**RIE Covid-19 Student Survey: Discovering Student Challenges & Solutions During A Trying Time**

Daniel:

Hopefully when faculty see this, it helps them sort of conceptualize some of the issues they may be facing. Students indicated that when faculty were proactive, they showed caring and understanding of their situation. That's when they felt most connected to their class, they felt most connected to the college. And they explained that that was what helped them get through.

Christina Barsi:

Hi, I'm Christina Barsi.

Sun Ezzell:

And I'm Sun Ezzell, and you're listening to the Magic Mountie podcast,

Christina Barsi:

Our mission is to find ways to keep your ear to the ground, so to speak. By bringing to you the activities and events you may not have time to attend, the resources on campus you might want to know more about, the interesting things your colleagues are creating, and the many ways we can continue to better help and guide our students.

Sun Ezzell:

We bring to you the voices of Mt. SAC from the classroom to completion.

Speaker 5:

I know I want to achieve my goals, and I know people here are going to help me to do it.

Speaker 6:

She is a sociology major and she's transferring to [inaudible 00:00:55]. Psychology major. English major.

Speaker 7:

I'm transforming part-time into full-time.

Speaker 8:

I really liked the time that we spent with Julie about how to write a CV and a cover letter.

Christina Barsi:

Or just finding time to soak in the campus.

Speaker 9:

We think of the natural environment around us as a library.

Christina Barsi:

We want to keep you informed and connected to all things Mt. SAC. But most importantly, we want to keep you connected with each other. I'm Christina Barsi, Mt. SAC alumni, and producer of this podcast.

Sun Ezzell:

And I'm Sun Ezzell, learning assistance faculty and professional learning academy coordinator.

Christina Barsi:

And this is the Magic Mountie podcast.

Christina Barsi:

Hi, this is Christina. And in this episode, you'll be hearing from Mt. SAC's research and institutional effectiveness department. Our host, Sun Ezzell, talks with Daniel Brauman, senior research analyst and Vera Froman, educational research assessment analyst, all about a Covid-19 student survey they conducted. There's a link in the show notes if you want to learn more about this study, but first here is Sun with Daniel and Vera.

Sun Ezzell:

Well, good afternoon, Vera and Daniel. Thank you so much for joining me today on the Magic Mountie podcast.

Daniel:

Thank you for having us.

Vera:

Yeah, thank you.

Sun Ezzell:

So I'm so excited to have a chance to talk with you today and hear more about Mt. SAC's research and institutional effectiveness Covid survey that was done in the spring. But first I was wondering, maybe could you introduce yourselves and tell us a little bit about your work at Mt. SAC?

Vera:

Yeah, so my name is Vera Froman and I'm an educational research assessment analyst in the research office. I've worked at Mt. SAC for four years now, and I help out a lot with different surveys that go on on campus, including the Covid survey. Another one students might be familiar with is the safety survey that came out about campus safety in our police department. I also have participated or helped create our survey that evaluates our sexual harassment training, but that's a lot of what I do on campus is creating and disseminating surveys to our students and faculty.

Daniel:

Yeah. My name is Daniel Brauman. I'm the senior research analyst in the office, or a senior research analyst in the office. I do a little bit of everything. I mostly handle a lot of enrollment management data. I do some equity stuff, guided pathway stuff, sort of just support our instruction office on research studies related to, as I mentioned, enrollment equity, student retention and success persistence, kind of a Jack of all trades in our office, I would say.

Sun Ezzell:

Well, thank you both for the really important work that you're doing to help students share their experiences and to help the whole campus constantly work to improve, to support students. I was wondering if you could tell us a little bit about the Covid survey.

Daniel:

Yeah. So I'll talk a little bit about sort of the impetus for the survey. In March when we went, right before we shut classes down we actually sent a very rapid six question anonymous survey to all our students to get really basic information about, do you have a laptop? Do you have online access? Have you used canvas before? We sent that out on a Saturday, we met with leadership on that Tuesday, right before we closed that week and we gave them the initial results and that sort of help them plan or sort of think about the kind of services they were going to have to offer, if we shut everything down, which we did. Once we went into sort of the online learning environment, there was a sense that there was a lot more questions we needed to ask and we wanted to really get the temperature of students. What are their experiences in the classroom? What are the issues they're dealing with outside the classroom? And to get a sense of, we have all these programs and resources, are they aware of any of this stuff? Are they using it?

