Navigating White Waters: Generation Z Untraditional College Transition Amid Unprecedented Social, Health, and Academic Crisis

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Abstract

Over the last three years, crises of a historical magnitude have had a profound impact on the higher education system in the U.S. During the spring of March 2020, COVID-19, referred to as the coronavirus, caused a significant health crisis, killing hundreds of thousands of people, while disrupting the educational, economic, and health system (Gupta, 2021). The following year, a 46-year-old black man, George Floyd, was brutally murdered by a white police officer, sparking violent protests and debate around racial equity, policing, and justice. A toxic and polarizing political environment further complicated issues under the controversial leadership of President Donald Trump. Colleges and universities had to quickly pivot to remote instruction, enforce mask mandates, and carefully navigate discourse to minimize disruption to the education of students. The adjustment was challenging for most institutions, particularly those classified as Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSI) or Minority Serving Institutions (MSI). They are usually under-resourced but serve many marginalized, low-income, first-generation, and at-risk students. These organizations encountered both obstacles and opportunities in the attempt to usher in a new generation of learners, Generation Z. Generation Z, often referred to as Gen-Z, are those individuals born between the years 1995-2015; a group that has experienced an untraditional and unprecedented college transition that will have a lasting impact on their younger and older adult lives. This qualitative case study explored the lived experience of Generation Z college students as they navigated the uncertain and tumultuous college transition into an HSI/MSI during the large-scale U.S. and world crises.

Keywords: Generation Z, college experience, student experience, remote learning, Covid-19, social justice

1. Introduction

1.1 Introduction of Problem

Since 2020, the U.S. has experienced a pandemic, social unrest, economic distress, and political turmoil that have sparked controversy and innovation. These issues challenged the U.S. to explore uncharted territory and navigate the white waters of change. White waters, often referenced in rafting, form from turbulence in the rapids resulting from fast-flowing currents (Keebler, 2022). To maneuver the quickly changing, fast-moving water, the rafter must be able to pivot quickly, anticipate the movement of the waves, and adjust accordingly (Keebler, 2022). According to Keebler (2022), the term "permanent white waters", coined by Peter Vaill in 1996, illustrates the continuous challenges that organizations encounter as they operate through a complex and nuanced climate. The risk, uncertainty, and potential dangers associated with maneuvering unfamiliar spaces can cause fear, anxiety, depression, distrust, conflict, and anger. Whitewater conditions have five distinct traits: unpredictability, emerging new problems, high cost, chaos, and intermittent issues (Keebler, 2022). These factors underscore the circumstances created by the three crises of 2019 (e.g., COVID-19, polarizing political climate, and social justice movement), which the U.S. continues to struggle to manage. Social issues, conflicts, unpredictable change, and outbreaks are elements that higher education has contended with during the evolution of society, so adversity is not new (Selingo, 2021). In addition, higher education has functioned during wars, recessions, protests, terrorist attacks, and other adversities. However, these calamities occurred at the same time as the compounding group of three: pandemic, social unrest, and toxic political environment (Selingo, 2021). Now that colleges and universities have returned to mainly in-person classes and campus interaction, institutions struggle with how to engage or re-engage students after two years of isolation and remote learning. According to

Green, (2022), current students feel overwhelmed, experience high levels of anxiety, and question the value of a college education, while faculty are frustrated with their lack of motivation and commitment to learning, leaving educational leaders perplexed on how to best address the lasting impact of the crises which have changed the landscape of higher education, ushering in a new normal. Today's students are not the same learners we educated in 2019. The present students' lives have been disrupted by forced remote learning, social isolation, mass death, sickness, social unrest, economic challenges, political unrest, and the absence of key transitional moments. The research study explored the lived experience of Generation Z college students as they navigated the uncertain and tumultuous college transition into an HSI/MSI during the large-scale U.S. and world crises. Insight into the psychological and social experience of this population of students will provide educational leaders with a comprehensive understanding of complicated and nuanced factors that influence student academic behavior and mental health due to societal crises. These research-based findings should inform and guide program development, resource services, financial support, and instructional practices that (re)engage and support retention, persistence, and graduation.

1.2 Literature Review

In December 2019, the COVID-19 disease quickly spread globally due to its infectious volatility, which became a pandemic in record time. It became evident that the world was facing an "unprecedented global catastrophe" (Srirampur, 2020). A pandemic is a type of epidemic. However, a pandemic involves the number of people and the geographical area that the disease affects (2020). Rapid person-to-person virus transmission was determined during the early stages of the outbreak. The contagious virus could spread when someone sneezed, coughed, or spoke. Droplets released in the air could infect another person when they landed on the eyes, nose, or mouth of the individual. The transfer of the virus could result from droplets being inhaled directly into the lungs or if a person touched their own eyes, nose, or mouth with hands that had been in contact with the virus (Centers, 2021).

The COVID-19 pandemic has become a turning point in society as it has disrupted the "normal" lifestyle of the global population. The global, and U.S. society in particular, had to adopt new norms, behaviors, and practices to navigate the pandemic. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) routinely shared empirical research and crisis updates as they became available. Statewide mask mandates, for example, were a part of multiple strategies to slow the spread of the virus after experts identified a correlation between mask-wearing and COVID-19 morbidity and associated mortality (Joo H, Miller GF, Sunshine G, et al., 2021). Similarly, other strategies for prevention were vaccinations, distancing at least 6 feet from others, avoiding poorly ventilated places and crowds, washing hands, covering coughs and sneezes, and cleaning and disinfecting surfaces (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2022).

Multiple sectors of society were impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, such as the economy, the educational system, and other important areas. The strain the pandemic placed on the healthcare system in the U.S., for example, had become evident (Joo H, Miller GF, Sunshine G, et al., 2021). In terms of the economy, Schleicher (2020) points out the interconnection between learning loss and skill loss resulting from COVID-19 and how both factors account for low productivity levels and economic outcomes. The report shows that member countries' gross domestic product (GDP) could be 1.5% lower on average throughout this century. If so, the U.S. would encounter an economic loss of USD 15.3 trillion, impacting other sectors of society (Hanushek & Woessman, 2008). Regarding the education system, since the early stage of COVID, the negative impact the virus had on student learning outcomes and the variety of ways learning loss would manifest were anticipated (Daniel, 2020). The course of study and where a student was in their program were all variables that influenced the type of challenges and constraints encountered. For example, Daniel (2020) drew a difference between the anxiety levels of a group of students at the starting point compared to those students who were halfway through their programs. Anxieties about readiness and admission standards were likely to apply to the former, while the burden of autonomous online learning at home would be a stressor for the latter.

Many organizations, notably higher education, have suffered enormous effects from lockdown measures, which have jeopardized international students' learning, testing, safety, and legal standing. College enrollment numbers have decreased, affecting institutional measures and outcomes such as retention, graduation, and persistence. Nearly an 8% decline was reported in the overall college enrollment numbers in Fall 2021, compared to Fall 2019 (Venit, 2022), with the most significant decline experienced by two-year institutions. The COVID pandemic has threatened to dismantle the advances made by already under-resourced institutions, particularly those located on or near the Southwest Borderland such as California, Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas, whose student population encounter issues of immigration, employment, access to adequate medical facilities, transportation, gang violence, and border patrol, in addition to food and housing insecurity, technology deserts,

and language barriers (Contreras Aguirre, 2022). Consequently, this marginalized student population is at risk of falling behind (Schleicher, 2020). The economic and psychological effects of the pandemic may linger for decades and hinder the crucial gains and advances that education has made in past years, both globally and in the U.S. (Venit, 2022).

The pandemic created a need for college campuses to pivot to online learning to ensure the health and safety of faculty, staff, and students. Now that institutions are transitioning back to in-person learning, university leaders must pay close attention to violent activity, threats, social unrest, and protests that may undoubtedly make their way to college and university campuses (Kafka, 2021). The nature and intent of higher education are to create an environment where students can engage in civil discourse, address issues, and critically unpack economic, political, and social issues which Gen Z has fully embraced (Kafka, 2021). This generation has urged college campuses to remove artifacts that promote racism, debated Title IX policies, fought for inclusion practices, protested police brutality, and demanded the use of identity pronouns in addition to leading protests against white nationalism (Kafka, 2021).

