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When the World Paused for COVID-19, We Finally Caught Our Breath: Students' Schedules, Stress, and the Busy Time of the Semester

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When the World Paused for COVID-19, We Finally Caught Our Breath: Students' Schedules, Stress, and the Busy Time of the Semester

Abstract

Life as a postsecondary student can be extremely busy especially as many students combine academic studies with volunteering, employment, and personal commitments. Students become even busier at the middle of the semester with midterms and assignments due at the same time, which can lead to stress. This busy time typically continues into the end of term. Our qualitative study with nine university students captured what happened when the busy time of the semester coincided with the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. The stress students felt during this busy time in the semester was paused while the university adjusted to online learning. Although the pandemic was stressful for many, the pause it created for students was appreciated as they were unsure how to manage all their commitments – both academic and non-academic. These findings suggest that the structure of university schedules and academic timetables may have harmful effects on student well-being.

La vie en tant qu'étudiant ou étudiante post-secondaire peut être extrêmement occupée alors que les étudiants et les étudiantes combinent leurs études universitaires avec le bénévolat, un emploi et les engagements personnels. Les étudiants et les étudiantes sont encore plus occupés au milieu du semestre avec leurs examens de mi-session et les dates de remise de travaux qui tombent en même temps, ce qui peut engendrer du stress. Cette période de forte activité peut continuer jusqu'à la fin de la session. Notre étude qualitative auprès de neuf étudiants et étudiantes universitaires a permis de saisir ce qui s'est passé quand la période chargée du semestre a coïncidé avec la pandémie de la COVID-19. Le stress ressenti par les étudiants et les étudiantes durant cette période chargée du semestre a été mis en pause alors que les universités se sont ajustées pour l'enseignement en ligne. Bien que la pandémie ait été une période stressante pour de nombreuses personnes, la pause qu'elle a créée pour les étudiants et les étudiantes a été appréciée à un moment où ceux-ci ne savaient pas comment gérer toutes leurs obligations – universitaires et non universitaires. Ces résultats suggèrent que la structure de l'emploi du temps des universités pourrait avoir des effets néfastes sur le bien-être des étudiants et des étudiantes.

Keywords

COVID-19, stress, well-being, post-secondary education; COVID-19, stress, bien-être, enseignement post-secondaire

University is an exciting and challenging time for students. The typical challenges experienced by university students changed as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. In March 2020, most, if not all universities, quickly responded to the COVID-19 pandemic by closing campuses and switching to an online learning environment (Day et al., 2021). While the impacts of COVID-19 vary depending on geographic location, we focus on Acadia University in Wolfville, Nova Scotia, Canada. Acadia University students transitioned to online learning within a week. This shift occurred during one of the busiest times in the academic timetable—midterm exams and assignments while leading up to final exams. Many students were balancing this busy time in the semester while also volunteering and/or working. Interviews with nine students in March and April 2020 captured students' experiences of transitioning from a busy and stressful time of the semester to a complete standstill while the university transitioned to online learning. Our data captured the first moments of the global pandemic and provide an in-depth view of how students managed these new and unknown transitions. Students' academic life came to an abrupt stop while their stress and fears about the unknown virus interfered with their studies and many other aspects of their life.

Life as a Student – Prior to COVID-19

Postsecondary education goes beyond what is learned inside the classroom. Many students are engaged in activities outside of academics which become a large part of the university experience, especially at Acadia University where it has become expected of students (Robart, 2020). The university is situated in a small town in Nova Scotia, and “with the presence of Acadia University, Wolfville’s population doubles to over 7,000” (Acadia University, 2022a). Therefore, the student population is integral to the community and, as a result, students are encouraged to participate in extracurricular activities and to volunteer both within the university and in the community. Involvement in extracurricular activities and volunteering provides students with the skills needed for their future and allows them to further their interests (Robart, 2020). Volunteering is popular among postsecondary students, as it should “enhance students’ employability; provide students with fun and stimulating experiences and opportunities to make friends – as well as developing students’ sense of civic duty and responsibility” (Holdsworth, 2010, p. 422). Younger people engage in volunteering to acquire skills and training to help them with future job opportunities (Handy et al., 2010; Roulin & Bangarter, 2011) and activities such as volunteering often help students with their studies (Newmann et al., 1992, p. 11). Involvement beyond just academics can be a transformative experience and a critical component to the post-secondary education experience.

Stress among students has received much research attention, especially over the last decade. Studies have found that students face high levels of stress which has a negative impact on their academic success (Frazier et al., 2019; Wiens et al., 2020). One way to reduce stress levels is to provide students with resources and support. Students at Acadia University have access to various workshops and supports throughout the school year to help them with time management, study skills, note taking skills, and other relevant skill development. During Orientation Week, the availability of programming varies from year to year but each year students can register for workshops to help them adapt to university life. There are three main departments at Acadia University where students can access support throughout their academic career: Accessible Learning Services, Academic and Student Support Services, and Mental Health and Wellness Services (Acadia University, 2022b; Acadia University, 2022c).

