Education Impacts of a Pandemic on Business Students in the Short Term

Tará Burnthorne Lopez, Michael C. Budden, and Michelle Hall

ABSTRACT

In January 2020, disturbing scenes online of pain and suffering in Chinese hospitals heralded a pandemic that would force the closure or minimization of efforts by many organizations across the world. Impacted efforts included on-campus operations of most universities. With short notice, students were told to leave campuses while many classes were moved online in an attempt to curtail the impact of the spreading virus while continuing the education process. Campuses were impacted in numerous ways. This article investigates the impact of stay-at-home orders on the educational experiences of the college of business students due to the pandemic shortly after its commencement. Findings suggest that the majority of college students experienced changes in their learning behaviors and perceptions after transitioning online.

Keywords: Business Students, Covid-19, University, Stay-At-Home.

I. INTRODUCTION

For many college students, the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic in the spring semester of 2020 felt both surreal and abrupt. One day students are on campus, socializing and having shared, learning experiences with classmates. The next day, with very little warning they are abruptly dismissed from classes, banned from campus, dispersed, and told to socially distance themselves from others.

Though news of the virus had been circulating in the United States since January, the subsequent rapid spread across Europe and into the United States took many college students by surprise. In an unprecedented move, in concert with the rest of the world, governors across the U.S. began issuing stay-at-home orders in mid-March impacting all but essential workers [1]. The order sent many home to use the technology. The need for computers, fast internet access, training in new technologies without advance notice. Some students had hurdles to face in switching back and forth to finishes the spring semester through distance education environment. A summary and recommendations section are included.

II. COLLEGE STUDENTS AND THE STAY-AT-HOME ORDERS

College students experienced the impact of the pandemic on many fronts – as students, as consumers, and as essential and non-essential workers. College students were sent home to finish the spring semester through distance education technologies without advance notice. Some students and faculty were better prepared than others to take on new pedagogies to advance education in a new reality. Universities scrambled to provide support to students who did not have access to technology [3]. Students and faculty scrambled to learn how to use the technology. The need for computers, fast internet access, training in new technologies and methodologies, and communication difficulties highlighted some of the challenges facing students and faculty.

In addition, online coursework presented students who had never taken online classes with additional hurdles of learning, sharing, and communicating with others. Access to computer labs, libraries and other support mechanisms were severely curtailed. Students also faced social challenges such as the lack of access to campus and campus resources which left a void in social connections and added to anxieties [4].

Beyond the academic challenges, students faced abrupt changes in their living situations, with many in campus housing returning home. Some had personal hurdles to face as jobs were curtailed and the need for childcare in the absence of in-school care for primary school-aged children...
was a concern for many. The pandemic disrupted school, work, and life, as most knew it. The term “new normal” took on an ominous tone and became trite in the process.

As of the beginning of 2021, distance education and social distancing has been the norm for most of a year. Changes in educational delivery while necessary, have been disparaged. Indeed, some unhappy students filed lawsuits against their universities. The willingness to sue by unhappy students appears to be gaining steam [5]. Filed by students who are unhappy with the move to a digital format in their education, they argue the quality of education and campus life experiences expected when they enrolled are not present and impossible to experience or attain in a digital-only format [5]. In short, such lawsuits argue the experience (and result) of online learning fails to deliver what was promised to students. So, for better or worse, students were wearing masks, social distancing, using technology to learn and ostensibly, staying home. Were all university students’ educational experiences negative? This research was conducted to understand student perceptions of their learning experiences in the immediate aftermath of stay-at-home orders.

III. OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY

A survey was administered to college of business students on one campus located in the southeastern U.S. approximately seven weeks after stay-at-home orders were initiated. The survey measured perceived impacts of the stay-at-home order on students’ behaviors and the educational environment. The survey, administered online via Survey Monkey, was open for one week. The survey was administered to a convenience sample of students enrolled in seven junior and senior level courses and one graduate course in business. Recipients enrolled in more than one of the selected classes were asked to answer only one questionnaire to prevent duplication. A total of 294 completed questionnaires were returned for analysis.

