

## The Effects of University Communication on Student Resilience and Engagement during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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**Abstract:** The COVID-19 pandemic has affected the lives of many people around the world. However, college-age students have been identified as a population whose lives have been particularly disrupted (Browning, et al., 2021; Madrigal & Blevins, 2021), thus placing higher education institutions in a position where they need to find ways to support their students. One way that American universities have attempted to help support their students is through the use of increased communications. The present study examined the effects of university communications on student resilience and engagement. A total of 148 students at a small, private, Midwestern university completed an online survey in which they rated university communications in terms of thoroughness, helpfulness, and thoughtfulness and responded to questions regarding their resilience and engagement. University communication did not significantly relate to resilience; however, communication did significantly predict student engagement, with communication thoughtfulness being the key predictor. Implications for universities are discussed.

**Keywords:** Organizational communication, Student engagement, Student resilience

### Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic caused global-wide disruption to all organizations. However, higher education institutions were particularly impacted by the pandemic. Not only have these institutions had to consistently adapt to ever-changing circumstances, but they have also seen a sharp decline in enrollment over the past two years (Conley & Massa, 2022). Additionally, college-aged students have shown an increase in mental and emotional challenges during the pandemic (Browning et al. 2021; Madrigal & Blevins, 2021). Thus, it is essential that higher education institutions find ways to support and retain their students. One way in which higher education institutions have attempted to support students during the pandemic is through increased communications. Some research studies have examined the content of these crisis communications (O'Shea & Mou, 2021); others have examined the communications' alignment with best practices (Liu et al., 2021). However, very little attempt has been made to understand the impact of the increased communication for students and the universities themselves. Thus, the purpose of this study is to examine those effects. Specifically, this study will examine the effect of university communication on student resilience and

engagement.

## Importance of Resilience and Engagement

Researchers define resilience as the ability to “carry on” or “bounce back” from adversity (Garcia-Dia et al., 2013). Resilience has been shown to be associated with improved psychological well-being (Avey, et al., 2010) which has in turn been linked to increased employee performance (Luna-Arocas & Danvila-del-Valle, 2020). Resilience has also been linked directly with positive organizational outcomes such as job satisfaction and organizational commitment (Youssef & Luthans, 2007). Thus, resilience can affect employees’ well-being, performance, and job attitudes. In much the same way, resilience in college students may have an effect on their well-being, their academic performance, and their attitudes regarding the school they attend. For this reason, it is important that universities understand what actions they might take to increase student resilience.

Similar to resilience, research has shown employee engagement to be associated with many positive organizational outcomes. Employee engagement is generally thought to be a positive work state that promotes “involvement, commitment, passion, enthusiasm, focused effort, and energy” (Macey & Schneider, 2008, p. 4). Increased employee engagement has been linked to positive outcomes such as increased job satisfaction and organizational commitment (Saks, 2006; Youssef & Luthans, 2007), as well as improved job performance (Christian et al., 2011). Most notably, however, research indicates that employees who are more engaged are less likely to leave an organization (Saks, 2006; Shuck et al., 2011).

Given this research on employee engagement, it seems likely that university students might be engaged in their studies in the same way that employees are engaged in their work, and researchers have shown this to be the case (Schaufeli et al., 2002; Farr-Wharton et al., 2018). Furthermore, just as employee engagement has been associated with positive outcomes for organizations, student engagement has been associated with positive outcomes for universities. These outcomes include increased academic performance of students (Schaufeli et al., 2002) and lowered intention to leave the university (Farr-Wharton et al., 2018). Thus, having more engaged students benefits the university, especially if student engagement increases the likelihood that students would wish to continue their studies with the university. For this reason, just as with resilience, it is important for universities to understand what may contribute to employee engagement. One factor that may play a role in both student resilience and student engagement is university communications. This relationship is examined next.

