

COVID-19 Reflection

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Introduction

The outbreak of COVID-19 came unexpectedly; no one was expecting this type of pandemic to hit worldwide. Having never dealt with a pandemic, most people were thinking it was not serious. But once they started to notice that schools and jobs were being closed down, everything started to get serious. For most students, this has been a huge impact in our education. It has been difficult to keep up with all our classes and assignments. Having to feel stressed out because of the virus and on top of that school assignments can be very difficult to cope with. Providing students with remote learning has been something new that students have to manage to learn and be able to work with by themselves. Many students are experiencing this pandemic differently than others. For example, having to share laptops and other technology with your family members and having unstable internet connection. Alongside the students, it is also difficult for some teachers that have never done online teaching and they have created more stress and panic for students. The fact that professors also chose to have assignments due every day, but with online learning, it is difficult to stay attentive with daily tasks. Lack of internet connection has become an obstacle during these times because some students do not have stable wifi at home or if they do their connection loses service and they struggle to get their work done. This may be due to lack of service in their area or not having access to an internet connection at home.

Mental health has also been an issue with students. The outbreak of coronavirus disease may be stressful for people. Fear and anxiety about a disease can be overwhelming and cause strong emotions in adults and children. This makes it difficult for students to concentrate on their education. Students had to move out of their dorm

and this may have increased their stress levels. Living arrangements of students have also caused great distress. Issues that students are going through have solutions, some have been implemented while others are still a work in progress. Staff and faculty have the opportunity to help students get through these problems in an efficient manner that may increase student learning and student engagement.

Remote Learning Structure

The current student population, as well as campus staff and faculty, are facing uncertain times and are trying to keep up with making sure everyone's needs are met. When it comes to providing students with resources and needs, colleges need to be informed of what their current students are struggling with. Students from low socioeconomic backgrounds continue to struggle with receiving the adequate resources they need in order to fulfill their needs and quarter requirements. Examples may include a lack of internet connection, difficult curriculums, and/or not having the tools to study. In addition, low-income students were obligated or saw it best to move back home for financial or living reasons. For many students, this move has created a challenge to learning overall and their stress levels. During these difficult times, it is crucial that students are able to learn as much as they can without being overwhelmed. Many courses during this pandemic still had very high expectations with an overwhelming amount of assignments. Professors should be trained and/or advised in knowing that online learning is completely different than in class learning and therefore should be able to assign work that they know students can get done.

The Curriculum

The COVID 19 pandemic has left many students to figure out and navigate online remote learning on their own. Some have taken online classes and already knew the logistics of it while others were left to figure it out on their own throughout the quarter. For students who had never experienced online learning, this made it harder for them to stay on task and contribute to their courses. Many courses remained with the same amount of course work as if it were to be done in-class setting. Many of the lecture videos posted by professors were too long for students to stay concentrated and attentive in comparison to an in-class setting. Many professors also struggled with navigating online remote learning and created more stress and panic for students. Some professors also chose to have assignments due every day for the convenience of not forgetting an assignment, but with online learning, it is a little more difficult to stay attentive with daily tasks.

Some classes required mandatory attendance in both lecture and discussion, while other classes made it optional and created substitute assignments. At home students are overwhelmed with many more responsibilities than just being a student. Some students, especially those who live with big families, have to take care of their siblings, parents, or grandparents. Students from low income communities may have had to pick up another job due to their financial burden. Some professors took the time to create substitute assignments and longer assignment deadlines in order to give students that flexibility. Most courses did not change the grading policy of their assignments, but just by giving students flexibility to work at their own pace allows students to feel supported.

Internet Connection

Students from disadvantageous socioeconomic backgrounds and low income households are also faced with a lack of stable internet connection. With classes and discussions taking place on Zoom, it is difficult to stay concentrated and encouraged when the internet is constantly disconnecting or going slow. When most students are on campus, they highly rely on the same network which means that if that network shuts down, everyone is on the same page. At home however, students from middle to high income statuses may have more access to a stable internet than others and that itself creates an inequality. Students who likely have a stable internet connection are able to fully focus on their work and not be distracted on the stability of their internet. Students from low socioeconomic backgrounds who would usually rely on libraries also do not have access to that resource due to closures. Students, like myself, do not have internet access at home, so when I need to do my work I have to use my hotspot at a specific time so that I can get the most out of it. This may be the case for many low-income students who may feel rushed to get work done so that they could go to work or give their family/siblings internet connection.

