

COVID-19 Effects on Incoming College Students: How Can We Support Them?

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Abstract: COVID-19 developed challenges worldwide. As educators did their best to develop online courses overnight, high school students faced many restrictions during the pandemic. High school students lost life experiences, educational experiences, and social experiences. As they enter college, these students struggle with trauma and inexperience. Therefore, as professors of future educators, we must support these students who are preparing to teach the future generation. While there are many methods of supporting these students this article will discuss how to use balance, self-care, and expectations to guide these students to become excellent educators.

Introduction

The strain of COVID-19 has affected all of us over the course of the pandemic. Parents have learned to become teachers, teachers have become more technologically proficient, and technology has rapidly improved. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has affected children and their learning progression in education. Students are experiencing significant learning loss due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Huck & Zhang, 2021). However, it is necessary to consider additional losses children faced because of COVID-19, specifically high school students preparing to go to college.

Statement of the Problem

According to Hoofman & Secord (2021), high school students have been impacted negatively by COVID-19 in the following ways: lower academic achievement, decreased independence, loss of important life events, increased depression, and excessive screen time. Additional struggles include decreased standards from high school teachers as they navigated teaching during COVID-19, trauma from living through COVID-19, and challenges with time management (Huck & Zhang, 2021). With all of these negative impacts, it is unsurprising to discover these students are struggling with college transition.

As these students have entered college, they lack the skills necessary to function in college. For example, lower academic achievement has not prepared students for the elevated standard of college (Akdogan & Ergin, 2022). Boredom from lack of social interaction in the classroom paired with boring virtual lessons caused a decrease in learning during COVID-19 (Akdogan & Ergin, 2022). Difficulty getting questions answered by teachers has also caused decreased learning and the likelihood that students will ask for help (Akdogan & Ergin, 2022). Due to issues getting information to students during COVID-19 based on various factors, teachers often needed to

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implement flexible due dates (Agayon et al., 2022). Flexibility in turning in assignments has students needing clarification about firm deadlines on a college syllabus.

Throughout the pandemic, screen time was excessive due to online schooling and a lack of leisure activities (Toombs et al., 2022). Increased screen time has made students distracted by social media and streaming services, causing challenges with time management and deadlines. However, because deadlines may not have been enforced in high school due to COVID-19, as these students enter college, they need clarification as to why deadlines are not more flexible.

The loss of significant life events and decreased independence have also created stress and anger for students as they transition to college (Akdogan & Ergin, 2022). Many of these students missed graduation, prom, college visits, senior skip day, and other rite of passage events. Missing these critical life events has decreased their independence (Akdogan & Ergin, 2022). Often there is planning supported by parents for many of these events, but a good portion may fall on the student. Therefore, they may need to gain the skills necessary to be as independent as is required on a college campus.

Excessive screen time has also become a challenge for these students, including Zoom fatigue (George et al., 2022). Because courses were virtual during COVID-19, students became passive learners (Agayon et al., 2022). Often, during Zoom sessions, students can partially pay attention while attending to emails, text messages, and assignments (George et al., 2022). With classes being back in person, students need help with time management and struggle with how to interact in a classroom setting. Students enter classes late, with earbuds, attending to text messages on their devices, or talking during instruction. These new challenges college professors face are likely due to COVID-19 restrictions and the ability to adapt to being alone and multi-tasking (Akdogan & Ergin, 2022).

Lastly, and possibly most importantly, students are entering college with depression, trauma, and mental health concerns from COVID-19 (Hoofman & Secord, 2021). Due to the lack of social interaction, many students come to college struggling to develop relationships (Hoofman & Secord, 2021). They are much more likely to isolate than engage with one another (Akdogan & Ergin, 2022). Isolation causes increases in depression and loneliness as people are wired for connection (Akdogan & Ergin, 2022). In turn, this affects mental health, causing students to miss more classes and assignments, creating difficulty passing courses.

Supporting Struggling Students

According to the World Health Organization (2023), "mental health is a state of well-being that enables people to cope with the stresses of life, realize their abilities, learn well and work well, and contribute to their community." Given the COVID-19 pandemic, incoming college freshmen are entering college with trauma and decreased mental health (Akdogan & Ergin, 2022). Therefore, colleges must address these issues to support these students as colleges guide them toward their careers. There are three main areas in which professors can support students as they embark on their journey: expectations, balance, and self-care. In conjunction with one another, these three areas can help increase student mental health and awareness of how to become successful in their college career and beyond.

Expectations

Clear expectations are something that professors need to ensure they provide to students when we begin our courses. Although policies are listed in the syllabi, often, students need to thoroughly read the syllabi and therefore understand the expectations of the course. In addition, it can be helpful to discuss expectations during class sessions so that students clearly understand and can ask questions regarding any policies they do not understand. Clarifying expectations for the

entire class is beneficial. However, follow-up may be necessary with individual students as issues arise throughout the course.

