

The Effects of COVID-19 on College Students

Joselyn Alvarez, Tanya Martinez, Andrew Saldana, Alyssa Vidal, and HeungYing Wong

University of California Riverside

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Introduction

Humanity is no stranger to disease. From the Bubonic Plague which claimed the lives of over 200 million people in the 1340s to something as recent as the HIV/AIDS outbreak which is still ongoing to this day, diseases come in all shapes and sizes. As we have dealt with each illness throughout history we have done our best to learn from our mistakes and prevent history from repeating. However, the most recent discovery and outbreak of COVID-19 has shown us that even still, we were not as prepared for a widespread pandemic as we believed ourselves to be. Being one of the first widespread pandemics of the 21st century, COVID-19 has caused many unexpected changes and disruptions to our daily lives which have caused severe issues to arise in the educational field.

Though there have been several instances of temporary changes in education in attempts to alleviate struggles in education, nothing has been as dramatic as what we have seen recently with COVID-19. However, this does not mean we are completely in the dark when it comes to the impacts and possible solutions for educational issues that will and already are beginning to arise. If we were to look back at the recent history of education, it would not be difficult to find issues similar to the current global pandemic in terms of drastic impact to educational equity and capability. Events such as Hurricane Katrina and the 2008 recession saw many families being evacuated and economically vulnerable. One article discussing the drastic ramifications of Hurricane Katrina shed light on the fact that nearly 34% of children were held back in school as a direct result of the natural disaster (Wade, 2015). This resulted in a cascading effect on a vast majority of students and caused many to miss school often (sometimes more than 10 days a month) and fall behind. The Great Recession led to many teachers being laid off and had a

disproportionately large effect on minority and disadvantaged students (Shores and Steinberg, 2017). Though these events were upsetting and difficult to watch unfold, we were also able to learn from them. An article from Inside Higher Ed detailed how Hurricane Katrina affected faculty and university teaching and detailed what would be best to take away from such a harrowing event (Schroeder, 2020). Similarly, a paper from 2014 attempted to look at the impact the Great Recession had on schools and strived to learn how to better shield schools from the effects of similar situations in the future (Shores and Steinberg, 2017). It is important that we take the time to reflect on the past and learn from it, as many schools have been attempting to do.

While many schools have started doing their best to help their students, it may not always feel like enough to those who are facing more extreme issues due to the pandemic. Even with the help of things such as the CARES Act and the adjustment of grading policies seen at many schools (such as UCR and Cal State San Bernardino) it may be difficult for students to feel that any real change or support is being provided with access to resources and support systems being cut off because of COVID-19. Though this is not the fault of the campus faculty or staff, it is their job to address these issues and attempt in finding solutions for the issues that have arisen.

Throughout the rest of this paper, we will be detailing the common difficulties faced by our group such as the struggles of mental health during quarantine and the difficulties of remote learning, and some other common difficulties faced by our group and how COVID-19 has impacted us over the past quarter. However, it is important to keep in mind that the perspectives we as students bring are only a small subset of that faced by the ever-expanding population of students that are a part of higher education. There is no “one size fits all” approach to dealing with a global pandemic that will fix all issues that students face. But we hope that the struggles

we faced and difficulties described can be used to help create solutions for students moving forward.

Routines

COVID-19 has disrupted the lives of many people throughout society. People are no longer able to go to work as usual, and millions of people are struggling to pay for housing and basic necessities. Adding onto that, even the basic necessities of life were not guaranteed due to supply shortages at many major retailers. Many people were struggling to make ends meet. Even after a few months of this new normal, we still feel the effects of the pandemic because of the closure of service institutions such as dining locales, movie theaters, and most importantly college campuses. These disruptions in what we used to consider our normal lives have become detrimental to our overall health because of the interference to our routines.

All of our group members have had our daily routines disrupted since the outbreak of the COVID-19. Many studies have shown that having a daily routine can help reduce our stress level and cultivate positive daily habits (Blurt Team, 2018). However, studying and having classes at home has caused a lack of interest and overall focus, which makes it difficult to keep up with the academic deadlines along with a number of different issues that have arisen due to COVID-19. Alyssa's mother, who is an essential worker, has to go to work early in the morning which leaves Alyssa with the responsibilities of taking care of her siblings while also juggling with her academic deadlines and self-care routines. With the sudden increase in the number of tasks, Alyssa found it difficult to carry on a routine. Joselyn had kept a routine of waking up early before class to get dressed, clean, and cook before the midterms started which allowed her to try to imitate her physically going to class. However, once midterms came along, she lost that

routine due to stress and a lack of motivation. In addition, because her relaxation space is now associated with her work space, it is difficult for her to concentrate on her studies and find time to relax. Because of the illusion of having “infinite time” during quarantine, she found herself pushing off assignments to a later time and as a result, sleeping even later.