Lack of adequate resources or technology has also impaired learning. Students who do not have the technology to accommodate online learning are often obligated to share resources within the home. For example, if there is only one computer in the household students would have to share it. Students in that household would have to equally share that computer and in many instances that may not be possible. Another issue arises when both students have a class or discussion at the same time as the other student. Students may rely on a cellphone, but there is only so much a cellphone can do compared to online learning on a computer.

Mental Health

The mental stability of students has also caused great distress. Low-income students who are home may not have the ability or financial resources to visit a counselor or speak to a psychologist. In addition, low-income students who are home may live with large families and may not have that space to communicate their emotions; either because of the lack of communication with family or feeling misunderstood. Not properly attending to one's mental health can cause problems in other parts of our lives including schoolwork. During times like these, it is very important that students feel supported. Especially with many students being forced to move from their life on campus back home to their parents or relatives house, mental and emotional struggle is very high. This is unfamiliar terrain for many and students need to feel as though their experiences and emotions are valid. Students need to feel that even though they are not on their physical campus, they are still able to rely on on-campus resources. Staff and faculty have the ability to communicate to their students that they are heard and understood. This can help comfort students and give them the additional support that they need.

School work also becomes a challenge to complete. For students who have additional responsibilities on top of their assignments it can be difficult to create a balance on top of dealing with one's mental health. This can increase stress levels and can cause students to feel unmotivated and possibly become unattached to their learning. Some of these extra responsibilities include babysitting, homeschooling our siblings, attending to parents, and/or work.

Continuing the conversation on lack of motivation, many students are also experiencing academic burnout due to the intensity of the virus situation coupled with the academic, financial, and social demands that need to be met. This is a very extreme example of the surge of lack of motivation that many students are experiencing at this time. For most students within higher education, this might be the very first major financial and social catastrophe they have experienced. As stated before, juggling different responsibilities during a jarring change in lifestyle is very difficult, especially for individuals who strive to complete their education. Many students have been left extremely frustrated as they are exhausted from balancing all their responsibilities and do not quite know why they cannot complete their responsibilities as efficiently and quickly as they once did in previous quarters. It is extremely helpful that students have access to our university's mental health support systems however, amidst this pandemic, students need extra support. Sometimes reassuring that things will get better is not enough to pull students out of their burnout, students need academic support as well as patience and compassion in order to juggle their academic and social responsibilities. It is crucial to understand that creating a balance between passing courses and maintaining a stable mental state is extremely difficult when students do not have the additional support they need to push through this tough time.

Conclusion

There is absolutely no doubt that this COVID-19 pandemic has been hard on everyone in many ways. The pandemic was sudden and jarring, taking people out of their norm and throwing them into the unknown without proper knowledge on how to handle the situation. With the need to juggle one's responsibilities amidst this crisis, help

is needed more than ever. Student's in particular have needed to quickly adjust to the situation at hand and with that comes a plethora of unforeseen problems. Many students have been struggling with the new remote learning format, their internet connection, as well as their mental health all through this crisis and the struggles are only continuing as the pandemic does. Education is a very important part of our society as it grants our youth the tools they need in order to succeed within our society. The young minds of today need to be educated and cared for, even in crises such as COVID. Higher education institutions need to do all that they can in order to raise student learning and engagement within the classroom . This is crucial for a student's academic success as well as their well-being. It is very important that effective solutions are implemented in order to not only aid our students in the present, but to also prevent all of these academic problems from happening within future pandemics if they were to arise. Our fellow students are important and their educational journey as well as their mental health is important so we must learn how to provide them with the tools and compassion they deserve in situations like these so that they continue to thrive despite the hardship thrown their way. We must all stand together and help to lift up those who struggle from this situation and if that were to happen, there's no doubt that our society and our education system will come out of this pandemic stronger than it was before and better prepared for the next big catastrophe to come.