The specific research objectives to assess the impact of the stay-at-home order and the resulting shift to online delivery included:
1) To understand the college of business student perceptions of learning and learning behaviors.
2) To understand college of business perceptions of the online class environment.

IV. FINDINGS

The COVID-19 pandemic impacted business students in several ways. The results presented below provide evidence supporting how it impacted their learning, learning behaviors, and perceptions of the online class environment.

A. Perceptions of Learning and Learning Behaviors

The transition to online classes required traditional business students to change the way they approach learning. Most prevalent was the widespread adoption of distance technologies. Though, the current generation of college students are generally considered to be digital natives [6], our results suggest that they, too, had to adapt when it came to using video conferencing technologies. Not surprisingly, an overwhelming number of students reported using Google Meet, Zoom, and similar sites more after the order than before. Students reporting increased usage totaled more than 92% of respondents. Approximately 5.2% reported the same amount of usage, while less than 2.5% reported decreased use of video conferencing technology.

Though classes were transitioned to online, students were expected to continue to meet learning outcomes. Business courses commonly require research for class assignments or projects. Since access to the university library on campus was not permitted, the researchers explored whether or not students relied more heavily on the online resources provided by the university library. Surprisingly, 72.9% reported using the library less after the move off-campus. Almost one-fourth (23.4%) reported using it the same while only 3.8% reported using it more. The decreased use of the library was surprising to the authors as the library has numerous databases and online, text, and email services that continued to be available to students throughout the time period.

Another behavior necessary for success in the classroom is that of studying. The stay-at-home order impacted more than universities. Restaurants, bars, gyms, and other retailers came under the order as well, resulting in decreased hours of operation and in some cases, complete closures. So, did students spend the extra time studying? Slightly more than one-fourth (26.3%) of respondents reported spending more time studying after the order. Approximately one-third (32.6%) reported spending less time studying, and a fully 41.1% reported studying the same amount as before the order went into effect.

The students were asked several questions related to their learning. They were asked whether or not the online delivery impacted their ability to learn and their performance. A majority of respondents (56.2%) reported they felt their ability to learn had decreased since the move to online delivery of classes. Almost one-third (31.2%) felt their ability to learn was the same, while 12.7% felt their ability to learn actually increased since the order. When comparing online learning and face-to-face, only 14.5% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that online courses allow for more learning than traditional in-class offerings. At the same time, 60.9% disagreed or strongly disagreed with the notion that online courses allow for more learning than in-class offerings. Approximately one-fourth (24.5%) neither agreed nor disagreed with the notion.

When asked about the impact of online courses on their class performance, 24.2% of respondents felt their performance had improved. Those who felt their performance had not improved accounted for 40.9% of respondents. Those respondents who neither agreed nor disagreed with the idea of an improved performance level accounted for 34.9% of respondents.

B. Perceptions of the Online Class Environment

This research also considered students perceptions of the online class environment after the stay-at-home orders were implemented, including whether or not they missed in-person classes and would take 100% online classes in the future. When asked if their appreciation for 100% online classes had increased, decreased, or stayed the same since the move to online, responses were somewhat equally distributed. One-
third (33.2%) felt their appreciation for such courses had not changed. Slightly more than one-third (36.7%) felt their appreciation for such courses had increased since the order, while 28.6% felt their appreciation had decreased.

In the present study, nearly three-fourths (71.8%) of respondents indicated they missed the classroom environment. Some 9.6% of respondents disagreed with missing the classroom environment, while the remaining 18.6% neither agreed nor disagreed with missing the classroom environment. Only 20.5% of respondents indicated they planned to take additional 100% online classes after the order is lifted. Interestingly, almost one-half (49.1%) of respondents indicated they were likely to sign up for more classes offered entirely online. And the remaining 30.5% were unsure about tackling such courses after the order is lifted.

V. SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Impacts of the order on students were numerous. Even though the order had been in existence less than two months, students seemed to have developed strong attitudinal tendencies during the short duration of the order – which continues to this day. The results provided here offer several findings for universities to consider.

