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Mary E. Ogidigben

Kennesaw State University, mary.ogidigben@gmail.com

Ernesto R. Rivera

Kennesaw State University, ernspeare@aol.com

Robert S. Keyser

Kennesaw State University, rkeyser@kennesaw.edu

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Faculty Perceptions of Safety and the Impact of Online Classroom Modalities During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Mary E. Ogidigben, Ernesto R. Rivera and Dr. Robert S. Keyser
(Faculty Advisor)

Kennesaw State University

ABSTRACT

The coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has affected a number of institutions – one of which is Kennesaw State University (KSU). In the fall 2020 semester, KSU implemented safety protocols following the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) as well as the University System of Georgia (USG) guidelines. A cross-sectional survey was sent out for faculty to complete at their own will regarding their thoughts on how the new guidelines are affecting their work as well as their safety while on campus. The survey consisted of 18 Likert-scale questions and eight free response questions. The survey results showed that 60.42% of faculty members reported that they were trained regarding their new work requirements and that while faculty generally felt safe, they had concerns about specific areas on campus. As most in-person classes across the KSU campus were forced to become fully online, faculty reported that their relationships with students changed as their class modalities changed. KSU faculty and students alike tried their best to adjust to the new environment and will continue to do so to promote safety and stop the spread of COVID-19.

Keywords: COVID-19, pandemic, descriptive research, survey, Kennesaw State University

Introduction

Reports of COVID-19 first surfaced in December 2019 (Borowiak et al., 2020) but gained worldwide attention in January 2020 when the World Health Organization (World Health Organization, 2020) declared the COVID-19 outbreak a “public health emergency of international concern” (Kennedy, 2020). In February 2020, the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) provided guidelines on how to protect yourself and others. These guidelines included wearing a mask, maintaining a 6-foot distance from others, avoiding crowds, washing hands, covering coughs and sneezes, disinfecting frequently touched surfaces, and monitoring daily health (Centers for Disease Control and

Prevention [CDC], 2019). On March 11, 2020, the Director General of the World Health Organization characterized COVID-19 as a pandemic in his opening remarks at a media briefing (World Health Organization, 2020).

COVID-19 has had a profound impact on the world at large including college and university campuses during the Spring 2020 semester, over the summer, and leading to the Fall 2020 semester, the beginning of a new academic year. With new COVID-19 cases ramping up over the summer months, many questioned why colleges and universities wanted students to return to

campus in the fall. Many schools took the position that Northeastern University assumed, that students wanted to return to campus and their parents wanted them on campus as well (Auon, 2020). Conversely, institutions of higher learning face enormous financial pressures to bring students back on campus (Nocera, 2020). However, the return to campus did not come without many inherent risks. For example, many faculty members across the U.S. expressed grave doubts regarding their institutions' ability to safely bring students and staff together (Marek, 2020).

Many universities, such as The University of Alabama, The University of Southern California, The Ohio State University, and universities in Britain (Ivy.ai, 2020) rolled back campus reopening plans due to COVID-19 outbreaks. Some universities, such as The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, University of Notre Dame, and Michigan State University allowed students to move back on campus and then immediately asked students to leave campus due to a COVID-19 outbreak (Camera, 2020; Grayer & Stuart, 2020; Nadworny, 2020a; Raimonde, 2020). Examples of outbreak countermeasures implemented by universities included asking students and faculty to self-quarantine (Diep, 2020), providing mobile phone apps that allows users who test positive for COVID-19 to upload a magic key to alert other people. This system pings people who are dangerous and those who are not (Nadworny, 2020a). Finally, some universities have implemented moving all in-person classes to fully online for the coming academic year (Vaghela, 2020). Many universities view testing students for COVID-19 as the only safe way to bring students back on campus (Court & Lorin, 2020). While several schools have provided COVID-19 guidelines for a safe

return to campus, the concern that some schools may not follow the plan is prevalent (Goldman, 2020).

Despite such countermeasures, there has been an increase in new COVID-19 cases at institutions around the world. Although the University of Illinois conducted a mass testing for COVID-19, hundreds of asymptomatic cases have surfaced, mostly among undergraduate students (Nadworny, 2020b). Virus clusters have appeared at universities in France (Corbet & Siegel, 2020). Fall COVID-19 outbreaks have been linked to student fraternities and sororities (Reilly, 2020).

