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The Importance of Faculty/Staff Support During Times of Crisis

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to gain a deeper understanding of the relationships between workload, faculty/staff support and mental wellbeing of students during a pandemic. Specifically, we are interested in better understanding the moderating effects of faculty/staff support on the negative relationship between workload and mental wellbeing of students. The findings of the study show significance in the conditional effects. At the highest levels of support, faculty/staff support moderates the relationship between workload and mental wellbeing of students. Faculty/Staff should be prepared to provide high levels of support for students during normal times, but also during times of crisis. Universities should look to provide training to help prepare them.

Keywords: Mental Wellbeing, Faculty/Staff Support, Workload, Online Learning

1. INTRODUCTION

COVID-19 caused major disruptions to the spring 2020 semester in colleges and universities across the globe. Due to health concerns, universities moved their classes online and closed their campuses. With the sudden closing of campuses, students were required to find housing elsewhere. Many students returned home, some stayed near campus with roommates, some international students remained on campus due to an inability to return home, and others found accommodations in homes with people other than their families. Students were also required to find ways to continue their studies not only on a different platform, but also in a totally different environment.

Faculty transitioned their courses from on ground to online within a matter of weeks. Some were teaching online for the very first time. Faculty began using technologies they had access to in the past but had never fully utilized. Some faculty were able to navigate the transition virtually seamlessly, while others experienced quite a few bumps along their journey. Some faculty adjusted their syllabi to lighten the load of the semester, while others adjusted the syllabi in a different manner. Some changed group projects to individual assignments, and many required presentations were changed to papers. Faculty tried to determine if they planned to meet their classes synchronously or asynchronously. All these decisions needed to be made quickly to determine what made the most sense for the students, the content, and the remaining course activities.

Many faculties involved in the transition process saw with clarity that many of their students were underserved when schools and colleges moved rapidly to remote instruction. Indeed, many of the most vulnerable students had great difficulty accessing reliable high-speed internet. Other students could not find a quiet place to study, and many more needed to take on greater responsibilities at home to help support their families who needed to navigate through very difficult times. Articles have begun to surface regarding the lack of access to proper technology and Wi-Fi for students off campus. Some of this was stated to be due to too many people in the home or even neighbors competing for Wi-Fi (Day, 2020). Other articles discussed students in low-income environments may be at a disadvantage when transitioning to online learning (Hoover, 2020). These were all issues to consider when determining the content delivery method.

As if it was not painfully clear before, all faculties need to embrace what it means to be an inclusive learning community. As new semesters approach, the faculty need to embrace the reality that good pedagogy is inclusive pedagogy, regardless of whatever mode they find themselves in. Faculty need to recognize that many students are being asked to learn while living through traumatic circumstances and events, conditions that make it virtually impossible to succeed without intentional support and care from the faculty. This means reaching out to students now to ask them what worked and what did not work during the Spring 2020 transition to online classes. Given the students' experiences and their respective realities, faculty must hear their voices regarding what they need to be successful. It means hearing the students' stories and working to bring their voices into the conversation of the classroom in ways that include all voices. It means being a mentor and a voice of support for students when they are faced with the reality of what they are living through.

A survey of college and university presidents found that 91% indicated they were very concerned or somewhat concerned about the mental health of students (Inside Higher Ed & Hanover Research, 2020). However, not much current research is available for colleges and universities to lean on in trying to understand how to improve student experiences in this regard. In order to address the above concern, the student's mental wellbeing is an important factor which need to be studied first. This study will be examining mental wellbeing during a pandemic and a move to virtual instruction and advising and will hypothesize that workload will negatively impact mental wellbeing and this relationship will be moderated by faculty/staff support.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND RESEARCH MODEL

Articles are beginning to emerge regarding psychological stress and the workload of healthcare workers as a result of COVID-19 (Breillat & Birtus, 2020; Taylor, 2020; Thompson, 2020). However, COVID-19's effect stretches far beyond healthcare. One area, in particular, that has been drastically altered is higher education. This study examines workload and faculty/staff support effects on a university student's mental wellbeing during the pandemic. The research model is presented in Figure 1.

Workload

Additional and unexpected work added to the students during a time of transition can be stressful. In a study of 209 first-year undergraduate students, teacher-student relationships and sense of purpose were found to impact the perceived workload of the students, and in turn, the perceived workload impacted student engagement (Xenni, Radford, & Shacklock, 2018). It has been also shown that excessive content in University classes can result in a student feeling overloaded (Feldon, 2007), which is even more exaggerated when a pandemic is added to the mix. Smith (2019) examined associations between over 1200 student perceptions of workload and their wellbeing outcomes. The Wellbeing Process Questionnaire was used for the outcomes. The questionnaire groups outcomes in three categories of positive (happiness+life

satisfaction+positive affect), negative (anxiety+depression+stress) and cognitive problems. Workload was significant across all the outcomes. It is important to consider workload as higher perceptions of workload can result in greater stress for students and less engagement (Ruohoniemi & Lindblom-Ylänne, 2009).

