Responding to the Forced Pivot of Higher Education Planners and Practitioners Serving Students in the Aftermath of COVID-19

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This research provides valuable insights into the impact of COVID-19 on the education system, the need for adaptation, and the importance of various aspects such as experiential learning, emotional well being, mental health, workplace and online education. It offers recommendations and considerations for policymakers and practitioners in higher education to navigate the post-pandemic world successfully.

Keywords: students, professors, educators, COVID-19, impacts of COVID-19, mental health

INTRODUCTION

Research shows that the education system could benefit from supporting planners and practitioners fundamentally to improve overall success (Fernández-Cerero, 2021). COVID-19 has deeply affected how we live, and we have adapted accordingly. However, little has been done in the teaching industry to adapt to post-COVID life. Educators have had to deal with an increased workload that leads to burnout and stress, negatively impacting their mental health (Ramos, 2023). Educators have recently begun introducing new teaching practices, such as flip-classroom learning. They have also realized that a proper education may not be kept solely online. Blended classrooms have allowed educators to incorporate aspects of learning virtually and physically. Students can now learn through seemingly the only thing they knew during COVID— social media (Enterprise Social Networks). Students also benefit from Social and Emotional Learning (SEL), which allows them to build connections with their communities while learning to understand themselves (CRPE, 2021).

This research examines the impact of COVID-19 on institutional practices and policies that have influenced campus operations and student services. It aims to identify present-day issues facing higher education practitioners and considerations to be made as student needs a shift in a post-pandemic world. These changes include the impact of COVID-19 on student internships and experiential learning opportunities, which are paramount to their career readiness for the workplace (Domitrovich, et.al., 2016). This research aims to cover the impact of COVID-19 on student data and its connection to student success, experiential learning, including student internships and community engagement, and the emotional impact on student well-being.

Experiential Learning

Experiential Learning is one of the most vital components of today's educational experiences (Ferreira, 2020), including internships, part-time jobs, and volunteer positions. Most of these opportunities were shut down during COVID-19. This research will also explore some innovative ideas that institutions utilized in immediate educational planning change to ensure stakeholders continue to receive these services. The educational changes explored will include laptop programs (NPR.org, 2020), crucial to students suffering in the Digital Divide (Rauf, 2020). Institutions also implemented virtual internships and experiential learning programs for students to continue their education (Leif, Moore & Heath, 2021). Virtual labs proved to be extremely important for science courses to keep students moving forward with their studies will be explored (Puzziferro & McGee, 2021), including the importance of online tutoring services and continuous initiatives to close the Digital Divide beyond COVID-19 (Cantu, 2020).

The reimplementation of in-person operations during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has exposed gaps in retaining undergraduate students across college campuses (National Clearinghouse Research, 2021). While pivoting to meet the evolving needs of students and the institutions serving them is essential to understanding the challenges academia faces, concerns regarding the ability to properly decipher and apply the takeaways of big data are rising. As recent fall enrollment rates experienced multiple downward trends during the pandemic, the shift in students' perspectives and needs will reform how institutions refine and restructure student-centered policies and practices that strengthen success and engagement (Simpson Scarborough, 2020).

Institutions have been tasked with marrying the intricacies of learning needs, emotional development, and co-curricular involvement to understand how policies and practices must transform to answer the evolution of student development. As student needs surrounding the pandemic trend towards personal fulfillment outside of the classroom to succeed, higher education administrators will benefit from identifying how to merge emotional learning practices with university goals for student success. By improving students' ability to make decisions and set goals, they can improve co-curricular activities and programs that accentuate academic curriculums that were altered due to remote learning.

Navigating Online Education

The lockdown contributed to a greater social divide between students and instructors. Many students form emotional attachments or special bonds with their instructors, and without strong friendship networks, students seek social support from their instructors. Being in the same room with the instructor week after week once helped form these attachments, but interacting solely online would make that more difficult (Tice et al., 2021). In addition to forming these bonds with students, it helps to have professors with high expectations for the success of their students. Lobos et al. (2021) examine a study where student performance is measured based on professor expectations. The results show that these expectations directly affect student success (Lobos et al., 2021). Having instructors identify "strengths" in virtual education can help maintain and improve student success when transitioning post-COVID-19. These results can also help colleges improve their strategy by fostering optimistic attitudes for the future of both virtual and physical classrooms.

