**COVID-19 Policies and Their Effects on Students at Longwood University**

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Abstract

The one thing that is affecting our societies around the globe is the COVID-19 pandemic. Unique environments offer different perspectives and require different needs during the pandemic. Many colleges around the country have reopened this fall, necessitating strict mitigation guidelines. As a result, there was little information or knowledge of how people would react to guidelines and restrictions set into place on the campus of Longwood University. This study was completed in order to learn more about the reactions and impressions of students during the pandemic and how they have been affected by their experiences. The purpose of this study was to gather information from the students at Longwood University in order to understand how they are handling the new guidelines, there opinions about them, and the effects the policies are having on their educational experience. The students were asked to share their opinions regarding the COVID-19 guest policy restrictions and rated themselves on a scale of 0 (extremely dissatisfied) to 10 (extremely satisfied), and some “yes”, “no”, and “maybe” questions. The survey was circulated by Sociology, Anthropology, and Criminology department professors to their students. Data was collected from questions taken from the survey related to the guest policy and student satisfaction this semester. Qualitative data was collected through open-ended questions while quantitative data was gathered by the use of closed-ended questions. The theme that emerged from this study was that the students felt some dissatisfaction during the Fall 2020 semester and the COVID-19 related guest policy appeared to have a strong correlation. Implications were drawn that the lack of social interaction was negatively affecting students’ mental health and students that did not respect the policy, found ways to break it.

**Introduction**

The problem presented that this study seeks to provide insight to is “How do students feel, and are being affected by, the changes Longwood University has made concerning the guest policy?” In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, Longwood University implemented a guest policy that does not allow anyone from living in other building complexes to enter another building. For example, if you have friends living in a dorm building different from your own, you are not able to visit them inside their building. The university indicated that the guest policy was implemented in order to attempt to slow the spread of the virus.

Even though this is a current global issue, some studies have been completed on COVID-19 as well as Influenza (the Flu), which is a similar virus class. Many of the other studies shared information about how students were becoming depressed because of the limited or no social interaction with friends and family (Andrews, et al., 2020). Students also had a lack of motivation and were often worried and stressed because of not being able to see friends (Elmer & Stadtfeld). The literature review did note a deficiency in collecting an statistically appropriate amount of data. When a survey was sent to students and their parents, the initial return rate was only 8%. The return rate increased to 14% when the survey was sent to the students and their parents. The next year, it was only sent to the students and the percentage dropped to 3% (Kelly & Townsend, 2013).

This study was completed during the beginning of the pandemic which could highlight the short-term effects; but the long-term effects are still unknown as we are still practicing these same guidelines. The study also did not consider that the many of the students surveyed were freshman who were already stressed more than normal because of the transition from living at home in high school to living on their own.

The study and its results should be reviewed by Longwood officials, universities and schools in the country and around the globe. It contains vital information relating to student experiences and how the guest policy is affecting their mental health. Students and their parents could also benefit from this information in order to be alert for warning signs of mental health issues or a lack of academic progress.

The purpose of this study was to gather information from the students at Longwood University in order to understand how they are handling the new guidelines, their opinions about them, and the effects the policies are having on their educational experience, all while sharing their responses with Longwood University and other universities around the world.

**Literature Review**

The one thing that is affecting our societies around the globe is the COVID-19 pandemic. Unique environments offer different perspectives and require different needs during the pandemic. Many colleges around the country have reopened this Fall, necessitating strict mitigation guidelines. As a student at Longwood University, I am seeking to research and understand how the social restrictions in the dorm environment are affecting Longwood students. My research hopes to answer this question: How do students feel about the changes Longwood University has made concerning the guest policy? In answering my research question, I hope to find evidence to support my hypothesis which is: Students are suffering negative effects, socially, emotionally, or academically because of the guidelines Longwood has in place. In preparation for my research, I have read academic articles about COVID-19 and the college student. There are no previous studies completed before in our generation on this topic, because a pandemic has never happened in our lifetime.