1.3 Social Justice

The murder of George Floyd, Ahmad Aubrey, Brianna Taylor, Antonio Valenzuela, and other persons belonging to a marginalized population sparked national and international outrage and protest (Thompson, 2021). These individuals were killed either at the hands of white police officers or at the hands of white vigilantes. The size, scope, and intensity of these were so vast that protests spread to dozens of major cities, which entailed riots, looting, pepper spray, police barricades, arrest, vandalism, and the burning of cars (Thompson, 2021). In addition, in 2014, there were large-scale mass eruptions of protest across the U.S. over the death of Eric Garner, a 46-year black male killed by a New York police officer using a prohibited and illegal chokehold. Also, the shooting of Michael Brown, an 18-year-old black male, by a white police officer in Ferguson, Missouri, resulted in his death. In these cases, the courts decided either not to indict or found the officer not guilty, which sparked social protest and movement around police brutality and the treatment of people of color (Reny & Newman, 2021).

A core characteristic of Gen Z is a strong commitment and desire to advocate for disadvantaged and disenfranchised groups, particularly those historically marginalized and underserved such as people of color, the queer community, the disabled, and women (Tanaid & Wright, 2019). Motivated by a pursuit of diversity, inclusion, equity, and social justice, this generation of influencers and digital natives can use social media and technology to galvanize a group of like-minded persons on both the local and global scale (Buzzetto-Hollywood, Hill, & Banks, 2021). Fundamental issues this generation is concerned about are women's rights, immigration reform, human trafficking, #MeTooMovement, Black Lives Matter, LGBTQ+, climate change, Gun violence, and DACA (Buzzetto-Hollywood, Hill, & Banks, 2021). These same social media outlets also serve as tools for receiving current political news and information.

Unlike Millennials, who were considered the "Me" generation, Gen Z is referred to as the "We" cohort, as this group thinks in the collective and believes in fairness, social responsibility, equity, and inclusion (Luttrell & McGrath, 2021; Corey & Grace, 2019). According to Luttrell and McGrath (2021), three areas of focus and commitment for this group are social, environmental, and political, which drives this group to address inequities due to race, gender identification, police brutality, gun control, disability, classism, sexism, and other ills of society. With a firm trust in government, this generation believes the central purpose of politics is to keep society safe, and their role is to make politicians accountable to the people (Pew Research Center, 2019). A survey conducted by the Pew Research Center that examined critical social and political issues of Generation Z reported that 70% of this group believed the government should be doing more and taking an active role in solving the problems of society (Pew Research Center, 2019). When compared to the previous four generations, this percentage is higher.

When it comes to social awareness or consciousness, this generation is acutely and keenly aware of many of the issues that plague the U.S. (Luttrell, & McGrath, 2021). Often referred to as "woke," this group has been bombarded with negative messaging from the media regarding Muslims and debates over issues such as sexual orientation, gender identity, women's rights, voter suppression, and other human rights affairs. Luttrell and McGrath (2021) argued that members of this group have not only experienced hate crimes, acts of racial profiling, church bombings, and mass shootings, but they understand the difference between equality and equity. Generation Z has witnessed a U.S. President mock people with disabilities, make sexist remarks, and exemplify racist behavior. However, this group has also had the opportunity to witness Mala Yousafzai receive the Nobel Peace Prize at the age of 17, activists fighting for transgender and gay rights, protesters arguing for justice reform, and celebrities using their platform to address immigration issues (Luttrell, & McGrath, 2021). Gen Z is

the generation that will demand transparency and draw back the curtains and veil of social justice to reveal the opportunities and challenges of our country.

1.4 Political Climate

A tumultuous and agitated evolution of the political climate in the U.S. has become a defining period in history. White supremacists or White nationalists, fueled by violence and hatred with a belief in white power and dominance, have played a vital role in the political discourse in the U.S. political arena. One-third of the 20 deadliest shootings in the U.S. since 2012 reported having been executed by someone with some form of emotional/ideological connection to white supremacist extremism (Kafka, 2021). Though violence and hatred perpetuated by white supremacists may assume many forms, the mission remains the same, to advance their agenda of accelerationism, aggravate political tensions, and increase racial conflict, which is enforced through chaos, intimidation, and the silencing of differing voices (Byman, 2022; Kafka, 2021).

In 2019, colleges and university campuses became an intended target for white supremacist groups to disseminate information and host discussions (Kafka, 2021). According to Kafka, (2021), between 2018 and 2020, there was a sharp increase in reported instances of white supremacist propaganda and violence, reaching an unprecedented record, averaging 14 incidents per day. Byman (2022) stated that since the ideology of white supremacy has filtered into mainstream politics over the last 15 years, society has encountered increased threats of mass shootings and acts of terrorism. For example, violence against minority groups, such as the 2015 shooting at the Charleston Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church, where nine people died. The shooting at the gay nightclub in Orlando resulted in 49 casualties. The 2018 shooting at the synagogue in Pittsburgh left 11 casualties. The 2019 shooting at the Walmart in El Paso, where 23 Mexican Americans died. Also, the 2021 shooting in Atlanta left eight people dead. Terrorism Task Forces and security experts foresee significant dangers from within the country in the form of internal terrorism (Kafka, 2021). Data analysis validates such claim indicating that instances of domestic terrorism have increased to unprecedented levels, spearheaded by white supremacist, anti-Muslim, and antigovernment extremists on the far right (Kafka, 2021).

Although nothing new, the white supremacist movement is rooted in historical issues of discrimination and prejudice, which have evolved in creative and contemporary approaches (Byman, 2022). Five factors connect to the nature of white supremacy violence and power: globalized shared ideas, strategic approach to course of action, current technology, current political landscape, and widespread sympathy (Byman, 2022). These individuals typically share the feeling of fear and threat of a "white genocide" resulting from current social phenomena such as migration, interracial marriage, racial equity, social and economic shifts, and other issues (Byman, 2022). Sharing such ideas and emotions has given birth to various groups that bond over the vision and mission of the white supremacy movement.

Since 2016, the political climate in the U.S. has provided a platform for radical nationalism and white supremacy groups, such as the Proud Boys, to participate actively and engage in the political process. While viewed as a contemporary group for seven decades the focus of this group has been to regain a white social order and enforce gender norms through religion, gender roles, and masculinity. These beliefs are rooted in a strong sense of superiority in Western civilization and white power (Kriner & Lewis, 2021). The Proud Boys have gained political influence with a significant increase of members through initiation rituals, an organized structure, and a national anthem that legitimizes the group which provides members with a sense of unity and belonging (Kriner & Lewis, 2021). Though the group claims to be nonviolent, evidence to the contrary has been shown through public displays of hostility, violence, and hate speech (Kriner & Lewis, 2021). One example would be the January 6, 2021 insurrection at the U.S. Capitol, where extremists stormed the capital with the threat of harm of political leaders (Kriner & Lewis, 2021).

1.5 Hispanic and Minority Serving Institutions

Colleges and universities classified by federal law as Minority Serving Institutions (MSI) or Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSI) serve a population of students that have historically been underserved, under-resourced, under-represented, and, in some cases, under-valued. These institutions occupy an essential place, serving primarily, but not exclusively, low-income students, first-generation students, and students of color. Many MSIs, such as historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs), and Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs), began in response to a history of inequality and lack of access for people of color at PWI (predominately-white institutions). Their primary role is to prepare a diverse workforce and underrepresented students for graduate and professional school, which is essential to the economy. However, limited research exists about Borderland institutions, HSIs, and the population of students these institutions serve. According to Garcia (2019), in the U.S., there are 569 colleges and universities classified as HSI. However, there exists a need for a clear distinction

between those institutions that are "serving" rather than "just enrolling" Latinx students. Institutions fulfilling the true intention of MSI and HSI are laser-focused on their approach, measures, and commitment to serving underrepresented students (Garcia, 2019).

