RESEARCH

Pandemic hampers student engagement, highlights inequities

By Joan Hope Ph.D., Editor

In early summer, nearly 70% of college students felt they were falling behind in their studies because of the COVID-19 pandemic. That’s one of the findings of State of Student Success and Trends in Higher Education: 2020 Global Research Study and Trends, a report by Canvas that reveals results of a survey of students. The findings also show major disparities in reported engagement among students of different economic classes, with 2.5 times more students from upper economic classes reporting feeling extremely engaged in the classes and coursework than their lower-income peers.

The survey, conducted in June 2020, collected 7,070 responses from students in 13 countries.

In the United States, 75% of respondents said COVID-19 had negatively impacted student engagement, compared with 78% in Asia-Pacific countries and 62% in Europe, the Middle East, and Africa.

In many cases, students who reported they were falling behind were achieving and submitting assignments, said Ryan Lufkin, Senior Director of Higher Education Product Marketing at Canvas. Some of their responses were probably based in anxiety following the rapid transition from in-person to online classes, he said. The courses they were taking were not designed to be taught remotely, he added.

On a positive note, the pandemic has accelerated effective use of learning management systems, beyond professors posting their syllabus, Lufkin said.

Other key data from the survey included:
- 80% of students ranked work or career preparation as the most critical measure of student success. However, students were less likely than administrators to cite development services (37% compared with 42%) or educational technology resources (also 37% compared with 42%) as critical to their success. That perhaps indicates an awareness gap in the services offered by institutions to support career readiness.
- 69% of students reported feeling engaged with their classes and coursework. However, students who identified as being in disadvantaged groups (had a lack of access to technology in high school, self-identified as being in a lower economic class, had no parents in the household growing up, or were raised by a guardian) were significantly less likely than their counterparts to feel engaged.
- 88% of students said quality of faculty is a key factor to student success; other factors ranked critical to student success were engaging content (86%), hands-on instruction (86%), access to the internet (89%), learning resources (88%), technological devices (87%), and psychological well-being (88%).

Respondents said instructional designers’ role is to find the easiest approach to instill knowledge and should help meet any gaps or weaknesses in courses and instruction.
- 85% of respondents said COVID-19 impacted their ability to succeed as students.
- 71% of respondents said COVID-19 impacted their academic progress.
- More than 60% of administrators and 50% of students said they now have a more positive attitude about and preference for online learning.

Download the report at https://bit.ly/2Hu47DU.

REVIEW 6 KEY TRENDS

State of Student Success and Trends in Higher Education: 2020 Global Research Study and Trends, a report by Canvas, noted six key trends based on a survey of students, administrators, and faculty members around the world:

1. Career readiness is the number one priority for students. Matching program to job demand is increasingly important as students prepare for a post-COVID-19 workplace.
2. Institutions need to think beyond the lecture. Teaching for success beyond grades and a focus on mental well-being have never been more important.
3. Faculty-student engagement is critical. The quality of faculty is a well-known and leading contributor to academic success.
4. Online learning needs to be intentionally designed. Creating meaningful, interactive experiences will be critical to continued student engagement.
5. Societal economic disparities impact engagement. Levels of income and access to education, resources, faculty, and technology continue to leave some students behind.
6. Democratization of education begins with equitable access. Internet connectivity is one of the basic needs of the modern pursuit of education.