Daniel:

The other piece, the fourth piece I think, is that we really wanted to just show them that we're listening and we're caring and we wanted to message that to them. So I remember our VP at the time was really interested in making sure when we emailed them, that we showed that the intent was to listen to them and to show that we're interested in what they have to say. So we had discussions with instruction leadership, student services leadership, we met with faculty leadership, FA, academic senate. We met with, virtually met of course, with library and learning resources. So just to kind of map out sort of a whole suite of surveys, because we were going to talk about the student survey, but we also had surveys for faculty and staff and the surveys just plan out what were the topics you want to talk about.

Daniel:

And from there we went, once we got sort of a general guidelines of what they were interested in finding out, we got a team in the research office together to sort of build out the survey. And I think Vera can talk about what the actual survey looked like for students.

Vera:

Yeah. So after having all these conversations with people across the campus, we started to put the survey together. And we took the concerns that all these different stakeholders had, we started putting them into different questions that we could ask since Mt. SAC, wasn't living in a bubble and a lot of other places were going to remote learning because of Covid, a lot of other surveys came out at the same time. So we took some of these other surveys. We looked at their questions and thought, oh, that would be good questions to ask our students. So for example, when they asked about their food security, housing security in, I don't remember exactly which survey it was, we reached out to the creators and asked, could we borrow these questions and put them in our survey? And so we did that. I want to say, and Daniel could correct me, it was maybe five, five or six different surveys that we took questions out of their survey and included in ours.

Vera:

And then we also included questions that were more specific to Mt. SAC. We asked them if they had used the laptop lending program or any of the Mountie Fresh Basic Needs services. And in total, what we ended up with was a 42 question survey. And we asked, like I said, we asked about their basic needs. We asked about their mental health, how classes were going, how work was going. It was a very comprehensive survey. And not only could students mark their responses on a Likert scale or do a check all that apply, but we had a lot of open-ended questions as well.

Vera:

So the last two questions on the survey were open-ended and they asked, what has been the hardest thing that you've experienced in this time and what has been the best thing you've experienced? And so those were some of the questions that we asked. We sent the survey to all of our credit students that were enrolled during spring. And so over 27,000 students got a survey invite and we left the survey open for a few weeks, sent out a few reminders and a little over 2000 students responded, which gave us a response rate of 10.2%.

Daniel:

I'm going to be honest. I was not expecting a response rate that large, I was concerned that given everything that was happening and I know staff faculty had mentioned feeling inundated with emails, we weren't sure we were going to get that many responses. So pleasantly surprised sort of is an understatement, we were incredibly surprised as the responses kept coming up. I think it really indicated how much the students really felt they wanted to communicate and how important their issues were that they took the time. Vera mentioned it's 42 items. Now not everyone had answered 42 questions because we did put skip logic, but it wasn't a five minute survey. It was 10, 15, 20, if you really took the time. So we were very on one hand happy for the response rate and the other hand it sort of gave us a sense of the importance of the issue and how serious things were that they were that responsive.

Vera:

And to piggyback off of that point, like I said, we had a lot of open-ended, and so one way to also make the survey go on even longer is to actually put in thoughtful responses in those open-ended options. And our students definitely did. They were very vocal and it provided us with a lot of really rich content that we needed to analyze. And so they spent a lot of time telling us exactly how they felt and what they were experiencing.

Daniel:

Yeah. We got... Again, having done this for almost like a decade now, you sort of get into a flow and you sort of know, okay, this is about how many responses I'm going to get, this is how the open-ended comments are going to get here, but we got thousands of open-ended comments. We had sort of a timeline to get this finished and we had to extend it out weeks because it was just, people were writing really in-depth commentary about the situation. And we wanted to honor everyone who tried the survey. So, hats off to Vera. She did a lot of that work going through just a lot of comments and trying to analyze that. So that was a huge surprise too, to us.

Sun Ezzell:

Well, it sounds like it was a huge success and you asked the right questions so that students were able to share their experiences in a meaningful way. Can you share a little bit about what were the main takeaways when you looked at the students' responses?

