to whether or not they themselves would return. Health and financials were the second two biggest concerns, but interestingly, the spread of the COVID-19 was less concerning than those two. Health and safety and money were also cited as reasons that would govern whether students returned to school or not, but these were less than half of the respondents that indicated campus re-opening plans as their reason (Fig. 2).

Overall, most students reported either feeling ‘some’ or ‘a great deal’ of stress as it pertained to COVID-19. Most of the students indicated very little or no sense of connection to their institution, but, except in cases where students were graduating, planned to return in the Fall of 2020 (Fig. 3).
IV. REFLECTIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

The students surveyed here were generally disappointed in the institutional response to COVID19, both in terms of the level of personal care shown, and the handling of the logistics as it pertained to coursework and financials. The remote transition resulted expectedly in the use of mostly virtual platforms for teaching. Students identified both strengths and weaknesses of these platforms centered mostly around the degree to which it was used interactively. Little differentiation was made between a specific brand of technology (e.g., Zoom), and the broad use of virtual platforms in general. It was therefore not possible to determine specifically how many of the students wound up using a particular software, since those reporting ‘video lectures’ could well have been referring to Zoom or Webex as well. Students lamented the lack of interactivity of some of their video lectures and pointed out that the new ‘school from home’ situation exposed them to new issues relating to distraction and inconsistent WiFi quality. In the immediacy of the transition, students’ concerns were mostly about their academics and the reduced social connection brought about by the new social distancing rules. Concerns about their own health regarding COVID19 were a distant third to academic and social wellbeing. Looking forward, students’ concerns for the semester following the remote transition mostly pertained to whether their institutions were going to reopen in person, which they said would impact whether they returned to that school or not. In spite of this, most respondents indicated that they would return to their institution of higher education.

The one-time responses of the students to the HEDS COVID19 survey while specific to the higher education transition, were overall reflective of a broader national struggle to construct a coherent response to the pandemic in the US. Higher education was not the only industry that struggled to communicate its transition-related challenges and lay out clear policies for what its new normal was going to be (Chin et al. 2020) [11]. However, in soliciting feedback from the students through this survey, a few interesting things come to light, that if fully reflected on, can provide lessons for when institutions of higher education fully pivot back to ‘regular’ operations.

First, in the self-reported reasons provided in response to whether or not online instruction was useful, answers revolved around the desire for connectivity to some sort of structured educational experience. In pre-COVID19 times, it was easy to take for granted the stability, safety and equalizing power that the physical classroom provided (Rovai and Jordan 2004) [12]. Students, regardless of background could attend class and experience reliable WiFi access and a curriculum built for the dynamics and nuances of the F2F experience. The hastiness of the transition meant that not all instructors were going to be able replicate the quality and structure of F2F virtually resulting, in some cases, in a steep decline in structure. What unfolded was a mix of instructors some of whom heroically created an interactive experience, while others dumped course...
content online in its entirety (Henriksen et al. 2020) [13]. Students then had to sort through it and create some semblance of an academic experience while dealing with newly created ‘home’ problems and in many cases significantly less resources. We are not suggesting that higher education cannot create meaningful and inclusive online classrooms. However, responses here in general do point to the power of structure and connectivity, regardless of medium as key factors for keeping students engaged. These factors should be attended to even more closely when full F2F instruction returns.

Second, students demonstrated near equal concern for the COVID19-related impacts on both their academics and social wellbeing. Concern about the loss of connection to friends was expressed by most survey respondents. In the midst of the transition, universities understandably focused on the logistics of transitioning classroom instruction. Even in pre-COVID19 times, though many would tacitly acknowledge that the social experience on campuses were crucial, universities and colleges were by-and-large thought of as places for instruction first and foremost (Collini 2012) [14]. However, the relationships students cultivate at this level go a long way in providing them a different form of education – one that helps them interrogate and actualize their social self (Elliott and Gramling 1990) [15]. This process is often treated as an automatic byproduct of physically gathering students on a college campus, but perhaps the forced social distancing, both due to the transition, and for the months that followed, should serve as a reminder of its powerful role in quality educational experiences.

Third, most of the students reported little to no connection to their institution. This is perhaps the most troubling finding in light of the increasing volume of literature demonstrating how predictive sense of belonging is for successful academic experiences, particularly for students from marginalized backgrounds (O’Keefe 2013 [16], van Herpen et al. 2020 [17]). We found no correlation between students who reported low connection with how they interpreted the university response to their needs during the transition. This suggests that regardless of whether they were satisfied with the transition logistics or not, they still felt little connection to the institution. It is in this last point that institutions of higher education would do well to reflect the most, as the COVID19 transition has revealed the somewhat transactional nature of our enterprise. Though the experience is marketed otherwise, students may very well view the grades and diplomas received as simple utilitarian quid pro quo for tuition dollars paid. Lofty values associated with community and belonging ring hollow when students feel uncared for and abandoned at the precise time when that sense of community should be demonstrated the most.

COVID19 presented a unique, once-in-a-generation challenge that tested the weakest links of our broader social structures, including those embedded within institutions of higher education. Though the survey was sent to a broad subsample of students, the narratives that have emerged from the responses highlight constructs that studies confirm disproportionately impact students from historically marginalized backgrounds. This underscores the reality that events, even those not as seismic as COVID19, can be disruptive to students lives in disproportionate ways. We hope that the voices of the students are clear on where those structures have been found wanting. We also believe that in reflecting on the challenges that the transition created for these institutions, opportunities exist for a renewed focus on the sense of belonging, community building, and social dynamics that are a critical but often overlooked aspect of the higher education experience.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Bryan Dewsbury conducted the survey and did most of the writing. Zoe Mermin conducted the data analysis and produced the visuals associated with the results.

REFERENCES


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Bryan M. Dewsbury is from the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago. He has a Bachelor’s in Science in Biology from Morehouse College (Atlanta, GA) and a Masters and a Doctorate from Florida International University (Miami, FL) in Biology. He is an Associate Professor of Biology at the University of Rhode Island and Principal Investigator of the Science Education and Society (SEAS) research program. Dr. Dewsbury is a Fellow of the John N. Gardner Institute and advisory board member of the Quantifying Undergraduate Biology Education Synthesis (QUBES) organization.

Zoe A Mermin is from Newport, Rhode Island. In the fall she will attending Princeton University where she hopes to pursue a Bachelor of Arts in Molecular Biology with a certificate in Applications of Computing.