HeungYing is originally from Hong Kong and because of the virus she needed to move back in as soon as possible. The lack of face-to-face instruction left her constantly needing reminders for due dates. However, her professors were understanding and flexible enough to alleviate the stress. Because of the complete change in time zones, she has to go to class at inconvenient hours and sleep during the day which profoundly disrupts her regular schedule. Lastly, Tanya is scheduled to graveyard shifts for her job at Amazon and scheduled to work during the day for her job at a local grocery store. She feels as if there is not enough time in the day for her to do school work and go to her work shifts as her breaks in between shifts are tightly limited. Moreover, following a strict schedule between work and academic work, Tanya often mistakens what day it is which affects the way she turns in and completes assignments.

Stress and Lack of Motivation

The inability to set a routine for our daily life has affected our stress levels in many different ways. As students we have each encountered stress differently according to our specific situations and the stress that comes from having to complete school assignments. Alyssa deals with the stress of having to take a parental role for her younger siblings since her mother has to leave early in the morning for work. Acting as a parent added a lot of stress to the workload that a full time student has to deal with. That parental role that Alyssa takes on comes with cooking meals for her siblings and also tutoring her younger brother who is still in high school who is not

performing his absolute best. Through the pandemic Andrew has kept his job working at In-N-Out which forced him to be in contact with many people, therefore risk being exposed to COVID-19. His transition from going to school into remote learning was not the smoothest because he was also dealing with moving to a new home and had to get settled right before the stay at home orders were implemented. Dealing with a move while also accommodating to remote learning added more stress to being a full time student. Andrew also experienced lack of motivation due to his workplace not being ideal because he did not have a desk to work on and study. He was mainly working on assignments from his bed which was associated with relaxation. Therefore, the limitation between not being able to separate his work and home space was difficult for him to adapt to.

Joselyn encountered a different type of stress now that we have shifted to remote learning. During a regular quarter system, her mental health would decline during midterms and finals week due to the stress, but the remote learning has heightened the stress to a physical level. Feeling overwhelmed with deadlines, she started to feel heat on her upper back and her knots be more pronounced. The result of having to sit down at a desk all day contributed to the strain on her back and the pressure of getting assignments done on time. Stress comes in full circle and affects the body in many different ways that is very unhealthy for the person's mental state. HeungYing as an international student dealt with the stress of having to go back home to Hong Kong. With the pandemic going on, her parents worried about her staying in the United States since she is an international student. Being an international student she was worried about not being able to sell her furniture and having to pack all her belongings to go back to Hong Kong. She also had to worry about her student visa. Moving back to your country of origin in such a

short amount of time is a lot of stress to deal with and is not healthy for a student. Lastly, Tanya was dealing with the stress of working two part time jobs and being a full time student. The pandemic laid off both her mother and her sister, therefore she knew that she was going to have to take on more responsibility with the expenses at her house. Worried about the effects of the financial instability in her family, she knew she needed to keep both jobs. Tanya and Andrew both share the same fear and risk of being exposed to COVID-19.

Our lack of motivation mainly came from the stress that we encountered while adapting to remote learning and trying to find a routine that best worked for us. The effects of our routines being interrupted heavily impacted our productivity academically and personally. This caused us to feel unmotivated in continuing our studies with the work that was assigned to us throughout the quarter. Without having the resources to educate on the importance of a routine and how to improve our lack of motivation and stress, we have struggled together but in distinct ways throughout this quarter with the pandemic going on. As we draw closer to our last couple of weeks as our last year being an undergraduates, we only wish for it to end on a smoother note.

Remote learning

COVID-19 has had a major impact in our life as students, a shift from on campus learning to remote learning has not been the smoothest, but during this time we have been forced to learn, adapt, and keep moving forward. With adapting to a new “classroom” setting comes the difficulty of learning how to stay on top of assignments, testing, and group projects remotely while juggling other life expectations and responsibilities such as being with our families now that we are home for an extended time period. Time management during this time has also proven to be a necessary skill to learn alongside learning to balance the new and unexpected

responsibilities that have been inserted in our lives in a time we have to deal with a pandemic like COVID-19.

One of the major changes has been going from in-person classes to remote instruction through other learning outlets such as Zoom and Canvas. This is not an ideal class setting for many students since it takes away the hands-on learning experience which lacks connection between students, peers and instructors. The fact that as an institution we had to adapt to remote instruction overnight proved to be a challenge and overwhelming to some. The way professors and instructors have gone about leading the course differed and makes for a difference in the learning experience. For instance, in order to be more flexible, some professors decided to record lectures for students who had difficulties joining in at a particular time, and upload them for students to watch later. While some students might find this helpful with their busy schedule, some may have difficulty remembering to listen to lectures or do activities to get participation points such as Joselyn since she says it interferes with her routine. Alyssa and Andrew, on the other hand, prefer asynchronous learning since it gives them an opportunity to be more self-disciplined while there is some flexibility when it comes to their routines.

