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Community Colleges and COVID-19: An Exploration of Challenges and Inequities

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Abstract: COVID-19 drastically changed many aspects of life in the U.S. and most certainly changed standard operating procedures in higher education. Moving all classes completely online created numerous challenges not only for students, but also for faculty. For students, these challenges included issues related to physical and mental health, job loss, and caregiving, as well as access to internet and even access to a home computer. Faculty also faced challenges. For example, many colleges and universities rely on adjunct faculty who are compensated on a course-by-course basis. Although most institutions provided faculty development sessions to make a smooth transition to online teaching, adjunct faculty were not necessarily invited to participate and, when they were, they were not compensated for time spent in these sessions or the additional work incurred to transition and teach in the online environment. This essay explores how community college students and faculty in the basic course responded to the COVID-19 crisis. Specifically, we discuss issues of employment, family responsibilities, and the digital divide as they reveal systemic inequities in the college setting, as well as in society.

Community colleges provide two key professional development opportunities for students: (1) occupational training to advance career opportunities and (2) academic education in preparation for transferring to a 4-year institution. These opportunities fill an essential need for students who lack financial resources and/or academic credentials to attend a public or private university for 4+ years. Harbour and Smith (2016) explain that community colleges exist to serve these key demands of society.

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In this sense, they are the bedrock of their communities as administration, faculty, and staff respond to the needs of the time.

COVID-19 introduced a need that community colleges had not previously faced. As was the case in most if not all higher education institutions, all instructors were forced to transition their classes quickly to online delivery in March 2020. Although online teaching and learning was not new to our institution, we had never faced the challenge of offering all of our courses fully online, not to mention all student services, administrative needs, and staff roles. Furthermore, this monumental transition took place in under 14 days.

In this essay, we explore some of the ways COVID-19 affected community college students and faculty. More specifically, we examine challenges faced by students and adjunct faculty members, especially those that perpetuated inequities. Because both authors are faculty at this community college, we were afforded the unique opportunity to be participant observers as problems unfolded during the crisis. We arrange our account in two main areas: community college student challenges and community college faculty challenges.

Community College Student Challenges

As Fong et al. (2017) reported, compared to their 4-year college counterparts, community college students are more likely to be first-generation, non-White, lower income, working (full- or part-time), and generally non-traditional (i.e., age 28 and older). This is particularly important since statistics show that students in these demographics are at higher risk for contracting and spreading COVID-19 than the majority of 4-year college and university students. To clarify, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) (2020) reported that people of color and lower socioeconomic status (SES), as well as essential workers were disproportionately affected by the virus.

Certainly, these higher risk factors increased anxiety among community college students attending our institution. For example, some students feared exposing their grandparents to the virus since they live in the same house. Unfortunately, many of these same students were also employed as essential workers (e.g., grocery store checkers, baggers), which increased the chances that they could infect their grandparents.

Moreover, these community college students also faced financial challenges. Whereas some students expressed anxiety about being essential workers, others worked in service professions (e.g., restaurant workers, retail clerks) and were furloughed or terminated as a result of health and safety restrictions imposed on small businesses. Another challenge imposed on many community college students was access to computers and reliable internet at home (Barzilai-Nahon, 2006, p. 269). To clarify, because the computer labs were closed, students that relied on lab computers with reliable internet, many could not complete assignments. Furthermore, many of the students that reported having a computer and internet access in their homes explained that the entire family had to share a single device. Imagine the complications of working from home, managing children's K-12 online learning, and completing online college courses on a single personal computer. Certainly, the digital divide was felt acutely among students at our community college during COVID-19.

Our institution responded to the digital divide challenges associated with computer and internet accessibility in two important ways. First, the college's Advocacy and Resource Center (ARC) made small

grants available to purchase digital equipment. Second, the IT department loaned refurbished computers to students to use at home. Not all students took advantage of these affordances and, instead, relied on their smartphones to complete online assignments. Although simple assignments (e.g., discussion posts) can be completed via most smartphones, other assignments (e.g., papers, tests, recorded speeches) are not a good fit for this platform. Editing features are limited on smartphones, small screen size makes it difficult to read test questions, and slow processing speeds and battery life make extended use nearly impossible. Consequently, students that relied on smartphones were put at a disadvantage that resulted in much lower scores than their classmates with computer and internet access.