## Role of Communication

### Communication and Resilience

Although it might seem unusual that universities could have a powerful influence on individual students’ abilities to cope, research has shown that organizational actions during times of change are related to how employees perceive the change and their subsequent willingness to support it (Kernan & Hanges, 2002; Paterson

& Cary, 2002; Tsai & Harrison, 2019). Thus, organizational communications can influence individual's perceptions of changing circumstances, and therefore, it seems likely that organizational communication could have an influence on resilience. Specifically, universities could potentially influence their students' perceptions of a crisis and their students' beliefs that they can persevere, thus helping promote student resilience. This link between university communication and resilience is also supported by research that demonstrates a link between certain leadership behaviors and employee resilience (Sommer et al., 2016).

This leads to the first study hypothesis which is:

*Hypothesis 1: Greater quality communications will be associated with greater student resilience.*

### **Communication and Engagement**

Research has also shown a connection between internal organizational communication and increased employee engagement (Karanges, et al., 2014; Mishra, at al., 2014). Thus, it seems likely that university communications may help to increase student engagement. This leads to the second study hypothesis which is:

*Hypothesis 2: Greater quality communications will be associated with increased student engagement.*

## **Method**

### **Participants**

A total of 148 undergraduate General Psychology students (53 males; 85 females) from a small Midwestern private university participated in the study. Participants had to be at least 18 years of age to participate, and most participants were between the ages of 18 and 22. Participants received research credit for their participation.

### **Procedure**

Participants provided informed consent and then completed an on-line survey containing the study items. The study items included demographic variables. A description of all of the study measures is described below.

### **Measures**

#### *University Communication*

Participants were asked to rate university communications on three factors: thoroughness, helpfulness, and thoughtfulness. For each item, participants responded using a scale from 1-5 wherein 1 = *Not at all* and 5 = *To a great extent*. The items were adapted from Tsai and Harrison (2019) in which the connection between communications and employee support for change was examined.

Thoroughness, helpfulness, and thoughtfulness were each assessed using a varied number of items. Three items were used to assess thoroughness. An example item is, “Did the university provide you with detailed information regarding new campus health and safety guidelines?” Two items were used to assess helpfulness including, “Did formal communication from the university help you understand the new campus health and safety guidelines?” Finally, two items were used to assess thoughtfulness such as, “Did communications from the university make you feel cared about as a person?” Items for thoroughness and thoughtfulness of communications had good internal reliability ( $\alpha = .82$  and  $.74$ , respectively). Reliability for helpfulness of communication items was also reasonable, but not as high ( $\alpha = .58$ ).

### *State and Trait Resilience*

State and trait resilience were assessed using the State-Trait Assessment of Resilience Scale (STARS; Lock et al., 2020). This scale assesses state resilience using six items. Participants were asked to indicate how they feel right now regarding those six items. An example item is: “At the moment I can cope with any difficulties I might face in my life.” This state resilience subscale had high internal reliability ( $\alpha = .86$ ).

The STARS assesses trait resilience using seven items. Participants were asked to indicate how they feel in general regarding those seven items. An example item is: “I generally bounce back following stressful situations.” For both state and trait resilience, participants indicated the extent of their agreement with each item using a scale from 1-4 (1 = *disagree*; 4 = *strongly agree*). This trait resilience subscale had high internal reliability as well ( $\alpha = .80$ ).

### *Student Engagement*

Student engagement was assessed using two items that were created for this study. The items included, “I am enthusiastic about attending the university” and “I am proud to be studying here.” Participants indicated their level of agreement to each item on a 7-point scale with 1 being *strongly disagree* and 7 being *strongly agree*. This measure of student engagement had high internal reliability ( $\alpha = .88$ ).