As college campuses navigated to virtual modalities, the ability to encourage student success through physical activities was diminished. Student success is typically defined by academic achievement and degree attainment (Kuh et al., 2006). These factors combined allow for institutions to gauge their level of

effectiveness; however, through the accommodations made to abide by COVID-19 protocols, data showed a negative trajectory in enrollment trends. In the 2021 National Clearinghouse Research Center's enrollment report, it was noted that undergraduate enrollment saw a downward trajectory of 7.8 percent compared to the pre-pandemic fall enrollment rates of 2019 (National Clearinghouse Research, 2021). The inability to engage in these practices was not limited to the quality of campus resources extended remotely. As student development research has shown, personal concerns in response to changes during the pandemic rose as the most prominent obstacles to student enrollment and success. Some physical aspects that were compromised during COVID-19 include but are not limited to, participation in first-year transitional programs, co-curricular activities, and the experience of learning communities. These practices are inclusive, as students of various backgrounds can employ these activities to shape their college experience, increasing the possibility of retention (Abes, 2019).

It is to be noted that many institutions before the pandemic intermittently introduced mixed modalities for students to expand learning environments. Though unsubstantial, data provides an idea of the needs that may arise for students who participate in hybrid or fully remote learning (Abdul-Alim, 2016). While the pandemic offered an opportunity to test what institutions have piloted in virtual settings, it was apparent that higher education has not made the necessary adjustments to utilizing and understanding learning analytics from a student perspective (Mengash, 2017).

Effect on Professors' Role

A huge factor that negatively impacted professors' ability to provide a quality education for students is their lack of education regarding online learning. Educators had trouble with "knowledge transfer", especially when figuring out what students had learned. So, it is thought that the difference between what the university offered for training and what the teaching staff needed caused a transfer issue that should be kept in mind for the future. Educators aren't encouraged in their training to form networks with other educators, which could be a source of support and information. The sudden shift to online learning required the development of online courses, the use of new technologies and platforms, and faculty training on how to use them. An observational study by Asgari et al. (2021) identified challenges encountered due to the abrupt transition to online instruction of engineering courses during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study found 15% of the faculty had issues with software licenses or no access to personal computers/tablets, 20% of the faculty did not have access to a microphone/headset or printer/scanner, 23% of the faculty had no reliable internet connection. In comparison, 32% had no access to a webcam or camera for online instruction, and close to half of the faculty indicated that they had no access to or had technical difficulties with online writing tools (Asagari et al., 2021).

The lack of experience in virtual education, the lack of preparation by educators' education programs, and the possible lack of expertise from both the school educators and the university supervisors might have also directly contributed to making the switch to online learning during COVID-19 difficult not only for students but for planners and practitioners in higher education (Sepulveda-Escobar & Morrison, 2020). Another technical challenge that planners and practitioners faced was adapting assessments to be online. One of the great challenges facing online education is assessment, and planners and practitioners were responsible for solving it quickly due to COVID-19 and a switch to online learning. Planners and practitioners had to design the assessments to be compatible with a wide range of devices and operating systems, accessible to all students regardless of their abilities, and scalable to accommodate large numbers of students taking the assessments simultaneously.

The shift to online assessments increased the risk of cheating as students had more opportunities to access unauthorized materials, collaborate with others, or engage in other forms of academic misconduct. Planners and practitioners had to devise strategies to address this issue, such as using proctoring software, implementing strict authentication procedures, and designing assessments that were more difficult to cheat on (Montenegro-Rueda et al., 2021). In addition to technical challenges from the shift to online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic, concern for student well-being also increased stress and anxiety in higher education planners and practitioners. To better serve students, University educators need extensive training

on how to teach online. The training should be related to teaching topics, real-world activities, competency-based assessments, and methods that help educators form collaborative networks (Ramos et al., 2021).

