

Impacts of a Global Pandemic on Student Engagement in Business Education

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Abstract: *It is no secret when COVID-19 surfaced, students found themselves learning online as well as tending to other life disruptions simultaneously. Due to the pandemic stressors, it seems reasonable to believe that the COVID-19 lockdown has negatively impacted student engagement in higher education. Knowing student engagement has positive implications for students, the authors sought to examine this phenomenon regarding the negative impact, specifically in business education.*

Keywords: business education, student engagement, pandemic consequences

BRIEF BACKGROUND

In the United States, the response to the COVID-19 pandemic was essentially a shutdown across the nation, especially among businesses, employment, and education. Within higher education, a quick pivot to emergency remote instruction was the norm during the Spring 2020 semester. Students found themselves learning online and expected to meet new educational requirements, some with limited technology abilities or access. Occurring simultaneously, life disruptions with living arrangements, employment availability, physical and mental health worries, added additional stressors to student lives.

In relation to the importance of why student involvement is essential, studies indicate students who participate in extracurricular activities have greater academic success, greater character development, especially in the areas of time-management and leadership skills, more positive social development, and greater interest in community involvement (Christison, 2013).

An investigational focus group led by Hews (2022) sought to understand the influences and outcomes of student engagement after the COVID-19 disruption to learning: “Students appeared to prioritize lifeload over learning, even when this choice was detrimental to their learning” (p. 129). Once things began to reopen and campuses were again in-person, it seemed student engagement was still lagging in comparison to pre-pandemic levels. Due to the aforementioned stressors and various unknowns, it seems reasonable to believe that the COVID-19 lockdown has negatively impacted student engagement in higher education.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study was to examine faculty experiences and student perceptions regarding student engagement upon return to traditional instruction after the COVID-19 lockdowns. Three faculty looked at three specific aspects of student engagement at their institution: computer lab/classroom engagement, student involvement in an organization focused on business and leadership, and a high school business contest where college students serve as key volunteers. Findings of the study could provide potential support and insight for those experiencing similar difficulties with regaining student engagement on campus.

REVIEW OF RELEVANT LITERATURE

Student engagement is a multifaceted phenomenon, and many definitions have included “at least both behavioral and affective components” (Callaco, 2017, p. 40). Chapman (2003) provides a bit more specific and plausible definition: “students’ cognitive investment in, active participation in and emotional commitment to their learning” (p. 1).

Astin’s theory of involvement (1993) in conjunction with Pace’s theory on quality of effort tie in and apply intuitively to student engagement. When applied, “students will have a great experience from college based on the time and effort they devote to their college activities” (Collaco, 2017, p. 41). Both time and effort are necessary to demonstrate engagement, and oftentimes, students see positive results (Trolan, 2019): higher grades, higher levels of satisfaction with the college experience, increased knowledge, and improved personal and social skills (Webber, Krylow, Zhang, 2013).

Astin (1999) states that “a highly involved student is one who, for example, devotes considerable energy to studying, spends much time on campus, participates in student organizations, and interacts frequently with faculty members and other students (p. 518). Much research on student engagement in relation to success and positive outcomes has related to the academic realm, offering an opportunity for increased study. Participation in sports, student organizations, and other *ad hoc* interactions require more innovative methods of data collection (Bouton, Hughes, Kent, Smith, & Williams, 2019).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The authors examining their experiences and student perceptions related to implications of student engagement following the pandemic lockdown lent itself well to the exploratory approach. “Researchers explore when they possess little or no scientific knowledge about the...activity or situation they want to examine but nevertheless have reason to believe contains elements worth discovering” (Given, 2008, p. 327).

Observations and records of data were utilized for the initial data collection and review. Data is collected and recorded annually for the computer lab usage, membership and participation in the business and leadership organization, and volunteerism and work with the high school business contest. Student commentary added depth to the data when individuals openly discussed why they believe there has been such a drastic decline in participation and engagement.