Important issues to discuss when going over course policies include the late work policy, failure for absence policy, and the tardy policy. In my own experience, the late work policy has been a challenge. My syllabus states that late work is prohibited unless there is an emergency, and the professor approves a late submission. While we reviewed this policy at the start of the semester, several students needed to realize the policy applied to them or what constituted an emergency. Unfortunately, this caused several students to earn zeros on assignments. Therefore, reviewing this type of policy is critical to ensure student success.

Another policy that often needs special attention is the failure for absences policy. At my university, students fail lower-level courses if they miss a certain amount of classes. Again, while these policies are reviewed at the start of the semester, there were some challenges. For example, students who are absent for medical reasons often provide medical documentation. When this occurs, a discussion ensues that the policy does not allow for excused absences. Other students need to understand that the policy applies to them or that the policy applies to tardies as well. Currently, at my university, three tardies are equivalent to an absence. Often students are late to class, and while they might never be absent, they need clarification on how they earn absences. Therefore, clarity of policies and how they apply is imperative.

In addition to policies, it is essential to cover class expectations. According to Harlacher (2015), "expectations are general behavioral guidelines that apply to all rules and routines in the classroom" (p. 15). As many of these students are out of practice with classroom routines and procedures, covering these expectations at the start of the semester is critical. Some issues that have become prominent in recent years are earbuds, technology, and dress code. In our current society, it is common to see individuals walking down the street with earbuds. However, we are now seeing students wear them during class. In this case, the challenge for the professor is to determine whether or not students are playing something on the earbuds during class. If they are, while it is not necessarily distracting to others in the class, when attention is diverted, it causes a loss of learning for the student. Because of this challenge, I have implemented a no-headphone policy during class periods.

Technology has been another challenge during class. Students used to take notes on paper, but often they take notes on devices or follow along with lecture slides on a device. In other scenarios like mine, throughout the class, devices are used. However, students often need help with the device as they check email, answer text messages, work on other assignments, or search the web during class. Multi-tasking on devices has caused me to implement another policy within my class where students must put their devices away unless they are using them to take notes actively or if devices are necessary to complete work during the class period.

Lastly, dress code has become a challenge in classrooms. While this may not affect every major, as education majors, we try to impress appropriate dress on our students early on in their program and throughout their program. Current trends promote revealing midriffs, short skirts, and low-cut shirts. Due to the nature of teaching, it has become a requirement to talk to students about dress and dressing appropriately inside and outside the classroom. These discussions may be the whole group as students prepare to go out to practicum sites or individually based on concerns about dress during class. Either way, it has become critical to clearly outline policies and how policies tie together to support this generation of students in the college classroom.

Balance & Organization

According to Mental Health America (2023), organization is another area current students struggle with in college. Due to COVID-19 and the lack of social events, these students were not required to balance school, events, work, and other responsibilities. Therefore, they need help with

balance and organization as they enter college. Students are becoming overwhelmed with the possibilities of college and making decisions that negatively impact their health and academic success.

Lesh (2020) refers to several components to ensure a balance of health and wellness. Some of these include eating balanced meals, drinking water, exercising, taking time for reflection, and allowing time for work and play. For physical health, eating balanced meals and drinking plenty of water is essential (Fisher, 2011). According to Hoofman & Secord (2021), students' consumption of sweets and processed foods increased during the pandemic. As students enter college, we often see them pile their plates with greasy foods in the cafeteria and choose coffee or energy drinks over water. These two decisions negatively impact their health and sleep, causing increased stress and anxiety.

Exercise is something that also tends to be overlooked by college students. Getting regular exercise reduces stress and anxiety. However, because of the stress college students undertake when starting school, they often rely on coffee, as mentioned above, rather than balance, forgetting the importance of taking care of their bodies. Neglect of the body can cause long-term effects such as chronic stress, anxiety, or medical issues later on in life (Richards & Smith, 2015).

According to John Hopkins University (2023), students wear various hats, including school, work, friendships, and romantic relationships, which can increase stress and cause anxiety. Taking time for reflection and balancing work and play is another challenge individuals encounter (National Education Association, 2019). Often, students need help shifting from perfection on assignments to good enough in their college courses (John Hopkins, 2023). Others allow too much time for extracurricular activities allowing their academics to decline. Therefore, it is essential to teach students how to reflect and determine how they should spend time getting everything done while still maintaining time for themselves.