Daniel:

Yeah, so as we mentioned, we talked about, we asked questions about learning and online learning. And so some of the main takeaways in that realm and for faculty who have been teaching this fall and who are around in spring, maybe it's not too big of a surprise, but a lot of the responses were that students, a lot of our students were not very comfortable in online learning. We asked them and almost 60% indicated that they had trouble completing course assignments. They had difficulty focusing or paying attention in remote instruction and activities. 54% exactly said that they just straight out preferred face-to-face learning. And so there was just issues in relating to that sense. And then some of the issues were compounded by everything going on. So almost half had trouble finding time to participate, almost half, so about 43% had trouble completing assignments on time.

Daniel:

We asked them about their schedule. Are you able to keep a schedule to complete your coursework? And about 60% indicated that they were having challenges or just sort of straight up unable to keep a regular schedule. And in the comments, they explained a lot of the reasons why. So you had frontline workers who scheduled sort of changed because of the situation. One of the comments I've been reading was about someone who worked at a grocery store and suddenly her hours expanded because she was a manager there and they just, she's like people were quitting and I had to cover shifts. And so I was coming into work hours more than I was expecting, people who worked out warehouses, suddenly their schedules started becoming different.

Daniel:

And so you started seeing this consistent note about being unable to find time that they had expected when they started the semester and suddenly this whole situation changed their time. Not to mention the other factor there was children and childcare and having your school-aged children at home with you and their Zoom classes are at the same time as your class. And you'd have no one to take care of them while you're in class. And so keeping a schedule, keeping ability to stay online was difficult on top of the fact that like half of them didn't want to be online to begin with. So those issues all kind of compounded themselves. So those were some of the main takeaways in terms of learning in the online environment. We asked about their awareness of resources, because we, as a college try to provide. We had resources already available before this crisis, but we try to come up with new ones to address some of the issues that came up.

Daniel:

And I think students generally were aware of some of the basic ones, like the excuse withdraw, online counseling, laptop lending, but we saw that we had gaps in their awareness of the two, I think resources that to me struck me as their awareness wasn't as high as they should be considering the situation where the Mountie Fresh Basic Needs Resources, which provides food resources, housing referral, case management support for students, and then the mental health services. So that offers short-term counseling, but then they can refer you to longer term mental health counseling, and Vera will talk about some of the results in terms of students' needs and mental health, but their awareness of our services was relatively low. So about half of students were not aware of these two, even though a significant majority has indicated that these were two major issues.

Vera:

Daniel talked about how some of the essential workers had their hours increased. Well, the flip side of that is that students that had been working before Covid happened, we asked them, were you working, and then what happened after Covid? And 25% said that nothing changed at all. Then there was 36% that said their hours or their pay had been reduced since the shutdown order was administered. And then the next thing we found was that 39% of our previously working students have lost their job in response to Covid-19 and the shutdown order. And so, that was a big concern. And that kind of ties in with some of our other main takeaways. Students talked about how they were concerned about paying their bills, lack of food in their household. They talked about just how difficult it is to have lost their job. And so with a shutdown coming into effect and people being furloughed, or just losing their job, it affected a lot of different aspects of their life and their wellbeing.

Vera:

And in our open-ended responses, some people did talk about that. They talked about how am I supposed to focus on my schoolwork when I can't put food on the table for my family? And so that was a big concern. And since we asked about their job experience and what had been going on, we also asked about their food and housing security. And we found that unfortunately, 3% of the people that took the survey said that they had to sleep in an outdoor location, which brought up a lot of red flags for us that we had to communicate to others. We found that 10% were living in like a temporary location. And so that brought up a lot of concerns that we, as a research office, weren't prepared for, we didn't know as researchers what to do or who could take this to. And so that led to a lot of conversations between us.

Vera:

But we also found that Daniel talked about there's not so much use and awareness of our food pantry programs and those different resources. And there are students that are telling us that they're having to cut the size of their meals or skip meals because they didn't have enough money to buy food. And that came from about 30%, 36% of the sample said that they had to cut the size of their meals because they couldn't afford to buy more food, or they just had to skip a meal. And so, a lot of our students communicated that their basic needs were a big concern and their basic needs kind of interacted with what they were willing to do for school. You're concerned about putting food on your table, feeding yourself and feeding your family, completing a term paper is not much of a priority anymore.

Vera:

Other things that we found out from the survey is that with the social distancing and having to stay in your house, there were a lot of concerns and a lot of feelings of social isolation. They were feeling disconnected from others. They were missing interacting with others. In fact, 74% said that they were experiencing some social isolation and another 79% said that they were having mental and physical health concerns and that they were worried about how their mental health was fairing, if you will. Within our open-ended comments, that mental health aspect really came into play. A lot of our students talked about how they don't know how to cope with this. They miss talking to people or they miss seeing people. And so they kind of felt like I can't focus on my schoolwork. I feel so alone. And I have anxiety about what's going to happen, what the future holds. And it kind of shifted their priorities to taking care of themselves versus completing their schoolwork.

