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Positive Workplace Adaptations Made During the COVID-19 Pandemic in a Higher Education Setting

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Abstract

This study describes what higher education professionals perceived as positive workplace adaptations in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Two surveys were administered to groups of professionals in the field of higher education to obtain information about their perception of positive changes experienced in their work during COVID-19 pandemic. The results of this investigation describe positive changes including work from home options, schedule flexibility, and increased sustainability. While not ignoring the negative aspects of COVID-19, it was concluded that many professionals were able to create positive change within their institution for themselves and their students.

Keywords: COVID-19 in higher-education, positive workplace adaptations, COVID-19 pandemic, pandemic effects



The COVID-19 pandemic has drastically altered how professionals everywhere do their jobs. The novel coronavirus first presented in China in 2019, and the United States received its first confirmed case of COVID-19 in January 2020 (Cohen, 2020). The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) confirmed that case in Washington State and over the next few weeks it spread to all corners of the country, with New York being the initial epicenter in March 2020 (McKinley, 2020). The workplace now seems irrevocably changed (Parker, Horowitz, & Minkin, 2022), higher education included (Bramnick, 2021).

The CDC issued guidance to workers who were at the highest risk of infection when completing any activity in a face-to-face setting (CDC, 2020), and employees at colleges and universities were part of those directly affected. This reality led to higher education practitioners having to adapt how they teach and shifts to remote learning have not only affected faculty but also their students (Zackal, 2021). This investigation sought to uncover what positive adaptations were made by higher education practitioners during the COVID-19 pandemic, with the goal of sharing these adaptations with personnel who may benefit from them. There is an assumption that only undesirable outcomes have occurred because of COVID-19, but not all changes have been negative. Professionals were able to make positive adaptations due to their changing world and that these changes may extend beyond the pandemic.

Literature Review

While research related to COVID-19 pandemic, and contextualized in higher education, is still emerging, much can be gleaned from scholarship on past crises and disruptions to workplaces. What was found about positive adaptations revolves around past epidemic and



pandemic experiences or involves the work of COVID-19 research specific to areas outside of the United States.

COVID-19 is not the only medical crisis to affect the lives of many people on a global level in recent memory. In the early to mid-2000s, the world faced the SARS and H1N1 pandemics (Pergolizzi et al., 2021). In their research, Pergolizzi et al. (2021) identified lessons learned from both pandemics as well as from the COVID-19 pandemic. A major lesson learned from SARS and H1N1 was that medical professionals should be involved in policy and decision making since those individuals are actively fighting the viruses.

Mitchell et al. (2014), in their investigation into effects of the H1N1 pandemic on higher education, revealed how individuals at one college communicated during the crisis, getting updates from their institution by text message and email. This positive adaptation was possible since approximately 90% of students at the time were able to use text messaging services (Mitchell et al., 2014). While many students in this study reported it was a benefit to receive daily notifications about changes made to campus policy, they noted that it was never explained why changes were made. The participants felt that their student peers may have been more supportive if they understood the reason behind the decision-making process. While the technology use was seen as a positive adaptation, it was still lacking per these participants' reports. This was supported by others who state similar findings with social media. Pergolizzi et al. (2014) found that social media made sharing information easy but also allowed for the spread of misinformation. What this research provides to the higher education field is that technology, and even social media use, can be powerful tools if utilized correctly.

One of the largest obstacles faced by practitioners in higher education during the COVID-19 pandemic was the inability to meet in person (Hale & Grenny, 2020). At the start of



the pandemic, interactions changed from planned and intentional to those that became forced emergency transitions to online services (Brown & Finn, 2021). This led to increased reliance on campus technology. Some individuals found success utilizing existing structures at colleges and universities instead of creating new processes (Lubarsky & Thomas, 2020). By adapting existing processes to meet a current need, personnel were able to more quickly connect with students because they already knew how to use the resources. Many faculty were able to adopt their use of technology for emergency remote teaching but had a steep pedagogical learning curve for how to engage students in a digital setting (Ahshan, 2021).

Several scholars reported success utilizing debates during online classes (Durrani, 2020; Lubarsky & Thomas, 2020). Facilitating debates allowed students to engage with each other in meaningful ways (cite). Researchers also describe benefits of utilizing items such as audience polls, games, journal exercises, virtual workshops and having meaningful interaction with a stable peer group (Brown & Finn, 2021; Lubarsky & Thomas, 2020).

