The Z-Shift: Examining Factors Associated with Student Well-Being and University Experiences After The Great Experiment of 2020

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This dissertation titled

The Z-Shift: Examining Factors Associated with Student Well-Being and University Experiences After The Great Experiment of 2020

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Abstract

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Quantitative data was collected from 926 traditional-aged postsecondary students, of which most (69%) respondents were upperclassmen in their junior or senior year of college. The findings from this overall research indicate that there has been a shift in how today's Generation Z learners view online and hybrid learning and their ideal way to take college classes. Over half (61%) of the research participants reported hybrid course format as their most ideal way of taking college courses. In addition, the results confirmed that students who engage in positivity practices are generally happier individuals, and there was a positive relationship identified between the status of happiness in students who preferred the hybrid learning method. Finally, when comparing the status of sense of belonging in college students, the research results uncovered a strong association between students' campus involvement and sense of belonging levels. Developing flexible learning cultures, as well as promoting consistent practices of positivity methods and encouraging active campus involvement, are factors associated with higher levels of overall well-being (subjective happiness and sense of belonging) that can lead to healthier student populations, greater academic success, increased retention, and higher graduation rates.

Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my dear husband, Chad, and son Cade. Earning this degree has been a family endeavor, and I am forever grateful for their love, patience, and continued support throughout my Ph.D. journey. It is also dedicated to the memory of my father, who inspired me to be strong, goal-oriented, hard-working, to believe in myself, and never give up on my dreams.

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I appreciate the love and support from family and friends. I am thankful for my parents planting a seed of passion for learning and nurturing it throughout my childhood that grew into a genuine love for lifelong learning. I am grateful for the encouragement from my in-laws and aunts. I value the mentorship from colleagues. Prior to starting my Ph.D., Dr. Mary Tucker offered guidance to help me learn and navigate the academic research process to begin contributing to the existing body of knowledge. She sparked excitement and intellectual curiosity in me, and her leadership approach of building a collective culture of support is so inspiring. I am appreciative of the many students who participated in the research and shared their thoughts and experiences with me. Thank you to so many of my former and current colleagues who have been supportive and motivational prior to and during this journey: Dr. Joan Wigal, Dr. Jacob Hiler, Dr. Mick Andzulis, Dr. Jessica Weeks, Dr. Melissa Davies, and Dr. Rebecca Dingus, to name a few.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Background and Context

When the highly contagious coronavirus disease (COVID-19) emerged toward the end of 2019, it quickly spread to the United States of America and most other countries around the globe by March of 2020. As a result of this unexpected health emergency, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 a worldwide pandemic and took swift actions in attempts to slow down the rapid spread of the dangerous virus (Arestovich et al., 2020). Educational institutions of all types and sizes implemented emergency remote teaching methods and shifted away from face-to-face (F2F) in-person classes to online modalities. “Emergency remote teaching (ERT) is a temporary shift of instructional delivery to an alternate delivery mode due to crisis circumstances” (Hodges et al., 2020, para. 13). This wide-reaching crisis disrupted nearly all aspects of modern society, including major disruptions that continue to affect higher education institutions (HEIs), students, educators, and other stakeholders. Higher education has always been slow to adopt new pedagogical practices, but the pandemic sparked rapid changes (Pokhrel & Chhetri, 2021). Educators across the globe stopped delivering traditional in-person classes in a F2F format and expeditiously pivoted to fully online course delivery, which created a series of firsts for many educators and learners.

And so, it began: The Great Experiment of 2020. The unexpected global viral pandemic coerced nearly all higher learning institutions to shift in-person classes to the computer in some capacity. Although this shift created hardships for many, it also organically created a natural laboratory on a global scale with opportunities for higher

education stakeholders in the masses to experience online learning and arrive at renewed conclusions based on their first-hand experiences. Simultaneously, this worldwide "experiment" has provided researchers with the right set of circumstances to investigate the strong effects that the COVID-19 crisis has had (and continues to have) on higher education and society at large.

The historical events of the different stages of the Industrial Revolution and the COVID-19 pandemic have greatly contributed to the "dragging" of colleges and universities into the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR). These experiences have resulted in the "Z-Shift" of Generation Z college student stakeholders desiring expanded options in the ways in which they take their postsecondary courses. The ways in which traditional postsecondary learners interact, study, prepare, and engage with course content and within the classroom (brick and mortar, as well as via online platforms) differ noticeably from what educators observed and expected prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. "The COVID-19 pandemic has provided us with an opportunity to pave the way for introducing digital learning" (Pokhrel & Chhetri, 2021, p. 133). Initial research results from The Great Experiment of 2020 are beginning to suggest that digital learning may be more efficient and effective than pre-pandemic research revealed, especially when hybrid (blended) instructional practices are implemented.

Concurrently, it is apparent that overall well-being levels, such as subjective happiness, sense of belonging, and stress levels are in flux for numerous traditional-aged college students today. The spike in anxiety and depression rates among college students appears to be affecting many. These shifting challenges are significantly altering the

overall well-being of student stakeholders, as well as the landscape of higher education. By investigating experiences that initially happened during the COVID-induced ERT period, and by collecting and analyzing data from postsecondary learners, possible factors can be identified that affect the university experience and overall well-being of traditional-aged undergraduate college students.

My goal for this dissertation is to produce three publishable full-length articles, joining them with an introduction chapter that provides the general theme of the overall research and wrapping up with a conclusion chapter to tie the articles together and summarize key findings. I believe this approach is beneficial in producing empirical research, based on real life data, to compare against the theoretical frameworks and hypotheses. My intent is to present each article to editors of a journal to request publication with the goal of contributing to the body of knowledge and helping to fill a research gap in literature.

New empirical evidence on the topic of college student experiences in relation to their overall well-being can be beneficial for educators and leaders in better understanding the transformations that are organically happening in institutions of higher learning. Findings from this research can shed light on this phenomenon to work toward positive and intentional improvements to enhance teaching and learning outcomes and address changing needs of today's learners. In this first chapter, relevant terms are defined as they are used throughout the research articles in this overall study. In addition, a background section is included to provide context on how I became interested in this research topic and to acknowledge preconceived notions from my vantage point as the

researcher. The statement of the problem and relevance of the overall research are addressed directly after reviewing the IRB process. To wrap up chapter one, the research paradigm is described, and then a summary of each article is provided that includes the main research questions and hypotheses for the studies. The second chapter of this document contains Article 1, the third chapter encompasses Article 2, and Article 3 is covered in the fourth chapter of this document. The fifth and final chapter contains the overall conclusion of this multilayered research and summarizes key findings from the overall research of the three articles.

Defining Course Delivery Modes

Since the turn of the century, there have been multiple types of higher education course delivery modes established, implemented, and expanded upon in recent years. Some of the course delivery modes that are discussed in this research include traditional in-person/face-to-face (F2F), online synchronous, online asynchronous, and blended/hybrid formats.

F2F course delivery occurs when all scheduled class sessions are delivered in person. Online courses are delivered synchronously and/or asynchronously. Hybrid, or blended, refers to courses that offer online components integrated with F2F delivery (Müller & Mildenberger, 2021; Rist, 2023). Blended learning refers to a convergence of F2F and online instructional formats, and is often synonymous with hybrid learning (Graham, 2004; Müller & Mildenberger, 2021). “Hyles” is a type of hybrid course delivery format that happens when educators provide students with both options, so they have the choice of either attending class in-person or virtually through an online

streaming platform; this term was originated by combining the words “hybrid” and “flexible” (Miller et al., 2021).

Background Statement

After the pandemic began and educators swiftly transitioned in-person classes to online modalities, plans were unfolding about the direction of how to navigate postsecondary education course delivery in future semesters. Anecdotally, I observed a higher percentage of college students in my classes struggling with the rapid societal changes and shifts in pedagogy; simultaneously, I noticed a higher percentage of college students in my classes seemed to be struggling with overall well-being. Therefore, out of genuine concern, intellectual curiosity, and to stay as informed as possible about how to move forward most effectively in this unchartered territory, I decided to start collecting data from students in my classes to provide them with a platform to express their voices and to learn more about their experiences, well-being, perspectives, and preferences on these timely topics. Afterall, the primary reason that we are here (and why the higher education sector exists) is to serve the student population and to operate under a sustainable model so that HEIs can continue to exist, thrive, and contribute positively to individuals and society at large.

Although I was not planning to leverage the data collected for formal academic research, I later realized that there is a gap in the academic body of knowledge on this novel topic, and there was limited “just-in-time” data that was being collected and published during this historically unprecedented time in our society. Therefore, with this type of data from the student vantage point being scarce, limited, and time-sensitive, it is

worthwhile to share with the broader higher education community to help inform decisions and best practices for the future, in the best interest of our students.

Institutional Review Board (IRB) Approval

I contacted the University's Office of Research Compliance to tell them about the data that I had been collecting, and they advised me to include the information in an Institutional Review Board (IRB) protocol for them to review. They approved it and said that I can continue to collect and analyze this type of data and share it with others. I am grateful that they recognized the importance of this time-sensitive data, as it is a "snapshot in time" that is rare and would be difficult and less accurate to try to collect after our society has been able to move away from the more severe pandemic phase of COVID-19 and onto the more stable endemic phase. However, as society continues to make strides to transition away from the COVID-19 pandemic period, this data can help inform both strategic development and thoughtful execution as HEI educators/leaders work to better position higher education institutions to deliver valuable pedagogical services in more inclusive, effective, dynamic, innovative, and versatile ways for the diverse college learners of today and tomorrow.

In short, I was primarily interested in how traditional-aged college students (as well as faculty and HEIs in general) were affected, and continue to be affected, by milestones in the evolution of society, including the different stages of the Industrial Revolution and the COVID-19 global viral pandemic. I sought a deeper understanding of how historical and modern events continuously shape and revolutionize the evolution of the higher education system, and how these influences affect the overall well-being of

postsecondary learners as the key stakeholders within the higher education sector. With a strong applied organizational background in academic technology and leadership in higher education, I was interested in investigating college student experiences, satisfaction, overall well-being (subjective happiness and sense of belonging) levels, as well as positivity practices during their traditional undergraduate college years in a residential four-year university setting.

Statement of the Problem

The overall effects on college students' pedagogical adaptation and well-being since the COVID-19 global viral pandemic began has been vast and multifaceted. Higher education stakeholders, including students and faculty, have faced a multitude of challenges that are becoming more mismatched between historical higher education instructional approaches and ever-changing student learning styles and ideal ways of receiving their educational content. Innovative practices have been occurring throughout the history of American higher education during the phases of the Industrial Revolution, and at an even greater expeditious pace since the COVID-19 pandemic began in spring of 2020.

This is an opportune time for systemic reform to occur within the higher education sector, amid the era of the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR). Importantly, examining this topic can provide a better understanding, and help inform higher education leaders and policymakers, of how COVID-19 pandemic effects are driving much-needed change, potentially "dragging" higher education institutions into the 4IR and soon into the Fifth Industrial Revolution (5IR) (Noble et al., 2022). Researching this

topic from the college student point of view is helpful in providing insights to determine what worked well during the pandemic, what did not work well, what opportunities exist to make further improvements, and how to best plan for the future of higher education.

Relevance of the Study

This is the first time that higher education stakeholders in our present-day society have experienced a global viral pandemic of this magnitude, which has created various emergent disruptions in nearly every aspect of life for individuals and organizations across the globe. It was like being dragged and fully immersed into the 4IR practically overnight for higher education institutions! These disruptions have brought along with them a ripple effect that continues to create complex and multilayered obstacles. The COVID-19 pandemic and social unrest in 2020 significantly hastened the pace of disruptive change in higher education (Smith & Fairbrother, 2021). Though these times of adversity have been difficult for many, with big challenges come great opportunities for the higher education sector.

It is important to study how milestones in our history, such as the various stages of the Industrial Revolution and the COVID-19 pandemic, continue to shape society and the American higher education system. With most of today's postsecondary faculty and students now having first-hand experiences with online and/or hybrid learning methods because of the ERT methods that were instituted when the global pandemic was declared (Rapanta et al., 2021), many uncertainties lie ahead for the higher education industry. Better understanding how HEIs are evolving, and changes in how college students learn, can help inform how the COVID-19 pandemic is driving further changes and potentially

"dragging" higher education institutions into the 4IR and the 5IR. This profound breakthrough has created a golden opportunity for the higher education sector to move forward with longer-term intentional growth and reform. "If we can turn everything we do upside down and inside out in a global pandemic, we can do this transformative, revolutionary thinking to address all the crises higher ed and our students face today" (Davidson, 2022, p. xix). This momentum should be leveraged and used as a change agent for policy reform and higher education institutions to become more nimble, adaptable, efficient, and proactive organizations, paving the way for a next-level trajectory for higher learning.

Educational practitioners and leaders of HEIs may leverage the results from this research to help make data-informed decisions regarding the delivery of educational services, the overall design of the higher education system, and how students' subjective well-being and sense of belonging may be affected and improved. Especially as society begins to move away from the emergency pandemic period and into a more stagnant endemic phase, it is necessary for higher education leadership to stay informed, redefine their institutional value propositions, and for educators to reassess how courses are delivered to college student stakeholders to add value to individuals' lives, to continue to contribute education as a public good to improve society at large, and for HEIs to persist and thrive in an everchanging world.

Studying this phenomenon can shed light on factors that affect college student perspectives, experiences, satisfaction, and overall well-being levels that are shifting the landscape of higher education. It can help inform strategy development and tactics to

enhance outcomes and strengthen the value propositions for HEIs and benefits to college student consumers, the labor market, and society at large. By learning from the COVID years, HEIs have an opportunity to take forward the "best of both worlds" (i.e., the most excellent aspects of online and F2F formats) as we progress into post-pandemic times (Singh et al., 2021). The findings from this research can help higher education stakeholders take proactive measures during this paradigm shift, which is vital to empower students, educators, institutions, and society to flourish now and into the future.

General Purpose

The overall primary purpose for proposing the three research studies is to examine the intersection of well-being (with a focus on subjective happiness and sense of belonging) and institutional and technological change. There is still a lot to be learned about ideal ways of working in the workforce and in higher education, especially with the collective shift in work experiences that occurred when the COVID-19 global pandemic began. It brought with it a ripple effect of monumental transformation and a collective shift in how people in modern society prefer to work and go to school. It is yet to be fully understood how change of this magnitude affects individuals' overall well-being.

By acquiring knowledge of the different stages of the industrial revolution throughout American history, and by studying the aftereffects of the COVID-19 pandemic, a goal for this research is to gain a deeper understanding of how technological revolutions drive the availability and use of technologies that continually affect individuals' overall well-being, society at large, and the higher education system. I believe the proposed triple article format for this dissertation is conducive to investigating

various angles of the research topic, including how higher education continues to evolve in the era of the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR), the direct effects that the COVID-19 global viral pandemic is having on adoption of innovative practices, college student perspectives and satisfaction levels, variables that may affect college student well-being, and ways that HEIs can adapt and further help learners and society flourish.

Research Approach, Research Questions, and Hypotheses

A quantitative methodological design was the research approach, leveraging surveys. Below are some research questions and hypotheses posed that began the research process.

What are the levels of overall well-being (subjective happiness, sense of belonging) and satisfaction among today's traditional-aged Generation Z undergraduate college students? What factors may affect their university experiences and overall well-being levels? How might lifestyle dynamics, such as campus engagement and employment status, influence students' perceived sense of belonging during their college years? How might stress levels and positivity practices affect their subjective well-being levels during their time on a college campus? Are there other factors, such as pedagogical modes, that might have an association with students' overall well-being? What are the implications of this research and how might the findings help inform ways for universities to strengthen their value propositions, create stronger competitive advantage within the higher education sector, and increase the return on investment for college consumers and society at large? Here is a summary of the plan for the triple article approach.

Dissertation Structure and Overview of Articles

The primary purpose of this section is to describe the general organization of this dissertation and to provide a high-level overview of the main points that are included in each article. The relationships between ideal course delivery formats and well-being variables are studied on each of the three articles, which are organized across the middle three chapters, Chapter 2 (Article 1), Chapter 3 (Article 2), and Chapter 4 (Article 3). Each article was crafted in a stand-alone format because the intention is to submit each one separately to different journals for publication to contribute to the body of literature.

Article 1: The Great Experiment of 2020: Discoveries of New Age Hybrid-Wellness Connections

Leveraging a quantitative research survey, relationships were examined between the valid Subjective Happiness Scale (SHS) (Lyubomirsky & Lepper, 1999) variables and the student-reported ideal course delivery format variable. The main research questions and hypotheses were as follows:

Research Question 1 (R1): What is the relationship between college students' self-reported happiness compared with their ideal method of course delivery in a traditional four-year residential university setting?

Research Question 2 (R2): Have traditional-aged college students' perspectives/preferences about online education changed since before the COVID-19 pandemic?

Hypothesis 1 (H1): Most traditional-aged college students prefer the hybrid course delivery modality.

Hypothesis 2 (H2): Hybrid course format is associated with higher levels of subjective well-being.

Article 2: The Z-Shift: Experiential Pedagogies and College Student Well-being in Marketing Education with Lasting Effects on Work Modalities

This research was designed as a quantitative study, where relationships between variables were reviewed, looking at measures taken on the valid Subjective Happiness Scale (SHS) (Lyubomirsky & Lepper, 1999) as the dependent variables and examined with independent variables including ideal course delivery format, stress, and positivity practices. Here were the main research questions and hypothesis:

Research Question 1 (R1): How do stress levels and positivity practices relate to subjective happiness?