Issues that have surfaced on college campuses during the COVID-19 pandemic include modifying facilities such as libraries (Dixon, 2020), addressing the needs of college students with special needs (Gould, 2020), and managing the mental health of students (Aufderheide & Gondles, 2020). Additional COVID-19 issues include athletes (Roetert, Bell, & Hainline, 2020), people in general (Shuja, Aqeel, Jaffar, & Ahmed, 2020), protecting the safety and well-being of the student LGBTQ+ community (Weissman, 2020; Wood, 2020), and the effects and added responsibilities absorbed by the faculty (Alexander, 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic has come with an abundance of uncertainty, including whether students should be allowed to return to college campuses. The University System of Georgia (USG) determined that if Georgia schools followed the safety guidelines set forth by the CDC, students should be given the opportunity to return to campus for the fall semester of 2020. As a part of the USG, Kennesaw State University (KSU) made the decision to allow students to return to campus while working with faculty members to

determine the safest way to deliver classes. This resulted in most professors delivering online and hybrid (50% online, 50% in-person) classes with very few traditional in-person classes. This descriptive study used a survey to provide insight as to how faculty members have responded to changes in the classroom for safety during COVID-19 and will explore faculty perspectives on KSU's new policies concerning COVID-19.

Literature Review

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, plans to protect students, faculty, and staff from the virus resulted in several schools making the decision to deliver classes online. This online transition came with a lot of uncertainties as to how students and faculty would respond to such a big change. A main concern was how faculty and students would adjust to the new class modality.

Mouchantaf (2020) concluded that most faculty members were able to transition well and mostly mentioned “students missing lectures, technical complications, and a lack of institutional help and training” as areas that could improve. A medical college in North India also found that teachers were satisfied. However, contrary to Mouchantaf (2020), the students at the medical college reported feeling engaged and excited to learn (Khan, Patra, Vaney, Mehndiratta, & Chauhan, 2021).

Technological competence among faculty members would certainly contribute to student engagement (König, Jager-Biela, & Glutsch, 2020). While many classes are taught online at KSU, most classes are usually taught in person. If faculty members do not feel comfortable maneuvering the technology necessary to teach online courses,

they may not be able to effectively communicate with their students, leaving their students feeling unengaged. This issue may be overcome by allowing a safe space for faculty to ask questions and address their concerns with online learning as suggested by Justis, Litts, Reina, and Rhodes (2020).

This study will focus on faculty perspectives as they adjust to their new classroom modality. The following research questions (RQs) will be explored:

RQ1: Were faculty members able to implement the safety guidelines put in place by Kennesaw State University?

RQ2: How did faculty members respond to their new environment?

RQ3: How did the changes to the school environment impact faculty members' classroom modalities and their relationships with students?

Method

Participants

The participants in this study consisted of faculty members and staff at KSU on the Marietta campus. Faculty members at KSU have a wide demographic in both age and race. While every faculty member registered with KSU was given a chance to complete the survey, only 48 responses were recorded. A total of 52 faculty members began the survey, but four members did not complete the survey questions beyond the online survey consent questions.

Materials

As researchers, we deliberated over potential questions to generate survey

questions that would directly answer the research questions that were driving the study. Once satisfied with the question pool, the survey was submitted to and approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Kennesaw State University. The survey consisted of eight free response questions and 18 Likert scale questions where:

- 1 = Strongly Agree
- 2 = Somewhat Agree
- 3 = Neutral
- 4 = Somewhat Disagree
- 5 = Disagree
- 6 = Strongly Disagree

All questions were directed towards faculty members and were focused on subjects that pertained to classroom modality, COVID-19 safety, and challenges faced in their new environment (see Appendix A).

Procedures

The data collection method was an online survey that was created using Qualtrics XM and then posted in the KSU system for posting announcements, KSU Today. As a result, faculty members and staff could complete the survey at their own will. At the end of the survey period, Qualtrics XM generated a report with the 52 responses that were received. Only 48 responses were useful

as four of them had no data beyond the online survey consent questions. To interpret the responses, descriptive statistics generated by Qualtrics XM were used to analyze the answers to the Likert scale questions while the answers to the free-response questions were grouped by similar answers and served to provide more detailed responses for the researchers. The Likert scale questions were used in the Results section to quantify the research questions set forth above, while the free response answers were used to provide quotes as additional proof of the conclusions drawn by the researchers.

