Perceived Student Vulnerabilities during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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November 1, 2021

This report was collaboratively prepared by the Teaching, Researching, and Understanding the Social Science of Trust Lab at Michigan State University (www.trusstlab.com).

Recommended Citation

Osuna *et al*., (2021). Perceived student vulnerabilities during the COVID-19 Pandemic. Available at http://trusstlab.com/resources

Executive Summary

The COVID-19 Pandemic has impacted higher education both through the structural changes that comprise university responses and through student experiences of their real and perceived effects. Research has begun to attend to these impacts, and to date, most seek to understand how these responses can best position universities to adapt (*e.g.,* Gonzalez *et al*., 2020; Reimers *et al*., 2020; Toquero, 2020). Less work, however, has considered how these adaptations affect students and virtually none has considered these impacts through students' eyes. Addressing this gap in knowledge is important because these perspectives may reveal unintended and even surprising impacts of the decisions made by universities as they navigate the pandemic.

This report presents the results of a qualitative analysis of data collected via an online survey of Michigan State University (MSU) students conducted in September of 2020. The purpose of the survey was to understand trust and harm in higher education from a student perspective. To this end, the survey asked students to discuss both experienced and potential harms controlled by their university and, as might be expected given the timing of the survey, harms related to the COVID-19 Pandemic emerged naturally. These COVID-specific responses were then categorized into four somewhat overlapping themes. Students discussed **educational** and **financial harms**, especially regarding the perceived decrease in the quality and value of instruction as courses moved online and university decisions that left students in expensive housing contracts. Students also discussed **failures to mitigate student injury**, a related but distinct set of harms that arose from situations where they felt that the university could have alleviated some of the injuries to students by taking a slightly different approach, even to the same end. Key among these were the timing and transparency of the university's communications, which some participants felt were intended to reduce university harm at student expense. The final set of harms focused specifically on the university's **stay-at-home order** where students highlighted a lack of consistency and fairness in its application.

Although our data are limited—both in that the survey was not initially designed to collect COVID-specific harms and in that they were collected at only one university—our data provide an important window into student experiences during the first year of the pandemic. In particular, our results highlight (1) the need for universities to engage in effective and timely communication with students to position them to make informed decisions, especially regarding their finances, (2) a need to think proactively about the resources students need to be successful in the new environments created by responses to crises, and (3) an overarching need to demonstrate unwavering concern for student welfare.

Background

The COVID-19 Pandemic has changed virtually every facet of modern life but one industry that has been especially impacted is higher education (Gonzalez *et al*., 2020). Institutions of higher education (IHEs) have experienced a financial impact of over $120 billion in both added expenses and lost revenue (Forbes, 2020). In response, IHEs have implemented policy changes that include moving to remote learning, travel and fieldwork restrictions, and social distancing guidelines. In general, these policies focus on maintaining the greatest possible degree of normalcy while addressing revenue losses and reducing community spread (Reimers *et al*., 2020; see also Toquero, 2020).

Research has begun to shed light on the impacts of these adaptations with most focusing on the quality of online versus on-campus education (Aristovnik *et al*., 2020; Ferdig *et al*., 2020; Gonzalez *et al*., 2020; Marinoni *et al*., 2020). However, no work has directly considered the impacts of university decisions from a student perspective. This is a significant gap because it is only through these perspectives that universities can fully understand the impact of their decisions and identify unintended or hidden consequences experienced by this key stakeholder group. Addressing this oversight will not only position universities to better respond as they navigate this ongoing pandemic but may also allow them to do better in a variety of future challenges (Lyons *et al*., 2008).

Method

Survey Design

The data reported here were collected in September of 2020 via an online survey designed to investigate students' relationships with their university. One hundred and seventy-seven MSU students completed measures addressing trust, harm, and institutional betrayal as contextualized within their experiences in higher education, but the COVID-related responses reported here were generated in response to two general questions:

- Please provide one or two examples of the ways that the deliberate actions of each of the following groups can intentionally or unintentionally cause you harm. If you do not feel that it is possible for these groups to cause you harm, please write "none".
- Please provide one or two examples of the ways that each of the following groups can make deliberate decisions to PREVENT harm from happening to you. If you do not feel that it is possible for these groups to prevent harm from happening to you, please write "none".