Research Question 2 (R2): How do Generation Z learners of higher education institutions prefer to take classes?

Hypothesis 1 (H1): College students who engage in positivity practices will report lower stress levels and higher subjective happiness levels.

Article 3: Examining Factors that May Affect Sense of Belonging in the College Years: Investigations into Course Delivery and Demographic Contexts

This research was designed using a quantitative approach, where relationships between sense of belonging variables using the valid Psychological Sense of School Membership (PSSM) scale (Goodenow, 1993) were analyzed and compared with demographic and psychographic (e.g., campus engagement, employment status). The primary research questions and hypotheses were as follows:

Research Question 1 (R1): What is the relationship between the ideal course delivery mode(s) of traditional-aged undergraduate college students and their sense of belonging while attending a traditional four-year residential university?

Research Question 2 (R2): Is there a relationship between demographics and sense of belonging?

Hypothesis (H1): Traditional-aged undergraduate college students who indicate their ideal course delivery mode to be hybrid are predicted to have higher sense of belonging levels.

Hypothesis 2 (H2): Students who identify as non-minority are predicted to have higher sense of belonging levels than students who identify in a minority racial group.

Theoretical Frameworks and Relevant Literature

The three articles in this study leverage elements from the following theoretical frameworks/models: the Well-Being Theory (WBT), Positive Psychology, Seligman's PERMA, Strayhorn's Sense of Belonging, Universal Design for Learning (UDL), Learner-Centered Education (LCE), and the Experiential Learning Theory (ELT).

Sense of Belonging, Well-Being, and Positive Psychology in the College Years

According to Strayhorn (2018), sense of belonging refers to how supported and connected college students feel on campus, as well as their perceptions of feeling that they matter and they are cared about, treated respectfully, valued, and accepted into the campus community by peers, faculty, staff, etc. Having a healthy sense of belonging during college is an important factor that contributes to college success in the classroom and on the campus environment (Strayhorn, 2018). The terms subjective well-being and

subjective happiness are viewed as part of the study of positive psychology and are used interchangeably in this research. “Happiness, therefore, according to the positive psychology movement, includes a deep experience of well-being, vitality, and meaningfulness” (Mather, 2010, p. 160). When an educational enterprise adopts positive psychology techniques and cultivates a positive educational environment, everybody wins.

Mather (2010) indicated that findings in the large body of research reveal that Positive Psychology techniques are advantageous in helping students to boost their acquisition and conceptualization of knowledge, and there is also a connection between higher well-being levels resulting in learning more effectively. Mather also reported noteworthy evidence that optimistic mindsets lead to improved reasoning and problem-solving skills, and more accuracy in self-awareness and self-perceptions. Research also suggests that when positive psychology techniques are taught in education institutions, depression and anxiety rates are greatly reduced.

Student-Centered Paradigm

In American higher education, the Learner-Centered Education (LCE) paradigm of curriculum continues to shift from teacher-centered instruction to a more learner-centered approach. What are some of the most effective strategies for impactful and inclusive learning? Although there is no unilateral response that can effectively answer this question for all higher education classes, leveraging the UDL framework is an excellent place to start. Also, asking our student stakeholders for their feedback can be an effective strategy to provide meaningful insights to make data-informed decisions and

help to solve this mystery. The key for each educator in solving this puzzle may be unlocked through designing and implementing a combination of pedagogical practices that is unique to each course and the individuals who enroll.

Cultivating an environment that is student-focused and inclusive of students' input can be helpful to begin understanding this phenomenon. It is important for educators and policymakers to have an open mind, take an agile approach in our rapidly changing world, and be inclusive of the highly diverse college student population. There should be ample consideration, reflection, and planning around a multitude of topics in this arena, with an emphasis on lifelong learning and inclusive access. "Student engagement increases student satisfaction, enhances student motivation to learn, reduces the sense of isolation, and improves student performance in online courses" (Martin & Bolliger, 2018, p. 205). It is even more important than ever before for educational institutions to make learners the focal point and consider unique differences in this ever-changing world in which we live with instant access to information and resources that our modern society has at our fingertips. By garnering feedback and engaging learners at a deeper level, students become more enthusiastic and invested in the learning journey, are more likely to become further involved, and are more likely to feel comfortable providing their thoughts and preferences when given a platform to express their voices.

Universal Design Principles

According to CAST (2021), the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) framework was developed to encourage learning spaces that are more accessible and inclusive, as well as adaptable to how people process information most effectively regardless of their

needs or abilities at the individualized level. Being open and accommodating to various learning styles and preferences, regardless of the course delivery mode(s), to optimize the student experience are important components of UDL. In a study of online learning methods, the top three most effective active learning strategies found were cooperative learning, gaming and simulations, and interactive multimedia practices (Davis et al., 2018). More specifically, the research findings revealed a 71% positive result for cooperative learning, 68% for simulations & gaming, and 64% for interactive multimedia, which were higher results than other online learning methods that were tested in various categories with an average of a 43% positive result. Ultimately, different approaches to various pedagogical practices should be designed and tested to figure out what combination works best for each distinct class.

Methodology

Overview of Research Design

After working with staff from the institutional Office of Research Compliance and getting the Institutional Review Board (IRB) protocol in place, the data has been approved to be collected and analyzed from a reasonable sample size of the population through surveys. The key demographic of research participants includes traditional undergraduate college students enrolled at a university in the Midwest region of the United States of America, enrolled in a Marketing course.

The primary methodology is grounded in a quantitative approach that leverages quantitative data collection and analysis procedures. The quantitative survey questions were developed to help inform the research objectives and questions in the first two

articles, using Lyubomirsky & Lepper's (1999) validated four-item Subjective Happiness Scale (SHS). Additionally, the data collected to align with the quantitative survey questions in the first and third articles will leverage Goodenow's (1993) validated eighteen-item Psychological Sense of School Membership (PSSM) scale. "Researchers frequently use the PSSM to measure students' sense of school belonging and to examine the quality of the student's connection to their school" (St-Amand et al., 2020, p. 5). Demographic and psychographic survey questions were also included.

Sample

The convenience sampling technique was leveraged to reach the target population for this study, which consists of traditional-aged college students at a residential public four-year university in the Midwest. Specifically, the sample of the population represents undergraduate students, mostly juniors and seniors majoring in Business and enrolled in a Marketing course in 2023. The survey instrument was made available to individuals in this demographic and yielded a sample size of 926 undergraduate college students.

Data Collection Procedures

An online survey link was posted in a research participation system that undergraduate college students who were enrolled in a marketing course could access and volunteer for various studies to earn a small percentage of class credit in exchange for their participation. To measure subjective happiness, the valid Subjective Happiness Scale (SHS) research instrument served as the positive psychological well-being construct, asking respondents to answer four indicator-based statements/survey questions on a seven-point Likert scale (Lyubomirsky & Lepper, 1999). Ranging from one to

seven, the SHS Likert scale response choices started with “one” to indicate the lowest level of agreement/happiness, with a neutral score positioned in the middle represented by “four,” and “seven” listed as the last option to express the highest level of agreement/happiness. The Subjective Happiness questions are listed in Table 1 (Appendix).

Additionally, well-being questions that relate to sense of belonging were included in the survey. To measure sense of belonging levels, the valid Psychological Sense of School Membership (PSSM) scale was used. There are eighteen questions comprising the PSSM scale, and the indicator statements are on a five-point Likert scale (Goodenow, 1993). Ranging from one to five, the response options for the PSSM instrument begins with “one” to indicate the lowest agreement level (never true) and ends with “five” to signify the highest agreement level (always true), with the middle response choice of “three” listed to represent a neutral score (neither true nor false). The PSSM questions are listed in Table 2 (Appendix).

Quantitative Data Analysis

By deploying the quantitative research method, more college students’ feedback was attained, increasing the sample size, increasing the research validity, and obtaining a higher response rate. The raw data was exported from Qualtrics and cleaned before analyzing it with jamovi, a statistical software application program that is similar to SPSS. After running descriptive statistics on the relevant variables, the data was analyzed so that key findings about relationships among variables can be identified and reported.

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Appendix

Table 1. Subjective well-being questions using the Subjective Happiness Scale (SHS) (Lyubomirsky & Lepper, 1999):

1.	In general, how happy of a person do you consider yourself?
2.	Compared with most of your peers, how happy do you consider yourself?
3.	Some people are generally very happy. They enjoy life regardless of what is going on, getting the most out of everything. To what extent does this characterization describe you?
4.	Some people are generally not very happy. Although they are not depressed, they never seem as happy as they might be. To what extent does this characterization describe you?

Table 2. Sense of belonging well-being questions using the Psychological Sense of School Membership (PSSM) scale (Goodenow, 1993)

1.	I feel like a real part of (name of school).
2.	People here notice when I'm good at something.
3.	It is hard for people like me to be accepted here. *(reversed)*
4.	Other students in this school take my opinions seriously.
5.	Most teachers at (name of school) are interested in me.
6.	Sometimes I feel as if I don't belong here. *(reversed)*
7.	There's at least one teacher or other adult in this school I can talk to if I have a problem.
8.	People at this school are friendly to me.
9.	Teachers here are not interested in people like me. *(reversed)*

10.	I am included in lots of activities at (name of school).
11.	I am treated with as much respect as other students.
12.	I feel very different from most other students here. *(reversed)*
13.	I can really be myself at this school.
14.	The teachers here respect me.
15.	People here know I can do good work.
16.	I wish I were in a different school. *(reversed)*
17.	I feel proud of belonging to (name of school).
18.	Other students here like me the way I am.

Chapter 2: (Article 1): The Great Experiment of 2020: Discoveries of New Age Hybrid-Wellness Connections

Abstract

Purpose

The key objective of this research is to investigate traditional-aged college students' academic experiences operating in the hybrid system, their attitudes toward hybrid modalities, and connections with overall well-being levels.

Design/Methodology

Quantitative data was collected and analyzed from a sample of the target population for this empirical study. Specifically, a quantitative survey was completed by 926 undergraduate students enrolled in at least one Marketing course.

Results

Results of this study suggest that the highest preference among traditional-aged college students for taking courses is in hybrid format, and those who prefer hybrid have higher subjective happiness levels.

Practical Implications

In the post-pandemic era, a vast majority of today's Generation Z college students prefer to shift to a hybrid learning culture. With this finding, as well as the positive association identified between hybrid preferences and increased well-being, a shift to more flexible course designs merits further consideration.

Keywords

Hybrid, Well-being, Adaptability, Experiential learning, Student Satisfaction

The COVID Catalyst

Students attending institutions of higher learning have been affected in various ways since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. The highly infectious coronavirus began spreading rapidly around the world in only a few months when the World Health Organization (WHO) officially declared the COVID-19 global pandemic in March of 2020 (Aristovnik et al., 2020). “On 1 April 2020, schools and higher education institutions (HEIs) were closed in 185 countries, affecting 1,542,412,000 learners, which constitute 89.4% of total enrolled learners” (Marinoni et al., 2020, p. 8). Pedagogical adjustments were made at an incredible velocity throughout postsecondary institutions when the COVID-19 global viral pandemic unfolded, despite the long-standing reputation for the higher education sector being slow to change and adapt to innovative practices throughout its history (Pokhrel & Chhetri, 2021). As the world continues to grapple with life-altering disruptions brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic, many changes were catalyzed, yet many uncertainties lie ahead for the higher education sector.

The primary objective of this research study is to uncover insights regarding university experiences, ideal course/work modalities, and overall well-being among traditional-aged college students in marketing education. Reviewing the history of American higher education and investigating this topic to understand it from college students’ perspectives based on their experiences during this period, can help shape the future of how postsecondary courses are formatted so they are offered in ways that best fit the needs and desires of current and prospective learners. By examining college students’ overall well-being levels (i.e., subjective happiness and sense of belonging) and discovering ideal ways of experiencing university pedagogies during their academic

careers, educators can be better equipped to prepare college students to adapt to the changing workplace when they transition into their future professional careers in the dynamic business world.

Defining Course Delivery Modes

With a wider array of course delivery formats and combinations being utilized in larger volumes in the present day than compared to pre-pandemic times, the purpose of this section is to provide a definition of terms regarding various types of instructional delivery formats in relation to how they are addressed and discussed throughout this article. It is important to understand how delivery modes are defined and referred to in this study because instructional design terminology and instructional approaches have changed and evolved over the past couple of decades due to situational factors and varied perceptions among educators and instructional design professionals. “At almost all HEIs (424 higher education institutions in 109 different countries), COVID-19 affected teaching and learning, with two-thirds of them reporting that classroom teaching has been replaced by distance teaching and learning” (Marinoni, 2020, p. 2). The course delivery methods included in this study are face-to-face (F2F), online formats (both online synchronous and online asynchronous), and hybrid (blended) modalities.

F2F course delivery refers to the facilitation of classes in the traditional in-person format, where all scheduled class sessions occur in person and in a designated physical space (usually a classroom). Online course delivery refers to courses that take place on the computer, using the internet in some capacity, and are described either as fully synchronous or fully asynchronous (Hassan et al., 2021). Fully synchronous delivery

means that the class sessions take place live on the computer during the scheduled days/times so that the instructors and learners are logged in at the same time and can interact in real time within the specified digital space (i.e., web/video conferencing platform). On the other hand, asynchronous courses are designed for each student to work on the computer at their own pace and on their own time schedule (usually within a specified timeframe).

The hybrid, or blended, course delivery format leverages a combination of different methods, and most often occurs when educators offer online components that are intermixed with F2F delivery (Young & Bruce, 2020; Müller & Mildenberger, 2021; Rist, 2023). “Blended learning is a hybrid of classroom and online learning that includes some of the conveniences of online courses without the complete loss of face-to-face contact” (Rovai & Jordan, 2004, p. 1). A focus of this study is on overall well-being levels (subjective happiness and sense of belonging) among postsecondary learners, as well as hybrid modalities, with workforce development considerations when it comes to preparing college students to learn how to navigate growing trends within hybrid workspaces where working in a variety of hybrid modalities may be required and/or offered as opportunities within companies and organizations worldwide.

Significance of the Research

With the COVID-19 effects on higher education and college student overall well-being and satisfaction still not fully understood, additional research is needed for educators, leaders, and policymakers to better understand this phenomenon and work towards cultivating optimal postsecondary learning environments presently and into the

future. Further research on this topic is coveted to help bridge the gap between postsecondary coursework and preparing learners for the workforce (Edmondson & Matthews, 2021). A primary goal of this empirical research study is to investigate college students' academic experiences with working in the hybrid system and their attitudes toward it, in combination with overall well-being (subjective happiness and sense of belonging). Learning about how today's college students view physical and remote educational environments, as well as work-from-home practices, is a valuable approach for educators to design curricula when they better understand the experiences, needs, and expectations of today's learners from the student perspective (Eunhwa et al., 2021). This can help shed light on how instructional adjustments can be implemented to not only accommodate the needs of modern-day learners and support their academic success, but also to best prepare them for the workforce.

Uncovering the various experiences encountered after the onset of the worldwide health crisis from the traditional-aged college student vantage point can help educators and policymakers recognize how the pandemic effects have influenced learners' outlook on higher education. Examining past and current experiences can provide a better understanding of how students are affected during their college years and after graduation, as they move into their professional careers. It is important to produce timely empirical research on this ever-changing topic to discover and report meaningful insights to help guide policymakers in rebuilding and improving higher education opportunities, equity, and inclusion within the higher education system for current and future learners, who will become professional leaders of tomorrow.

Research Questions

1. What is the relationship between college students' self-reported happiness compared with their ideal method of course delivery in a traditional four-year residential university setting?
2. Have traditional-aged college students' perspectives/preferences about online education changed since before the COVID-19 pandemic?

Hypotheses

1. Most traditional-aged college students prefer the hybrid course delivery modality.
2. Hybrid course format is associated with higher levels of subjective well-being

Theoretical Frameworks and Relevant Literature

The theoretical framework of this study is largely based on Seligman's Well-Being Theory (WBT) and the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) framework.

Well-Being Theory (WBT)

The Well-Being Theory (WBT) is a framework that consists of five measurable dimensions (often referred to as PERMA), including positive emotion, engagement, positive relationships, meaning, and accomplishment (Seligman, 2011). "No one element defines well-being, but each contributes to it" (p. 24). Seligman (2011) further explains that a person who "flourishes" through the five pillars of PERMA (displaying positive emotions, being actively engaged, maintaining positive relationships, achieving meaning and purpose in life, and having goals and working toward achievements/accomplishments) is more likely to reach higher levels of positivity in their

everyday life and experience an optimal level of happiness/well-being than those with negative mindsets.

Positive Psychology and Well-Being/Happiness in Higher Education

Positive Psychology is a concept that centers around well-being and positivity. Although other traditional psychologists (such as Maslow) recognized that there should be more positive elements emphasized in the broader field of Psychology, Martin Seligman is the American psychologist who introduced this new science and coined it, "Positive Psychology" in the late 1990s (Bloom et al., 2013). Positive Psychology falls under the umbrella of Appreciative Education and leverages human strengths, nurturing positive thinking and emotional wellness that help to create a healthier balance and healthier goals. It encourages positive language while also acknowledging the reality of negative emotions.

