COVID-19 AND THE STAFF EXPERIENCE AT THE UNIVERSITY OF UTAH
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Introduction

In March 2020, amidst the COVID-19 global pandemic, the University of Utah moved all instruction online and suspended on-campus operations for the duration of the spring semester. This study explores the impact of the suspension of in-person operations on University staff. Through interviews with 19 frontline staff members from across campus (Academic and Student Affairs), we explored the impact of working from home in a virtual modality on staff members' motivation and the quality of their interactions with students and colleagues. Our findings indicate four salient themes that describe staff members' experience: connection, job tools, communication, and burnout warning. These findings are described in this paper, along with recommendations as the University continues to forge new ways of working with students amidst a global pandemic.

Literature Review

There is limited literature about the impact of COVID-19 on higher education staff, since this is a new virus with effects that have not been experienced in modern, higher education history. However, despite the new circumstances of the virus, many universities around the nation have begun to analyze the effects that COVID-19 has had on their campus communities. This includes determining the mental health impact on students, staff, and faculty, as well as the potential lessons learned that have come from the pandemic. One of the most notable findings discussed in recent literature is the impact that virtual learning has had on campus communities. Students, staff, and faculty have been forced to learn and work from the safety of their own homes; however, this type of learning platform--although convenient in some cases--may not be practical for everyone. It could be argued that in order for college communities to thrive, they need to be able to interact and communicate in person. The virtual world of online learning does not afford the same face-to-face connection for which so many yearn. But despite the challenges that come with it, virtual learning has also provided opportunity for academic growth. This has been seen in cases where universities have embraced online learning and worked to develop long-lasting solutions that create environments for students, staff, and faculty to thrive. Joseph Aoun (2020), president of Northeastern University, comments on this idea as he states, "The institutions that will thrive in the future will be the ones that embrace online platforms, not just hastily assembled short-term replacement for classes, but long-term expansions of classroom instruction, campus life, and off-campus learning." (Section 3, para. 3)

Although the change to an online platform was a shock for many around the world, it can be said that there are many benefits to this mode of learning, and we should seek ways in which to combine the previous, in-person learning modalities with the online methods we have adopted during the pandemic. Patricia McGuire (2020), president of Trinity Washington University,

discusses this new mode of learning as she states, "We should envision a distinctively hybrid future in which the faculty will have far more freedom to develop instructional designs using both virtual and live classes." Although there is much to learn from the pandemic in terms of reshaping higher education, McGuire also recognizes the social inequities that exist on university campuses which have been highlighted by the pandemic, especially for members of the staff community. McGuire empathizes with university staff members as she states:

> Staff personnel in admissions, advising, finance, and more are running universities from their kitchen tables. Sadly, other staff members have lost their jobs, particularly hourly workers employed by contractors in food service or facilities…This crisis should finally force higher education to confront its deep social inequity. (Section 8, paras. 3-4)

This social inequity, combined with the challenges of virtual learning, has created an environment where mental health impacts have started to develop among university members. For instance, recent research among university students has shown that the long-term effects of the pandemic may significantly impact their well-being. Amy Bintliff, a developmental psychologist and professor in the University of California, San Diego's department of education studies, has noted lowered motivation and a sense of alienation among surveyed college students (Burke, 2020). Along the same theme, Rayane Alamuddin, an associate director of research and evaluation at the consulting firm Ithaka S+R, addresses students struggling with social isolation as she states:

> Students talked a lot about really missing being in person with their classmates, with their colleagues, with their faculty members, and having those spontaneous, organic conversations and relationships. They miss the [relationships] they make in the context of their college education specifically, because not only does it make them excited about learning and hold them accountable and motivate them to stay engaged in school, but they also actually learn a lot more. (Burke 2020)

Although the research on mental health among university staff members remains limited, this is a topic that was consistently discussed among staff members at the University of Utah, and it is the framework of the burnout warning theme that was developed from our research.

