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Understanding the Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Honors College Students: A Qualitative Content Analysis

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Abstract: While the coronavirus crisis altered all facets of life across the globe, its impact on American higher education posed immediate challenges to students and faculty alike. Disruptions in normal, in-person instruction affected all students' abilities to connect and create, but first-year students and their professors were particularly restricted in areas relating to classroom engagement, interpersonal exchange, and academic support. This pilot study presents first-year experiences of honors students during this time. Using reflective writing exercises, authors examine and assess a range of student responses ($n = 98$) to this extraordinary circumstance. Qualitative content analyses and coding reveal eight major themes: 1) shift in perspective resulting in personal growth, 2) changes in family dynamics and interpersonal connections, 3) focus on economic concerns, 4) focus on mental health and coping strategies, 5) changes in impressions of others and society, 6) understanding a "new normal," 7) lack of trust, and 8) increase in social isolation. Results indicate that COVID's multifaceted effect on honors students range in consequence from health to professional outlook. Authors suggest that understanding the nature of the first-year experience during this time can facilitate multi-level approaches and inclusive strategies for honors practitioners to help students effectively move forward on their educational path.

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic—teaching and learning; first-year experience (FYE); student growth; mental health of students; East Carolina University (NC)—Honors College

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INTRODUCTION

The global COVID-19 pandemic upended society and affected all facets of life from travel to dining to healthcare to education. An early target of this impact was the field of higher education. Many universities and colleges around the United States abruptly halted in-person learning in March 2020, with the education of over 14 million college students (Hess, 2020) pivoting to slow the spread of the virus. Faculty, staff, and students altered learning plans and modalities swiftly to accommodate online learning environments. These pivots included not only shifting the learning environment and medium of how classes were taught but also factors such as assessments and student engagement. The disruptions in normal instruction plans significantly affected students and their abilities to connect with one another and create meaningful interactions in and out of the classroom. Honors students enrolled in the East Carolina University Honors College experienced significant impacts on their classroom engagement, interpersonal exchanges, and personal and professional lives.

METHODS

Following a year-long service and leadership seminar, honors college freshmen were required to write reflections on their honors experience and the sudden pivot to online learning due to COVID-19. Specifically, students were asked to reflect on their perceptions, challenges, and lived experiences during the pandemic. These reflection pieces were written in April 2020.

Honors college students ($N = 98$) signed informed consent documents and allowed their reflection pieces to be used as the primary data source for the current study. All participants (25.1% male; 74.5% female) were first-year students with an average age of 18 ± 0.53 years. Students were 78.57% Caucasian, 8.16% Asian, 4.08% African American, 4.08% Latinx, and 5.10% other.

Data were de-identified by the faculty supervisor prior to being distributed to the other members of the research team, three honors college undergraduate students. The faculty supervisor trained these students in the coding process to identify all major themes and findings (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The research team was instructed to read through all reflection pieces individually to familiarize themselves with the data and then generate initial codes to find themes. As a group, the research team reviewed, defined, and named themes. Coders discussed discrepancies among themselves. Once a consensus was reached, the final list of themes was generated, and the themes

represented were found in at least 75% of the reflections analyzed. Finally, the research team, led by the faculty supervisor, produced a report. All methods and procedures were approved by the university's Institutional Review Board.

RESULTS

Analysis of the 98 reflection pieces revealed eight major themes:

1. a shift in perspective resulting in personal growth,
2. changes in family dynamics and interpersonal connections,
3. a focus on economic concerns,
4. a focus on mental health and coping strategies,
5. changes in impressions of others and society,
6. understanding a “new normal,”
7. development of a lack of trust, and
8. an increase in social isolation.

The overall observation was that COVID has affected and continues to affect students' daily lives, relationships, and views of the world around them. Within each theme students discussed perceptions, challenges, and lived experiences resulting from the pandemic.

