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COVID19 Student Survey Spring 2020: Feedback on College Communication

Research Brief # 206

College of the Canyons

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COLLEGE OF THE CANYONS

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Introduction & Background

This is the fourth edition in a series of research briefs organized by topic (RB#203-RB#209) reporting the results from the Student Experiences survey administered by the Office of Institutional Research, Planning, and Institutional Effectiveness. In response to the COVID19 Coronavirus pandemic, the college abided by the legislative stay-at-home order and transitioned to an entirely online/remote environment in week six of the spring 2020 term. All courses that were scheduled to meet face-to-face/on-ground were transitioned to a distance education format where instruction was changed to either synchronous or asynchronous mode, drastically changing how faculty and other student services departments interface with students. This report focuses on students experiences with the institution's communication surrounding the drastic changes to college operations and instruction that occurred in the spring of 2020.The student experiences survey provided a prime opportunity to assess the ways in which students most effectively received notifications and. Research results from *Higher Ed* and *Ellucian* have indicated that maintaining student engagement during these times when students are not physically present on campus and not in face-to-face classes is crucial. They suggest that the institution must leverage technology and reach out to the student virtually, with humanizing, supportive, and consistently administered messaging. As instruction is planned to continue via the online environment and primarily off-campus in the summer and into fall semester, the results from the communication related items within the student experiences survey also provides an opportunity to understand where usual points of communication between the institution and the student have been successful and where they can be improved.

Method

Of the original 41 items within the survey, six items specifically assessed students' perceptions of the college's methods of notification and communication:

Q18. Select the ways in which you have received notifications or information on changes related to COVID19 from the college. *Check all that apply*.

Q19. How would you rate the amount of communications you have received about changes related to COVID19?

Q20. What is your preferred mode of receiving communication from the college about changes relation to COVID19 from the College*? Select one*.

Q21. If/When you have questions, are you able to find the information that you need?

Q22. Overall, has the information about changes related to COVID19 been clear?

Q23. Do you have additional feedback on COC communication about changes due to COVID19?

As in the previous briefs; questions 18, 21, and 23, provided open-ended opportunity for students to expand further by providing free response explanations instead of and sometimes in addition to, the forced choices provided. Analysts read each response and allowed for themes to emerge freely from these responses. Responses were coded into the themes that emerged for each response. In all cases more than one theme could have been coded for any one response, as sometimes students discussed multiple themes within a single response. Thus, counts of themes will not always equal the number of individual responses provided. Across these three questions, there were 825 valid free-responses provided. Overall results will be disaggregated by ethnicity, age, modality (online only, face-to-face only, mix) where applicable.

Results

Figure 1 Ways in Which Students Received COC Communication Regarding COVID19 Changes
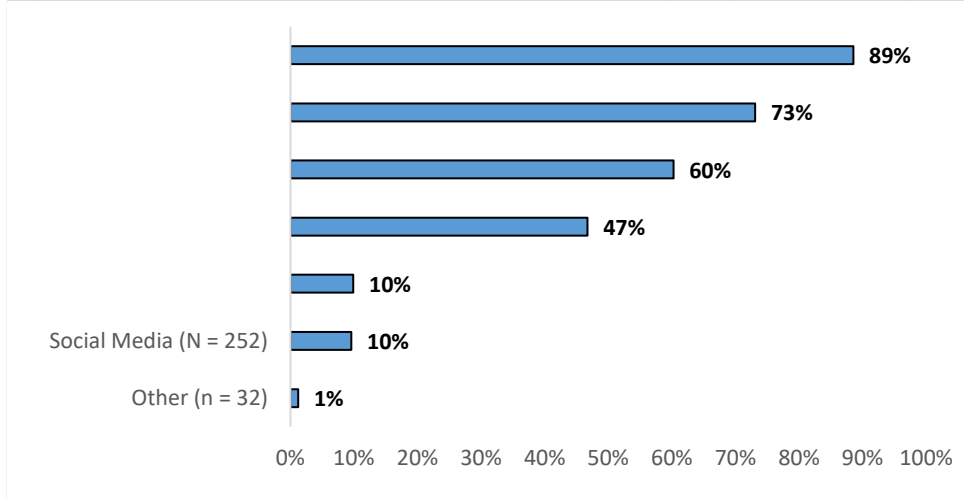
Analysts compared and contrasted the ways in which students reported they **received** communication from COC (*See Figure 1*) and the ways in which they **preferred** to receive communication (*See Figure 2*). Importantly, students received information and notifications in almost exactly the same way they **preferred** to receive that information. The top three most popular ways that communication was received (in order) was Email, CANVAS, then Text. These top three ways were the same regardless of student enrollment type (student enrolled in only online/vs. only face-to-face/ vs. enrolled in a mix). The top three most popular **preferred** ways to receive communications were (in order) Email, Text, then CANVAS. It is not surprising that during this time with the popularity of cell phones, that text message is within the top three.

