

Learning From Their Stakeholders: Social Work Students' Perspectives on a University's Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract: *Emerging initially in Wuhan, China in December 2019, COVID-19 steadily spread throughout and overtook the world by March 2020. College and university administrators were tasked with responding to COVID-19's unpredictability and persistence. The purpose of this study was to learn social work students' attitudes toward a large, public Midwestern U.S. university's response to COVID-19 at the outset and in January 2022 during the surge of COVID-19's Omicron strain. Using mixed methods, 43 social work students were surveyed (28 MSW and 15 BSW) in January 2022. The survey's data suggested four important lessons for universities navigating public health responses. First, students are not oblivious to the politics and budgeting concerns that drive many university decisions. Second, pertaining to the emergence of the Omicron variant, students are extremely divided over their level of concern with contracting the virus themselves and/or infecting others. Third, colleges and universities need to have a plan of action prepared for addressing future public health emergencies and digital equity. Finally, faculty and staff from social work departments need to be "at the table" when university decisions are made because social workers will ensure that student concerns and well-being are at the core of policy decisions.*

Keywords: *Scholarship of teaching, pandemic response, COVID-19, mixed-methods, social work students, social work education, public health issue*

Emerging initially in Wuhan, China in December 2019 (Holshue et al., 2020), COVID-19 steadily spread throughout and overtook the world by March 2020. College and university administrators were tasked with responding to COVID-19's unpredictability and persistence in ways that permitted continued learning and promoted the safety and well-being of faculty and students. To this end, the decision was made for many colleges and universities to cease physical operation in March 2020, requiring faculty and students to immediately shift to remote (i.e., online/digital) facilitation and learning.

Hensley et al. (2021) noted that college and university faculty and students were not prepared to shift and rearrange how they lived so quickly and unprecedentedly. Similar sentiments have been shared by faculty and students regarding remote facilitation and learning. For example, Hodges et al. (2020) encouraged members of the academy and public to consider the immediate shift in living and learning to that which was in the best interest to preserve public health and well-being. From March through December 2020, many college and university administrators were once again tasked with making another critical decision—whether and to what extent they were ready, willing, and able to return to in-person/face-to-face operations given COVID-19's persistence.

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Extant literature contains research studies that explore, describe, and explain faculty and students' attitudes, thoughts, and feelings regarding the shift to remote education. For example, Sullivan et al. (2023) interviewed 36 mental health professionals to consider ways to reimagine social work practice with the rapid acceptance of telehealth at the commencement of the COVID-19 pandemic. Cummings et al. (2023) reported that the majority of the social work students (BSW and MSW) sampled in their study struggled to remain focused on coursework, yet they appreciated their faculty members' flexibility regarding assignment submission. Additionally, the students in Cummings et al.'s (2023) study reported being grateful for the effort made by faculty members to use video platforming to sustain connections. Reitmeier et al. (2023) shared that faculty faced being furloughed or "laid off" due to the strain that COVID-19 placed on their respective institution's budget. Although COVID-19's persistence has weighed more heavily and disproportionately on individuals and communities who possess certain identity markers (e.g., Black/African Americans, First Nations/Indigenous peoples, and persons with lower socioeconomic statuses) (Cummings et al., 2023; Reitmeier et al., 2023), the researchers recognize the effect that COVID-19 has had on faculty and students, collectively. Similarly, the researchers validate decisions made by college administrators to shift to online learning modalities as an attempt to respond to the changing face of the pandemic in ways that they felt would best promote their students' and faculty members' overall health and well-being. Our study extends COVID-19 research by learning and excavating students' attitudes toward the pandemic at the outset and in January 2022 during the surge of COVID-19's Omicron strain.

Literature Review

Since March 2020, individuals and communities have been advised to incorporate "public care strategies" into their daily routines. These strategies include but are not limited to handwashing, wearing face masks, physical distancing, along with avoiding mass gatherings and assemblies (Pokhrel & Chhetri, 2021). Public health experts advised that these strategies were necessities for mitigating the transmission of COVID-19 (Sintema, 2020). College and university administrators throughout the world responded and contributed to public health experts' advice by shifting to remote facilitation and learning in March 2020. Extant literature maintains that making the shift required many faculty and students to finish their spring semesters away from their college and university environments. Evans et al. (2021) and North (2020) saw COVID-19 as upending college students' (undergraduate and graduate) ability to receive financial, social, academic, and psychological support. Moreover, Pacey et al. (2021) addressed the inability for students to participate in "rites of passage," from March 2020 onward, such as college graduation, due to the effects of COVID-19.