Participants who indicated that they have previously experienced harm caused by their university were also given the opportunity to explain that injury via the following question:

- If you feel that you have experienced harm caused by your university, please briefly describe the harm. If you have not, please write "Not Applicable".

The first two *potential harm* questions asked students to provide separate responses for university- and college-level administration; major academic units (MAUs); and faculty, staff,

and students with whom they interact. The third *experienced harm* question did not specifically designate any part of the university, thus allowing participants to respond regarding any university-related injury they felt they had experienced. These questions, therefore, sought to solicit the universe of harms for which any given part of the university community could reasonably be responsible. Given the timing of our work, however, a noteworthy portion of the data collected directly referenced pandemic-related injury, and only these responses are reported here (for a complete description of the survey and responses see Osuna *et al*., in prep). Because the focus here is on understanding the breadth of university-controlled harms of relevance to the pandemic, the following thematic analyses were conducted considering both potential and experienced harms as well as the full variety of actors.

Sample Characteristics

Through the analysis described below, harms relating to COVID-19 appeared as a running theme in 38 statements made by 28 students. In general, these students were similar to those who did not identify COVID-related harms. Thirty-three percent self-identified as male (compared to 37% of those who did not mention COVID-related harm), 81% as White (77%), 67% as exclusively heterosexual (70%), with an average age of 24 years (25). A plurality (59%) identified as Democrats (compared to 51% of those who did not mention COVID).

Regarding their time on campus, all but one was enrolled during the current semester, 26% had been on campus less than one year, 37% were professional students, 74% were exclusively on-campus students prior to the pandemic, and all were full-time students.

Analytic Strategy

Grounded theory methods were used to conduct a thematic analysis of the complete data. To combat threats to validity, inductive coding was performed by two team members and was an iterative process with a continual return to the data corpus through every stage of coding and continual use of a codebook (Saldaña, 2015; Yin, 2016). The coding process utilized Auerbach & Silverstein's three-stage coding process. First, two lab members coded for repeating ideas which refers to the same or similar words used by participants to express the same idea (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003), and met to discuss discrepancies and adjust the codebook. Next, the repeating ideas were independently organized by the two coders into themes which refers to groups of repeating ideas that have something in common (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003). Again, discrepancies were discussed and resolved. Finally, the themes were organized into higher-level theoretical constructs (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003).

Given the timing of our work, themes naturally emerged that referenced university responses to the pandemic. While this was outside the scope of the larger research project, these themes flagged unique student concerns about harm. We, therefore, posed a secondary research question: *How do students describe harms related to COVID-19 as related to university actors*? The results presented here are restricted to this question such that we only report the subset of harms students identified that were relevant to the COVID-19 Pandemic.

Results

Statements addressing COVID-19 highlighted both experienced harms (n = 7) and potential harms (n = 31). The potential harms were identified as arising from university administration (n = 22), the student's college (n = 4), faculty they interact with (n = 2), and students they interact with (n = 3).

Educational Harms

The first theme focused on the quality of online education after the decision was made to go virtual in March of 2020. The statements (n = 10) were primarily worried about a lack of clear expectations and believed that online classes were lower in quality than in-person classes. Seven statements reported potential harms students felt were controlled by the university administration, one potential harm controlled by their college, two potential harms controlled by faculty with whom they interact. Three statements addressed experienced educational harm but these were not substantively different from the potential harms addressing this theme.

Example responses include:

- Sarah[1] shared that there was a "lack of planning for online schooling" which left her unsure of expectations and requirements for her classes.
- Bella shared that in-person practicums are distinct from online courses in both quality and content, and that there was a failure in "attempting to teach clinical skills through videos."
- Astrid felt that there was a failure in "Not giving teachers enough warning to plan online courses."
- Stuart felt that there was a failure in "not properly adapting coursework to an online format" and "not taking advantage of synchronous learning."

