Students' perceptions and experiences of learning during the coronavirus pandemic

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ABSTRACT This paper examines how students experienced the unexpected shift to online learning during the coronavirus pandemic during the spring of 2020. Two surveys were sent six weeks apart from one another to a sample of students at a small, Southeastern, public university to gauge their responses and experiences with the shift to online learning. Closed-ended responses demonstrate the majority of students agreed with moving classes online and were mostly concerned with balancing work, school, and family life and educational changes made to online learning. Open-ended responses indicated three major themes from student experiences: unrest in personal life, concern for immediate and long-term impacts on education, and critiques on how the university handled the transition to online learning.

Key words Coronavirus, pandemic, students, learning, online

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INTRODUCTION

Students at colleges and universities across the United States experienced an unexpected shift to online learning during the coronavirus pandemic of spring 2020. On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a pandemic (World Health Organization, 2020). Forced to decide how to protect health and learning, most institutions of higher education responded by rapidly closing campuses and moving instruction online. With little warning, students had to move out of campus housing—often leaving many of their belongings behind—and transition suddenly and unexpectedly from face-to-face instruction to remote learning. The purpose of this study is to explore the personal and academic challenges students at a small, Southeastern university experienced as the institution implemented various changes in the early stages of responding to the coronavirus pandemic.

 What many students in higher education experienced during the spring of 2020 is best described as emergency remote teaching (ERT). Whereas traditional online courses are institutionally planned, deliberately crafted by instructors, and chosen by the student, ERT is unplanned, hastily designed by instructors, and foisted upon students in the wake of an emergency or crisis (Hodges et al., 2020). In the present study, ERT occurred due to the global outbreak of COVID-19. However, other emergencies or crises, such as natural disasters, severe weather events, localized epidemics, or campus fires or shootings, could

prompt a university to enact ERT.

It is, therefore, important to understand what students experience during ERT in order for colleges and universities to design more effective policies to ease the transition from in-person to online learning. Utilizing role theory (Agnew, 1992; Goode, 1960; Merton, 1957), we explain how some students at the university in this study experienced the transition to ERT during an early stage in the coronavirus pandemic. In doing so, we demonstrate what students at other colleges and universities may encounter when moving suddenly and unexpectedly from in-person to online learning and offer suggestions to ease the transition. The findings from this study provide a cautionary tale for institutions of higher education when forced to implement ERT in response to a crisis.

BACKGROUND

Role theory provides a useful theoretical framework to understand how students experienced the transition to ERT. A basic tenet in role theory is that to understand individual action you must understand how intrinsic motivations are based upon socially constructed categories within a society (Goode, 1960). For example, "student" is a role created within an academic setting. Attached to any role is a set of behaviors that guide individual behavior and interactions with others. In performing the behaviors attached to a role, people come to create shared understandings of what others "should" or "should not" do

while occupying a role within society. Within a university setting, those occupying the role of "student" are expected to, among other behaviors, care for oneself, attend classes, complete assignments, and express deference when interacting with faculty members.

Another tenet in role theory is that an individual can occupy multiple roles or positions within society. According to Goode (1960), individuals who hold multiple roles can generally fulfill them and are expected to manage the numerous expectations associated with each role. Integral to this assumption is the idea that people want to do what they are "supposed to do" and behave in ways which comport with their various roles (Goode, 1960).

The challenge many students face when entering college is that they have to fulfill multiple roles (e.g., employee, friend, partner, teammate) in addition to their academic role, which can create competing and contradictory ways of behaving. Competing role demands, known as "role conflict," occur when individuals struggle to manage the adverse obligations of two or more social roles (Goode, 1960; Merton, 1957). The result is that individuals experience varying amounts of strain between these roles and may experience negative emotional and psychological responses, such as stress, anxiety, depression, and decreased aptitude for learning (Agnew, 1992; Piquero & Sealock, 2000). As discussed below, the global pandemic coupled with the university's response to the unfolding crisis suddenly and drastically altered the obligations and expectations of students, which resulted in an acute sense of role conflict between their academic, personal, and professional life.