## **Results**

Table 1 shows the means and standard deviations for each of the study variables. It also shows the correlations among each of the variables. As indicated in the table, resilience was not significantly correlated with any of the communication factors. Thus, hypothesis 1 was not supported and no further analyses regarding this factor were conducted. In contrast and as can be seen in Table 1, student engagement was significantly correlated with thoroughness, helpfulness, and thoughtfulness of communication. Each correlation was significant at the  $p < .01$  level. Thus, Hypothesis 2 was supported.

Table 1. Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations for Study Variables

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Thoroughness	3.88	.78	--					
2. Helpfulness	3.79	.92	.61**	--				
3. Thoughtfulness	3.87	.94	.56**	.60**	--			
4. State Resilience	2.98	.63	-.04	-.07	.00	--		
5. Trait Resilience	3.19	.52	.02	-.09	.11	.70**	--	
6. Student Engagement	5.66	1.18	.25**	.30**	.44**	.11	.27**	--

In order to further assess the relationship between the communication factors and student engagement, a multiple regression analysis was conducted. Table 2 shows the results of this analysis. The communication factors did significantly predict student engagement with thoughtfulness of communication being the significant predictor ( $\beta = .40$ ,  $SE = .12$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

Table 2. Regression Results Predicting Student Engagement from Communication Thoroughness, Helpfulness, and Thoughtfulness

Variable	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i>	$\beta$	<i>F</i>	<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>
Constant	3.46***	.48	7.27		11.33	.19***
Thoroughness	-.02	.15	-.16	-.02		
Helpfulness	.09	.13	.67	.07		
Thoughtfulness	.51***	.12	4.10	.40		

## Discussion

University communications were not associated with student resilience. Although this result was not as expected, it is consistent with some research, which suggests resiliency is built dynamically across time (Luthar et al., 2000). Therefore, it may be that resilience requires much more consistent interaction directly with leaders and others who can support students. In contrast to resilience, student engagement was found to be significantly associated with university communications. Specifically, thoughtfulness of communication significantly predicted student engagement. This finding supports previous research that indicates perceived support has an effect on how communication will impact employee engagement (Karanges et al., 2014). In other words, more thoughtful messaging by the university may increase the support felt by students and lead to greater engagement.

## Limitations and Future Research Directions

The present study had several limitations. First, the study is correlational. Thus, no cause and effect

relationships may be determined. Second, this research was conducted with a limited sample at only one university, thus limiting the generalizability of the findings. Finally, this study asked students to reflect on university communications that had been received up to a certain point in time.

Asking students to reflect on communications in this way assumes that they understand the communications that are being referenced and that they can adequately remember them, which may not always be the case. For all of these reasons mentioned above, future research should explore the relationship between university communications and student engagement using different methods and samples. It would also be especially beneficial if data could be collected in more real time.

Furthermore, additional research should also continue to explore factors that may promote student resilience, as this study found university communications to have no significant effect on student resilience. As mentioned previously, resilience may need to be built across time, and therefore, university services that offer more consistent support to students may be the key to helping students increase their resilience. It may also be that student resilience will be best supported by other factors in the student's life outside of the university. However, further research is necessary to explore all of these possibilities.

### **Practical Implications**

This study indicated that students benefitted from increased university communications during the pandemic. Thus, universities should continue to communicate regularly with their students, especially during turbulent times or times of crisis. Also, because thoughtfulness played a key role in student engagement, it will be important for universities to ensure that their communications with students reflect their care and concern for students and their well-being.

Additionally, because communications were not associated with increased resilience, universities should ensure that they are taking other proactive measures to support students' well-being during the pandemic and beyond. These measures might include ensuring that students are aware of services available at the university such as academic assistance services or counseling services. They might also include taking measures to ensure students understand the importance of social support and know how to seek it out.

### **Conclusion**

This study examined the effects of university communication on student resilience and engagement. Communication did not have a significant effect on student resilience, but did significantly impact student engagement. Specifically, thoughtfulness of communication was the key predictor of student engagement in this study. Thus, universities should ensure that their communications, especially during times of crisis, are not only informative, but also thoughtful.

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