Financial Harms

Five statements addressed concerns regarding financial hardships students faced due to campus restrictions. Some noted that, given the decrease in educational quality, the university should compensate by reducing the cost of tuition. Others focused on the fact that changes in university policies, especially regarding housing and whether classes would be held online or virtually, left many students locked in housing contracts they no longer needed, further challenging their financial situations. Four statements reported potential harms students felt were controlled by the university administration, one potential harm controlled by their college, and one experienced harm was reported. As above, the experienced harms were not substantively different from the potential harms addressing this theme.

Example responses include:

[1] Names of the participants have been changed to preserve anonymity.

- Joe felt that the university should be "adjusting tuition accordingly [for the] decreased cost of resources used and quality of teaching presented" and that there was a "lack of response to student financial concerns regarding tuition rates & COVID."
- Denise thought it was unfair for the university to decide on "changing housing decisions last minute."
- Nikki focused on the administration informing students that it would be "cancelling school AFTER[2] tuition and move-in days."
- Astrid felt that it was wrong for the university to "wait for students to already be locked into their housing leases before cancelling in-person classes."
- Gretchen suggested that the university "provide adequate funding for students to be able to deal with a variety of difficult situations (pandemic-related expenses, commuting troubles, housing troubles, etc.)."

Failures in Mitigating Student Injury

A related set of responses focused on missed opportunities whereby the university could have engaged in different processes that might have lessened the harm to students. In general, statements (n = 11) addressing these concerns suggested that the way that some decisions were made advantaged the university at considerable cost to students who then lacked the opportunity to respond in a way that minimized the harm to them. Eight statements reported potential harms students felt were controlled by the university administration, two potential harms controlled by their colleges, and one experienced harm was reported. Again, the experienced harms were not substantively different from the potential harms addressing this theme.

Example responses include:

- Sally shared "I was disappointed the university even considered bringing students back on campus for fall for the sake of their tuition dollars over their safety."
- Gretchen thought that the university was "not taking serious enough measures to prevent COVID-19 cases."
- Marcos shared "also I feel like their actions with the COVID plan were lacking and came across as selfish."
- Ann thought that it was wrong for the university to "force all on-campus freshmen to live in Case Hall for their 'safety,' which is really just for the purpose of lowering university spending and incidentally majorly increases the risk of COVID-19 spreading throughout said group."
- Tucker thought that the university did "not inform students of the actual plans for COVID."

Stay-at-Home Order

Statements (n = 11) also addressed more specific concerns about the inconsistency and ineffectiveness of the university's stay-at-home order (i.e., "don't come to campus"). Some statements suggest that it was upsetting that the stay-at-home policy did not apply to all students. Students found it important that policies like this should apply to everyone and that no

[2] Emphasis in the original.

preference should be given to any one student over another, especially given that their success seemed to hinge heavily on large numbers of students complying with them. Six statements reported potential harms students felt were controlled by the university administration, three potential harms controlled by other students, and two experienced harms were reported. The experienced harms were not substantively different from the potential harms addressing this theme.

Example responses include:

- Helen mentioned that the university was "saying students have to stay at home like me but then allow[ed] students to have a form to go [to campus] if they really have to but accept[ed] the most minuscule reasons."
- Julie was alarmed that students were not prevented from "hav[ing] parties during the COVID pandemic."
- Suzie was uneasy with "students who choose to party and not follow safety guidelines set in place regarding the spread of COVID - not wearing masks."
- Gabriel shared that "I am additionally surrounded by undergrad students who are partying all the time and therefore I do not feel comfortable seeing my family because this school is going to be diseased ridden. The university has made no concessions to help make life easier for me."

Discussion

The responses analyzed here provide a window into the experiences of students during the COVID-19 Pandemic and especially how those experiences intersected with the deliberate decisions of the MSU community. Students in the complete sample were relatively easily able to identify specific potential harms both when they thought about injuries the university could directly cause and when they considered the opportunities the university had to prevent harm. Happily, though, a much smaller number of students identified harms they had personally experienced with 71.8% of the full sample indicating they had not personally experienced harm from their university.