Positive adaptations extend beyond the classroom. The Comparative and International Education Society along with other groups have found great success in hosting professional development opportunities in a virtual format (Goebel et al., 2020). This is an important point to note because, much like students, professionals need to be able to learn and grow so that they stay current to help their students. Lubarsky and Thomas (2020) noted that not all people enjoy the same access to technology. This is the case for many people, however other researchers provide a positive counter to this concern. While it is true some may not have the same access, others, such as commuters or night students, were able to better thrive because of technology and the ability to access resources from home instead of traveling to campus (Zuo & Juvé, 2021). Some professionals may not have the ability to take time off and travel for conferences; however,



via a digital format, employees can still “attend” from the comfort of their home, often at a reduced cost. While not related to professional development, Zuo and Juvé (2021) also made note that, students who are not often able to come to campus for appointments may now benefit from increased virtual appointments. This helps to create an increase in access to campus resources for students which in turn increases the number of students that professionals can meet with.

Scholars have also illuminated the importance of shared decision-making during crises (Illanes, Law, Mendy, Sanghvi, & Sarakatsannis, 2020). A positive workplace adaptation is ensuring that stakeholders have a voice in decisions (Green et al., 2020). Green et al. (2020) reported that stakeholders felt more involved and heard when their concerns were considered in decision making. In sum, scholars attest to changes in communication, namely through use of technology; importance of having a voice in decision making; and pedagogical shifts in teaching and learning as workplace adaptations that are positive.

Methods

The purpose of this project was to identify positive adaptations that were made or realized by higher education practitioners during the COVID-19 pandemic. IRB approved to administer two surveys to two groups of participants. In this section, I describe the study’s design.

Recruitment of Participants

The participants for this study included higher education professionals, including support staff, instructional faculty, and administrative aides, from across the U.S. Participants were recruited by posting the surveys in higher education groups on the social media platform,



Facebook. Because the participants were gathered from these social media groups, participants represented institutions from around the country, if not the world.

Data Collection: Phase 1

The first phase of data collection was the administration of Survey 1, titled “Types of Positive Workplace Adaptations Made During the COVID-19 Pandemic in a Higher Education Setting.” This was an anonymous four-item survey that asked participants about length of service in the higher education field, institution type, higher education functional area, and the types of positive workplace adaptations they observed in their role. The question about workplace adaptations was open ended so the participants could identify multiple adaptations. The purpose of this survey was to obtain evidence from practitioners in the field about what they see as beneficial. At the conclusion of the one-week survey period, the results were compiled to see which items the participants listed as positive workplace adaptations in their job. These results provided the necessary data to design Survey 2.

Data Collection: Phase 2

The second phase of data collection consisted of administering Survey 2, titled “Frequency of Positive Workplace Adaptations Made During the COVID-19 Pandemic in a Higher Education Setting.” This survey was also anonymous and included seven items. The survey collected both quantitative information through close-ended items about total use of adaptations as well as qualitative information (collected through open-ended items) about professionals’ feelings about moving forward out of the pandemic. The first three items collected demographic information consistent with Survey 1, asking about length of service in the field, institutional type, and functional area of higher education. Item 4 asked participants to select which of the workplace adaptations identified in Survey 1 applied to their workplace. The final



three items asked participants to provide open-ended responses about specific adaptations made during the pandemic. This survey was open for one week after which all data were compiled consistent with process used with Survey 1.

Data Compilation

After Survey 1 was completed, participants' demographic information was compiled based on the multiple-choice questions that were answered. For the open-ended question about workplace adaptations, all answers were recorded. If an individual reported multiple answers, each workplace adaptation was listed separately to get a total count of individual workplace adaptations. Like-answers (i.e., work remotely and work from home) were consolidated into single data points.

When created Survey 2, only data points that were identified by multiple participants in Survey 1 were considered. This was done for two reasons: conciseness of the survey as well as ensuring that data were found in multiple settings to increase universality of them. For the qualitative information obtained in this survey through the short answer questions, data points were compiled based upon like-answers similarly to data points from Survey 1.

