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Abstract

As part of a larger study, the researchers sought to understand how higher education professionals (faculty and staff) and employed students navigated work during and since the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic. Results underscore the urgency for targeted interventions to alleviate identified challenges faced by students, faculty, and staff.

Introduction

The societal upheaval related to the COVID-19 pandemic was far-reaching and continues to impact individuals in both personal and professional ways. Attempts to mitigate the spread of COVID-19 included quarantining at home and temporarily closing schools, businesses, and other public spaces. As these disruptions of everyday life eased and restrictions were lifted, individuals and organizations alike are reflecting on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The pandemic continues to have differential effects across industry types. Higher education institutions (HEIs) are a particularly unique example as they serve as both an organization navigating employee needs as well as providing learning services and support to students who may also be working outside of classes.

This study aimed to investigate the unique impact of the pandemic on employee and working student experiences within a HEI using nine constructs of work-related experiences.

Method

Participants

Participants were recruited from a relatively large Southeastern university.

Students. $N = 379$, 69% identified as female, 69% identified as White, $M_{age} = 25$ ($SD = 9.64$)

Faculty. $N = 118$, 60% identified as female, 86% identified as White, $M_{age} = 50$ ($SD = 11.13$)

Staff. $N = 133$, 78% identified as female, 79% identified as White, $M_{age} = 43$ ($SD = 12.07$)

Procedure

A campus-wide recruitment email explained the study and included a hyperlink to the survey.

Measures

A total of 43 items across 9 established scales were used to assess various work-related experiences.

- *Work-Family Conflict:* 6 items from the Abbreviated Work-Family Conflict scale
- *Perceived Organizational Support:* 8-item short form of the Survey of Perceived Organizational Support (SPOS)
- *Perceived Supervisor Support:* 4 items adapted from the SPOS
- *Job Insecurity:* 3-item subscale of the Copenhagen Psychosocial Questionnaire (COPSOQ-II)
- *Work Pace & Hours:* 4 items from the Quantitative Job Demands subscale of the Danish Psychosocial Work Environment Questionnaire (DPQ)

Measures Continued

- *Job Autonomy:* 3-item subscale of the Job Diagnostic Survey (JDS)
- *Job Stress:* 9-item Job Stress Scale
- *Work Engagement:* 3-item ("ultra-short") Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES-3)
- *Global Job Satisfaction:* 3-item Job Satisfaction subscale of the Michigan Organizational Assessment Questionnaire (MAOQ-JSS)

Selected Results

- Employed students reported higher levels of work-family conflict ($p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .05$), greater job stress ($p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .03$), and lower levels of job autonomy ($p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .08$) than faculty and staff.
- Faculty and staff reported greater work engagement ($p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .06$) and global satisfaction ($p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .07$) than students.
- Staff reported greater levels of perceived supervisor support than students ($p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .02$).
- Faculty and students reported greater quantitative job demands than staff ($p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .02$).
- No differences were observed between samples for perceived organizational support ($p = .06$, $\eta^2 = .01$) or job insecurity ($p = .25$, $\eta^2 = .01$).

Discussion

Clear differences emerged in our samples' experiences related to work, some of which are consistent with inherent sample characteristics. Samples reported higher levels of WFC than FWC indicating that demands at work interfered with their ability to tackle the role demands at home at a higher rate than the also-reported interference occurring from home to work.

Students reported significantly higher WFC, FWC, and job stress as well as lower job autonomy, engagement, and job satisfaction. As emerging adults participating in tertiary education while experiencing a strong and unpredictable external stressor impacting all life domains, as was the case in this global pandemic, it is unsurprising that the student sample reported the strongest negative experiences across most of the work variables.

However, it is surprising that faculty and staff, the "front line" workers of the university, did not report more significant negative responses. This may be attributable to their increased life, job, and financial stability given their different stage of life. It is possible that faculties' higher experiences of work engagement and satisfaction served as a buffer or replenishing factor that protected against domain conflict, job stress, and turnover intentions despite reporting the highest level of quantitative job demands.

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References available upon request.