Results

At the end of the ten-day survey period, Qualtrics XM provided the survey responses to all questions as well as descriptive statistics for the Likert scale questions. Considering both the Likert scale questions and the free response questions, a full view of faculty members' thoughts and perceptions of safety, the new school environment, classroom modality, and faculty relationships with students were able to be collected. These questions and responses were categorized into three sections that served as research questions one, two, and three.

RQ1: Were faculty members able to implement the safety guidelines put in place by Kennesaw State University?

Table 1

Responses to Research Question #1: Were faculty members able to implement the safety guidelines put in place by Kennesaw State University?

Question Number	Question	Strongly Agree	Somewhat Agree	Neither	Somewhat Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
3	Have you been provided with training regarding changes to your job due to COVID-19?	17	12	8	6	3	2
4	Are you required to wear a mask during the course of your work?	29	11	3	1	1	3
5	Have you heard of KSU's Presidential Task Force?	30	11	4	1	1	1
6	Have you taken the COVID-19 Self-Assessment provided by KSU?	14	4	3	1	11	15
7	Have you taken advantage of the on-campus COVID-19 testing?	5	1	5	0	12	23
8	Did you receive a branded KSU face covering?	39	4	0	1	1	2
9	Do you feel that KSU has taken the appropriate steps to ensure multiple cleanings of high-traffic areas?	19	14	6	4	2	2

12	Regarding Social Distancing Guidelines, do you know what "rules of the road" means?	21	9	0	1	6	11
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Table 2

Descriptive Statistics for Research Question #1: Were faculty members able to implement the safety guidelines put in place by Kennesaw State University?

Question Number	Question	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std Deviation	Variance	Count
3	Have you been provided with training regarding changes to your job due to COVID-19?	1.00	6.00	2.42	1.44	2.08	48
4	Are you required to wear a mask during the course of your work?	1.00	6.00	1.81	1.38	1.90	48
5	Have you heard of KSU's Presidential Task Force?	1.00	6.00	1.65	1.09	1.19	48
6	Have you taken the COVID-19 Self-Assessment provided by KSU?	1.00	6.00	3.75	2.11	4.44	48
7	Have you taken advantage of the on-campus COVID-19 testing?	1.00	6.00	4.78	1.68	2.82	46
8	Did you receive a branded KSU face covering?	1.00	6.00	1.45	1.22	1.48	47

9	Do you feel that KSU has taken the appropriate steps to ensure multiple cleanings of high-traffic areas?	1.00	6.00	2.19	1.38	1.90	47
12	Regarding Social Distancing Guidelines, do you know what "rules of the road" means?	1.00	6.00	2.90	2.12	4.51	48

Based on the survey results (see Tables 1 and 2), 60.42% of faculty members reported that they were trained regarding their new work requirements, 85.42% of faculty reported they were made aware of the Presidential Task Force, and 90% of those who responded to the survey were administered a KSU face mask and were made aware of the requirement to wear the masks. While most faculty members had not taken advantage of the on-campus COVID- 19 testing, about half of the faculty had taken the COVID-19 Self-Assessment quiz provided by KSU. Based on free response questions #7 and #8, three out of eight faculty members reported that they were provided with cleaning supplies and seven out of eleven faculty members reported using them regularly as well as reported that there were cleaning supplies in the classrooms. However, there were two responses stating that no cleaning supplies had been provided as well as the following response:

I see cleaning supplies around the building. I also see someone come into my office which only I use and clean the door handle to a closet that has not been used in years every single day. Why? Seems like a waste of resources (Response to free

response question #8).

This suggests that while each faculty member may not have been provided cleaning supplies, the maintenance staff still made an effort to clean each office and classroom.

RQ2: How did faculty members respond to their new environment?

Based on the survey results (see Tables 3 and 4), 70.83% of faculty members reported that they felt comfortable and safe on campus overall, but when asked about specific places on campus, the results varied greatly. Due to differing results/comments when presented with sanitation effort questions in the survey, the results are inconclusive as to whether faculty are satisfied with the new cleaning/disinfecting efforts. Two responses from free response question #6 also revealed concerns over students and faculty alike who do not follow the guidelines as well as the lack of required testing. One faculty member reported being “scared of colleagues who appear to forget their mask or don’t want to wear it and don’t seem to believe they should while wanting to speak with [them] in a single office setting.” This faculty member continued saying, “I

have felt ‘hostage’ to two different (male) colleagues who didn’t think they needed to have a mask on for one-on-one interaction.” It is not just faculty who are not following CDC guidelines. Another faculty member stated that they have “stress and anxiety of worrying that [they are] in an unsafe environment because students are not being

careful.” While these responses and two more like them point to a fear of being on campus, the Likert scale questions must also be taken into consideration. Looking at all the evidence, while faculty are unsure about their safety in some areas, 70.83% are somewhat confident about being on campus.