Shift in Perspective Resulting in Personal Growth

The first theme to emerge from the students' reflections was a shift in perspective resulting in personal growth. Common areas of growth included self-discovery, learning lessons, shifts in perspective, awareness of individual and global effects on others, and the development of new skills or hobbies. A recurring point was that COVID provided students with the opportunity to re-evaluate and reflect on their lives and what changes they wanted to make to have a more fulfilling life both personally and professionally. One student stated, “I have come to find that there is more to life than schoolwork and completing assignments.” Another mentioned, “I chose to see the good in the world, and I am using this pandemic as a chance to build and strengthen relationships, pick up good habits, and become a better person.” These quotations, along with others, highlighted the character development that many of the students experienced during the pandemic. Other statements demonstrated that students developed a selfless way of thinking as they focused

on how COVID affected others rather than themselves. One student wrote about her mother: “I don’t think I realized how scared she was for her own health. Being home has allowed me to gain understanding for what she’s going through.” COVID forced life to slow down for many students, as a result leading them to grow and take note of the world around them.

Changes in Family Dynamics and Interpersonal Connections

The second theme involved changes in family dynamics and interpersonal connections, including loss of family income, a challenging living situation, or the stress of potentially infecting a family member with COVID. The living situations of many students changed dramatically in a short period of time, with many families not prepared for this change. One student wrote, “My cousin stays in my sister’s room and his kids stay in my room. The plan was that my sister and I wouldn’t be home that much. . . . I’m stuck in an overcrowded house with nowhere to go and no way to help my family by bringing in a few extra bucks.” With very little time to prepare, families had to accommodate other members of the family returning home on top of financial struggles already brewing. One student described her mother as “a single parent with three different jobs just to try and make ends meet.” With college students unexpectedly living at home, many parents were not prepared for the monetary setbacks.

Some students reported that the health of their immediate family members took priority over all else, including school. A student discussed worrying about her mother because of the autoimmune disorder medication she was taking, thus placing her in the at-risk population. She wrote, “A pandemic is terrifying when she is actively suppressing her immunity.” Other students discussed similar fears. One wrote, “Of the eight people who live in my house only three of us are likely to survive this pandemic. I am terrified.” Another wrote, “At first, I was not super concerned about the virus because it was not in my own community. However, now it is still getting more serious. It is still not a concern for my own life, because it is not affecting the lives of the people my age, however it is concerning about the affects it could have on my parents and other older family members.” Even if students were not afraid of the virus regarding their own health, the fear of loved ones getting sick was a constant fear.

The pandemic also resulted in positive changes in family dynamics for some students. Several students mentioned that their family became stronger due to the amount of time they spent with one another. A student reflected

that “Increased social interaction between families could help fix problems within a family and deepen relationships as family members can get to know one another better than before. For families who need to spend more quality time together, this quarantine provides that opportunity and stresses the importance of having strong family ties.” The forced quality time spent within families sometimes helped reignite weak relationships that resulted from physical and emotional distance. While not ignoring the negative aspects of the pandemic, some students saw changes in their families that would not have occurred had they remained on campus. One student stated, “In the middle of this quarantine and global pandemic, people are beginning to reconnect with their families, take charge of their health, and get outdoors more than ever.” Students were able to find positives in the pandemic through reconnections with family members despite the numerous negative changes in their lives during that time.

Focus on Economic Concerns

The third theme revolved around economic concerns that arose as a result of the pandemic. Students looked introspectively toward their own finances and outward not only toward their family’s finances but the effects on businesses and other people in society. A student stated, “As the coronavirus makes its way across the nation, its effect is being felt by all American workers. The lockdowns are not only stopping the spread of the disease but stopping the flow of money in our world markets as well, sending the economy into a downward spiral. . . . There is no way for the economy to recover during quarantine as it has already caused so many business closures and layoffs.” This statement expresses the student’s worry about negative economic effects on every level of the economy as well as how these detriments will take a long time to reverse. Students and their family members were losing their jobs, which was terrifying in such unprecedented times. Multiple students emphasized their fears about the collapsing economy and loss of work. One student reported, “The deficits the economy and job market are experiencing have personally impacted me. . . . I was recently laid off from my job.” Another student stated, “The economy is slowly falling apart. Millions of Americans nationwide are losing their jobs and the economy is headed towards a recession.” The economic detriments of this pandemic were terrifying to students, many of whom partially or completely financially support themselves. A student stated, “I tried getting a job since one of my mom’s jobs laid her off, but no one is hiring because of the pandemic, even though I need money because of the pandemic.”

