COVID-19 on College Campuses

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**Abstract**

The purpose of this study was to evaluate how Longwood students feel about changes in their environment and how it is affecting their college experience. The sample used for this survey is from Longwood University students, this survey was not sent out to the entire student population but instead to certain populations. The survey was sent out as a google survey though the internet and it had 31 questions. This was a mixed method study using quantitative and qualitative data. The quantitative data that was used for this survey was close ended questions. And the data from this survey came from Longwood students and there were 423 observations made from this survey. The close-ended survey questions were analyzed by using descriptive statistics and figures. The qualitative data used in this survey was open-ended questions. Open-ended techniques were used to analyze the themes in the written responses. The hypothesis for this research is if Longwood restricts social interaction and Longwood traditions to take place for the student body, then I expect students to have a negative attitude about the changes to their college experience. Statistically this research will show that students will either have a negative, positive, or neutral attitude towards Longwood. Three themes in this paper where, working in a home environment versus a school environment; mental health; and campus events. In the data it showed that the highest mean was 6.25 and the lowest was 3.98 in students’ satisfaction for this semester. This data has some practical implications such as that students may have not been 100% truthful or that the participants could have taken the survey more than once. These implications can be eliminated after this research has been replicated multiple times.

*Keywords:* Mixed Method, Survey, Quantitative and Qualitative Data

**Introduction**

This research focused on the effects of COVID-19 on college campuses, primarily focusing on the question of how do Longwood students feel about changes in their environment and how it is affecting their college experience? A researcher, Ruth Chao (2012) hypothesized that social support moderates the relationship between students' perceived stress and well‐being. This means that if students lack the ability to socialize in class or on a campus their stress levels will rise. If there is a lack of social interaction and stress levels rise a student’s performance in the classroom will be affected. Researchers Hurst, Wallace, and Nixon (2013) conducted a study to identify social interaction in classrooms and if it would benefit the students. They found that 57% of the students said that social interaction in the classroom helps improve comprehension and their ability to learn. Several studies have found that participating in activities outside of class increases students’ sense of belonging to a college community (Fish, et al., 2015). If the student lacks the ability to connect in a classroom or socially on campus not only is their stress affected but also their attitude about the situation and their willingness to comply with any rules put in place. There are deficiencies in these studies, they can’t predict what every student is going to go through but they can for their majority out of their population. An issue that can be present is that not every person handle stress the same way, it may not affect them seriously or it might. Not all students learn the same either, some may adapt better to being online or don’t need that face-to-face interaction with professors.

A survey was sent out to Longwood University college students by their peers and professors. The participants could have also been motivated to take this survey just because they wanted their voice to be heard on this situation. This study was conducted so that the researchers could gather data on Longwood University’s student body’s attitude toward the changes that COVID-19 brought to their college experience.

**Literature Review**

In 2019 the virus SARS-CoV-2 that originated in China, sparked a global pandemic across the world that society now knows as COVID-19. By March 11th, 2020 the World Health Organization declared the COVID-19 outbreak a pandemic with an estimated 7,000 deaths in 150 countries (Lipsitch, et al., 2020). As of March 16, a total of 4,226 COVID-19 cases in the United States had been reported to the CDC, in the following months and under the national state of emergency business and schools were shut down for the safety of all citizens (Lipsitch, et al., 2020).

Universities' responses to change differed across America and college students' experience on campus changed as well. Students face and will continue to face a loss of in person academic time along with a drastic change to their environment and ability to have social interaction. Students' attitudes will be affected by the changes happening to their environment caused by COVID-19. College students are being affected by COVID-19, their environment and the way their college experience is being affected will change their attitude on the situation. The way students are able to learn is being changed along with the basic action of social interaction. Social interaction in any situation on a college campus is key to having a positive experience, however because of COVID-19 students' ability to interact have become limited.

**Student Education**

COVID-19 affected higher educational institutions globally, and by April 06, 2020 institutions were put into the position to find other means to continue the school year. Cathay Toquero (2020) explained that there has been an estimated 1, 576, 021, 818 affected learners out of 91.3% total enrolled learners in 188 countries in all levels of learning being affected by COVID-19. Toquero (2020) argues that for institutions to have the most success in transitioning and in student learning they must have equal and free resources. These free resources should include online learning workshops for students and teachers, more emphasis on hygiene practices around campus, and free mental and medical health assistance to have the best outcome. Toquero outlined ways that universities could do better in the future when faced with the dilemma of having to go online while Hurst, Wallace, and Nixon (2013) showed the importance and the impact that social interaction on learning.