The Hispanic and Latinx populations have seen a growth in enrollment in 2 and 4-year institutions over the past decade, resulting in more institutions' status as HSI (Laden, 2004). The U.S. Department of Education (2022) defines a Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI) as a postsecondary academy that enrolls at least 25% of the full-time equivalent (FTE) Hispanic and Latinx students. Like MSIs, HSIs aim to develop culturally aware programs and services that meet the unique needs of minorities, particularly Hispanic students (Cuellar, 2018). Additional HSIs and MSIs are also eligible to receive funding used to invest in that population. Examples of institutions with a designation of HSI are Santa Barbara City College, Mercy College, New Mexico State University, and the University of El Paso.

Minority-Serving Institutions (MSI) are unique as the student population consists of predominately-ethnic groups such as Black, Hispanic, Native American, Alaskan Indian, and Asian. The federal government diverts funds to assist in the programming and facility maintenance or improvement of MSIs, as they are interested in developing these groups and communities (Baez et al., 2008; U.S. Department of Interior, 2022). The premise derives from a mission of social justice and equity. Historically, these populations have experienced oppression from previous administrations at the local and federal levels, so funding can be considered a form of restitution. By awarding the title of MSI and providing additional funding, these institutions can provide opportunities for social and economic mobility for these populations (Espinosa et al., 2018; U.S. Department of Interior, 2022).

1.6 Generation Z or Gen-Z

The concept of "generation" is a term used to frame the collective experiences of a specific group of individuals during a specific period (Juul, 2008; Strauss & Howe, 1991). This collective experience is influenced by profound and significant social, political, and economic events that shape their values, behavior, and ideologies. A typical lifecycle spans 22 years from adolescence to young adulthood. The term serves as a lens or viewpoint to understand a group of people within a period (Gregory & Eighmy, 2009). Generations provide a snapshot, impressions, or moments in time that aid in chronicling the life cycle of decades to the present day (Strauss & Howe, 1991). From the G.I. Generation (born 1901-1924) to the Millennials (born 1982), these groups are seen as cohorts moving through time with distinctive peer personalities shaped by historical events.

Generation Z, sometimes referred to as Homelanders or iGeneration, are those individuals born around 1995 categorized in both negative and positive aspects of popular culture, as is done with most emerging generations (Mohr & Mohr, 2017; Corey & Grace, 2016). Some researchers report the birth year starting in the mid-to-late 90s, while others state the early 2000s (Dimock, 2019; Tanaid & Wright, 2019; Selingo, 2021), so the birth year can vary between 1995- 2002. The defining characteristics of Gen Z are commitment to social justice, collaboration, respect for authority, living and breathing technology, and possessing a high level of passion for solving world problems (Corey & Grace, 2016). Compared to previous groups, Gen Z was enrolling in college at a higher rate than past generations during that age (Selingo, 2021). Before the pandemic, Gen Z had been predicted to be the most educated generation since the Millennials. Freshman or first-year students entered the college campus in the Fall of 2020 during the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic. By Spring 2021, twenty and thirty-year-olds were hospitalized at alarming rates due to severe virus symptoms (Gupta, 2021). Now, the adverse effects of the pandemic on this generation's mental, physical, emotional, financial, and educational health are uncertain. Millennials are still considered the largest group; however, Generation Z makes up the majority of undergraduate college students and is considered the most racially and ethnically diverse generation (Pew Research Center, 2019; Chronicle of Higher Education, 2020). Though some of their characteristics and traits are considered similar to Millennials, the comparison was conducted by researchers prior to the COVID pandemic, polarizing political environment, and social justice movement, which had a profound impact on the young adult phase of their lives. According to the Chronicle of Higher Education (2020), Gen-Z has been considered the most "woke" and socially aware group since the 1960s and 70s. The term "woke" is defined as being acutely aware of societal issues, particularly those having to do with racism, injustice, and equity.

Giunta (2017) characterized Gen Z as outspoken, action-oriented, optimistic, idealistic, co-creators, influencers, self-reflective, and committed to self-discovery. Generation Z has a short attention span (8 seconds) and spends 2 to 7 hours online, blogging, vlogging (video/bloggers), or publishing digital videos. These co-creators design immersive live-streaming interactive videos through smartphones, laptops, iPads, and other innovative technologies. This cohort is considered the do-it-yourself (DIY) generation, with a strong affinity for video games and other gaming devices (Jenkins, 2019). According to Jenkins (2019), 66% of Gen Z identified gaming

as their outlet for fun. The preferred method of communication is through images, icons, symbols, and other visually creative approaches, unlike text-based messaging (Giunta, 2017). For self-educators, YouTube videos are the average tool used to learn new skills and knowledge, which provide lessons in short, bite-size information chunks (2017). More than three hours a day is spent in front of a screen and surfing Instagram, TikTok, Snapchat, and other social media platforms. Unlike the Millennials, Generation Z is more sophisticated regarding technology use in the social and academic environment (Giunta, 2017). With the talent to navigate several digital platforms simultaneously, this group uses YouTube, Google Scholar, Khan Academy, LinkedIn, Google Classrooms, and other educational and social platforms to collaborate on projects or seek peer assistance (Giunta, 2017). Because this generation is digitally connected worldwide and constantly receiving real-time news feeds, Generation Z is acutely aware of social, political, economic, health issues, and accustomed to real-time feedback, anonymous criticism, and expects to have a voice on current topics (Giunta, 2017).

During their lifecycle's early or formative years, Gen-Z has experienced and witnessed a tremendous amount of social unrest, mass shootings, and other alarming events (Tanaid & Wright, 2019). According to Tanaid and Wright (2019), this generation has been exposed to traumatic events such as 33 deaths and 23 injuries at Virginia Polytech Institution and State University and other violent incidents at secondary and postsecondary institutions. Since 2007, due to gun violence in the U.S., 122 people have been killed and 198 injured. In addition, over 6700 sexual assault cases have been reported on college campuses, and 1250 hate crimes (Tanaid & Wright, 2019). These atrocities have created a social consciousness, awareness, and commitment to social justice that contributes to their choice of colleges. When asked what colleges need to emphasize during recruitment, the top six answers were well-being, inclusion, ethics, safety, social justice, and diversity (Selingo, 2021). Because this generation is equity and civic-minded, academic and professional workplaces are evaluated based on their proven commitment to a safer, cleaner, and just society (Selingo, 2021).

Many of the characteristics and traits of Generation Z are still emerging, but there are clear patterns in behaviors and expectations (Cilliers, 2017). Technological advances such as YouTube, blogs, barcodes, Bluetooth, intelligent devices, mapping, live streaming, Artificial Intelligence (A.I.), Virtual Reality (V.R.), augmented reality (A.R.), metaverse, and platforms that blend the physical and virtual space, have had a significant impact on preferred teaching and learning (Cilliers, 2017). Rather than taking handwritten notes, students now rely heavily on tech P.C. recorders, desire entertaining teaching, and engage in lessons driven by technology. When a classroom lecture is missed, or a student cannot attend class in person, the assumption is that a recording is provided or on-demand streaming access is granted. Cilliers (2017) posited that because this generation has grown up with sophisticated technology that provides vivid imagery, immersive reality, interactive characters, and collaborative activities, their brains are conditioned or respond better to activities and approaches that mimic these features. This group is less likely to respond to auditory learning or lecture-based lessons that position them as passive learners. Classroom lessons are expected to reflect and address current real-life issues while also integrating the lived experience of Gen Z.

2. Method

2.1 Purpose of the Study

This qualitative case study explored the lived experience of Generation Z college students as they navigated the uncertain and tumultuous college transition into an HSI/MSI during the large-scale U.S. and world crises. Generation Z college students had to navigate the college experience amid three social and educational crises. While Generation Z has entered college during temporary untraditional circumstances, the effects of these crises will be long-lasting. Therefore, a multifaceted and multilayered perspective will be needed to be explored to create a comprehensive understanding of the lived experience of Gen-Z college students during this unprecedented and turbulent period. Comprehensive knowledge will aid educators, policy-makers, and leaders in constructing targeted and intentional solutions to address the short and long-term effects. Currently, institutions are navigating uncharted territory, so ongoing assessment and integration of the best strategies to retain and support students will be critical to retention, persistence, and graduation rates.

Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs Theory (1943) and Alexander Astin's (1999) Theory of Student Involvement served as the theoretical framework to provide sight into the psychological and sociological factors that motivate behavior and the atmosphere needed to cultivate a robust learning experience. Together, these psychosocial theories detail the cognitive and physical surroundings required to promote a safe, secure, and robust environment to support basic human needs.

2.2 Participant Profile

Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was received in February 2021 and assigned Project #21012.

Word-of-mouth, flier, and email were used to recruit participants for this proposed study. Several courses (i.e., First-Year Experience-FYEX 1112 and FYEX-Academic Success) that focused on academic success and social integration were identified. First-Year students and other classifications enroll in these courses. To recruit stop-out/dropout informants, the names and personal emails were provided by Institutional Analysis (I.A.) of students enrolled during the Spring 2021 semester but did not return for Fall 2021. Program Directors and instructors selected possessed expertise in the lived experience of college students and applied knowledge in support services. This group taught first-year and upper-class students, focusing on underrepresented and marginalized groups such as first-generation students and students of color. A diverse perspective, knowledge base, and positions were essential to the validity and credibility of the study. A total of 23 participants volunteered for the study: six- Directors, 11 students, and six- instructors.

A flier was created that provided information about the study and how to participate. The flier was then emailed to the instructors of seven sections of First-Year Experience (FYEX-1112) courses and 8-week mid-semester courses to promote to their students. The goal of FYEX 1112 is to assist first-year students during the transition into the college environment. The goal of mid-semester courses is to aid students in maintaining their minimum credit hours and developing academic success skills such as studying, time management, faculty communication, accessing university resources, financial literacy, and other skills critical to building student agency. The flier was emailed to 275 students, of whom 11 volunteered to participate in the study.

Program Directors and instructors were recruited using a modified version of the flier that provided details of the study, but the verbiage was tailored to university employees. The information was emailed to 11 program directors in various student services units and 14 faculty members from different academic departments. Respectively six and six volunteered for a total of 12 university employees were selected.

The sample consisted of 23 participants who were purposely selected for the study, which consisted of six instructors (I), six program directors (D), ten currently enrolled students (S), and one stop-out or student no longer enrolled at the institution (SO). Data were collected between the Spring 2021- Fall 2022 semesters which the student classifications were: two freshmen, seven seniors, one first-year stop out, and one junior. Gender identification comprised 14 women and nine males, with a racial makeup of eight White, four Black/ African-American, 10 Hispanic or Latinx, and one American Indian. Directors (D) had been employed at the institution for a minimum of eight years, and the average length of employment for instructors (I) was three years, with one having worked at the institution for more than eight years.

Participants were each assigned a special identifier to safeguard identity and privacy. Identifiers consisted of race, gender, and institutional affiliation. In addition, a numeric value was assigned in the order of participation. The following were used to classify race (i.e., Hispanic-H, Black-B, White-W, and Native American- N), gender (Male-M and Female-F), and institution affiliation (i.e., Student-S, Instructor-I, and Program Director-D). For example, the first Hispanic male student to be interviewed would be HMS1 or the second director to be interviewed, who identified as a black female, would be classified as BFD2. Figure 1 shows the demographic information of the male participants.

Figure 1. Demographic Information

Participants	Role	Classification	Major or Specialization	Race
6	Instructor	N/A	English, First-Year Experience, Education, and Astronomy	White (2), Black/African American (1), Hispanic/Latinx (3)
11	Student	First-year (2), Senior (7), Junior (1), First-Year Stop out (1)	Chemistry, Education, Engineering, Medical, Counseling, Fine Arts, and Undecided	Hispanic/Latinx (6), White (4), Black/African American (1)
6	Directors	N/A	Diversity Programs, Advising, Support Services, and Financial Aid	American Indian/Alaska Native (1), Black/African American (2), White (2), Hispanic/Latinx (1)

2.4 Data Collection Procedure and Analysis

The research relied on semi-structured interviews consisting of several demographic questions and 23 open-ended questions allowing participants to share personal perspectives and lived experiences. Participants

were informed to speak freely, be honest, and provide as many contextual details as possible to provide a vivid picture. The primary researcher conducted all interviews to ensure questioning strategy and approach consistency. If further details were required, follow-up questions were posed to clarify particular points made by the informant.

Imposed restrictions due to the Covid pandemic that mandated social distancing and mask-wearing made it necessary to conduct and record interviews using the Zoom video conference system. Before the beginning of the interview, participants were informed of the Zoom recording, and permission was requested to use the device. The virtual recordings were saved to a secure computer and placed in a safe location (e.g., encrypted, physically secured computer, OneDrive cloud-based solution). Results were stored in a password-protected account accessible only by the researchers. The average length of each interview was 40-60 minutes, depending on the depth and breadth of the experiences shared by the participant.

NVivo qualitative software was used to organize, sort, analyze, code, and graph the data. Individual cases were created for each participant, so associated information, such as demographic, interviews, memos, annotations, and other personalized documents would remain connected to that person. An initial query search was conducted to explore the most frequently used words and phrases; done first with each participant group, then the entire research pool. Recurring words and phrases such as *student experiences, transition, mental health, online classes, rights*, and *services* consistently surfaced, ranking among the top 10 of each group. Based on the query and mapping process, the data was sorted and organized into 20 codes, which were then consolidated by topics and reduced to six primary codes: crises; institutional responsibility; social & mental health needs; social justice & safe space; student experience; and teaching & online engagement. From those codes, four themes surfaced: a comprehensive understanding of the student experience; adaptive support services campus communication, and response time; structured teaching, online engagement, and leadership; and leading during difficult time and uncomfortable conversation.

2.5 Research Site

The study was conducted at an institution classified by federal law as a minority-serving institution (MSI) and Hispanic Serving Institution (MSI), which serves a high percentage of minorities or students of color from underserved and low-income communities. With the designation of a land-grant institution, the comprehensive research university is dedicated to teaching, research, and service. Located in the southwestern region of the U.S., the university is 30 minutes from the Mexico Border, with a total student enrollment of 14,000. The 14,000 is made up of 11,569 undergraduates and 2,652 graduate students. Classified by Carnegie as a Research 2 institution, the university extensively investigates borderland issues, immigration law, and other areas affecting Hispanic, Latinx, and indigenous peoples. A demographic profile of the students shows 58% identify as Hispanic, 68% are Pell eligible, 50% classify as first generational or the first in their family to go to college, and some are considered Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) students. Though considered a residential campus, 83% of the students live off-campus. Full-time enrollment is 78%, with a medium age of 21. As a NASA Space Grant College, a Hispanic-serving institution, and home to the first Honors College in the state, the institution prides itself on offering accessible, equitable, and societal mobility in pursuit of quality and responsibly priced education.

3. Findings

The qualitative study revealed four major themes that affected the lived experience of Generation Z college students as they navigated the college experience during unprecedented world crises of the Covid pandemic, social unrest, and a polarizing political situation: *a comprehensive understanding of the "student experience"; adaptive support services, campus communication, and response time; structured teaching and online engagement; and leading during difficult times and uncomfortable conversations*

3.1 Comprehensive Understanding of the "Student Experience."

The concept or term "student experience" has become prevalent and expansive in postsecondary education over the last few years. Colleges and universities in the U.S. use the term in resource material, marketing campaigns, or orientation events to promote engagement, services, support, development, or types of involvement a student can expect at their institution. However, according to Benckendorff, Ruhanen, and Scott (2009), the meaning of student experience extends beyond the construction of curricular and co-curricular learning activities, which is a traditional and outdated approach. A contemporary framework includes curricula, assessment, pedagogy, extracurricular activities, mental health resources, residential life, cafeteria, and all things students interact with physically and mentally within the university (Benckendorff, Ruhanen, & Scott, 2009; Pötschulat, Moran, & Jones, 2021).