People who are generally happier tend to be more motivated and involved than less happy people in nearly all aspects of life, including work, home, and within their communities (Meek et al., 2019, p. 3). This concept applies to individuals of all ages and in different life stages, including students of higher learning institutions. When college students have higher levels of well-being and subjective happiness, they are more likely to set goals and work toward accomplishing those goals; they also have higher retention rates of staying in college, and they increase their chances of achieving academic success. "In light of the pandemic, student recruitment and retention has become even more crucial in ensuring the traditional university model remains sustainable long-term and to compete as a university, it is essential that student satisfaction rates remain high" (Bashir

et al., 2021, p. 2). In higher education, professionals who work with students can adopt the Positive Psychology approach to cultivate positive emotions, to foster commitment for "happiness-generating" activities and reflect on positive emotions (and practice gratitude, leverage strengths, engage in service, etc.), emphasize possibilities over problems, inspire healthy goal setting, and encourage students' growth in various areas of their lives, and ultimately enhance quality of life and institutional environments and increase the likelihood of achieving at higher academic levels. (Mather, 2010). Institutions can leverage Positive Psychology techniques to not only be more student-centric, but also to promote more optimistic and effective environments throughout the enterprise among all constituents (such as students, faculty, and staff in HEIs).

Universal Design for Learning (UDL)

UDL is an adaptive framework that is designed to cultivate inclusive learning environments, make content more accessible, and maximize the acquisition and synthesis of knowledge according to how humans learn best regardless of individual abilities or needs (CAST, 2021). Universal Design for Instruction (UDI) is a framework that can be used by "faculty and future faculty at all stages of their careers, whether they are working as teaching assistants in their graduate training program or as assistant professors balancing the roles and responsibilities of teaching, research, and service" (Scott et al., 2003, p. 375). Numerous benefits and opportunities can come from leveraging the comprehensive UDL and UDI principles when designing and delivering higher education courses and programs.

Although the topics of "course delivery methods" and "inclusive education" have been deliberated in the literature quite extensively over the past couple decades, findings from the literature review suggest that more up-to-date empirical research is needed to better understand how the aftermath of COVID-19 has affected higher education services, stakeholders, and expectations as society at large transitions from the shorter-term pandemic phase into a prolonged endemic state. By combining various instructional theories and frameworks, pedagogical design and instructional delivery can be more customized to students, especially when students are viewed as partners in cooperative learning endeavors. In addition, effective use of technology to enhance instructional and learning outcomes can play a positive role in helping educators cultivate a student-centric academic environment. The student learning experience can be transformed in the physical classroom, as well as in the digital classroom, when student-centered, active, and experiential learning methods are embraced and actuated (Olugbenga, 2021). Technological tools can aid instructors in providing an array of educational formats and resources for students to learn course materials in ways that are most conducive to their individual learning styles and preferences.

The student-centric framework of UDL is designed to decrease academic obstacles and build community in more accommodating, accessible, holistic, and equitable ways to be more collaborative and inclusive of different learning styles, preferences, and wide-ranging abilities (Rogers-Shaw et al., 2018). In an empirical study conducted by Black et al. (2015, p. 1), "students with and without disabilities reported having a variety of learning preferences, and rated UDL/UDI principles as useful in

improving their learning." According to the International Association of Universities (IAU) Global Survey Report (2020), many higher education institutions from around the world viewed the swift transition from F2F to distance learning that was brought on by COVID-19 "as an important opportunity to learn from this exceptional situation and to propose more flexible learning possibilities, explore blended or hybrid learning and mixing synchronous learning with asynchronous learning" (Marinoni et al., 2020, p. 4). With UDL and UDI serving as the underpinning, this empirical research is strengthened and supported by the framework and ultimately aims to help unlock the now uncertain direction of higher education into the future.

Multimodal Course Delivery Formats

A large body of research exists in the literature regarding a multitude of benefits and drawbacks for various forms of course delivery (Gracyalny & Hurtienne, 2023; Imran et al., 2023; Jackson, 2014; Müller & Mildenberger, 2021; Patel-Junankar, 2017; Reigeluth et al., 2016; Scott et al., 2003; Whenham, 2021). Although online learning has been around for many years, it really became normalized after COVID-19 was announced, and a lot of people experienced online class for the first time. "No matter where we live in the world, as the pandemic hit each country, working from home for many people became a new normal" (Cooker et al., 2022, p. 2). Prior to Spring of 2020, it was less common for traditional-aged college students to enroll in fully online courses, and more common for non-traditional learners who were juggling full time jobs and families (Marcus, 2022).

The invention of the Internet and continually evolving technologies has led to a multitude of innovation and digitization this century, which have expanded upon the first three phases of the Industrial Revolution and advanced modern-day society to the next level. “Modern networked computing has changed everyday life and work, and these changes accelerate each year” (Davidson, 2017, p. 5). The higher education industry has experienced digitization in various capacities during the past couple of decades. As with just about anything new that emerges, there have been ample benefits gained from digital advancements, as well as a fair share of concerns and this is also true with online education. This review begins by first examining some advantages of online education and continues by exploring some shortcomings as well.

Benefits of Online Education

The Internet was initially made accessible to the public in April of 1993 (Davidson, 2017), and has exploded with exponential growth since that time. Online education has become progressively more widespread since the turn of the century. Nevertheless, the adoption rate of online learning soared to new heights out of necessity when COVID-19 began. “Nobody could have anticipated the acceleration in learning online driven by a global pandemic” (Chen et al., 2022, p. 2). Some of the many benefits of online education are discussed in the below paragraphs.

A few of the top advantages of online education for students include flexibility, convenience, choice, and accessibility. Recent research underpins the importance of some of these values from the perspectives of today’s Generation Z postsecondary students; when it comes to how they desire college courses to be delivered, most expect flexibility,

convenience, and choice (Rist, 2023). Additional benefits of online education for higher learners include personal growth and skill development in the areas of autonomy, self-discipline, organization, reflection, and self-analysis skills (Lozovoy & Zashchitina, 2019). Research has shown that digital learning can be especially helpful for individuals who have introverted personality types, who have demonstrated increased levels of learning outcomes compared to learning levels achieved with traditional F2F course delivery. Taking fully online courses offers learners an increased level of independence and the added benefits of flextime and flexplace, which often results in higher convenience and flexible scheduling, a more comfortable learning environment, and an increased cost-benefit ratio for going to college through saving time and money (Lozovoy & Zashchitina, 2019; Rist, 2023).

Online higher education learners typically have greater access to educational content that can be reviewed at an individualized preferred pace and reviewed multiple times to reinforce the knowledge and comprehension of the course material and concepts. Further beneficial elements of online education include having more widespread access to academic programs, rather than only those F2F programs available within limited geographical locations. Having access to a larger array of digital learning options provides access to more diverse populations, which results in higher education services being more inclusive and equitable.

Shortcomings of Online Education

Some of the top concerns/reservations of online education compared to traditional F2F learning include factors such as individual preparedness (such as self-motivation for

learners and technological savviness of faculty and wide-ranging levels self-discipline), decreased opportunities for socialization, reduced communication stream, and perceptions of digitized services being dehumanized and less personable. These issues were present prior to the pandemic and were highlighted at a larger scale after the pandemic came and there was a broad movement to learning in the online world.

The absence of physical interaction is another concern with online learning that can lead to less opportunities for socialization occurring in the college student's life. There is a strong social component embedded in environments of higher education institutions, which became much more apparent when people were forced to stay home during the quarantine period and isolated from others to minimize spreading of the highly contagious virus. The physical classroom setting is typically a more conducive atmosphere for students to meet other students with a higher potential of making friends, as opposed to in a fully online setting. According to a research study published in spring of 2023 at a Midwestern university, students indicated that meeting friends is a benefit to going to classes in person. "Social aspects associated with the collegiate learning experiences for traditional college students should still be considered when courses are delivered in an online and/or hybrid format" (Rist, 2023, p. 109). Opportunities for socialization, even within the higher education classroom realm, are especially important for most traditional college students.

In addition to less social interaction, another drawback of fully online courses for traditional-aged college students that was noted from survey results include less effective communication in which many students indicated a desire for increased in-person

interactions with peers and professors (Ghazi-Saidi et al., 2020). A faculty member's teaching and communication style can affect each individual learner's ability to stay on top of the learning activities or fall behind schedule and perform at a lower academic level. Less direct communication can also lead to feelings of loneliness and/or a disconnection from the instructor and peers.

Another notable shortcoming of online course delivery for some students is a perception of feeling lost or less supported when it comes to fully learning and conceptualizing course content, especially if there is little or no synchronous time with the instructor. Poor performance and/or malfunctions in the technology required for online education can be a barrier to successful learning outcomes as well. At the individual level, the lack of a structured schedule can be another disadvantage of fully online courses for some students, especially those with lower levels of autonomy and self-motivation. A drawback of online education for some learners is self-motivation, particularly for those who may have underdeveloped self-discipline skills (Lozovoy & Zashchitina, 2019).

Disruptive Innovation: Dragging Higher Education Into the 4IR

Undisputedly, the first three stages of the Industrial Revolution transformed modern society in life-altering ways. Originating with the development of machinery in 1760s, then continually scaling up the efficiency of manufacturing goods through the discovery of various types of power (steam engine, and eventually combustion engine power and electricity), technology, and the factory system, the three stages of the Industrial Revolution enabled humans to produce a higher volume of output than was

ever possible by hand (Britannica, 2022). This successfully resulted in economies of scale, increased profits/higher return on investment (ROI), a healthier economic balance between supply and demand levels, and ultimately expanded and diversified businesses/industries and the supply chain as we know it today. The transformations during the Industrial Revolution have altered the ways in which we live and work, making the leap from a traditional agricultural economy into a society that is dominated by commerce and mass production of goods (Xu et al., 2018).

The American academy has fundamentally remained the same for about half of the nineteenth century and the entire twentieth century. The foundation of the current (mainstream) educational system was reformed during the Industrial Revolution timeframe (from approximately 1860 to 1925) to fulfill learning and industrial needs of that time as society was transitioning to a manufacturing economy (Davidson, 2017). During the 1800s, the production of goods shifted from primarily handmade to machine made, which resulted in larger scale production and more efficient processes that allowed products to be sold at more affordable prices, etc. However, with the world changing so rapidly during the earlier years of the Industrial Revolution, and with the development of the assembly line, etc., there was an immense need for training to fill an educational gap for the circumstances of that time.

American higher education has been heavily influenced, and continues to be impacted, by the American Industrial Revolution. It is beneficial to study the history of the different phases of the Industrial Revolution and evaluate how the higher education industry is performing amid the current stage of the Industrial Revolution. Considering

the effects that the COVID-19 global viral pandemic has had on adopting innovative practices at the most expeditious pace in the history of higher education, this is an opportune time for systemic reform to occur within the higher education industry in the era of the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR). Importantly, examining this topic can provide a better understanding, and help inform higher education stakeholders, of how COVID-19 pandemic effects are driving much-needed change, potentially "dragging" higher education institutions into the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) and soon into the Fifth Industrial Revolution (5IR).

When reflecting on the early days of the COVID-19 emergency, it is nearly unfathomable how quickly change was implemented broadly across the nation and globe; not only did educational enterprises shift to online modalities, but they also made significant alterations to instructional practices, adjusted academic calendars, recreated assignments and assessments, entertained alternative grading approaches and more. "Faculty, staff, administrators, students, and students' families turned everything upside down and inside out in a matter of weeks" (Davidson, 2022, p. ix). This is concrete evidence that, despite this seemingly impossible prior to March of 2020, higher education institutions and their stakeholders are more than capable of change and innovation. "Now the question is, how much of what we changed will remain?" (Davidson, 2022, p. ix). With the connected nature of HEIs, there are endless possibilities and a multitude of opportunities available if leaders and stakeholders would work together to strategize and institute much-needed reform in the academy for the modern learners of our time amid the fourth and fifth industrial revolutionary timeframe.

The educational system as we know it is long overdue for another overhaul for our present time with it having been in place for a century-and-a-half. It needs to have a more contemporary design to not only accommodate the digital age but to embrace it and leverage technology in meaningful ways to improve the learning experience, to enhance teaching and learning outcomes, and to help present-day students thrive in the world in which they live today. “We need individuals and institutions to work together to rejuvenate an antiquated system for our accelerating times and to ensure that the solutions we craft address the real problems rather than just generating new ones” (Davidson, 2017, p. 248). Some stakeholders of educational institutions at various levels are starting to head in the direction of reshaping, redefining, and redesigning the educational infrastructure to work toward modernizing academic institutions and programs/courses and move forward by leveraging technological tools more and by creating and implementing innovative pedagogical approaches, such as the Learner-Centered Education (LCE) paradigm. Many advancements occurred practically overnight during the spring of 2020 out of necessity, instigated by the COVID-19 global viral pandemic. The more that these efforts are put into action, the more progress our society will make toward continual progress to work toward modernizing the educational system for our era and beyond.

Currently amid the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR), and quickly approaching the gateway into the Fifth Industrial Revolution (5IR), technological advances are continuously being made at lightning-fast paces that are “characterized by a fusion of technologies that is blurring the lines between the physical, digital, and biological

spheres" (Xu et al., 2018, p. 91). There are more ways to communicate and further innovative opportunities than ever before in this current stage of the industrial revolution series. The Fourth Industrial Revolution concept was initially described by Klaus Schwab, who explained that it was uncertain exactly how the 4IR would unfold, but "one thing is clear: the response to it must be integrated and comprehensive, involving all stakeholders of the global polity, from the public and private sectors to academia and civil society" (Schwab, 2016, para. 1). The 4IR was also described as evolving at a faster pace and bringing with it more disruptive innovation than previous phases of the Industrial Revolution.

Although college courses were delivered in online formats long before 2020, it was a much lower percentage; a vast majority of professors lacked skills and experience with online instruction. According to a study published by Martin et al. (2019), six months prior to COVID-19 being declared as a worldwide pandemic, several HEIs used a readiness instrument to evaluate faculty readiness to instruct online; however, most of the instruments had not been systematically studied or tested through empirical observations. "An important finding from the study is that the competencies that faculty perceive as most important in all competency areas differ from the top competencies that faculty believe they can perform" (Martin et al., 2019, p. 111). Additional findings from the study suggested that instructors with little or no online teaching experience had diminished faith in their own competencies to provide educational services in a digital setting as compared to their more experienced colleagues with more than five years of experience. Most college and university instructors have not had formal education or

formal training and mostly rely on their own encounters as a student and their own experiences teaching F2F courses (Martin et al., 2019). The occurrence of COVID-19 and what unfolded as educators had to quickly shift to ERT practices online is proof of how much more resilient and agile people are to change, especially when faced with extreme circumstances to act swiftly under high pressure and short timelines.

Despite the topic of online and blended education being a highly discussed topic even before the occurrence of the COVID-19 disruption, educators were not doing enough to keep up with learners' needs and expectations. Back in 2014, Jackson argued that the methods in which courses are delivered should change and evolve in alignment with students' familiarity and adaptations to technology advancements, and flexibility is the key to reaching students effectively. Jackson's points are even more relevant today. Considering the changing landscapes of higher education and the workplace, actively garnering the student stakeholder perspectives in how they take college courses is paramount in protecting and sustaining the higher education sector and preparing learners for the workforce.

Intentionally Redesigning the Academy for the 4IR and 5IR

There have been many speculations made about what the destiny of higher education institutions will be moving forward beyond the COVID-19 pandemic era. While there is a wealth of knowledge that can (and should) be learned and applied from the digital education alterations that were instituted broadly and reactionary during the pandemic, there are some common themes that emerged, as well as some conflicting information. With different colleges and universities having unique attributes and diverse

demographics, intentionally designing pedagogies for learning for The Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) and Fifth Industrial Revolution (5IR) is not a one size fits all solution. Instead, this is our big chance to further build upon the rock-solid foundation of higher education and intentionally realign higher education, by design.

Using a collective approach, and consistently seeking ongoing feedback from our learners, we can more effectively move higher education institutions in 4IR and into the 5IR. In addition, acknowledging the COVID-19 pandemic aftermath in our communities is not enough. With the education system being one of the major pillars of modern society (Lozovoy & Zashchitina, 2019), humanity is counting on HEIs to further help navigate through the many challenges that have been brought on by the pandemic. "Higher education can add momentum by renewing our commitment to academic freedom, institutional autonomy and engagement by students, faculty and staff, and by re-emphasizing the role of higher education institutions as societal actors for the public good" (Bergan et al., 2021, p. 21). This is an opportunity, a call to action, for the higher education industry to collectively lead the positive change needed in the world to be more inclusive, equitable, and socially responsible.

As suggested by a national study conducted and reported in 2020, perceptions of online education among most traditional college-aged students were relatively negative or non-existent before the onset of the COVID-19 global pandemic (Means et al., 2020). The quantitative data collection process for this study took place in the spring of 2020 after the pandemic started. There were 1,008 survey respondents who were traditional college students enrolled in F2F courses and experienced the radical shift to online

learning for the latter half of the semester. Research conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic suggests that a high percentage of college students desire a hybrid mix for most of their classes. The benefits of effective communication, as well as a more interactive social component, were noted from survey results regarding F2F class sessions in which many students indicated a desire for increased in-person interactions with peers and professors (Ghazi-Saidi et al., 2020).