Regarding learning behaviors including library usage and studying, 72.9% reported using the library less after the stay-at-home orders were mandated and 32.6% reported studying less. Taken together, these findings suggest the possibility that students did not put forth the same effort once at home. There are several possible explanations for this that have differing implications. One possibility is that the rigor of courses declined. The burden placed on university faculty across the globe was immense, requiring that they, in only a matter of days, restructure their courses and begin delivery online. To ease the burden, some faculty may have adjusted course expectations, altering major research projects or assignments that require significant mentoring to assignments that more easily and quickly fit into an online format. Similarly, due to concerns about cheating on online tests, some faculty may have shifted to other methods of assessment. Another possible explanation is the emotional stress and external challenges facing students at the time. While many businesses were not open to provide sources of distraction, students faced distractions from other sources. Many were called on to care for younger siblings or their own children who were no longer in school. Anecdotally, one student had to move out of the home he shared with his grandparents into a home without internet access due to fears he might infect his grandparents. Other students, employed by essential businesses, were expected to work more hours to help with increased demand.

With respect to actual learning, 56.2% of students felt their ability to learn was decreased by the online delivery of classes and 60.9% claimed that online delivery did not allow for more learning than face-to-face classes. In past research, Tichavsky, Hunt, Driscoll, and Jicha [7] found that 56% of the university students they surveyed preferred face-to-face courses. However, the present study found that 71.8% of students surveyed miss the classroom environment. It is possible that with greater exposure to online learning due to the stay-at-home orders, some students recognize that online course delivery is not the best fit for their learning needs.

These results indicate that while online learning benefits some students, there are many who prefer tradition, face-to-face instruction. Universities need to prepare to return to campus-life as quickly as possible. At the same time, many students have enjoyed the move to a digital format and learning environment, and as a result, universities will need to work to accommodate those students.

Improvements to the online delivery process on the part of faculty – who were also called short by the order – need to continue. With over one-half of students feeling their ability to learn has been curtailed by online classes, the need to improve the learning environment is paramount. Especially, since 9 months after the order, campus life has still not returned to normal and many classes are being offered online only.

REFERENCES


Dr. Tará Burnthorne Lopez earned a Doctor of Business Administration degree in marketing from Louisiana Tech University in Ruston, Louisiana, U.S.A. in 2000. She is currently an Associate Professor of Marketing at Southeastern Louisiana University. She previously taught at the University of Southern Mississippi, Mississippi College, and was a guest lecturer at Pole Universitaire - Leonard de Vinci School of Management in Paris, France. She has published research in the Journal of Personal Selling and Sales Management, the Journal of Business and Industrial Marketing, and the Journal of Marketing Theory and Practice. Her research interests include business education and pedagogy, and professional sales and sales management.

Dr. Lopez is a member of the Global Sales Science Institute and the Direct Selling Association. Dr. Lopez holds the Rubio Family Endowed Professorship.
Dr. Michael C. Budden received a Ph.D. in Business Administration from the University of Arkansas (Fayetteville, Arkansas) with a major in marketing in 1982. His MBA was obtained from Southeastern Louisiana University (Hammond, LA) and his BS in finance was earned at Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge, LA. He is the Benjamin Jones’ Professor of Retail Marketing at Southeastern Louisiana University. He served twenty years as a university administrator, 14 of which were in the position of dean of business. Budden’s books on trade secrets laws and merchant detention statutes (shoplifting laws) are published by Quorum Books. He has over authored/co-authored over 200 articles and paper presentations.

Dr. Budden is a member of the Association for Business Communication. He has served for the past 11 years as University Ombudsperson at Southeastern where he teaches consumer behavior, marketing management and retail management.

Dr. Michelle Hall received a Ph.D. in applied experimental psychology from Southern Illinois University Carbondale in 1995. Her MA in applied experimental psychology was also obtained from SIUC and her BA in psychology was earned at Monmouth College in Monmouth, IL. She is the Director, Institutional Research at Southeastern Louisiana University, a position she has served in since 2000. She has presented several workshops state conferences and papers at the regional and national level.

Dr. Hall is a member of the Association for Institutional Research where she has served as Forum Chair and Board Member. She has served as President, Treasurer, and Board Member for the Southern Association for Institutional Research, where she won the James Montgomery Outstanding Service Award in 2013.