

SPECIAL CONTRIBUTION ARTICLE

Staying on Course During the Pandemic Storm: Challenges and Opportunities

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Essie Childers is the recipient of the CASP 2020 Lifetime Achievement Award. Recipients of this award must have 20 years of experience and made outstanding contributions in the field as well as have contributed significantly to Texas Association of

Developmental Education (TADE) and Texas College Reading and Learning Association (TxCRLA). Childers, having taught for 32 years, is known for mentoring and encouraging students to visualize success to reach their academic and personal goals. For the past 13 years, she has taught learning frameworks and integrated reading and writing courses at Blinn College in Bryan, Texas. Childers is past president of the Texas Community College Teachers Association and in addition to her lifetime achievement accolade, she has received numerous institutional, alumni, community, state and publisher awards for her long-time advocacy and support of students. Childers currently serves on the Quality Enhancement Plan Development Team at Blinn College and is a Senior Fellow of the first Blinn College Future Works Academy. Adapted for J-CASP, her CASP 2020 keynote address focuses on challenges and opportunities during the COVID-19 pandemic.

*"One thing I always say is that learning something new does not require a skill set; it requires a mindset."
—Clara Alan*

I am so honored to participate in the first virtual College Academic Support Programs (CASP) 2020 Conference. I am standing on the shoulder of greatness today, a membership of 2,000 educators, students, administrators, business partnerships, and many other supporters of CASP. Before I share my topic, I would be remiss if I did not recognize President Rachel Hunt of CASP and President Mary Hellen Martinez of TADE. I know that these two outstanding leaders and many CASP members and their respective committees have put in many hours to make this conference a reality. Additionally, the newly revised website for CASP is inviting and informative, and I congratulate and salute the efforts of all involved.

Several months ago, when asked to be a speaker, I immediately examined the website and conference theme, "Discovery and Opportunity." What a timely theme. So, to echo the theme, allow me to tug at your sleeve for a few moments on the topic, "Staying on Course during The Pandemic Storm—Challenges and Opportunities.

Do you remember the story of the *Little Engine That Could*, retold by Watty Piper (a pseudonym), and credited to Mabel C. Bragg for the 1916 version *The Pony Engine*? Published by Platt & Munk, the book has sold millions of copies and been translated into numerous editions since its first printing in 1930 (Plotnick, 2012). A classic tale of optimism and determination, the book was a favorite of my children. As the story goes, when a locomotive engine pulling a train carrying birthday toys and goodies to children on the other side of the mountain breaks down, none of the other locomotives passing by would help. Finally, a little blue switch engine with the mantra "I think I can, I think I can," saves the day by pulling the train over the mountain to reach the children.

Figuratively speaking, I would like to compare higher education as the train, the mountain as COVID-19, and the little blue switch engine as CASP. Hold those thoughts for a moment. The landscape of higher education has changed dramatically amidst the pandemic. We, as a nation have experienced COVID-19 illnesses and deaths. There has been a rise in police brutality with conflict between people of color and the police. For example, consider the deaths of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor. Also, we see crises in the economy and public health sectors, continued segregation in housing and public education, loss of jobs, students moving out of dorms to switch to remote learning, and the list goes on and on. However, life continues to happen, and students must continue their education. It is no wonder our students need our help to navigate through this pandemic.

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Challenges and Opportunities

The smooth mountain became uneven, rocky, and stormy, leaving many eyebrows raised in disbelief. However, the mission of CASP has not changed. During this rocky period, CASP continued to create learning and training environments to address the call of “Help!” from students and faculty. There were many challenges created by the pandemic storm rolling over the mountain. Some Texas postsecondary institutions remained open with social distancing guidelines in place, and some decided to go entirely online. Regardless of the circumstance, there was a need for immediate faculty training in online pedagogy and technology, communication with students, and social distancing.

National Survey of Faculty

Remote learning last spring enhanced educators’ views of how faculty can use technology for student learning and opened growth opportunities. According to a survey report titled, *Time for Class COVID-19, Part 2: A National Survey of Faculty During COVID-19* (Fox, et al., 2020), in which I was a participant, faculty redesigned their courses from spring to fall to achieve those goals. More than half of the instructors said they had updated their learning objectives, assessments, and activities (61%) and integrated the use of new digital tools (60%). In comparison, nearly half (46%) said they had embedded more active learning elements (e.g., group discussion) to enhance student learning and engagement. About three-quarters of those who were preparing to teach online (74%) and those who were preparing to teach fully in-person (73%) agreed with the statement, “I am prepared to deliver a high-quality learning experience to my students this fall,” while about 10% disagreed.

Informal Survey of Texas Postsecondary Educators

I also surveyed faculty members throughout our state with this question, “As a result of COVID-19, what new programs or changes has your institution created to help students succeed?” The myriad of responses included institutions establishing protocols for self-reporting illness/symptoms, mandating social distancing, the wearing of masks, cleaning and sanitizing desks, and establishing hand sanitization stations. COVID-19 websites were created with resources, information, and contacts to guide students through the pandemic. Institutions have amended academic calendars and remodeled classrooms by knocking out walls to create more social distance for face-to-face classes. Administrators have also offered faculty training for online pedagogy and assisted them with equipment needed to create home offices.

Institutions have amended attendance policies for COVID-19-related absences and created 4- and 8-week classes to improve student retention. Regarding technology support, institutions have posted frequently asked questions and answers on their websites and used platforms such as Blackboard Collaborate, Microsoft Teams, Zoom, and CircleIn.

Support has included offering Chrome Books and laptops to students in need. Colleges have utilized success coaches, virtual and recorded simulation labs, virtual advising, and virtual office hours. Supplemental Instruction and tutoring have been offered as free services in both online and in-person formats. Additionally, several institutions have formed diversity councils.

Administrators, faculty, and staff were able to find solutions for the many challenges they faced to ensure that the facilitation of learning continued. There were many doubts and questions in planning and revising programs and procedures, questioning if the new format or changes would work. But somewhere, confidence grew, and I can hear someone say, “I think we can, I think we can, I think we can.”

Can you see opportunities arising from the result of COVID-19? Absolutely! One can conclude that the programs and changes are a work in progress. Teaching and learning are always under construction. Burger and Starbird (2012), in their book, *The 5 Elements of Effective Thinking*, stated that the fifth element is the simplest and most difficult as the title of their chapter suggests: “Engaging Change: Transform Yourself” (p. 119). COVID-19 caused many of us to change or adjust our thinking about online learning.

Conclusion

As educators prepare for the upcoming semester, the mountain has not moved. There are still some rocky paths to climb. However, it is a comfort to know that educators have been resilient in creating solutions during the pandemic, learning new active-learning strategies, and seeking ways to continue our mission of serving students. I may compare CASP to a little switch engine, but anything is possible when great minds collaborate. Educators keep the steam rising, and instead of saying, “I Think I Can,” Let’s say, “I Can.” Let us embrace change and rise over the mountain, elevating academic support programs to help all students reach excellence on their educational journey.

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