



THE LASTING IMPACT OF COVID-19 ONLINE EDUCATION ON COLLEGE STUDENT FRUSTRATION, IMPATIENCE, AND ENROLLMENT TRENDS

Education

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic precipitated an abrupt transition to online education, disrupting the traditional collegiate experience and presenting multifaceted challenges for students, faculty, and administrators. This article examines the impact of the pandemic-induced shift to online learning on college students, focusing on their well-being, academic performance, and future educational plans. A comprehensive review of existing literature reveals heightened frustration and impatience among students due to technical difficulties, reduced interaction, increased workload, inadequate support, and challenging home learning environments. These factors have contributed to a decline in student satisfaction and engagement, as well as exacerbated mental health issues, such as anxiety and depression. Furthermore, enrollment trends indicate an increase in student decisions to stop out, influenced by financial concerns, mental health struggles, and the desire for a more conventional college experience. The article concludes with a discussion on the implications for the future of higher education, emphasizing the need for institutions to adapt by investing in robust online infrastructure, expanding mental health resources, and fostering community. Strategies for improving student engagement and success in post-pandemic education include the implementation of hybrid learning models, enhanced faculty training, and comprehensive student support services. The findings suggest that by embracing a student-centered approach and learning from this experience, higher education can better prepare students for future disruptions and ensure a more resilient academic environment.

KEYWORDS

COVID-19 and higher education, Online learning during pandemic, Impact of COVID-19 on college students, Challenges of remote learning in universities, Student mental health and online education, Academic performance during COVID-19, Technological challenges in online learning, Student engagement in virtual classrooms, Future of higher education post-COVID, Adapting to rapid online transition in education

INTRODUCTION

The global COVID-19 pandemic has profoundly disrupted the traditional educational landscape, forcing colleges and universities worldwide to rapidly transition to online learning platforms. While online education has been a growing trend in recent years, the sudden and widespread implementation due to the pandemic was unprecedented, presenting numerous challenges for students, faculty, and administrators alike. This abrupt shift has led to heightened levels of frustration and impatience among college students, as they grapple with the impact of the COVID-19 online education experience on their well-being, academic performance, and future educational plans. As the pandemic continues to shape the future of higher education, it is crucial to examine the existing literature to understand the needs and frustrations of the COVID generation of students and identify strategies to support their success in the post-pandemic educational environment.

The Rapid Transition to Online Learning:

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020 prompted a swift and unprecedented shift to online education. Colleges and universities had to quickly adapt their curricula, teaching methods, and infrastructure to accommodate remote learning. While some institutions had prior experience with online education, many were ill-prepared for the scale and suddenness of the transition. This rapid change led to numerous challenges, including technological issues, inadequate training for faculty, and a lack of resources for students.

Studies by Adnan and Anwar (2020), Darroch (2023), Lumina Foundation-Gallup (2022), Roman (2020), Rosario-Rodríguez et al. (2020), and Tejedor et al. (2020) have shown that the abrupt transition to online learning had a significant impact on student satisfaction and engagement. Many students reported feeling disconnected from their peers and instructors, struggling with the lack of face-to-face interaction and the absence of a traditional classroom environment. The loss of campus life and extracurricular activities further contributed to feelings of isolation and disengagement.

Frustration and Impatience Among College Students:

The literature consistently highlights the high levels of frustration and impatience experienced by college students during the COVID-19 online education period. Several factors have been identified as contributing to these negative emotions, including:

1. **Technical difficulties:** Students often faced issues with internet connectivity, device compatibility, and learning management systems, leading to frustration, and hindering their ability to fully participate in online classes.

2. **Reduced interaction:** The lack of face-to-face interaction with peers and instructors led to feelings of isolation and disconnection, making it challenging for students to engage in meaningful discussions and collaborate effectively.
3. **Increased workload:** Many students reported a higher workload in online classes compared to traditional on-ground courses, with more assignments, readings, and self-directed learning activities.
4. **Inadequate support:** Some students felt that they received insufficient support from their institutions and instructors during the transition to online learning, leading to increased stress and frustration.
5. **Home environment challenges:** For many students, the home environment was not conducive to learning, with distractions, lack of privacy, and competing responsibilities, such as caregiving or work, adding to their frustration and impatience.