In addition to these aforementioned problems, even when computer and internet access was available, many students had never used the college's learning management system (LMS). To clarify, colleges and universities have been offering online classes for years (Kentnor, 2015). However, many students at our community college had never participated in online learning prior to the pandemic. To address this challenge, our community college offered student training sessions through the eLearning Department. They offered these opportunities in a number of formats (e.g., drop-in labs, traditional staff-led workshops, one-on-one appointments, and both synchronous and asynchronous online training videos).

These institutional level affordances were helpful to some extent; however, students also faced challenges on a course-by-course basis. One particularly difficult transition occurred in the skills-based Basic Communication course. Based on guaranteed transfer agreements by the State, this course must include teaching and learning in communication theory; interpersonal communication; researched informative, persuasive, and group speeches; as well as an impromptu speech and two exams.

In the year prior to the transition to online learning brought about during COVID-19, the Communication Studies Program Coordinator (also one of the authors of this essay), developed a fully online version of the Basic Course. Through a partnership with the college's eLearning Division and Quality Matters (QM), the online version of the Basic Course went through a rigorous process to provide a class that students could successfully complete while remaining engaged with their peers and audience members to fulfill the standards of the class. The final version of the online class was offered for three semesters prior to the pandemic. The original plan was to train adjunct faculty how to teach the Basic Course online using this class as a model. However, the pandemic accelerated that process not just for adjuncts but for all faculty.

Having a fully online Basic Course available as a model for all instructors certainly helped eased some of the difficulties involved in transitioning face-to-face courses into fully online ones. For instance, the class included a recording platform for presentations that worked on smartphones and computers. This platform also allowed students to complete a group project in the same online space, eliminating the need to meet face-to-face. Additionally, all assignments, rubrics, audio lectures, and exams were already in place for students to access. Moreover, the college embedded WebEx into the LMS for all classes so that students could meet with their instructors as needed.

Although helpful, this preparedness did not yield a seamless transition for students. As previously mentioned, not all students had access (or only had limited access) to computers and the internet. Digital fatigue was also an issue. Living life fully online 24/7 proved to be overwhelming for students. Some students claimed it was too difficult to schedule a virtual out-of-class meeting with the instructor or their classmates. Thus, many students relied on the telephone to keep them connected and moving forward successfully.

Another problem with transitioning the Basic Communication course to an online one was the need to have an audience when giving speeches. Given State mandates, COVID-19 risk factors, employment issues, and family responsibilities, it simply was not possible to require students to gather a face-to-face audience for their presentations. Although students did learn important skills about developing and delivering speeches on-camera, they were not afforded an opportunity to practice skills that are easily incorporated into a face-to-face speech event (e.g., answering questions, managing feedback, connecting with the people). Arguably, most students did complete the Basic Communication course; however, doing so did come at the expense of some student learning outcomes.

Community College Faculty Challenges

It is no secret that many institutions rely on adjunct faculty to keep tuition rates low. Although the practice of hiring part-time faculty occurs in both 2-year and 4-year colleges, this practice is arguably more pronounced at community colleges. For example, adjunct hiring rates rose over 104% across institutions between 1993–2013, bringing the full-time to part-time ratio at community colleges to 1:2 (National Education Statistics as cited in Xu, 2019). Unlike their full-time cohorts, "part-time faculty are less knowledgeable about college services and resources; frequently lack access to an office space, phone line, or computer; have fewer professional relationships with colleagues; and often struggle financially as a result of low pay" (Bickerstaff & Ran, 2020, p. 3). Furthermore, in the authors' region, many adjuncts teach at multiple colleges with an average course load ranging from 12–27 ILUs. This disparity is further extended by minimal to no access to health-care benefits.

For adjunct instructors, the landscape of their career in higher education consists of teaching multiple courses at multiple institutions for much less than that of their full-time faculty colleagues. When COVID-19 forced higher learning institutions to transition immediately to online coursework only, adjunct faculty felt a burden perhaps higher than traditional faculty. This added workload meant more work for no additional pay, learning multiple online course management tools used at the different institutions where they were employed, and trying to work with administrations who struggled to aid even their full-time employees.

Adjunct faculty are paid less than minimum wage per course taught when preparation and grading time are included. Moreover, many institutions limit the number of courses one adjunct may teach to avoid paying for health care. Consequently, many adjunct faculty teach at multiple institutions simultaneously simply to earn enough to make ends meet. One author of this essay often teaches five courses per semester at multiple institutions that amounts to 100+ students in these speaking and writing intensive courses. A typical workweek (including preparation and grading time) ranges from 60–70 hours.