Hurst, Wallace, and Nixon (2013) conducted a study to identify social interaction in classrooms and if it would benefit the students. 57% of the students said that social interaction in the classroom helps improves comprehension, makes the classroom a learning environment, helps students become comfortable and confident, prepares students for the real world, teaches students how to work together, makes students want to come to class, helps students develop social skills, helps students improve their communication skills, provides for more ownership of learning, prepares well rounded students (Hurst, Wallace, Nixon, 2013). The role of a student is to learn, but if the teacher is the one preparing all the lectures and just standing at the front of the room lecturing the whole time, it is the teacher who took the time to comprehend the lesson and not the student.

When social interaction is brought into the classroom it allows for students to discuss and comprehend the lecture. When COVID-19 forced schools to transition to online learning they lost the ability to fully interact with each other. With the loss of in person classes students have said that it is not as effective as learning with their peers (Hurst, Wallace, Nixon, 2013).

**Social Interaction**

For college students, life is full of stress. Life often throws students off track with unexpected breakups, difficult tasks beyond their capabilities, and other situations that suddenly force them to make decisions about their future. All of these events can stress them enormously. College stressors have wide varieties, but this year no one was expecting COVID-19. From academic work, lack of social interaction, to the uncertainty of the future stress is running high. Ruth Chao researched what the roles of social support/interaction has on student’s stress levels. Chao (2012) explains that it is inevitable to see how low social support may change the association between stress and well‐being among students. Chao (2012) hypothesized that social support moderates the relationship between students' perceived stress and well‐being. The greater social support students perceive, the more the support will buffer the effect of stress on well‐being. For students to succeed they not only need that social support but positive social support because low or negative social support will cause a negative effect between stress and well-being.

Chao’s experiment proved that with a lack of social interaction during the school year there is a direct link to students being unwell and having a high amount of stress (2012). Villar and Pilar (2010) discovered that for students to be successful they have to be in the positions of *socio‐affective*, *pragmatic* and *context‐contingent*. Socio-affective is the rationalization of the formation of social bonds as a result of the 'natural tendency' of humans to interact and create ties of closeness and affection (Villar and Pilar, 2010). It is important for individuals to have relationships and social bonds that are positive, as Chao states in her research it reduces stress and negative outcomes for well-being. Context-contingent is described as an individual whose relationships are closely connected to his/her own current personal circumstances and goals (Villar and Pilar, 2010). These connections can appear to be flexible, changing in line with the context and circumstances of the individual's life.

It is important for students on a college campus to have connections in their classes, organizations, and majors to build that support system to help reduce stress. If a student is able to achieve both of these positions, they will be able to achieve student success, however because of COVID-19 the ability for students to have connections in classes and/or on campus has been very limited. With these limitations’ students' attitudes are going to adjust on how they view their college experience.

**Attitude**

The wellbeing of an individual depends on the wellbeing of the community. In a study done by Fish, Gefen, Kacztow, Winograd, and Futtersak-Goldberg (2015) about college climate and college environment, it found that social interactions/expectations were ranked as high as academic/career expectations by students. The purpose of this study was to develop a scale to measure college campus environmental characteristics that student’s value. Students value or connect their education and future careers based on their social connections they have created. The extent to which students take on social and/or leadership positions on campus was deemed an important factor since it has been found to be related to student success (Fish, et al.,2015). However, leadership, or the value placed on opportunities to lead, provides students with opportunities to lead social events, or host events that would benefit their academic career. Participation in social and extracurricular activities has been found to positively impact student outcomes such as engagement and persistence and development of career-related skills. Several studies have found that participating in activities outside of class increases students’ sense of belonging to a college community (Fish, et al., 2015). Because of COVID-19 college students have not been able to fully participate in activities outside of academics.