The research and literature surrounding academics in the time of a pandemic continues to evolve, and new insights are being developed every day. Although there is much to learn from the effects of the coronavirus on higher education, it is clear that the effects of this crisis are far reaching and they have significantly changed the way that students, staff, and faculty interact.

Theoretical Framework

We utilized literature around thriving at work as the theoretical framework for this research. Thriving at work is defined as "the psychological state in which individuals experience both a sense of vitality and a sense of learning at work" (Spreitzer 2005). Thriving in work environments is important because people spend so much time at work (Porath 2012). Thriving in work consists of vitality and learning: individuals must have opportunities to learn and feel a sense of energy and excitement for their work (Spreitzer 2005). Organizations are key to thriving

at work, because they support learning and vitality. Kuntz, Naswall, and Malinen (2016) noted the importance of organizations providing opportunities for employees to learn on a daily basis to ensure they develop the ability to flourish, or thrive, in times of crisis. Flourishing is reciprocal between the organization and the individuals working within it. Spreitzer, et al. (2005) model of Social Embeddedness of Thriving at Work frames our study. In this model, contextual features of a work environment combine with the resources produced by the work to influence individuals' agentic work behaviors, which lead to thriving at work. As individuals thrive, their experiences of vitality and learning loop back to influence their agentic work behaviors. Subsequently, these individuals experience well-being and continued professional development.
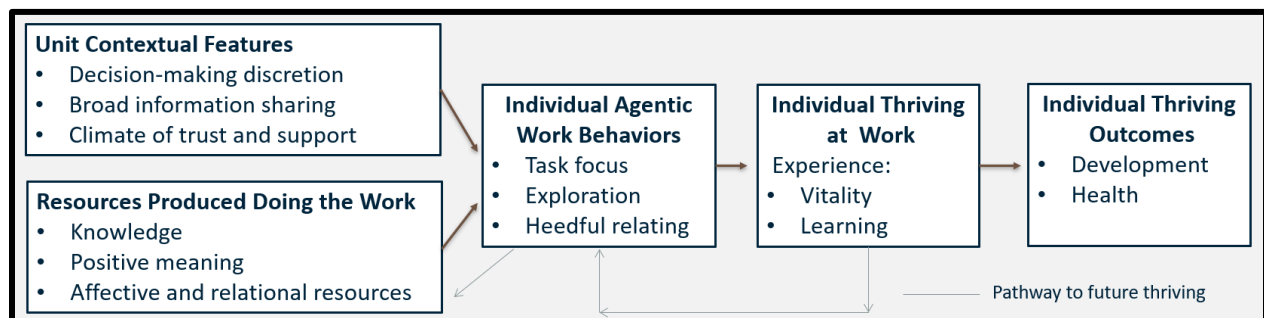

Figure 1. Spreitzer, et al. Model of Social Embeddedness of Thriving at Work (p. 540).

Methods and Participants

Data collection was conducted via individual interviews with 19 University of Utah staff members. Staff members were asked a series of questions regarding their reactions to COVID-19 and how their work has been impacted. Our research team individually coded all 19 interview transcripts. Table 1 outlines the categories and codes identified to develop each theme. We engaged in group discussion to develop the four emerging themes and then identified recommendations based on these themes.

Findings

The four following themes stood out as those that related to the major concerns among university staff members: communication, job tools, connections, and burnout warning. Each of these themes was built on corresponding categories that were developed from individual codes identified throughout staff interviews. The major themes are discussed below, and the individual categories and codes are outlined in Table 1.

Communication: One finding consistent across interviews centered on communication. The act of communicating transcends everything we do on and off campus. The ability to communicate effectively with peers, colleagues, and co-workers is of vital importance not only in the academic setting but throughout all aspects of life. During our interviews with university staff members, we found that communication breakdown was one of the most salient themes. Staff members talked about a severe lack of communication in their individual departments as well as throughout the university as a whole. Additionally, there were significant discrepancies in the delivery of information, which was often detrimental to staff. This included instances where staff members would learn of important campus information through another department or, in some cases, on the local news. We also observed communication discord across and between campus units. Overall, staff expressed a desire for more complete and consistent information delivered directly from the University.