DATA AND METHODS

Data for this paper were collected from two surveys administered during the spring of 2020 to undergraduate students at a public university located in the southeastern part of the United States. Each survey was designed to capture students' perceptions and experiences with the transition to ERT at the beginning of this shift and then later towards the end of the semester[1]. Using a combination of closed- and open-ended questions, each survey asked students for demographic information and their opinions on the university's response to the pandemic.

The first survey (Time 1) was sent on March 20th, one day after the university announced that all in-person classes were canceled and were being converted to an online format. The second survey (Time 2) was sent on April 25th, four days before the last day of the semester. Students were recruited through a convenience sampling strategy. Faculty who taught classes in sociology, anthropology, criminal justice studies, mathematics, computer science, education, and music were asked to distribute the link to the online surveys to students in their classes. The number of students receiving the survey links is unknown, but in total 397 students responded across both surveys (n=310 at Time 1 and n=87 at Time 2).

Closed-ended questions were analyzed by comparing descriptive statistics at the Time 1 and Time 2 surveys. We were unable to perform any inferential statistics because of how the data were collected. Specifically, we could not track if the same individuals responding in Time 1 were the same individuals who responded in Time 2. The demographic make-up of our sample is reported in Table 1.

Open-ended responses were analyzed using an open-coded approach (Charmaz, 2006; Esterberg, 2002). In the Time 1 survey 84.5% of students provided an open-ended response and 75.8% provided a response in the Time 2 survey. Qualitative data were initially coded to capture the themes within every open-ended response in each survey. After identifying three major themes from the first round of coding (discussed in further detail below), the coding process was repeated to identify minor themes that appeared within the broader themes.

RESULTS

Student concerns were primarily centered around balancing work, school, and family life and educational changes made to online learning. Table 2 displays student responses to the question, "What are you most concerned about in terms of moving classes to an online format?"

In both Time 1 and Time 2, students' greatest concern was balancing work, school, and family life when moving classes from in-person to an online format. While a little over one-third of students (39%) cited this as their primary concern at Time 1, this increased to over half (55.8%) at Time 2[2]. The second major concern for students was changes to course material. At Time 1, 17.5% of students cited changes to course material as something which they were most concerned about when moving classes online

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1   Faculty were also surveyed. For a further discussion of faculty data see Bidwell, Grether, and Pederson (forthcoming) and Bidwell, Boyle, and Boyle (2020)

2   Not depicted in Table 2 is that students were also greatly concerned about a loved one contracting COVID-19. At Time 1, 41.7% of students expressed this as their greatest concern related to the coronavirus and this increased to 47.7% at Time 2.

and this increased to 19.5% in the Time 2 survey.

These data, however, do not capture the full experience of students in this sample. Our analysis of the open-ended responses indicate that students harbored anxiety, frustration, and anger towards university administration and their course instructors. Below, we highlight three major themes from responses to the open-ended questions: unrest in personal life, concern for immediate and long-term impacts on education, and criticism of how the university handled the transition to online learning.

Unrest in Personal Life

The university's decision to shift to ERT, close campus housing, and cancel all in-person events, created a variety of different circumstances for students. Some assumed more family responsibility, resumed their jobs (or had to find jobs) as essential employees, and continued taking classes in a new format. Others, coupled with additional and competing roles, were disappointed about missing friends and having planned social events canceled. In short, the university's response to the COVID-19 pandemic created unrest in students' personal lives. In roughly one-third of all open-ended responses students said they experienced some form of unrest in their personal life as classes moved to an online format. Specifically, students reported struggling to focus on their schoolwork and changes to their social life.

