MANAGING EXPECTATIONS IN A PANDEMIC AND "GETTING BACK TO NORMAL"

by Kristie A. Abston, Middle Tennessee State University | Helen A. Soter, University of West Florida

Kristie.Abston@MTSU.edu
HRichard@UWF.edu
Full Paper
Innovations and Future Directions in Education Track

ABSTRACT

Faculty around the world are getting back to teaching in ways that resemble life before COVID-19 closed everything down in March 2020. Still, many things involved in teaching are far from "normal." This paper explores the residual negative effects of faculty delivering and students receiving instruction exclusively via online, remote, or hybrid delivery modes for multiple semesters. Student and faculty professionalism behaviors changed dramatically, and expectations shifted as everyone tried to roll with all the changes. We discuss the stress and well-being issues faculty continue to face as they navigate managing expectations while a new normal emerges, including setting boundaries to offset the always-on feeling that became normal during the pandemic. We share observations from two business professors at different universities in the United States and discuss our strategies and suggestions from research that are aimed at helping faculty find a healthier, more sustainable balance. This paper extends our previous work on student professionalism behaviors. At the conference, the authors will use part of the presentation time to engage attendees in a discussion about their own experiences with this important topic.

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic flipped the world, including colleges and universities, on its head in early 2020. The first official case in the United States (US) was recorded in January 2020, and by April, all 50 states were covered by disaster declarations (US Department of Defense, 2022). ABSEL 2020 was impacted directly as the conference had to pivot quickly from being offered in -person to being held online. Everyone, including students and faculty, had to adapt in a matter of days to new ways of working and living, in general. Some schools forced students to leave their dorms with very little notice and sent faculty to work from home regardless of the technology and space available there. Issues like reliable and sufficient internet access, adequate electronic devices, and even physical space became critical to a university's ability to continue offering its services.

Given that our focus was on surviving the semester and finishing our courses, less attention was paid to the parameters within which our course experiences would operate. New policies and procedures in light of the course delivery mode changes were not pressing matters. As such, many students and faculty alike paid less attention to norms of professionalism with this new virtual or remote delivery mode than they previously did with in-person courses.

This paper explores the pandemic experiences of two professors with emphasis on how student and faculty professionalism behaviors changed throughout the pandemic and with attention to the stress and well-being issues facing students and faculty. Having been accustomed to holding students to high standards of professionalism through the business college culture, the pandemic brought forward some new experiences and learning opportunities for faculty. We propose that preparing students for successful careers in a post-pandemic world requires greater awareness and additional teaching skills. In the next sections, we outline our experiences as business professors from different disciplines and different AACSB-accredited public universities in the United States, and we discuss the resulting implications for both students and faculty well-being. At the conference, we hope to engage attendees in a discussion about their own experiences with this topic so that collectively we may increase our awareness of the key issues and identify best practices with the goal of developing effective strategies for the future.

CHANGE HAPPENS

Even before COVID-19, professionalism was declining. The use of social media seems to have increased unprofessional behaviors by making them seem normal and acceptable. Koo, Ficko, and Gormley (2017) examined public Facebook profiles of urologists who had graduated from U.S. urology residency programs in 2015. The authors found that half of those graduates "posted unprofessional or potentially objectionable content, which may negatively impact public perceptions about urologists or the specialty" (p. 958). By March 2020, COVID-19 propelled students and faculty alike into survival mode. Professionalism was no longer a concern as everyone was just trying to get through the crisis. Online course delivery, whether synchronous or asynchronous, was suddenly the only option. Administration at both of our universities advised faculty to be there for the students and to accommodate as much as possible. In speaking with other colleagues, we learned that we all had nonexistent

or inadequate policies and procedures because none of our institutions were prepared for a pandemic. The reality that our administrations were improvising and making decisions on the fly, too, became clear.

By Summer 2020, faculty and students evolved more toward an attitude of "We can do this! We know what we're doing (sort of)!" In Fall 2020, hopes of everyone being back in the classroom were dashed as public universities in the US offered multiple delivery modes due to space limitations and social distancing requirements. Students and faculty alike were frustrated. By Spring 2021 and into Fall 2021, we had fallen into a bit of a routine, even though students seemed ambivalent to the idea of masking. As we began Spring 2022, one of our universities had dropped the mask mandate while the other still had masks listed as being required when inside campus buildings; however, most students, faculty, and staff there were not wearing masks there either. By Fall 2022, masking was optional at both universities, and a small number of students and faculty continued wearing them. Students continued messaging faculty to say when they were missing due to COVID. Otherwise, COVID was just being treated like any other illness.

