

College in the Time of COVID-19: An Ethical Perspective

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SCU and other universities are trying to decide what to do about fall term classes given the pandemic. Discuss the ethical issues involved and how might you solve them.

Abstract

This paper is an analysis of ethical issues involved in Santa Clara University's decisions regarding fall quarter given the current COVID-19 pandemic. This paper applies a variety of moral philosophical perspectives to discuss three main ethical issues that SCU should consider when moving forward: disclosure of information, liability issues, and public health concerns. In order for the university to be better prepared for the fall quarter, this paper concludes by proposing possible strategies and solutions that the current university's system can implement.

Keywords: college, COVID-19, pandemic, ethics, moral philosophy

College in the Time of COVID-19: An Ethical Perspective

Living in the time of Coronavirus is no easy task. Without a doubt, these are highly uncertain times; little do we know for sure what the state of our world will be like in a month, a week, or even tomorrow. The COVID-19 pandemic has affected everyone, especially college students.

College is a significant period in an individual's life, and a time filled with opportunities for growth, challenges, and developing ethical skills (Plante, 2016). These aspects of college also apply under abnormal circumstances. During a global pandemic, there are even more decisions to be made. Everyone involved with a university has the power to make sound ethical choices, as well as impulsive and uninformed ones. No matter who we are, our behavior during times of crisis speaks to our character and conveys our way of being in this world.

For the purposes of this paper, I will be examining the ethical issues involved in Santa Clara University's decisions regarding fall quarter given the pandemic. This paper applies a variety of moral philosophical perspectives to analyze three main ethical issues that SCU should consider when moving forward. Furthermore, I will be proposing possible strategies and solutions that individuals and the current university's system can implement in order to be better prepared for the fall quarter.

Ethical Considerations

Disclosure of information. When the United States government recognized the threat of COVID-19 and implemented shelter-in-place orders across the country, universities announced their transition to a virtual format. Students' lives were quickly disrupted, and many wondered what things would have been like had they finished the school year in person. Universities and

their stakeholders (including students, professors, employees, administration, parents) have made haste in their plans for the upcoming school year. While the California State University system and other schools have made it clear that they will either be completely online or going back to campus in the fall, Santa Clara has not been as transparent regarding this issue. According to SCU's latest update, President Father O'Brien is planning to "open campuses in the fall, with modified in-person classes and instruction" (Santa Clara University, 2020). However, it is not clear to what extent classes will be in-person or virtual.

When considering ethical egoism, it is understandable that SCU might not want to be completely transparent with their plans. It is natural for egoism to be the first consideration when making decisions, because it allows parties to support themselves by doing what is in their self-interest (Vaughn, 2014). If the university wants to stay afloat, it needs to receive sufficient funds, which come from students who pay tuition. SCU does not have as large of an endowment fund compared to other schools and may have to shut down if there is a deficit in enrollment in the upcoming academic year. This is especially the case for incoming international students, who might not want to pay full tuition for hybrid classes; their parents may be deterred from letting their students travel to America, given the current state of public health concerns in this country.

Liability issues. If SCU decides to open campus in the fall, there is potential for liability issues. This is a larger problem than it initially seems; having cut funding to REAL and other student programs, the university has demonstrated that its financial situation is not optimal. If all parties involved do not sufficiently comply with public health measures, cases of COVID-19 might make a comeback. How many people will be infected before the university shuts down, transitions to online classes again, and starts receiving lawsuits?

Another challenge SCU faces is continuing to provide essential resources for students without sacrificing the health of its employees. On-campus workers in the dining hall, Learning Commons, and other public, highly populated areas risk their lives to serve students every day. Furthermore, the university needs to give special consideration to a population that is older and more at risk for COVID-19: its professors. Do professors have the right to refuse to teach in-person classes if they want to protect their health? If so, what does that mean for students who plan to enroll in the fall only if classes will be taught in person? As an institution of higher education, SCU should take its quality of education very seriously. Social interaction is a crucial component of education, because gestures, eye contact, and physical presence in the classroom are integral to the educational experience for both students and teachers. As we delve deeper into these ethical issues, we can see that all stakeholders are connected, and everyone is likely to feel the impact of a single action.

Public health concerns. So far, Santa Clara's Public Health Officer has extended the shelter-in-place order and implemented safety and cleaning protocols. SCU has followed the County with several public health strategies, such as creating open study spaces, serving take-out food at Benson, and disinfecting commonly used surfaces on a regular basis.

Despite the County's and SCU's efforts, not all students will comply with public health guidelines. Unfortunately, some individuals may refuse to wear masks to make a statement. When Donald Trump visited a mask factory without wearing a mask, he set an example for the public, resulting in many people also refusing to wear a mask (Elving, 2020). This is a prime example of cultural relativism, which establishes an action as morally right if one's culture approves of it (Vaughn). Although cultural relativism can justify acts of defiance that could

endanger others, SCU can use cultural relativism to its advantage. By encouraging members of the community to wear masks to protect themselves and others, SCU may be able to establish a culture of care as a norm that goes beyond its Jesuit values.

Possible Solutions

We can establish a framework for the university's actions by using the three main *prima facie* principles, which are principles that apply in a situation unless exceptions are justified (Vaughn). The first principle is respect for all persons, which can be done by honoring the means-end principle: treating people with great intrinsic worth and as ends in themselves. The second is justice: treating equals equally, making reparations for wrongdoings, and taking an approach of distributive justice — distributing society's benefits and costs fairly. Ideally, SCU would balance its need to sustain itself while doing what is best for the health and safety of its stakeholders. Finally, the third principle is beneficence: acting to benefit others and produce the most favorable balance of good. SCU can accomplish this by being transparent about its plans and upholding its promise to deliver the best possible experience to everyone involved.

Although we are living in an age of anxiety and uncertainty, it is only a matter of time before we find out how the universities will decide to move forward. At the end of the day, this pandemic is bigger than all of us. Despite being physically isolated from each other, we can and should work together to overcome the hardships that our community and the whole world are facing. As responsible members of Santa Clara University and the greater human community, there is a valuable tool we all have the power to use — an ethical perspective — especially during times like these when we feel powerless.

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