Focus on Mental Health and Coping Strategies

The fourth theme was a renewed focus on mental health during the pandemic and strategies for coping with the many unknowns. Overwhelmingly, students reported that the pandemic had negative and often detrimental impacts on their mental health. One student stated, “There was no way to escape reality after that, and it left me wanting to do nothing more than sleep.” Another student affirmed, “It’s difficult for me to be alone with myself. . . . I just struggle to assimilate and lack self-control.” A student reported, “I am an anxious person, it’s no secret, so with all of the buzz and constant talk on Instagram, Twitter, Tiktok, and the news it makes it difficult to not let it consume you.” These statements demonstrate how students struggled to maintain a positive mindset. The pandemic exacerbated many factors the students were unable to control, leading to poor mental health. However, some students saw positive mental health benefits from the pandemic. One student reported, “I have more time to focus on things that make me happy and for the first time in a while, I’m able to enjoy nature more.” Another stated, “I have also found peace with myself.” Some students took a step back and happily accepted the pause COVID-19 put on society. Students saw the need to be positive during the hard times but could not deny that the pandemic was negatively affecting them internally. A student reported, “When I talk to my family and friends about COVID-19, I can be rational, calm, and even seem optimistic. However, when I am just holed up in my room for hours on end either doing my online work or attempting to be quiet while the rest of my family members are doing work in their own respective ‘work areas,’ I am significantly more upset.” For many students, the loneliness resulting from the pandemic was affecting them the most.

Changes in Impressions of Others and Society

The fifth theme revolved around changes in impressions of others and society in terms of understanding accountability and personal and societal responsibilities. The theme focused primarily on students’ perceptions of society’s reaction to the pandemic and the desire to “flatten the curve.” Students overwhelmingly responded that they felt the pandemic was handled poorly by individuals around them, especially those in their generation who engaged in irresponsible behaviors. One student noted, “People are so recklessly endangering the lives of others, simply because they don’t believe they’ll be impacted.” Another student stated, “It does annoy me, however, to

see young people go on spring break and party with large groups of people and continually break social distancing precautions.” Many college-aged students, believing that they were invincible to the virus, acted recklessly without keeping others in mind. Many of the students reported anger about this behavior and its negative effects on society as a whole. A student stressed, “Everyone should consider the impact of their actions, and do everything possible to stay safe and keep others safe.” The majority of students believed that all members of society need to take responsibility and realize it is their job to stop the spread of the virus: “Putting a fun time before your own health and the health of others around you is frankly selfish.” These students believed continuing to ignore guidelines set in place regarding gatherings and groups will exacerbate the pandemic and its negative impacts.

Understanding a “New Normal”

The next theme to emerge was students’ understanding of a new normal, focusing on students’ setbacks, pivots, adaptability, lifestyle adjustments, and cancelled plans. The most notable and discussed challenge and readjustment of the new normal was online education, with students forced to learn from home as campuses closed nationwide. One student stated, “The biggest transition is obviously online learning. . . . This has been fairly difficult for me . . . no face-to-face instruction is jarring and hard to adapt to suddenly.” Students also noted that they felt many instructors were unable to teach at the high-quality level they were accustomed to: “online learning will never compare to learning in the classroom,” and “online schooling is extremely confusing and doesn’t measure up to in-person learning.” One noted that their instructor “sent me a paper with all of the notes on it and it was too overwhelming to understand. . . . I was not taught through the lessons.”

The loss of a traditional face-to-face educational experience placed an unexpected emotional burden on many students, with one noting, “I’ve been really struggling with online classes and have been letting my grades slip just because of the emotional toll I feel right now.” Others discussed the anxiety of losing a traditional face-to-face learning experience: “I am very stressed out about the remainder of the semester.” Another student commented, “I have so much anxiety about classes being online now and all the changes in my life that it actually is a negative feedback loop, and so I don’t do my work. Then I freak out about not doing my work, and I can’t enjoy anything.”

Furthermore, students did not feel adequately prepared for the remainder of their college careers. One student discussed second-guessing if she will be

ready for challenging classes next year because of education being “stripped down to laptop cameras and online critiques,” and she wondered “if I’ll even be ready for my more challenging classes next year.” One student noted, “I am concerned about my ability to perform well in online classes, especially those in the science field.” Finally, one student reflected, “I’ve never done school any other way than face to face, and I was worried that I wouldn’t be successful, productive, or perfect.”