According to recent research results from a quantitative study published by Wiley in 2024 with a sample size of over 2,500 learners across the continent of North America, a large percentage of today's college students (over 80%) are battling mental health issues, and most (over 50%) are also voicing strong preferences for a more hybrid courses. "The hybrid format offers students the flexibility that they want, while also allowing for more engagement and making it easier to learn the material" (Wiley, 2024, p. 7). According to this study, nearly half (47%) of college students like opportunities to work at their own pace, and about a quarter (23%) believe that a hybrid flexible educational model has a positive effect on their mental health.

The results of a national survey conducted in 2021, which included nearly 1,500 students, revealed that 68% of college students would like to take hybrid college courses that are delivered with a blend of online and F2F modes (McKenzie, 2021). Similarly, another empirical study, which included 351 undergraduate learners, found that prior to the pandemic, 41.2% reported being unhappy about online learning (Rist, 2023). Furthermore, students adjusted to online education as the pandemic continued, and faculty acclimated and improved as well; 18% of the respondents reported being happier

about digital learning as they gained more first-hand experiences with it. According to this data, some postsecondary learners have developed a more positive mindset regarding online delivery of college courses than they had before the pandemic started. The data for the study were collected throughout the year in 2021 and early in 2022, yielding a total of 339 college students; the findings revealed that 69.91% (237 respondents) desired hybrid course delivery as their top preference for taking college classes (Rist, 2023). More specifically, a popular hybrid format preference, as reported by the postsecondary learners who participated in this research, is for about half of college class sessions to be offered face-to-face (F2F) and the other half occurring on the computer in some capacity (asynchronous and/or synchronous format).

With the transition of COVID-19 shifting from a pandemic period into an endemic stage, higher education institutions are wise to consider continuous improvement opportunities for course design and delivery to implement effective strategies to best meet the ever-changing needs and preferences of college student stakeholders. “This generation of college students desire more flexibility, convenience, and choice regarding how their higher education services are delivered” (Rist, 2023, p. 112). According to Jones and Graham (2013), leveraging various technologies and a mix of learning methods can lead to a successful online class. Moving forward, it will be advantageous to ask for student feedback to continually improve the teaching and learning outcomes, to view students as important stakeholders of the institution, and to offer more flexibility, choice, and inclusive access to learners during their higher education journey. “Use of systems that integrate accessibility options is very much in

line with the concepts and principles of UDL" (Dalton et al., 2019, p. 5). Adapting to our student stakeholders is a key factor in offering strong pedagogies using multiple platforms and providing additional resources to accommodate unique learning preferences.

A top theme that emerged from a study that was administered at a higher education institution in mid-2020 during the pandemic was an increased demand for more support in the future, which suggested "the need for academics to continue to take a pragmatic approach; the need for exemplars, demonstrations of best practice, and practical guidance on how to construct suitable teaching units that combine face-to-face and online delivery" (Goria, 2021). This is one action-research study that helped to reveal findings that would not only help inform and guide HEIs into the next phase of the pandemic, but which can also aid in the next evolution of higher education services into 4IR.

By using a combination of multiple-delivery modes, capitalizing on effective traditional methods, and utilizing emerging technologies, higher education institutions have the capability to increase flexibility and individualization, rebuilding higher learning through developing dynamic and sustainable strategies and purposefully designing more inclusive, interactive, and experiential courses. This motivational energy can be used to intentionally optimize course design and raise postsecondary pedagogies to higher levels than ever before in the 4IR and into the 5IR.

Methodology

This study was designed and executed using a quantitative approach with the following categorical variables comprising the independent variables: 1) students' self-reported ideal course delivery format, 2) students' perspectives of online education before, amid, and after the COVID-19 pandemic, and 3) demographic variables. The subjective well-being variables served as the dependent variables in this study, leveraging the validated scale Subjective Happiness Scale (SHS). The relationship between and among variables were examined.

Sample

The sample size of this quantitative study consisted of 926 survey respondents within the Generation Z population of traditional-aged undergraduate college students, and most (78%) were Business majors. Over two-thirds (69%) of the learners in this sample were upperclassmen (juniors and seniors). The sampling technique of convenience was used to recruit research participants on a voluntary basis. All participants who signed up for the study were enrolled in at least one Marketing course at a university in the midwestern region of the United States of America in 2023.

Quantitative Design and Data Collection Procedures

An online survey link was made available to traditional-aged college students on a digital research participation system. Undergraduate students enrolled in a marketing course could then voluntarily complete the survey in exchange for an opportunity to earn a small percentage of class credit in one of the participating courses. The Subjective Happiness Scale (SHS) research instrument was used as the positive psychological well-

being construct to measure happiness via four survey questions with indicator statements based on a seven-point Likert scale (Lyubomirsky & Lepper, 1999). The Likert scale response choices range from one to seven, with the first option of "one" indicating the lowest agreement/happiness level, the middle option of "four" representing a neutral score, and the last option of "seven" signifying the highest agreement/happiness level. The following Subjective Happiness questions were part of the survey:

1. In general, how happy of a person do you consider yourself?
2. Compared with most of your peers, how happy do you consider yourself?
3. Some people are generally very happy. They enjoy life regardless of what is going on, getting the most out of everything. To what extent does this characterization describe you?
4. Some people are generally not very happy. Although they are not depressed, they never seem as happy as they might be. To what extent does this characterization describe you?

Quantitative Data Analysis

In addition to general descriptive statistics, chi-square tests of independence and paired samples contingency tests were run using the jamovi statistical software program to understand the relationship between variables. Demographic and correlation analyses, as well as t-tests, were also performed in the statistics computer program.

Ideal-Post-COVID	Counts	% of Total	Cumulative %
1: Online Asynchronous	95	10.259 %	10.259 %
2: Online Synchronous	23	2.484 %	12.743 %
3: Hybrid (combination of online/F2F)	328	35.421 %	48.164 %
4: Hybrid Flexible (virtual and F2F)	232	25.054 %	73.218 %
5: F2F (100% in person classes)	240	25.918 %	99.136 %
6: Other	3	0.324 %	99.460 %
7: Unsure or prefer not to answer	5	0.540 %	100.000 %

Figure 1.

Frequencies of Post-COVID Ideal Course Delivery Format Independent Variable

Measure	12.7% prefer **Online**	60.5% prefer **Hybrid**	25.9.7% prefer **F2F**	0.3% prefer **Other**	0.5% were **Unsure**
SHS1					
Not happy	1.6%	4.97%	2.3%	0.1%	0%
Neutral	1.2%	5.62%	1.9%	0%	0.3%
Happy	9.9%	**49.9%**	21.7%	0.2%	0.2%
Total: 100%	*12.74%*	*60.48%*	*25.91%*	*0.3%*	*0.5%*

n = 926

Figure 2.

Paired Samples Contingency Tables Analysis for Subjective Happiness (SHS1) Dependent Variable and Ideal Course Delivery Format Independent Variable

Discussion of Results

A noteworthy consideration regarding the demographic descriptive statistics of this data set is that 78% of the learners were part of the College of Business, with 69% of the research participants being in their junior or senior year of college. The statistical results provide meaningful insights that confirm the first hypothesis that most traditional-aged college students from this data set prefer their courses to be instructed using a hybrid format. Specifically, the quantitative research results revealed that 61% of the learners in this sample of the population prefer to take college courses in a hybrid (or hybrid flexible) modality. The second most popular response was F2F, with 25.9% of the research participants indicating their ideal way of taking college courses is completely in person. The least ideal course delivery format reported was online synchronous (2.5%), followed by online asynchronous with only 10.3% of the respondents preferring that format. Table 3 (Appendix) depicts the data of how students reported their ideal way of taking postsecondary courses.

A paired samples contingency analysis was run using a statistical computer software program to understand the relationship between the subjective happiness and ideal course delivery variables. This analysis confirms the second hypothesis that hybrid course delivery format is indeed associated with higher levels of subjective well-being. Specifically, half (49.9%) of the total research participants who reported hybrid as their ideal course delivery mode (60.5%) are also happy individuals in general; this is the highest level of subjective happiness reported in the sample of the population. Less than 5% of those who prefer hybrid instruction self-reported being generally less happy

individuals. The second happiest group at 21.7% reported F2F courses as their ideal way of taking college courses, with only 2.3% of the responses indicated that they are generally less happy in life. Table 4 (Appendix) provides the results of the paired samples contingency analysis displays more details regarding the association between the first subjective happiness scale variable (SHS1) and ideal course delivery categorical variable.

A chi-square test of independence (Independent Samples X2 Test of Association) was also run in the statistical software program to analyze the data between the ideal course delivery categorical variable and all four subjective happiness scale variables. There was a strong statistical significance between the SHS1 variable and the ideal course delivery variable, as well as between the SHS3 variable and the ideal course delivery variable, with the p-values significantly less than 0.05. There was also a statistically significant association between the SHS2 variable. There was not a statistically significant relationship found between the SHS4 variable and the ideal course delivery variable (p-value above 0.05), which is logical with the reversed nature of the question.

Renewed Perspectives Toward Online Education

After the COVID-19 pandemic started in spring of 2020, and the switch from predominantly F2F college courses to online happened, many students' perceptions began to shift as they gained experience with different course delivery modalities. The data from this research uncovers that only a quarter of the research participants had positive sentiments, with most college students (75%) reporting negative or neutral

feelings, about the idea of taking postsecondary courses in the digital realm when they reflected on the timeframe before March of 2020.

More specifically, of the college students who participated in this research study, 44% reported that they were not happy about the idea of taking college classes on the computer in some capacity prior to the occurrence of the COVID-19 pandemic. Another 31% of the research participants were neutral on the topic, revealing that they were neither happy nor unhappy about it, or that they had not considered it at all in pre-pandemic times. The remaining 25% indicated that they were slightly, moderately, or very happy about the idea of taking postsecondary courses in the digital realm prior to March 2020 when the pandemic began.

When asked how they generally felt about online education (taking classes in some capacity on the computer, such as online/virtual/remote) in after the pandemic, there was a notable difference in perspectives, according to the empirical data of this quantitative study. The descriptive statistical results reveal that there was nearly an exact reversal in shifting perspectives, where only one-fourth (25%) of this sample of the population indicated not being very happy about online education and three-fourths (75%) reporting that they felt happy or neutral about taking college courses in the virtual realm after the pandemic abated and classroom instruction again became an option.

Shifting Preferences for Hybrid Course Delivery

As discussed above, the results of this study suggest that there has been a shift in how Generation Z college students perceive online education, according to this research, and changes reported by most of the students regarding how they feel about online

education after the pandemic and after having first-hand experiences with taking classes on the computer. A large body of research exists in the literature regarding a multitude of benefits and drawbacks for various forms of course delivery. Modern research is increasingly suggesting that most Gen Z students are shifting their preferences to desiring their higher education classes to be instructed in a hybrid/HyFlex format, no longer preferring traditional 100% in-person course delivery in college; however, many do recognize and appreciate various benefits that are derived from F2F class sessions. Similarly, today's traditional college students enjoy the convenience, flexibility, and choice offered by online courses, despite some limitations of online education. Therefore, it is logical that newer research is revealing that a growing number of higher education learners across the globe desire a healthy blend of the two.

Recommendations and Conclusion

Future Research

It is recommended that further empirical research be conducted in the future, preferably with larger samples of the population, to understand the rapidly changing landscape of higher education and how to best meet the needs of current and future college students. In addition to using quantitative methods, deeper exploration leveraging qualitative and/or mixed methods would be valuable to combine analytical rigor with rich descriptions to collect more specific information and better grasp the hybrid learning experience from the student perspective. It would be advantageous for this research to be repeated on a wider range of the various micro demographics of the larger college student

population, such as to include more first-year and second-year traditional-aged college students, as well as non-traditional students and graduate students.

Conclusion

The declaration of the COVID-19 global viral pandemic catalyzed change worldwide and revolutionized educational course delivery on an amplified scale across the globe. “Lessons learned by institutions and student experiences of remote delivery during the pandemic will shape students’ future expectations of learning, teaching and assessments, emphasizing the need for universities to focus on their unique selling points in a competitive market” (Bashir et al., 2021, p. 2). Higher education stakeholders and policy makers should take proactive measures to not simply react to the past and present challenges from the pandemic crisis, but moreover to be intentional with addressing current and future needs.

Students are valuable stakeholders in the higher education sector, and their feedback should be garnered to understand their preferences regarding how academic courses are delivered. The results from this research align with other recent research, suggesting that over half of today’s college students are voicing strong preferences for more courses in hybrid format that offers greater flexibility, allows for active engagement, provides greater access to resources, and increases student satisfaction (Krisna, 2024; Rist, 2023; Wiley, 2024). Being open to listening to the learners that HEIs serve is vital to maintaining healthy enrollment numbers, increasing retention rates, creating competitive advantages, cultivating more dynamic learning spaces, and providing flexibility and options to best serve learners of higher education.

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Appendix

Table 3. Results of the Chi-square Test of Independence between the SHS1 and Ideal Course Format variables

Contingency Tables / Independent Samples X^2 Test of Association

SHS1	Ideal-Post-COVID							Total
	1: ONL-A	2: ONL-S	3: Hybrid	4: HyFlex	5: F2F	6: Other	7: Unsure	
1: Not a very happy person	1	0	0	1	1	0	0	3
2: Moderately unhappy	4	0	3	4	8	1	0	20
3: Slightly unhappy	9	1	21	17	12	0	0	60
4: Neutral	6	5	31	21	18	0	3	84
5: Slightly happy	21	6	67	34	37	0	2	167
6: Moderately happy	41	10	172	134	119	2	0	478
7: A very happy person	13	1	34	21	45	0	0	114
Total	95	23	328	232	240	3	5	926

χ^2 Tests

	Value	Df	p
χ^2	72.774	36	0.00028
N	926		

Table 4. Paired Samples t Test Results for SHS1 and Online/Hybrid Education Sentiments

Paired Samples T-Test

			Statistic	Df	p	Mean difference	SE difference
SHS1	Three-Online Post-COVID	Student's t	15.833	925.00	< .00001	0.99784	0.063022

Note. H_a $\mu_{\text{Measure 1 - Measure 2}} \neq 0$

Descriptives

	N	Mean	Median	SD	SE
SHS1	926	5.4644	6.0000	1.1792	0.038752
Three-Online Post-COVID	926	4.4665	5.0000	1.6049	0.052740

Table 5. One-Sample t Test Results for Online Education Sentiments

Sentiments of Online Education		***M***	***df***
Online Pre-COVID (1)	Student's t	3.54	925
Online Amid-COVID (2)	Student's t	4.21	925
Online Post-COVID (3)	Student's t	4.47	925

* $p < .00001$ (n=926)

Chapter 3 (Article 2): Experiential Pedagogies and College Student Well-Being in Marketing Education with Lasting Effects on Work Modalities

Abstract

Purpose

The purpose of this study is to explore well-being levels and work modality perspectives of Generation Z traditional-aged college students, which may affect future workforce preparedness.

Design/Methodology

A quantitative study was conducted with 926 research participants. Each survey respondent was enrolled in at least one university-level marketing course when the data was collected.

Key Findings

Students who engage in positivity practices report lower occurrences of stress and are happier. Hybrid is the most popular course format among college students. A positive association exists between the hybrid format and higher subjective happiness levels.

Originality

Results from this quantitative study share new contributions to the higher education literature that shed light on progressive pedagogical practices and student well-being that can enhance teaching and learning outcomes, based on experiential learning and preparation for the modern workplace.

Keywords

Well-being, Hybrid, Experiential learning, Adaptability, Positivity Practices, Stress, Workforce preparedness

The Z-Shift

The COVID-19 pandemic not only sparked change on a global scale regarding how courses are delivered overall, but recent research also suggests that it has begun to shift a large majority of college students' preferences and expectations for how they desire higher education to be offered. "Reflecting back and looking to the future, it appears the nature of learning and teaching is starting to shift" (Cooker et al., 2022, p. xi). The role of higher education is fundamentally critical in our world, as are the opportunities and call to action to evolve the academy. We may not be able to solve a massive systemic problem overnight; however, we can work to make strides toward improving and redesigning the higher education system to better align with modern times for a more hopeful and flexible future.

Further empirical research will continue to help educators and leaders of higher learning institutions to better understand the rapidly changing landscape of higher education and how to best meet the needs of modern society and current and future college students. According to recent post-pandemic research studies, the findings have already started suggesting that most Gen Z students have shifted their preferences for college classes to be instructed in a hybrid format. Many of today's postsecondary learners enjoy the convenience, flexibility, and choice offered by online courses, despite some limitations of online education; at the same time, many traditional-aged college students appreciate the various benefits that are derived from some face-to-face (F2F) interactions during in-person class sessions. Therefore, it is logical that newer research results show that a growing number of higher education learners across the globe desire a healthy blend of the two.

In an effort to develop a more contemporary and sustainable model, higher education stakeholders and leaders should continually reflect inward and backward to learn from the experiences and trends that occurred after the COVID-19 global pandemic began to make future improvements. This includes reevaluating the ways in which college courses are delivered and how learners can be best supported and prepared for the workforce, and ultimately contribute effectively to society at large. “The new education must prepare our students to thrive in a world of flux, to be ready no matter what comes next” (Davidson, 2017, p. 255). College students are important stakeholders in higher education and should be provided with a platform to express their voices and preferences to help shape higher education's future.