Figure 2 Ways in Which Student Prefer COC Communication Regarding COVID19 Changes
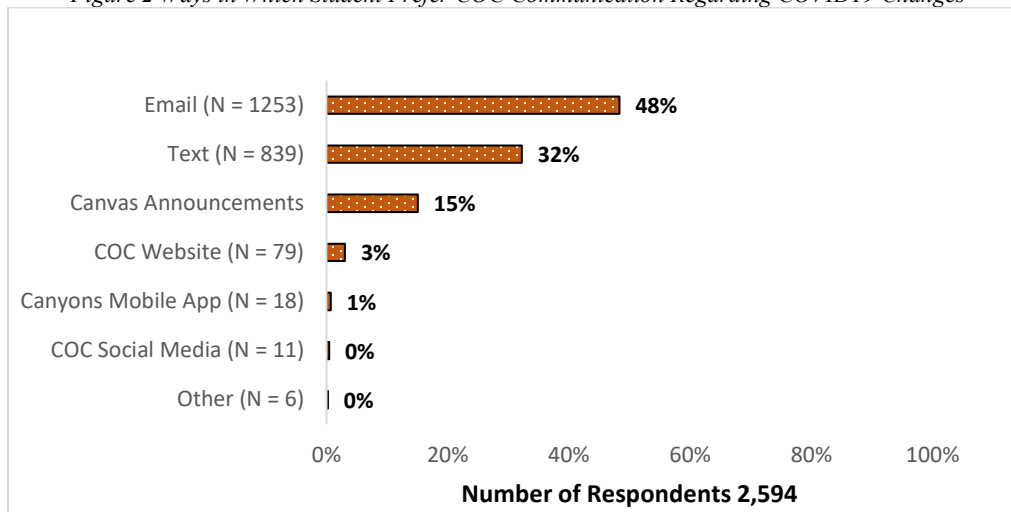
While only 32 respondents indicated they received notifications that were something "Other" than the six forced-choice options provided, we were interested in how those students were receiving information (*See Figure 3*). Of the 32 responses provided within "Other" only 29 were valid to be coded as three were illegible. Of the valid 29 responses, the majority of these students (n = 15) indicated they received notifications and communications regarding COVID19 changes via professors or the news (n = 9). Next, from family/friends and other digital formats (e.g., slack and google classroom).

