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College Student COVID-19 Relief

COVID-19 is a worldly issue, and many have not been granted the relief they deserve, specifically, university students in the United States. The poor preparation of pandemic response has always been evident in the United States, as shown by Jester, Uyeki, and Jernigan's analysis of the country's response to the H1N1 pandemic in 1918 and its preparedness 100 years later, stating the United States had little improvement to their pandemic response plan over the last century, other than unifying to take on the issue (2600). However, the political climate from 1918-2018 has drastically shifted, as COVID-19 is seen as a political hoax by a portion of United States citizens, significantly changing the findings of studies such as this. While more high school graduates are attending college as compared to previous generations, the current pandemic response is not adequate, as a college student's mental health is more susceptible than others, as stated by the Center of Collegiate Mental Heath in their 2019 health review (Cummins 15). The 2020 health review by the Center of Collegiate Mental Health indicates a 10% increase of students attending counseling than 2019, while students feel their mental health is worsening while attending counseling (Cummins 1), theorizing there are not enough mental health professionals at colleges, or universities lack the values to encourage mental health support upon their students. Adding on further, serious suicidal ideation has increased 12.7% from previous years, indicating unstable mentalities are becoming dangerous for more students (Cummins 13).

Various studies have concentrated on how United States college students view their mental health (Son, et al), as well the cross-examination of college students from differing countries handling themselves (Wang, et al), while a study on the higher education's decisions during the pandemic concluded universities were concerned about their funds rather than their students (Smalley). Throughout these studies, evidence shows college students are suffering more than they have vocalized, and in the times they have been vocal, their complaints have not been thoughtfully taken into consideration.

Purpose Towards Higher Education Boards

The analysis of my findings is guided towards the education boards of universities, explicitly public universities. Studies have clearly shown university students are losing hope in their learning institutions during the COVID-19 pandemic, constructing the possibility of current students not sending their future children to university. In order to keep their current prestige and likeable environment, public universities should infer first-hand evidence from this analysis. I hope to be educated on how other higher education students are coping/not coping during the COVID-19 pandemic, and what concerns have been answered or unanswered by their school of residency. Understanding the complaints and struggles of students provides universities the opportunity to better their facilities and practices, encouraging and assisting students in their mental health endeavors. If the targeted audience does not learn from this analysis, future generations may have distrust towards higher education, as their parents will hold onto a negative view of university through their personal experiences. By offering this analysis the college student experience during COVID-19, I hope school boards will genuinely take the mental health of their youthful students into consideration. I want universities to understand how much anguish their students are carrying, as this is a mental health crisis college boards appear to

be pushing aside. By researching and writing this analysis of college student mental health issues of COVID-19, college boards should begin to realize their students' concerns need to be recognized, as does this analysis. Acknowledging student voices will not only benefit the students, but it will also benefit the university in the present and future, gaining the trust and attendance of others seeking higher education. I intend on refashioning how universities communicate with their students, especially revising the language used by higher education officials in order to create a safe haven for all attending students. The safety of students physical and mental health needs to be a university's top priority, not fabricating normalcy.

Methodology

In the modern era, communication has become simplistic, as receiving emails and texts from an attending college is the current regular way to be in contact. For massive alerts of communication, proper wording, tone, and context is ideal. In times of distress, a poorly sent message could negatively impact a student's mental health. I will be analyzing the university system of communications, specifically their webpages relating to COVID-19, depicting their pandemic plans, data reporting, and tips for guiding students through the pandemic. As previously written, proper wording, tone, and context are necessary for higher education students, more-so, trauma communication. Trauma communication is pivotal in stressful situations, it must be receiver orientated and recognize the stress of its language. In community orientated situations, it is expected for information to be provided. The focus on rhetorical university communication systems developed through reviewing specific university websites (University of Michigan, University of Alabama, and Saginaw Valley State University) on COVID-19 protocol, understanding their guidelines on sharing information with students, and reviewing data on college student mental health through 2020. I narrowed my focus to

communication systems via recommendation of other college students, as the lack of, or improper use of massive communication regarding the COVID-19 pandemic is their largest concern during the Fall semester of 2020. As this analysis solely depends on mental health and counseling facilities, there are limitations to the research. The analysis of this information is cross-sectional. All data regarding COVID-19 within this academia paper is prior to November 29, 2020. Furthermore, there is no information on the percentages of specific years (freshman, sophomore, etc.) attending counseling, or the reasons why specific years are attending counseling, as it would violate HIPPA (Health Insurance Portability And Accountability Act), which provides security provisions and privacy, keeping medical information safe for patients (HHS.gov). Universities may be reluctant to share their information involving their counseling center and students as well, narrowing limitations further. Private information must remain private, and that is a line that will remain untouched.