This ties into Bhavsar's (2020) research on balance which discusses getting enough sleep and being cautious not to overextend oneself. With the many options available during college for clubs, sports, and campus life, students can become over-involved in their university and need to pay more attention to their studies (Mental Health America, 2023). In addition, when students are overextended, they are more likely to forego sleep which is necessary for them to function to the best of their ability (Mental Health America, 2023).

Self-Care

Many self-care techniques also tie into balance but from a slightly different perspective. According to the National Institute of Mental Health (2023), self-care includes exercise, healthy meals, appropriate water intake, restorative activities, developing priorities, gratitude, and spending time with others. As mentioned previously, college students need help with balance. Therefore, self-care is often neglected but critical to learn and understand, especially when becoming an educator (National Education Association, 2019).

Several of the items listed above were already discussed in the balance section of this paper, but restorative activities still need to be discussed. With the increased stress and anxiety college students face, restorative activities are essential to self-care. Restorative activities include breathwork, yoga, stretching, or meditation (Beyer, 2020). While students may have some concept of these activities, it is vital to help them understand the benefits of these activities on their mental and physical health in the long term.

Developing a gratitude practice is also essential. According to Howels (2014), practicing gratitude can help us interpret life from a positive vantage point allowing individuals to be more open in situations they may encounter. In addition, research shows that teachers who practice gratitude are more likely to develop stronger relationships with their students in the classroom (Howels, 2014). As students get overwhelmed with assignments, activities, and personal agendas,

they often struggle with a negative mindset. Creating a practice of gratitude can support students in looking at the positive aspects of a situation and support them from developing depression, anxiety, and stress.

Practical Tips

With all these overwhelming challenges facing students as they enter college, we, as the universities, have a responsibility to help them. However, it can be challenging to determine how to support students as there is so much content to cover in a short period. Therefore, we must address this issue with our upcoming teachers so they do not burn out due to stress and anxiety.

According to van der Kolk (2014), “social support is the most powerful protection against becoming overwhelmed by stress and trauma” (p. 81). One method of providing social support to students quickly is having a joys and concerns segment at the start of class. Providing time to share joys and concerns is something I have done in class for about five years, and initially, students find it awkward. I've discovered that I have to share first, but after about two weeks, students begin sharing and opening up with one another. Sharing creates a sense of community where students get to know and care about one another. I have also seen this develop friendships as students support one another through shared challenges. However, follow-up is critical to helping students feel seen and heard (van der Kolk, 2014). I often find myself checking in with students regarding something they have shared. Seeing them smile and realize that someone listened and cared enough to remember is amazing.

Another option is to have wellness invitations. I've begun this in the past year and have seen success with students willing to invest in the invitations. Each class period, I invite students to a different wellness concept. One day the invitation may be to watch clouds before the next class or drink 60 ounces of water in a day. Then, during the next class period, we talk to anyone who took the invitation and discussed how it made them feel. While not every invitation is for everyone, it opens the idea of self-care and the opportunities to take care of yourself in many ways.

Meditation is another excellent option. It can be as quick as five minutes, where you either lead students through a guided meditation or find one on YouTube. Not only does this allow students to quiet their minds, but it allows them to focus more on the content by reducing distractions through meditation (Columbia School of Professional Studies, 2021). If five minutes seems too long, consider using a quick breathing exercise to calm and focus everyone. Two quick and easy breathing exercises are box breathing and triangle breaths. Professors can find these with a quick Internet search, and anyone can perform them.

Studies with babies have shown that playful tones allow them to open up and relax, which is similar as we age (van der Kolk, 2014). Movement breaks are another idea to support our teachers. While we teach our teachers to use movement breaks with our K-12 students, why not use them with our college students? When I use these in the classroom, I often use them under the guise that they will need to be willing to be the silliest person in the room. Again, I have to be the one that breaks the ice to be the silliest, but once students see it is acceptable to be silly, they often find great joy in the few minutes of movement in the middle of class.

As mentioned previously, device policies are a great option to help students stay focused and on task during class. Some may even consider flexible due dates. While this may only work for some classes providing students some flexibility on due dates is something they might find truly exceptional. Lastly, allow for work sessions during class. Many of these students need help with getting together outside of class if there is a group project. Allowing time during class to work releases a considerable burden for many students. Even if it is a significant individual assignment, working in class allows the professor to answer questions and students to help one another, increasing those relationships and interpersonal skills that were diminished during COVID-19 (Akdogan & Erin, 2022).

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic presented numerous challenges and continues to present difficulties as we resume our daily activities. Unfortunately, students in high school during the pandemic have trauma, reduced learning, and decreased social skills. As we prepare future teachers to teach the next generation, we must examine the whole student. Therefore, while our curriculum is already demanding, we need to make time to support these students as they grow into competent educators preparing to develop the future generations.

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