Daniel:

Yeah. And I think that all compounds right with the learning environment. So it just makes all of it difficult. And you saw that in the comments, these were all intertwined. It wasn't sort of a separate issue. It was because of this it affects me here. And this is why I'm just sort of... Research looked at the enrollment numbers and in spring we lost 21% of our students just dropped all their classes.

Sun Ezzell:

So can you talk a little bit about how the survey results are being used by the campus to better support students or how they could be used to better support students during this time?

Daniel:

Yeah. I mean, I think when we finished the results, we try to get this to leadership right away. I wrote a quick brief, I went to president's cabinet. We met with leadership, the people who helped us complete the survey and walk them through the results. I've gone to a number of meetings. As Vera mentioned, we had some concerns. Some of the responses were really striking. And so we met with the basic needs folks. We met with student services people, there's a basic needs work group, we took the results to them. So we tried to send it out so that the campus was more aware of the work that they still needed to do. And that was also part of their planning in terms of offering products over the summer. So we continue to this day, offer laptop lending, Mi-fi lending, mentioned the food pantry. So that information was very useful to kind of continue funding that sort of work.

Daniel:

I think, for me, when I'm thinking about the results of the survey is, how this relate to a faculty member or an individual classified member who was meeting with students. The survey was done in May, June, which feels like a lifetime ago, but I think we're still trying to talk about it. And we're here talking with you about it. We're still going to come to other committees about it because as people may be aware, the situation is still dire for a lot of folks. Cases are spiking, we're doing another sort of shutdown. So these issues, I think they're still pertinent right now. And as we transition to spring, considering that we're not, as of right now, we don't have financial support from the government, we're going to see continued unemployment, continued stresses related to basic needs. So hopefully what I would like is that when faculty see this, it helps them sort of conceptualize some of the issues they may be facing.

Daniel:

So what does that mean? Like if you're a faculty member, one of the results we talked about is that students felt very isolated. And so one of the things we learned in our research and talking to faculty, talking to other peers, is ideas to help our students. One of the questions we asked, as Vera mentioned, was what has gone well. And when we asked them what has gone well, one of the most common themes that came up was students indicated that when faculty were proactive, they showed caring and understanding of their situation, that's when they felt most connected to their class, they felt most connected to the college. And they explained that that was what helped them get through. The data suggests that being proactive about reaching out to your students, communicating positive and personalized messages, doing proactive check-ins, proactive emotional support, sort of asking how you're doing, how you're feeling and the key being proactive, taking the time to ask them.

Daniel:

The students mentioned a lot, again, we talked about keeping schedules and keeping focused on class, given everything that's happening. No one's asking to lower standards, but we are asking to maybe be flexible. Ask yourself, does this policy or deadline, does that need to be rigidly enforced right now? And if it is rigidly enforced, is it going to have a disproportionate impact on our vulnerable students right now in the current situation, and maybe just sort of trying to think of alternatives, ways to do student assessments. So to portfolios, presentations, group projects. I think these are some of the tips to sort of keep in mind the situation.

Daniel:

For many students it's the first time they're learning it online, so they haven't taken online tests. And online tests can be very stressful for students. And so are you really measuring their learning or are you measuring other aspects of them? So that's an idea we had. The other thing students said is that, again, half the students didn't like learning online or weren't planning to learn online. So some of the things I read that are helpful are creating tips for engaging classes, creating a predictable rhythm. So for faculty, keep your routine, your weekly routine consistent so that students are able to kind of jump back in. So they have a lot of things going on in their personal life, when you get back into canvas or get back into their shell, they kind of know where to stand. They know where to find the things they need to find. When you're sharing your agenda, students can prepare that for themselves that week. So you were sharing your activities.

Daniel:

And one of the things that you mentioned, and actually we saw this in all three surveys was inundated with messages. So streamlining communication is helpful. And I think that connects back to when we were talking about resources, it's probably best to take that personal touch with resources instead of sort of just forwarding something or saying, check in, taking the step to personally say, hey, there's this resource. And even further, if you really want to be that extra, get that extra credit that like a plus student work, you connect them to an actual individual. So instead of saying, there's this program, you go there. Rigo Estrada in basic needs, he helps students with this thing. And that helps sort of close those barriers a little bit. When you're talking about a person who can help you versus sort of a program that they're sort of not aware of, if that helps. So there's some things like that. And we hope to continue to come up with those tips.