This study explains that students believe that to have a good college experience you have to hold academics and social life to a high standard. However, because of the pandemic students have had limited interactions with anyone other than those they live with because of government protocol on how to socially distance. College campuses look different because of COVID-19, so students' attitudes and willingness to accept change to their environment is also going to look different.

In summary, college students need social interaction to help them succeed in their college careers (Hurst, Wallace, Nixon, 2013). Not only does social interaction help students succeed in the classroom but it helps them manage stress, creates social bonds and relationships that will help mold their future careers. Social interaction is an important aspect of the classroom but with COVID-19 students have had either no or minimal time in a classroom let alone actually interacting with their peers. With the loss of in person classes students have said that it is not as effective as learning with their peers (Hurst, Wallace, Nixon, 2013). However, because of COVID-19 students have been faced with little to nonsocial interaction/activities on their campuses and it is affecting them. College students' attitudes based on changes in their environment and how they will react will be further studied in a research question sent out to Longwood University’s student body.

**Data and Methods**

## **Sample**

The sample for this survey is from Longwood University students, this survey was not sent out to the entire student population but instead to certain populations. These populations were made up of multiple groups on campus. The survey was sent to students in the departments of criminal justice, Sociology, and Anthropology through the professors and classes. The survey was also sent to Longwood class Facebook pages. It was also sent out to Longwoods athletic programs including club sports as well as the social Greek life on campus. On the survey the questionnaire included class types, attitudes towards policies, health effects, and demographics. The survey was sent out as a google survey though the internet and it had 31 questions.

**Quantitative Data**

The quantitative data that was used in this survey was close ended questions. This was used because it allowed the possibility to compare the answers from different participants. Close ended questions allowed the questions to be more easily analyzed and it was used to draw generalized conclusions based on statistical analysis. The data from this survey came from Longwood University students and there were 423 observations made from this survey. The survey question that was used to operationalize the dependent variable was “On a scale from 0-10, how satisfied are you with your overall college experience this semester?” And the survey question that was used to operationalize the Independent variable was “Considering COVID-19 policies, how much do you think your involvement on campus has been affected?” These questions were used because not only were they well written, but they avoided being double barreled, they made the items clear, they were relevant, and they avoided any biases or negative items. The close-ended survey questions were analyzed by using descriptive statistics and figures.

**Qualitative Data**

The qualitative data used in this survey was open-ended questions. Open-ended techniques were used to analyze the themes in the written responses. The survey was sent out to the Criminal Justice, Anthropology, and Sociology departments at Longwood University to recruit participants. Participants were also recruited by other researchers through the Facebook class pages, Greek organizations and the Longwood athletics teams. The number of participants that answered the open-ended questions on this survey was 423. The open-ended questions were analyzed by if the participants answered the question, how they answered the question, and if they answered all of the open-ended questions.

**Findings**

**Quantitative Findings**

The dependent variable is self-ranked on the satisfaction of how their fall semester 2020 experiences has been as a student. This is asked on a 0 (Not at all) to 10 (an extreme amount) scale. The independent variable is self-ranked on the amount of involvement by the individual. This is asked on a 0 (Not at all) to 10 (an extreme amount) scale. The hypothesis is “If Longwood restricts social interaction and Longwood traditions to take place for the student body, then I expect students to have a negative attitude about the changes to their college experience.”

The mean score for self-rated satisfaction for this semester was 4.91. The standard

deviation was 2.66. This means that about 68% of students answered between 2.25 and 7.57. This

shows that answers on this variable varied greatly.

Table 1.

Level of satisfactions for this semester

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| level of satisfaction | 0 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 |
| Responses | 27 | 26 | 38 | 43 | 56 | 56 | 65 | 48 | 46 | 22 | 14 |

*Note*. N=432

Table 1 shows the number of responses to the survey question “On a scale from 0-10, how satisfied are you with your overall college experience this semester?” 27 students rated their level of satisfaction as a 0. 26 students rated their level of satisfaction as a 1. 38 students rated their satisfaction as a 2. 43 students rated their satisfaction as a 3. 56 students rated their satisfaction as a 4. 56 students rated their satisfaction as a 5. 65 students rated their satisfaction as a 6. 48 students rated their satisfaction as a 7. 46 students rated their satisfaction as an 8. 22 students rated their satisfaction as a 9. And 14 students rated their satisfaction as a 10.

