
EXTERNAL STRESSORS AND TIME POVERTY AMONG ONLINE STUDENTS: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY

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Abstract

In this exploratory study, we report results from interviews with 49 students at a large public urban university in the US who enrolled in at least one course online. In line with the literature, many students cited work or family reasons for enrolling in an online course. However, when asked at the end of the interview whether there were any other life events that impacted the time and energy that they had for their studies, 73% of the students cited at least one additional external stressor, and many of them cited up to three or four different categories of external stressors. These included illness/disability, death in the family, caretaking responsibilities, and housing instability, among others. One particularly striking result is that 89% of the external stressors reported by students in response to the final questions of the interview had not been volunteered by students when they were originally asked why they enrolled online or what factors impacted their course outcomes – this suggests that the prevalence of these more complex environmental factors may go underreported in studies that do not ask about them explicitly.

Motivation for the Study

Online students have different characteristics than face-to-face students (i.e. Shea & Bidjerano, 2014; Wladis, Hachey, & Conway, 2015a; 2015b) and research has investigated whether students are at higher risk of dropping out or failing online than in comparable face-to-face courses (i.e. Jaggars & Xu, 2010; Johnson & Mejia, 2014; Shea, & Bidjerano, 2014; Wladis, Hachey, & Conway, 2015b). While many studies account for online students' demographic data, few include data on student characteristics related to external stressors or time poverty. Yet, online students are more likely to be working full time or to have children, and these factors have been correlated with higher stress levels and higher rates of time poverty (Giancola, Grawitch, & Borchert, 2009; Wladis, Hachey, & Conway, 2018). Moreover, other external stressors (i.e. illness or job/housing instability) may also prompt students to enrol in online courses because of a need for flexibility in time and space. These

additional complex environmental factors may also correlate with course outcomes, so it is important to collect data on these particular factors when researching online students. In this exploratory study, we report results from interviews with students at the City University of New York [CUNY] who enrolled in courses online. We use the student narratives from those interviews to investigate to what extent external stressors may have impacted the time and energy that students had available for their studies, and to the extent possible, to explore the extent to which these characteristics may have influenced student online course enrolment decisions.

Literature Review

Online learners are more likely to be female, older, married, active military or to have other responsibilities (e.g., full-time work, children), and are more likely to have other “non-traditional” characteristics (e.g., delayed college enrolment; no high school diploma; part-time enrolment; financially independent) (Shea & Bidjerano, 2014; Wladis, Conway, & Hachey, 2015b). Several large-scale studies report that students who enrol in online courses are at significantly higher risk of course or college dropout (i.e. Xu & Jaggars, 2011a; 2011b), although a some large-scale studies suggest a positive impact of online enrolment (Johnson & Mejia, 2014; Shea & Bidjerano, 2014); so overall, results are mixed. One reason for the mixed results may be how researchers account (or do not account) for online student characteristics and life factors; currently, it remains unclear to what extent differential outcomes may be due to the characteristic profile of online versus face-to-face students (Wladis, Conway, & Hachey, 2016).

Many online students report the need for the flexibility afforded by online courses due to life challenges that make it difficult to attend face-to-face; students often cite lack of time/need for time flexibility, family responsibilities, reduced commute and work obligations as reasons for online enrolment (i.e. Daymont & Blau, 2011; Jaggars & Xu, 2010; Pontes et al., 2010; Wladis, Hachey, & Conway, 2015b; 2016). Yet, such student characteristics are not typically tracked by institutional research data, nor are they often addressed in studies of student characteristics that may impact online enrolment and/or outcomes. These and other environmental factors may be stigmatized and under-represented by online students, since “traditional” college students are not represented as having jobs, families, disabilities, health issues or other major life stressors outside of college (Chao, DeRocco, & Flynn, 2007; Chen, 2017).

Theoretical Framework

Our framework posits that *time poverty* (Vickery, 1977), a by-product of various environmental factors such as family responsibilities and work, influences students’ decisions about enrolling online and may impact course outcomes. Time poverty includes

both quantity and quality of time; in relation to time quality, the flexibility and predictability of available time [which can also often be influenced by external environmental stressors] may be important (Jaggars, 2014). There is clear evidence that student parents and working students are more time poor than their childless and non-working peers (Wladis, Hachey, & Conway, 2018) and both of these groups are more likely to enrol online (Jaggars, 2014). Further, in a previous study, we found that online students are, on average, more time poor than students who enrol in the same course face-to-face (Conway, Wladis & Hachey, 2020).