Throughout summer 2020, college and university administrators tracked COVID-19 data and used it as a tool to aid in their decisions regarding whether and to what extent to re-open campuses in fall 2020. Using data from Davidson College's (2020) College Crisis Initiative (CCI) that they retrieved from the Chronicle of Higher Education's (2020) website on October 22, 2020, Felson and Adamczyk (2021) used mixed-modeling and found that the most significant factors considered with re-opening colleges and universities

for in-person instruction were politics and financial health/budget. While Felson and Adamczyk (2021) showed the role that state/county health, faculty resistance, and market niche had in dialogues pertaining to re-opening, politics (as represented by the percentage of the population who agreed with Former President Donald Trump to re-open colleges/people with an Evangelical affiliation) and financial health/budget (by way of tuition, net revenue, endowment per student, and enrollment) were consistent predictors of a college or university's re-opening strategies. Frazier et al. (2022) described an epidemiological model that formed and framed Cornell University's decision to re-open for in-person instruction in fall 2020. The same model described in Frazier et al.'s (2022) study was used to support the creation and facilitation of an asymptomatic screening program that helped detect, track, and mitigate COVID-19's spread throughout the university. Chang et al. (2021) noted that a number of colleges and universities that re-opened in fall 2021 introduced procedures for providing COVID-19 testing for faculty, staff, and students. The procedures described by Chang et al. (2021) reflected colleges' and universities' desire to transition back into in-person learning while continuing to promote faculty and student health and well-being, concurrently.

Felson and Adamczyk (2021) and Frazier et al. (2022) used quantitative/ mixed-modeling techniques to show how college and university administrators supported decisions to re-open their institutions. Stowe et al. (2021) and VanLeeuwen et al. (2021) encourage readers to shift their focus toward considering the effect that the COVID-19 pandemic has had on college and university faculty and students' emotions and behaviors. Stowe et al. (2021) and VanLeeuwen et al. (2021) portray faculty and students as battling anxiety, depression, and stress due to ambiguity pertaining to whether and when life would return to "normal," coupled with a lack of institutional support while having to live and learn away from their educational environments. For students, specifically, the rate at which anxiety, depression, and stress have been felt throughout the COVID-19 pandemic has contributed to increased psychological, cognitive, and substance use disorders (Charles et al., 2021; Copeland et al., 2021).

Charles et al. (2021) and Copeland et al.'s (2021) studies segue readers from exploring and examining the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic to grappling with its implications. By doing so, Charles et al. (2021) and Copeland et al. (2021) exposed an additional gap in knowledge that Harper (2020) begins to fill by addressing the impact that re-opening college and university campuses has on race equity. Harper (2020) explained that college and university administrators and campus task forces worked assiduously to prepare campuses for a successful transition back to "normal operations" pre-March 2020. Laying the above entities' efforts aside, Harper (2020) exhorted readers to consider the added barriers and threats associated with race, ethnicity, and nationality. Among the 12 implications that Harper (2020) provided were three that were most salient: (1) the racial stratification of the workforce, (2) the risk of violence for Asian International and Asian American students and employees and (3) addressing racialized digital access inequity, such as a lack of access to computing equipment and/or reliable internet for students who depended on their institution's computing and networking equipment to complete their studies. These three implications reminded us that persons from minoritized and underrepresented communities are more likely to experience the lingering effects of

COVID-19, even after COVID-19's cessation because of the gaps in learning that might remain due to computing and networking equipment being unreliable or nonexistent.

Harper's (2020) study showed that decisions made to re-open campuses and facilitate in-person learning environments were made by people in positions of power with little to no contribution from those on the "front lines," that is—faculty and students. Even though COVID-19 is not as pernicious as it has been in the past, college and university administrators will continue to field questions, comments, and concerns from faculty and students whose perceptions and lived experiences on the "front lines" might vastly differ based on their identity markers, including but not limited to their race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, religion, ability, mental health status, and religion/spirituality. This might be more significant if faculty and students either perceive or know with certainty that they and their lived experiences, needs, ideas, and voices were not included in campus re-opening plans.

The Present Study

To date, researchers have masterfully captured patterns, trends, attitudes, feelings, and actions pertaining to the decisions leading to the shift to online learning in spring 2020 and to the re-opening of campuses from fall 2020 through fall 2021 (e.g., Cummings et al., 2023; Reitmeier et al., 2023; Scheffert & Parrish, 2023). Yet, no studies exist that also capture the lived experiences of students as they grapple with their attitudes toward campuses re-opening in January 2022 amidst the ever-increasing presence of the COVID-19 Omicron strain. This is both a gap and social justice issue that our study addresses since COVID-19 is an example of a public health emergency to which college and university administrators must respond. This study used a mixed-methodological approach to gathering and analyzing student perceptions of their university's response to COVID-19 at the outset and in January 2022 during the surge of COVID-19's Omicron strain. Our guiding research questions were:

1. What is your level of concern regarding COVID-19?
2. How well did the university respond to the initial COVID-19 outbreak?
3. How well did the university respond to the COVID-19 Omicron surge in January 2022?
4. What factors do you believe drove the university's response to the initial COVID-19 outbreak and the COVID-19 Omicron surge in January 2022?
5. What recommendations do you have to help the university respond to future public health emergencies?

