

Preferred Class Modality from a Sample of Community College Students during COVID-19 and after the End of the Declaration of the Federal COVID-19 Public Health Emergency

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Abstract

A student survey was conducted in the fall of 2021, during the COVID-19 pandemic, and summer and fall of 2023, after the end of the federal COVID-19 public health emergency (PHE) declaration. The results of this survey aim to increase an understanding of community college students' preferences of class modality as they relate to the wider context of their lives. A total of 607 responses were collected on student's preferred class modality. The findings demonstrate a preference for asynchronous courses during the COVID-19 pandemic. In comparison, the survey showed that after the end of the declaration of the federal COVID-19 public health emergency (PHE), there was a preference for synchronous courses instead of asynchronous.

Keywords: class modality, online courses, distance learning, preferred modality

Resumen

Una encuesta de estudiantes se realizó en otoño de 2021 durante la pandemia de COVID-19 y después del fin de la declaración federal de emergencia de salud pública del COVID-19. Los

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resultados de esta encuesta están orientados a incrementar la comprensión de la modalidad de clase preferida por estudiantes de universidades comunitarias en relación a un contexto más amplio de sus vidas. Se recolectaron 607 respuestas en total sobre la modalidad de clase preferida por los estudiantes. Los hallazgos demuestran una preferencia por los cursos asincrónicos durante la pandemia de COVID-19. En contraste, existe una preferencia de los estudiantes por los cursos sincrónicos en comparación con los asincrónicos después del fin de la declaración federal de emergencia de salud pública del COVID-19.

Palabras clave: modalidad de clase, cursos en línea, educación a distancia, modalidad preferida

Background

The COVID-19 pandemic thrust all courses to an online modality. This abrupt shift posed many challenges in the lives of underserved students who also faced various responsibilities. Approximately 94% of students worldwide were affected by the COVID-19 pandemic (Pokhrel & Chhetri, 2021). The City University of New York (CUNY), as the largest urban public institution of higher learning in the nation, serves New York's immigrant and low-income communities. Nearly 50% of the 34 Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs) in New York State are CUNY Institutions (Excelencia in Education, 2021). According to this annual report, CUNY colleges account for some of the highest percentages of undergraduate Hispanic student enrollment and for the greatest number of undergraduate Latino students enrolled in New York. CUNY is therefore poised to set an example to the rest of the nation of how public

institutions of higher learning can play a pivotal role in setting a model that supports diverse and underserved student populations in academic persistence and degree completion.

At the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, New York City became an epicenter where many underserved communities were disproportionately impacted (McKinley, 2020). A large portion of CUNY students, particularly community college students, were faced with the traumatic experience of living, attending college, and working in the city that experienced one of the highest burdens of the COVID-19 pandemic. Due to COVID-19 negatively impacting the retention, persistence, and degree completion of community college students, it is crucial to understand students' preferred class modality to offer academic programs that meet their needs. In addition, by community colleges understanding students' preferred class modality, they can plan effective strategies that will appeal to students and address the enrollment crisis that is being experienced nationwide among community colleges (Sau, 2022).

Community Colleges have a significant role in providing access to higher education and upward mobility to populations that have been historically marginalized. They serve first-generation college attendees and students of low socioeconomic status who must tend to multiple responsibilities while attending college, such as working and fulfilling family obligations (Ma & Baum, 2016). These obligations were heightened during COVID-19 as many community college students were essential workers during the pandemic and worked long hours, leaving a limited amount of time for their studies. Community College students are older and have more competing obligations than traditional university students. Due to community colleges having open enrollment and being more affordable, they have a unique opportunity to serve student populations that have been historically excluded from educational opportunities, and potentially changing their socioeconomic trajectory.

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Characteristics of Students Enrolled in Community Colleges

According to the American Association of Community Colleges (2021), the average community college student is 28 years of age, 29% are first generation college attendees, 15% are single parents, 72% work part-time, and 62% work full-time and attend school. These characteristics make community college students older than traditional college students with family and work obligations that create stressors and challenge their ability to progress academically. Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic compounded their educational challenges as many were employed as essential workers.