Historically, students have been regarded as "clients" seeking the expertise of faculty, which relegates them to the role of passive learner. Their role now is one of a "customer," which requires institutions to compete for their business. There is increased pressure for institutions to accommodate the diverse needs and desires to attract and retain students, i.e., customer base (Pätschulat, Moran & Jones, 2021). The "customer experience" notion has existed outside of higher education, where companies focus on components, like the ease of access to their products or how items are displayed, to attract and engage clients (Selingo, 2021). How customers interact with the product and are stimulated emotionally can determine their level of pleasure or displeasure. In recent years, the idea of customer experience has entered higher education but is referred to as the "student experience. Educators hesitate and resist viewing students as customers because it may imply that students are purchasing a degree. However, a 2020 survey conducted by Ruffalo Noel Levitz found that only half of the 500,000 current college students attending a four-year college were satisfied with their student experience, which may require a closer examination of their expectation of service (Selingo,2021). Students are purchasing access to institutional services and faculty expertise which may lead to a degree or certificate, also skill and knowledge development.

Over 147 references were made by participants using the word combination "student experience" to encompass the broader academic, social, and health reality of students. When asked to provide a single word that characterized their college transition, such words as *disaster, exhausting, chaotic, interesting, uncertain, isolated, anxious, zoom fatigued, disjointed, and disconnected* were used to describe their experience.

> HMS8*:* We had to quickly go online, and so that was rough. It was different because you didn't get to go out and interact with people. You had to stay home or go to work, and that's about it.

> WMS3: Doing online has been kind of a pain, I mean I live in EL Paso city, so there's been benefits because I'm not having to drive 1hr every day both ways, but I was only able to do like half the labs which were kind of a big problem. Plus, just the lectures for technical topics weren't as good over the computer.

Institutions were forced to immediately transition courses to online education, create social distancing plans, enforce mask-wearing mandates, cancel social events, and send students home in the middle of the semester to adhere to health and safety guidelines (Selingo, 2021). The pivot disrupted the typical or traditional anticipated transition that universities and students plan for months in advance. Participants believed these overall conditions and circumstances limited, if not eliminated, opportunities for students to establish meaningful new relationships, explore campus, and effectively navigate campus support services, which resulted in academic and personal challenges. Administrators such as BFD2 and HFD5 emphasized that typical planned and unplanned interactions that occur at residential college campuses were absent from the experience:

> BFD2: Students are not getting the collegial experience, where they have all of these activities, they would normally try to get involved in. The interaction on the campus. Even if they didn't want to get involved in different activities, just walking across campus, other students, staff members, or organizations along the way would try to recruit, so there's a lot of interaction that would happen. That level of interaction these students are not experiencing.

> HFD5*:* This is not a positive word, but I do not mean it quite as negatively as it maybe sounds. I feel like it is a little disjointed, you know that traditional experience and especially at a university like ours that you know we have Aggie families who attend. I think really just hasn't happened in the same way for this group of students who are entering in the pandemic right because, the majority of them, haven't been to campus yet.

During the interviews, participants mentioned that one benefit of attending a traditional residential college is the ability to use the campus as an escape from their traditional lives. Often the physical space served as a haven, a hotspot for Wi-Fi connection, and a quiet space for students to not only mentally and physically decompress but also get a balanced meal from the food court. The campus has a food pantry that distributes free food and meals to students and employees who might be experiencing food insecurity. For students who had to assume the role of caretaker, babysitter, and translator for family members who did not speak English, working 20-30 hrs. per week, and attending classes, the campus was a valuable space and resource for their sociological, psychological, and physiological well-being.

> HFS9*:* It's very hard and more, I have two small kids so it was very difficult doing school from my house with them there. Trying to do school work without interruptions from my kids, or family was impossible. Since you are home, everybody thinks you are available to do whatever. And you feel guilty not being available or to say, I got school work to do.

Outside of the regular life adjustments the traditional college transition encountered, these participants stated that

striking a balance between home life-school was further complicated by the abrupt pivot to online education. The initial plan or expectation was that courses would be attended in person, creating an organic separation between home and school. The physical and mental distance would allow the student to focus on one responsibility, "being a student", instead of simultaneously wearing multiple hats. A research report generated by the Student Experience Project (2021) stated that the various support mechanisms on campus create a positive student experience in both academic and social belonging, which can lead to increased overall success.

Though all participants mentioned the challenges and concerns related to their experience over the last two years, some focused on the opportunities and positive outcomes for what others defined as chaotic, disjointed, and overwhelming circumstances. These participants appreciated the outpouring of support provided by the institution and understood that adjustments had to be made to ensure the safety of the college community.

> BFS4: Honestly, I feel like in a sense, it made my college experience a little better, just because I feel like I was able to find people that like I felt genuinely cared for me and like understood, like my struggle like it was unfortunate that, like.

> HFS10: I mean, it was a good experience, just because I'm glad that everyone is able to stay safe throughout the pandemic and stuff, I would rather have everyone stay safe online than go in person and risk like getting sick, so I would think that like my experience overall was good. It could have been better, obviously doing more group work, like in person and studying at the library more, and all this stuff, but overall, it was good.

A frequency query in NVivo revealed that the word "experience" was mentioned by participants a total of 299 times in a variety of contexts such as *classroom, first year, learning, personal, remote, teaching, shared, and academic*. In addition, the word was the most commonplace across each participant group. The student experience was an interactive and individualized relationship with the institution that existed outside the broader college experience concept. These small encounters with critical campus units, such as the financial aid office, tutoring services, student organizations, faculty members, and diversity programs made up the total impression of the college experience. Each participant had different expectations of the student experience based on personal and professional demands. Pötschulat, Moran, and Jones (2021) posited that the concept of the student experience had gained much traction and attention from educational leaders, policymakers, researchers, practitioners, and students. However, a clear or agreed-upon definition has not been determined, which can cause some confusion and disconnection between how students and educational leaders expect this experience to be operationalized and felt.

3.2 Adaptive Support Services, Campus Communication, and Response Time

Providing students with adequate resources, support systems, campus connections, and service options inside and outside the classroom are critical components to successful academic and social outcomes. Colleges and universities often refer to this as supporting the whole student or providing wraparound services that take a strengths-based, needs-driven approach. However, making these systems and guardrails available was only the first step. The expectation was that support systems would be adaptive to the remote modality, without interruption of services, and provided promptly to accommodate the diverse needs of students. An NVivo search query revealed that of the 23 participants, 22 referred to the importance of offering a range of campus services and a need for improved delivery methods to connect to these resources. Counseling, mental health, and disability services ranked top on the list. Other services mentioned were advising, community resources, tutoring, and financial resources.

> BFD1: A problem was getting students more acclimated to available support and services on campus which would normally have been in person, but making sure that those things could still move forward for students, and you know in using Zoom and using those other digital platforms. The pandemic is not like anything we've ever seen before, so thinking outside of the box about student services and how we support students that are coming into the university definitely; some out-of-the-box things need to start happening

> NMD4: It was essential to practice adaptability models, especially regarding student accessibility services; accessibility issues of sight, hearing, writing, and physical.

During this time of uncertainty, abrupt changes, and limited access to support services, getting questions answered in what was deemed a timely manner was important to whether participants enrolled in college, registered for courses, received financial support, and in some cases, continued their education. When asked what was considered an appropriate response time, 24 to 48 hours was considered reasonable. Most participants (i.e., 80%) believed the institutions should have found more effective communication tools that allowed quicker response times to requests and questions made by students and parents. In some cases, participants felt the slow

response by the institution served as a barrier to educational progress and hampered the business operation. This issue was prevalent for students and Directors.

> WMS1: The majority of the time, the only way you can reach everybody is going to be through email and phone, which a lot of times get super backed up, so response times take a long time, or you just won't have somebody pick up. And then people respond to your voicemails, so it takes forever to get a lot of things done, a lot of times like that's why it took so long for me to get my financial aid stuff.