Faculty/Staff Support

Student satisfaction can often be attributed to a student's experiences with other students (Rowley, 1996). Without face-to-face support of fellow students during a pandemic, students rely even more heavily on faculty. Hammer, Kossek, Bodner & Crain (2013) studied 823 employees and 219 supervisors in an information technology division of a Fortune 500 firm. Using a four-item scale, the researchers asked the employees about their supervisors' help and support of their work and non-work issues/conflicts. They found that employees who rated their supervisors high on the support measurement scale felt they had "more control over their work hours, less obligation to work when they are sick, lower perceived stress, and higher reports of family time adequacy" (Hammer et al., 2013, p. 294).

Wickramasinghe (2012) surveyed 232 software developers who were part of an offshore outsourcing operation. The study found that supervisor support moderates the relationship between work schedule flexibility and job stress. Additionally, supervisor support has been found to have direct and indirect effects on job satisfaction (Charoensukmongkol, Moqbel, & Gutierrez-Wirsching, 2016) and to improve task performance (Afzal, Arshad, Saleem, & Farooq, 2019).

These studies' findings can be adapted to faculty/staff support at universities. It has been shown that students in a "normal" environment are not always aware of all the university support mechanisms available to them (Roberts, Dunworth, & Boldy, 2018). Therefore, faculty/staff must work even harder to ensure that students are aware of the support that is available to them during difficult times. Web-based learning communities and collaborative group assignments help to promote student support in an online class (Fisher & Baird, 2005).

Kirmeyer and Dougherty (1988) studied workload and supervisor support for police radio dispatchers. After each shift, dispatcher perceived workloads, anxiety, and copying mechanisms were assessed. They found higher supervisor support to moderate perceived workload and to help the dispatcher cope better and reduce his/her stress and anxiety.

Mental Wellbeing

Global health points to a student's overall wellbeing (National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, 2020). The PROMIS Global mental and physical health items ask questions regarding the participants overall health, quality of life, overall physical health, overall mental health and mood. Mental wellbeing can be examined for many constituents. Wellbeing of employees has been extensively examined. Wellbeing of employees at work can be linked to management leadership and employee trust (Baptiste, 2008). In a study of 19 social workers, workload and workplace expectations were found to impact wellbeing (Shier & Graham, 2013). Additionally, in a study of 64 employees, workload was found to negatively affect the employee's wellbeing, and organizational support was found to moderate the relationship between workload and distress/blood pressure (Ilies, Dimotakis, & De Pater, 2010).

There have also been studies examining the wellbeing of students. However, studies have not examined student wellbeing during a pandemic that forced all classes online. In a study of 594 students from 55 classes, student perceptions of teacher behavior were found to impact student wellbeing (Van Petegem, Aelterman, Van Keer, & Rosseel, 2008). In a study of Australian students, 410 undergraduates were assessed regarding resilience (Turner, Scott-Young, & Holdsworth, 2017). The study found student resilience to be a precursor to student wellbeing. It also found student resilience to be a factor of his/her "experience, university policy and the interactions between the university, work and home environments" (Turner et al., 2017, p. 707). These are all important aspects during a pandemic and online classes.

Given these previous studies and their findings, the current study proposes the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: Workload will negatively impact mental wellbeing.

Hypothesis 2: Faculty/Staff support will moderate the relationship between workload and mental wellbeing.

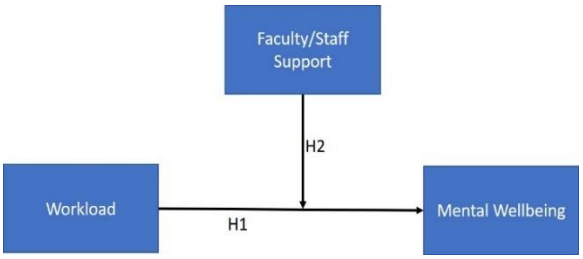

Figure 1. Research Model

3. METHODOLOGY

Students from two US universities were sent emails and asked to anonymously participate in the survey. They were provided with an email link to a survey created in Qualtrics. Some survey questions were adapted from Hammer, Kossek, Bodner & Crain (2013) (Faculty/Staff Supportive Supervisor Behavior Assessment Tool) and PROMIS Global mental health items (Hays, Bjorner, Revicki, Spritzer, & Cella, 2009). Other questions included items regarding environmental factors such as instructor support, personal perceptions, and wellbeing items (Das, 2020). Demographic items were also asked. Items used for each construct can be found in Tables 1-3. Participants were informed that the survey was voluntary and that responses would only be reported in the aggregate.