The average age (26.2 years) of Hostos' students resembles the national age profile of community college students (OIRSA, 2021). More than half (58.4%) of the Hostos student population is Hispanic, followed by Black (26.1%), and most students at Hostos are female (71%) (OIRSA, 2021). Most students (43.5%) enrolled at Hostos are residents of Bronx County (OIRSA, 2021). Hostos is situated in Bronx County, which reports having the poorest health outcome out of all 62 counties in New York State (UWPHI, 2023). In addition, Bronx County has one of the highest levels of digital inequities in New York State (Ahigian & Hungtington, 2021). At the Borough of Manhattan Community College (BMCC), 36.6% of students are Hispanic, followed by 33% Black, 14.3% White, 15.8% Asian, and 0.4% American Indian (IEA, July 2022). At BMCC, 58% of the population is female, followed by male at 42%. The average age of students at BMCC is 23 years of age (IEA, Fall 2022). Most students (21.1%) enrolled at BMCC reside in Brooklyn (Kings County), followed by Bronx County (13.7%), Queens County (13.0%), and Manhattan County (12.2%) (IEA, Fall 2022). Although the geographic representation of students in BMCC is throughout New York City, most of the students reside in

underserved areas such as Brooklyn and the Bronx.

Methods

An anonymous online survey was administered to students who volunteered in fall 2021, summer and early September 2023, asking for their preferred class modality. The anonymous online survey asked students to choose a preferred class modality between asynchronous, online synchronous, hybrid, and in-person (daytime, evening, and Saturday). Students were allowed to select only one modality. The survey was administered via Google Forms and took approximately 5 minutes. No student-identifying data was collected. Since this retrospective data was originally collected for pedagogical planning and course scheduling, no incentives were given to student participants. This study compared students' preferred class modality during COVID-19 and after the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) declared the end of the federal COVID-19 public health emergency. The retrospective data was collected from students via an online link to a Google Form that was announced to students via Blackboard. At Hostos, the survey link was posted in health-related Blackboard course sites. Similarly, at BMCC, the survey link was announced and posted in health-related Blackboard course sites. Due to the anonymous survey only collecting information about preferred class modality and no identifying data such as email or demographics, no consent was obtained. This study was granted IRB approval under the exempt category as protocol number 2023-0586-HCC through the CUNY integrated institutional review board.

Results

Students' responses during the COVID-19 pandemic in fall 2021 demonstrate a preference for online asynchronous courses at 52.1% (n=221), followed by online synchronous at 24% (n= 102), then hybrid at 10.4% (n=44) and in-person daytime at 9% (n=38). The least

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preferred modalities were in-person evening and in-person Saturday at 2.4% (n=10) and 2.1% (n=9) respectively. Students' responses after the end of the declaration of the federal COVID-19 public health emergency demonstrate a preference for in-person daytime at 40.4% (n=74), followed by online synchronous at 29% (n=53), in-person evening at 13.1% (n=24), hybrid at 8.2% (n=15) and online asynchronous at 7.7% (n=14). The least preferred modality was in-person Saturday at 1.6% (n=3). A limitation of this study was that a convenience sample was used only in health-related courses, which limits the generalization of the study to the population surveyed.

Discussion

National data from 2021 reports that 40.7% of students were enrolled exclusively in distance education courses (U.S. Department of Education, 2022). Students' responses during the COVID-19 pandemic (fall 2021) demonstrated a preference for online courses (76.1%), with a breakdown of 52.1% asynchronous and 24% synchronous. After the end of the declaration of the federal COVID-19 public health emergency, students reported a 36.7% preference for online courses, with a breakdown of 29% synchronous and 7.7% asynchronous. This demonstrates a 39.4% drop in preference for online courses. This decline may be due to the digital inequities that students experienced while learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. It is noteworthy to mention that in this discussion, the hybrid courses, due to having an in-person requirement, were counted as an in-person modality. Students' responses during the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated a 24.2% preference for in-person (hybrid, daytime, evening, and Saturday); by comparison, after the end of the declaration of the federal COVID-19 public health emergency, students reported a preference of 63.3% for in-person (hybrid, daytime, evening, and Saturday),

an increase of 39.1% for in-person courses. This shift in preference from online to in-person classes may be due to the challenges many students experience with online courses. In a random national sample of undergraduate students during the COVID-19 pandemic, 1 in 6 students experienced challenges with Internet connectivity as well as hardware and software problems that interfered with their learning (Means & Neisler, 2021). The challenges were more pervasive for Hispanic students and students of low socioeconomic status. Students unable to troubleshoot computer or tech problems on their own may feel overwhelmed and some students may find it hard to ask for help, while others may find it hard to receive help from an information technology (IT) department that is overextended (Hernandez, 2021; Grajek, 2021).