Table 3

Responses to Research Question #2: How did faculty members respond to their new environment?

Question Number	Questions	Strongly Agree	Somewhat Agree	Neither	Somewhat Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1	Do you feel safe coming to work at KSU?	19	15	1	5	6	2
10	Do you feel safe eating at Stingers?	9	4	18	0	7	10
11	Do you feel safe using the Wellness Center?	6	2	21	3	4	11
13	Do you find it easy to stay 6 feet apart from everyone while indoors?	13	15	2	5	4	9
14	Do you feel that the high-touch surfaces are being cleaned often enough to prevent COVID-19 from spreading?	14	10	8	8	5	3
15	Have you seen people indoors who are not wearing a face covering when they should?	15	11	5	2	3	11
15a	Are you likely to approach that person and correct their behavior?	5	7	6	7	7	15

16	Do you feel safe using the Owl Bus?	3	3	28	2	4	8
17	Do you feel that the Owl Bus is being cleaned often enough to prevent COVID-19 from spreading?	1	2	38	0	3	2

Table 4

Descriptive Statistics for Research Question #2: How did faculty members respond to their new environment?

Question Number	Questions	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std Deviation	Variance	Count
1	Do you feel safe coming to work at KSU?	1.00	6.00	2.38	1.58	2.48	48
10	Do you feel safe eating at Stingers?	1.00	6.00	3.46	1.76	3.08	48
11	Do you feel safe using the Wellness Center?	1.00	6.00	3.64	1.63	2.66	47
13	Do you find it easy to stay 6 feet apart from everyone while indoors?	1.00	6.00	2.98	1.88	3.52	48
14	Do you feel that the high-touch surfaces are being cleaned often enough to prevent COVID-19 from spreading?	1.00	6.00	2.77	1.57	2.47	48
15	Have you seen people indoors who are not wearing a face covering when they should?	1.00	6.00	3.00	1.98	3.91	47
15a	Are you likely to approach that person and correct their behavior?	1.00	6.00	4.04	1.76	3.10	47

16	Do you feel safe using the Owl Bus?	1.00	6.00	3.52	1.38	1.92	48
17	Do you feel that the Owl Bus is being cleaned often enough to prevent COVID-19 from spreading?	1.00	6.00	3.17	0.87	0.75	46

RQ3: How did the changes to the school environment impact faculty members’

classroom modalities and their relationships with students?

Table 5

Responses to Research Question #3: How did the changes to the school environment impact faculty members’ classroom modalities and their relationships with students?

Question Number	Question	Strongly Agree	Somewhat Agree	Neither	Somewhat Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
2	Has COVID-19 impacted the way you do work at KSU?	32	11	0	0	1	4

Table 6

Descriptive Statistics for Research Question #3: How did the changes to the school environment impact faculty members’ classroom modalities and their relationships with students?

Question Number	Question	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std Deviation	Variance	Count
2	Has COVID-19 impacted the way you do work at KSU?	1.00	6.00	1.73	1.45	2.11	48

From the Likert-scale survey questions (see Tables 5 and 6), 89.59% of faculty members reported that COVID-19 impacted the way they do work at KSU. One major difference shown in free response questions #1 and #2 was that the staff held office hours almost exclusively online rather than in person, and while more students

attended the office hours, faculty found it difficult to connect with students both on and off campus. For on campus meetings, one faculty member reported “indoor air quality and not wanting to be in close quarters” as a challenge of interacting with students on campus. This concurred with another response stating “students gather outdoors

with no distance at all thus contributing to increase virus spread [and] also when indoors, in general people do not wear face masks properly not covering their noses” as a reason why face-to-face interaction was difficult. Another major difference shown in free response questions #3-5 was classroom modality and attendance. While not all classes had to change their class format in response to COVID-19, some face-to-face and hybrid classes were forced to go fully online. Because of this switch in class modalities, faculty had to adjust their class content to accommodate for demonstrations that would have required student involvement and class exercises that would be difficult to monitor online. For those classes that remained on campus, one of the faculty members reported 50% less enrollment and another reported using rotational schedules to determine which students would be in class each day.