The first concept to be explored is the spread of the disease in the dormitory environment. Many of the articles discussed how the students were sent home because of the COVID-19 pandemic. The spread of respiratory viruses like COVID-19 and Influenza can stay alive on hard, non-porous surfaces for up to 24 hours, while only staying alive on porous surfaces, like carpet, for 8-12 hours. Of the students who received the survey, only 42% of them responded and found that if a dorm had more than 50% carpet, they were at a greatly reduced risk of contracting the virus (Tsuang, 2000). Students would also experience symptoms of COVID-19 and then continue with their day without heeding symptoms. Of the 35% of students that showed symptoms, only 5% of those actually got medically tested. This caused campuses to close rapidly as more and more dorms were becoming infected (Cohen & Dull, 2020). Some students were not sent home, but rather lived by themselves in a dorm. They had the choice to either go home with their families or stay isolated because they either desired to go home or they were experiencing symptoms. As a result of living alone, many students in this study experienced great amounts of stress as a result of being isolated, and repeating the same thing every day (Huskey, et al., 2020).

What about the way students’ peers look at the virus and whether they decide to follow the guidelines? COVID-19 poses a lower risk for young adults and students. However, by choosing to not follow the rules set in place, they could spread it to people who may become very ill and even die. Research conducted by Andrews, that actually measured behavioral changes in young people when peer norms were influenced, found most students would adhere to the guidelines to protect their loved ones from the virus (Andrews, et al., 2020). However, even with the severity of the virus, some people may still refuse to follow the guidelines. According to Stapleton, to whose research findings were based on the behavioral science of rule following, people are less likely to follow these guidelines if they are given by a person they either do not trust, or do not respect. But, during a pandemic, students will make exceptions to keep their social circles smaller in order to keep others safe (Stapleton, 2020).

Students will not take a covid test if they are not 100% sure that they might have the virus. When a survey was sent to students and their parents, the initial return rate was only 8%. The return rate increased to 14% when the survey was sent to the students and their parents. The next year, it was only sent to the students and the percentage dropped to 3% (Kelly & Townsend, 2013). Even on smaller campuses, the spread of COVID-19, without intervention, was able to spread to over half of the campus within 40-50 days. Places like the dining hall, dorms, and large social gatherings contributed to a large portion of the rapid spreading. But when the next test was done, they introduced masks as a restriction to judge effectiveness. The amount dropped from 2000 infected to 230 after 45 days (Bahl, 2020). The closing of campuses and dorms has a major effect on the students’ social networks and mental health. Students reported having .8 fewer interactions with partners and .46 fewer study partners. They had increased stress and anxiety due to decreased human interactions in the dorms (Elmer & Stadtfeld). Increasing our understanding on how dorm environments cause viruses to spread easily is important for the welfare of our students.

The second concept to be discussed is how the spread of diseases in dorms looks during the COVID-19 pandemic. The various articles discuss how COVID-19 is spread throughout the campus and dorms. Students were sent home because of the rapid spread on most college campuses. They were made to quarantine, and most colleges continued classes online. Being quarantined, many students were put out of a job as well (Cohen & Dull, 2020). Due to the severity, some students were forced to live by themselves as a precaution to either their family or their own safety (Huskey, et al., 2020). Many students also had to change their social habits. Their social groups had to become smaller and could only socialize with a certain few because of the rick of continuing the spread (Andrews, et al., 2020). Some school have returned to campus for the 2020 Fall semester. If students do not follow the guidelines put in place by their Universities, the campuses will be shut down again causing everyone to return home and online (Stapleton, 2020). If students and faculty did not participate in intervention, COVID-19 could spread at an exponential rate and infect over half of the campus in around 45 days. But, if students wear their masks, respect social distancing, adhere to dorm restrictions, and all the other rules, the infection rate should be much slower and the total amount should drop drastically (Bahl, 2020). The severity of COVID-19 has caused many students to be quarantined by themselves, leaving them unable able to see their friends and in some cases their family. Mental health problems have developed as a result of no face-to-face interaction for weeks or months at a time (Elmer & Stadtfeld). COVID-19 is a very contagious virus and colleges have never seen anything like this before. Campuses stay open and function normally during seasonal influenza, but COVID-19 is causing campuses to close and classes to move online.

A global pandemic has never been experienced by this generation and it presents a unique opportunity. The research is intended to find out how students are feeling and being affected by the guest policies and what they think about what Longwood’s efforts as a whole. This relevant information and our results could help inform future research as well as current areas of needed support.

**Data and Methods**

***Sample***

Students at Longwood University made up the population for this study. A nonprobability convenience was used. The link to the survey was sent to the faculty members associated with Sociology, Criminology, and Anthropology departments. The faculty members sent the survey to their students. A student put a link to the survey on the Facebook class website. Researchers who were apart of Greek organizations sent the survey to their Greek organization. It is also being sent through Longwood athletics and Club athletics. 434 of surveys were returned. The Questionnaire was set up in four sections; policies, mental health, demographic, and course types relating to Longwood students during COVID-19 using Google Forums to send the questionnaire.