A total of 127 participants began the survey. Ninety-four completed the survey. Incomplete surveys were excluded. A majority of the participants identified as women (52.6%). Most participants were obtaining a bachelor's or associate's degree (91.6%). Eighty-seven percent of participants were living with family during the pandemic. Most participants were living with three or more people.

4. DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

Harmon's single-factor test was used to determine if common method variance was an issue since several constructs were collected from the same source. The authors entered all variables together. If all variables load on one factor accounting for all of the variance or if one factor accounts for the majority of the variance, common method variance would be present. Using exploratory factor analysis, 3 factors resulted with an Eigenvalue greater than 1.0. The variance explained was between 11.5% and 51%. Therefore, common method variance was not a concern.

Discriminant validity was tested using Spearman's formula (Spearman, 1904). Using a cutoff point of 0.85, all construct pairs were valid, discriminant validity did exist between the constructs.

Construct validity and reliability were tested for all multiple item constructs. Using principal component analysis, factors were extracted. Factors with eigenvalues greater than 1.0 were retained. Varimax rotation was used to indicate high item correlations with a 0.50 cutoff being used.

The items for the Workload can be found in table 1. All of the items of the construct loaded on one factor. The Cronbach's alpha was 0.87. The variation explained percentage was 78.2%. The Workload variable for each subject was calculated as the average of the items.

Workload*
I have too much school work to do.
I have to work extra hard to finish school-related tasks on time.
I have problems with the workload at school
*Scale used: 1 = Never to 4 = Always

Table 1: Workload

The items for the Faculty/Staff Support can be found in table 2. All of the items of the construct loaded on one factor. The Cronbach's alpha was 0.91. The variation explained percentage was 78%. The Faculty/Staff Support variable for each subject was calculated as the average of the items.

Faculty/Staff Support*
Faculty/Staff make you feel comfortable talking to them about your conflicts between school and non-school.
Faculty/Staff work effectively with students to creatively solve conflicts between school and non-school.
Faculty/Staff demonstrate effective behaviors in how to juggle school and non-school issues.
Faculty/Staff organize the work in class to jointly benefit individuals and the entire class.
*Scale used: 1 = Strongly disagree to 5 = Strongly agree

Table 2: Faculty Staff Support

The items for the Mental Wellbeing can be found in table 3. All of the items of the construct loaded on one factor. The Cronbach's alpha was 0.73. The variation explained percentage was 79%. The Mental Wellbeing variable for each subject was calculated as the average of the items.

Mental Wellbeing*
In general, would you say your quality of life is
In general, how would you rate your mental health, including your mood and your ability to think?
*Scale used: 1 = Poor to 5 = Excellent

Table 3: Mental Wellbeing

Means, standard deviations, reliabilities and intercorrelations of the study variables can be found in Table 4 (Appendix A). We used Hayes' (2017) PROCESS macro (Model 1) to test our hypotheses. This macro examines the conditional effects of moderating variables. For our study, we entered workload as the independent variable, faculty/staff support as the moderator, and mental wellbeing as the dependent variable. Table 5 (Appendix A) presents the results.

Support was found for both hypothesis 1 and 2. As can be seen in Table 5, the overall model was significant (p=.000) and had an appropriate R^2 (Chin, 1998, Cohen, 1988; Falk & Miller, 1992).Workload is significantly negatively related to Mental Wellbeing (b = -.18; SE = .08; p = .02). In addition, there is significance in the conditional (moderating) effects. When the Faculty/Staff Support increases, the interaction becomes significant. At one minus the standard deviation, there is no significant effect (b = -0.13, SE = 0.16, p = 0.41). When the Faculty/Staff Support increases to the mean level, there is a significant effect found (b = -0.37, SE = 0.12, p = .003). When the Faculty/Staff Support increases to one plus the standard deviation, there is an even higher significance (b = -0.61, SE = 0.16, p = .000). This suggests that increased levels of faculty/staff support can help students' mental wellbeing when they are finding heavy or difficult workloads, especially during unusual times such as a pandemic in this case. Appendix B provides examples of open-ended responses that further support the need for faculty/staff involvement.