Results

Results of Survey 1

A total of 78 participants took part in the completion of Survey 1; however, only 77 participants were considered; one individual identified themselves as a member of a high school teaching system and thus did not meet the criteria of working in the higher education field. The participants involved were representative of a wide variety of length career service, institution type, and function areas; specific participant demographic information is found in Tables 1-3.



Table 1.*Length of Time in Years in the Field, Excluding Graduate Assistantship*

<u>Years</u>	<u>Number</u>
Less than one year	1
1-3 years	15
4-7 years	24
8-10 years	9
Over 10 years	28
Total	77

Table 2.*Participants by Type of Institution*

<u>Institutional Type</u>	<u>Number</u>
Public, two-year college	10
Private, two-year college	1
Public, four-year institution	42
Private, four-year institution	20
Art, technical or trade institution	0
Medical School	2
Military University	1
Alternative pathway to teacher license	1
Total	77

Table 3.*Participant's Functional Area of Higher Education*

<u>Name</u>	<u>Number</u>
Faculty/Instructional Staff	29
Housing and Residence Life	18
Academic Advising/Success	8
Title IX/Prevention Education	3
Fraternity and Sorority Life	2
Belong to multiple offices	2
Student Conduct	2
Institutional Research	2
Admissions	2
Orientation Services	1
Trio/EOP/HEOP	1
Administrative Support Services	1
Program Administration	1
Curriculum Operations	1
Instructional Design	1



CATEGORIES OF CULTURAL ARTIFACTS

42

International Student Services	1
Campus Activities/Programming	1
Career Services	1
Total	77

When analyzing participant responses, many provided multiple answers to the question regarding positive workplace. Most participants were broad in their explanations of positive adaptations (i.e., “We give tours online now” as opposed to “We give online tours to out-of-state students using X video platform”). Because responses were not process specific, many answers were consolidated. Even with answer consolidation, a total of 55 unique positive workplace adaptations were named. Because the purpose of this survey was to generate necessary questions for the second survey, not all 55 unique adaptations were utilized. Data points which received three or more total responses were utilized for the follow-up survey. The total number of considered data points was 25 uniquely mentioned positive workplace adaptations due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

All 25 points are listed in Table 4. It is also important to discuss an unintended outcome of this first survey. While frequency of adaptation was not the primary focus of the first survey, it is important to note that 32.4% of all participants provided “increased accessibility to students due to virtual meetings (in relation to class, programs, and meetings)” as a positive workplace adaptation.

Another important note to make is that not all participants in Survey 1 felt that there were positive adaptations that were made. One individual reported the word “none” as their only answer. Another, while in the end did identify one positive, reported numerous negative adaptations that were made in their workplace environment. These two participants represent approximately 2.5% of the total participants for Survey 1.



Table 4.*List of Positive Workplace Adaptations*

<u>Adaption</u>	<u>Number</u>
Wider accessibility for students due to virtual meetings (for class, programs, etc.)	29
Working remotely	22
Flexibility in scheduling day-to-day tasks	18
Decreased use of paper because of increased reliance on technology in the workplace	16
Improved work life balance	10
Less need to have meetings unless absolutely essential	8
Increase in professional development opportunities because are cheaper, virtual events	7
Virtual programming opportunities	7
Virtual campus tours and info sessions	5
Virtual Staff Training	5
Classes being taught completely online	5
Decreased travel time and expenses (personal or institutional)	5
University technology, software and Wi-Fi receiving necessary upgrades	5
Being able to watch recorded virtual meetings or classes if missed it	4
Express check out of residence halls	3
Institution gave professionals more technology to use	3
Relaxed dress code	3
Increased use of campus email	3
Academic advisement appointments held virtually	3
Increased general communication between team members	3
Better trained on university technology	3
Fewer "drop in" appointments by parents and students	3
Use of remote course placement testing before the semester starts	3
Quiet students engage more via "chat function" or discussion boards in online forums	3
Easier to run search committees for professional and student staffs online	3

Results of Survey 2

Eighty participants participated in the second survey; these participants may or may not have been the same as the first survey. The participants were gathered from the same sources, but because the surveys were administered at separate times with no requirement to complete both, there may have been some different participants the second time.



