



How Students Can Rise Above Any Crisis

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Have you ever imagined that one day students will have to be their own Heroes? Similar to the Marvel Heroes we watch on TV, but what these students are fighting for is their own education, and college life. Imagine to suddenly become a virtual human being that is forced to stay at home 24/7 in order to protect humanity's health. This is the reality nowadays due to the Global pandemic called "covid-19". Students worldwide have been witnessing one of the sudden global pandemics which had a huge impact on the student's life in general, and on their education.

In Lebanon, the situation was double the trouble. It was a hectic year on all the Lebanese people including college students, in which they found themselves disappointed with the eco-socio-political context that they are forced to live with every day. There is nothing worse than feeling powerless, when you are a dynamic, full-spirited student. Nonetheless, students did not refrain from action. Specifically, Lebanese students refused to stay silent about breaches happening at the national level, and tried to replace these lacks with personal and team initiatives. Here comes the role of student representatives who chose to rise in the mid of a chaos.





Despite the fact that all the university services had to shift to the online world, students were ready to adapt and convert their creative ideas into a reality to keep their engagement high. It is sufficient to highlight on the fact that students in international universities have been facing similar issues due to this pandemic.

For instance, in Cádiz university they faced many obstacles in this pandemic including the elections of the students' representatives that was always essential to them to increase the students' engagement. It was not only hard on the representatives of each degree, but also with the representatives of the faculties, since they were used to conduct all the elections face to face, but this academic year has not given them the chance to do so. They were forced to continue with the same representatives of last year. That is not just a problem related to the idea of democracy, but also for representatives, who in normal circumstances receive some credits in return of their work, but this year they are working only for the sake of help.

Therefore, this article is going to introduce the solutions created by the students themselves in response to these challenges and crises. In addition to the advantages, they actually gained from the latter within their student engagement. All the ideas will be provided by real examples from the following universities: Lebanese American University (LAU), Holy Spirit University of Kaslik (USEK), University of Cádiz in Spain (UCA).

- **Students Unity is the key**

Despite all of the challenges that students have been facing, there have been many advantages. One of the most interesting phenomena observed was the unity of students which enabled them to be their own representatives and



fight for their rights as students to receive all the services they need in both, education and helping their community.

In terms of education, the student council at the Lebanese American University (LAU) was able to gather all the students and use online petition platforms to make sure that the students are expressing their demands, one of these petitions included the pass/no pass feature which can help students to alleviate their stress during the difficult times, especially in Lebanon. Since, implementing the pass/no pass option on the chosen courses means that their final grades will not affect the overall GPA of the student. Fortunately, the student council was able to successfully change the administration's decision, and implement the pass/no pass feature for 2 courses.

Similarly, at the Holy Spirit University of Kaslik (USEK), student representatives were able to mirror several important concerns to their administration. One of these concerns was also the Pass/Repeat option, where the overall GPA of the students was protected as long as they pass the course. Another great result of the student's unity appeared in some cases in Lebanon where students were able to overcome the difficult economic crisis. This occurred since Lebanon has been facing a huge banks issue where they couldn't make transactions especially in dollars, a lot of limitations were taking place which negatively affected students' ability to pursue quality education, and receive their basic rights. Imagine that students were not able to buy an eBook online due to this situation!

Therefore, at LAU, it was necessary for students to gather themselves up and contact their instructors or even their Deans about their issue of not being able to purchase sufficient books. So, they created some pressure which led to contacting the books publishers and companies themselves to tell them about their situations.



Luckily, the book publishers sympathized with the Lebanese students and provided them with free codes to access the eBooks for a whole semester for some course, for example, the managerial accounting course.

Furthermore, at the USEK, students had to find other solutions to cope with the economic situation. Hence, with the help of the student representatives, courses were being taught in hybrid manner (they were both synchronous and asynchronous at the same time), so the instructor would give a live session using Microsoft Teams at the scheduled time of the class. Also, the professor posts several materials including the recordings of the live session on Moodle Elearning. This allows students who need to work in these difficult times to have the flexibility to access the courses at any time they want. Also, it helps students who own only one electronic device to be able to share it with their sibling and manage their time to receive education equally.