University Policies and Practices on Data

In educational research, practices have evolved to expand the breadth of subject matters and information that is used to frame and validate knowledge. Institutions then use this information to create and administer policies used to govern college campuses to increase overall effectiveness. Institutional improvement has lied solely in the hands of educational entities. Parameters used to set student success standards are often formed based on student data collection that is not shared with students themselves. The institution's needs lie at the crux of data collection, rather than that of the most essential stakeholder (Broughan & Prinsloo, 2019). The importance of the student's voice moved to the forefront of campus concerns throughout the pandemic. This, however, is data and information that institutions do not leverage in shaping programs and services. In (re)centering students in learning analytics: in conversation with Paulo Freire, the authors state the following:

> "In the social imaginary of learning analytics, students are habitually seen as the producers of data and as data objects, but not as equals. They have no input into what, when, or why data are collected or how they are analyzed and used. It is paramount to consider not only the linkages, overlaps, and differences between assessment and learning analytics but also to foreground the role and voice of students in both assessment and learning analytics of/for learning. Student-centered learning analytics represents an opportunity to (re)engage students and the institution in embracing authentic learning and negotiated assessment practices."

When coupled with the disconnect that occurred in response to the pandemic with student perspectives directly linked to their academic and institutional experiences, issues as mentioned in the article, will undoubtedly become exasperated. Through the onset of remote learning, student concerns regarding the quality of instruction, the availability of enriching activities, and institutional support regarding personal matters that impact their enrollment became prominent throughout higher education.

Before the pandemic, during major recessions, some universities began to take measures to improve their use of data to support students. The University of Texas System implemented seekUT, an online site that guides students in the college search process and career planning (APLU, n.d.). This program was built based on the data collected by the Student Debt Reduction Task Force, formed in 2012. By researching the link between student success and financial concerns, the UT system was able to provide student loan debt and earnings information from students and recent graduates (APLU, n.d.). At the start of the pandemic, high school seniors and enrolled college students each cited changes in financial status as factors that impacted their college-going and continuation plans (Simpson Scarborough, 2020). The financial impact that followed the pandemic was studied by Pew Charitable Trusts. It was surmised that though past economic downturns, such as recessions, typically saw an increase in enrollment as individuals sought to gain more marketable skills in a limited market, the pandemic has shown a deviation from this expected trend. While students borrowed less to support their education during the pandemic, this was not indicative of stable financial statuses but of the decline in overall undergraduate enrollment (Oliff, 2021).

Mental Health Effects

With the closing of college campuses, many university students experienced declining mental and emotional health as they shouldered the weight of the COVID-19 virus. 41% of students indicated a negative change in their perception of their university or college because of the pandemic (Simpson Scarborough, 2020). For those on track to graduate, data showed that 60% of students were troubled with anxiety and approximately 45% struggled with family tensions, impacting their ability to complete their degrees (Lee et al., 2021). While many students seek out personal remedies to relieve themselves, institutions are still responsible for developing strong support systems for students (Lee et al., 2021).

Institutions that failed to strengthen communication and understanding of future decisions for students as they prepared for remote learning and services ran the risk of seeing higher rates of student dissatisfaction. The change to digital formats for learning and instruction, as well as campus services, proved to be a challenge as the ability to transition as many programs as possible within a short period influenced 63% of students surveyed to view the quality of their education as worsened (Simpson Scarborough, 2020).

In addition to additional stress on students, research has shown that the switch to online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic has significantly impacted the mental health of higher education educators, particularly in the areas of workload and burnout (Gonzalez et al., 2021). In a cross-sectional study of 166 educators in Montería, Colombia, Gonzalez and colleagues found that educators experienced an increase in workload during the pandemic, which was associated with higher levels of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment. Another study conducted in Brazil by Ramos et al. (2021), concluded that higher education educators experienced higher levels of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study found that the shift to online learning, increased workload, and lack of social support significantly contributed to burnout among educators. Higher levels of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment can negatively affect the mental and physical health of higher education educators. Emotional exhaustion can lead to feeling overwhelmed and drained and can increase the risk of developing mental health issues such as anxiety and depression. Depersonalization, or the feeling of disconnection from one's work and the people one works with, can lead to a lack of empathy and care for students and colleagues, damaging relationships and impair effective teaching and collaboration. Reduced personal accomplishment, or feelings of ineffectiveness and lack of accomplishment, can lead to decreased motivation and job satisfaction and may contribute to burnout and turnover.