Another related issue that may impact both enrolment and outcomes online is external stressors; student stress can arise from various environmental factors or from the amount of time and energy required for college study (i.e. time poverty). Academic, social, emotional or financial stress has been shown to negatively impact college students' academic performance (for a review, see Pariat, Rynjah, Joplin, & Kharjana, 2014). In particular, non-traditional students (who enrol online at higher rates), often face additional external sources of stress within their family, job and personal life in comparison to traditional college students (Giancola, Grawitch, & Borchert, 2009). However, little is known about the more complex external life factors that may exist in the lives of online students, and how these may impact online enrolment decisions and/or online course outcomes.

Method

In-depth hour-long semi-structured interviews with 49 students enrolled in online courses at one of the two- or four-year colleges (in an undergraduate or master's program) throughout the City University of New York (CUNY), a large urban public university in the United States. Interviews were conducted immediately after the completion of a semester in which each student had enrolled in an online course. Students were recruited via email, were paid \$20 for their time, and were interviewed over the phone (a few students elected to come in and be interviewed in person). Students were asked about their reasons for enrolling in an online course, about their experiences in the course, and about various complex environmental factors that were present during the semester in which they were enrolled in the course, such as whether they have children (and if so, about their ages and the childcare available to them), their work hours (as well as the impact of work on their studies), and other external life stressors (e.g. health issues) that may have impacted their studies that semester. Interviews were continued until full saturation was reached, both in terms of repetition of common themes in the interviews, as well as representation of various student demographic groups that were present in the overall online student population at CUNY (e.g. gender, race/ethnicity, program and college

enrolment, grade point average, successful versus unsuccessful completion of the online course, etc.).

An emergent coding scheme was developed to determine common themes. First one of the researchers read through all the student responses and developed an emergent coding scheme using constant comparison analysis. Then, two other researchers coded all of the student reasons for course dropout using this coding scheme; all three researchers involved in the coding revised the coding structure throughout the coding process by combining codes, splitting codes, suggesting new codes, re-categorizing codes according to the framework, and re-defining codes. Such changes were undertaken through joint discussion until all three researchers came to a consensus. After two full rounds of coding, with a norming session in between, final inter-rater agreement for all codes used on this sample as measured by Krippendorff's alpha was 0.976.

Results and Discussion

Incidence of Factors Related to Time Poverty and Stressors

As expected, many students cited work or family reasons for enrolling in an online course; this replicates results already found in existing literature on students' reasons for enrolling in courses online: 51% cited commitments related to paid work; 31% cited family obligations; and 27% cited commute, distance, or convenience as reasons for enrolling online. This is similar to previous studies, and reflects that various external non-academic factors are particularly relevant to students who select courses online at public universities in the US; many of these factors are also related to time poverty (e.g., Wladis, Hachey, & Conway, 2015b) and stress (e.g., Savage, 2006; Grabowski et al., 2016).

However, what was particularly striking and surprising is that, when specifically asked at the end of the interview whether there were any other life events that impacted the time and energy that they had for their studies that semester, many students brought up a whole host of external environmental stressors that they had not originally cited when asked about either their reasons for enrolling online or the factors that impacted their course outcomes. Seventy-three percent of students cited at least one external stressor, and many of them cited up to three or four different categories of stressors. Of those who reported some kind of external stressor, the vast majority were serious health problems (either for the student themselves or a close relative) or the death of an immediate family member. Frequencies of each category can be seen in Table 1 below.

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Table 1: Proportion of different types of external stressors cited by online students during the interview

Serious illness/injury (family/close friend)	33%
death in the family/close friend	19%
caring for sick/disabled parent/grandparent	19%
job stressors	19%
Serious illness/injury (their own)	17%
unemployment/job change	17%
moving house or housing insecurity	17%
pregnant/birth of a child	11%
financial issues	11%
childcare issues	8%
romantic relationship stressors, including divorce	8%
disabled child	9%
planning a wedding	3%
domestic violence	3%
immigration	3%

Notes: n = 49

These external stressors were reported by students when they were asked specifically about factors that influenced the amount of time or energy they had for their studies, so this is not a simple recording of all students who experienced any of these events – there may have been students who did experience them but did not report them because they did not feel that they influenced the time or energy they had for their studies (or who did not report them because of desirability bias, influenced by the stigma that may be attached to some of these stressors).