Vera:

Our students talked about how a little bit of leniency can go a long ways and it can really help them manage what they're doing for not only their schoolwork, but helping out with their kids or for their jobs that they have. Just that little bit of leniency and consideration. Our students are still dedicated. They still want to do well in class. They still want to get their degrees. They're very passionate about that. And that's what they told us. But part of that concern is they want to come to the synchronous classes, but that class time is the same time that their kid is in class. And so if the faculty member could just simply record the lecture so that they can watch it when they're no longer trying to help their own kids get an education that would go a long ways for them.

Vera:

And the same goes with having a consistent schedule, homework from the chapters due every Friday, module exams are every Sunday, that consistent schedule makes it easier for them to kind of set up their lives, plan how they're going to help their kids or go to work or just make those types of normal day-to-day decisions. So that type of schedule and understanding is helpful. And then another big part is just a little bit of leniency in terms of when things are due. Can it be turned in late? If we're talking about chapter homework and they're still doing everything else, but the chapter homework is a little bit late. We're talking about students that are either trying to find jobs or they're taking care of their kids. A lot of people talked about taking care of their older relatives or having people in the hospital and that interferes with your ability to do your homework.

Vera:

And so that little bit of leniency that little bit of scheduling goes a long ways. And that's what our students told us is if things were just recorded or if it was okay that I turned it in at 12:01 and not 11:59, that would be a huge help for them. And when teachers had shown leniency and did help out and do those types of things, students said that was the best part of this experience. So you have both sides, it's when it was happening, it helps students, they loved it, they appreciated it, and it made this very difficult, trying time, easier on them. So I think it is important to consider that just those little bit of changes can go a long way.

Sun Ezzell:

Thank you so much for sharing all of those ideas. Everything that you've talked about seems really doable, very compassionate. And I'm thinking that we ourselves also maybe need some of that flexibility, right, and leniency, as things come up. We're all working from home and juggling many responsibilities all at the same time.

Daniel:

Just to piggyback on what you just noted. Yeah, we all are going through a lot of these things. I mentioned early on that we did do a faculty survey and some of the listeners might've helped complete that. And so we also indicated that faculty themselves are going through a lot of the same issues, childcare issues, scheduling issues in terms of their... particularly for part-time faculty, it's very hard to do online training certification for this school and online training certification for another school. And so they would say in their comments, now I'm working 12 hour days to try to get my class that I built to be in person to built online. So one of the things I like to stress when I write or talk about the survey is we say these things also knowing the fact that our faculty are going through a lot of the same things, maybe not to the depth that our students are, but at least enough that we have to take that into consideration.

Daniel:

So we are mindful that it's a challenge for all of us. And I think in the comments that students mentioned that they also understood that it was a challenge for their faculty as well. So I think what it is is just, like you said, compassion and caring and then modeling that behavior in the classroom, works both ways. And I think that's a big thing I want to take away is that we're all sort of as a community, as a Mt. SAC community, going through this together and supporting each other and communicating with each other.

Daniel:

We hope that this data is useful to engage your conversations in your department and your divisions. That's our goal here is to put students first to be a student ready college, and to think equitably about our practices. And so that's our hope. We're going to be presenting a flex day, spring flex day. We're going to have a session about using data to engage in conversations, sort of like we did right now. We're going to go over a little bit of the student data then provide space for faculty to have conversations with each other, to do sort of group work about some of the situations the students have been in and share their tips. So the more faculty we get into the session, the more... If you have a great idea and you're wondering how to get that out, that's an opportunity. So that's just a little plug for flex day.

Sun Ezzell:

Great. Thank you so much for sharing. I will definitely be signing up for that session.

Daniel:

Thank you.

Sun Ezzell:

Well, Vera and Daniel, thank you so much for sharing the work that you're doing to help students tell us their experiences during this really challenging time. I appreciate so much our conversation, not just the results of the survey, but also how we can take that data, that information, and move forward in a really positive way to better support student learning.

Vera:

Thank you for having us.

Daniel:

Yes, thank you so much.

Christina Barsi:

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