These factors, among others, have contributed to a growing sense of dissatisfaction and disillusionment among college students, with many questioning the value and effectiveness of online education (Aucejo et al., 2020; The Third Way, 2021; Cao et al., 2020).

Impact on Academic Performance and Mental Health:

The literature also sheds light on the impact of the COVID-19 online education experience on students' academic performance and mental health. Several studies (Dhawan, 2020; Ghazi-Saidi et al., 2020; Lumina Foundation-Gallup, 2022; Rosario-Rodríguez et al., 2020; Son et al., 2020) have reported declines in student grades and overall academic achievement during the pandemic, attributing this to the challenges of online learning, reduced motivation, and increased stress levels.

Moreover, the pandemic has had a significant impact on the mental health of college students. Several studies have documented increased rates of anxiety, depression, and stress among students, as a result of the uncertainties and disruptions caused by the pandemic (Darroch, 2023; Gen Z Report, 2018; Lumina Foundation-Gallup, 2022; Rosario-Rodríguez et al., 2020; Son et al., 2020; Velázquez, 2020).

In addition, the Lumina Foundation-Gallup State of Higher Education 2022 study, depicted in the accompanying table, highlights the exacerbation of mental health concerns due to a lack of social support and the challenges associated with online learning. This combination of factors has further intensified the mental health struggles experienced by college students.

- About four in 10 students (41%) currently enrolled in a postsecondary education program say they have considered "stopping out" in the past six months
- Nearly nine in 10 students say they "frequently" (40%) or "occasionally" (46%) experience emotional stress.
- About seven in 10 bachelor's students say emotional stress (69%) and about six in 10 say mental health reasons (59%) are reasons they considered stopping their coursework
- Bachelor's students are significantly more likely than associate students to give mental health or financial reasons for considering stopping out

Source: Lumina Foundation-Gallup State of Higher Education 2022 study

Enrollment Trends and Stop-Out Decisions:

The COVID-19 pandemic has also had a notable impact on college enrollment trends and students' decisions to stop out or take a break from their education. Many students have reported reconsidering their educational plans due to the challenges and dissatisfaction experienced during the online learning period (Lumina Foundation-Gallup, 2022; Gen Z Report, 2018).

Financial concerns have emerged as a significant factor influencing enrollment decisions. The economic impact of the pandemic, including job losses and reduced family income, has made it difficult for some students to afford tuition and related expenses. Additionally, the perceived diminished value of online education has led some students to question the return on investment of their college degrees (Gen Z Report, 2018; Rosario-Rodríguez et al., 2020).

Mental health struggles and the desire for a more traditional college experience have also contributed to students' decisions to stop out. Some students have expressed a preference for waiting until they can return to on-ground classes and fully engage in campus life before continuing their education (The Third Way, 2021; The Lumina Foundation-Gallup, 2022).

The literature suggests that these trends may have long-lasting effects on college enrollment, with projections indicating potential reductions in attendance in the coming years. Institutions will need to adapt to these changes by offering more flexible and affordable educational options, as well as providing enhanced support services to address students' academic and mental health needs.

Implications for the Future of Higher Education:

The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the adoption of online education and highlighted the need for institutions to be prepared for future disruptions. The literature emphasizes the importance of investing in robust online learning infrastructure, providing adequate training and support for faculty, and developing innovative pedagogical approaches that foster student engagement and interaction.

Moreover, the pandemic has underscored the critical role of student support services in ensuring academic success and well-being. Institutions must prioritize the expansion and enhancement of mental health resources, academic advising, and financial aid to help students navigate the challenges of online learning and the ongoing impact of the pandemic.

As colleges and universities look to the future, it is crucial to incorporate the lessons learned from the COVID-19 online education experience. This includes embracing a more student-centered approach to education, offering flexible learning options, and fostering a sense of community and belonging in both online and on-ground settings.