5. DISCUSSION

Support was found for faculty/staff support moderating the effects of workload on mental wellbeing. This indicates that students may in fact utilize faculty/staff support to help alleviate some of the stress and pressure that is felt when workload is perceived to be high. Faculty/Staff can be a valuable resource for students as mentors and advisors. Universities should take the opportunity to provide faculty/staff with the appropriate tools by training them in this area. This training should not only prepare them for the typical semester scenarios, but also for potential crisis mode such as the pandemic. How might faculty/staff be better prepared to serve students in the coming months? What steps should they take now to be ready for students' arrival in the coming semesters? Are there students they haven't heard from who they should be reaching out to now? Today, faculty should be seeking methods to begin interacting with future semester's students. There is still great uncertainty with the coming months, or even a year. Faculty should focus on how their guidance can be used to improve student wellbeing.

6. LIMITATIONS

This study focused on the moderating effects of faculty/staff support on the relationship between workload and mental wellbeing. While we believe this is an important first step in understanding what was happening during the pandemic, we recognize that there are other factors which need to be studied. For example, students' psychological safety and willingness to seek help. Both factors may have impacted a student's mental wellbeing. Future researchers should look at these factors and determine their impact.

In addition, our study looked at two universities. This would be more generalizable if we had a larger sample size. Future researchers should look to replicate the study and gain additional data.

Another limitation of the study is the authors only looked at the mental well-being of the students. During the pandemic, faculty workload was also heavily increased. Just as with students, there may be a negative relationship with workload and mental well-being of faculty. Future researchers should study this and determine if there are any reciprocal effects on the relationships to the student.

7. CONCLUSIONS

This study provides valuable insight regarding faculty/staff support. When given at the highest levels, faculty/staff support moderates the negative relationship between workload and mental wellbeing. This shows the importance of faculty/staff support during a time of crisis, such as the pandemic. Universities should strive to train faculty/staff on how to mentor and advise students, so they are prepared to serve the students appropriately. Future researchers should look for other variables, such as psychological safety, which may impact student mental wellbeing.

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Appendix A
Data Analysis Tables

	M	*SD*	1	2	3
1. Work Load	2.36	0.80	(.87)		
2. Faculty/Staff Support	5.18	1.32	-.35**	(.91)	
3. Mental Wellbeing	3.22	1.05	-.41**	.47**	(.73)

Cronbach's alpha are found on the diagonals. *p <.05, ** p <.01

Table 4: Variable Statistics

				95% Confidence Level	
DV: Mental Wellbeing	*b*	SE	*p*	Lower	*Upper*
Workload (Direct Effect)	-0.18	0.08	0.02*	-0.33	-0.03
Conditional Effects:					
Faculty/Staff Support 3.86 (-1 SD)	-0.13	0.16	0.41	-0.44	0.18
Faculty/Staff Support 5.18 (SD)	-0.37	0.12	0.003**	-0.93	-0.29
Faculty/Staff Support 6.51 (+1 SD)	-0.61	0.16	0.000***	-0.93	-0.29

Note: Faculty/Staff Support in the conditional table is the mean and +/- SD (standard deviation) from the mean; *p< .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001; Overall model: p= .000***; R^2 = .34

Table 5: Results

Appendix B
Sample of Open-Ended Response

1. *Faculty were very good at working with us to adjust deadlines and workload, eliminating some of the nice-to-have small tasks while maintaining the core workload and helping me learn the concepts I enrolled to learn.*
2. *The only thing that has been difficult moving online that is notable is the group work. I wish that if we had designated group time it was on Zoom in breakout rooms because it is incredibly difficult to hold people accountable. My professors have been super helpful when things go awry, but I wish that there was a way to hold everyone more accountable.*
3. *I felt that it was hard for some of my classes to be online because it requires the professor to know how to utilize technology. I have been getting a lot of busy work and unbeneficial work during online classes. I do not feel productive about this.*
4. *My professors at [university] have made the online transition seamless; very upfront, communicative and understanding.*
5. *The School of Business professors have been by far the best at keeping in touch with their students during this transition. All of them have been incredibly supportive, flexible, and understanding to those who are struggling or maybe need some space. My professors have given me extra time to complete assignments when I inform them of my work schedule that was vamped up due to COVID19 - I have absolute confidence I will pass my courses with all A's while balancing work and family life. My professors want me to succeed, and oftentimes, will check in on me at random to see how life is going and how my job search is coming. The support has been unreal and incredibly appreciated.*
6. *As someone who struggles with anxiety, the recent changes have been quite overwhelming. I have never really struggled much with keeping up with work, but since moving online, I have struggled very much to keep track of deadlines and to do the work to the best of my ability.*
7. *Certain professors are very very understanding of the increased workload, while others continue to pile it on. In one particular class, it is almost impossible to understand the assignments and the adjunct professor does not know how to give personal assistance and is not available. It is also very difficult to show up for zoom meetings at the time of the meeting due to family needs and personal needs daily during this…*
8. *Online learning is surprisingly difficult. I can't find enough motivation to do school work and no peers to ask questions.*