One particularly striking result is that 89% of the factors reported by students in response to these final questions of the interview did not come up when students were asked specifically why they enrolled online, or what factors impacted their course outcomes. Instead, most of these factors arose only when students were specifically asked about other life events that impacted the time or energy they had to devote to their studies. A variety of examples were given to students during the interview, which may have influenced results (e.g. students may have been more likely to report health issues since this was given as a specific example – however, other examples that were listed, such as immigration, were not cited by students at high rates). Some students simply stated briefly without detail an event that had happened (e.g., “My father died last semester”), whereas other students gave significant detail about exactly what had happened and how it had either influenced them to enrol online or impacted their ability to complete coursework that semester. Many students were struggling with multiple challenges at once – often one challenge would lead to others, or several would naturally co-occur for common reasons. We present here a small sample of student narratives from the interviews, to give a sense of the scope of the challenges that many students were facing.

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One student was working 40 hours/week to pay for living expenses and was the primary caretaker of two children in primary school. While this student cited work and childcare as having an impact on the decision to enrol online as well as on course outcomes, these stressors were not the only ones:

“Recently I found out I had kidney stones, you know I was getting a lot of pain, and I thought it had to do with my sleeping habits. I would wake up and I would have a lot of lower back pain. It affected me as far as moving around and certain points it was very painful for me to move around... The semester that I took the classes online, my father actually he was actually dying of cancer, and that was hard of course because I was still in school...he passed [in] November during this time. I did let the teachers know and they were very considerate. You know they said you’ve been a good student and you know if there was an assignment when we were going to have the funeral, they told me you go be with your dad, even though I was trying to do the work the same day I found out... since my dad passed, I also alternate households because I would stay with my mom, because she was by herself. I would stay there a couple of nights and go to my home with my husband and kids, then there would be times when we would all stay there and like that.”

Another student worked 20 hours/week to pay for living expenses and was the primary caretaker of three children (in high school and primary school), but described other stressors that impacted time and energy for school while enrolled in an online course:

“I suffer from clinical depression so some days it’s very very hard to get out of bed in the morning. My life tasks let alone any of my other additional tasks that has impacted my education has been fortunate though because I’ve had professors [who are] very very understanding and with dialogue I was really able to do what I had to do to make sure I was reaching my grades even though I was feeling very very overwhelmed...[Last semester] my sister died from cancer... I was very tired. I was being pulled in a lot of different directions and a lot was being expected of me. I think it’s different when you’re a parent and you’re going to school than when you’re fresh out of high school living at home you know, and classes don’t take that into consideration when writing the syllabus. We’re expected to perform as if we’re 18 and have no responsibilities when in all actuality we have 1000 responsibilities. So depression, grief she was very sick you know chemo radiation, all of those things had me being pulled in 1000 different directions and it was hard for me to not only cope but to keep up.”

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This student did not have any children, yet had a challenging work schedule which was the reason for enrolling online; they described work as having a major negative impact on their ability to do well in school:

“I was working so I was kinda getting bogged down. I was full-time school, I never took an online course in my life, so I figured I’ll try it because I don’t have to go in that day, I’ll be able to go to work and then study at night when I go home...I was working in retail at the time and it was very demanding. Sometimes they wanted you to stay later or if someone else is not doing their job you have to pick up their slack. Working on weekends, no time to yourself, it was very stressful to manage. Yeah in the beginning everything was they had a system set up where it was a set schedule where you knew when you were coming in on the exact days. Then later they changed it where the schedule changes every single week. It was just the worst system so you never knew when you are coming in so you know what to expect. The store got busier and busier and busier... I tried not to make noise about things so I would go home late and still have to study...I was able to do it but I wish I would’ve had more time definitely.”