PROFESSIONALISM DISMANTLED

When the shift to virtual or remote learning happened abruptly in Spring 2020, many of us were not experienced enough to know what kinds of behaviors to specify as acceptable or not in a new policy or a revised syllabus. Our administrations did not offer such policies, either. We were encouraged to use the same standards as those required in a traditional, face-to-face classroom, while being gracious and understanding with students.

Almost immediately, students began displaying behaviors that were considered unprofessional for a business environment and for collegiate teaching. We witnessed the following behaviors ourselves or learned of them from our colleagues who witnessed them in their courses while students were on camera for synchronous class delivery via Zoom or a similar tool:

- Skimpy attire (e.g., shirtless males, revealing shorts, sheer pajamas, workout clothes/sports bras)
- Playing guitar during class
- Driving
- Smoking
  Drinking beer (especially Corona brand)
- Other people in the room (e.g., asleep in bed behind the student on camera)
- Inappropriate things in view behind the student
- Lying in bed (e.g., head on a pillow) to watch the course
- Lying in bed next to a parent while drinking wine and watching a presidential debate on TV during a 3-hour night class with participation requirements
- Blank, disengaged expressions
- Using other devices (texting, wearing earbuds)
- Not being on camera/walking away during lecture

By the second semester of the pandemic, our administrations had helped faculty by formulating policies for synchronous courses being delivered online, and we knew enough about what to expect to revise our syllabi regarding the behavioral expectations for professionalism. Students were also more accustomed to remote instruction by this time, and on-camera behavior stabilized.

In the asynchronous online environment during the pandemic, our observations involved primarily academic performance and communications:

- Missing quizzes that had been open for days but students asked for second chances several days later (i.e., not in a timely manner)
- Missing assignments, including those worth substantial points, with no explanation
- Using COVID-19 as blanket excuse for missing deadlines and asking for extensions

Faculty behaviors on camera during virtual meetings mirrored some of the student behaviors we were noticing during our courses, which was a surprise. We saw colleagues engaged in the following behaviors during meetings, such as departmental, committee, college-wide faculty, etc.

- Driving
- Distracting backgrounds, such as family members, collectibles, ceiling fans running, etc.

- Lighting issues or windows with a glare
- Not muting themselves when others are talking, even when dogs, mowers, kids, etc. are in the background
- Blank, disengaged expressions
- Unusual styling choices (e.g., hats, long hair, long beards)

During Fall 2021, in the face-to-face Writing for Business class, about half of the students were wearing masks during the first week of school. By week 9, no students were wearing masks. We wondered if students in face-to-face classes were weary from COVID-19 or did the governor saying that mask mandates cannot be enforced lead to more resistance regarding classroom and workplace behavior? Attendance decreased only slightly, but the majority of students were keeping up with assignments and coming to class. Those who missed class were sending emails to let the professor know in advance they would not be in class although there is no penalty for not attending and all assignments and instructions are available online. These emails suggest that courtesy and professionalism were important to these students. It does not seem that the resistance to wearing masks affected professionalism in the face-to-face classes.

The majority of students in the online Writing for Business classes at the University of West Florida usually send emails requesting extensions or asking questions suggesting they have not reviewed any of the material. The majority of those asking for extensions blatantly state in the email that they forgot about the assignment and make excuses for forgetting the assignment (working full time, taking other classes, working multiple jobs, etc.). These emails from the online students demonstrate a lack of professionalism and inability to keep up with tasks. The University of West Florida uses CANVAS which had a new feature in Fall 2021 called "New Analytics," allowing professors to see exactly what the student viewed each week. For those asking vague questions, such as "What are you looking for in this assignment?", the analytics show that the student did not view any of the assignment information. The analytics have also revealed that many of these students are going into exams "cold" with no page views at all except for opening the exam. While the face-to-face students seem to be weary of COVID-19 and eager to return to a more normal school environment, the online students seem to have become even more complacent and less willing to exit the virtual world created by the pandemic.

Currently, in Fall 2022, students are still not reviewing information posted in CANVAS. Student emails have increased, and many emailed questions indicate that the student has not read the syllabus or the assignment instructions. Students are now preferring to communicate with the professor by email instead of in-person or in a Zoom meeting. Ironically, technology issues seem to be a primary problem with online classes as many students are trying to work with outdated devices that are not compatible with current software and programs. When they encounter technical problems, most will email the professor instead of contacting tech support for help. Requests for extensions because of technical difficulties have increased post-COVID -19.