Struggling to Focus

The move to online classes clearly affected students' ability to focus on their classwork. Specifically, respondents discussed difficulties balancing competing occupational, familial, and academic obligations after moving off-campus, which interfered with their ability to focus on their schoolwork. For instance:

For a student taking the average 15 credits, they are spending hours a day working on class work when they need to balance a social life as well. Some people might even have to work at a job to help support a family as well and simply don't have time. (Time 1, Student 89)

The open-ended responses further indicated that students were not prepared for their numerous roles to suddenly conflict and overlap as a result of the shift to online classes. The struggle to "balance" their social and academic life reflects the strain caused from the competing demands of their multiple roles (e.g., student, family member, employee). For many students, the competing expectations of multiple roles within their personal lives was impacted by the difficulties they experienced when attempting to change their daily routine. For instance:

It is pretty overwhelming and is an unexpected lifestyle and routine change that most students will have to embrace. A lifestyle living at home and away on campus are different in regards to how we get our studies done. Living at home and balancing academics with family and employment affairs is excessive. (Time 1, Student 236)

Many students clearly experienced difficulty adjusting to online learning in their home environment while trying to uphold obligations within their personal lives.

Changes to Social Life

The impact of moving to ERT on their social lives was another concern for many students. This could partly explain why student concerns about balancing work, school, and family life increased from 39.3% in the Time 1 survey to 55.8% in the Time 2 survey. In their open-ended responses, students noted that they missed face-to-face interaction with their classmates and professors. For instance, "This pandemic is making me miss out on seeing many of my friends" (Time 2, Student 28), and "I am sad considering I won't see my favorite teachers and classmates again, but I understand it's for everyone's safety" (Time 1, Student 79).

Many students also indicated that they were troubled by the cancellation and rescheduling of various planned social events such as commencement. For example, "It is a difficult and depressing transition to moving to a fully online format in the middle of the semester with so many important upcoming events that have now been cancelled or 'delayed'" (Time 1, Student 95). Students clearly struggled to maintain their social relationships as classes moved online and in-person events were cancelled or postponed.

Effect on Education

Competing role demands combined with changes faculty made to course syllabi left students worried about the effect on their education. The most prominent concerns surrounding the shift to ERT were the quality of online learning and how their grades and learning opportunities would be affected.

Quality of Online Learning

Students perceived their online learning experience as inferior to in-person classroom learning and believed online learning would negatively affect their grade. Lack of experience with online classes and being forced to "teach themselves" were some common reasons cited for why they disliked online learning. For example, "It will be more challenging to learn the material online than in an in-person class. As someone who has never done online classes I feel I won't be able to adapt and my grades can suffer because of it" (Time 1, Student 212). Another was that students felt like they had to now "teach themselves" as the following quote illustrates:

Professors expect us to read all these things and teach ourselves. And speaking personally I will probably end up getting lower grades then [sic] I would have if we didn't switch to online because I don't retain information when I read to myself or teach myself [sic] I need to visually learn from someone else. (Time 1, Student 156)

The comments from Student 212 and 156 reflect how students may have perceived a change in their role as a "student" after the university decided to move to ERT. Rather than being tasked with just learning course material, students may have interpreted the university and course instructors as creating an additional expectation to their role as student – teaching. For students, this change in expectations clashed not only with how they have come to understand what it means to be a student, but what it also means to be a "college professor" and enrolled at a "university." This point is further illustrated in the following comment made when classes initially moved online:

It is beyond stressful. We did not sign up for this when registering for classes. If I had known that we would be switching to online classes, I would not have taken some of the courses I am now. I took them because I knew they would be challenging, but I had a good relationship with the professors. I have only taken one online course for a reason. The fact that we have spent so much money on classes, meal plans, and housing just to not be able to use them anymore is frustrating to say the least. (Time 1, Student 71)

Students also described lack of access to on-campus academic tools, having to complete more work than they would in a classroom setting, and inconsistent direction from instructors as other reasons why the quality of online learning was worse than classroom learning.