A Surge in Hybrid Work Experiences

The onset of the COVID-19 global viral pandemic served as a catalyst for expanding ways in which people work, including changes in the workplace and the ways in which learners of higher education acquire knowledge and skills. This rapid change took place on a large scale in March of 2020 around the world out of necessity after the COVID-19 pandemic began. Lockdown mandates were enacted to reduce the spread of the highly contagious and dangerous virus; this included people in the workforce altering how and where they worked to maintain business continuity, as well as educators converting traditional face-to-face (F2F) courses to digital learning spaces to maintain academic continuity. Nearly all in-person courses worldwide had to be shifted to online formats in spring of 2020. This monumental undertaking was eye-opening for the higher education community and the business world, and it coerced those who had previously

resisted change to become more innovative, learn new skills, and adapt to modern times. There was exponential growth in the number of people who shifted to virtual and hybrid work modalities worldwide.

A Surge in Mental Health Challenges

Data around heightened patterns of mental wellness difficulties is being observed, captured through research, synthesized, and published in the literature showing even more alarming rates than research revealed before the pandemic began (Colby, 2024). Recent research findings suggest that there is a mix of factors that affect overall well-being, and that college students have been struggling mightily with mental health issues more than ever before, in the post-pandemic era. “This is having a direct impact on their educational challenges and preferences, with an increased need for hybrid methods of learning” (Wiley, 2024, p. 3). Research has linked positivity practices with lower stress levels, which is also linked to improved overall health and quality of life. Higher levels of stress are shown to increase inflammation in the body; stress is linked with higher rates of mental health challenges (e.g., depression) and inflammation is associated with increased physical health issues such as chronic illnesses (e.g., autoimmune diseases, cardiovascular disease, upper respiratory infections, etc.) (Cohen et al., 2012). “Psychological stress occurs when an individual perceives that environmental demands tax or exceed his or her adaptive capacity” (Cohen et al., 2007). Depression is associated with stressful life occurrences, and stress in general has been shown to be a predictor of depression (Cohen et al., 2007).

In a recent study conducted during the COVID-19 global viral pandemic, a group of researchers set out to assess the relationship between positivity attitudes and stress, as well as other factors such as anxiety and depression, among over two thousand university students (Ocal et al., 2022). They found that "the risk of showing stress symptoms increases as the positivity attitude decreases" (p. 1578). Furthermore, research results from a 6-week Positivity Study completed in 2019 suggest that when individuals incorporate positivity practices (i.e., yoga, positive visualizations, expressions of gratitude) into their lives regularly, life satisfaction levels increase and physical health (blood sugar levels and markers of cardiovascular inflammation) improves (Lord et al., 2019).

With Great Adversity Comes Great Value-Creation Opportunity

The Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus brought with it great adversity on a multitude of levels that people and organizations have had to cope with and are still learning how to overcome. The countless challenges, ranging from health issues to heartbreak and loss to economic hardships, etc., that were caused by the pandemic disruptions have resulted in implications and issues that modern society will likely continue to grapple with for years to come. By acknowledging and understanding the evolving landscape of work in this post-pandemic times, there may be a potential silver lining amid the swelling cloud of great adversity. With a cultural shift in demand for better work-life balance happening on a broad scale (national and global level), it is important for the leaders of the collective higher education system to recognize that we are amidst a great value-creation opportunity for the higher education

sector and for society at large. A huge social responsibility of higher education is workforce preparedness, and now learning how to operate well in flexible environments is part of that responsibility. Leaders in industry are redefining and sharing mission-critical values and designing successful hybrid cultures with intentionality; a key component to building and implementing effective hybrid structures is to not only offer people flexibility, but also to help individuals feel connected and aligned with the organization's vision and culture (Ekelman & Kantor, 2023). By learning how to work differently, embracing agility and adaptability, and being intentional about rebalancing lives by working smarter and better, the quality of lives for the holistic individual can be improved, and the trickle-effect would undoubtedly have positive ramifications for organizations and our broader society.

Furthermore, in higher education it is vital that we listen to the students we serve to maintain healthy enrollment numbers, increase retention rates, create competitive advantages, cultivate more dynamic learning spaces, and provide flexibility and options to best serve our students and society. "To revolutionize the university, we don't just need a model; we need a movement" (Davidson, 2017, p. 13). College and university stakeholders and policy makers must take proactive measures to not simply react to the past and present challenges that we have been thrusted into from the pandemic crisis, but moreover to proactively address current and future needs. This is a great opportunity to create value and intentionally redesign higher education for the era of the fourth and fifth stages of the Industrial Revolution.

Defining Instructional Delivery Formats

The face-to-face (F2F) format refers to the traditional course delivery method where students attend all scheduled class sessions in person, in a designated physical space (i.e., a classroom). Online education takes place fully on the computer, in some capacity, with courses typically offered in one of two ways: synchronous or asynchronous. Synchronous online courses are designed and delivered to occur online with the students and instructor interacting in real time on the internet via a virtual web conferencing platform (e.g., Zoom, Microsoft Teams) during designated, predetermined times. Online synchronous courses can offer opportunities for increased student engagement, when compared to asynchronous courses, because the students and instructor can engage in live, just-in-time conversations by talking with one another (through the microphone and chat functions) and seeing each other (when participants turn on their cameras); therefore, synchronous class sessions can be more like in-person class sessions than asynchronous delivery. “Student engagement increases student satisfaction, enhances student motivation to learn, reduces the sense of isolation, and improves student performance in online courses” (Martin & Bolliger, 2018, p. 205). The delivery of asynchronous courses is when all classes are online and not at the same time. In the asynchronous online format, the instructor usually assigns work for students to complete on the computer at their own pace so that the instructor and the students engage with the course content at different times and from different locations.

Hybrid learning is a course delivery method that combines ideal elements of online learning with the best components of traditional F2F learning to provide

educational content. “Hybrid refers to teaching that is roughly balanced between its two formats (think 50/50)” (Mumu & Chowdhury, 2023, p. 2). There are ample opportunities, using various combinations, for educators to blend the content delivery modalities to achieve a healthy balance that works best for their courses and the specific students they serve in each class. According to the results of a recent study conducted by Ma & Lee (2021), students who participated in hybrid learning were more engaged, confident, and satisfied versus those who received the course content fully online. The hybrid learning model, especially when well-designed with the intentions of enhancing learning and teaching outcomes in the course, can be a valuable course delivery strategy to engage learners more effectively by appealing to a wider range of learning preferences, increasing inclusivity and equity, cultivating community, and encouraging thoughtful knowledge acquisition and synthesis.

Significance of the Research

There are new ways of working and schooling now that we are in the fourth stage of the Industrial Revolution, and as society begins moving into the fifth phase of the Industrial Revolution. In addition to technological advancements being made in society through the evolution of the Industrial Revolution, the progress of hybrid education has been expedited especially in the recent few years from the COVID-19 pandemic period when there was a substantial surge in people working and learning in hybrid modalities. This resulted in a collective societal shift as people experienced working remotely and in hybrid formats, and therefore started thinking differently as many viewpoints shifted on the topic.

In addition, with positive mindsets and positivity practices being shown to reduce stress levels and bolster overall health and quality of life, the topic of well-being is important to consider for college students during a pivotal time in their lives when they are entering adulthood and establishing their independence. “People who have the most positive emotion, the most engagement, and the most meaning in life are the happiest, and they have the most life satisfaction" (Seligman, 2011, p. 15). Individuals have a higher likelihood of preventing unhealthy levels of anxiety and depression when they are filled with higher levels of positive emotion and maintain healthy levels of subjective happiness. This is a key factor for many students to adjust socially and succeed academically.

Although similar research has been conducted prior to COVID-19, there is less research in the literature on this topic since March of 2020. This is an especially timely topic due to the mental health crisis elevating drastically in the past few years, and it is helpful to examine the relationships between the variables with so many changes occurring in higher education and overall society since the COVID-19 pandemic began.

Research Questions

1. How do stress levels and positivity practices relate to subjective happiness?
2. How do learners of higher education institutions prefer to take classes? How do experiences with hybrid work structures in college compare with settings in the workforce?

Hypothesis

1. College students who engage in positivity practices will report lower occurrences of stress and higher subjective happiness levels.

Theoretical Frameworks and Relevant Literature

This study leverages elements from the following models/theoretical frameworks: Appreciative Education, Positive Psychology, the Well-Being Theory, PERMA, and Haidt's Happiness Hypothesis.

Appreciative Education

Appreciative Education (AE) is a theoretical framework that can be applied to educational practices with the goal of improving effectiveness at both the individual and institutional levels. AE considers what resources and assets are already present in individuals and organizations, and then seeks out possible solutions to leverage good out of what is already available by providing guidance to professionals to help students as best as possible and to keep the best interest of students as a top priority.

Positive Psychology

The field of Positive Psychology is valuable to help bring to light human and institutional strengths and potential, as well as how people can live more meaningfully and foster more positive mindsets (Bloom et al., 2013). Positive Psychology compliments traditional Psychology and can result in opportunities for humans to lead higher quality lives and increase their well-being (happiness) levels. It highlights possibilities and potential, rather than shortcomings, to bring out the best in people and organizations to foster thriving in human beings and institutions.

The Well-Being Theory (WBT) and the PERMA Model

The PERMA model is part of Seligman's Well-Being Theory (2011) and consists of the following measurable elements: positive emotion (P), engagement (E), relationships (R), meaning (M), and accomplishment (A). These individual elements of PERMA work in conjunction to form a hierarchical structure in the multidimensional Well-Being Theory (WBT) that can serve as an indicator of how groups and organizations may flourish (Coffey et al., 2016). Individuals who flourish through the five pillars of PERMA (displaying positive emotions, being actively engaged, maintaining positive relationships, achieving meaning and purpose in life, and having goals and working toward achievements/accomplishments) are more likely to reach higher levels of positivity in their everyday life and thus experience an optimal level of happiness/well-being than those with negative mindsets.

When elements of PERMA are implemented, more "human flourishing" can be experienced (Seligman, 2011). Therefore, higher education institutions can foster wealthier, healthier, happier environments with less stress/anxiety/depression. Moreover, students, faculty and staff can experience more positive emotions, more active engagement with each other and content being taught and learned, better relationships with one another and among groups, more meaning and purpose in life and in the learning process, and more positive accomplishments.

Haidt's Happiness Hypothesis

Haidt (2006) asserts that humans' brains are adaptable to changing conditions to a certain degree, but not so sensitive to changes at absolute levels. When discussing the

pursuit of happiness, Haidt addresses various types of conditions, introduces the "Happiness Formula," and emphasizes the importance of finding flow and maintaining it to increase and sustain happiness levels. Although there are some things that cannot be changed (e.g., external conditions like race, age, etc.), there are many conditions and voluntary activities described in the Happiness Formula that can be changed (e.g., marital status, geographical location of residence, meditation, exercising, vacationing, learning new skills, etc.). The keys to finding and sustaining flow that Haidt reveals are embedded in the Positive Psychology framework, especially elements pertaining to positive emotion and engagement (finding something that one is interested in, challenged by, and engaged positively in), as well as leveraging strengths to meet the challenge and find meaning and purpose in the results.

Subjective Happiness/Well-being

For the purposes of this study, subjective wellbeing and subjective happiness are used interchangeably. "Happiness, therefore, according to the positive psychology movement, includes a deep experience of well-being, vitality, and meaningfulness" (Mather, 2010, p. 160). Subjective happiness is a subjective evaluation of whether someone is a happy person overall or if the individual is generally unhappy (Lyubomirsky & Lepper,1999). The process of measuring overall subjective happiness/well-being in individuals relies heavily on self-reporting.

Well-being levels and the process of learning are closely connected. Learning is enhanced amid positive learning spaces, and learning can cultivate higher levels of well-being and happiness. "The well-being movement emerged at least in part from a focus on

problems, barriers to student success and institutional health" (Colby, 2020, p. 22). It has been proven that when positive psychology techniques have been taught in educational institutions, depression and anxiety rates are greatly reduced.

Learner-Centered Education (LCE)

The Learner-Centered Education (LCE) model helps educators shift the focus from teacher-centered to a learner-centered instructional approach. In the LCE paradigm, there is a dual focus on individuals as learners and how the learning occurs, as well as on instructional methods that yield the best results and most effective learning, motivation, and academic achievement (Reigeluth et al., 2016). The LCE model emphasizes the students' learning journey and sets the stage to prioritize further active learning methods to better engage students and encourage collaboration between learners and educators, as well as among learners in each classroom environment. More educators are starting to realize that making the shift from teaching-centered to learner-centered instruction encourages more creative thinking regarding new ways to facilitate education in more interactive ways. "The notion of engaging students in learning and educating them to be critical thinkers requires a shift in pedagogy from the teacher being at the center of the classroom to the learner being at the center" (Patel-Junankar, 2017, p. 5). The learner-centric approach benefits students because each learner has their own unique set of learning preferences, as well as different experiences with their own learning journey.

Experiential Learning Theory (ELT)

The concept of experiential learning refers to learning and doing, inside and/or outside of the classroom, in dynamic and engaging ways with real-world implications.

Learning in this way encourages acquiring and applying knowledge with higher order thinking and reflection, and it typically results in students being more invested in the learning process. “For a learner to engage fully in the learning cycle, a space must be provided to engage in the four modes of the cycle—feeling, reflection, thinking, and action” (Kolb & Kolb, 2013, p. 20). The Experiential Learning Theory (ELT) is a model that offers a holistic approach to the process of how adult learners acquire and apply new knowledge through experiences and according to their learning preferences (Kolb et al., 2014). This approach to learning underscores the key function of experiences in the process of acquiring knowledge and developing skills.

In the literature, specific characteristics of experiential learning are described as requiring the presence of certain elements. For example, learners need to take on the role of actively engaged participants with exposure to novel experiences (Morris, 2020). Furthermore, the experiential learning process is designed to align with real-world situations, through investigation and knowledge acquisition, with real-world implications. Varying levels of risk are present with a reflection process involving critical thinking to reinforce concepts and result in meaningful insights gained. Essentially, all learning happens through experience (Dewey, 1938). Direct experiences and thoughtful reflection optimize teaching and learning outcomes.

Key Benefits of Hybrid Learning Environments From the Student Perspective

Recent research suggests that the hybrid modality is viewed as the ideal package for today’s Generation Z college students. Most students enrolled in institutions of higher learning are in favor of hybrid instructional methods due to the effectiveness,

inclusiveness, and efficiencies that hybrid courses bring into the higher education landscape through merging the greatest benefits of each to best serve the students and prepare them for the workforce.

When hybrid learning methods are incorporated into the college curriculum, there are many benefits that allow students to have their cake and eat it too. Students who are engaged in hybrid course formats gain the increased flexibility that they crave, and they can also reap the social perks that they desire. Markedly, some of the extrinsic motivational factors that students appreciate about having some class sessions F2F include having an opportunity to establish a stronger rapport with the professor, to feel more comfortable asking questions during or after in-person class sessions, and to interact with peers. “The pedagogy of hybrid learning relates to different media serving to present learning content, excellent availability of online content, well-executed interactions of teacher-student, student-student, and student-teaching content, and above all, the availability and adoption of learning materials to the students” (Mumu & Chowdhury, 2023, p. 2). Mumu and Chowdhury (2023) further explain that, by offering hybrid learning opportunities, there is an increased chance of students experiencing a stronger sense of community, which creates a positive effect on the learning process that leads to a greater likelihood of academic success.

Trends in How People Work and School

There have been numerous types of work and instructional formats developed and implemented in the workforce and in higher education since the turn of the century; however, most organizations operated under traditional ways of working and going to

school. For example, most traditional-aged college students attending traditional four-year institutions of higher learning still took most or all their classes in the traditional F2F delivery mode. Research is beginning to reveal that, with increased levels of experience taking courses and working in different ways, people are recognizing the possibilities and benefits that can be achieved when hybrid modalities are applied in both physical and digital workspaces. For example, most learners became aware of and gained first-hand exposure to a myriad of learning spaces available after the COVID-19 pandemic began. This was a major turning point for learners of higher education institutions as they experienced various pedagogical formats in new ways and became cognizant of expanded opportunities that come along with blended work environments. Updated empirical research on this topic will help to better understand the current landscape and shifting student perspectives and preferences; it can also inform strategy development and techniques on effectively intertwining the most student-centric elements of each course delivery mode to stimulate and enhance teaching and learning outcomes in the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR). This shift is likely to continue to shape the evolving landscape of the workforce too.

Early COVID-19 Effects on College Students Studying in the U.S.

Many HEIs across the United States were officially on spring break when the pandemic was declared, and institutional leaders and educators initially wrestled with how to maintain academic continuity by shifting vast numbers of in-person courses to the online academic environment. Understandably, many educators were caught off-guard, overwhelmed, and not prepared for instructing in the digital realm when the pandemic

disruption occurred (Goria, 2021). There was a very short window of time that faculty had to switch F2F courses to the online environment, which affected students in different ways.