Table 2.

*Mean self-ranked satisfaction and involvement for this semester*

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| *Level of satisfaction* | *Mean* |
| 0 | 6.25 |
| 1 | 4.5 |
| 2 | 5.5 |
| 3 | 5.5 |
| 4 | 4.13 |
| 5 | 6.19 |
| 6 | 5.55 |
| 7 | 5.71 |
| 8 | 5.47 |
| 9 | 4.83 |
| 10 | 3.94 |

Note. N=432

Table 2 shows the comparison between self-ranked satisfaction with the semester and self-ranked on the respondents' involvement this semester. The highest mean recorded that 6.25 respondents answered 0 out of 10 in their satisfaction levels for this semester. The lowest mean recorded that 3.98 respondents answered 10 out of 0 in their satisfaction levels for this semester.

The data collected in this study provided insight as to the students' attitudes about the COVID-19 changes that Longwood made to big social events and the college environment in general. More specifically, many participants disagreed with the decision to cancel or move social events online, but there were also many other participants that did agree. The independent and dependent variable helped to narrow the focus of the study, so that the results could represent the student’s attitudes and views.

**Qualitative Data**

The data collected within the questionnaire, suggested that students had concerns about the COVID-19 changes made to Longwood University. Within the data collected, three themes became apparent – working in a home environment versus a school environment; mental health; and campus events. The three themes related to the overall research question, “How do Longwood Students feel about changes in their environment and how it is affecting their college experience?”. When arriving back to campus, students knew that their college environment was going to be different from past semesters. Many students knew if their classes were going to be fully online, in-person or hybrid classes. Based on the type of class, students would be forming new opinions and attitudes toward Longwood. By having many online classes, students found it “harder” to focus on a home environment than in a school environment. When students faced being online or in a different school environment, they also had to handle new stressful situations and facing new lows in their mental health. Not only were students' attitudes altered due to COVID-19, the social events that would typically occur during a regular semester, were also changed or even cancelled. The events that typically occurred on campus have impacted students’ college environment, but because they were cancelled, many students feel that there is nothing to do besides classes.

**Attitudes toward Longwood**

The qualitative data showed students’ attitudes about Longwood. Much of the data regarding this theme was presented in the open-ended question, “What seems to be working well this semester?”. This survey question allowed students to write in their own answers and provide the researchers with as much or as little information as possible. This semester is very different from previous semesters allowing a fluctuation of attitudes and opinions on Longwood and the interactions with professors. Working in a home environment is very different from working in a school environment. Some students have had better reactions to Longwoods responses and classroom changes. For example:

What seems to be working well? I cannot think of a single thing. My schedule has a full course load on top of in-person hybrids, and professors are unempathetic about the ongoing home life conflicts and unwavering about assignment deadlines. (Respondent 044)

Similar responses held that “Honestly nothing. This school has been such a disappointment to me after they promised for 6 months everything. They just needed money and don't give a shit about students” (Respondent 318). Although many students found that they are having a negative attitude toward Longwood, other students responded positively to the survey question. Some positive responses held that “classes seem to be going well, communication between college and student is going well” (Respondent 266). Even though there are positive responses there is a trend of negative examples of negative student attitudes toward Longwood. For example:

Not much, I feel like students are being blamed too harshly, and it’s almost like we’re being threatened if we make even a small mistake. I personally don’t participate in anything and just stay home, but the emails are kind of scary from higher ups, but I feel like they’re just worried about money rather than our actual health. It’s like all students are being blamed for the few parties that most of us had NO involvement in and we are expected to just stop the pandemic at the snap of a finger. We can’t do that, there is bound to be exposure when you’re still having in person class and other in person things, which I don’t mind and enjoy, but we can’t be fully blamed for it. The higher ups need to take responsibility too and not make us feel terrible and threaten suspension. (Respondent 341)

Overall, many students found that they are not happy with Longwood (Respondent 341) and some are having positive attitudes toward Longwood this semester (Respondent 266), but other students reported that they are not happy with longwood at all (Respondent 318 and 044).