To address the challenges faced by the COVID generation of students and improve student engagement in both online and on-ground settings, institutions can implement a range of strategies that prioritize student well-being, adaptability, and support. These strategies include:

1. Offer hybrid (HyFlex) learning options: Provide students with the flexibility to choose between online, on-ground, and hybrid courses to accommodate their individual learning preferences and personal circumstances. This allows students to maintain a sense of control over their educational experience and helps them balance their academic responsibilities with other commitments.

2. Prioritize mental health support: Expand and enhance mental

health resources, such as counseling services, wellness programs, and support groups, to address the heightened stress, anxiety, and isolation experienced by the COVID generation of students. Ensure that these services are easily accessible, well-publicized, and available in both online and on-ground formats.

HyFlex (Beatty, 2007), short for Hybrid-Flexible, (its beginnings are credited Brian Beatty and the Instructional Technologies (ITEC) graduate program at San Francisco State University) is a course design method and teaching approach that was designed to better accommodate student needs by combining online and classroom-based components. Instructors make their courses more accessible to students who could not attend in person while still maintaining a traditional classroom component. Their solution: create class content and material that could be accessed either in the classroom or online and allow students the flexibility to choose their learning path.

3. Foster a sense of community and belonging: Create opportunities for students to connect with their peers and faculty members both in-person and virtually. Encourage the formation of study groups, clubs, and extracurricular activities that cater to a wide range of interests and backgrounds. Host social events, workshops, and mentorship programs to promote a sense of belonging and support.
4. Adapt teaching methods to promote engagement: Encourage faculty to adopt innovative teaching strategies that foster active learning, critical thinking, and collaboration in both online and on-ground settings. This may include incorporating interactive elements, such as group discussions, case studies, and hands-on projects, to keep students engaged and motivated.
5. Provide comprehensive student support services: Offer a wide range of support services, including academic advising, tutoring, career counseling, and financial aid assistance, to help students navigate the challenges of the post-pandemic educational landscape. Ensure that these services are accessible, responsive, and tailored to the unique needs of the COVID generation of students.
6. Invest in technology infrastructure and digital resources: Prioritize investments in reliable and user-friendly technology infrastructure and digital resources to support seamless learning experiences in both online and on-ground environments. This includes ensuring access to high-quality video conferencing tools, learning management systems, and digital libraries.
7. Offer professional development opportunities for faculty and staff: Provide ongoing training and support for faculty and staff to enhance their skills in teaching, advising, and supporting students in the post-pandemic era. This may include workshops on online pedagogy, trauma-informed practices, and strategies for promoting student engagement and well-being.
8. Foster partnerships with community organizations: Collaborate with local community organizations, businesses, and government agencies to provide students with opportunities for internships, service learning, and community engagement. These partnerships can help students develop real-world skills, build professional networks, and contribute to the well-being of their communities.
9. Promote flexibility and adaptability in policies and procedures: Review and update institutional policies and procedures to ensure they are flexible, compassionate, and responsive to the needs of the COVID generation of students. This may include adjusting attendance policies, extending deadlines, and providing alternative grading options to accommodate students' diverse circumstances.
10. Continuously assess and improve student engagement strategies: Regularly collect and analyze data on student engagement, satisfaction, and success to identify areas for improvement and inform decision-making. Use this information to refine and adapt engagement strategies based on the evolving needs and preferences of the COVID generation of students.

CONCLUSION

The COVID-19 pandemic has profoundly impacted the college experience, forcing students to quickly adapt to online education amidst unprecedented levels of frustration and uncertainty. As higher education institutions navigate the post-pandemic landscape, it is crucial to prioritize student well-being and adapt to their evolving needs and preferences. By incorporating the lessons learned from the COVID-19 online education experience, colleges and universities can create a more supportive, engaging, and resilient educational environment that helps students thrive in the face of unprecedented

challenges.

Looking ahead, institutions must remain proactive, adaptable, and responsive to the changing needs of students, ensuring that they feel supported and empowered in both online and on-ground settings. Through the implementation of strategies that foster community, promote flexibility, and enhance student support services, colleges and universities can work towards building a more resilient and student-centered educational landscape that prepares learners for the challenges of the future.

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