The data also demonstrates an increase in preference for courses that are in-person evening (13.1%) after the end of the declaration of the federal COVID-19 public health emergency, as opposed to during the COVID-19 pandemic, which was 2.3%. This preference was only reported by students enrolled in the Borough of Manhattan Community College (BMCC), which is situated in an affluent commercial sector of New York City that only reported 4 incidents of gun violence and zero murders between 2022 and 2023, as opposed to Hostos, which is in an impoverished sector of the South Bronx with high numbers of gun violence (185) and murder (31) (CompStat, 2023). The difference in crime rates between the surrounding neighborhoods may impact the students' choices in scheduling their course modality. For example, Hostos students did not report a preference for in-person evening or in-person Saturday courses when the surrounding neighborhood is deserted, which may pose a concern for safety. Hostos students demonstrated a preference for more hybrid courses, which allows them to maximize their time at the college by taking 2 courses instead of 1 on the same day. This allows students to get faster credit accumulation with limited disruption in their work-life schedule. In

addition, BMCC students reported a preference for synchronous (29%) courses instead of asynchronous (7.7%). Their preference for synchronous may be due to the decrease in active engagement that the asynchronous courses created during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Synchronous courses, although remote, provide more online learning structure and communal learning, along with allowing students to ask questions and receive immediate feedback from the instructor (Means & Neisler, 2021).

Community College students are often faced with jobs and family responsibilities that reduce the amount of time they can spend on campus (Belemian & Feng, 2013; Jean, 2020). The students' preference for remote learning in the form of synchronous as well as hybrid offers students the flexibility to attend to the various competing responsibilities that they have primarily because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Many of these students are essential workers and work additional hours due to financial constraints (Gonzalez et.al., 2021). Moreover, during the COVID-19 pandemic, many students took on the role of unpaid care provider to family members and continue to do so post-pandemic. This limits their ability to take in-person classes as well as evening classes.

Implications

The study demonstrated students' preference for in-person classes as opposed to remote post-pandemic. This preference may be partly due to the digital inequities that students of color and low socioeconomic status experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the disadvantages of the digital divide. Digital inequities during the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in many populations experiencing poor social-emotional health as they were unable to fully engage in remote learning, connect with their social network, and work

remotely. Digital inequities are prevalent in New York State, where 1 in 4 households do not have internet connectivity, such as wireline high-speed internet subscription (Ahigian & Hungtington, 2021). The digital divide reflects the historical inequities in the United States and therefore is not mainly an issue of technology; it also is a social problem that needs a multisectoral approach. The digital divide is prevalent in New Yorkers of low socioeconomic status and communities of color. It is noted that nationwide, one-third of African American and Latino households do not have wireline broadband in their homes or a desktop or laptop computer (Horrigan, 2021). Various advocates for digital equity have underscored the importance of addressing the root causes of oppression, such as racism, classism, and other forms of discrimination as a strategic way to tackle digital inequities. Ensuring that populations historically excluded from full participation in the digital world are included in strategies for digital equity is a step in the right direction. Furthermore, a significant number of households in New York City are without digital access tools.

Hostos Community College is in Bronx County, which has the highest number (38.7%) of households that lack wireline subscriptions compared with all of New York City (28.7%) (Ahigian & Hungtington, 2021). Moreover, 38.2% of Bronx County households lack access to a desktop or laptop compared to 24.2% for all New York City (Ahigian & Hungtington, 2021). Addressing the digital divide will require concerted efforts from private and public organizations that can significantly invest in digital equity. To assist students during the pandemic, Community Colleges offered digital tools such as tablets and laptops, without considering that many students lacked wireline high-speed internet subscriptions in their households. Community Colleges are open access, considered a low-cost alternative, assist with financial aid, and offer support for food, transportation, housing, and counseling; hence, remote access to stable internet should be

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included while they are students. The findings of this study demonstrate that community college students' decisions for selecting a course modality are based on their life context. Community College students must attend to various competing responsibilities that pose a challenge to their education. Therefore, community colleges must acknowledge the digital inequities that are part of the life context in which their students live when making policies and programs. More investment in infrastructure and personnel is needed in the IT departments of community colleges to be able to assist students remotely with online courses. Like remedial academic courses, there should be remedial courses instructing students in the usage of education technology and troubleshooting technology, which will enable students to use technology in an effective way and empower them to choose the modality that reflects the wider context of their lives.

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