Inevitably, another public health emergency will occur. It is imperative for colleges and universities to gather data and obtain suggestions from students to ensure continued enrollment, and retention, to garner their trust, and most importantly, to ensure their well-being and successful completion of their studies.

Methods

The purpose of this study was twofold: to assess the perspectives of social work students with regard to a university's response to the pandemic, and to solicit recommendations from students for effectively managing future public health emergencies. A total of 43 social work students (28 MSW and 15 BSW) at a large, Midwestern university responded to a mixed-methods survey during the height of the Omicron surge in January 2022.

Students were enrolled in one author's course; however, this IRB-approved study was introduced and administered by a neutral, third party. No identifying information was collected. Surveys were stored in a locked cabinet and all data was maintained on a secure network. The survey took approximately 15 minutes to complete. The survey was administered during the third week of the semester, at the beginning of a class session, and during the last week of January 2022. No extra credit or any benefit was provided for completing the survey.

The survey included a mix of open-ended and quantitative questions about the university's response to the pandemic and sought recommendations for addressing future public health emergencies. The four quantitative statements were evaluated on a scale from 1 to 5 (from excellent to poor on questions regarding the university response and extremely worried to not worried at all on the question regarding student concern over COVID-19). Students were given space to provide written comments on their responses. Survey questions fell into four categories: (1) student concern regarding COVID-19, (2) satisfaction with the university's response to the initial COVID-19 outbreak and then the Omicron surge in January 2022, (3) the inclusivity of the university's responses, and finally, (4) student recommendations for response to further emerging public health crises. Quantitative responses were entered into SPSS Version 26 to measure frequency. Narrative responses were independently coded by the researchers for reoccurring and emergent themes using grounded theory analysis to avoid overlaying preconceived ideas onto the data (Charmaz, 2014). Triangulation among the researchers was used to ensure trustworthiness of the analysis.

Results

Demographics

Due to the small sample size, the only demographic information collected was whether students were enrolled in the BSW or MSW program. Twenty-eight students were in the MSW program and 15 were in the BSW program. No significant differences were found between MSW and BSW responses on any question.

Student Concern Regarding COVID-19

Students were divided on their level of concern about COVID-19 on a 5-point Likert scale, with 48% reporting being extremely worried or worried (1 or 2) and 45% reporting

being only a little or not worried at all (4 or 5). The most common emergent theme from the students who were concerned about COVID-19 related to missing class and not being accommodated. “The university has tried to act ‘normal’, but we can’t be ‘normal’ if half of a class is out due to Covid [sic],” said one student. Similarly, another student said, “With some professors not allowing Zoom or not being able to hear when I do [Zoom], I am constantly worried I’m missing assignments and participation and will have to re-take the class.”

The other common theme from students worried about COVID-19 related to infecting loved ones and/or themselves. “I have a weak immune system and am always worried when I have to come to campus, especially now with Omicron,” said one student. Others mentioned living with older relatives, such as “My 85-year-old grandma lives with us. I wouldn’t forgive myself if I brought home Covid [sic] because the university says classes have to be in person.”

Students who reported little concern with regard to COVID-19 most often mentioned fatigue with online classes and the pandemic in general. As one student explained succinctly, “We are all just exhausted.” Several students cited not being able to learn well online:

I’m a person who needs to be in a classroom to learn. We went online when it was needed and I didn’t learn anything for a year. Classes need to be back in person...I’m fully vaccinated now and able to interact with my peers on campus rather than online.

Student Satisfaction With the University Response to COVID-19

While students were divided regarding their concern over COVID-19 in January 2022, they were less divided regarding their perceptions of the university’s evolving response to COVID-19. Toward the end of the fall 2021 semester, faculty and students received written correspondence from the university that cited rates of vaccinations and boosters, along with masking, as its justification for resuming in-person operation for the spring 2022 semester. While four out of five (80%) participants thought the initial university response to the pandemic in spring 2020 was good or excellent (4 or 5), only 34% thought the response to the Omicron variant was good or excellent (4 or 5). Both narrative and quantitative data pointed toward lower satisfaction with the Omicron response. For instance, a comment on the university’s response was “Originally I was impressed by the university response, but as time went on, it seems like the university stopped caring about our safety and individual student needs.”