Many students balance multiple roles, such as employment, volunteering, and extracurricular activities while completing their postsecondary education. Balancing these multiple roles can be problematic as extra non-academic activities often compete with academics (Greene & Maggs, 2015). Students must learn how to balance their time and determine how to prioritize where and how they spend their time. American college students, on average, spend 3.9 days a week on educational activities and approximately 14 to 15 hours a week preparing for class (National Survey of Student Engagement, 2013). Greene and Maggs (2015) report that American college students, on a daily average, spend 31 minutes on employment, two hours on organized activities, and slightly less than three hours on academics. Employed students often have more difficulty balancing their time as jobs may be less flexible compared to volunteering opportunities (Greene & Maggs, 2015). In addition to trying to balance multiple roles, students often place high expectations on themselves leading to further demands on their time and additional stress (Hamaideh, 2011). Students experience a variety of stressors as a result of their desire for academic achievement, engagement in employment and/or volunteering, and personal interactions. While many of these stressors are self-imposed, they still impact the general health and well-being of students (Hamaideh, 2011) and their educational achievement (Pascoe et al., 2020).

First Impacts of COVID-19 Pandemic

Acadia students first heard about COVID-19's impact on their university in January 2020 (Acadia University, 2020a). However, it was unclear how the world would change over the next several months. Acadia University sent an electronic announcement to students, faculty, and staff about the virus and preventative measures to avoid becoming sick. During the early part of March, Acadia University quickly responded to the growing concerns about the global pandemic and started to issue restrictions on non-essential gatherings, international and domestic travel restrictions, self-quarantine requirements and guidelines, and changes in residence life operations. On March 14th the decision to suspend classes until March 20th was made and the university closed for all non-essential activities on March 17th. Suspending classes for a week allowed students time to move home, if needed, and gave professors time to prepare for online learning (Acadia University, 2020b). All students in residence were required to move out by March 22nd (Acadia University, 2020c; 2020d). Finally, on March 23rd, classes transitioned to an online format for the remainder of the year¹.

Changes in Student Life as a result of COVID-19

The academic life of students was not the only thing halted during the initial stages of the COVID-19 pandemic. All extracurricular activities were cancelled and people were encouraged to stay home except for essential needs and activities and told to avoid physical interactions with others. During the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, in-person gatherings, meaning central social components to higher education, such as lectures, classroom discussions, meeting with peers and professors, and volunteering, either switched to an online medium or were cancelled. Thus, the ways in which students form essential connections were disrupted. These

¹ This detailed list only includes details provided from the University and does not include any emails that students would have received from the university, their professors, or anyone else affiliated with the university.

disruptions could be problematic for students as formal and informal interactions with peers are essential for students' success (Peregrina-Kretz et al., 2018).

Interference with Student Learning

The COVID-19 pandemic created a situation that was largely unimaginable. The pandemic led to a shift in format of how university students learn, one that no longer consists of students and professors being in the same room (Biswas & Debnath, 2020, p. 2038). The pandemic forced online learning to become the new 'normal' for postsecondary institutions (Ando, 2021, p. 438). However, this new 'normal' interfered with students' expectations of postsecondary education as they were no longer able to participate in extracurricular activities unless they engaged virtually. Students were skeptical about online learning as they did not believe that online learning would provide them with the proper tools and skills they need for their future careers (Ando, 2021). Online learning during the pandemic could also negatively effect students' learning experiences as there was a lack of motivation on the student's behalf to learn in an online setting (Serhan, 2020). These concerns were being expressed at postsecondary institutions worldwide. Not only were students struggling with online learning, but they were also missing out on opportunities and services outside of the classroom as a result of the pandemic.

Theories on Time Management

The concept of social time and the sociology of time can be applied to understand the impact COVID-19 pandemic had on students. Social time illustrates the way social systems intersect and interact with each other and how individuals must prioritize and manage certain components of their lives at different times throughout the day. Students' use of time and their interactions changed as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, the pandemic impacted interactions and negotiations which we analyse using the concept of "time embeddedness" (Lewis & Weigert, 1981, p. 437). Examples of students engaging in time embeddedness occurs when students leave an interaction early because of the larger obligation of attending class or when students stay up late and forfeit sleep because of institutional requirements to complete coursework by a certain deadline.