**Mental Health**

The qualitative data also showed the students’ views on their mental health during the semester. The survey question that the theme was most prominent in was, “Is there anything you would like us to know related to longwood and changes due to COVID-19?”. The effects on student mental health has had mixed views from students, and what has caused any declines this semester. Online classes have required students to stay at home or in their campus residential housing and participate in class through modules, Zoom lectures and discussion posts. As an example, for many students, “I don't feel connected to this school, I haven't made any friends, and I struggle with my mental health. I feel bored because it's as though nothing is happening, and I don't know anyone to do things with (Respondent 107). Not only are the students lacking in connection socially but academically which is affecting their mental health. Respondent 246 reported that, “It seems like the professors are giving us even more work than ever before since we are online. I have never been this busy before and I'm starting to burnout.”, and Respondent 251 said, “Due to the policies Longwood has put in place, It has had an extreme negative effect on my mental health and sense of belonging and increased my feeling of isolation and anxiety.” On another hand, some students have connected how Longwood decided to handle COVID-19. Some students blame Longwood and believe that the university neglected to take in student mental health as something important for getting through this semester. For example:

I believe that the changes that Longwood made due to the virus were not completely thought out with respect to the mental health of its students. There are people who thrive because they are social and when that is taken away, they suffer. The guest policy was poorly re-evaluated because they only waited two weeks into school to do that, which would of course not have been enough time. In regard to moving events. (Respondent 271)

The responses from the questionnaire provided insight into the views on online classes. Students’ responses were pretty even when it came to their mental health, most students have struggled with their mental health (Respondent 107 and 246) and other students blame Longwood for their decline in mental health (Respondent 251 and 271).

**Campus Events**

Campus events was a prominent theme in the qualitative data that was collected from the questionnaire. The open-ended question that contained the most responses about campus and social events, was “Is there anything you would like us to know related to Longwood and changes due to COVID-19?” Due to the changes made to the policies on campus, many social and campus events were cancelled. This created many different views from students, some students were angry about the cancelled events and then there were others that were grateful for the cancelled events because it would help prevent the spread of COVID-19. Students who disagreed with the decision of cancelling campus events, are angry at the university for robbing students of their favored events and want to have more campus events. For example:

I miss the traditions that I’ve come to look forward to over my 3 years at longwood. I am super sad that we didn’t get to have all of our fall celebrations/traditions. I also really love attending basketball games with my friends and that’s not going to happen this semester and for some of my friends this is their last semester, and all of these fun things were taken away. (Respondent 234)

Other students understood the university’s reasoning behind cancelling campus and social events. Many were disappointed but weighed the positives and the negatives on having campus events and came to the conclusion that not having social events would be safer and more beneficial to keeping the COVID-19 cases down. For example:

It sucks that things have to be canceled and changed, but that’s not Longwood’s fault. I’m sad that traditions and things are no longer happening, but I understand why Longwood has to cancel them. Also, while I don’t like certain rules like the guest policy, I know that Longwood has to and it’s important to have them to stop the spread of COVID. (Respondent 415)

Overall, the university’s decision to cancel campus events was viewed differently by students. Some students did not agree with the university’s decision and felt that they were “robbed”, whereas other students were understanding of the decision, saying that it was the “safe” decision.

**Conclusion**

The point of this research was to assess students' attitude towards Longwood and how they feel about the lack of social interaction and the changes toward their college career. This research found that many participants disagreed with the decision to cancel or move social events online, with a mean score for self-rated satisfaction for this semester was 4.91. The standard deviation was 2.66. This means that about 68% of students answered between 2.25 and 7.57. This shows that answers on this variable varied greatly. The data that compare between self-ranked satisfaction with the semester and self-ranked on the respondents' involvement this semester showed that the highest mean recorded that 6.25 respondents and the lowest was 3.98 that answered 0 out of 10 in their satisfaction levels for this semester. The data collected in this study provided insight as to the students' attitudes about the COVID-19 changes that Longwood made to big social events and the college environment in general. More specifically, many participants disagreed with the decision to cancel or move social events online, but there were also many other participants that did agree. This data ties into a bigger picture because not only can this affect Longwood University but other universities across the country in how they make decisions that will affect their student body. This data, if given to Longwood, can aid them in seeing how their choices affect the student body.

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