Figure 3 Popular Themes Among Open-Ended Responses to College Communication Received
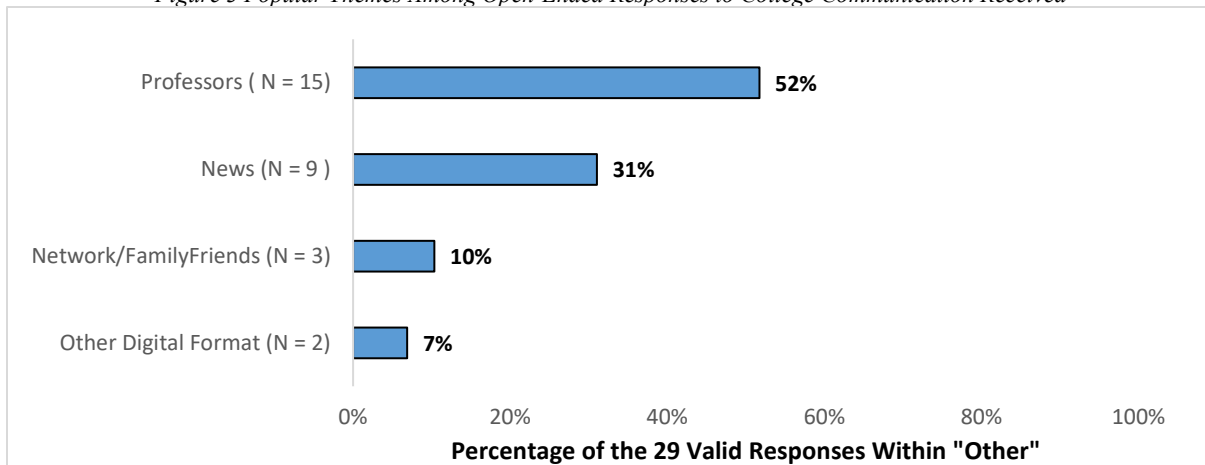
A total of 71% of student respondents (*N* = 2,610) provided an answer for question number 19, regarding the amount of communications received. The majority (74%) of those 2,610 respondents indicated that the amount of communications from COC were "just right" (n = 1,943), 20% indicated the amount was "not enough" (n = 519), and 6% indicated it was "too many" (n = 148) (*See Figure 4*). The rate of Latinx and Multiracial respondents who said the amount of communications was "Not enough" was slightly higher (22% for both ethnic groups) as compared to the overall rate (20%), suggesting these populations perceive the need for more communication and information. This pattern was similar for respondents who were younger (25 and younger) as their rate of saying communication was "not enough" was 23%. There were no differences based on first generation status or online versus face to face modality.

Figure 4 Student Ratings on Amount of Communications Regarding COVID 19 Related Changes
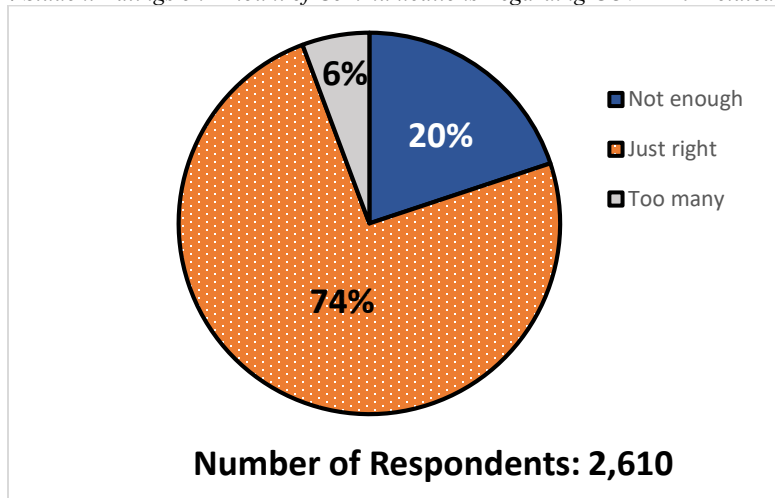
A total of 69% of participants (*N* = 2,563) students provided an answer for question number 21 regarding the ability to find the information needed (*Figure 5*). The majority (87%) of respondents (n = 2,232) overwhelmingly indicated they were indeed able to find the information that was needed while (13%) of respondents (n = 331) indicated no, that they were unable to find information they needed.

*Figure 5 Student Responses on Ability to Find Information That is Needed*
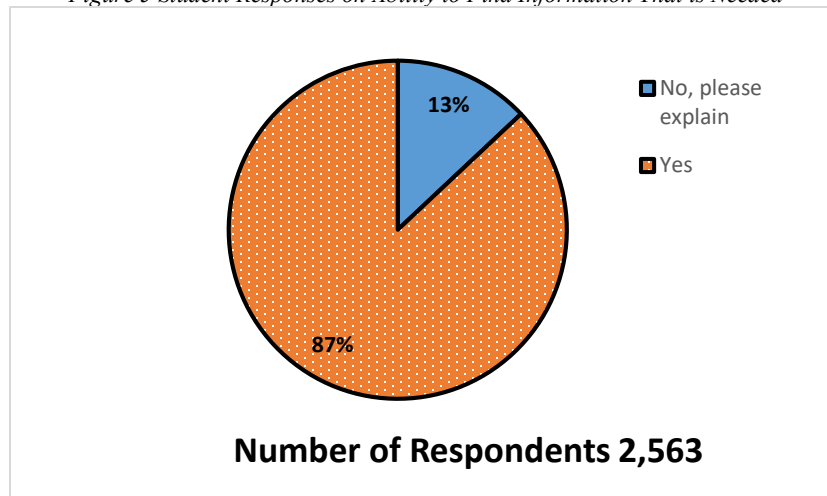
Disaggregating these results by ethnicity, age, course modality, and first-generation status (*see Figure 6*) analysts found that face-to-face only course modality, multiracial ethnicity, and respondents age 50 and older were slightly more likely to indicate that they were unable to find the information that they needed (*see Figure 6*). Figure 6 displays the results for only those disaggregated groups that showed proportions who replied "No" at a higher rate than the overall.