Lewis and Weigert (1981)'s paradigm for the sociology of time consists of three features — embeddedness, stratification, and synchronization. They argue that:

social times are embedded within larger social life and facts, stratified by one's social role as a free individual, a follower of the state, and an agent of a social institution, and synchronized with the irreducible collectiveness of social order (Lewis & Weigert, 1981 as cited in Liao et al., 2013, p. 122).

These three features interact with different levels of social time which are self time, interaction time, institutional time, and cyclic time. Self time is experienced at the individual level, for example, the time students spend alone relaxing. Interaction time occurs during informational interactions at the group level and assumes that all social acts are embedded within larger social acts. An example of interaction time is when students engage with their classmates or professors. Institutional time occurs within bureaucracies and other formal organizations that construct their

own time schedules and rules. In the university setting, institutional time could be timetables and end of term deadlines. Finally, cyclic time occurs at the societal-cultural level and represents the daily, weekly, and yearly cycles that influence social interactions (Lewis & Weigert, 1981). These levels of time are stratified as cyclic time takes precedence over interaction time and interaction time takes precedence over personal time.

Careers, referring “to sequences of statuses which make up a unified time period, like the four years in high school or mother’s child-bearing career”, are another focus in social time (Lewis & Weigert, 1981, p. 443). Therefore, the time period which students enter post-secondary education and graduate is considered a career. Post-secondary institutions have criteria based on efficiency and standardization. There are relatively clear markers of progress that dictate advancement within the career, such as different student levels (first year, second year, etc.) and grade point averages. Lewis and Weigert’s (1981) theorization of the sociology of time provides a framework for understanding the career of a post-secondary student and the ways in which different levels of social time and aspects of student life, such as academic workload, employment, and volunteering, are influenced by time embeddedness. Unique to our study is the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on post-secondary students. The COVID-19 pandemic, in this sense, challenges synchronization as there are expected timelines and expectations of university life that were disrupted during the pandemic. Therefore, the pandemic can be viewed as a “societally unsynchronized event” (Lewis & Weigert, 1981, p. 452) resulting in collective distress and anxiety and profoundly affecting quality of life.

Overall, the COVID-19 pandemic created a great deal of hardship for many students as their lifestyle, both within and outside the classroom, changed completely. The pandemic altered traditional time patterns for students. We examine what happened to students at the start of the pandemic when things shut down and classes shifted to an online format. Online learning has been a challenge for some post-secondary students and recent studies have shown that it may not meet the expectations of students and is underpreparing postsecondary students for their future (Ando, 2021; Day et al., 2021). Additionally, postsecondary students were likely facing restrictions in their extracurricular activities, such as volunteering, which had the potential to impact their educational experience and future opportunities. COVID-19 impacted postsecondary students across the world as institutions shifted to online learning and involvement outside of academics was disrupted. These changes can have lasting impacts on students’ educational experiences and on their futures.

Methodology and Data

Data for this study came from interviews conducted with university students who initially participated in a larger mixed-methods study. The focus of the original study was to examine time management skills, finances, and overall health and well-being of students. An online survey was developed in LimeSurvey by students in a third-year Sociology methods class². The final question in the survey asked students if they wanted to be interviewed and 50 students agreed to be interviewed and provided contact information. The first author received approval from the University’s Research Ethics Board and contacted the 50 interested students to see if they were

² The Department of Sociology’s Research Ethics Committee provided ethics approval for this online survey that was developed by students in a Sociology class. The survey was distributed by email to all university students from October 22, 2019 to November 8, 2019 which overlapped with the fall reading break in 2019.

available to do an interview. Student research assistants were hired to conduct the interviews and nine interviews were completed between March 2020 and April 2020. As these interviews were conducted at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, all interviews were done virtually. All participants provided informed consent and the interviews were recorded with permission from the participants. The fully transcribed interviews were coded and analyzed using Dedoose, a software program to analyse qualitative data. The process of coding followed Strauss and Corbin's grounded theory approach, which includes open coding, axial coding, and selective coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The second author did all coding and met regularly with the first author to discuss the themes. Open coding, in which the data were broken into discrete parts and then labelled into codes, was used in the first step of analysis. Following this process, the first two authors met to discuss how to move towards axial coding. Axial coding was used to draw connections between the codes. In this step, the codes that were developed in open coding were organized into a number of categories. The third, and final step, included selective coding, in which all of the categories were connected to the overall theme of time use and stress of university students and the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. Finally, all three authors met to review the codes as a team and a consensus about relevant themes was reached.