Job Tools: Resources to perform work are essential to productivity and job success. Throughout our interviews with staff members, job tools and resources were a key topic. Staff members commented on the concerns they had as they transitioned from working on campus to working at home, where they did not always have the tools they needed to perform their work functions successfully. This includes instances where staff members did not have proper internet access or even computers to connect to their workplace online. Another challenge that staff members faced was accessing simple workplace resources like office supplies. Many staff members were left to purchase such items on their own or risk going to campus in order to obtain the supplies they needed to execute their duties. As staff members transitioned to working from home, access to computers, office supplies, and other workplace resources directly impacted their ability to maintain job performance. The challenge in accessing job tools is highlighted below in several quotes from university staff members as they recount their experiences when first transitioning to an at-home work environment.

> My concern was not having the technology set-up and access to all of the things that we use in our office…

> There's an assumption…because you're at the University of Utah, you have access to technology…I didn't know my staff didn't have access to the internet at home.

Connection: Before COVID-19, connections with others at work contributed to intrinsic motivation for work at the University. The ability to connect with others in order to share ideas, concerns, and questions is of vital importance in any field. Staff members at the university commented on a lack of connection during the pandemic not only with their workplace colleagues but also with students. For many staff members, the ability to connect with others was a significant part of their workplace livelihood, but as the pandemic progressed, staff members began to see that those day-to-day connections were far and few between. This lack of connection not only impacted their work functions but also significantly affected the way that staff members interacted with students. The ability for staff members to physically talk to and connect with students is what drives a large portion of learning and thriving on campus. When this connection is no longer possible, staff and students begin to suffer. Staff members are concerned about how to maintain these connections as the University navigates education through virtual modalities. This lack of connection can be seen in the following quotes as staff members comment on the impact virtual learning has had on their motivation:

> For me it really took the joy out of being at work because I realized truly how much I relied on the energy of the other people there.

> I think there was some hunger for that connection…about how to develop that sense of belonging.

Burnout Warning: While staff uniformly expressed intrinsic motivation to do their jobs, we noticed concerning signals encompassing the nature of their work during the pandemic. As the pandemic extended beyond weeks into months, staff members began to note loss of motivation, difficulty staying on task, and exhaustion. This includes what many staff members termed

"Zoom exhaustion," commenting on the often countless Zoom meetings that now make up day-to-day interaction in the virtual workplace. Although many staff members expressed they are still motivated to do their jobs and contribute to student success, many commented on the fact that this mode of working and learning is not sustainable as a means to thrive in the long term. These fears and concerns could indicate that staff are on the edge in terms of their mental well-being, which is centered on uncertainty, job stability, and the general sense of not knowing when the pandemic will be under control enough to return to more normal working conditions. This idea of burnout warning is encapsulated in the following quote as a staff member comments on the "extra pressure" that has resulted from the pandemic:

> Their workload had just shot up because I think this change in the way we work had put all this extra pressure; they're trying to do several different things like build a new system while working with the old system.

Communication	Job Tools	Connection		Burnout Warning	
Transparency	Computers and software	*Students*	*Colleagues*	*Fear*	*Nature of Work*
How and why decisions are made	Access to reliable internet	Students connect through technology	Miss talking in the hall or bouncing ideas off each other	Furloughs/pay cuts	Work-life balance
Inconsistent information across campus – trickle-down does not work	Ergonomic desks/chairs	Concern about quality of interactions	Miss being part of campus life	Job security	Productivity expectations
Communicate contingency plans	Inconsistency in access to job resources at home	Lack of student-student interactions	Co-workers as family	How long will COVID be a concern?	Time for self-care
Out of touch administration	Lack of training on necessary technology tools	Improve student outreach (out-of-state)	Inequities in access to campus resources	Will it be safe to be back on campus?	Top-down approach demotivating/ demoralizing
Lack of interpersonal connection	Paying for tools out of pocket due to lack of departmental support	New student connections	Digital divide concerns	Concerns about trust from supervisors	Work overload – time and stress
Need more proactive communication and action	Departments already short-staffed have a shortage of people as a resource	Inequities in access to campus resources	Support from co-workers	What will "normal" look like?	Concerns about adherence to policy