Following questions regarding student satisfaction with the university response in March 2020 and January 2022, students were asked the open-ended question, “What do you believe guides university policy with regard to COVID-19?” In response, 92% of answers began with either money or politics. The researchers note that students’ responses align with prior literature on what factors informed U.S. college and university administrators’ decisions on whether to operate in-person between the fall 2021 and spring 2022 semesters.

Although 38% of responses mentioned themes of public health and science, these themes were nearly always mentioned later as a response to the diminishing concern of universities for student health and well-being. As one student explains, “The university really seemed to want us safe and doing what the CDC recommended at first, but now the focus feels like it is on appearances for certain donors.” Another student explained their view this way, “money and political statements guide the policy now.” Moreover, another student responded,

Sometimes I feel the university does not have the student and staff's best interest at heart, but cares more about 'looking good' or public opinion, as well as the money coming in whether it be from students or the government.

As the university had lifted most restrictions prior to the emergence of the Omicron variant, a student theorized, “the school is afraid to go back on their new policies, even if it would increase safety, just because of potential backlash.”

Inclusivity of University Response

Students were asked an open-ended question regarding whether they believed the university took Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) concerns into consideration while making decisions in response to COVID-19. Two themes emerged from the analysis of the data. The most common theme was a lack of consideration for students at high-risk for COVID-19 complications or a lack of concern over students exposing their loved ones to COVID-19, particularly if their loved ones are “high-risk.” As one student wrote,

At the beginning of the pandemic, we all went online and it allowed everyone to be safe. But with Omicron, we just have to be in class. Accommodations aren't being made which is really unfair for people at high risk.

Another stated, “Everyone seems to be getting Omicron and we are still required to be in person. What are people living with people at high risk supposed to do now? Quit school?”

Another theme that manifested was a lack of cultural sensitivity due to a vaccine requirement. One student shared, “I’m vaccinated but as a Black woman, a lot of my family is vaccine hesitant. I probably wouldn’t have gotten it if I didn’t have to.” Another student said, “I bet some people quit school rather than getting the vaccine. And they might have a legitimate reason. The university should grant exceptions on a case-by-case basis.”

Recommendations for Future Public Health Responses

Finally, students were asked what recommendations they had for the university when responding to the next public health emergency. Thematic analysis revealed several useful suggestions by students. The most common was the need for flexible attendance policies. Students recommended for the policies to originate from and be disseminated by upper-level administrators to avoid exposing students to inconsistent policies and protocols from faculty. It was also expressed that policies originating from and being disseminated by upper-level administrators would place less pressure on faculty to develop and enforce policies. As one student explained, “The university seems to let every professor decide

what their attendance policy is. That's been really hard during Omicron because so many people are out sick, and the attendance policy varies in all my classes."

The second most common theme related to the university providing faculty with guidance on when to move classes online, such as if a state reached a specific case count. Again, students mentioned this would bring consistency across their courses and reduce last-minute decisions from individual instructors.

During weeks when case counts are high, half my classes might be on Zoom and the other half in person. And I'll get an email from the professor an hour before I leave for campus letting me know class will be online. It's really hard to keep track of and frustrating if you drive to campus and find out class is on Zoom. There should be consistency from the university so we can plan at least a week in advance, explained a student.

Students discussed how better communication from the university could raise their confidence in safety procedures. Nearly one-quarter (23%) of respondents referred to being confused as to why classes were going forward in person during the Omicron surge that infected so many more people than any prior wave. "If the university would just explain their thinking, like high vaccination rates, I'd feel better about why we are all forced to be here."

Finally, students also had some recommendations for safety and flexibility, including providing online options for taking classes if there were multiple sections of the same class and facilitating classes in larger classrooms. As one student pointed out, larger classrooms might be more available if some sections of a class were offered online.

Implications for Future Responses to Public Health Crises

Nearly two years into the most disruptive pandemic in 100 years, student concern about the Coronavirus (COVID-19) was highly mixed; nevertheless, this data provides insight for how universities can take student voices into consideration throughout their decision-making processes. The survey data indicated four important lessons for universities navigating public health responses. *First*, students are not oblivious to the politics and budgeting concerns that drive many university decisions. *Second*, with regard to the emergence of the Omicron variant, students were divided over their level of concern with contracting the virus themselves or infecting others. *Third*, universities need to have a plan of action prepared for addressing future public health emergencies and digital equity. *Finally*, faculty and staff from social work departments need to be "at the table" when university decisions are made.