Triggered by COVID-19, the emergency remote teaching method became known as ERT and is distinct from intentional online education. ERT is transient in nature with the main goal being educational continuity to respond to a crisis and avert an unanticipated disruption in courses delivered. According to Hodges, et al. (2020), ERT is a temporary shift of course delivery to an alternative delivery mode due to emergency situations as opposed to being experiences that are intentionally planned from the beginning. Although traditional F2F classes were tossed into a state of upheaval across the globe, learning was less disrupted due to the following major factors.

To begin with, modern technological infrastructure was already in place and being used, such as learning management systems (LMS) and web conferencing solutions. Therefore, having access to contemporary technology offered robust options when it came time to make the sudden switch from physical classrooms to virtual/remote and/or asynchronous digital classrooms. The circumstances would have been very different if this plague shocked our society even just a few decades before the current timeframe when technological platforms were much less developed.

Secondly, the global health crisis prompted inadvertent mass coercion of faculty and students to shift to the digital realm, more fully utilizing synchronous and asynchronous platforms than ever before, which enabled educational continuity and simultaneously imposed new learning challenges and opportunities through this

disruptive innovation. By heavily relying on various technologies, educators and learners were able to see, communicate, and interact with each other without posing health risks and increasing the community spread of the highly infectious coronavirus disease.

When the state of emergency began, it was quickly realized by leadership at most higher education institutions that pivoting classes from physical classrooms to online modalities would be daunting for educators, especially considering the swift turnaround that was required to maintain academic continuity. Though it was uncertain how long the pandemic would endure, leadership at most higher education institutions remained realistic overall and made clear that the need to respond urgently to the unprecedented situation had an emphasis on timely progress over perfection as the primary short-term goal. The outcome was continual learning through disruptive innovation after education professionals reacted and applied ERT methods to complete the Spring Semester in 2020.

Much can be gained through thoughtful reflection and review of lessons that were learned from the big shift to online/remote learning during the COVID-19 pandemic period. Notably, the pandemic effects have been felt by students, faculty, and staff at colleges and universities across the country and globe, which were especially amplified for college students. “As a group, college students seem to experience more challenges during the pandemic due to the unique transition time from being at home to being independent individuals away from home” (Xu et al., 2021). In the United States, many campus jobs were paused, creating another layer of hardship for students with a lack of money to buy essentials such as food. Many campuses closed and asked students to leave. These measures, in addition to lack of timely communication, triggered higher levels of

stress, confusion, and fear for college students already amid an unnerving and unprecedented time.

There was also a broad range of technological factors that affected students differently, such as internet availability and if or how internet (and course content) may be accessible at their permanent residence. This was the case for American students, as well as international students. Some of the international students who were studying in the United States and able to travel back to their home countries were told they would be able to maintain academic continuity by continuing their classes from the internet, then later discovered that they could not apply for practical training from abroad because they had to be physically in the United States at that point due to the existing guidance and regulations in place. However, they were not physically able to get back to the USA, and this generated a lot more anxiety and uncertainty about how to proceed.

Ongoing COVID-19 Effects as the Pandemic Persisted

As the COVID-19 pandemic persisted and many courses continued being delivered in an online or hybrid capacity, numerous realizations were brought to life from the students' vantage point. College students began to realize and express various benefits and drawbacks from their first-hand experiences between taking higher education courses on the computer with an online format (i.e., online synchronous, online asynchronous, and/or blended) versus face-to-face in a classroom. Some educators began collecting data to understand how the shift to online education affected learners and how it might provide opportunities and guidance into the future. New desires were being shaped as the pandemic endured and more diverse experiences were gained by college

students in how their education services were being delivered. “Choice and its frequent associate freedom are unquestioned goods of modern life” (Haidt, 2006). Some common themes that began emerging as the pandemic progressed include the idea that most students value choice and flexibility when it comes to taking college classes.

Post-Pandemic Workplace for Higher Education and the Workforce

Due to the infectious 2019 novel coronavirus outbreak that resulted in the COVID-19 global pandemic unarguably wreaking havoc on the world in catastrophic ways, educators urgently responded to the crises to transition their courses online. Now is the time for stakeholders to thoughtfully reflect on the pandemic impacts regarding higher education services and develop effective strategies to optimize and revolutionize higher education and best prepare students for the workforce. According to a recent research study conducted with 2,574 college students in North America, “sixty percent of students are most concerned about finding a job they enjoy post-graduation" (Wiley, 2024, p. 9).

What are the best aspects that emerged from the disruptive innovation? How can we take our collective experiences from the challenging circumstances and turn the many lessons learned from our rapid digitization ERT efforts into new directions and opportunities to adapt teaching and learning strategies to thrive like never before in the future? “Well-planned online learning experiences are meaningfully different from courses offered online in response to a crisis or disaster” (Hodges et al., 2020). HEIs can leverage the disruptive innovation for good through utilizing this distinctive window of

opportunity and using the insights gained and better prepare learners for their future careers.

Embracing Change and Lessons Learned From the Collective Experience

As the world continues to contend with momentous disruptions following the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic, uncertainties and opportunities lie ahead for the higher education community and business industry at-large. Overall, society has worked through and moved past the initial feelings of shock and disbelief, embracing changes and lessons learned from the collective experience of the Great Experiment of 2020. There has been a lot of discussion about the world beyond the COVID-19 pandemic and with acknowledgements that many aspects of life have been reshaped. This includes the higher education system, as well as the workplace, being reimagined. “Adoption of online, blended, and hybrid models for course delivery, according to the ebbs and flows of the pandemic, has arguably accelerated the evolution of higher education” (Peimani & Kamalipour, 2021, p. 11). Imposed changes during the emergency transition to digital learning allowed most learners to experience online education for the first time.

Similarly, experiences gained on a large scale in the workforce during the pandemic period provided valuable insights for organizations and businesses across the nation and globe on how work can be effectively redesigned and improved. Although some organizations dabbled with hybrid work structures (i.e., time and place) prior to March of 2020, it was on a small scale compared to the events that unfolded after COVID-19 was declared and most of the world and nation went into ‘lockdown’ mode with ‘shelter in place’ emergency order implemented by governments in the modern

world. Pre-COVID, most leaders of organizations and higher education institutions resisted remote and hybrid work structures on a large scale. That is, until they were faced with the global health crisis that organically led to The Great Experiment of 2020, and then organizations had to be creative with reformatting work structures on a larger magnitude to maintain academic continuity and business continuity. The shift to digital platforms occurred in most industries to keep operations afloat. What occurred from the collective natural experiment was eye-opening; it proved not only that humans in our society are resilient and adaptable in general, but also that they are also extremely capable of learning new digital skill sets at an accelerated pace and under high pressure and stressful conditions. “This is a chance to harness the real momentum for a radical shift in how we work” (Gratton, 2022, p. 2). The experiences and realizations that occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic are testaments that positive change can happen swiftly in and across numerous industries and sectors for continual improvement and adaptation to better align with each other and to fit the needs of modern society.

Strategies for Creating Impactful and Inclusive Educational Experiences by Design

There are countless benefits of higher education for individuals and society. However, there have been recent claims such as, “college is no longer good at equipping graduates to succeed in an even more complex and bewildering world” (Davidson, 2017, p. 4). To reshape the future of higher education into a more modern institution that aligns with the needs of individuals and society today, we must reflect on what went well, and not so well, during the great shift of 2020 while coping with the COVID-19 crisis.

Further research would be advantageous to analyze the good and the bad. For example, should the “digital lecture” be kept, and the traditional classroom lecture be abandoned in exchange for more interactive and dynamic learning activities within the physical classroom space? If this example would be adopted broadly, perhaps students could benefit from being able to learn the course materials at their own pace, and re-watch the recordings to reinforce the material, and select from a smorgasbord of learning options that better suits their learning style and preferences.

Furthermore, the time taken to gather in a physical classroom space could provide more meaningful and engaging learning opportunities and empower the students to be partners in their learning journey. By dedicating in-person class time for interactive group activities, such as students teaming up on case studies, etc., the knowledge foundation can be expanded, and skills can be deepened and reinforced in a learning community environment. This can be done well leveraging the hybrid course format as well, especially when educators are intentional about designing courses with a well thought-out, balanced, student-centered approach. By developing a variety of activities and assignments, instructors can create dynamic learning spaces in F2F settings, as well as in the digital realm. "In the learner-content category, students mentioned working on real-world projects and having discussions with structured or guiding questions were the most beneficial" (Martin & Bolliger, 2018, p. 205). Real-world projects also lend themselves well to providing students with experiential learning opportunities that better prepare them for their future career.

In the late 19th century and early 20th century, Charles Eliot and his colleagues were able to redesign higher education, even with society in that timeframe experiencing rapid change and being highly strained in ways that are comparable to today. This reinforces the importance of revisiting history to help inform our present and future wellbeing. “What would it mean to redesign higher education for the intellectual space travel students need to thrive in the world we live in now?” (Davidson, 2017, P. 6). We too have the ability and competence to forge through the challenges and restructure the higher educational institutions of America to meet and exceed the needs of present-day society.

Future of Higher Education Scenarios to Prepare Students for Future Work

T Undisputedly, the COVID-19 pandemic impacted the world in countless ways, including ways in which people learn and work. Historically, educational institutions have not adapted and evolved as quickly as the workforce overall. Certainly, remote and hybrid work was an option for some, and some educators were offering online education to varying degrees, but there was not a broad shift to the digital realm until the pandemic occurred and pushed as many aspects of everyday life online as possible. The world of work is changing. “If we want to take the phrase ‘workforce ready’ seriously, then we have to understand what is required of today’s workforce” (Davidson, 2017, p. 140). Now more than ever before, a myriad of opportunities abounds in rethinking and rebuilding educational environments to coincide with the ever-changing occupational landscape.

How can we begin to forecast what the future is going to be like and plan accordingly? For starters, an observable trend is that more and more employers are moving to a hybrid model where employees are expected to hold themselves accountable to produce quality work sometimes at home and sometimes at the office. When higher education institutions offer hybrid courses, they are providing students with opportunities to practice working and collaborating in a hybrid setting during college which is beneficial to them before they transition to the rapidly changing workforce (Rist, 2023; Whenham, 2021). Post-pandemic research studies are increasingly finding that more traditional-aged college students favor blended methods due to the effectiveness, inclusiveness, and efficiencies that hybrid courses infuse into the higher education landscape through merging the greatest benefits of each to best serve the students and prepare them for the workforce.

Methodology

Quantitative Research Design

The design of this research study is quantitative with a focus on examining Generation Z college students' opinions, attitudes, preferences, stress levels, positivity beliefs and behaviors through survey questions. Included in the online survey were the following categorical variables that were used as the independent variables: 1) students' positivity beliefs, 2) students' positivity practices, 3) self-reported stress, and 4) students' self-reported ideal course delivery format.

Positive emotion is an element of PERMA in the Well-Being Theory (WBT) that is measured subjectively by individuals self-reporting their feelings. Therefore, it was

logical to leverage the valid Subjective Happiness Scale (SHS) as part of investigating this topic in association with students' self-reported most ideal way of taking college courses. Questions regarding subjective happiness, leveraging the SHS were included on the survey as the dependent variables. The survey was made available to undergraduate learners enrolled in at least one marketing course at a Midwestern university in 2023.

Sample and Data Collection Procedures

The sample of the population for this quantitative research study includes 926 respondents within the traditional-aged college student demographic. The convenience sampling method was utilized to recruit the research participants who voluntarily completed the survey. The survey respondents participated in this research study while attending a university in the Midwest and enrolled in at least one Marketing course in Spring Semester or Fall Semester of 2023.

Quantitative Data Analysis

After collecting quantitative data from the sample of 926 individuals within the target population through a survey, the raw data was exported from Qualtrics into Excel, and then cleaned and prepared for analysis. Next, the cleaned data file was imported into jamovi, a statistical software program, and descriptive statistics were run to better understand demographics and psychographics of this sample of the population. In addition, statistics between the independent variables (stress and positivity factors) and dependent variables (subjective happiness) were run to analyze possible associations. Variables around course delivery format perceptions and preferences among today’s college students were also analyzed.

Results

Demographic and Psychographic Analysis

Of the 926 total survey respondents, over two-thirds (69%) were in their junior or senior year of college at the time in which they participated in this research. According to the quantitative data collected, the majority of the college students from the quantitative sample of the population indicated that they are not first-generation students (77.5%), meaning that they have at least one parent who earned at least a bachelor's degree from a higher education institution. Over three-fourths of the respondents from this sample of the population are from the state of Ohio (87%), with 12% being from another state in the U.S., and only 0.7% of the sample indicating that they are international students. Most of the students self-identify as white, with a total of 79 respondents (9%) indicating that they belong to at least one minority group. Slightly over half (51.7%) of the students identify as male (51.7%), with less than half identifying as female (47.3%). and most of the students (64%) in this study are enrolled in 15-17 credit hours. Nearly three-fourths (71%) of the respondents self-reported getting approximately 7-8 hours of sleep each night, with about 23% getting about 6 hours of sleep per night on average.

Positivity and Stress

Out of the 926 traditional-aged college students who were asked if they believe in the power of positive thinking, 764 (82.5%) indicated yes; however, only 592 (63.9%) of the individuals in this sample of the population reported practicing positive well-being methods regularly (such as meditation, exercise, affirmations, visualization, etc.). When respondents were asked if they think stress helps to complete their work on time, 481

survey respondents (52%) responded yes. Furthermore, 848 students (91.5%) in this sample disclosed that they had experienced academic stress during the academic term (spring, summer, or fall) in which they were enrolled when participating in this research in 2023. When it comes to stress management, over half of the respondents (53.5%) believe they do manage stress in a healthy way, such as by exercising, meditating, and/or deep breathing, etc.

Positivity and Happiness

To analyze the data between the “practice-positivity” independent variable and the main Subjective Happiness Scale (SHS1) dependent variable, a chi-square test of independence (Independent Samples X2 Test of Association) was run in the statistical software program. The results revealed a strong statistical significance between the SHS1 variable and the practice-positivity variable with the p-value significantly less than 0.05. The details of the chi-square tests of independence are outlined in Table 7 (Appendix).

Stress and Happiness

To analyze the data between the "Aca-stress” (experienced academic stress this semester) independent variable and the primary Subjective Happiness Scale (SHS1) variable, the statistical software program was used to run a chi-square test of independence (Independent Samples X2 Test of Association). The p-value was 0.118, revealing that it is more than 0.05, which indicates that there is not a statistical significance between the SHS1 variable and the academic-stress variable. This confirms the predicted result that happiness levels do not increase when stress increases. The results of the chi-square tests of independence are provided in Table 8 (Appendix).

Discussion of Results

The Z-Shift of Traditional-Aged College Students

The results of this study suggest that Generation Z undergraduate college students' perspectives and preferences regarding higher education course delivery have been shifting since the start of the COVID-19 viral global pandemic in March 2020. The research respondents have experienced various course delivery modalities over the past few years, ranging from online asynchronous and online synchronous, to F2F, to different variations of blended learning (such as hybrid, including HyFlex). Online educational experiences became more prevalent after the onset of the global pandemic when courses at all levels worldwide urgently pivoted from the traditional F2F format to online asynchronous and/or synchronous instructional delivery.

When evaluating online education perspectives among the student participants, most gained more positive opinions about taking classes on the computer after March of 2020. The results of this study suggest that Generation Z college students in developed nations have begun shifting to a more optimistic mindset when it comes to taking classes, at least in part, on the computer in some capacity. After the COVID-19 pandemic was declared and countries went into lockdown mode to protect their citizens from the highly infectious virus, it was the first time most students had ever taken any education classes on the computer. As time went on, students and educators became more accustomed to the learning and teaching digital environment, and technology further evolved with additional features and functionality being rapidly developed and rolled out to better suit the online academic environment. Overall, these factors and experiences have led to a

shift in mindsets regarding how online education is perceived by traditional-aged college students, with many more viewing it in a positive light.

The results of this research study show that there is a statistically significant relationship between students who engage in positivity practices (e.g., meditation, exercise, affirmations, visualization) and higher subjective happiness levels. These findings suggest that when students practice positive well-being methods regularly, the happier they are likely to be in their lives over time.

Recommendations

Future Research

Continual future research on this topic will be advantageous to keep the education sector and workforce community apprised of societal needs when designing and shaping modern work structures to best meet the needs of current and future college students. Ideally, it would be beneficial for this research to be conducted at higher education institutions across the country and globe to understand this phenomenon more fully. By leveraging data to help inform and implement positive change, HEIs can proactively prepare for the future needs of traditional and lifelong learning in the higher education sector and the surrounding communities that are served by colleges and universities.

The Hybrid Approach: The "Best of Both Worlds"

Hybrid learning increases flexibility and creates opportunities for individuals to establish a healthier work-life balance, whether they are working and/or learning. This was realized at a broader level when society was pushed into online and hybrid settings due to the COVID-19 global viral pandemic. Not only were students and professionals

experiencing different ways of learning and working than they were accustomed to, but they were also beginning to see and appreciate how flexible remote and blended options can be in learning and working environments. Newer trends are contributing to a larger societal shift in how people work and go to school that is likely going to become a shift in long-term society. Whether people are in learning mode and/or working mode is becoming more interchangeable than ever before as the increasingly digital world evolves. “Our experience of digital technologies, which were accelerated during the pandemic, have shaped our and our employees’ expectations” (Gratton, 2022, p. 54). A flexible hybrid model is becoming more common and expected in the workforce, where there is a mix of individuals going into the office some days and working from home other days.

