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Changes for Academia During the COVID-19 Pandemic

The undergraduate population is suffering while higher education institutions fail to provide them with adequate support . With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, everyone has been facing new challenges and attempting to navigate a new way of life, but young adults in particular have been burdened with extra layers of difficulty. For those pursuing further education after receiving their high school diploma, college has now become even more difficult to complete than before. On top of their rigorous coursework, undergraduates are faced with the mental strains of isolation alongside the new challenges posed by online learning. Due to the particular vulnerability of young adults to loneliness and declining mental health at this time, post-secondary education should be further relaxed and modified for the duration of the COVID-19 pandemic.

It seemed to me, as an undergraduate student at Stony Brook University, that the best way to get a baseline of the undergraduate feelings toward this subject was to reach out to my peers with a survey. A Google Form I created to poll their feelings towards their education during the pandemic was shared across my social media, to my writing class, and to clubs that I partake in. It garnered 114 responses with a majority of respondents being Stony Brook University students, but a smattering of students from other institutions were also included in the sample. The respondents covered all years of college, from freshman all the way to fifth-year seniors, but a majority of them were first-year students. After the poll results were in, I moved

forward with interpreting the data I collected by looking at the different ways students are impacted by the societal changes that accompanied the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Isolation was a common tactic employed to minimize the spread of the coronavirus, but despite its benefits, it came with its own set of challenges. Research has shown that young adults are one of the populations most vulnerable to loneliness, and as such, “As social distancing because of the COVID-19 pandemic continues, adolescents, young adults, and old-old adults are likely to experience worsening loneliness...” (Beam S59). My own research affirms this increased loneliness in college-aged students. Of the 114 respondents, 94 of them reported themselves to be feeling lonelier now than they did before the pandemic. Along with this, a publication from *Cambridge University Press* presented that all personality types are vulnerable to loneliness and its stressful impacts (Miller 171). This indicates that most all young adults, the population that makes up the majority of undergraduate students, are feeling some adverse effects of loneliness.

Following this trend, general mental wellness has been found to be at an overall low among college students right now. According to a study published in *Canadian Psychology*, students without preexisting mental health conditions displayed higher signs of mental distress after the onset of the pandemic. Those with preexisting conditions tended to show slight improvements, but still had overall worse mental health than those without said preexisting conditions (Hamza). What this demonstrates is that more of the student body than ever is combating mental struggles. Those without preexisting conditions are now navigating difficulties they’ve never faced, and those who had already been suffering still are.

The correlation between poor mental health and lower academic achievement is undeniable. A paper presented in the *American Journal of Health Studies* noted that there was a

strong, direct correlation between higher symptoms of mental health disorders and lower grade point averages (Herbert), which is supported by my own research as well. Over half of the participants in my survey reported that their mental health has worsened throughout the pandemic, with 70.2% of participants finding themselves achieving lower academic standards than they previously had, and 84.2% of participants in the survey citing the pandemic as a negative influence on their ability to be successful as a student. This is a correlation between the reported mental effects of the pandemic and student success that cannot be overlooked.

On top of a decrease in general mental well-being of the student body, the lack of social interaction is also incredibly damaging to students. While it may seem like the frequency of social media use in our generation would combat some of that, it is unfortunately not so. Increased social media use could actually cause more damage as, “Average Semester and Cumulative GPA was significantly lower among students who used social media ‘5 or more hours’ than all other groups” (Herbert 8). The connection provided through online interactions may minimize some aspects of loneliness, but it is detrimental to student academic success. While social distancing must be maintained to prevent further spread of the coronavirus, it is inevitable that students, no matter their previous mental health and current coping mechanisms, will struggle more than they previously have with their studies if they try to utilize social media to feel less alone —something that is inescapable for the generation known for their use of online socialization platforms.

TikTok, a social media platform heavily dominated by members of Generation Z, is one such media that seems to be useful in making suffering undergraduates feel less alone in their struggles even if it doesn’t successfully provide them the social interactions they crave. User @isabellesaville posted a video of her having a breakdown over just how much difficulty she is

facing by trying to receive her college education online from her home. She placed the caption, “do professors actually realize how isolated and alone we feel? i’ve made maybe three friends this year. i feel so alone in most of my classes. i hate being home. i hate staring at my computer all day. i hate watching some of my other friends live the life i want to be living. all i do is work constantly, but it feels like im learning nothing. the only social life i have is my job. the world feels grey and empty. i feel like i can’t even breathe. i don’t think I can do this for another semester” overtop of the video, highlighting the unique difficulties caused by remote learning and the way that professors may struggle to fully understand or relate them. The most sobering part of this video is not her personal breakdown, but the fact that the video has nearly 170,000 likes. Based on the level of engagement her post received, the overwhelming feelings of stress, isolation, and an inability to carry on is not unique to the user who posted it. I know I clicked the like button.