> WMD3: You basically had emails and phone calls and waited for responses back, sometimes, and so you know, I think there were some frustrations and stuff from the students, and so I think that created some barriers.

For some participants, English was not their first language. Effective communication, speaking to someone in person or via Zoom, and transparent message transmission systems were essential to comprehending institutional policies, processes, procedures, and meeting deadline dates. Participants mentioned that the language barrier often required more time to read, analyze, and respond to requests and assignments. What would typically take days required weeks because of confusing messages, miscommunication, and misinterpretation. The confusion caused anger, frustration, anxiety, and depression. A few participants considered not attending that semester because of what was referred to as an "unpleasant" experience.

> HFS10: Like I would ask questions, but the problem is because it is through text, it did not convey what I'm trying to say, and it was often very much confusing, so it took weeks for me to get everything figured out because English is not my first language.

Though communication surfaced among all groups, the subject was commonly discussed or mentioned by the directors and instructors. These individuals considered themselves frontline workers who provided forward-facing services. Participants felt the institution could have done a better job with streamlining transmission, providing guidance, taking proactive actions, conveying a consistent message, and exploring the use of various mediums to communicate with the campus community.

> BFD1: In comparison to a lot of other schools, I think that we were late in disseminating information; and I also think that systemic-wide communication was fragmented in terms of how we got information out to students. I would definitely say more streamlined communication and more informed guidance for departments to make sure that students were receiving the same type of information from departments on campus as well.

3.3 Structured Teaching, Online Engagement, and Leadership

The classroom experience, whether in-person or remote, serves as the conduit for transmitting information, knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSA) for both the student and faculty. The classroom is where the material is created, analyzed, synthesized, and evaluated so students can develop the expertise and intelligence to acquire a job or career in a particular profession. The abrupt transition to remote learning severely disrupted the in-class learning experience participants were anticipating for their academic matriculation. Participants were acutely aware of the reasons behind the transition to remote education but were unprepared mentally and, in some cases, technologically, to take all or most of their courses online. Some student participants experienced increased anxiety levels, while others struggled to adapt to the new learning reality. Participants encountered learning challenges, particularly with online-proctored exams.

> WFS6: Every single class was online and so doing exams online was awful. I have never had anxiety taking tests until I had to do them online and I couldn't see what was going on around me with other students and stuff so that was very hard. And like computers were tracking every single movement, so if my eyes look to the side. I'm not a technologically savvy person, I was very much struggling.

The struggles and barriers for many student participants extended beyond just online exams but entailed accessibility to adequate technology, internet access; stable Wi-Fi, and sufficient physical learning space. Over the last few years, many conversations have been had about the *digital divide or digital deserts*. The term *digital divide* refers to the disparity between those areas, such as communities, households, or regions that do not have adequate access to technology, compared to those that do possess access. Digital desert refers to those technology-starved areas. Participants believed the lack of access and proper technological devices was a barrier to meaningful fruitful learning opportunities. Participants provided examples of instances where they had to purchase new technology, locate hotspots for Wi-Fi connection, and share devices, which resulted in the submission of late assignments.

> HMS2: I had to get another computer because me and my brother use to share a computer because he's

> going to UTEP and I'm going to NMSU. Last year actually we got quarantined. That was one of the things that I struggled with because, like, I said, I had to share the laptop with my brother. I basically had to stay in my room, so I missed a whole month of material.

Though the institution provided loaner devices and technology, it was based on a first-come-first-served basis, which was problematic for those without transportation to the campus or who lived too far away to take advantage of the opportunity. These participants had to rely on sharing devices with friends, family members, or roommates, which increased exposure or risk of contracting the virus.

> BFD1: The digital divide for sure was a major issue; not having access, a lot of students, not having access to adequate internet, and also not having adequate access to the technology itself being laptop computers and even in our own space, not having computers that have webcams and so that digital divide. Students do not have adequate technology at home.

The online learning, teaching, and engagement experience were not awful for all participants. Some viewed this as an opportunity to learn differently and develop new skills while remaining safe during the pandemic. However, 90% of them did expect the transition to remote learning to be a troublesome experience but were pleasantly surprised with the creativity and freedom the moment offered. The real-time unfolding of the transition provided one participant, whose interest was technological advances, the experiential, hands-on learning, which was viewed as invaluable.

> HMS5: You know, working with ICT our job for that summer and in 2020 we were setting up cameras, were setting up microphones; we were the ones that were installing everything for all these classrooms so that we can have this type of hybrid experience that way people wanted. I felt that illusion that they were in class and it allowed the ability to have classes to be both online and in person. You know it would switch depending on the day and you know that was a really good idea. I was like, okay let's see if this works.

> HFS10: I mean, it was a good experience, just because I'm glad that everyone is able to stay safe throughout like the pandemic and stuff. I would rather have everyone stay safe online than go in person and risk getting sick, so I would think that like my experience overall was good. It could have been better obviously, like doing more group work like in person and studying at the library more, and all this stuff, but overall, it was good.

> WMS1: The switch to online classes has been good, I will say that. I was, I was expecting it to be worse, but it was better than I thought. I think the only main issue, of course, was the course delivery.

Participants understood the tedious and challenging balance required to ensure a rigorous academic experience for students while creating a safe learning environment. Their only hope was that more group work was integrated into the classes to encourage student-to-student interaction and a unified, structured, and systematic approach to courses delivered by the instructors. Daniel (2020) argues for a more systematic organization within schools to identify and nurture the most valuable aspects of technology-based learning experience amidst COVID-19. The study reports that reaching a point that considers all essential components of good technology-based education has proven more challenging than expected.

3.3.1. Faculty

The faculty-student relationship is a crucial factor that significantly influences students' overall success, classroom performance, agency, belonging, and college experience. Research has shown that students who have meaningful engagement with faculty or at least one faculty mentor (i.e., formal, informal, inside or outside classroom) demonstrate better overall academic performance than those who do not. Students feel comfortable asking questions, visiting during office hours, and engaging in intellectual conversation that stimulates their curiosity. The comfort is because students view the faculty member as approachable, accessible, and supportive. However, during the abrupt transition to remote learning, faculty members tried adjusting to their new reality, staying safe, learning new technology, supporting students, and teaching courses, all without a blueprint or roadmap.

> HFD5: There was no standard way the courses were being offered; there was not a standard student experience, so even in those first couple of weeks of classes and even this semester right, we have been doing this for three semesters even this semester. Even more than other institutions, I am all for faculty playing the important role they play at the institution, but one of the bigger challenges was that we didn't give faculty enough guidance or a little bit of a requirement; you, don't have to be making mandates left and right, but a little bit of a requirement. Participants encountered overwhelming disengagement, inconsistencies, and confusion during the classroom experience.

HMS2: Because the professors are not fully understanding what's happening, that's affecting the students. In a way, it affects the professors, the way they teach, so that it affects students, the way that we learn". The overall sentiment was that there were too many professors struggling with the use of Zoom, relying too much on teaching assistants, and unable to effectively convert their courses to the online platform. These struggles resulted in barriers for participants who could not make sense of class lessons

WMS3: Some professors created arbitrary rules that just did not make sense. It was just kind of ridiculous. Like I had two labs, it was in the same lab, same instructors, but you're only allowed to work on stuff you know, for that class in that lab. So, I am ahead in one class but behind in the other because I could not use time in one to catch up with the other.

BFS4: The coursework that she's asking us to do was like to make up for like not having a lecture or anything like that, but it was like more work than I feel like she would have given us if this was like a normal in-person semester, so it was like a lot of busy work and, just like. It made it just like a little bit more stressful just because, like all my professors, I feel like try but then it's like you're getting no lectures and like not really much like guidance from them and, like some of them have like office hours like some professors were like impossible to like reach like even right now for.