When the pandemic caused all coursework to transition to online delivery, all faculty including adjuncts had to learn quickly to teach online. Although some had some training, not all did. Moreover, the colleges did not offer additional pay for adjuncts that had to add training to their schedules. Essentially, all faculty including adjuncts were trying to learn to use the digital tools to teach online, as well as the new digital resources students would be using. For adjuncts, this came with limited to no training in how to teach online, how to use the new student tools, and what affordances those tools offered. Unfortunately, with COVID-19, all faculty, staff, and administrators were overwhelmed. Consequently, when adjuncts reached out for help regarding how to access and use these new tools, they often waited days or even weeks for a response. Meanwhile, when students rightly looked to their instructors for guidance, many adjuncts felt ill-prepared to meet their needs even though they wanted to do so.

To this end, students were having a difficult time managing challenges brought on with the pandemic. Thus, they begged for deadline extensions, offered multiple excuses for late work, and sought numerous exceptions to classroom rules. Admittedly, their lives had been turned upside down. However, these requests by so many students undoubtedly took a toll on the instructors. For instructors with policies not to accept late work, it was difficult to do so even when mandated by the institution. For instructors, the goal shifted from achieving student learning outcomes to merely getting students through the semester. Moreover, both students and faculty felt a strain on physical and mental health. Students reached out to faculty with questions at all hours of the day and night, and faculty felt obligated to answer as quickly as possible. This onus meant checking email at all hours and, when we took too long to respond, students reached out again, either to their instructor or to someone in a higher position. Worse yet, they stopped responding altogether. Instructors expressed stress about questions such as: Did I do everything I could? Did I say the right words to help my student? Is it my fault they are not responding? What if . . . what if . . . ? All faculty—not just adjuncts—were feeling the strain.

Faculty in general and adjunct faculty in particular complained about being overwhelmed, feeling inadequate, and experiencing mental and physical exhaustion . . . all for the same paycheck they had been receiving before the pandemic. Stress was at an all-time high for adjuncts trying to balance their own well-being with limited or no health care while, simultaneously, caring for the health, well-being, and success of their students.

COVID-19 changed the lives of most Americans. Those working as instructors in higher education were no exception. Students coped with issues related to internet access, employment, caregiving, and maintaining their own physical and mental health. Instructors had to quickly learn new ways of teaching and learning while trying to maintain their own physical and mental health. Adjunct faculty faced all these same challenges while working at multiple institutions, managing significant course loads, and earning substandard pay per course. Although the higher education landscape is likely to be forever changed by the pandemic, one thing did and will remain the same: the dedication of instructors to their students. Both full-time and adjunct instructors made the best of a terrible situation. Faculty are resilient as they strive tirelessly to teach students, mentor students, and foster student success. COVID-19 stripped many experiences from students and faculty during the spring 2020 semester, but COVID-19 also demonstrated how resilient faculty can be and are. That is a lesson for the ages.

Implications and Suggestions

As people discuss COVID-19, the tendency is to focus on the negative. However, that perspective is short-sighted. Although there were numerous challenges, students and faculty extended their knowledge and skill sets. For instance, digital communication improved. As faculty and students navigated email, WebEx, and Zoom they learned how to be appropriate and effective across platforms. Furthermore, communicating in these platforms fostered relationships despite continued campus closures. These relationships were and are important because through them, faculty learned about the inherent disparities students face. This realization led to the development of an equity task force on the authors' campus to improve teaching and learning.

College campuses will return to in-person learning. Yet, it would be a mistake to forget the lessons of the pandemic. Moving forward, equity work must continue. College administration should consider seminars where faculty and students can tell their pandemic stories. This opportunity could uncover

meaningful ways to promote equity. Working from home versus on-campus should also be part of these conversations. It could be that allowing hybrid teaching and learning would be more equitable for faculty and students. For instance, there would be less commuting and more time with family. Institutions should also encourage language in the syllabus that allows instructors time to log off and disconnect so burnout is reduced (e.g., no answering email after 7:00 p.m.). It is imperative that we learn the lessons from COVID and use them to advance our educational atmosphere to be healthier and more equitable.

Conclusion

In sum, COVID-19 presented numerous ongoing challenges for both students and faculty teaching and learning in a community college. Despite these challenges, students and faculty persevered together to complete the semester. Nevertheless, this success came at a price in terms of workload, work-life balance, digital (a.k.a. Zoom) fatigue, as well as physical and mental health. Life will go on after the pandemic and we must take care of ourselves and our students as we prepare for that life.

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