Despite the sample size being relatively small, the nine interviews included a diverse sample of students with seven undergraduate students and two graduate students (see Table 1). Among the interviews, the sample included six women and three men between 18 and 31 years old. We included students from the four faculties on campus: Arts, Professional Studies, Pure and Applied Sciences, and Theology. Of the sample, one graduate student was studying through correspondence and the other eight students were studying on campus. While the interview guide did not intentionally plan to address stress and well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic, the interviews occurred as students were transitioning from in-person lectures to online learning as well as making decisions about moving home. The topic of COVID-19 came up in all the interviews when asked: How would you describe your level of stress over the last few days on a scale of 0 (no stress) to 10 (extreme stress)? Additionally, participants raised the adjustment to COVID-19 when asked about their daily schedule, if they were currently working or volunteering, what their workload looked like, and other questions related to health and well-being. We address two main research questions in this paper:

- 1) Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, how did students manage their time and what impact did their schedules have on their overall well-being?
- 2) What impact did the COVID-19 pandemic have on students' schedules and general well-being?

Table 1*Description of the Participants*

Pseudonym	Gender	Program	Student Level	Student Status
Kate	Woman	Biology	Undergraduate – 1st Year	Full Time
Carrie	Woman	Psychology	Undergraduate – 4th Year	Full Time
Peyton	Woman	Nutrition	Undergraduate – 4th Year	Full Time
Jack	Man	Engineering	Undergraduate – 3rd Year	Full Time
Meredith	Woman	Theology	Graduate	Part Time (Distance)
Julia	Woman	Education in Counselling	Graduate	Full Time
Philip	Man	Kinesiology	Undergraduate – 4th Year	Full Time
Amanda	Woman	Community Development/ Environmental Sustainability	Undergraduate – 2nd Year	Full Time
Matt	Man	Environmental Sustainability	Undergraduate – 2nd Year	Full Time

Results

We identified two main areas of focus: life before COVID-19 and life during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic. Within the life before COVID-19 section we focused on students' activities while attending university. First, we focused on student time use and stress leading up to the COVID-19 pandemic through the following three key themes: time spent on academics, time spent on employment, and time spent volunteering. We then focused on the busy time of the semester for students which coincided with the start of the pandemic and when students were interviewed. The final section focused on how students adapted to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Time Use and Stress Leading up to COVID-19

Within the interviews, post-secondary student lifestyle was depicted through three components: academics, employment, and volunteering. These components, and students' ability to manage them, should be considered when depicting student well-being. Students' commitment

to employment and volunteering varied depending on their course load, financial status and support, and time management skills.

Time Spent on Campus and Learning

Students spend much of their time in lectures, labs, and tutorials. For the seven undergraduate students who were studying full-time, most reported spending between 20 to 25 hours each week in lectures and tutorials, which was similar to the amount of time American students reported spending on their academics (National Survey of Student Engagement, 2013). Peyton explained her schedule as:

I go to my classes early and try to check my email and stuff or do some work before other people come. Then classes, then I usually have meetings—volunteer groups or with professors, and stuff—and then lunch... Then I do more schoolwork.

The participants noted that while their day-to-day activities change depending on their course schedule, they spend the majority of their day on campus. Typically, students remained on campus after their first class and used breaks throughout their day for studying, meeting with professors, socializing with peers, volunteering, or employment. A usual day for Kate is explained as “Just get up, go to Acadia usually in the SUB [Student Union Building], go to my classes then go back to the ASU [Acadia Students’ Union] to do homework and then go home to do homework.” Other students reported spending time in the library or other central buildings on campus rather than going home. Therefore, even if students only spent 20-25 hours of their week on academics (between class, labs, and tutorials), much of their daily routine took place on campus.

Time Spent on Employment

Seven of the nine participants worked throughout the school year. Most of the students had jobs either on campus or affiliated with their schooling, such as co-op job placements or community-based work with local organizations. Two students talked about working locally in retail and the restaurant industry. Of the seven students who were working, one was working full-time and studying part-time and the remaining six were working part-time while studying full-time. Students working part-time reported spending approximately six to eight hours a week on employment. Employed students cited their employment as a critical source of income used for everyday finances such as rent, groceries, and utilities.

Summer employment was also an important income source for students. Two participants described how their summer income was sufficient to cover their living expenses throughout the school year and, therefore, they did not have to work and were able to prioritize their courses. When asked about employment, Carrie explained:

No, I don’t have a job. I did have a job ... I was serving over the summer, and I tried to do that a bit into the fall. Once like mid-late September rolled around, I was like ‘no thanks’ ... I’m very fortunate and privileged to not have had a job, I’ve tried to avoid that.

As Carrie described, she was fortunate because not working during the school year allowed her more time to prioritize her studies. Other students who were unable to stop working during the

school year may have experienced additional stress trying to balance employment and school as schedules tend to conflict. These conflicts are highlighted by Kate, who explained:

Well, I don't have too many hours at work but once and in a while it does tend to stack up. My shifts are unpredictable. Sometimes I work one shift a Friday night, other weeks I have three shifts on Sunday, Monday, and Tuesday. So, I guess the unpredictability of my schedule, especially when my work doesn't always pay attention to when I have a midterm the next day or when I have assignments due that night.

