Examining the Experience of Undergraduate Students During the COVID-19-Driven Transition to Online Learning

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COVID-19 led to rapid, chaotic transition to remote socialization and activities, as well as increased levels of stress and depression. In spring 2020, undergraduate students were forced to make large adjustments in both personal and academic contexts in a short period of time, yielding the possibility of compounding stressors. Given that socialization has been shown to mitigate stress for college students, decreased socialization may undermine students’ cognitive functions. Additionally, given that classes will continue to be conducted online, it is important to examine the perceived advantages and disadvantages for undergraduates to ensure online education is both effective and supportive for undergrads in a time of crisis.

RQ: What are some characteristics of undergraduates’ experiences of the rapid transition to online instruction across the first quarter of the pandemic?

METHODOLOGY & MEASURES

Participants (N=19)
• University of California Irvine, Spring 2019
• Recruited from two anthropology courses
• Female (n=12), Latinx (n=7) 1st gen (n=12)

Procedure & Measures
• Initial Online Learning Survey
• Demographic and situational reports
• Positive and negative ratings of environment, online learning, and impacts
• Free response prompts related to ratings
• Weekly Course Surveys
• Course module(s) and measures of task-based enjoyment/stress, and attention
• Attention/comprehension scales

MEETING THEMES

Online Learning
• Autonomy and online learning
• Changes in learning interactions
• Distractions/disruptions while studying

Non-Academic
• Living at home with family members
• Current and future financial concerns
• Future employment concerns

Mixed Reports
• Mixed positive/negative ratings of environment and online learning
• Low scores of impact but written responses indicate distress or concern

THE STUDENT EXPERIENCE

Online Learning: Autonomy. Students were positive about being able to learn at their own pace and not worry about attendance. “I like the idea of having more time on my hands to complete my assignments” “…because attendance has posed an issue for me in the past, [having classes online] prevents that from negatively impacting my grade”

Online Learning: Interactions. Though average concern scores were low, written responses expressed concern about the changes in class interactions and context. “It is very hard for me to be engaged in lectures/zoom meetings.” “Because I am naturally extremely introverted it is hard for me to make connections with people without being "forced" [into] a social situation.”

Online Learning: Distractions. Difficulty focusing and space were prevalent concerns. “It is a lot more difficult for me to stay focused when I’m not in class in person because, since I’m already on my laptop, it is very easy to open another tab or notification.” “It is difficult to find a place and time at home that is solely designated for the benefit of my concentration in studying and doing homework.”

Non-Academic: Living at Home. Students generally regarded living at home as a positive, but some reported additional distractions or pressure. “Being with my family motivates me to do well in the courses I am taking and even teach them a little of what I have been learning.” “I don’t want to slack off and be a negative example for my younger siblings that are also doing school remotely, as elementary and high school students. I also am now not the sole caretaker of the house, so I’m less distracted by household chores.”

Non-Academic: Financial Concerns. Though the degree and type of financial concern varied amongst responses, no students had positive or optimistic responses about financial prospects or wealth. “Both of my parents are not working and my older sister as well.” “I am fine for the next month or two but if this keeps going [I’m] not sure what will happen. Especially if I [don’t] get that unemployment check.”

Non-Academic: Future Employment. Students were all pessimistic, to varying degrees, about future job prospects. Year 4 and 5 students were all pessimistic, to varying degrees, about future job prospects; Year 4 and 5 students were all pessimistic, to varying degrees, about future job prospects.

CONCLUSIONS & DISCUSSION

Although students appreciated the self-paced nature of online learning, they consistently reported distractions were a concern. Academic and economic disruption was significant. Task stress generally decreased over the quarter, suggesting students may acclimate over time. This sample may reflect non-random sampling – this is a small set of students who opted to participate in the study and who completed more than two asynchronous activities. Further analysis with larger samples is required to examine the interactions between social supports, living situations, and learning outcomes in this time of crisis.