COVID-specific harms were similarly infrequent as only 28 of the 177 students mentioned them when prompted to think generally about university-caused harm. These responses addressed four areas in which they felt that they could or had been hurt by university action or inaction. Students were concerned about the educational and financial implications of moving classes online. In general, students seemed to believe that online classes could be beneficial, but they did note several challenges that undermined their success like a lack of planning. Students also highlighted the process by which the university responded to the complications posed by the pandemic. Here, they tended to focus on a lack of timeliness and transparency which they often felt were driven by a need to protect the university at their cost. Students pointed to a number of what they seemed to feel were errors in the process and used them as evidence that managing their and the university's vulnerability had become a zero-sum game. Finally, students pointed to a specific policy, the stay-at-home order, which they felt was applied inconsistently and was, therefore, less likely to be effective in protecting them.

Limitations

Before presenting the recommendations that we believe flow from this data, it is first important to contextualize our findings against the limitations of our approach. In particular, our convenience-based recruitment, qualitative approach, and small sample may challenge the extent to which our findings generalize to the entire MSU campus or other IHEs. Additionally, it is important to note that the initial survey was not designed to capture COVID-19 related harms and instead sought to address the full breadth of university-controlled harm. A more specific survey may have elicited other COVID-related concerns from more students. Nonetheless, our study provides insight into the experiences of at least some MSU students, and our general questions were likely still able to capture at least the most salient issues.

Recommendations

The responses analyzed here provide some guidance for universities as they continue to navigate the COVID-19 Pandemic and three recommendations stand out in particular. Managing a pandemic is certainly a challenging process of navigating real impacts that have already been experienced while also responding to an ever-changing landscape of potential impacts and local, state, and federal restrictions. It is likely, therefore, inevitable that universities would constantly need to make, unmake, and change policies but what our students' responses suggest is important in this process is an identifiable commitment to limiting injury to students. One specific action that may have curbed the majority of the issues noted here would have been to engage in effective and timely communication with the specific goal of helping students to make informed decisions, especially regarding their finances. Keeping in mind the point at which students had to make decisions about housing in particular and preemptively moving classes online ahead of this deadline is an especially important missed opportunity.

A second concrete step that may have helped assuage student harm would require the proactive consideration of the specific resources that students would need to be successful in their new university environment. Navigating the pandemic required of students considerable intellectual, financial, and emotional resources, and preemptively anticipating and supporting these needs may have better positioned them to respond effectively.

We must, however, acknowledge that the ever-changing nature of the pandemic makes these two recommendations much more difficult. Thus, it is likely that efforts to address them were initiated and although we can, in hindsight, see how they could have been improved, there may have functionally been little that the university could have done differently given what it knew then. This reality does not undercut the importance of learning from these mistakes, but it does highlight our third recommendation which is that universities prioritize their need to both state and clearly demonstrate their unwavering commitment to advancing student welfare. Universities, including MSU, have long accepted that they have important responsibilities to their students, but many are challenged in the extent to which they continue to demonstrate that recognition in cases where student and university harm appear to be pitted against each other. It was clear in the responses collected here that, no matter how much students believed that MSU would prioritize their interests when it was able to, many felt that the university had demonstrated that it would prioritize its own interests over theirs when a conflict emerged. Some student responses expressed hurt at this realization, which aligns with the theory of institutional

betrayal. This theory emerged from trauma and sexual assault research but that been increasingly applied in other institutional contexts and posits that an institution's unsatisfactory response in the wake of some harm can cause distinct harms to a range of individual members and stakeholders of the institution (Smith & Freyd, 2014).

Addressing this is, in part, an issue of messaging. The proposed antidote to institutional betrayal is institutional courage, including improving education, increasing transparency, and engaging in self-study (Freyd, 2018). Many of the decisions that resulted in student harm likely also caused harm to university interests, but the shared nature of this harm was not clear, at least to some of the students surveyed here. This messaging implication should, however, be contextualized against the power differential between the university and students. Students are often much more vulnerable to harm than are universities both because of their lack of experience with the university itself and because of their stage in life. There is therefore a need for universities to accept more than what is perceived to be their share of the potential injury in the face of challenges like the pandemic. Protecting student vulnerability, both in word and deed, is a critical element of building and maintaining student trust.

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