ADMINISTRATIONS REACT

The University of West Florida has a case management system while Middle Tennessee State does not, where faculty were told that COVID-19 was to be treated no differently from any other illness. Students at UWF were to be referred to Case Management (part of the Dean of Students Office) if they had an illness (including COVID-19) preventing them from coming to class. Daily COVID-19 screenings were required during the pandemic, but no longer mandatory beginning Fall 2021 unless the student/employee tested positive for COVID-19. The university offered incentives to students to get vaccinated (drawings for prizes like free tuition for a semester, etc.) as a way to return to the face-to-face environment. The wording of the daily pre-screening survey email included:

Welcome to the University of West Florida COVID-19 Pre-screening Survey. UWF students and employees must complete the COVID-19 Pre-screening if they Fall under one of the following categories. Thank you for doing your part to keep Argo Nation safer and healthier.

Students
Students must fill out the University of West Florida COVID-19 Pre-screening Survey ONLY if they have:
Tested positive for COVID-19 in the past 10 days, or are awaiting COVID-19 test results
Been alerted they have had potential 1:1 contact with a known COVID-19 positive person in the past 10 days
Traveled internationally in the past 10 days
*Student exemptions: Fully online students do not need to complete the COVID-19 Pre-screening Survey.

Employees
All UWF employees (faculty, staff, and OPS) regardless of remote or on-site must fill out the University of West Florida COVID-19 Pre-screening survey ONLY if they have:
Tested positive for COVID-19 in the past 10 days, or are awaiting COVID-19 test results
Been alerted they have had potential 1:1 contact with a known COVID-19 positive person in the past 10 days
Traveled internationally in the past 10 days
*Employee exemptions: Anyone living out of state does not need to complete the COVID-19 Pre-screening Survey.

The Florida governor mandated that the wearing of masks cannot be enforced, so the university could only make recommendations about wearing masks on campus. A statement was sent out to all faculty, who were asked to include it in their syllabi:

Face Coverings Syllabus Statement: The University of West Florida is dedicated to maintaining the best learning environment possible for our entire community of students, faculty, and staff. *We* are the University of West Florida. Each of us, and all of us, by the act of stepping onto this campus and into a classroom, accept the responsibility as the University of West Florida to help make this a safe place to learn. A central element of our shared responsibility is to commit to wearing face coverings at all times on campus when indoors and when in class. This is the best way to ensure the least disruption to our ability to teach and learn. We will continue to rely on guidance from the Department of Health and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and we remain flexible as that guidance changes.

A NEW NORMAL

By Fall 2022, social distancing requirements have been lifted, and our campuses appear to be back to normal to some extent. Although COVID-19 is not the threat it was before, students at university 1 are preferring online classes to in-person classes as demonstrated by enrollment numbers. The shift to in-person classes across campus is still ongoing. Students will say they prefer in-person classes; however, in Spring 2022, many in-person classes had to be cancelled at the last minute and replaced with online classes because students did not sign up for the in-person classes. Instead, the online classes filled quickly, and students signed up for the waiting list for the online classes rather than signing up for the unfilled in-person classes. There were not as many changes in Fall 2022, but the number of in-person offerings did not increase significantly.

There are more student absences post-COVID-19 in the in-person classes, and participation is minimal in the online classes. Many students seem to have the expectation that they can work full time, take care of family, and take five online classes successfully and easily. When they discover that it is not easy to do it all, they frequently complain that the class requirements are too stringent. The expectation is that the class is the product they purchased, so when unhappy with the product, they request that the product be changed. Harper and Robinson (2022) note that professor behaviors are then shaped by the student behaviors, with the professor becoming the "merchant" and grades the currency (p. 44). Naturally, absences in the in-person classes have increased along with an increase in requests for make-up work.

Many faculty are still preferring to teach online classes, and departments that used to be full of faculty and students are now empty and eerily quiet. Those of us who have in-person classes and in-person office hours often find ourselves alone in the department during working hours. On the occasion when more than one person is in the department at the same time, the need to socialize is often a temptation that cannot be overcome after two years of working from home.