Moreover, in the case of Cádiz university (UCA) in Spain, many educational obstacles occurred. Still, students relied on their unity to face all the issues and continue their education in any way possible. For example, when students were doing their oral exams, some professors started to ask these students to turn on their webcam. Although, the bitter truth is that not all of these students have webcams, or even the ability to purchase one due to their economic issues. Thus, students decided to unite and gather themselves to solve their issue which includes the fact that many of them do not have laptops to use throughout their online classes. As a result, student representatives were here to help and take actions as mediators between the students and the professors. Luckily, they found another solution to conduct the oral exams and discussed it with the administration. Moreover, they used the university service which includes lending the students some computers with a camera.



Although it was still impossible to apply this for every single student, they are still trying their best to find new solutions and face all these obstacles.

August 4 was one of the most traumatic days ever for Beirut and all the Lebanese hearts. At 6:07 pm, a huge blast took place in the port of Beirut which was considered as the 3rd most powerful blasts to ever exist in the world after Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Words will never be able to describe what happened to the people's health physically and mentally, including students. Some students lost their homes, or people they love, and most importantly they lost their city of life, Beirut. However, this lit the fire of responsibility in the hearts of the students to stand up for their community and help each other to rise again. Students united once again on the ground to their community in all the ways possible.

For instance, at the Lebanese American university, students did a lot of initiatives, and dealt with several NGOs even before the help of the administration. It is important to highlight that students developed several skills during these activities, one of them was the ability to be as organized as possible in a team. They were able to create committees and sub committees to divide all the work with the leadership spirit, so this can be considered as a bulb of hope in a catastrophe. These initiatives reflected the love that students held for their country and for each other, as they cleaned the streets of Beirut, organized fundraising campaigns, and even donated several needs. For instance, one of these initiatives held by the LAU Social Work Club was the fundraising campaign for the Lebanese civil defense that were mostly affected by the blast, they successfully helped in repairing the damages that hit the department of the civil defense after the explosion.





Similarly, in the case of USEK, several students mentioned their will to help families inflicted by the disastrous blast. Thus, students organized their initiatives with the help of the Green Committee, who created a centralized group using WhatsApp. Its main task was to link the students to specific NGOs, or families, or even hospitals. Meeting points were set at the university and groups of students were divided in AM and PM teams to try to cover all needed calls for help. In addition, many fundraising events and food banks have been made at the level of each faculty or school at USEK (Ex: School of Medicine, School of Law and Political Sciences) after the increasing level of poverty in Lebanon.

In conclusion, if students really want to become their own heroes, then the concept of unity should be implanted in their spirits to be able to rise over and over again, just like a phoenix!

- **Students Can Create a Safe Environment in the Mid of a Chaos!**

Not only did Lebanese students have to deal with a traumatic explosion, but they were also struggling with political, economic, and health problems at the same time. Nevertheless, an impressive phenomenon was observed in which students were able to create a safe environment that is student centered rather than being politically oriented. Students were influenced by the October 17 uprising which was against all kinds of corruption. All they wanted was an independent state that ensures their rights as humans by shifting to secularism. This led to the rise of the LAU Secular Club which listened to the students' demands along with the student council. Despite all of the challenges, the students' elections were held online in a smooth manner, in which they used the social media to effectively campaign using short videos.



In fact, students' participation in voting was around 61.9% which constitutes a large number of LAU students. It was remarkable that the elected members of the student council were independent candidates for the first time in LAU history! We observed that when students are independent candidates that believe in the importance of secularism and democracy, they tend to be more student oriented towards all the different needs and demands of students. Indeed, the independent student council proved this by holding biweekly meetings to address students concerns under the title of "The Conversation Hour". This initiative is surely protecting students' rights in pursuing a quality education at LAU with a safe community inside the university where all students are respected without the interference of any political or even economical issue that students are not responsible for. Moreover, students were able to voice their concerns safely without any type of judgement. This ensured students' encouragement to maintain their productivity and healthy mental state rather than giving up to the depression around.