Philip also discussed the conflicts he experienced between work and school. He worked as a student therapist for one of the teams on campus which made his schedule busier at the beginning of the term. He explained:

My study habits definitely fluctuate depending on how busy I am. My schedule is a lot busier until November-ish and then it kind of eases up because they move out of their season. So earlier on in the school year when I'm busier, my study habits are definitely better because I have to stay on top of things and whenever I get a free hour, I usually spend it studying as opposed to sitting back relaxing.

Unpredictable schedules for working students were a common problem as many of the students were working part-time jobs where they may not have the same schedule each week. Employment was typically not as flexible as volunteering or other extracurricular activities (Greene & Maggs, 2015), which can be problematic for students. When employment was not flexible, students needed to learn how to budget their time. Some students, like Philip, were better at balancing work and school when they were busy as they needed to be more accountable for their time. Although students may have a challenging time balancing work and school, the need for income pushes them to find ways to cope. The interview data highlight how the high cost of post-secondary education created financial barriers that not only required many students to seek employment while in school, but also added an extra layer of stress.

Time Spent Volunteering

A final component to student lifestyle was volunteering and all nine participants volunteered. Examples of their volunteer activities included community out-reach programs, internal organizations on campus, program-specific organizations, and various events held within the community. The students reported spending six to eight hours a week volunteering although several reported volunteering on less regular basis. There is a program called S.M.I.L.E. (Sensory Motor Instructional Leadership Experience) at Acadia that relies on students as volunteers throughout the school year to provide programming for people with disabilities and is a popular volunteer activity for students (Acadia University, 2022d). Peyton was the most active with volunteering and had consistent commitments throughout the school year. She described her volunteer activities as:

The biggest one is the S.M.I.L.E. program, and that's 3-4 hours once a week. Then a couple of nutrition societies, which is at least an hour a week, or maybe 1-3 hours a week... In the

fall I helped coach ... [a public school's sports] team, and that was one to two hours a week. Those are the big ones that I can think of ... So, maybe, four to six hours a week.

Others, like Jake, volunteered on a less regular basis. Jake said, "I don't volunteer regularly, like any kind of a weekly event, so I would say nothing that would be consistent, but there would be occasional events I would volunteer for. I did the, I'll go with the robotics week."

Balancing volunteer work with their other responsibilities was often a challenge for students. Julia wanted to spend more time in her volunteer role as a horse therapist but was unable to balance it with program requirements. For others, the time commitment was possible but may increase stress levels. Students had to determine whether the benefits outweighed the costs. For example, Peyton, who spent a lot of time volunteering with S.M.I.L.E. reported: "Volunteering with S.M.I.L.E. gives me a little bit of a distraction even though it cuts down on my free time, which maybe makes me more stressed, it relieves my anxiety."

Busy Time of the Semester

Although students appear to be busy throughout the school year, there is a period of time that is busier than usual for them. This busy time occurs when deadlines for papers and assignments, as well as testing, all occur within the same few weeks. The start of this period is typically in the middle of the semester as students have midterms, projects wrap-up, and students start to prepare for exams. Due to these additional stressors for students, they often dread the final six weeks of term. Peyton described how she sees the academic term as:

I mean, it's [academic workload] designed in fluctuations. The beginning's not so bad, then you get midterm round one stress, then nothing, then midterm round two happens, and then exams... It's consistent, and... always sort of—really busy and then not, so you have some time to catch your breath.

As the end of term fills up with assignments and testing, students typically need more time to focus on studying. For instance, Phillip described how his routine changed based on deadlines and tests that occurred throughout the term. His study habits were better earlier in the term when he had a busier schedule with extracurricular activities. However, during the busy time of the semester he found that all he did was study. Amanda also commented on the structure of the school year and how it impacted her learning. She said:

I do wish that university wasn't so back ended, I find the beginning is my favourite time, like starting a semester is my absolute favorite time of school because I do genuinely love learning and I love school...I love that phase because you're just learning all this new information and it's so interesting and doing all these interesting readings, and then it just gets to a point where you're just having to pound out information and not really be able to properly process it, just kind of hand out these essays, so I don't like that part.

The structure of the semester was problematic for Amanda as she felt there was not enough time to properly process all the assignments she needed to complete.

Not only does this busy time of the semester impact students' desire and motivation for learning, but it also impacts how they determine which tasks to prioritize throughout the day. Students have come to recognize that in this busy time of the semester they prioritize schoolwork and studying over taking care of themselves. Critical to their well-being, tasks such as eating properly, getting a good night's rest, and engaging in physical exercise were often forgotten. Phillip and Carrie talked about having to give up exercise in order to meet the academic demands during this busy time of the semester.