COVID-19 Communication Analysis

Research shows universities have taken two different and clear paths guiding their students through the COVID-19 pandemic. The first approach is transparently communicating with students, making the total number of cases visible and updated, properly explaining governmental guidelines, and enforcing disclosed repercussions as needed. The second approach is inadequately communicating with students, keeping portions of total COVID-19 cases secretive, manipulating a false sense of security, and foregoing violations upon offenders. These pathways have a direct correlation to a student's state of mental health. The more open and reliable an administration is concerning COVID-19 and mental health struggles, the easier it will be for students to cope with the reality before them. Two universities provide great examples for

these differing paths: The University of Michigan and the University of Alabama, while Saginaw Valley State University provides a metaphorical line between these pathways.

Michigan

Students attending the University of Michigan have been openly disregarded by the Office of the President, as well as the Leadership Team, led by the university's president, Mark Schlissel. On the official University of Michigan COVID-19 website, entitled "CampusBlueprint," there is very little information on how students should be taking care of themselves, physically and mentally. Of the headings listed on the website, one of which is labeled, "Educate yourself and promote safety" (CampusBlueprint). The wording of this heading acts to remove responsibility of safety measures away from university officials, and onto the students themselves.

More-so, the University of Michigan President, Mark Schlissel, faced backlash when filing a restraining order on graduate student employees, forcing them to work in unsafe conditions. In September of 2020, the university's COVID-19 testing limit was 3000 students (Heidt), worrying student workers of the possible dangers at their workplace. The Graduate Employees' Organization (GEO), went on strike, prompting the university to increase weekly testing from 3000 in early September, to over 8000 in October.

Trauma communication relies on peers and officials, in any situation, acknowledging the victim is not at fault. The CampusBlueprint website and GEO strike provide instances of the University of Michigan officials delivering COVID-19 situational responsibility upon the students. There is no compassion, trust, or collaboration between the students and university officials, three of the core principles regarding trauma communication. The visible indifference

of students shown by the University of Michigan officials is a prime example of the worsening mental health conditions of higher education students, as higher education learning may be one of the most stressful institutions a young mind has faced. The stress of common university responsibilities, in addition to safety protocols placed in the hands of students, describes poor protocol choices made by officials, negatively affecting a student's mental condition.

Alabama

The University of Alabama's COVID-19 organized plan substantially differs from that of Michigan. On Alabama's COVID-19 website, "University of Alabama System," one of the first headings that can be seen is "Comprehensive and Safety Plans" (uasystem.edu). When viewing the information provided in the plans, the trust between students and faculty can be noted. The plans specify all student and faculty policies, the repercussions for not following guidelines, and where to find counseling and therapy if needed, while Michigan does not provide any professional plan for public viewing. Furthermore, the COVID-19 data provided by both universities depicts how well these protocols are working. The University of Michigan, as of November 11, 2020, has 1.8% of total students and faculty quarantined due to COVID-19, while the University of Alabama has .62% quarantined (both percentages provided are numbers for the primary campus only) (uasystem.edu). The numbers provided prove a trustworthy, understanding, and knowledgeable plan will provide a negative feedback loop on total COVID-19 cases at a university. It is worthy to note that Alabama provides counseling centers and therapy locations on their COVID-19 website, while Michigan does not. Even though University of Michigan students have vocalized their concerns, their officials have done the bare minimum to assist in their concerns.