Solutions

For the University of California, Riverside, the transition to online learning was unforeseen and neither the instructors nor the students had ample instruction to help navigate education behind a screen. While every educational institution is doing their

best to provide education and support through online platforms, future preparation and contingency plans are necessary to ensure that the institutions will not sacrifice the quality of education once similar issues arise. The University of California, Riverside has been proactive in implementing modifications to aid students, faculty, and administrators through delayed deadlines for course withdrawal, online mental health counseling, keeping one-campus housing options open, and emailing out surveys for our input. However, further consideration and preparation is necessary to prevent confusion on both parts and minimize mental tolls.

One of the most important preparation strategies would be to provide online learning preparation modules or courses early into the year. The demands of the course or the preferences of the professor and students may require the use of different online platforms. The University of California, Riverside primarily utilizes iLearn and Zoom as its online learning platform. But some classes are also conducted asynchronously on Canvas and other courses may require proctor programs like ProctorU which requires a fee and thorough preparation. The alcohol and sex education modules conducted online prior to a student's first year at the University of California, Riverside can be used as the framework for potential modules for online learning instruction. Another way to prepare students is to include a section on online learning programs during orientation or seminars. To expect students and faculty to dive into a new learning environment and adjust in a limited time frame is quite difficult and mentally exhaustive. Prior to events like COVID-19, it would be helpful and in the institution's best interest to provide instruction on how to use these online learning platforms to ensure that the instructors

and students are well-informed and familiarized with the many programs needed to successfully conduct higher education online.

In our current situation, it is understandable and necessary to assume that education is not a key priority for many students and faculty. Outside of education, people are struggling financially, mentally, physically, socially, and in every other aspect that requires some sort of stability. To relieve some stress off of the students, institutions like Carnegie Mellon, MIT, University of Mary Washington, Duke University, and Georgetown University have turned to expanding the options in which pass/fail grading options are applied (Burke, 2020). These options include making pass/fail grading mandatory for all classes, allowing for more than one class to be graded pass/fail, and extending the deadline of when grading options can be changed after final grades are posted (Burke, 2020). While this change may bring concerns over GPA, financial aid, graduate school applications, and transfer credits, this adjustment can be influential in mitigating anxiety and stress for students in such an uncertain time (Burke, 2020). This would allow for students to focus solely on learning and their wellbeing while also giving instructors an opportunity to focus on mindful instruction.

Many students are struggling financially and do not have the school's resources available to them. To minimize the financial weight, professors and colleges may be able to find ways to make textbooks and other necessary resources accessible online. Uploading PDF versions of the required text or adjusting the syllabus to allow an older, less expensive version of the required text may be helpful in alleviating any financial stress on top of the current unemployment struggles brought on by COVID-19.

In comparison to 4 year colleges like UCR, students attending a community college are more likely to be 1st generation college students, from low-income families, nontraditional college students, and belonging to racial or ethnic minority groups (Flannery, 2020). Considering the current strain on everyone due to COVID-19, communication is key. Elroy Ortiz Oakely, chancellor of 115 CA community colleges describes “everything from grading policy to extending their semesters” (Guzman-Lopez, 2020). Given that community colleges are on different budgets than UCs and other 4-year colleges, distribution of technology, tuition adjustments, and preparation or contingency plans may not be a feasible option for every college. What can be done, however, is flexibility and understanding. This can refer to soft or open-ended deadlines, make-up work, extra credit opportunities, and other chances that would provide small points in the event that academics cannot become priority (Flannery, 2020). Additionally, reaching out through emails and online office hours can also be helpful in providing support. Not everyone will reach out when help is needed and not everyone will be aware of the resources and opportunities available to them. A simple email or check-in can be uplifting in difficult times by letting students know, even if they do not respond or reach out, that there are things that can be done and there is support available to them.

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