Another student described work as the reason for enrolling online, but went on to later describe other challenges, including childcare, financial stress, and housing insecurity, that impacted their ability to do well in courses:

“There is no adequate affordable childcare and when I was at [the college] they had a daycare center, so I could take my classes there, but the debt that I was accruing because I would have to take student loans to make ends meet it’s why I had to start working. And I’m married, there was a cap, my husband said I could borrow a certain amount of money. And I exceeded that so... [My job] is not very flexible at all I have to be there. I work Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, and Saturday. My Fridays alternate between 7 PM and 7 AM and sometimes there are 11 to 7am... I have two minor children one is seven and one is one. My seven-year-old I had to send to a private school in Pennsylvania but it’s free because I wasn’t making enough money to make take care of her. Once I lost my last job and I started school I had to send her and they accepted her thank God so she’s safely in school. Now that this job and things are getting better I can go get her... I think I could do better as a student if I didn’t have the responsibilities of children. As a matter fact I know I could do better I could do a lot better if I had done it sooner or before I had children... The only problem that I ran into in my first semester was that I was almost homeless. That was the only

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thing just getting through the first year was a struggle I was absent a lot and I didn't have--I wasn't able to study as much... I just want you to know that this is hard with my responsibilities, like going to school is the hardest thing, but it's the best thing that I've ever done you know it really is it's a real sacrifice now that I'm thinking about it, as I'm listening to myself, it's a real sacrifice..."

While the external stressors experienced by students in these particular excerpts from student interviews may seem strikingly severe, these examples are fairly representative of the type of challenges that different students described. While some students did not face challenges of these kinds, they were in the minority. In addition, we assume that the sensitive nature of these challenges means that they are likely underreported in these interviews (e.g., Dayan, Paine, & Johnson, 2010; McNeeley, 2012). Our data itself also suggests that these stressors are underreported: Of the students interviewed here, 20% cited general work and/or family or other external factors as impacting their decision to enrol online without ever describing or detailing the exact nature of these stressors, so these stressors were not included in the table above and these students were not coded as having these specific stressors during that semester. Many of these stressors (e.g. disability, illness, and even work and family responsibilities) are often stigmatized, or at least presented as “atypical” of college students (e.g., Chen, 2017), and therefore, students may feel more comfortable keeping these details of their lives private, even though they can have a profound effect on their postsecondary outcomes (e.g. Grabowski et al., 2016).

For example, of those students who originally described family commitments as a reason for enrolling online, only about 60% of them went on to provide specific details about the particular family commitments that impacted the time that they had for their courses. On the other hand, of those students who described family-related stressors that impacted the time or energy that they had for college, only 32% of them had originally cited family responsibilities as a reason for enrolling online. This is likely in part explained by the fact that some students had family-related stressors that were unanticipated and therefore, not factored into their course registration decision. However, it is also possible that students' decisions to take an online course were actually influenced by family-related stressors, but that students didn't always feel comfortable reporting that as their reason for their online enrolment. This could happen either consciously or unconsciously, as students may attempt to focus attention on justifications that might be considered more “acceptable” according to unspoken norms in college, such as citing academic rather than person reasons for enrolment decisions because of desirability bias and the stigmatized nature of many of the stressors that “non-traditional” students face in college (e.g., Chen, 2017).

Limitations

This is a qualitative study. The results here are exploratory, and suggest key factors that should be further tested by future research. This study cannot establish generalizable causal relationships, and it would not be appropriate to use the results presented here to make larger-scale inferences. In addition, because we only interviewed students taking courses online, and not students who enrolled in only face-to-face courses, we cannot say whether these patterns are specific to online students. However, the high frequency of these external stressors in the interviews with online students, and the specific linking in many cases of these stressors to student decisions to enrol online, does provide some evidence of a link between online enrolment and high incidence of external stressors. While this cannot be used to definitively conclude what the relationship between online enrolment and external stressors may be, it does suggest that further research should be conducted to explore the links between online enrolment and external stressors, particularly those that may limit the time or energy that students have to devote to their college work.

Conclusion and Implications

External stressors and life circumstances that contribute to time poverty were very prevalent in this sample, and included factors such as illness, death in the immediate family, caretaking responsibilities, job stressors, and housing insecurity. Many of these stressors were interrelated and co-occurring. We cannot say for certain if the patterns observed here with students are significantly different for online versus face-to-face-only students or not—this is an exploratory study, intended to identify factors that may have been previously overlooked that might be important to consider when looking to support the college success of students enrolled in online classes. But whether these stressors are more specific to online students or not, it is clear that students enrolled in online courses at public institutions in the US face a host of external challenges that likely impact their ability to successfully complete their courses, and that further research which investigates these factors could be critical to fully understanding how to best support these students. The results of this study suggest that non-academic supports that help students successfully navigate complex external stressors, like those cited by students in these interviews, may be particularly important for supporting the academic success of students who enrol in online courses.

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