***Quantitative Data***

We collected our quantitative data from closed-ended questions. For my dependent question I used the question: “The guest policy prohibits family and visitors from visiting campus housing. It also prohibits fellow students from visiting Longwood managed housing they do not live in (for example, if you live in Stubbs you cannot visit the Landings). Do you support the guest policy at Longwood University?” This question is coded with drop answers that include: Yes, No, Maybe, does not Apply, and other.

My independent question that correlates with my dependent question is: “On a scale from 0-10, how satisfied are you with your overall college experience this semester? This question was coded with a scale system ranking from 0-10 based on how the students felt about their experience. Quantitative data was gathered by descriptive statistics and figures.

***Qualitative Data***

I recruited the survey subjects by having the questionnaire sent out around campus though the help of other faculty members and students. In the survey, 875 out 1,302 open-ended questions were answered. To analyze this portion of the survey, we looked for frequencies among the answers. Open-ended questions were analyzed with an open coded approach looking for themes in written responses.

**Findings**

***Quantitative Findings***

The dependent variable is how students felt about the guest policy. Respondents answered “yes,” “no”, “maybe,” and “does not apply.” The independent variable is a self-evaluation of their satisfaction this semester at Longwood with scale rating from 0 (extremely dissatisfied) to 10 (extremely satisfied). My hypothesis for these questions is that the mean score of students that are happy this semester will be lower than the mean of if they agree with the guest policy.

My dependent variable shows that 182, or 42 percent, of the respondents stated that they were against the guest policy. 93 students, or 21 percent of the respondents, said that they were okay with the guest policy. 90 students, or 20 percent of the respondents, stated “maybe” which means that are okay with some aspects of the policy. Then 46 students, or 11 percent, said this question does not apply to them because they are not attending classes on campus at this time. Lastly, 22 students, or one percent did not answer this question.

Table 1

How students are feeling about the Guest Policy

Guest Policy Count Percent

Yes 93 21%

No 182 42%

Maybe 90 20%

Does Not Apply 46 11%

Note. N=432

My Independent variable shows that the mean score was 4.91. The standard deviation for the table is 2.65. This means that 68% of students answered between 2.26 and 7.57. When people said they were happy with their overall experience this semester, the trend is pointing downwards below a five. A little more than half of the respondents said that they were dissatisfied with how their semester is going. Since our scaling system starts with zero, the median number of the scale would be 5.5. More students were dissatisfied than satisfied.

The correlation of my dependent variable and my independent variable shows that the students that had answered no for if they agree with the guest policy, also put a lower score at 4.43 for if they are happy this semester at Longwood. Students who answered any of the other answers for if they agree with the guest policy, scored much higher than the ones who say they did not as well as the mean score for if they were happy this semester.

Table 2

Mean scores of how students are enjoying this semester

Answer Mean

Yes 5.23

No 4.43

Maybe 5.30

Does not apply 5.13

Note. =432

The findings state that if students stated that they did not agree with the guest policy at Longwood, they scored lower drastically on the scale of happiness at Longwood this semester. Students who said that they were ok with the guest policy scored much higher than the ones who did not by a margin of .8 of a point. Also, over 40% of all the participants stated that they were not happy with the guest policy while only around 21% said they were. Almost 50% more said that they were not in favor of this policy. My findings support my hypothesis based on the responses. The mean score of the students who said they were against the guest policy is much lower than the mean that of how students said this semester was going.

***Qualitative Findings***

The findings below relate to the themes of the feelings and effects of the guest policy and overall student satisfaction with their fall semester. The Longwood guest policy consists of not being able to see family members and friends that do not go to Longwood, friends that go to Longwood but do not live in the same building as you, and being discouraged from returning home on the weekends. The survey shows that most students are “not satisfied” with the guest policy. In addition, many students also spoke about the overall dissatisfaction and mental issues related to their fall semester.

***The Guest Policy***

Students have expressed their opinions on the guest policy Longwood has in place during the pandemic. Most students shared that they were not in favor of this guest policy, but even more for its removal or alteration. Many students felt when they paid for college it was for the ability to experience all aspects of college, academic and making lifelong friendships. Not all, but a majority expressed that the policy is negatively affecting both aspects of college. Students expressed that by not being allowed to have guests over, they cannot make new friends, they cannot go to clubs, events or parties, and some may even take the risk of school suspension by breaking the guest policy. “The guest policy is completely unnecessary, and if it was gone, my entire semester would have been much better” (Student 350).