Online testing has also dramatically changed since instructors and professors are unsure how to go about testing. Some have opted out for testing on Blackboard which is not restrictive on background use of the web from the students end. What this means is that some students potentially could cheat in an exam without the instructor having a clue about it. In other instances such as what Joselyn described, the use of computer applications such as ProctorU (which requires you pay a twenty dollar fee in order to take a test online) allow instructors/test proctors to take control over your computer and ensure that you are not cheating on the exam. As

Joselyn described, this can feel extremely uncomfortable and stressful, which can negatively affect her exam results. It is important to note that testing this way might not be the best way to deal with online instruction because it might cause anxiety, worsen mental health and negatively impact one's overall exam performance.

Solutions

As we scramble to find ourselves lost in the mountain of work and our own personal dilemmas, the limitations have brought implications for future academic directions. During this process of identifying our academic and personal struggles during the pandemic, we have brainstormed ideas that may help future students who will stand in the shoes we once stood in.

Starting with the theme of routines, the day-to-day life we once had have been dramatically affected by this pandemic. As we go about our new normal, it is hard to ignore the importance of routines after having ours be interrupted so heavily. Routines have been proven to reduce stress level and cultivate positive daily habits (Blurt Team, 2018). Therefore, to spread awareness on just how important routines are to us and how to build and maintain them, we suggest the expansion of virtual workshops that include activities on how to manage time or create better workspaces. Our academic advisors can send out free printable and downloadable worksheets where we list how much time is going to what like studying, leisure time, working out, and etc. Our student ambassadors could also reach out to us and hold workshops. As a group we have identified that although we appreciate our academic advisors, having zoom meetings with them seems stressful as we feel as if we have to maintain that professionalism environment. On the other hand, student ambassadors may relieve that pressure of a professional setting which can lead students to feel more comfortable in a casual setting. Another way students can release

the pressure of being in professional settings, is having UCR associates reach out to us on different platforms. Our group has agreed that emails seem too add to the professionalism aspect, but possibly reaching out to us in other platforms could help us engage more. One method could be reaching out to us via social media apps such as Instagram. Features such as live streaming and instant notifications on when events happen would allow students to feel less pressure to stay informed via emails. This also aids in removing a level of professionalism on the end of the students which could be more enticing to those who feel the need to look presentable.

A suggestion for our professors would be to schedule lectures but also upload recordings of those lectures to give students the opportunity to choose how they want to learn. With some students still having obligations such as work or looking after family during the pandemic, the flexibility of providing both asynchronous learning and “in-person” Zoom classroom sessions give students more options to work with when deciding how to best fit learning into their new lives. The adaptability of these options will also greatly release the amount of stress students are experiencing during this pandemic. If possible, professors could also check in with students via frequent surveys where students can list their concerns.

Outside of UCR, we want to bring our attention to having therapy that is accessible to GIA. There are plenty of online therapy websites, but being college students and possibly not being financially stable during this pandemic, can be a quite expensive resource. We look to GIA to offer a suggestion of possibly being able to come up with ways to collaborate with online therapy websites to offer discounted prices to make it more accessible for students. As a whole, schools should be more structured in the way they grade their students during this pandemic. More specifically higher education as they struggle to meet a uniform structure based on the

differences in professor's preferences. Some professors have done a pass/no pass grading structure while others are still upholding the traditional grading structure as if we are still attending school in person. All in all, there needs to be multiple solutions in order to further accommodate students during this pandemic.

Conclusions

As students we have done our best to navigate ourselves through the transition to remote learning during this pandemic. Through our struggles we have come to an awareness about the certain support we need for ourselves as students both academically and personally. Through this project we have realized just how different this pandemic impacts our lives. We have students dealing with challenges of being in a completely different time zone that is 15 hours ahead of us here in California, students taking on more responsibilities, and students doing their best to navigate through their mental health. Although each member leads a different life we find unity in the effects of the pandemic on our academic performance and mental health. We unite in solidarity of how we are not really alone in the way we feel and struggle. This pandemic has taught us that there are students who may not be as privileged as us as we find out how differently the pandemic affects others. This paper is important to us as students since it gives us a platform to raise awareness of our struggles and highlight the hope for future directions. The pandemic has affected each person differently, therefore, different solutions are needed since not one solution can be applicable to all. We hope the different stories we have shared within this paper can help in creating accommodations for future students in need during such a turbulent time in the history of higher education.

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