During the interviews, the students presented ideas about what could be done to help them during the busy time of the semester. While Amanda and Phillip mentioned the need to work on time management skills, others wanted to see changes at the university level. Matt explained the range of possibilities if faculty across different disciplines communicated their course design to each other. He wants to see "communication between profs and in different departments on like final papers and stuff or like if there's a lot of overlap...then kind of making sure that it's not all kind of coming down at once." Kate echoes Matt's sentiment:

Well, a lot of profs are like "okay it's a really good time for a midterm" and then I have four more midterms on the same day. And that's not always fun I currently have courses in a variety of departments so while the math department are trying to balance out their own midterms, they miss all the other departments. They tend to pile up at the same time because they're not communicating.

Kate went on to explore options that professors could consider that would improve the busy time of semester for students. She wondered about having:

A sort of hub where every professor would put down the days and times of their midterms so that you could see who they might interfere with so if it's like a fourth-year geology and first year philosophy at the same time it would be fine.

Although this suggestion would create additional work for faculty members and would interfere with academic freedom, it showed that students are concerned about their schedules and trying to think of useful ways to improve the busy time of the semester.

Matt described how students and faculty have come to acknowledge this notion of the busy time of the semester and joke about it. Students would often check in with other and described the busy time of the semester as the worst time for students. However, making jokes about it does not help students manage the additional stress that occurs during this time. Matt said:

It's hard because, the assignments follow such a structure where it's like you have, you know, everything goes to the very end of the semester ... it's like I don't know if there could almost be some coordination ... I'm just short sighted in terms of like I look at one thing at a time and then you know, the model of five classes kind of demands that you don't do that which is like, you know, it's preparing you for the greater bureaucracy to come, but it's not ideal for me personally.

Matt was optimistic that changes could happen as one of his courses had a non-typical design where more things were due at the first part of the semester rather than the end. This format lightened up his workload at the end of the semester.

Adapting to COVID-19 and Lowered Stress

Most interesting for our research was that we interviewed students as the busy time of the semester was interrupted by COVID-19. Once the pandemic struck, students had to navigate their way through the uncertainty of the virus. Many postsecondary students had to make emergency travel plans including arrangements to move while adjusting to online learning.

At the time of the interviews, students were in the midst of completing their school year online. Online learning was a new experience for all but Julia who was already engaged in online learning. For the other eight participants, shifting to online learning occurred during the busiest time of the academic year when many of the students were writing or preparing to write mid-terms and complete term papers. Prior to the start of online learning, Acadia University shut down for one week. This break was appreciated as mentioned by Carrie who said, “I think having this week off has been a dream come true. Part of this semester I was like ‘ohhh this week is gonna be hideous!’ but now that it’s happening, I’m like ‘how beautiful!’” Despite being in the midst of a global pandemic, the week off allowed Carrie to catch her breath. Meredith also appreciated the break but also recognized new problems associated with the COVID-19 pandemic. She explained:

It [COVID-19] has cancelled events I was supposed to speak at and I didn’t have time to prepare my talk well, so I was, ‘Ah, when am I going to find the time to do this?’ and now I don’t have to, so that’s kind of nice! I don’t know... But, it’s a give-take. I’m definitely stressed for my family, who are travelling and not home.

Philip described how his life had changed as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. He said:

It is different, the last few days I suppose would include the time when I was moving out ... the stress was probably higher than usual and none of that was academic related. So, my stressing the last few days pre-COVID was pretty standard, I think I was stressed to right after reading week ... Since then, obviously I had to move everything out of my apartment, so stress levels were higher ... since getting [home]... stress levels have been really low which has been kind of nice. I still have classes to work on but all the other responsibilities that I had are gone so that’s super sweet.

As described by Philip, although academic stress levels and having to balance multiple roles with schoolwork decreased as a result of the pandemic, students faced new stresses from COVID-19 and the shift to online learning. However, these new feelings of stress were juxtaposed with some relief about the cancellation or rescheduling of assignments. Kate said, “I would’ve been very stressed today if school were still going on because I have three midterms back-to-back.” Therefore, despite the new stress associated with COVID-19, students felt a bit of relief as their academic work was rearranged and moved to a new online format. Matt also talked about feeling happy despite living through a global pandemic. He was not looking forward to the last few weeks of the semester and said “it would have been really intense, like, and not fun at all ... But now I’m like kinda relaxing.” Matt went on to explain:

I’m kind of happier than I have been the whole semester in like the worst time to be happy, and I feel weird saying that because I know people are like having so many issues right now and like you know family members of people are dying because of the virus. I don’t

mean to diminish or minimize any of that, but it's kind of like the semester got cut off fairly early and like the structure was the issue.