Discussion

The results related to safety on campus were inconclusive. In contradiction with our initial thoughts, while faculty members claim to feel safe enough to be on campus, it appears that not all faculty members believed enough safety precautions were taken. However, this is not uncommon as many faculty members across the United States had doubts about their schools keeping them safe on campus (Marek, 2020). Faculty members at KSU mentioned multiple different reasons why they felt unsafe on campus, and most of them point to safety precautions not being enforced in the way that faculty members expected. In relation to faculty members’ relationships with students and their overall classroom environment, while not all faculty members are content with their class modality, most of the faculty were able to transition to online classes

smoothly. Faculty members were probably more receptive to teaching online classes because it was a commonly-used countermeasure in preventing outbreaks on campus (Vaghela, 2020). Changing class modality to online instead of face-to-face likely also brought solace to those faculty members who felt they would be unsafe on campus.

Limitations

One of the major limitations of the study is that it only looks at faculty members from KSU’s Marietta campus and does not include faculty from the school’s Kennesaw campus. Another limitation is that demographic data was not collected, which means that we cannot know how well our findings reflect the general demographics at KSU. Also, the survey was only open to faculty members for ten days. For the next study, researchers should allow faculty members at least 30 days to fill out the survey as well as include demographic data questions to determine how well the survey results reflect the faculty population.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic required institutions such as KSU to drastically change the way they operate on campus as well as to change the way their classes are delivered. This descriptive article used a survey to explore how faculty at KSU responded to these changes and to get their thoughts on their new environment. While most faculty tried their best to adjust to fully online classes and the new safety protocols on campus, they were not able to connect with students as they usually would. This was as a result of not only the online class modality, but also due to fear of catching COVID-19 on campus. This was indeed a

concern among many faculty members in colleges across the U.S. (Marek, 2020). KSU faculty's feelings of safety on campus were overall positive, but there were some faculty members who were unsure of whether they felt that the school did an adequate job of cleaning/disinfecting certain areas and providing cleaning supplies to students and other faculty members.

Overall, this study showed that faculty members were concerned about their students' learning environment as well as everyone's overall safety. Faculty were aware that KSU was trying to keep staff and students safe but felt there was a need for more instruction about safety guidelines as well as implementation of the guidelines.

Many institutions tried to keep up with the guidelines provided by the CDC. For example, the University of Illinois announced that rigorous mass testing would identify those students who had contracted the COVID virus before it became a crisis (Nadworny, 2020c). KSU followed all the safety protocols from the USG and the CDC to the best of their ability. Faculty and students alike tried their best to keep up with the many changes that came with the new school year. The Fall 2020 semester served as a good trial run as changes are always being made to improve the quality of education at KSU while still maintaining the safety guidelines to stop the spread of COVID-19.

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Appendix A: Survey Questions

Likert-Scale Survey Questions

#	Questions
1	Do you feel safe coming to work at KSU?
2	Has COVID-19 impacted the way you do work at KSU?
3	Have you been provided with training regarding changes to your job due to COVID-19?
4	Are you required to wear a mask during the course of your work?
5	Have you heard of KSU's Presidential Task Force?
6	Have you taken the COVID-19 Self-Assessment provided by KSU?
7	Have you taken advantage of the on-campus COVID-19 testing?
8	Did you receive a branded KSU face covering?
9	Do you feel that KSU has taken the appropriate steps to ensure multiple cleanings of high-traffic areas?
10	Do you feel safe eating at Stingers?
11	Do you feel safe using the Wellness Center?
12	Regarding Social Distancing Guidelines, do you know what "rules of the road" means?
13	Do you find it easy to stay 6 feet apart from everyone while indoors?
14	Do you feel that the high-touch surfaces are being cleaned often enough to prevent COVID-19 from spreading?
15	Have you seen people indoors who are not wearing a face covering when they should?
15a	Are you likely to approach that person and correct their behavior?
16	Do you feel safe using the Owl Bus?
17	Do you feel that the Owl Bus is being cleaned often enough to prevent COVID-19 from spreading?

Free Response Survey Questions

#	Questions
1	Has anything changed about your office hours?
2	Is interacting with students more of a challenge now? If yes, how so?
3	What kind of format is your class being delivered? What kind of format was it supposed to be?
4	What changes to your class content/schedule did you have to make to accommodate your new format?
5	If time is spent in-person, how has social distancing changed your class size?
6	What changes have impacted you the most due to COVID-19?
7	Are cleaning supplies available in every classroom? If yes, are students using them?
8	Have you been provided with cleaning supplies?