There is a parallel movement happening centered around mental health and student well-being, and at the same time, there is a broad shift in ways of learning and working. We are now starting to realize the numerous benefits of redesigning work and course structures to unlock new approaches to innovation and improved overall well-being to individuals, organizations, and society at large. When it comes to student well-being, there is a mix of factors at play; it does not come down to one single factor that can solve the mystery. However, when operating under a hybrid model, we can get closer due to the key benefit of this model is flexibility, which can lead to lower stress levels and higher happiness levels. Just as when employers move to a more flexible model it helps working professionals balance various responsibilities (e.g., work, home, family), it can help students who desire a flexible modality to be able to achieve a healthier balance

with engaging in the course, studying, and having a job, etc. When educators and leaders of HEIs embrace a more flexible environment, perhaps it is possible to provide optimal learning experiences by providing students with the "best of both worlds" by merging the convenience of technology with the benefits of F2F learning through impactful blended methods.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 global viral pandemic in early 2020 was unpredicted and triggered many unexpected and indirect consequences. After the COVID-19 pandemic was declared, people in society had to quickly pivot and adapt their ways of working and going to school. This resulted in a massive surge in people operating in remote and hybrid conditions. With the urgent need for rapid change, there was a surge in hybrid work experience on a large scale that was vastly different from the norm. There were so many moving parts and much ambiguity in a suddenly uncertain world which simultaneously resulted in a surge in mental health challenges on a national and global scale.

This was the first time that most educators and students experienced working in a fully online or hybrid environment. Therefore, educators had to employ digital practices and innovative techniques at an extremely fast pace. An operation of this magnitude presented various challenges that, in the long run, is also showing to present many opportunities that are expediting the progress of hybrid education. The increased presence of hybrid learning in higher education institutions is transforming the pedagogy of traditional teaching and learning practices. Moving forward, intentional planning and

thoughtful preparation is needed to integrate the hybrid learning techniques well, while improving and preserving the well-being of students at the same time.

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Appendix

Table 6. Subjective well-being questions using the Subjective Happiness Scale (SHS) (Lyubomirsky & Lepper, 1999)

1.	In general, how happy of a person do you consider yourself?
2.	Compared with most of your peers, how happy do you consider yourself?
3.	Some people are generally very happy. They enjoy life regardless of what is going on, getting the most out of everything. To what extent does this characterization describe you?
4.	Some people are generally not very happy. Although they are not depressed, they never seem as happy as they might be. To what extent does this characterization describe you?

Table 7. Results of the Chi-square Test of Independence between the SHS1 and Practice-positivity variables

X^2 Test of Association

	SHS1							
Practice-positivity	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**6**	**7**	**Total**
1: Yes	0	7	27	40	102	321	95	592
2: Maybe/Unsure	1	6	13	21	30	84	12	167
3: No	2	7	20	23	35	73	7	167
Total	3	20	60	84	167	478	114	926

X^2 Test of Association

	SHS1							
Practice-positivity	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**6**	**7**	**Total**

χ^2 Tests

	Value	Df	P
χ^2	58.133	12	< .00001
N	926		

Table 8. Results of the Chi-square Test of Independence between the SHS1 and Academic-stress variables

X^2 Test of Association

	SHS1							
Aca-stress	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**6**	**7**	**Total**
1: Yes	3	16	58	74	155	444	98	848
2: Maybe/Unsure	0	2	2	3	6	12	4	29
3: No	0	2	0	7	6	22	12	49

Total	3	20	60	84	167	478	114	926

χ^2 Tests

	Value	**df**	**p**
χ^2	17.910	12	0.11844
N	926		

Chapter 4 (Article 3): Examining Factors that may Affect Sense of Belonging in the College Years: Investigations Into Course Delivery and Demographic Contexts

When the COVID-19 worldwide viral pandemic was declared in March of 2020, traditional classes were hastily shifted online to reduce the spread of the dangerous virus. This initial urgency resulted in instructors across the globe to stop delivering traditional in-person classes in a face-to-face (F2F) format and expeditiously pivot to delivering classes fully online, which triggered a series of new experiences for so many students and educators. These experiences initially resulted in college students experiencing physical isolation, which led to higher levels of emotional health challenges and difficulties with feeling a sense of belonging. This also resulted in learners gaining first-hand experiences with taking their classes in a variety of formats, which has stemmed a higher number of today's college students desiring expanded options regarding ways in which they receive their college courses.

Defining Terms Used in This Study

This section provides context around how some key terms are used and discussed in this document. Specific course delivery modes addressed in this paper include traditional in-person/face-to-face (F2F), online synchronous, online asynchronous, and blended/hybrid (including HyFlex). Some terminology related to student development theoretical frameworks that are leveraged in this study include subjective well-being and sense of belonging.

Course Delivery Modes

There are multiple types of higher education course delivery modes that have been established since the turn of the century, which have been implemented and

expanded upon in recent years. Face-to-face (F2F) course delivery occurs when all scheduled class sessions are delivered in person. Online courses are delivered synchronously and/or asynchronously. Blended learning is often synonymous with hybrid learning and refers to a convergence of F2F and online instructional formats (Graham, 2004; Müller & Mildenberger, 2021, Rist, 2023). The term HyFlex originated by combining the words “hybrid” and “flexible” (Miller et al., 2021). HyFlex course delivery happens when educators provide students with multiple options for attending class, such as in person or via online platform(s).

Statement of the Problem

Although innovative practices have been occurring throughout the history of American higher education, especially over the past couple of decades, they occurred at an even greater expeditious pace during the COVID-19 pandemic out of necessity. The overall effects on college students’ pedagogical adaptation and well-being since the COVID-19 global viral pandemic began have been vast and multifaceted and are still not fully understood. Higher education stakeholders, including students, have faced a multitude of challenges that are becoming more mismatched between historical postsecondary instructional approaches and ever-changing student learning styles and preferred ways of receiving their educational services.

An important consideration during this societal time of rapid change is that traditional-aged college students are in a phase of life when they are transitioning from childhood to adulthood, which is often a time of uncertainty and confusion in an individual’s life when the human psychological need for belonging is high. “The need for

belonging, social support, and acceptance takes on special prominence when young people consider seriously who they are and wish to be, with whom they belong, and where they intend to invest their energies and stake their futures" (Goodenow, 1993, p. 81). It is not uncommon for a college student's sense of belonging and/or identity to become insecure or unstable. This can have psychological effects that can affect overall well-being and can even lead to critical issues such as depression, anxiety, loneliness, and even hopelessness. Additional research is needed on this topic to capture updated insights on shifting variables, which can help inform higher education leaders and policymakers of how action that occurred out of necessity during the COVID-19 pandemic years are influencing student sense of belonging and pedagogies during their traditional college years.

Educational practitioners and leaders of HEIs may leverage the results from this research to help make data-informed decisions regarding the delivery of educational services and the overall design of the higher education system in the best interest of student stakeholders. Especially as society has begun to move away from the emergency pandemic period and into a more stagnant endemic phase, it is crucial for HEIs to stay informed, redefine their value propositions, and reassess how courses are delivered to college students, how university experiences affect students' lives and overall well-being, to continue to contribute education as a public good to improve society at large, and for HEIs persist and thrive in an everchanging world.

Studying this topic can shed light on factors that affect college students' overall well-being and that are shifting the landscape of higher education. It can help inform

strategy development and tactics to enhance outcomes and strengthen the value propositions for HEIs and benefits to individuals, the labor market, and society at large. By learning from the COVID years, HEIs have an opportunity to take forward the "best of both worlds" (i.e., the most excellent aspects of online and F2F formats) as we progress into post-pandemic times (Singh et al., 2021). The findings from this research can help inform stakeholders in the higher education sector to take proactive measures during this paradigm shift, which is vital to empower individuals, institutions, and society to flourish now and into the future.

Purpose of the Study

The primary purpose for proposing this study is to examine factors that may contribute to traditional-aged undergraduate college students' sense of belonging while immersed in a residential four-year university campus environment, and to describe how pedagogies in higher education have been influenced by the COVID-19 global viral pandemic from the student perspective. By investigating various factors from different angles, a key objective for conducting this research is to determine whether relationships exist among different variables such as sense of belonging, campus involvement, job status, pedagogies, and other demographic variables.

Research Questions

1. What is the relationship between ideal course delivery mode(s) of traditional-aged undergraduate college students and their sense of belonging levels while immersed in a traditional four-year residential university setting?

2. Is there a relationship between demographic variables and levels of sense of belonging levels?

Hypotheses

1. Traditional-aged undergraduate college students who indicate their ideal course delivery mode to be hybrid are predicted to have higher sense of belonging levels.
2. Students who identify as non-minority are predicted to have higher sense of belonging levels than students who identify in a minority racial group.

Theoretical Frameworks and Relevant Literature

Student development theories that relate to sense of belonging suggest that higher level needs cannot be focused on until lower-level needs are met. For example, a student will not be able to care about building their own self esteem unless they first feel a sense of belonging within their community. This study leverages elements from Strayhorn's Sense of Belonging and Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs theories.

Belongingness: A Human Need

Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs theory is perhaps the most well-known theory of human motivation that organizes humans' needs into various categories and addresses them in a hierarchical order, starting with satisfying basic physiological needs at the utilitarian level with the goal of progressing up through the ranks to the highest hedonic level of self-actualization. According to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs pyramid, after humans satisfy basic survival needs (food, drink, shelter, etc.), they can progress to the safety and security level, and then to the belongingness level. When an individual

feels like they are a member of at least one group or community, the human-centered need to feel a sense of belonging is addressed (Maslow, 1950). Strayhorn discusses sense of belonging to highlight this human need in the traditional college years.

According to Strayhorn (2018), sense of belonging refers to how supported and connected college students feel on campus, as well as their perceptions of feeling that they matter and they are cared about, treated respectfully, valued, and accepted into the campus community by peers, faculty, staff, etc. Having a healthy sense of belonging during college is an important factor that contributes to college success in the classroom and on the campus environment (Strayhorn, 2018).

An initial prediction was made prior to collecting data that sense of belonging and subjective well-being levels would be higher for traditional-aged undergraduate college students who are more actively engaged on campus, such as members of one or more student organizations. If a student belongs to one or more student organization(s) and/or professional organization(s), they are more likely to make social connections with others, feel valued, and perceive themselves as (and be perceived as) a stakeholder within the campus community, or within the organization(s). Similarly, this concept translates to the employment realm; if a student undertakes a job while going to school, they are likely to make stronger connections with others and have a higher sense of belonging and overall healthier well-being levels. Therefore, this research seeks to examine the relationship among traditional-aged college students' engagement, subjective well-being, and sense of belonging levels.

In addition, a second prediction was made before the data collection process began which was about the total sample of the population compared with students who self-identify as part of a minority racial group. The hypothesis was that the results would likely be lower for minority students than the overall population when it comes to subjective well-being and sense of belonging levels.

Finally, a third prediction was made about student satisfaction rates as they pertain to how higher education services are delivered. That is, if students are happier about how their courses are delivered to them, then they will likely have higher subjective well-being levels.

Methodology

Research Design

The methodology for this study is grounded in a quantitative approach that leverages quantitative data collection and analysis procedures. After reviewing the literature, a research instrument (survey using a validated scale) was used. Prior to collecting quantitative data for this research study, an IRB protocol was submitted to the institution's Office of Compliance and approval was granted to collect and analyze data ethically from human subjects.

Engagement is one of the five measurable elements in the Well-Being Theory (PERMA model) and relies on individual self-reports that are subjective in nature. An online survey was developed in Qualtrics, a survey creation tool, to include questions suitable for the quantitative research method. To collect data on student engagement, quantitative survey questions were created to align with the primary research objectives

and questions. Included in the survey were questions pertaining to campus involvement and employment status, which were among the independent variables of this study. The independent variables were compared with the dependent variables, which used Goodenow's valid Psychological Sense of School Membership (PSSM) scale (1993), to identify possible associations between the variables analyzed. "Researchers frequently use the PSSM to measure students' sense of school belonging and to examine the quality of the student's connection to their school" (St-Amand et al., 2020, p. 5). The survey included some additional demographic and psychographic questions.

Sample

The convenience sampling technique was leveraged to reach the target population for this study, which consists of traditional-aged students attending college at a traditional American public four-year university in the Midwest. The survey instrument was made available to individuals in the target demographic who are enrolled in a Marketing course within the College of Business at the Midwestern higher education institution, yielding a sample size of 926 (n = 926) clean survey responses.

Data Collection Procedures

After the online survey was created, a link was posted to a digital research participation system where college students who were enrolled in a marketing course had a menu of research study options that they could voluntarily choose to participate in for an opportunity to earn a small number of points for class in one of the participating courses. The valid Psychological Sense of School Membership (PSSM) scale research instrument was used in the survey instrument so that dependent variable data could be

collected from traditional-aged college students regarding their levels of subjective sense of belonging. The PSSM scale includes eighteen questions, as shown in Table 9 (Appendix) and the indicator statements leverage a five-point Likert scale (Goodenow, 1993). The Likert scale response choices on the PSSM scale range from one to five. The first option of "one" is the lowest agreement level on the balanced scale and indicates never true. The middle response option of "three" represents a neutral score, which is neither true nor false. The last option of "five" signifies the highest agreement level, and that is always true.

To collect data on the independent variables, related survey questions and response choices were added to the survey. Respondents were asked about their ideal form of taking college courses with single-answer response choices ranging from online learning (both asynchronous and synchronous options were provided), to hybrid learning (with an option to also include HyFlex), to F2F (all class sessions in person). There were additional choices offered for respondents to select, which included "other" (with a text box provided for respondents to type specific details) and "unsure or prefer not to answer" (to give an answer choice to those who may be neutral on the topic). Survey respondents were also asked how many academic and/or professional extracurricular organizations they belong, if they currently have a wage-earning job, and they were given a multiple-answer style question to allow them to select one or more races that they consider themselves to be.

Quantitative Data Analysis

By adopting a quantitative research method, a larger number of college students' feedback were attained more quickly than could have resulted in the same timeframe from a qualitative method, thus increasing the sample size, obtaining a higher response rate with a better chance of more accurately generalizing results from the sample to the larger population. With a total of 926 completed responses to the survey, the raw data was exported from Qualtrics after the data collection period closed; the raw data was cleaned and prepared before analyzing it with jamovi, a statistical software application program that is similar to SPSS. After running descriptive statistics on the relevant variables, the data was analyzed and relationships between variables examined so that key findings can be identified and reported.

Results

Demographics and Psychographics

Most of the individuals in this sample of the population self-identify as white (91%), with 79 research participants self-identifying in at least one minority group (9%). Of the total survey respondents, most (69%) of the respondents are in their junior or senior year of college. According to the data, the majority of the college students who participated in this research are not first-generation students (77.5%), meaning that they have at least one parent who earned a bachelor's degree or higher. Most respondents are from the state of Ohio (87%); 12% of this sample are from out-of-state, and only 0.7% are international students. There was a higher response rate among students who identify as male (51.7%) than female (47.3%).

Most of the individuals in this sample are majoring in the College of Business (72.5%), with the second most common response being the Scripps College of Communication (13.5%). Most of the students live with at least one other roommate (83%), some live alone (8%), and a smaller percentage indicated that they live at their permanent residence with family (7%). Over half (68%) live in an apartment or house, 25% live on campus in a residence hall, and 6% live in sorority or fraternity housing.

Campus Engagement Findings

When asked how many academic and/or professional extracurricular organizations they belong to, 75% of the sample indicated that they are part of one or more organizations, and about 25% indicated that they do not belong to any organizations. Here is the specific breakdown of the campus engagement results:

- 24.7% are not part of any organizations
- 30% belong to one organization
- 27.4% belong to two organizations
- 12.5% belong to three organizations
- 3.4% belong to four organizations
- 1.5% belong to five or more organizations

Student Employment Findings

When research participants were asked if they have a job, the results show that over half of the students work at least part-time, and less than half are not currently employed while attending college. More specifically, 57.4% of the survey respondents reported that they do have a part-time job, with 30% working between one and nineteen

hours per week and 27.4% working between twenty and thirty-nine hours per week. Only 3.4% of the respondents have a full-time job (working at least 40 hours per week). On the other hand, 12.5% responded that they are not currently employed.

Sense of Belonging Findings

The 18-item Psychological Sense of School Membership (PSSM) scale questions that were asked on the survey all had the same response options, based on a 5-point Likert scale that ranges from one to five (1=Never true; 2=Usually not true; 3= Neither true nor false; 4=Often true; 5=Always true). After the PSSM scale was used in the survey instrument to collect sense of belonging data for this research, the total PSSM responses were scored using a reverse formula for the means of the negatively worded items. To begin analyzing all eighteen items from the PSSM scale, the mean values from the entire sample of this study (n=926) were compiled, and then the five negatively worded items were reversed using a 5-point Likert scale reversal formula. The means of the thirteen positively worded questions were totaled with the reverse score means of the five negatively worded questions, and then the total sum was divided by eighteen (because the means from all eighteen items were used in this formula). Using this method is a more accurate way to display and compare the data, due to multiple negatively worded items comprising the total PSSM scale. The collective PSSM mean score from the entire sample of this study, using this approach, is 3.87. This data point reveals that the average student's total sense of belonging falls between neutral and often true but is closest to the "often true" response option.