For example,

I believe 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, which would of course was enough time. In regard to moving events online, they are just doing that to cover themselves, they do not care about how that will affect the students’ experience on campus. They do not care about robbing anyone of their last year here. They are concerned with one thing and one thing only, money. It is obvious that that is the case, when keeping the school open this long so refunds don’t have to be issued and waiting until the last minute to cancel events after students have purchased things like caps and gowns. The logic behind decisions is just non-existent, they make choices too quickly without taking the time to think out all the problems because they have the virus to blame and use as an excuse if it turns out to be a bad idea. They are just showing that the student body does not matter (Student 271).

The guest policy is really the only thing that bothers me. Since I live in the Landings, we are not allowed to have any guests (including family), while also being encouraged not to go home. I feel like Longwood should allow you to pick 2-3 people that are the only guests you can bring in during the pandemic. I am doing this; I would be able to see family members and close friends that I am being encouraged not to visit. I think it is unfair that I pay an insane amount of money to live here and I am not allowed to have any guests at all (Student 226).

The guest policy was created for Longwood to stay open and on campus. They didn’t consider on how not seeing family and friends would affect their mental health and motivation. The online classes are for Longwood to only cover themselves, not the students. They had made the decisions too fast and without enough thought in how the s students would react (Student 271). Some students’ semester are completely ruined by this policy and think that its unnecessary (Student 350). Some had given suggestions on how to fix the policy by allowing a select few family and friends to be guests (Student 226).

*Mental Health*

The mental health of the students at Longwood University is deteriorating; whether due lack of social interaction or a decreased motivation with online classes. Students have noted that because they do not have in-person classes, they have lost motivation to do classwork, self-care, and even try to socialize. This revolves around the idea that humans are social creatures, especially college kids, and they need to be social to do well in school and in life. Longwood has taken the social aspect of that away and students are becoming depressed, failing classes and experiencing decreased mental health, which Longwood has caused because of its policies. For example, “It’s making everyone depressed and have very bad mental health” (Student 49).

The visitor policy should not be in place. Other students should be able to visit. If I want to have my SO over that should be allowed, it’s really the parties that are spreading COVID, not people who only interact closely with one or two friends and the visiting rules are only really hurting those people and their mental health because the parties are going to happen anyways (Student 409).

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 (Student 107).

I think it is unfair that Longwood removed breaks from the semester. I understand wanting to keep people safe and by eliminating breaks they were discouraging people from going home, but people go home anyway. It seems unnecessary and has had a negative impact on my mental health and many other students that I have talked with (Student 199).

The mental health and satisfaction of the Longwood student appears to be a significate side effect of the Longwood policies. The students feel as if they are being overlooked. First year freshman and transfers cannot make new friends because they aren’t allowed too, and this causes depression, extreme boredom, and sadness (Student 107). Longwood had also gotten rid of its breaks that it had scheduled this semester. Students use these breaks as a way to get a mental break from the stresses that professors and Longwood in general give them (Student 199).

**Conclusion**

The relationship that students had between their happiness and the guest policy is pronounced. The study showed that almost half of the students who took the survey were not pleased with the policy and students also said that they were not pleased with how this semester went. This is valuable information indicating that Longwood University needs to consider the effects on its students before enacting policies. The students are what is keep the university alive and functioning. Without students, there is no funding and there is no Longwood. The guest policy needs to be rewritten in a way where students can still socialize but also kept safe during the pandemic. If this does not happen, Longwood could begin to lose its students, as well as future students looking to receive a college education because they want the whole college experience, not just the academic aspect.

According to the data, over 400 students took the survey and close to half of them stated that they were not happy with the guest policy. Longwood, when creating this policy, failed to ask the students and keep their opinions in mind. It appears Longwood made the effort to keep the campus open in order to maintain funding. They made strict policies that benefited the university seemly without considering the effects on its students. Students may not want to return to Longwood University because of this reason. A majority of those who answered that they were against the guest policy were also displeased with their semester at Longwood. If the policy was revised or taken away, students would have been more likely to have answered that they were having a good semester. The results of this study indicate that Longwood University needs to reevaluate adjustments to the guest policy in order to keep students safe in addition to providing an appropriate college experience.

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