These factors, in turn, can also impact the quality of education provided to students. Educators who are emotionally exhausted, disconnected, and feeling ineffective may be less engaged and less effective in their teaching, which can lead to lower student outcomes and decreased overall quality of education. In addition to increased workload for higher education practitioners and planners, many showed an increase in uncertainty due to the sudden shift to online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Shift for Planners and Practitioners

The sudden shift to online learning during the pandemic created great uncertainty for planners and practitioners in the higher education sector. As pointed out in a study by Grenha Teixeira et al. (2021), the emergency transition to online learning left many educators feeling unprepared and uncertain about the future. The lack of clear guidance and policies for online teaching and learning added to the uncertainty and stress of educators. This uncertainty could lead to increased anxiety and burnout for planners and practitioners, making it essential for institutions to provide adequate support and resources to help educators navigate the challenges of online learning. The uncertainty faced by planners and practitioners during the pandemic was further compounded by the need to rapidly develop and implement new policies and practices to support remote learning. As the article "An exploratory study on the emergency remote education experience of higher education students and Teachers during the COVID-19 Pandemic" (Grenha Teixeira, et al., 2021) highlights, many educators were unprepared for the sudden shift to emergency remote education and were forced to quickly adapt to new teaching methods and technologies. This uncertainty and lack of preparation added to the stress and anxiety already being experienced by educators, leading to further burnout and mental health challenges. (Argel, M. N. M, et al., 2021)

Certainly, in addition to the uncertainty related to the sudden shift to online learning, there were also concerns among planners and practitioners about the stability of their employment. The study by Akram et al. (2021) highlights the financial concerns during the pandemic and the potential impact on job security for higher education faculty in Pakistan. This concern was shared by many educators globally, as the pandemic disrupted higher education institutions and threatened the financial stability of many. The possibility of layoffs or reduced job security added layer of stress and uncertainty for planners and practitioners. In addition to uncertainty with employment, higher education planners and practitioners added stress and anxiety due to technical challenges.

Negativity Period for Online Learning

Surveys have repeatedly shown that students are dissatisfied with online learning. One of the main reasons education systems have hesitated to adopt online education is technical difficulties—which can range from limitations in equipment, internet connection issues, or platform availability. The student's technical challenges also play a role. Insecurity in using new technologies in such a short period reflects a lack of digital skills. Aside from technical complications, these surveys also show that despite the seemingly stagnant activity used for online learning/teaching, it requires good physical and mental performance. Further research demonstrates that online learning negatively affected students' "motivation, self-efficacy, and cognitive engagement", while students' preferences for face-to-face instruction were evident (Scavarda et al., 2021). To ensure students do not face these learning challenges as harshly, remote education must be carefully blended with in-person instruction. Based on the feedback from students, this is not an option, but a requirement that entails more than simply uploading instructional content. It is a learning process that gives students freedom, ownership, creativity, and opportunity (Selwa et al., 2020).

Many of the new ideas that started during this time are likely to continue after COVID-19 is over. For example, the educational plan will likely still include technology and online meetings. Everyone in education and other fields is encouraged to rethink what they do and figure out what can be done online and what should be done in person, taking the best parts of both approaches. In some situations, like the COVID-19 pandemic, the use of technology is crucial, like in the education sector. Some technologies are more desirable or intriguing because you don't need to know much about complicated systems to use them. It's important to stress that using technology to teach and learn can make the process easier. It would be a disservice to education not to use technology. Everyone in higher education is adapting to the changing needs of students, and the main goal is to come up with new ways to teach and learn. Using technology in the classroom is a great opportunity to share knowledge and see how digital advancements can make learning easier and add to traditional education in the time after COVID-19 (Scavarda et al., 2021)

One way that professors have been using this hybrid way of teaching is through "blended learning." This method is only used as a way to supplement the teaching process. In addition to electronic communication, classes are still held the old-fashioned way— with educators and students in the same room simultaneously. Blended learning involves engaging online systems that allow instructors to design and deliver their courses within a versatile framework that incorporates several different tools to help learning and communication happen. The educational platform that can run e-learning classes is an advanced technology that is also easy to use and put into place. In response to COVID-19, these, among other, different ways of learning and teaching that use an interactive communication approach are being implemented (Molchanova et al., 2021).