RESULTS/CONCLUSIONS

While it was presumed there would be confirmation that student engagement has lagged since the COVID-19 lockdown, this research sought to find more specifics regarding the rationale or causation as to why it is still occurring. Figures 1, 2 and 3 share faculty data regarding student engagement in their respective areas within business education. Figure 1 indicates a significant decrease in student membership in Phi Beta Lambda-Future Business Leaders of America Collegiate since Coronavirus events. When students are members in this organization, they are actively involved in a variety of aspects: service, professional development, and competitions. Figure 2 shows the reduction of student involvement in the annual business contest conducted on campus. Student participation is required to be considered in the data calculation; students must actively serve as volunteers for this event. Figure 3 portrays the reduction in volunteer student participants over five academic years. With the computer lab involvement, it is imperative to be actively engaged as many hands-on activities occur.

Figure 1

Professional Business Leaders/Membership

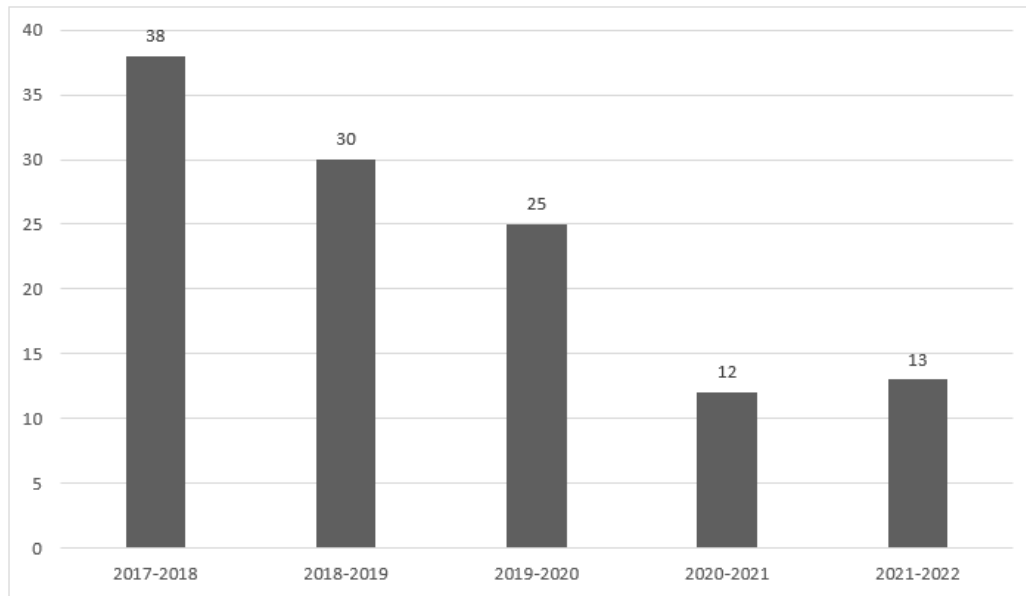


Figure 2

Business Contest Student Engagement

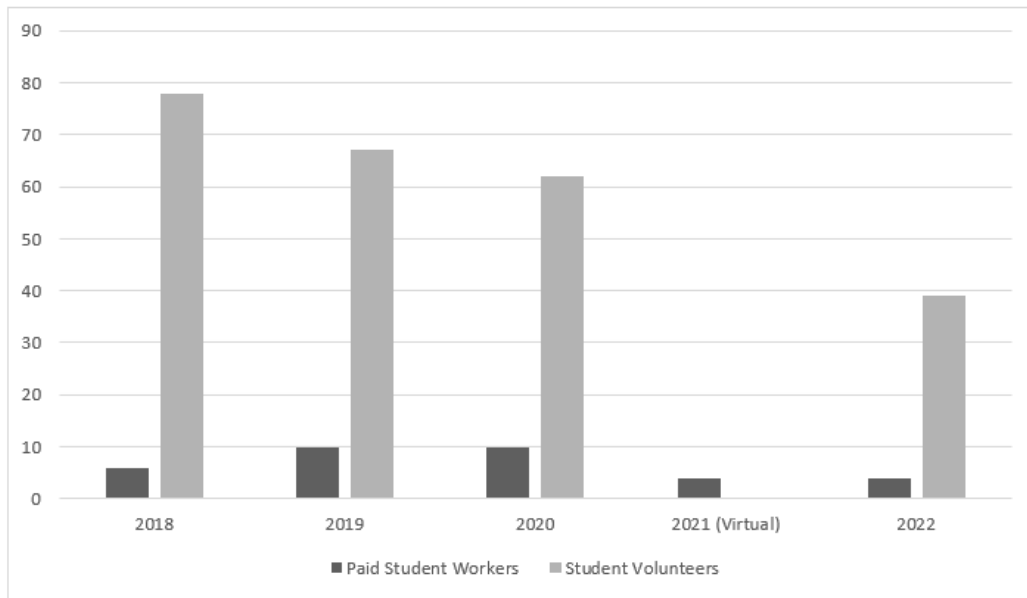
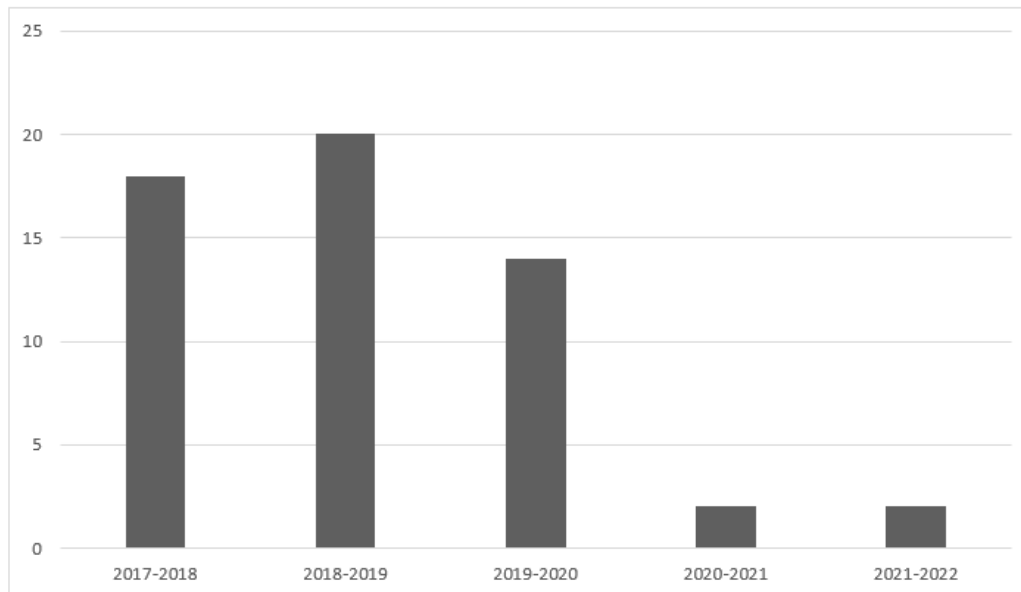


Figure 3

Computer Lab Student Participants



Oftentimes, students would share their own thoughts and feelings about why others were not getting involved again. One student stated how they were “shocked into priming our nervous systems to avoid human contact for safety...and there has been no definitive release from this.” Additional student explanations included the following:

Figure 4
Student Explanations

Overstimulation pre-COVID-19 led to enjoying more free time during/after, thus not going back to same levels of involvement post-COVID-19 lockdown
Focus on work more to make money
Family pressures and/or living location in relation to campus
“...students were already lacking in the further development of social skills with the assimilation of technology. Missing a couple years of true interpersonal connections put us behind. This lack of development creates a self-consciousness that leads us to err on the side of “safety”/ not getting out and trying new things.”

EDUCATIONAL IMPORTANCE OF THE STUDY

The educational importance of exploring the relevance and reasoning behind the decline in student engagement after the pandemic seems obvious. As research has concluded in several studies, student engagement has several positive implications.

Participating in extracurricular activities benefits students’ personal and academic success. First, students who participate in extracurricular activities have greater levels of academic achievement. Second, extracurricular participation supports students’ character development by giving them skills required for personal success, such as leadership skills, time-management skills, and the ability to accept constructive criticism. Third, extracurricular participation raises students’ self-esteem and resiliency. Additionally, participation in extracurricular activities cultivates social development. Lastly, participating in extracurricular activities provides opportunities for students to experience the importance of community involvement (Christison, 2013, p. 17).

Therefore, it is important to work to increase our levels of student engagement to, at the very least, return to pre-pandemic levels if possible. In a perfect world, we would see students voluntarily want to be re-engaged; with insight from this study, we aim to experience positive results in semesters to come.

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