The lack of a predictable schedule caught many students off guard as the abrupt change in learning style happened halfway through the semester. One student found it challenging to motivate herself to complete work if she was not in a classroom, and being convinced things were going to go wrong, she continued to be demotivated from even trying. The immense amount of stress endured during this time was given by a student as the reason her “grades are slipping” and “I feel like I can’t keep up with all of the due dates.” Others also mentioned how COVID cancelled plans that may have been beneficial to their future. One student expressed regret at “having to come home to a house I was excited to leave, losing my job, and having the summer program I worked so hard to get into be cancelled.” Though students accepted the fact that there was a new normal, the vast majority of them were not happy or thriving in this situation.

Development of a Lack of Trust

The seventh theme focused on the distrust and lack of transparency regarding the government, media, and society when dealing with the pandemic. Many students felt the government failed to protect or accurately inform them during the pandemic and even used the pandemic for political gain and power. One student stated, “Politicians are trying to use the relief effort to push their own agenda and completely ignore what people need,” with another commenting, “Both parties have used this virus for political games and aren’t truly thinking about the best way to solve the problem.” Yet another noted, “The government failed to act to ensure that all U.S. residents and citizens are protected from getting kicked out of their houses as well as having their utilities shut off.”

This distrust of the government extended to distrust in the media. Students felt the media exploited the pandemic and played a role in increasing panic with one reporting, “the mass media is having a meltdown and acting like this virus will wipe us all out,” while another stated, “The news outlets are using the coronavirus to scare the general public into thinking only about the virus and

nothing else.” One student commented, “The disease has struck up panic across media outlets, enticing ethnic and racial disputes, causing resource shortages, and igniting arguments on how best to maintain our sense of normal.” Another student stated, “I can’t make an opinion on whether the media is covering this in an appropriate manner or if they’re making the situation worse.”

Finally, the development of a lack of trust was seen in regard to society as students felt individuals within communities did not do their part to follow public health guidelines, thus further worsening the pandemic and its effects. One student expressed frustration and commented, “The vast majority of the younger population have refused to stop their everyday lives and practice social distancing.” One of the students noted, “Citizens are not held accountable enough for the well-being of everyone,” while one commented, “It is disappointing to hear about people recklessly endangering the lives of others.” Notably, a student reflected, “I believe this pandemic has brought out some of the worst that our society can offer, and when it is all said and done, we need to truly look within ourselves and see what it is we need to change as a nation.”

Increase in Social Isolation

The final theme was social isolation: the negative impact COVID had on communication along with the challenges of sustaining distanced relationships, especially with friends. One student mentioned, “Having social interactions with friends was something I did not think much of until now.” Another student noted, “The impact of the virus goes far beyond the physical aspect. It is easy to feel loneliness and isolation.” Students were forced to transition from living in residence halls with hundreds of peers to being sent back to their hometowns and away from their friends and support networks. A student stated, “Being forced to move out of my dorm and say goodbye to all the friends and memories I have made has been heartbreaking.” Students were forced to transition faster and earlier than they expected, which increased feelings of isolation and loneliness once back at home; one commented, “Most of my time is spent in my room alone. It’s hard not to feel isolated.” College revolves around social interaction, so students were not ready to adapt to that aspect of their lives being stripped away.

DISCUSSION

The most novel finding of this qualitative study was the varied and numerous impacts the pandemic had on honors students. Much of the literature surrounding the effects of the pandemic on students has focused on

their mental health and disruptions to learning (Aucejo et al., 2020; Son et al., 2020) while we discovered the all-inclusive impacts of the pandemic on first-year honors students, which ranged from health concerns to consequences for professional futures. Understanding the numerous impacts that COVID had on honors college students, using their words, may allow honors faculty and staff to identify diverse strategies to help their students cope with the pandemic's ramifications.

Our study shows that simply focusing on one effect of the pandemic on honors students is not sufficient. COVID has disrupted every aspect of these students' lives; thus, honors faculty and staff must do their part to promote normalcy and support students through these inconsistent times. Students are not only struggling with school and social isolation, but they are also worried about and losing trust in the world around them. The job of leaders such as the staff and faculty in an honors college is to serve as a guidepost for these students and be a reminder that the situation will return to a "new normal." One such strategy is using the servant leadership model, where academic leaders value interests of others above their own while empowering, involving, and collaborating with their students (Fernandez & Shaw, 2020). Honors administrators should use this model going forward when developing and implementing programs for their students.