Another way that professors are serving students and keeping them engaged in a post-COVID world is through "Flipped Classrooms." In a flip class, the students would take the lead with help from the teacher, who would act as a mentor. They would present their ideas, propose questions about certain online data or start discussions to get other students involved and help them learn from each other. In this teaching method, professors can give students digital tasks to actively study, like videos, e-books, or other learning resources, as preparation for face-to-face classroom activities. During the face-to-face process, practices, learning workshop activities, discussions, or task execution are merely enhanced. Flipped Classrooms are not only turning traditional learning systems into student-centered learning, but they are also changing the roles of both educators and students in teaching and learning, which truly challenges and engages all parties (Fatriana, 2021). The flip-class is very different from traditional classroom teaching, in which the teacher or faculty usually is the main information source during class time. In a flip-class, the instructor could perhaps ask everyone to answer certain questions without giving much direction or feedback. In this type of class, the students explain the course material with the help of the teacher as a guide. In the traditional model, students may only be able to do activities the teacher sets up for them to do independently or in small groups. The teacher also typically only controls the flow of the discussion and the order of the information. In the flip class, however, the teacher explores the topics that the students like to learn and talk about, which makes them more interested in learning and gives everyone an equal chance to do well on the topic of discussion. With the ability to deliver information in different ways or even have a student or

another source do it, the next generation might be better prepared for the new normal: where more teamwork and critical thinking are required (Mohamed & Ahmed, 2021). The flip-class also allows the teacher to see how the students are learning and prompts them to spend more time on a certain idea or activity. In a time when positive attitudes and good performance are expected, helping students become more self-aware and improve their ability to solve problems through good teamwork and interactions would be greatly helpful.

Additionally, COVID-19 caused stress and anxiety, especially among young people. The flip-class could be a good alternative for social interactions and review students may not be ready for. As opposed to traditional learning, students seem to be doing better in the flipped-classroom regarding academic achievement and engagement and are happier with it (Mohamed & Ahmed, 2021).

Similarly to the U.S., most countries will likely mix online and physical education in the coming years. However, we can use online education to introduce students within and across nations to learn about their mutual interests. These views are likely about big problems affecting their personal and family well-being. These issues could include housing stability, the food and water quality that they consume, and their diverse environments. Standard tests would have to be replaced with more conceptual ones for this kind of curriculum to work. This involves student portfolios that show proof of projects, meetings, and other activities. These actions could be good for not just the classmates but also the people close to them, helping a wider range of societies. This kind of education allows students to bond over shared and opposing struggles, which helps everyone see how similar they are (Arnove, 2020). It makes them feel included and heard. While a certain degree of physical instruction is appreciated, online teaching can help students with disabilities, students who work, and people with other problems getting to class. Technology can be a useful tool for bringing together people from different cultures at risk of social exclusion. Many believe it can be the key to more integration (Pellegrini et al., 2020).

Pivot in the Workplace With Social Networks

The pandemic has become a potent force for change in the workplace. The rapid growth of Enterprise Social Networks (ESN) use and its important role in the "new normal" have changed the work environment in a way that organizational behavioral analysts find interesting (Dickinson, 2020). In the past few years, universities have encouraged users to take advantage of the new formal and informal ways to share knowledge that social network tools offer. Users could make friends with other people at their university through ESN interactions. ESNs are also widely used for academic and social reasons, such as discovering new professional relationships or staying current on the growth of a research area of interest. This is called "consumptive enterprise social networking," resulting from academic staff using public social networks for work. Microsoft Teams and other ESNs are now more popular than they used to be (Kazemian and Grant, 2022).

Another powerful strategy being implemented in classrooms is Social-Emotional Learning (SEL). The idea of injecting SEL into the academic curriculum is not a unique approach. The concept of SEL was propelled into popular culture in 1995 (George Lucas Education Foundation, 2011), and yet it is still underutilized. We must focus on teaching and nurturing the whole student to equip them for lifelong success. With the onset of increasing educational reforms, student curricula have become more focused on educational standards associated with academic performance rather than the holistic development of children (Tarabochia, 2013). Education has become myopic in simply “teaching to the test” and regurgitating information. Both Charter and private schools have implemented SEL into their core curriculum, and the research reflects positive results. SEL participants demonstrated significantly improved social and emotional skills, attitudes, behavior, and academic performance that reflected an 11-percentile-point gain in achievement (J. A. Durlak et al., 2011).