Grades and Educational Opportunities

Students also believed the shift to ERT would affect their course grades and educational opportunities (such as internships). Students explained they were concerned about their grades dropping, failing their courses, or having more assigned work in their classes after switching to online learning. For instance, in Time 1, Student 230 stated, "I do not do well during online classes so therefore I'm worried my grades will decrease dramatically" and Student 199 said:
The switch to an online course format is very challenging. I have already noticed a decrease in my grades and am afraid my gpa will suffer from this…. My workload has already increased greatly, this is very difficult to manage when taking multiple classes and having to teach myself. (Time 1, Student 199)

Students also described how the public health crisis disrupted their educational opportunities, particularly how they were going to miss out on crucial hands-on experiences – like internships. Student 37 stated, "I am not able to complete my internship in the summer because of the coronavirus. I was very excited about [the internship] and it was going to help me start a career" (Time 2). In lieu of canceled internships, students planned to take classes, but remained disappointed as the following response demonstrates:

I was supposed to do an internship this summer, but instead I am taking an online summer class as an alternative. I am sad because I am not sure what I want to do after I graduate next May & I felt like this would have been a good opportunity to learn & gain first-hand experience in what I might want to do. (Time 2, Student 4)

Critiquing University Response

The majority of students believed that classes should have been moved to an online format. Table 3 shows how students at Time 1 and Time 2 responded to the question, "Do you think classes should have been moved to an online format?"

Even though only 41.4% of students believed classes should have been moved online at Time 1, this percentage increased to 55.2% at Time 2. At the same time, the number of students indicating "maybe" and "no" declined from Time 1 to Time 2. Additionally, 58 total students across both surveys provided an open-ended response expressing that they understood and accepted the university's decision to move classes online.

Although students generally believed the move to online courses was the right decision, they were critical of how the university handled the transition to online learning. While many acknowledged that in-person classes were no longer safe and moving online was unavoidable, they simultaneously expressed anxiety, frustration, and sometimes contempt towards university administration and faculty for how they handled the transition to online learning. The three major critiques students levied against the university were not allowing an adjustment period for online learning, academic policies, and increasing student obligations.

No Adjustment Period to Online Learning

Many students were fervent in their belief that the university should have created a period of time for students and faculty (and even staff in some instances) to adjust to online classes. To put this critique into context, from March 2nd to 6th students were on spring break. Classes resumed on March 11th and over the next eight days students received three official announcements regarding online classes – each detailing a different time-frame for how long classes would remain online. During these eight days students also received innumerable emails and campus updates regarding: a presumptive positive case of COVID-19 on-campus, changes to food service hours, financial aid, refunds, academic advising for the summer and fall terms, on-campus housing, changes to individual classes (or in some cases no updates at all), and a host of other issues regarding campus life (e.g., rescheduling graduation). When the university officially announced on March 19th that the remainder of the spring semester would be held online, there was no temporary cancellation of classes to allow for a transition to online learning.

The experience of transitioning to ERT for students was sudden and fraught with anxiety, frustration, and anger. One student perceived that, "faculty were not fully prepared for the transition to online classes," because their instructors, "scrambled to adjust classes to make sure that course objectives were still achievable" (Time 1, Student 245). This student went on to argue that the university, "should have had policies in place that could have made this transition simpler and easier not only for the students but for the staff as well" (Time 1, Student 245). Others linked faculty and staff not having, "enough time to properly plan and adjust accordingly" to their poor academic performance and the cause of, "more stress and anxiety for the student body throughout the semester… if there had been a little more time and preparations, everyone involved in this situation would have been better

off for it" (Time 1, Student 255). This sentiment was emphasized numerous times and in more forceful language:

This was disorganized and stressful beyond reason… Teachers were not given time to create their online classes, it was the worst transition. Some [students are] still at [university] [and are] trying to get home, some [are] forced home, and classes [were] never cancelled…They should have gotten at least a few days, all of us should have, to have time to pack, move, and prepare for online. I took 3 weeks to adjust if not longer because of it and I still hate online format. (Time 2, Student 22)

While there was inconsistency in how much time students wanted to adjust to online classes, these examples illustrate two consistent critiques of the university. First, many students were unhappy they did not have a window in which to move from in-person to online learning. Second, many linked their negative emotions and experiences regarding online classes to the university not providing a buffer period for them to prepare mentally and logistically for a full course-load online. Indeed, when considering this criticism through the lens of role theory, having such a time period could provide students some time to recalibrate what is being expected of them as a "student" in the online learning environment and adjust their behavior accordingly.