Figure 6 Disaggregation by Modality, Ethnicity, and Age
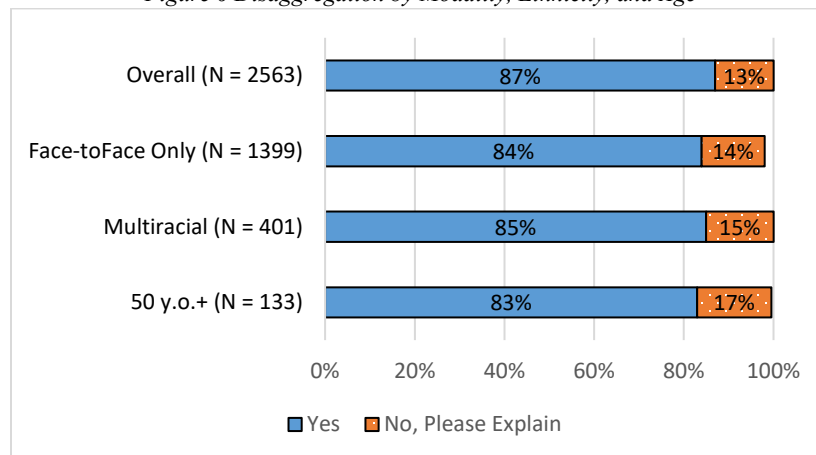

Of those who indicated no (n = 331) on question 21 these respondents then went on to provide free responses (*see Figure 7*). The top three most popular free response options sited for why respondents were unable to find the information that they needed were coded into the following themes: "Don't know where to access info (34% of responses), difficulty reaching anyone/response times are slow (24% of responses), professor lack of communication (24% of responses), and website is confusing (21% of responses). Some quotes to illustrate each of these themes are as follows. **Don't know where to access info**: "Not sure who specifically to contact with said questions./ I wouldn't even know who to ask or where to turn to./ Not knowing where to look./ Sometimes it's [information] hard or not specific to my needs." **Difficulty reaching anyone**: "It's hard finding answers and getting hold of staff members./ Everyone is too busy to answer questions./ Not sure who to call and when I do call I always get transferred from line to another./Sometimes it's difficult to get ahold of the right people and it's not answered in a timely manner." **Professor lack of communication**: "My professors don't know who I should be speaking to./ Sometimes instructors don't respond to the emails AT ALL./ Some teachers are not as competent with the online format and do not respond to questions." **Website is confusing**: "There is too much info, I need to dig through all the useless info to get to what I need./ A specific question that I have isn't answered in any of the answers provided on the website./ There isn't much information online of how students can get access to someone they need to talk to.