With all of these points in mind, it would be unfair to deny students additional supports and flexibility regarding their academics during these troubling times. The lack of precedent on this issue makes it a difficult thing to solve, but some universities are trying their best to accommodate students. Stony Brook University is one such institution, and as a student there, it is the one I am most familiar with. Through a myriad of emails that flurry into my inbox from Stony Brook, I’ve seen the university extend the pass/fail selection deadline and increase the number of courses a student can take as a pass/fail class from one to two. Some professors are even making changes to their courses without any university directives on the matter.

Respondents to my survey reported that many of their classes were dropping from the gradebook the lowest scores achieved by each student at the end of the semester, and that “Some lectures are recorded,” along with other changes. Despite this, though, 59.6% of respondents said that

they did not feel their university had made adequate changes regarding student success in light of the COVID-19 pandemic. One participant, when questioned about changes that had been made to aid student success, went as far to say, “None, its pathetic,” while many others noted that their school either had not made any changes or, if they had, left students unaware of the added support they could be receiving.

Recognizing that I am not an education professional, I realized that I needed to reach out to some professors to gain insight into what their job looks like under the pandemic before I could fairly make any recommendations for changes they could be making in their classrooms and what those additional supports from universities should look like. My perspective here is unique, as it is a combination of my opinions, the thoughts of three Stony Brook University professors, and the suggestions of over 100 undergraduate students. While there is no right answer for how to handle tertiary education during a pandemic, there are ways to at least make it less strenuous for the students without overwhelming the professors.

I spoke to three Stony Brook University professors who teach across several different fields, and all of them were open to making further changes regarding the way they run their courses, along with being supportive of some institutional changes. However, they did not all agree on what those solutions should look like. This is reflective of the notion that there is no right answer in this turbulent situation; Brian Colle, a professor in the School of Marine and Atmospheric Sciences, noted that, “...there's no simple blanket across the board... solution or answer.” He was supportive of solutions that were applicable on a case-by-case basis for students, but Kathleen Fallon, a professor, and department chair of the Department of Sociology, showed more interest in broad solutions that address overall class structure. Despite these differences, there was a sentiment that all three professors shared: students are indeed struggling.

Professor Patricia Medved of The Program in Writing and Rhetoric summed this sentiment up, observing that, “a lot of students [are] having problems. [With] staying organized, staying on top of their work. [With] staying interested in the work.” This demonstrates that the difficulties undergraduates are facing have not gone unnoticed by their superiors, which makes my presentation of possible solutions even more important.

Undergraduate students who took my survey were given the opportunity to provide their own solutions that they wanted to see their professors and colleges use. Some of their suggestions included having their professors decrease the workloads of courses, having their course grades curved, having exams weigh less heavily on their grades, being allowed to use notes on their exams, and being provided days off throughout the semester to allow for time to catch up on any coursework they may have fallen behind in. All of these solutions would decrease the stress levels of undergraduate students without adding much of any additional work for the professors, which addresses a concern raised by Professor Medved: professors are facing difficulties as well.

All three of the professors I interviewed noted that they had had trouble adapting to teaching in an online environment. This paper does not aim to say that their struggles are less valid than those of undergraduates, but rather that young adults’ particular vulnerability to the impacts of the pandemic may cause that demographic to require additional support and flexibility to be successful in spite of their challenges. When asked if he believed students, or professors and universities held more responsibility for adapting to the pandemic, Professor Colle pondered that, “[he] can’t think of a reason why all the burden should be either on the student or the faculty member, [he] think[s] we’re, we’re all in the same boat.” It has been demonstrated that due to the pandemic, students are not yet able to shoulder the burden tertiary education is currently placing

on their shoulders, so further adaptations need to be made on the side of the professors and universities to accommodate this. Since it is possible to achieve this goal without making it more difficult for professors who are already facing their own issues, it should be readily accomplished.

A suggestion made by Professor Colle for an institutional change caught my attention. He pondered that perhaps a notation could be made on student transcripts to remind future employers or graduate schools that the grades achieved by students during the pandemic are reflective of the additional strains they are under because of the coronavirus pandemic. This is another simple change that any institution could employ that would provide some peace of mind to undergraduates as it would relieve some of the pressure that they are grappling with.

There is certainly no right answer for the way to solve these unprecedented issues, but as Professor Fallon summed it up, “Everyone is running their lives as if nothing is happening. Everyone is running their lives as if we are not in a pandemic. As if we aren’t having huge transformational things happening in our own families and with our friends with life, right? And I know a lot of students are particularly very much touched by this, right, they have experienced the consequences of this pandemic and they felt it directly.” Universities cannot continue to run as they are, pretending to be successfully operating in “normal” ways with successful student bodies. Both previous and current research supports the notion that college students are struggling more than ever to be successful with their coursework because of the coronavirus’s impacts, and as such colleges and professors should further adapt to manage that. Because of the novelty of the situation, though, there is not much long-term research drawing conclusions on how to solve this educational debacle. However, the undergraduate population cannot wait for those studies to come out. They are struggling now, and as such, it is vital that universities and

professors alike listen to those around them and take their suggestions seriously. Both the student suggestion and professors' comments presented in this paper are possible shifts that universities and tertiary educators could be enacting to make it a little less difficult for the vulnerable population that makes up their student bodies— a vital thing to do, considering the mental and academic struggles the group is facing.

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