To further ensure that students were coping mentally, the USEK Counseling Center (UCC) was working 24/7 on student cases that were feeling depressed from the repeated lockdowns and from socio-political instability in Lebanon. The biggest number of students reaching out to the UCC was seen during this period; this proves that students are really going through tough times and that the tools provided for them by the university are effective. Surely, this service is free of charge and fully confidential. In conclusion, Students succeeded in creating their own environment that is known to be safe and supportive for everyone to spread some hope.

- **Unstoppable: Students' Life Activities**

The online learning system definitely was difficult for everyone to adjust to at first. However, despite this sudden challenge, students were able to adapt.



They even created their online zone where students seemed to be virtually engaged in many events more than they used to be on campus. This is due to many reasons; one of them can be the flexibility of their time and the fact that it's much easier to attend events from home. Fortunately, students did not accept the idea of the lockdown being a barrier to their university life and activities.

This can be clearly shown at LAU, where clubs held several events and worked hard on searching for suitable platforms to do their events. For instance, the LAU Music Club insisted on experiencing activities and jam sessions even with the online system. They actually spent days to install and find suitable platforms that can be effective especially concerning the sound quality of music. They currently have 3 platforms that they use for their events, one of them is "discord" which helps deliver clear instrumental sounds. They also wanted to spread some positive vibes to their fellow students, so they used their social media accounts efficiently to upload edited singing/performing videos of them asking people to always keep their hopes high. They even maintained their love for the country by singing a song that includes a message of hope for the country and honoring the victims of Beirut blast, and uploaded it on their social media platforms.

Accordingly, they collaborated with the Psychology Club to organize a webinar where the speaker explained music therapy and how it can be beneficial for our wellbeing and mental health. They also displayed by real life examples of the Music Club performing several types of music on the spot. Moreover, the Psychology Club collaborated with Sinine Nakhle, founder of Beirut by Dyke, who is an artist, researcher and psychologist. She touched on the subject of how to use art to deal with trauma by showing and describing her work which are comics that encompass a variety of themes such as the Beirut explosion, the struggles



of being a woman and/or queer in Lebanon... Students that attended this event were encouraged to express themselves through their preferred form of art and were empowered by listening to the speaker's experience and relating to it. Other events of all kinds took place including: the investing 101 by the Entrepreneurship Club, Game night by the Event Organization Club, and Online Chess Tournament by the Chess Club, etc.

Fortunately, in Cádiz, the university was able to make cultural activities online. Some examples included the activities of the Instituto Pushkin; an association whose purpose is to expand the Russian culture in Cádiz, that even in the summer offered an introductory to the Russian language course for free but had limited places. Therefore, the online system did not stop students from providing themselves with all types of events to maintain their productivity.

Conclusion

From all the above experiences, we can say that being a student representative gives exposure and titles, but also requires duties. These duties become difficult and overwhelming when crises occur: be it economic or political or social or health crisis. We would like to give some recommendations to future student representatives, from the personal experiences we have lived and shared throughout the year of 2019-2020 and seemingly 2021.

1. **Be united:** It is important to understand one of the main morals of this situation: union. As students, we have no one to fight for us but ourselves, all of this through a group of representatives, who at any cost must give the best of them to help the student. It does not matter where they come from or what politic ideologies they follow; the must of a representative is to act as a defender. When, we, students are well united and organized, no one can stop us.



2. **Never lose hope:** no matter the circumstances, your role as a student representative will still allow you to make change.
3. **Negotiate:** you need to keep a good relationship with the Administration of your university. One hand cannot clap alone.
4. **Stay healthy:** take care of your physical and mental health, because after all you are a student too.
5. **Communicate:** Keep a good relation with everyone around you while giving them value to improve the efficiency of your position.
6. **Believe in yourself:** you are able to do anything! Believe in your own power that can influence everyone around you.

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