Despite most of the students being relieved to take a break while the world adapted to the COVID-19 pandemic, others talked about the losses associated with the pandemic. For instance, Julia was supposed to be working full-time in a co-op placement, but COVID-19 cancelled her placement.

The pandemic increased stress in other areas of life such as students often had to move, navigate travel, adapt to new learning modalities, adapt to job or internship losses, all combined with the uncertainty of the COVID-19. This uncertainty and the need to move could cause stress for students. Amanda, who decided to move home, reported high levels of stress which was mostly related to decisions in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. When asked to rank stress on a scale from zero (no stress) to 10 (extreme stress) Amanda said:

I'd say it was pretty high, about a 10 because of this [the pandemic] and now I feel much better being at home ... was just really hard to make the decision should I stay, should I leave and once I decided to leave, I have like two days to pack up the whole house, move and I had to rely on other people a lot and I felt a bit uncomfortable to rely on others like to drive me to the airport.

Amanda's stress, although heightened at the beginning of the pandemic, decreased once she was settled at home. The stress of having to move abruptly without any planning was likely common for many students. Moving can be a stressful event and the stress may be heightened when having to do it with very short notice and during a pandemic.

Discussion

University is a unique experience during a person's life that can be both challenging and rewarding. Challenges are often related to the workload associated with being a student, such as tests, assignments, presentations, and exams, while balancing other activities such as volunteering, employment, and social activities. Many of the academic tasks are clustered around similar due dates which can contribute to additional stress especially for students who participate in multiple roles and activities. Our interviews were conducted during what students refer to as their busy time. However, these interviews capture a unique point in the semester in which COVID-19 interrupted this busy time period and allowed students to pause their schedules and try to adapt to what would become a new normal. COVID-19 disrupted the different levels of social time for students: self time, interaction time, institutional time, and cyclic time. Thus, we conceptualize the COVID-19 pandemic as a "societally unsynchronized event" (Lewis & Weigert, 1981, p. 452).

Life for university students goes beyond just academics. Students often balance academics, employment, volunteering, sports, and personal interactions with family and friends. Participating in activities beyond just academics is important for students (Newmann et al., 1992) even if they conflict with their academics (Greene & Maggs, 2015). Therefore, learning to balance these activities and their different roles and responsibilities is important for students but there are certain times during the term when balancing becomes especially challenging. Students who place a high expectation on themselves may be vulnerable to stress (Hamaideh, 2011) especially during busy time periods. The start of the COVID-19 pandemic occurred approximately six weeks before the end of term. Based on our interviews across various disciplines, we know that this is when students

were dealing with tests and assignments all due around the same time. Our interviews took place after the university paused for a week while professors adapted their courses to online learning. This pause allowed students to reflect on their schedules and appreciate the break as many due dates were extended or assignments and tests were canceled. Within a 10-day period, students went from experiencing heightened stress due to their academic obligations to relief from the temporary suspension of academic obligations to heightened stress from the pandemic.

The surprise pause in the semester that students experienced is not sustainable long-term nor do we recommend it. However, we argue that the reflection that occurred when students became aware of the multiple stresses occurring in the middle to end of their semester and how they felt when these were paused or canceled is important. In addition to the pause in their academic life, most of the students reported that their volunteer activities and some of their jobs were also paused allowing them time to reflect on how they had been prioritizing their schedules and activities. Prior to COVID-19, students had never experienced a disruption of this magnitude to their schedules. This disruption in schedules and routine brought to the forefront the reality of how institutional timetables and organizational structures are practiced in a way that can have negative effects on student well-being. The data showed that having multiple course requirements, such as midterms, assignments, and papers, scheduled at once does not promote student success. While COVID-19 brought on new stressors, such as learning and studying at home, it is critical that we recognize the relief students expressed from institutional pressures. More awareness of how timelines impact students is needed, by students, faculty, and administrators.

The ways in which COVID-19 challenged “synchronization” was explored in the interviews through students’ sense of normalcy and routine being disrupted and therefore causing a shift in priorities. As students described in the interview, the break from the institutional deadlines and testing while the university switched to an online format was greatly appreciated. The start of the COVID-19 pandemic occurred during the busy time of the semester, thus, experiences of time embeddedness that were normally depicted as forfeiting sleep due to end of term deadlines, were challenged by this societally unsynchronized event. Instead of focusing on institutional deadlines, students’ stress increased in other areas of life such as moving their belongings, navigating travel safely, and adapting to new learning styles, all of which were heavily influenced by public health guidelines. Thus, the ways in which individuals and institutions turned to public health and government authorities for guidance during COVID-19 can be conceptualized as an attempt to regain synchronization and social order.