Figure 7 Themes Regarding Student Inability to Find Needed Information
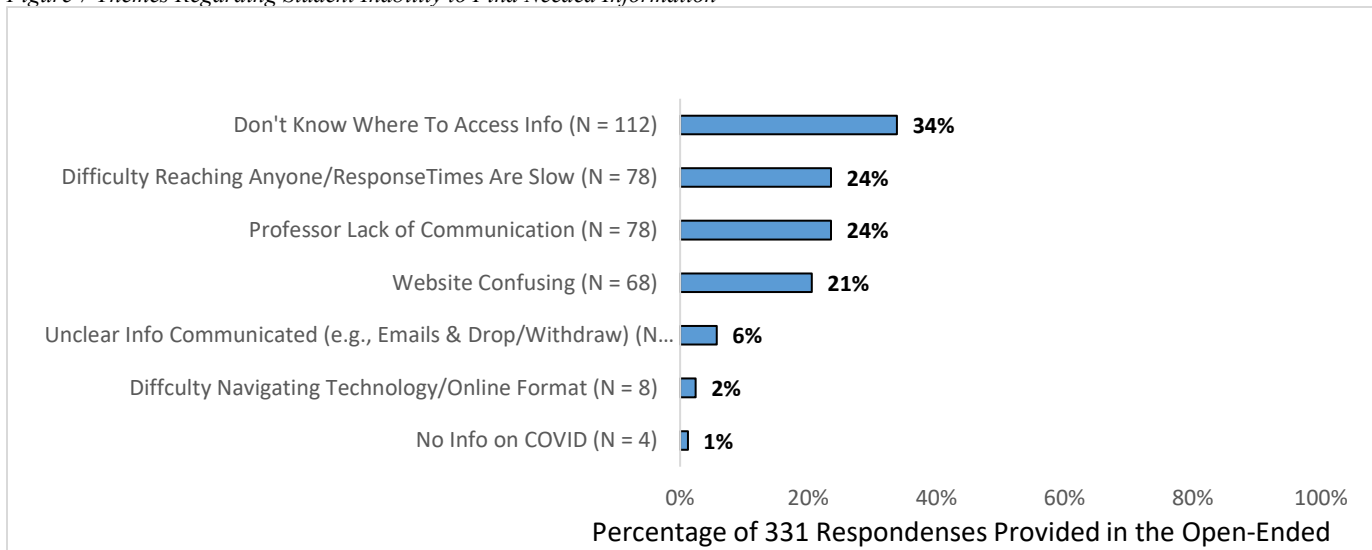
A total of 2,590 respondents (70%) answered question 22 which asked "has the information about changes related to COVID19 been clear?" A total of 2,280 (88%) of those who answer question 22, responded in the affirmative that information was clear, and 310 (12%) responded "no" that it had not been clear (*See Figure 8*). In disaggregating by ethnicity, age, modality and first-generation status results illustrate respondents ages 20-25 were slightly more likely (14.3%) to say information had not been clear as compared to the overall rate (12%) suggesting some disproportionality.

Figure 8 Responses Regarding Clarity of Information Regarding COVID19 Changes
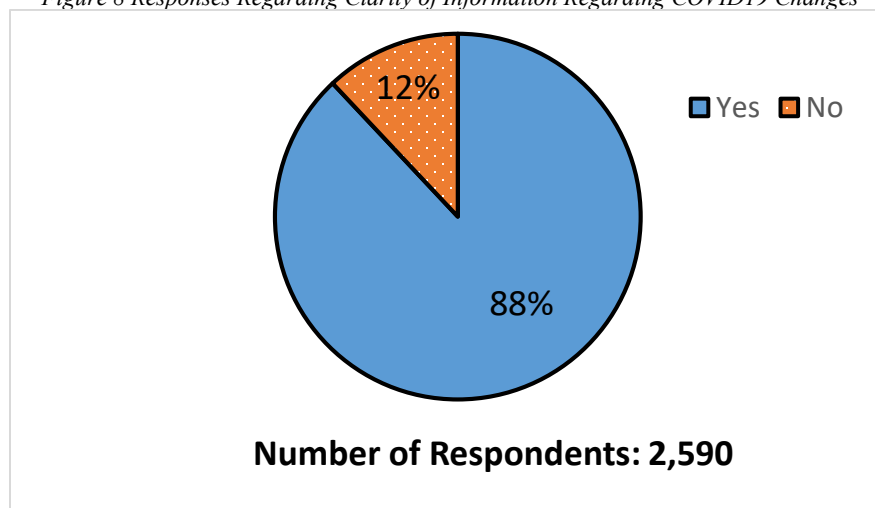
A total of 671 respondents provided a response to question number 23 which asked if there was any additional feedback regarding COVID19 communication. Of the respondents to question number 23, 209 (31%) answered No within the free-response space provided. Thus, leaving a remaining 462 (69%) valid responses to be coded for themes regarding additional feedback. These free-responses fell into 9 themes depicted in Figure 9. The top three most popular themes were: 1) online learning environment concerns (35% of responses), 2) course specific concerns and accommodations (15% of responses), and 3) quality of communication provided (13% of responses). Some quotes to illustrate each of the themes are as follows.