At MTSU, early on faculty were told that we were "not going to be an online school." However, our enrollment numbers continue to show that students prefer traditional, face-to-face courses the least and will choose online, when available. During Summer 2022, all in-person courses in the Department of Management were canceled due to low enrollment; only online courses were taught that semester. Faculty continue to be told to "help the student no matter what," making us wonder about support for policies that we used before the pandemic. In the traditional, face-to-face courses, students expect attendance to be optional because they can watch the course in real time online or the recording later thanks to the technology that was installed during the early days of the pandemic. However, faculty retain control the conditions under which students may access the live stream and the recordings with extremes being noted even within departments. Some faculty make the video access available on the navigation bar starting on day one while other faculty members remove the access button from D2L altogether and require students to request a link in advance of any excused absence. The university does not have an official policy regarding access to the recordings; rather, faculty are advised to help students however we can when students have to miss class for COVID-19 or other university-sanctioned reasons.

Faculty who enforce an attendance policy, even one with several free passes, are met with numerous emails justifying every single tardy or absence and the expectation of making up the missed work that has associated points. Between the pandemic

and the economic issues of the past year, a larger percentage of students seem to have an expectation of flexibility and an attitude of, "I am the customer" and "I will participate on my terms." Between the extra technology and continuing to accommodate students as much as possible, many faculty members are stressed out and seeking new ways to find balance in their lives. Many others are looking for options that will allow them to retire sooner rather than later. The impending enrollment cliff (CUPA-HR, 2022) and not replacing tenure-track faculty when they leave, which is occurring at universities with already declining enrollments, only further exacerbates this complex issue.

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

Tips from Faculty

We continue to struggle to find ways to be effective as teachers, colleagues, and scholars in this ever-changing environment regarding COVID-19 variants, monkeypox, etc. and the subsequent attitudinal changes by students and administration. In this section, we share some strategies that have worked for us personally or that we have observed to work well with our own colleagues.

Pick your battles on professionalism behaviors, with students and with colleagues. The world's playbook for professionalism has changed, and the rules have softened. Who knows if the rules will change back? We are seeing more and more executives demand that their workforce return to their corporate offices, and it is fair to assume that expectations for professionalism, such as attire, will return as well. It's also feasible that employees hold more power in the employment relationship now, at least in geographic regions with low unemployment, and they may insist that the old expectations for professional attire, punctuality, etc. stay in the past.

Be fair but flexible, recognizing that your administration may support the student, even on matters related to grades, conduct, or long-standing policies. We used to never doubt that student grade appeals would automatically be denied unless the faculty member made a mistake, either in calculation or in following a policy in their own syllabus. Nowadays, we cannot be sure that a student will not win based on situational factors to which university administrators are sympathetic. Disrespectful and even belligerent student behaviors seem to receive thoughtful analysis now when there used to be zero tolerance (when the evidence was irrefutable). Policies that we have used for 10+ years are not always enforceable now. For example, a graduate student recently requested an extra week for deliverables in an online course due to an uncle passing away. Keep in mind that the course schedule is set at the beginning and that the due dates are the same each week. The student was not exceptionally close to the uncle, but they had to travel out-of-state for the funeral services. The syllabus states that a death in the immediate family is a legitimate reason to ask for more time, but the student became defensive when told that an uncle is not considered immediate family unless there was a parental relationship. Knowing that the administration would likely back the student in this scenario, the late work was accepted.

Revisit the core purposes and goals of your policies around professionalism, attendance, and participation. Examine your most essential student learning outcomes and ensure that your policies are aligned with those outcomes. If not, then perhaps the policy is no longer necessary or practical. If the administration will not support the enforcement of a policy, even one about professionalism, attendance, or participation, then we should work smarter and save ourselves some headaches by keeping only those elements that are essential to our desired outcomes.

Be prepared to meet students where they are, even if their work is far below your expectations. While we always have been willing to help students beyond the classroom, we must recognize that the pandemic and enrollment challenges have increased the lengths to which administration, students, parents, etc. expect us to go when a student is facing extra challenges or an unusually stressful situation. Whether we grade more leniently, give more do-over options, etc., the expectation for accommodations when a student is performing poorly is palpable.

Be a role model/exemplar of professionalism with your peers. Perhaps the hardest adjustment of all is to continue showing up and bringing your "A game," from pre-pandemic days, when you see others doing less and seemingly receiving the same or more rewards. Equity theory explains this natural tendency, but you may have to be a change agent in this instance. Envision the culture you want to have in your program or department and do your best to demonstrate the behaviors that will help shift the norms. Reinforce any positive changes you observe, recognizing that these kinds of changes take time. Remember to also be a source of support and encouragement because you know how emotionally exhausted and burned out your colleagues might be.