Student Recognition of the Political Context of Policy Decisions

Students who responded to the survey were clearly aware of the political considerations that drove responses to the Omicron variant. As an interesting aside to this study, the finding demonstrates success in student internalization of the Council on Social Work Education's (CSWE) EPAS competencies requiring social work educators to ensure

students “recognize the historical, social, racial, cultural, economic, organizational, environmental, and global influences that affect social policy” (CSWE, 2022, p. 10). The majority of students mentioned that the political context of the state helped dictate the university’s response to the pandemic. The university in this study is located in a state with a Republican super-majority led state legislature. Similar universities should recognize that students, at least in social work, are cognizant of the political context in which decisions are made; students know when financial concerns take precedent over their education and safety needs.

Student Divide Over Concern About the Virus

The division of student concern regarding the current state of public health can be exceedingly difficult for universities making policy decisions because it seems that there is no way to make everyone happy. The concern of social work students over COVID-19 mirrors the public divide across society. With societal tensions high, it is recommended that universities, near and far, ask for and consider student input, particularly pertaining to communication. Woodly (2015) has written that clearly communicating the reasons for policy decisions can help encourage acceptance and lessen division.

Students Expect a Future Action Plan

Taking student recommendations into account, it is clear universities need to have a plan of action prepared to address differing severities of public health emergencies in the future. Plans must include metrics for when classes will go online, attendance policies, and plans for when to lift restrictions. These plans should be implemented across the university rather than left to instructor discretion, which causes confusion and anxiety for both students and faculty. If university plans are transparent, faculty and students can prepare so that instructor academic freedom is upheld as much as possible and student learning is disrupted as little as possible. Universities must also ensure that digital equity is addressed. When the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic struck, many students did not have adequate internet access, or even the equipment, to fulfill transitioned course requirements. Students were forgiving about this lack of digital equity in 2020, but they have expected (and do expect) the university to have learned from this recent public health emergency and be better prepared to respond to the next crisis.

Social Work Faculty Have a Duty to Help Shape the Future Action Plan

As future plans to address public health crises are developed, it is imperative that social work faculty and staff play a role in shaping these university plans. The National Association of Social Workers (NASW’s, 2018) *Code of Ethics* calls on social workers to “engage in social and political action that seeks to ensure that all people have equal access to the resources, employment, services, and opportunities they require to meet their basic human needs and to develop fully” (p. 30). Our profession requires that we work to ensure digital equity and that the concerns of students and others who may be particularly vulnerable to illness are at the core of policy decisions.

Limitations

This study was exploratory in assessing student perceptions about a rare historical event that initially took us all by surprise with the sudden onset of a pandemic. The small sample size diminishes the generalizability of the results, and it is not representative of the experiences of all social work students during the Omicron wave of January 2022. Demographic information beyond program enrollment was not collected due to the small sample. Collecting an age range or gender information would have made the surveys identifiable. Additionally, the study presents results from one large, U.S. public Midwestern university. A larger study that samples students from a broader scope of geographical areas, diverse socio-demographics and varying educational institutions, such as faith-based universities or for-profit universities, would bolster our understanding of student concerns regarding COVID-19 and necessary responses. Lastly, opinions on public health have evolved substantially since the emergence of COVID-19 and its variants. This study only reflects a small point in time, January 2022, during the largest wave of U.S. COVID-19 cases due to the initial Omicron variant and relatively few governmental mandates to combat the new upswing in cases. The student data collected regarding the initial response is also retrospective as students compared it during the time of the Omicron surge. Moving forward, future studies should track student opinions on public health and university regulations as crises ebb and flow to better understand how to address new threats.

Future Directions

With students at the core of higher education, it is important to understand their position on university responses to public health. However, future studies must also explore the perception and experiences of faculty and staff. The care and concern faculty and staff can show for students is impacted by their own personal challenges brought on by a public health emergency. Additionally, future studies must address what Funk (2021) terms *digital justice* as a way to gauge a university's readiness, willingness, and ability to adapt its operation to meet students' holistic needs within and beyond course delivery. College and university administrators will be expected to respond more effectively to the next public health emergency; students will be watching.

Conclusion

While COVID-19 turned our world upside down too quickly to involve a wide variety of voices in the response, the data in this survey provides information about student perceptions of public health as we prepare for the next emergency. It is imperative for colleges and universities to consider the needs of students and their suggestions as they prepare for the inevitable next public health emergency. Without attention to students, colleges and universities will compromise their crucial goals of garnering enrollment, retention, trust, and student well-being. However, with an action plan that is inclusive of student input, universities and higher education will be prepared to persevere and thrive during and after future public health emergencies.

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