Quantitative Data

Participant demographic data, presented in Tables 5-7, follows similar trends to Survey 1. There were data points representative of a multitude of functional areas, length of service to the field, and institutional type.

Table 5.*Participant's Length of Time in the Field, Excluding Graduate Assistantships*

<u>Length</u>	<u>Number</u>
Less than one year	1
One to three years	14
Four to seven years	19
Eight to ten years	11
Over ten years	34
Did not answer	1
Total	80

Table 6.*Participant by Type of Institution*

<u>Institutional Type</u>	<u>Number</u>
Public, two-year college	11
Private, two-year college	0
Public, four-year institution	44
Private, four-year institution	21
Art, technical or trade institution	2
Fraternity Headquarters	2
Total	80

Table 7.*Participant's Functional Area of Higher Education*

<u>Functional Area</u>	<u>Number</u>
Housing and Residence Life	23
Faculty/Instructional Staff	19
Did Not Indicate	16
Fraternity and Sorority Life	5
Upper-level Administrator	3
Title IX/Prevention Education	2
Student Conduct	2
Orientation	1



Recreational Sports	1
Registrar	1
Student Affairs	1
Institutional Research	1
Communications and Marketing	1
International Student Services	1
Administrative Aide	1
Instructional Design	1
State Mandated Office	1
Total	80

The data obtained about how frequently participants report their offices utilizing these positive workplace adaptations showed similar trends to Survey 1. The results that received a high frequency of response in the first survey also showed an elevated level of use in the second survey. Likewise, those less frequently identified in the first were less cited in the second. The lowest utilized positive workplace adaptation was remote course placement testing observed by over 11% of participants. This is in comparison to the highest reported adaptation which was working remotely. Remote work was reported by 82.5% of responding professionals. Over half of the total participants reported at least nine of the positive changes made during this pandemic. The full breakdown of responses is found in Table 8.

Table 8

Frequency of Use of Positive Workplace Adaptations from Survey 1

<u>Institutional Type</u>	<u>Number</u>
Working remotely	66
Decreased use of paper because of increased reliance on technology in the workplace	63
Wider accessibility for students due to virtual meetings (for class, programs, etc.)	62
Flexibility in scheduling day to day tasks	45
Decreased travel time and expenses (personal or institutional)	45
Being able to watch recorded virtual meetings or classes if missed	44
Relaxed dress code	42
Virtual programming opportunities	41
Classes being taught completely online	41
Academic advisement appointments held virtually	35
Virtual campus tours and info sessions	33
Fewer "drop in" appointments by parents and students	33



CATEGORIES OF CULTURAL ARTIFACTS

46

Increase in professional development opportunities because are cheaper, virtual events	31
Virtual staff training	31
University technology, software and Wi-Fi receiving necessary upgrades	30
Quiet students engage more via "chat function" or discussion boards in online forums	27
Improved work life balance	25
Less need to have meetings unless absolutely essential	23
Institution gave professionals more technology to use	23
Express check out of residence halls	18
Increased use of campus email	16
Better trained on university technology	15
Easier to run search committees for professional and student staffs online	14
Increased general communication between team members	13
Remote course placement testing	9

Qualitative Data

There were three short-answer questions at the conclusion of Survey 2. These questions were unanswered by an average of 27 participants. When considering these findings, while still relevant to the research study, it is important to note that the responses provided may not be representative of all 80 participants.

The first follow-up question was asking about any positive feedback regarding changes made during the COVID-19 pandemic. Many of the participants who answered this question answered it similarly to the data found in Table 4 in which they listed changes that were made in their office as opposed to providing feedback about the changes. That being considered, it is important to note that out of the 50 participants who responded to this question, 23 individuals mentioned that the increased flexibility in their workday has helped them be more productive and able to practice self-care habits. Likewise, just as many participants mentioned that they found they were just as, if not more, productive working from home than in their physical office.

The second open-ended question asked about which of the adaptation participants would want to revert to pre-COVID-19 norms. This question had a wide variety of answers from the 53 participants who responded. Four individuals stated that they wished no changes would revert



while one individual stated they wished everything would change back. Thirty-two (60%) of the participants all stated that they missed face-to-face interactions. These face-to-face interactions were things like meals with co-workers, teaching, in-person programming, or even being able to just walk down the hall and see students/co-workers.