Another interesting finding was that concerns about academics appeared explicitly only in the sixth theme, Understanding a "New Normal." One possible explanation is that the sudden worldwide shift affected many immediate facets of students' lives, not simply their college careers. Students reported family illnesses, job losses, and personal growth as more instant and acute impacts of the COVID pandemic, perhaps because this data was collected merely weeks after the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a pandemic and President Trump declared it a national emergency ("Timeline," 2021). Had this data been collected months into the pandemic when students had more experience learning virtually or in atypical ways, we might have seen academics appear more explicitly in other themes.

Another notable finding was that while some students were struggling with negative thoughts and feelings, others were taking this time to reflect on their lives and slow down, indicating the value of promoting positive coping mechanisms. The pandemic provided a much-needed pause in the fast-paced society that these students were experiencing, and this new world could promote better mental health and a brighter outlook on the multiple aspects of the pandemic.

Overall, our study suggests that focusing simply on students' mental health during the pandemic shows only a part of the big picture whereas we need to be assisting students through all their struggles while also introducing and promoting positive coping mechanisms. This perspective echoes the holistic approach to educating honors students advocated by Samuel Schuman (2013), who provided the framework for an integrative approach that focuses on ethics, values, and morals. These concepts provide a foundation for honors students to think about themselves and the world around them beyond academics. A holistic approach that supports students during this pandemic can ensure that they continue to be successful throughout their college careers regardless of how the world changes, an approach that aligns with recommendations derived from other studies (Kecojevic et al., 2020; Son et al., 2020).

Limitations and Future Research

Although this pilot study examining how the COVID-19 pandemic affected first-year honors students has significant strengths, such as a comprehensive look at the student experience during the pandemic rather than a focus on student experiences as distinct occurrences, some areas of limitation provide opportunities for future research. Notably, since reflections came from students who were motivated to share their perspectives about the COVID pandemic, students with negative perceptions of the course may not have opted to enroll in the study. Also, the generalizability is limited due to the disproportionate number of Caucasian and female students; future studies should examine a larger, more diverse population. Similarly, more varied data collection methods should be used to obtain more robust findings about students' lived experiences and perspectives; using focus groups and interviews might promote a more holistic and personal understanding of what students are experiencing during the pandemic. Additional studies could also examine promising and innovative strategies that honors colleges can use to manage potential pitfalls and pivots in the curriculum and the program after the pandemic.

Finally, because this data was collected so soon after the onset of the pandemic, long-term impacts on honors students are unknown and may influence how honors colleges provide student accommodations, develop programming and policies, and create budgets, among other issues. Future studies should focus on exploring and identifying how the COVID pandemic has continued to affect not only honors students but the infrastructure of honors colleges as well.

Practical Implications

Along with the implications of our study for honors college faculty and staff, students and their families may also apply these findings in beneficial ways. For instance, the finding that the pandemic affects students in multiple aspects of their lives, not just mental health, provides students and their families with a more thorough understanding of the effects they are experiencing due to this once-in-a-lifetime public health crisis. The findings also demonstrate to students that they are not alone in their experiences, thus normalizing their feelings while simultaneously demonstrating the unexpected positive impacts of COVID-19. Results provide students, their families, and honors colleges with an understanding of what supports are needed for the students to be physically, emotionally, and mentally successful during these times. For example, faculty and staff can offer safe opportunities for students to connect in small groups to help with the losses of interpersonal connections and the increase in social isolation. They can also help students find alternative professional experiences to reduce their fears about falling behind and about managing their “new normal.” To build positive coping mechanisms, workshops and interactive guest lectures can help students maintain their mental health and work on their coping skills throughout their college years and beyond. Accepting and appreciating the slowdown that resulted from the pandemic can make it easier to deal with change in mentally healthy ways.

CONCLUSION

This pilot study qualitatively examines the holistic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on first-year honors college students. The most notable finding is that this pandemic has dramatically affected every aspect of students’ lives and that many are struggling to cope with these changes, which have personal and professional ramifications. Honors administrators and faculty need to understand these impacts from a holistic perspective so that they can provide comprehensive, overarching support to their students and foster a sense of wellbeing and community. Looking at students as a whole, rather than breaking their emotions and feelings into different parts, is key to supporting them.

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