Higher education institutions’ access to Big Data provides the necessary tools to review, reframe, and refine policies and practices directly impacting student experiences. With increased diversity, institutions must efficiently mine student data, to improve student success and matriculation (Nehar, et. al., 2020). While universities and colleges possess this information, it has not been utilized fully when looking at student engagement and learning outcomes (Freire,2019). Proper collection, dissemination, and application of this data will lead to the improvement of student services, as well as institutional operations that benefit

multiple stakeholders. Those stakeholders include the employers. COVID-19 truly highlighted issues with connectivity for students who need technology to be successful (Eshoo, 2020). In a climate of increased emphasis on standards and accountability, positive academic achievement outcomes associated with effective emotional learning may significantly influence educational policymaking and decisions to adopt Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) programs (Hoffman, 2009). According to the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), "SEL is the process through which children and adults understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions" (Hoffman, 2020). SEL promotes the well-being of students and creates a healthy work environment that aids in educational development. All five key components of SEL are crucial to any student's well-being. SEL should not be considered a supplemental enhancement to education; hands-on experiential learning plays a serious role in student success.

Emotions are a critical factor in human function. The ability to navigate them could be the difference between failure and success. It could also mean coping during a pandemic or merely surviving. According to the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), "Social and emotional learning (SEL) is the process through which children and adults understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions (What Is Social and Emotional Learning, 2020). SEL promotes the well-being of students and creates a healthy work environment for them to get the most out of their education. All five key components of SEL are crucial to any student's well-being and even more critical during a crisis (such as the current pandemic). As the complexities and challenges associated with college students in this COVID-19 era increase, so will be needed for increase, proactive and comprehensive responses that would improve students' capacity to transit beyond the current period and remain resilient (Salimi et al., 2021).

Supporters of SEL in Congress have urged their colleagues to include SEL grants and teacher training in the upcoming reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, through H.R. 2437, the Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning Act of 2011 (George Lucas Education Foundation, 2011). It should not be considered a supplemental enhancement to education but a necessity for students throughout their education (and beyond). The conventional design of the academic education curriculum must evolve. Although the concept of social and emotional learning has not previously been applied to higher education settings, there are many mental health promotion and prevention programs that can be considered successful or promising in enhancing social and emotional development in higher education students (J. A. Durlak et al., 2016). SEL should be woven into the core curriculum at every level to create the next generations of leaders. More so, when we are faced with yet another crisis. U.S. systems need to transform their current crisis-focused approach to mental health to one that promotes wellness across the lifespan (Lomax et al., 2022).

The five key components of SEL have been proven to promote receptivity to learning and foster student connection to school and both are necessary for academic achievement. Building a continuous and consistent language, practice, and vision around SEL involves coordinated school–family–community programming to extend school-based SEL into the broader environmental contexts that shape students' development (Oberle et al., 2016). Students can be empowered and protected from detrimental effects on their mental health and well-being by developing resilience before a crisis. Researchers should identify promising ways to build a strong, engaging, and interconnected system of education and supports that fosters the social-emotional development, mental health, and well-being that all students need to thrive (CRPE, 2021).

SEL is so effective and important because the COVID-19 pandemic undoubtedly created unprecedented challenges that have affected students and educators on a personal and emotional level— not just physical. In the hopes of containing the ever-rapidly spreading virus, educational institutions were shut down, creating a mass disruption in education. Students lost more than academic learning during this crisis. Having endured over a year of loss in education, social connection, and routines, the COVID-19 pandemic illuminated America's deeply rooted structural inequities that have worsened the population's mental health and well-being (Lomax et al., 2022). A culmination of worries has plagued students, and we must recognize

that a student's mental health and well-being are crucial to academic learning. The Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), in conjunction with the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), routinely releases data that shows that Americans are seriously lagging in several educational performance assessments (Colagrossi, 2018). The learning loss due to the pandemic has put students even further behind. It will afflict this generation's prospects and limit opportunities into adulthood.

Negative Health Impact

The direct health impact, economic impact, and disruption of the social and community structures across the globe are potentiating a major international mental health crisis (Maulik et al., 2020). It has affected people of all ages, yet mental health and well-being are often two of the most neglected aspects when discussing "health". American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry (AACAP) and the Children's Hospital Association has declared a national emergency in children's mental health, citing the serious toll of the COVID-19 pandemic on top of existing challenges (American Academy of Pediatrics et al., 2021). Some students are coping; however, many still require mental health support to mitigate various challenges they have endured throughout this pandemic. Government lockdowns, social isolation, home issues, death and sickness, and uncertainty related to COVID-19 could cause mental health issues such as depression, sleep deprivation, and anxiety, which in turn could adversely affect students' motivation for academic success and create behavioral issues in schools (Pincus et al., 2020). Children and adolescents are not the only vulnerable population. Graduate and post-graduate students are at risk equally (if not more). A study on the negative impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on higher education highlights the urgent need to develop interventions and preventive strategies to address the mental health of college students (Son et al., 2020).