The final question asked in the open-ended section asked participants about which things they hoped would stay the same post-pandemic. In a stark difference to the answers provided in the second question, 49 of the 54 participants (~91%) who answered this question stated that they hoped virtual meetings and work from home options remain to different degrees. It is important to remember not every individual chose to answer all three questions so different people may have responded to each, but it is worth noting the discrepancy between the 60% of participants missing face-to-face interactions and the 90% who hoped to keep utilizing the adaptations that prevent that from happening. The remaining five participants who responded differently included nothing, relaxed dress codes, and the ability to record lectures for students who miss class.

Discussion and Implications

The COVID-19 pandemic had deep effects on how higher education professionals did their jobs. Classes and programs were moved online or canceled altogether due to student, faculty, and staff illnesses (Bramnick, 2021). Emergency (and sometimes planned) transitions had a profound impact on the quality of higher education activities planned (Brown & Finn, 2021). Yet, professionals found ways to adapt.

What was revealed through participant responses is that as the pandemic progressed and workplace changes were made intentionally (through campus planning or required mandate) some changes were viewed as beneficial. This was specifically true when we consider the



following topics: communication, technology-enhanced access to learning, and involvement in decision-making processes. The consensus between existing literature and the findings of these participants is unique in that it is in both agreement and disagreement at the same time.

When one considers communication during the pandemic, the mind may automatically go towards the perceived lack thereof that many felt at the start of lockdown. In fact, this is what the literature posited when considering health crises of the past (Mitchell et al., 2014; Pergolizzi et al., 2014). These studies told us that the biggest issue with communication was that many stakeholders felt while communication methods improved, that they wished to have been a part of the conversation to make the decisions. When asking these participants their opinions, many indicated that communication had improved, teammates worked better together and unnecessary communication was lowered (this being in the form of unnecessary meetings and drop by appointments). The rate in which different facets of communication noted in Table 8 shows that communication was important to these participants, however, the importance has shifted since the previous studies.

Another consideration that was supported and less challenged than the previous topic, both by the literature and these participants was the role that technology played in each health crisis. Pergolizzi et al. (2014) discussed at length how the advent of social media made mass communication much easier. Others observe that technology provided students a way to meaningfully interact with each other through online games, classroom polls, virtual workshops and connecting with peer groups (Brown & Finn, 2021; Lubarsky & Thomas, 2020). Participants echoed the same rating remote work, virtual meetings, recorded programs/events and technology upgrades as among the highest positive workplace adaptations of the study.



What can be gleaned from this study is that, even in the face of constant change, higher education professionals were, and are, highly adaptive and will work to make positive change. Stakeholders should be considered when making policy updates, so all feel validated in their concerns (Green et al. 2020). When considering this research to assist in making workplace changes, evaluate what actions will impact communication and technology within a team. The participants in this study have shown that communication and technology are crucial to them and their success and thus any adjustments to them should be made with care and consideration.

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

Limitations to this investigation need to be acknowledged and raise possibilities for future research. First, the same participants may not have responded to both surveys. This may have resulted in different opinions of what constituted a positive workplace adaptation. Notably, the design of Survey 2 was grounded in data collected from Survey 1, respondents were anonymous (with no identifying information collected); however, future research could ensure data collection from the same groups of participants.

Some participants mentioned in their answers to Survey 1 that they would have been interested in learning what higher education professionals thought were positive changes and would be perceived the same by students. This is certainly worth investigating, especially when considering the findings in Mitchell et al. (2014) that shared students mentioned that the administration left them out of decision making, thus upsetting the students. Along with this point, if similar research is completed it may be important to not only see if students' perceptions were the same as professionals, but also where their opinions differed. Finally, recognizing the adaptability of student affairs professionals through the pandemic, suggests a resilience worth investigating. Research has shown that higher education professionals, in general, possess high



resilience (Low, 2010; Higgins, 2021). Future research could investigate employee resilience during pandemic. As Finstad and associates found (2021), employees were able to deploy strategies through the pandemic that converted trauma into resilience. My inquiry also revealed that student affairs professionals were adaptive through the pandemic in ways that yielded positive changes.



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