Online learning environment concerns: "I have taken online classes in the past but the transition from in person to online classes has been difficult. The instructors who are not use to teaching online don't make their instructions clear. As a result I have been late with assignments and it has affected my grades. The assignments and due dates aren't clear and sometimes I send messages to my instructors to clarify but they don't respond until it is too late./Requiring all professors to have an online contingency plan in place moving forward could be greatly helpful. Some classes feel much less organized since

switching, while some took the change in stride. /Please review the LACCD online format to connect students with essential staff and services. They have an online portal where you can virtually knock on different staff doors, access to know if the person you are trying to reach is online to assist with any help and virtual chats with the staff. This challenging time made me rethink if this college cares about my academic success./"

Course specific concerns & accommodations: "I would like for the professors to be more understanding. We are all going through this pandemic and to keep the same syllabus and not adjust at all is very hard because school life has changed drastically./ Upgrade online tutoring and a lighter work load possibly for students that work full-time."

Quality of communication: "The email from COC regarding COVID has been random, I think it would have been better if COC sent out a email at regular schedule like weekly, to update students on the situation./ Have at least 1 person per department answering phone calls./ The texts should just be the same as the info given on the website instead of saying to "check the COC website"./When discussing COVID19 what you have put out is generic. Plus there were texts and emails twice a day some days that said nothing more then [sic] the previous. If your [sic] going to send out mass msgs [sic] make sure they have new information in them. And if not make sure they are easily understood."

Requesting more information regarding future plans: "The only feedback I would say is to let us know how summer session is looking like. What I mean is give us Information about whether or not summer session will be online as well or will it go back to face to face, or if there will even be a summer session ?/ I would like to know the plan for upcoming semesters as well as graduation plans & parking permit."
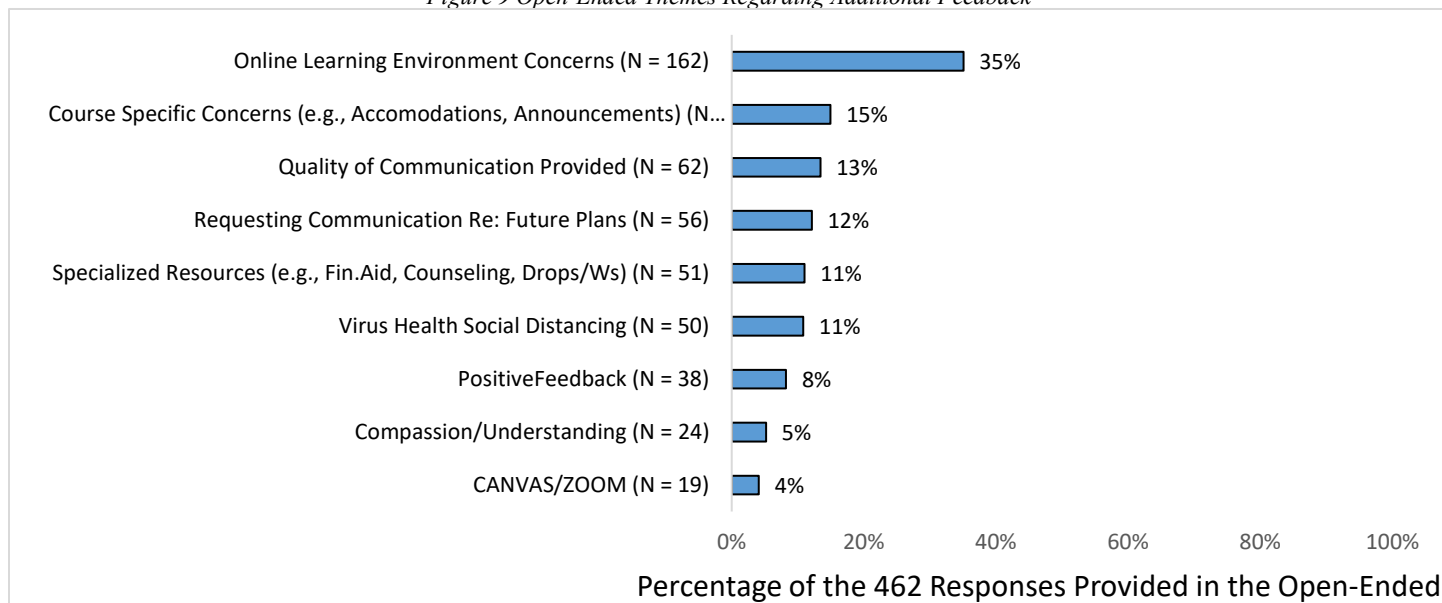
Specialized resources: "The only real feedback is how to turn in paperwork for student Aid other than that not really."