Planners and higher education practitioners were significantly concerned for student well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic has profoundly impacted students' mental health and well-being, with many facing increased stress and anxiety. Factors such as social isolation, challenges with online platforms, concerns about academic progress, and lack of personal contact with peers significantly impacted the mental health and well-being of students during the COVID-19 pandemic (Sipeki, 2022). Planners and practitioners had to devise strategies to address these issues and have flexibility and be adaptable in their approach to student well-being, recognizing that each student's needs and circumstances are unique. According to a survey of 1,330 Canadian educators, many educators expressed high levels of concern regarding the well-being of vulnerable students in their classrooms (Baker et al., 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted typical ways for educators to check in with their students, and many have hesitated to contact families due to concerns about the stressors caregivers may be experiencing (Baker et al. 2021). Additionally, educators have reported an increased awareness of inequities among their students, which has caused distress and prompted them to go above and beyond to provide materials, instruction, and support to meet their students' needs (Baker et al. 2021).

During the pandemic, many planners and practitioners similarly faced increased stress, anxiety, and depression. In a study conducted to analyze the levels of stress, anxiety, and depression of educators in the north of Spain at the beginning of the academic year during the COVID-19 pandemic, 49.3% of the educators surveyed showed anxious symptomatology, 50.4% showed stress symptomatology, and 32.2% of the educators showed a certain degree of depressive symptomatology (Santamaría et al., 2021). Another study conducted in Colombia by Gonzalez et al. (2021) showed that 54% of the interviewees perceive a moderate stress level while 31% perceived high stress levels. For planners and practitioners, the shift to online learning led to an increased workload, uncertainty, technical challenges, and concerns for student well-being. The need to rapidly develop and implement new policies and practices to support remote learning created a great deal of stress and burnout for planners and practitioners, while technical challenges with video conferencing software, learning management systems, and other educational technology led to frustration and anxiety.

The nation puts 11.6% of public funding toward education, well below the international standard of 15% (Hanson, 2022). Various initiatives, such as violence and pregnancy prevention, take up funding and

lack coordination. The mental health budget allocation should reflect the change in the burden due to the crisis. The government should be open to exploring innovative ways to build the mental health-related budget (Maulik et al., 2020). SEL is all-encompassing and can reduce violence, drug use, delinquent behavior, and mental health problems and provide internal support for children who experience the stress of poverty, violence, and trauma in their families or neighborhoods. They have the potential to help create a more equitable society where all children can succeed (Berman et al., 2018). Focusing on SEL integration would eliminate the need for numerous prevention programs and be more economical. In a climate of increased emphasis on standards and accountability, an emphasis on positive academic achievement outcomes purportedly associated with effective emotional learning may well influence educational policymaking and decisions to adopt SEL programs (Hoffman, 2009).

Given the increased need for mental health care and restricted access during and after the Covid-19 pandemic, immediate action is required to strengthen the mental health systems in all settings. Policymakers will play a major role in providing leadership to any programs and policies that they develop and implement. It is, therefore, imperative that they are both educated about their mental health needs during this crisis and supported by academicians and mental health professionals to develop robust policies and programs to address the increased burden of mental health (Maulik et al., 2020). There is an opportunity to reevaluate the current educational curriculum, tacit assumptions about student learning, and school effectiveness by incorporating SEL at all levels of education.

CONCLUSION

Higher education institutions need to recognize and address the mental health and well-being concerns of both students and planners/practitioners as a result of the forced COVID-19 pivot to online learning. This could involve providing additional mental health and well-being support, offering training and resources to help planners and practitioners adapt to new technologies and ways of working, and implementing policies and practices that help reduce workload and stress. By addressing these challenges, higher education institutions can ensure that students and planners/practitioners are able to navigate the transition to online learning more effectively in the future and continue to achieve positive educational outcomes, which leads to overall student success.

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