Tips from Research

Scholars began to post pandemic-related articles almost immediately after COVID-19 took hold, and we predict that many more articles are forthcoming as researchers begin to find time to analyze the data they have been collecting since 2020. We

found a few articles, which are highlighted in reverse chronological order, that might guide business faculty as we continue our pursuit of educating the next generation of business leaders while trying to maintain some measure of well-being and balance in our own lives under extremely challenging conditions.

Arrona-Palacios, et al. (2022) surveyed 214 faculty members in Mexico in the summer of 2020. They found that the pandemic negatively affected sleep duration along with sleep quality, which ultimately increased emotional exhaustion and burnout symptoms. We can relate to this study personally as our own sleep habits changed. While these results are not surprising, it's important to remind ourselves that sleep hygiene plays an important role in our well-being and feelings of burnout.

Karatuna, Jönsson, and Muhonen (2022) found that the pandemic increased academician's workload, led to a blurring of work and home lives, such as working space and having children around, and caused negative well-being outcomes, such as feeling lonely and social incompetency. Other important results were noted from this Swedish study, but these two themes address the issues in the current paper. The participants also shared their expectations for the future of their work, including having flexibility and options for their workspaces, improved digital resources, such as equipment, and the ability to have physical meetings.

Taylor and Frechette (2022) surveyed 400 marketing faculty members in the United States in April 2021. They found that teaching and research workload were associated with burnout while perceived research productivity, because of efficacy, was negatively associated with burnout. Student-related measures and social support did not reduce burnout as hypothesized. They suggest that chairs and administrators should recognize the impact teaching and workload have on burnout, particularly with junior faculty, and that faculty members should consider using any available tools and resources to offset students' need for interaction so that we do not sacrifice our own work-life balance.

Gewin (2021) wrote about burnout in academia caused by the pandemic, reporting on several studies detailing that stress among faculty members is dramatically higher, along with fatigue and even anger, than before the pandemic. Another point was that the pandemic only worsened the inequalities that already exist in academia, meaning that marginalized groups are likely experiencing disproportionate burnout. Some of the tips included connect with others who have similar vulnerabilities, join a union if your institution has one, and prioritize your mental health. Other specifics for managing burnout included: (1) avoid thinking of burnout as failure and process it like worry or uncertainty; (2) find activities that allow you to "detach" from sources of stress; (3) avoid isolation and be intentional about finding support.

McAllister et al. (2020) proposed three strategies to help protect our well-being as we navigate the "always-on" feeling that many faculty members have: (1) practice using self-regulation/increase our willpower to help us resist temptations to check our phones/email constantly; (2) create and maintain boundaries between work and home, especially because our ability to regulate temptations is lowest in the evenings; and (3) be deliberate with communications, limiting anything that might be unnecessary and paying attention to the day and time messages are sent, especially if you lead others as you are setting an example of what is expected or encouraged.

REFERENCES

Arrona-Palacios, A., Rebolledo-Mendez, G., Escamilla, J., Hosseini, S., & Duffy, J. (2022). Effects of COVID-19 lockdown on sleep duration, sleep quality and burnout in faculty members of higher education in Mexico. *Ciência & Saúde Coletiva*, *27*(8), 2985-2993.

CUPA-HR (2022, October). *Interactive: The Looming Enrollment Cliff* https://www.cupahr.org/issue/dept/interactive-enrollment-cliff/

Gewin, V. (2021). Pandemic burnout is rampant in academia. *Nature*, *591*(7850), 489-492.

Harper, J. C. & Robinson, J. B. (2022). Teaching from a distance: Challenges in classroom management to promote professionalism. *Journal of Business and Educational Leadership*, *12*(1), 35–56.

Karatuna, I., Jönsson, S., & Muhonen, T. (2022). Job demands, resources, and future considerations: Academics' experiences of working from home during the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic. *Frontiers in Psychology*, *13*(1-12).

Koo, K., Ficko, Z., & Gormley, E. A. (2017). Unprofessional content on Facebook accounts of US urology residency graduates. *BJU International, 119*(6), 955–960.

McAllister, C. P., Steffensen, D. S., Perrewé, P. L., Wang, G., & Brooks, C. D. (2022). "You've got mail": A daily investigation of email demands on job tension and work-family conflict. *Journal of business and psychology*, *37*(2), 325-338.

Taylor, D. G., & Frechette, M. (2022). The impact of workload, productivity, and social support on burnout among marketing faculty during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Journal of Marketing Education*, *44*(2), 134-148.

United States Department of Defense. (2022, October). *Coronavirus: DOD response timeline*. https://www.defense.gov/Explore/Spotlight/Coronavirus/DOD-Response-Timeline/