Saginaw Valley

Saginaw Valley State University (SVSU) finds itself in between these two education institutions, in terms of COVID-19 protection; however, the lack of trauma communication has been disastrous for its' community. SVSU has created a designated plan called, "New Expectations for a Safer Tomorrow," or NEST. This plan has created a physically safe and protective college campus for students and faculty; nonetheless, mental health concerns were not considered. Dr. Dennis Gray, a botany professor at SVSU, committed suicide on November 13, 2020, in his office. Dr. Gray cited mistreatment by the university in an email sent to various members of faculty, prompting police forces to evacuate the building (Beach). A ten-hour standoff between a police negotiator and Dr. Gray commenced, resulting in Dr. Gray taking his own life. Saginaw Valley State University officials did not confess to students the severity of the situation until Dr. Gray committed suicide. In addition, the officials implied students should seek counseling at their on-campus center if need be; however, Emily Burke, a Saginaw Valley State University student wrote in the Valley Vanguard, SVSU's student-led newspaper, stating she was told not to return to counseling for suicidal ideation, after missing one appointment (Burke). More students are concerned with the lack of morality shown by the university, as they decided to reopen SVSU's campus 3 days succeeding the suicide (McMillian). Not only is the lack of trauma communication recognized, as students did not understand the severity of the situation and left in the dark, the absence of sympathy towards student mental health concerns remain true.

Significance of Analysis

As the analysis shows, there is an accurate and invalid way of caring for students and faculty during a pandemic. By analyzing these three separate universities, the importance of

valuing students for their mind over monetary purposes is a significant issue in the COVID-19 higher education system. The GEO strike at the University of Michigan indicates how willing university students are to go against officials for what they value as righteous, as the students believed they were not properly taken care of. The University of Alabama shows how compassion and care can lead to a positive outlook on a university campus when a solidified procedure is followed by staff and students, as shown by the nearly 300% decrease in COVID-19 cases at the University of Alabama compared to the University of Michigan. Lastly, Saginaw Valley State University depicts how a lack of communication and understanding can lead to the most unnerving consequences: the death of a faculty member. SVSU exemplifies the critical dangers when disregarding proper communication and assistance between staff and students. A mutual understanding has to form between all university officials and students that is regarded by both sides; tragedies like that at SVSU must never occur, it is not normal. We must recognize the obvious disconnection between university officials and students, and these groups must learn how to care for one another.

Recommendations for Higher Education Officials

Students feel as if their personal lives are uncared for by their institutions. Issues, such as economic relief, unstable households, and health concerns are ongoing struggles besides class work for students (Kecojevic). The sense of overwhelming uncertainty keeps internal struggles rampant (Zhai). Students are in dire need of counseling to quell their internal woes. For this to occur, the stigmatic views on mental health counseling need to be addressed. As Holland writes in her article, "College Student Stress And Mental Health: Examination of Stigmatic Views on Mental Health Counseling," classroom education on mental health counseling decreases the stigmatic view held by students, as does confirmation from university authority figures,

addressing that it is okay to reach out for assistance if you are mentally unwell (18). Students should also have the option to acquire counseling in an easier fashion. Universities in China began providing the opportunity counseling to all students with specialized counselors for each student, whether the students asked or not (Wang, et al). Having the opportunity for counseling at a moment's notice is a system we should begin formulating.

Furthermore, Andrew Kelly and Rooney Columbus state education officials must be open to the voices of their students when discussing the failures of the specified university (13). As students are the primary attenders of higher education facilities, their firsthand evidence is key to addressing problems at the institution, as well as providing solutions to board members. For this to happen, though, faculty must form a trusting bond through communication with their students, letting them know they are cared for and their voices are listened to. All the listed recommendations with ease student minds, as the use of proper trauma communication is required by all universities.

Conclusion

University students need immediate counseling, and college boards must begin taking their students' concerns seriously. The difference between right and wrong policies on protecting students during the COVID-19 is clear, but the lack of proper trauma communication stains college boards. It is becoming more apparent that students are not the only party mentally affected by COVID-19, professors are under the same risks as well. Without any further research or action being taken by college boards, mental health instability will continue to rise each year. Tragic events, such as the death of Dr. Gray at Saginaw Valley State University, will become more widespread between students and staff alike.

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