Academic Policies

Students also were critical of the university's academic policies. The grading policy in particular sparked students' ire. Many students wanted a "pass/fail" option, rather than a traditional grading system. This critique was deeply connected to unrest in their personal life, concern about the impact online learning would have for their education, and the university not allowing for a transition period from in-person to online learning. For instance, one student described the transition to ERT as "chaotic" and ultimately damaging to their grades, "since I don't get to have IN-PERSON lessons which is better for my learning style. That is why I feel like [the university] should make it a pass/fail semester" (Time 1, Student 226). To the university's credit they amended their grading policy. Students were able to opt into a modified version of a "pass/fail" grading system or could choose to be graded in the traditional way. Despite making this adjustment, however, students continued to critique academic policy.

The second policy, or lack thereof, which students derided was the university not having a standardized approach

to dealing with the transition to online classes. Although not a major focus in the Time 1 survey, this criticism was quite noticeable at Time 2. For example, while accepting that classes needed to be moved online one student wrote, "It was in no way beneficial to my learning. Each of my professors is following a different format and it can be very difficult to keep up with" (Time 2, Student 24). Comments like this reveal that students were bearing the disruption of sudden instructional changes from course instructors. Students repeatedly commented on how the varied adjustments made by their instructors contributed to unrest in their personal life and increased the difficulty in fulfilling a primary role as a "student" – academic success. For instance:

I think that some professors did a great job at making their course manageable for their students and being in constant communication. Other professors did not change the amount of work or their expectations so it made it extremely difficult to succeed in their course. I understand the decision to make classes online but I think there should have been guideline rules for professors because I know its [sic] new territory for everyone but the professors that were not adapting to the new way made it that much harder. (Time 2, Student 60)

The diverse approaches faculty took to move classes online contributed to the difficulty many students experienced when transitioning to online classes. While instructors did make careful and intentional choices in how they adjusted their courses (see Bidwell, Boyle, & Boyle, 2020; Bidwell, Grether, & Pederson (forthcoming)), these changes unintentionally created difficulties for students when moving from in-person to online courses.

Increasing Student Obligations

Coupled with the aforementioned themes, many students discussed how managing their personal life circumstances (i.e., caring for loved ones, finding a job to help with their family's finances) increased the amount of obligations attached to the various roles they occupied. In other words, students were experiencing an acute sense of role conflict. They interpreted the university as only increasing the obligations associated with being a "student," because the university did not create a grace period to adjust to online learning, were slow to change some academic policies, and inundated them with emails and updates regarding changes being made due to the coronavirus. Moreover, students perceived the university as not being sympathetic to the other roles, and fluctuating expectations attached to each role, which they were also having to manage.

The following responses clearly capture that students felt the university was increasing the amount of obligations attached to their role as a student which, in turn, conflicted with their other roles. "I feel like [we're] having a lot thrown at us and expected to just keep up completely. When we go home some of us have to help support our families and can't keep up as well as others" (Time 1, Student 278) is how one student experienced a conflict in their roles as a "student" and "family member." Another was blunt and biting in their critique of the university:

Issue a 1-week extension on all assignments. Extend the semester by a week. Some type of official extension policy. You've asked/forced thousands of people to suddenly relocate without providing any extra time for assignments *in the middle of a pandemic.* If [the university] stubbornly sticks to previous due dates in the face of such drastic and sudden change it will look bad when the inevitable mental health issues arise in the student population… To sum up [the university]'s current response, it's been a few emails essentially saying: "there's a pandemic, all classes are now online, please move home, make sure to have all assignments turned in by the due date." To be blunt: this is bullshit. I expected better. (Time 1, Student 219)