Therefore, the findings from this research suggest that, on average, students in this sample of the population often feel that they belong to their university community. Table 10 (Appendix) shows the raw mean for each of the eighteen PSSM items, with the side-by-side comparison of the actual mean values that were used (after the five affected items were reversed) to calculate the total PSSM mean score for the entire sample within this data set.

Ideal Course Delivery Format for Students

The results of this empirical study divulge that 60.5% of the undergraduate college students who participated in this research selected hybrid as their ideal course delivery format. Traditional F2F and fully online asynchronous courses are less ideal among this sample of the population. After running a chi-square test of independence (Independent Samples X2 Test of Association) in the statistical software program, the data between the "ideal course delivery" independent variable and the "PSSM1" variables were analyzed.

Most of the students in this data set who indicated their ideal course delivery format is hybrid also had the highest reports of belongingness. More specifically, nearly half (43%) of the students who prefer taking hybrid classes also feel like a part of their university often or all the time. The second highest subset of this data set who often or always feel like they are a part of their university are the students who reported entirely in-person/F2F classes as their ideal course format. There is a strong statistical significance between the ideal course delivery variable and the PSSM1 variable with the p-value significantly less than 0.05. This suggests a strong association between students

who prefer taking hybrid classes and their higher level of sense of belonging. Table 12 (Appendix) provides more specific details regarding the results of the chi-square tests of independence.

A Comparison of Means Between Minority and Non-Minority Groups

A similar process as above was leveraged to split the data set and compare the student involvement levels and PSSM mean scores between non-minority students and minority students. To begin this comparison, the data set was split so that the statistics from the 847 non-minority student respondents were ran and analyzed separately from the 79 respondents in this sample who self-identify in at least one minority group. The mean values from each group were compiled separately, and the 5-point Likert scale reversal formula was used on the five negatively worded items. The means of the five negatively worded questions were added with the means of the thirteen positively worded questions, and then the total number was divided by eighteen (to represent all eighteen means that were included in this calculation. The results indicate that there is a difference between the total PSSM mean score of the non-minority group and that of the minority group. While the non-minority students, on average, reporting that they often feel like a real part of their university (3.7278), the PSSM mean score for the minority group is slightly less (3.5983). Although these data points still fall between neutral and often true, the non-minority mean value is closer to the “often true” response option. Therefore, the findings from this research suggest that, on average, non-minority students more often feel that they belong to their university community than their peers who are in a minority group. Table 11 (Appendix) displays the non-minority student mean values compared

with the minority mean values for each of the eighteen PSSM items (after the five affected items were reversed), with the calculations provided at the bottom of the table for each racial group within the data set.

Discussion

The main research results do align with the prediction that students who have a higher sense of belonging prefer taking classes in a hybrid modality. In addition, the students who are part of a minority racial group were shown to have lower sense of belonging levels than those who identify as white; however, the average PSSM score of minority students was still relatively high, falling between the neutral response and the response option that they often feel like a part of their university.

Additional findings from this research suggest that students who belong to one or more student organization(s) have higher rates of sense of belonging. This finding is consistent with much of the research in the body of literature which suggests that students who are more engaged on campus are more likely to make social connections with others, feel valued, and perceive themselves a respected stakeholder within the campus community or within the organization(s). In summary, this research suggests that there is a relationship among traditional-aged college students' campus involvement and sense of belonging levels.

Limitations and Future Research

One limitation of this research is that the sample of the population is largely homogeneous, with a relatively small percentage (9%) of minority students who participated in the study. Further research in this area with a larger percentage of minority

students in the sample size of the population would be advantageous to compare results. Another limitation of the study is that most of the student respondents were upperclassmen in their junior or senior year of college. Replicating this research on Generation Z students from other colleges and/or universities and/or on different levels of students, such as first-year and second-year students, would be insightful. In addition, including non-traditional and graduate students would be valuable to gain a better understanding of this evolving phenomenon more thoroughly from different viewpoints of college students. Furthermore, a recommendation for future research is to design a similar study using qualitative methods, such as individual in-depth interviews, focus groups, and/or open-ended text boxes within a survey instrument. While quantitative methods were helpful in collecting data on a larger sample size to gain greater breadth on the topic that can be generalized to the larger population, adding qualitative methods can help uncover deeper insights into the central phenomena to better understand students' experiences, beliefs, attitudes, and preferences on the topic.

Conclusion

Most higher education institutions are recognizing the benefits of prioritizing inclusive learning and social environments today. However, encouraging an inclusive culture does not always result in individuals feeling a sense of belonging within that environment. Therefore, it is vital for colleges and universities to continue to make progress in cultivating inclusive institutions, and moreover, to be intentional about encouraging learners to be engaged in campus life.

The research suggests that nurturing an evolving culture of learning that is more inclusive, accommodating, and accessible to students can lead to increased levels of sense of belonging and enhance their overall well-being. “Understanding how to facilitate college students’ sense of belonging is a key element for campus administrators and higher education researchers concerned with student persistence, success, and a variety of learning and development outcomes” (Johnson, 2013, p. 662). When healthier levels of well-being and sense of belonging are prevalent in student populations, there are greater instances of academic success that leads to increased retention and higher graduation rates which can extend into purposeful work, positive transformation of lives, and a better society at large.

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Appendix

Table 9. Sense of belonging well-being questions using the Psychological Sense of School Membership (PSSM) scale (Goodenow, 1993)

1.	I feel like a real part of (name of school).
2.	People here notice when I'm good at something.
3.	It is hard for people like me to be accepted here. *(reversed)*
4.	Other students in this school take my opinions seriously.
5.	Most teachers at (name of school) are interested in me.
6.	Sometimes I feel as if I don't belong here. *(reversed)*
7.	There's at least one teacher or other adult in this school I can talk to if I have a problem.
8.	People at this school are friendly to me.
9.	Teachers here are not interested in people like me. *(reversed)*
10.	I am included in lots of activities at (name of school).
11.	I am treated with as much respect as other students.
12.	I feel very different from most other students here. *(reversed)*
13.	I can really be myself at this school.
14.	The teachers here respect me.
15.	People here know I can do good work.
16.	I wish I were in a different school. *(reversed)*
17.	I feel proud of belonging to (name of school).
18.	Other students here like me the way I am.

Table 10. PSSM mean values of total sample (n=926), raw and reversed

PSSM Item	**Raw Mean Values**	**Total Mean Values (score after reversal)**
1. I feel like a real part of the University.	3.77	3.77
2. People here notice when I'm good at something.	3.48	3.48
3. It is hard for people like me to be accepted here. *(reversed)*	1.95	*4.05*
4. Other students at the University take my opinions seriously.	3.5	3.5
5. Most instructors at the University are interested in me.	3.44	3.44
6. Sometimes I feel as if I don't belong here. *(reversed)*	2.12	*3.88*
7. There's at least one instructor or other faculty/staff member in the University I can talk to if I have a problem.	3.75	3.75
8. People at the University are friendly to me.	4.16	4.16
9. Instructors here are not interested in people like me. *(reversed)*	2.02	*3.98*

10. I am included in lots of activities at the University.	3.29	3.29
11. I am treated with as much respect as other students.	4.14	4.14
12. I feel very different from most other students here. *(reversed)*	2.35	*3.65*
13. I can really be myself at this University.	4	4
14. The instructors here respect me.	4.12	4.12
15. People here know I can do good work.	4.2	4.2
16. I wish I were at a different university. *(reversed)*	1.89	*4.11*
17. I feel proud of belonging to this University.	4.17	4.17
18. Other students here like me the way I am.	4.05	4.05

Table 11. Campus involvement data and PSSM mean values (including reversals) of non-minority students

Campus Engagement (Organization/s)	**Non-minority Students (n=847)**	**Minority Students (n = 79)**
A member of at least one or more organization	71%	87%
Do not belong to any organizations	24%	13%
Sense of Belonging (PSSM Items) *(1= Never true; 5=Always true)*	**Non-minority Mean**	**Minority Mean**

1. I feel like a real part of the University.	3.55	3.55
2. People here notice when I'm good at something.	3.55	3.55
3. It is hard for people like me to be accepted here. *(reversed)*	4.09	3.42
4. Other students at the University take my opinions seriously.	3.42	3.42
5. Most instructors at the University are interested in me.	3.45	3.45
6. Sometimes I feel as if I don't belong here. *(reversed)*	3.9	3.45
7. There's at least one instructor or other faculty/staff member in the University I can talk to if I have a problem.	3.74	3.74
8. People at the University are friendly to me.	4.23	4.23
9. Instructors here are not interested in people like me. *(reversed)*	4	3.58
10. I am included in lots of activities at the University.	3.38	3.38
11. I am treated with as much respect as other students.	3.96	3.96
12. I feel very different from most other students here. *(reversed)*	3.7	2.91
13. I can really be myself at this University.	3.79	3.79
14. The instructors here respect me.	4.17	4.17

15. People here know I can do good work.	4.04	4.04
16. I wish I were in a different school. *(reversed)*	2.43	2.43
17. I feel proud of belonging to this University.	3.81	3.81
18. Other students here like me the way I am.	3.89	3.89
Collective PSSM Score (Mean Value)	67.1/18= **3.7278**	64.77/18= **3.5983**

Table 12. Results of the Chi-square Test of Independence between the PSSM1 and Ideal Course Delivery variables

X^2 Test of Association

Contingency Tables / Independent Samples X^2 Test of Association

	01-PSSM					
Ideal-Post-COVID	**1**: Never	**2**: Usually	**3**: Neutral	**4**: Often	**5**: Always	**Total**
1: Online Asynchronous	5	11	36	27	16	95
2: Online Synchronous	1	1	8	9	4	23
3: Hybrid	1	29	69	172	57	328
4: HyFlex	2	19	43	110	58	232
5: F2F	2	17	47	123	51	240
6: Other	1	1	0	1	0	3
7: Unsure	0	1	4	0	0	5
Total	12	79	207	442	186	926

X^2 Test of Association

χ^2 Tests

	Value	df	p
χ^2	86.665	24	< .00001
N	926		

Chapter 5: Conclusion

This concluding chapter includes the overall findings across the three research articles, summarizing the relationships among the key factors that were studied, including overall well-being, positivity practices, stress, pedagogical preferences, as well as some other variables that were addressed. Discussion of findings, recommendations, and limitations are also included.

Overall Research Goal

The overarching research goal behind this dissertation was to discover ideal ways of taking university courses from the student perspective, and to further examine factors that may influence overall well-being of traditional-aged college students during the college years. With so many unprecedented disruptions and changes rapidly occurring in the lives and minds of students today (e.g., COVID-19 global pandemic health crisis, economic hardships, social unrest/social justice movements, climate change, etc.), more findings from research in the recent literature suggest that flexible ways of learning (or cultures of learning) can aid students in achieving a better balance with their competing priorities. The research aim across these three articles is to further investigate students' preferred methods of course delivery and expand upon student well-being research with a common goal of understanding relationships between certain variables to shed light on different factors that may ultimately encourage healthier mindsets and overall wellness among students in their college years.

Article 1

In Article 1, the relationship between students' self-reported ideal format of taking college courses is compared with their subjective happiness levels. Although there

has been a spike in mental health challenges that have risen at an even greater rate post-pandemic (Colby, 2024; Prasath et al., 2021; Wiley, 2024), there may be opportunities toward reshaping the university experience. By redesigning the college curriculum toward a more flexible model, educators can help learners reduce stress, achieve a better life balance, and improve happiness levels. Future research on this topic will be beneficial to monitor the higher education landscape and societal needs, to offer guiding principles toward improving hybrid instructional practices to better serve students, and to implement data-informed positive change that purposefully extends into lifelong phases of the holistic individual.

Article 2

Article 2 extends student well-being and preferred course format research from the first article. In addition to investigating ideal ways of taking college classes from the student vantage point, other factors are addressed to determine whether occurrences of academic stress and regularly practicing positivity methods are associated with subjective happiness levels. After the COVID-19 pandemic began, organizations and individuals were creative in leveraging technology to find different ways of working and learning so they could continue to fulfill work and school responsibilities amid the global health crisis. With new experiences came new realizations for the education sector and the workplace. “This provides a real opportunity to move away from inflexible office-based working practices to embrace more flexible ways of working – in terms not only of place but also of time” (Gratton, 2022, p.11). As ways of working and learning are becoming more flexible and fluid, further research will continue to aid faculty on how to effectively

adapt to radical shifts in learning cultures and better equip students for their careers in the post-pandemic world.

Article 3

In Article 3, factors that may affect belongingness are examined. Specifically, traditional learners of higher education who reported hybrid as their ideal format of taking college courses also had a higher sense of belonging. Additionally, the research results uncover a positive association with sense of belonging for students who have higher campus involvement and are members of at least one student organization. Finally, non-minority students were shown to have a slightly higher sense of belonging level on average than their minority peers. A recommendation for future research on this topic is to repeat the study with a larger percentage of minority students as research participants.

Discussion

As traditional-aged students embark upon their journey into college, they are engaging in many new experiences that can feel overwhelming. When institutions of higher learning adopt a more flexible culture of learning, students can achieve healthier levels of overall well-being and can optimize their collegiate experience and lifelong learning journey beyond graduation. The rate of mental health challenges among young people has increased exponentially, according to data-driven findings. An especially alarming finding from recent research conducted through the national Healthy Minds Study is that suicide is the second leading cause of death in individuals who are in the 15 to 29 age range (Casey et al., 2022; Lipson et al., 2022; Oh et al., 2021). “The Healthy Minds Study provides a detailed picture of mental health and related issues in college

student populations" (Healthy Minds Network, 2023, p. 1). When the COVID-19 pandemic began, emotional health challenges continued to soar among the college student population on a national scale. "COVID-19 has and will continue to magnify this phenomenon" (Prasath et al., 2021, p. 46). Students who were used to the traditional academic environment were thrusted into a fully digital learning realm and were getting a taste of the various ways and possibilities of learning outside of the physical classroom spaces. This upheaval unexpectedly set the foundation for a naturally occurring lab experiment in the field with real-life situations at a magnitude that was unimaginable leading to The Great Experiment of 2020. A key result of this organic experiment was "the Z-Shift," meaning that today's traditional-aged Generation Z college students now expect a more flexible model when it comes to taking classes.

Findings

The general research findings of this dissertation show that hybrid courses, positivity practices, and campus involvement are factors associated with higher levels of overall well-being among traditional-aged college students. Specifically, students who prefer hybrid courses reported being happier than those who indicated a different format as their ideal way of taking college classes. Hybrid education provides a flexible culture of learning. Increased flexibility allows students to achieve a healthier balance in various priorities, which leads to lower stress and higher overall well-being levels. Students who practice positivity methods on a regular basis (such as exercising, meditating, etc.) are generally happier than those who do not. Positivity methods, when practiced in life regularly, are shown to lower stress levels and increase well-being. Finally, increased

student involvement in campus organizations is associated with a stronger sense of belonging. Sense of belonging is associated with increased retention and graduation rates.

Practical Implications and Recommendations

Undisputedly, there are numerous advantages and disadvantages when it comes to online education. The same can be said for other methods of learning too, including traditional in-person classes that are facilitated F2F entirely. Attitudes and preferences vary among people. However, today's traditional college students are speaking up about the new ways of learning that they experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic. Societal norms were shaken up and change happened radically so that educational institutions could maintain academic continuity, and so that many companies could maintain business continuity if possible while doing their best to keep people physically distanced in attempts to reduce spreading the dangerous virus. There were many ways, mostly using technological tools, in which people creatively adapted so they could continue to communicate with one another (mostly digitally) and carry out work and school responsibilities. These experiences were eye-opening to many as adjustments were made and the work that needed to get done happened. Although it may not have been realized by many people during the peak of COVID, the experiences from the pandemic timeframe sparked trends toward hybrid work models at a vast scale that have stuck.

Through experience and data, there are various ways to learn how to design a hybrid work structure. Ekelman and Kantor (2023) offer various guidelines to consider when designing and implementing the hybrid model. In addition to being flexible, they suggest also being cognizant of mental health and wellness challenges and

acknowledging the struggles that are often encountered in trying to establish and maintain a healthy work-life balance. Communicating expectations clearly, and be straightforward about synchronous meetings versus asynchronous time.

Although flexibility is the key to effective hybrid environments, it is not a one size fits all approach. By understanding possible options for setting up a flexible model, educators can observe and interact with each class to prescribe a hybrid approach. Consider designing hybrid courses in a way that "that gives learners voice, choice, and (some) control" (Cooker et al., 2022, p. 183). When students are afforded opportunities to provide input, they often become more active participants and more vested in the learning journey.

Conclusion

The overall findings of this research are in alignment with the available literature and suggest that a broad shift in paradigm for the higher education system would be advantageous for our modern times. In this post-pandemic era, most of today's Generation Z college students prefer to shift to a hybrid learning culture. Likewise, the positive association identified in this research between hybrid preferences and higher levels of overall well-being (subjective happiness and sense of belonging) should be considered in discussions and possible planning of larger change. Our society is amid times of great change with many companies and organizations already shifting to a more flexible work future with designing and implementing hybrid models in the workplace. These findings seek further consideration among leaders and educators of higher

education institutions, and more research is needed to fully understand the many layers and evolving nature of this topic.

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