We anticipated that students would have felt more stress and heightened anxiety due to the constant change and the need to adapt as the world responded to the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, we expected that students would feel elevated stress levels as a result of their academic work as interviews took place during what students identified as the busy time of the semester. However, our findings revealed that during the early stages of the pandemic, when students were already experiencing high levels of stress due to their class schedules, most participants felt as though their stress levels decreased despite the stress of living through a global pandemic. The decreased stress may have been a result of the week-long break to allow faculty to shift classes to an online format and allow students time to return home, if needed. This pause demonstrates that universities need to be more aware of the stress placed on students during this busy time of the semester and recognize the pressures that students face as a result of balancing multiple roles. The fact that students were relieved despite living through a global pandemic emphasizes the ways in which institutional pressures and stress has costly effects on their overall well-being.

As a stress-reduction tool, many Canadian universities adopted the use of fall breaks, yet there have been few institutional evaluations measuring the effectiveness of reducing student stress (Agnew et al. 2018; Pilato et al., 2022; Poole et al., 2019). Acadia University first consistently offered a reading week in the fall term in 2018/19; however, the impacts of this week have not been documented. Therefore, additional evaluations of the fall reading break are needed to understand the impact. In terms of understanding student well-being, further research is needed to address the needs of international and Indigenous students, as these populations might have unique student stress experiences (Pilato et al., 2022).

Based on the interview data, while the reading breaks are intended to reduce student stress, assignment deadlines, and midterms are not evenly distributed over the semester and instead are overloaded between the return from reading break and the end of term. This creates the perfect storm for students and is referred to as ‘the busy time of year’. Therefore, it appears that the reading break in each term does not successfully reduce student stress surrounding assignment deadlines, midterms, and exams.

Policy Recommendations

Universities have always had these busy times of the semester when multiple assignments and tests are due at the same time. Unlike scheduled exams where there are rules to protect students from having to write a certain number of exams over a specific time period, midterms, and final papers are at the discretion of the individual professor. The students found that most professors used similar due dates for assignments and tests. Some institutions may require a certain portion of students’ grades to be posted before the date when students can withdraw from a course without receiving an official grade. There may also be restrictions on when tests and assignments can be assigned at the end of the term. Also, it makes sense to test students halfway through a course to see what they have learned. All these factors contribute to what students define as their busy time. While the focus of this article is on university students, many colleges already offer supports to their students. It would be useful for universities to look at what is being done at other institutions, such as colleges, regarding stress reduction approaches. However, it is important to note that it may be more challenging for universities to address some of these changes as instructors at universities typically have more academic freedom than instructors at colleges.

Awareness of the stress experienced by students should be discussed at universities. An awareness of the busy time of year and the impact this has on students is needed. Although this surprise break was beneficial for students, it is not sustainable or recommended. However, discussions about how work is assigned during the term at the university level may help students going forward. Additionally, students would benefit from resources on time management and prioritizing schedules. We do recognize that these resources were available to the students in this study; however, it can be challenging to get students to attend events. The timing of these events is important as they need to be when students become aware of the importance of time management but not when they are too stressed to seek assistance. Professors could build some of these skills into their classes although this would take away time from the course content. However, this may be beneficial as students are often juggling academics with work and volunteering and may not have time for additional workshops outside of class. As both students and professors reflect on their teaching and learning experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic, perhaps some of these problems with the busy time of the semester will improve.

Study Limitations

This was a small sample of nine university students in a small rural university in Atlantic Canada. However, the sample included the perspectives of both undergraduate and graduate student experiences, full-time, part-time, and correspondence learning, and all four faculties across campus and captured the experiences of students during the early stages of a global pandemic.

Conclusion

This study captured the unique transition to online learning during the initial stages of the COVID-19 pandemic and the ways in which this event disrupted post-secondary students' sense of routine. This disruption occurred during one of the busiest times in the academic timetable on top of students' usual weekly work and volunteer commitments. As a result, students found a sense of relief from their academic workload as courses were paused to account for a transition to an online learning environment. This sense of relief points to the ways in which institutional timetables impact student well-being. Students and their professors acknowledge this 'busy time of the semester', yet students felt as though little was being done to improve their workload and decrease stress. Although it would not be easy to implement changes, students would benefit if universities were aware of the institutional pressures that accumulate during certain points in the term and made changes to spread assignments more evenly during the semester. Students also need to use resources on campus that are designed to help them manage stress and develop time management skills. Students might benefit if these skills are taught in the classroom rather than additional workshops. By minimizing institutional pressures and lowering student stress, we could see improvements in overall well-being and student success throughout their post-secondary education careers.

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