Students 278 and 219 capture the worry, frustration, and anger felt by many students as to how the university responded to moving classes online in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. While university administration officials were likely making the best decisions they could given the uncertainty and unprecedented events which occurred during the spring of 2020, their decisions were not received well by many students in this survey.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This paper examined how a sample of students experienced and responded to the unexpected shift to online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic during the spring of 2020. Findings from this study are limited because we relied upon a convenience sample – which means our results are not generalizable to the rest of the student population at this university. Using two surveys that were sent six weeks apart from one another, we find that students understood the decision to move online and were mostly concerned with balancing work, school, and family life and educational changes made to online learning. Students also experienced the transition to online learning in three distinct ways: unrest in their personal life, concerns about immediate and long-term impacts on their education, and an inadequate response from the university in handling the transition to online learning.

Based upon these findings we offer three suggestions for universities having to shift to ERT.

First, university administrators and faculty need to be clear about what is expected of students during and after the transition to online classes. The findings suggest that students were not prepared for the role conflict they experienced when transitioning to online classes. Moreover, faculty and administrators may not have fully appreciated how changes they made during the transition to ERT unintentionally created an acute sense of role conflict for students. The initial "student" role for those in this study did not incorporate the obligations of managing multiple online courses and most certainly did not include the responsibilities of transitioning from an in-person to online course format in the middle of the semester – while also managing family and work roles with very little notice.

Second, students need to have a voice in crafting academic policies during times of ERT. University administrators and faculty across the world, and certainly those at the university in this study, faced unprecedented challenges and circumstances due to the COVID-19 pandemic. It is unlikely, however, they integrated students into the decisions regarding the continuity of campus life and course instruction while transitioning to ERT. Having student representation in the decision-making process for ERT-related policy changes would help to address the institutional and interpersonal challenges that students would likely encounter when moving from in-person to fully online classes mid-semester.

Finally, universities should create a grace period for students and instructors (and even staff and administrators) to adjust from in-person to online learning during an emergency period. Instructors could more carefully adjust their classes, which were originally designed to be in-person, and university administrators would have more time to assess and address the many campus-related logistical issues (e.g., issuing refunds, moving students off campus). Most importantly, however, this grace period would enable students, and other university actors, to adjust to the expectations of the multiple roles they occupy and to mitigate any perceived or encountered obstacles during this transition period.

Table 1

Sample Description of Students at Time 1 and Time 2 Surveys

	Time 1	Time 2
Gender		
Female	76.9%	83.9%
Male	21.8%	14.9%
Prefer not to answer/Other	1.2%	1.1%
Race		
White/Caucasian	84.1%	79.3%
Black/African American	12.0%	13.8%
Latino/Latina	3.6%	3.4%
Asian/Asian American	1.3%	2.3%
Prefer not to answer/Other	2.9%	4.6%
Class Status (Students only)		
First-year	23.9%	26.4%
Sophomore	25.6%	23.0%
Junior	33.3%	34.5%
Senior	17.2%	16.1%
N	310	87

Note: Total percent is more than 100 for race because students were instructed to "select all that apply"

Table 2

Greatest Concerns among Students

	Time 1	Time 2
What are you most concerned about in terms of moving classes to an online format?		
Balancing work/school/family	39.3%	55.8%
Changes to course material	17.5%	19.5%
Not having enough one-on-one time with faculty	12.7%	5.7%
Communication transparency	12.3%	3.4%
Access to the internet	6.8%	2.3%
Missing important events on campus	5.5%	10.3%
Other	5.9%	3%
N	309	87

Note: **In the Time 1 survey 1 student did not provide a response to this question**.
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TABLE 3

STUDENT OPINION ON MOVING CLASSES ONLINE

	TIME 1	TIME 2
DO YOU THINK CLASSES SHOULD HAVE BEEN MOVED TO AN ONLINE FORMAT?		
YES	41.4%	55.2%
NO	25.4%	14.9%
MAYBE	33.2%	29.9%
N	307	87

NOTE: **In the Time 1 survey 3 students did not provide a response to this question**.

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