Virus, health & Social Distancing: 'I think the safest way is to keep the school cleared til [sic] fall semester or after because the last thing I want is to have to get sick by another student who has no idea they are sick after the ban has been lifted. This needs to be completely waited out because I truly don't feel safe with possible cases that are getting the end of the virus./ I am part of the high-risk part of the population, I don't want to go back to face to face classes until there is a vaccine, please make [department named] online."

Positive feedback: "Overall, COC been more accommodating helping students succeed by loaning laptops and provide resources that other students needs help with./ Everyone is doing the best they can with what they have."

Compassion/Understanding: "Please ask professors to understand that students do not have printers and adequate resources./

Figure 9 Open-Ended Themes Regarding Additional Feedback

Theme	Percentage
Online Learning Environment Concerns (N = 162)	35%
Course Specific Concerns (e.g., Accomodations, Announcements) (N…	15%
Quality of Communication Provided (N = 62)	13%
Requesting Communication Re: Future Plans (N = 56)	12%
Specialized Resources (e.g., Fin.Aid, Counseling, Drops/Ws) (N = 51)	11%
Virus Health Social Distancing (N = 50)	11%
PositiveFeedback (N = 38)	8%
Compassion/Understanding (N = 24)	5%
CANVAS/ZOOM (N = 19)	4%

Percentage of the 462 Responses Provided in the Open-Ended

Recommendations

Upon review of the results of the COVID19 survey data analyses, the following recommendations should be taken into consideration:

- According to results email, text, and CANVAS are both the most highly preferred mode of communication and the most highly received mode of communication. According to the themes that emerged from the qualitative analyses on open-ended responses, students who have had difficulty finding information or who have found the communication to be unclear have suggested the following:
  - o Emails with updates and changes surrounding COVID could be scheduled at known intervals to students such as once a week (e.g., every Tuesday) with updates.
  - o Emails should be clear and concise and not be repetitive with generic information but rather include specific details about a particular topic.
  - o Text is preferred however; the text alerts should not just refer someone to check their email or the COC website but contain stand-alone updates.
- With regards to communication with staff and faculty the open-ended responses illustrated that students had a difficult time knowing who to contact for a specific question and even once they isolated this, they could either not find the phone number or a response was not made in a timely manner.
  - o The recommendation would be for staff and faculty of all departments to consider updates to their COC website pages with clear information as to how they can be reached and what types of questions they/their department can help with. If the mode of communication on the part of the staff or faculty member is more efficient via email or a particular zoom link during work hours that can be made visible on the website. Something to allow for students to easily access them during work hours. Further, consider messaging on their department page regarding the usual or expected turn-around time for a response during these COVID19 conditions.
- A common theme throughout all the reports and all the Student Experience survey data is the reliance of students on faculty. In this case students rely on faculty for both information and for compassion during these challenging times.

   ○ It is recommended that perhaps a separate update memo or a running list of changes or progress report could be compiled for faculty every other week that they could then share out with their students or at least have access to if students ask them questions.

References

https://www.ellucian.com/insights/student-engagement-strategies-help-institutions-retain-students-during-covid-19-pandemic

For questions about this research brief, please contact Vida M. Manzo Senior Research Analyst (661) 362-5871, or Daylene Meuschke, Ed.D., Associate V.P. Institutional Research, Planning and Institutional Effectiveness at 661.362.5329. The Institutional Research, Planning, and Institutional Effectiveness office is located in BONH-224 on the Valencia campus.