When a student encounters issues in the classroom or has questions regarding grading assignments, policy, coursework, material, academic major, or other factors related to a course, the initial advice is to seek assistance from their professor. The professor is viewed as a frontline worker, directly interacting with students who can resolve issues during the early stages. The hope is that early intervention can minimize the adverse impact on the academic and social experience, allowing the students to recover more quickly. In addition, the collaboration between the student and faculty can foster agency, self-efficacy, and further develop the faculty-student relationship. However, of the 23 participants, 18 (i.e., 80%) reported delayed responses, lack of communication, or confusing directions from their professor, resulting in anger and frustration with the course and institution. The irritation could be heard in the voice of BFS4 when the statement was made:

BFS4: My summer class that I am taking, one of my professors, only gave us some emails as contact information. Last Wednesday, I emailed him for clarification on the syllabus and I still have not heard anything. It has been a week. He told us after 48 hours, if we haven't heard anything, send him a follow-up. I sent him a follow-up, I emailed him again yesterday for clarification, no answer.

When the participants could not reach their professors to answer their questions, an email would be sent to the assigned academic advisor, or attempts would be made to resolve the issue independently. For some, this was problematic due to their limited knowledge of institutional policies, systems, and procedures. Additionally, the responsibility of answering the question shifted from the professor to the academic advising office, which increased their workload.

HFD5: Students were reaching out to us in a panic saying you told me, this was an online class, but my professor just told me, I had to meet everybody Tuesdays at 5 pm. In reality, I think they are at a little bit of a deficit, I think, next year we are going to have a lot of catching up to do with these first-year students.

During this time of remote learning, five participants acknowledged that instructors provided additional support by allowing makeup assignments, recommended mental health counseling, responded to questions within 24-48 hours, and were available through Zooming if students needed to schedule a meeting. Participant WMS1 stated that the professor of a film & video course provided a free subscription to movies that otherwise would have been costly for the students. Opposed to having to search for the movies, the subscription helped minimize expenses, particularly for older movies that might have been difficult to locate and expensive to purchase or rent. The small gesture amounted to a significant difference for students struggling financially who had to make difficult decisions like paying an electric bill or purchasing a video for class. These participants agreed there were some unpleasant experiences with a few instructors; however, others demonstrated an overwhelming amount of support and sensitivity to the realities of students, particularly those from low-income, first-generation, and marginalized populations.

BFS4 "I think the end of spring semester last year was probably like the most understanding I've ever had professors be about certain things".

3.4 Leading during Difficult Times and Uncomfortable Conversations

Leadership is critical to any organization's direction, particularly during transitions, especially when facing internal and external challenges. Participants believed that during this time of the pandemic, social unrest, and complex political environment, strong leadership was extremely important to manage the campus community's

safety, offering support to the diverse needs of the campus constituents and creating structured guidelines for course offerings and management. A large percentage of participants (i.e., 80%), particularly the Directors, felt a lack of proper guidance, consistent communication, and orchestrated effort for course delivery and management. Participants (i.e., instructors and Directors) believed that executive leadership (i.e., Chancellor, President, Deans, Chairs, and Vice Presidents) were apprehensive about providing strict guidelines to faculty, which exacerbated the problems and stated:

> HFD5: I think one of the things that made some of our challenges more evident this year than they have been before, was leadership was very hesitant to tell faculty what to do; the guidelines they had to follow in this extraordinary circumstance. Leadership was always very scary to do that. We do not have a problem telling staff when they have to do things, but we have a real problem with telling faculty. I think that was one of our bigger barriers.

> HFI6: For the most part, there were just some really low-hanging fruits that we could have fixed. Leadership realized how low-hanging fruit that was or the consequences of not doing that, like how greatly that impacted the student experience. That would have been a very easy thing for the institution to prevent if we just put a little bit of a requirement on the departments and faculty side.

In the minds of the participants, hearing from the institutional leaders often, at least every two weeks, regarding issues of political unrest, pandemic, course delivery, institutional updates, social unrest, campus safety, vaccinations, and course delivery could have possibly minimized some of the confusion. For 90% of the participants, this type of open communication and dialogue from campus leadership did not happen, or they were not aware of these levels of conversation. This was of particular concern to participants who identified as a person of color and or women, who began to feel unsafe on campus. Participants stated:

> BFD1 and HFS10: I looked for the leadership team of the university to bring us together to have a town hall to talk about opening a safe space, and talk about what was happening, and there was nothing. How we would galvanize efforts and support. I feel like they were kind of quiet about social unrest or protest, but again I'm not on campus. I don't know if they did anything on campus to support that which in itself is problematic. Those kinds of efforts should be visible and publicly articulated through all of our media outlets. This was national headlines and news.

The initial reaction from student participants was that the political and social unrest would not be a concern due to the region and location of the university. However, other informants hoped for the best but braced for the worst. Of course, student participants were aware of instances of protests occurring through social media and news outlets, such as CNN. However, many participants were from small rural towns, with limited exposure or awareness of racial and political discourse.

> WMS1: when it comes to the social unrest, I didn't really think any of it was going to affect my schooling at all honestly". The sentiment was that those types of incidents or issues typically happened in large urban cities, not small rule areas. In some ways, the social and civil unrest allowed participants who identified as persons of color to feel seen and understood.

> BFS4: Honestly, as a Black woman, I feel like in a sense, it made my college experience a little better, just because I feel like I was able to find people that like I felt genuinely cared for me and understood, like my struggle. It was unfortunate that someone had to die for a lot of people to open their eyes, to what black people face in this country. For me like I have always gone to a predominantly white school, so like I've never really been around a ton of people who like looks like me or like experience. A lot of times when I did talk about my experiences its met with like gaslighting or people trying to tell me that, those things didn't exist, and I just feel like it just made me feel a lot better because I could openly talk about those things now with my friends.

According to participants, the social and civil unrest around the U.S. provided an opportunity to engage in robust conversations in the classroom about race and race relations. The classroom was viewed as a place to feel supported and explore various perspectives and opinions around topics often considered taboo.

> HFS7: With my teachers, I just kind of felt more supported and more understood. It felt like it made sense, for the first time". The participant hoped this would continue and become an ongoing way of sympathizing and empathizing with people from different backgrounds and experiences. Listening and reflecting are critical actions needed to learn and heal from this social and racial unrest.

> BFDS2: People need to hear other folk's perspectives to express their perspectives and then to look within themselves and say, okay, what I believe; should I continue to believe this?

During the interviews, participants expressed an interest in becoming more socially conscious and aware of issues happening outside of their local and regional areas. However, the hope was that the institution, leadership, and instructors would teach and engage in this type of dialogue inside and outside the classroom. There was an understanding of the dangers, complications, uncomfortableness, and anger that these types of conversations could ignite. However, participants believed that higher education was the place to engage in critical thinking and civil discourse, explore new ways of reason, and unpack social justice and human rights issues. The purpose of postsecondary education is to teach students how to be critical thinkers and global citizens.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The research findings offered a comprehensive understanding of the complex and nuanced challenges of Generation Z college students. These students navigated the college experience when the U.S. and postsecondary institutions attempted to manage the impact of the three crises (i.e., the COVID-19 pandemic, social unrest, and polarizing political environment). According to Levin and Van-Pelt (2021), higher education is amid relentless and uncharted challenges leaders, researchers, and constituents are unsure whether institutions possess the flexibility, adaptability, or capacity to survive. Institutions have two options: adapt to survive or become severely disrupted (2021). The critical areas identified in the study: a comprehensive understanding of the student experience; adaptive support services, campus communication and response time; structured, teaching, online engagement; and leading during difficult times and uncomfortable conversations should be viewed as both a challenge and an opportunity to engage the new generation of learners "customers". The higher education landscape is currently primed for the meaningful cultivation of reflection, innovation, creativity, experimentation, transformation, and re-imagination of outdated academic operations, programs, services, systems, and structures. However, this will entail a better understanding of the student experience, improving support services, campus communication, response time, and practical approaches to teaching, online learning, and leadership. A drawn connection between these critical components, basic human needs, and Gen Z's propensity to be collaborative, reflective, and advocates for social justice will be essential to successful outcomes.