Table 1. Themes and corresponding categories/codes that emerged throughout staff interviews.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The findings from this research reveal there are many areas that can be improved across campus, not only during times of crisis, but also for long-term educational success and thriving. As we discussed the effects of the pandemic on higher education learning, staff members highlighted key areas that may have made their transition to online learning easier and more efficient. This includes focusing on the four key themes discussed above as well as developing solutions that address the long-standing challenges that exist for staff members at the university. Specific recommendations are outlined as follows:

1. Transparent and timely information delivered straight from the institution: One of the major challenges that staff members faced was lack of communication throughout the earlier stages of the pandemic. Staff members expressed frustration about not knowing what was going on in their department and within the campus community as a whole. The ability for staff members to receive transparent and timely information will not only provide staff members with key information but also aid to prevent frustration that could

contribute to mental health impacts like anxiety. We encourage all departments throughout the university to evaluate their communication structure and ensure that every member of the organization is receiving the information they need in a timely manner.

2. <u>A standardized modality for communication:</u> Although many staff members discussed an internal method of communication for their respective departments, there was a significant lack of standardization in terms of campus-wide communication. Staff members discussed varying, often confusing ways that they would receive communication, which included a mix of emails, Zoom meetings, and word-of-mouth. This lack of a standardized communication delivery method created an environment where staff members were forced to seek out information on their own, leading to uncertainty, frustration, and greater difficulty in completing work tasks.

3. <u>Phones or similar technology as a "quick answer feature":</u> One of the more significant impacts of the pandemic was the inability to interact quickly with students or co-workers. Many staff members frequently commented on the lack of "in-passing" communication where they would quickly communicate with a student or co-worker that they ran into on campus or in their office. These short interactions made up a significant part of the work that staff members do, and the inability to have these interactions created real strain for staff members and the students they supported. The ability for staff members to quickly communicate with students may be solved by a quick answer feature where students could virtually "drop-in" to talk with staff members in an effort to recreate those vital in-passing communication moments. This includes issuing work-provided devices to staff members with a centralized text-messaging system that students can use to quickly communicate with the various staff-run resources throughout campus.

4. <u>Renting office equipment from the university:</u> Many staff members commented on the lack of physical resources to do their jobs. This includes access to internet equipment, laptops, and even chairs or desks. As we continue to navigate this crisis, the university should seek to develop a system for university members to borrow or rent office equipment necessary to successfully perform their work.

5. <u>Delegating contingency plans to lower departments:</u> One finding that was discussed among many staff members was the lack of contingency plans in place to offset a crisis. As we continue to navigate the pandemic, university departments should take the time to analyze how they reacted to the initial stages of the virus, and work to develop practical contingency plans that will aid in easier transitions for the future.

6. <u>Communication from university leadership recognizing staff, detailing new plans, and mentioning resources available:</u> Staff members recognized the challenges the university faced in response to the pandemic but desired recognition of their hardships. Although it was not always feasible for university leadership to provide timely solutions in response to the pandemic, staff members stated that they would have liked to receive some reassurance or recognition in regards to their own struggles at work and at home. This includes recognizing the mental health impacts that came with the pandemic as well as addressing the challenges the university faced in issues such as communication and resource allocation. As we continue to improve for the future, it will be of vital importance for university leadership to provide much needed moral support for the campus community and take steps to recognize the efforts that community members make to keep the campus thriving.

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