When parents, students, and families explore potential colleges and universities, they are now looking beyond residence halls, degree offerings, and tuition costs, as in past years. Generation Z and families closely examine parking, campus technology, mental health resources, disability services, diversity programs, green spaces, food courts, recreation centers, police safety, and other amenities that make up the total academic and social college lived experience. The vision of the student experience should extend beyond what was traditionally limited to curricular and co-curricular components (Benckendorff, Ruhanen, and Scott, 2009). Whether willing or unwilling, colleges and universities must start viewing students as customers instead of clients, who are educated consumers basing their decisions on both the organization's ability to provide a service and the totality of the ongoing lived experience. That means paying close attention to the nuanced details that help students navigate complex barriers, which may have been previously overlooked (McGuire, 2022).

Teaching and learning are at the core of colleges and universities mission, vision, and purpose. The federal government invests billions of dollars in supporting education. Postsecondary institutions spend billions to ensure their mission is accomplished. Families commit thousands of dollars each year, hoping their child will acquire the knowledge, skills, abilities, certificate, or degrees to enable social mobility. The Chronicle of Higher Education (2022) states, "Academics are the heart of college life, and the only piece of it all students participate in" (p. 46). Practical approaches to teaching and learning, both online and in-person, are critical factors in increased student engagement and deep learning. According to Kuh et al., (2005), a high-quality learning experience begins between the instructor and student, fostering a collaborative and interactive learning experience.

During the pandemic, many faculty members had to pivot their courses to online, learn new technology, and integrate meaningful ways to teach and engage students during this difficult time. Faculty members successfully balanced these complex priorities in some cases, while others may have taken the one-size-fits-all approach. Students and families understood and were sympathetic to the intricate, complex, and nontraditional circumstances that institutions had to navigate. However, moving forward, there will be an increased demand that colleges and universities take a systematic, intentional, and calculated approach to teaching and learning that will be inclusive, transparent, collaborative, and closely aligned with industry standards. Students have complained of feeling disconnected from their faculty members, disengaged from the learning material, and regard online learning as impersonal (Chronicle of Higher Education, 2022). Whether online or face-to-face, practical teaching, and learning provide three learning pathways to engage students: faculty-student, student-student, and student-material. Effective strategies found to engage Gen Z are icebreakers, peer educators, experiential learning experiences, high impact practices (HIP), research opportunities, inclusive teaching

practices, culturally informed strategies, personalized learning technology, adaptive learning, discussion boards, or online communities, active learning exercise, gamification or game-based learning, and leveraging the use of technological platforms such as Kahoot, Oculus, Google Art & Culture, Padlet, Thinglink, and Youtube to create an interactive learning experience; a learning environment that promotes collaboration, self-exploration, problem-solving, social justice, technology-driven, and allows for the opportunity to interact with peers, is what motivates and engages Generation Z.

5. Conclusion

The effects of the crises have forever changed the academic and social landscape of postsecondary education, leaving much to be contemplated. An emphasis will need to be placed on leveraging technology, educational equity, social justice, freedom of speech, mental health, student support, and institutional change. College students, administrators, and faculty offered insight into their shared experience around evolving issues over the last three years. The hope is that educational leaders, employees, and policymakers will contemplate and analyze lessons learned from the crises and develop equitable systems that support the whole student. While recovery efforts should be emphasized, calculated actions are necessary to ensure the student experience, institutional support systems, timely interventions, teaching & learning strategies, equity, and inclusive practices are equally important as indicators of advancement.

It will be advantageous to examine the differences between the college experience and the student experience and create an operational and measured definition of both terms. Define what is meant by students being college-ready and the institution being student-ready. Exploration may include a re-focus on training and professional development of employees on student-centeredness and equity. Contemporary resources are needed to address traumas experienced by students, particularly those from marginalized and underrepresented populations. Trauma may have been experienced due to sociopolitical factors that surfaced wounds of police brutality, discrimination, rhetoric about immigration, and violence against the LGBTQ and other minority groups. A college environment is a place for students to reflect on controversial issues and engage in civil discourse, which was not the case. Educational training and resources will need to be dedicated to assisting faculty and employees with practical ways of integrating inclusive strategies into the classroom and everyday operations. Only through grappling with social and racial issues can improvements be made to campus climate.

Currently, higher education is navigating white waters or disruption of a global magnitude. This upheaval can be an opportunity to reimagine and challenge long-rooted political, pedagogical, educational, social, and exclusive closed systems to merge as a student-centered, equitable, inclusive, and open industry (Levin & Van-Pelt, 2021). Through intentional, calculated, and bold innovation, institutions can successfully maneuver the changes ahead. Though there is some light at the end of the tunnel, the effects of the pandemic, social unrest, and polarizing political environment are far from over. Postsecondary education will navigate these white waters for years and possibly decades ahead. A generalization of these findings will allow educational leaders, faculty, policymakers, student service providers and social justice advocates to explore the implications these three crises have had on lives and college student experience. A comprehensive insight can aid in constructing solutions and interventions to the long-term effects and capitalize on the presented opportunities (Turner, 2022).

Recommendations

Recommendations would be a greater investment in mental health counseling, which may entail hiring additional clinical practitioners; a re-examination of disability services to ensure a seamless, timely, and empowering process; intentional and targeted diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) efforts with campus-wide ongoing training (education) to create a sense of belonging, particularly for those historically racialized and marginalized populations; closer partnerships with student-led organizations to develop insight into the challenges and opportunities of the daily reality of students; adoption of inclusive access strategies to eliminate barriers associated with textbook prices; integrate high-impact practices (HIP) that offer Generation Z experiential and collaborative learning opportunities; host family (i.e. biological, chosen, etc.) outreach activities that promote collaboration and care.

Students must navigate institutional policies, procedures, and other structural mechanisms during the stages of enrollment, matriculation, and graduation to complete a certificate or degree (McGuire, 2022). Often these organizational structures can serve as complex barriers to student access, retention, and academic success (2022). Processes can be confusing, frustrating, and foreign to those unfamiliar with postsecondary education systems, such as first-generation, low-income, or underrepresented populations. These groups have historically been excluded from the educational experience and are less likely to be retained or graduate with a degree or certificate than their White counterparts. Developing intentional, targeted, and innovative support services that

address the specific needs of this population of students will be essential to closing the opportunity and equity gaps in this population. That will entail integrating "early alert" systems that identify students who are struggling early on, so intervention actions can be designed; constructing targeted support systems (i.e., tutoring, mental health counseling, advising, financial support, inclusive teaching practices, etc.) to ensure that the whole student is provided wraparound care. Quickly identifying students in dire need and connecting them to the appropriate support service is essential for successful social and academic outcomes (McMurtrie, 2022); constructing effective communicative approaches to connect with internal and external constituents to disseminate institutional updates, information service offerings, and other vital information critical to the decision-making process for families, students, staff and faculty. The information should be targeted and specifically designed to reach those various stakeholders.

Generation Z is accustomed to customer-centered, user-designed services and products developed around their wants and needs (2022). More than any other generation, Gen Z is acutely aware and critical of poorly designed commodities that do not consider their characteristics and specified demands (2022). Dissatisfaction will often be articulated through a lack of financial support or broadcasted through social media like Twitter, Instagram, or other public platforms. Colleges and universities must design effective ways of communicating with Gen- Z and offer services that acknowledge their diverse needs and reality.

Depending on the student population, these efforts should be in English and Spanish to ensure inclusivity. An increasing number of college students admit to being home and food insecure and having limited access to technology and Wi-Fi connection. Support systems should be constructed to address these social, physical, and technological issues. Finally, the ongoing assessment of programs and collecting feedback from campus partners, specifically students, are critical to a comprehensive understanding of the student "customer" experience and best practices for practical outcomes. The data should be disaggregated and examined by race, gender, ethnicity, and other intersecting identities that affect student attrition, retention, and graduation. The student experience begins the moment inquiries are made about the institution by the potential student (The Chronicle of Higher Education, 2022). Therefore, colleges and universities must not only find creative ways to attract and connect with students to support basic needs, but it is also crucial that institutions convince families that the care and safety of the whole student is their top priority (2022).

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