The world is, most likely, coming out of the COVID-19 pandemic phase and moving into something new. What this “new phase” will look like is unclear but it appears very certain that there is no “going back” to the way that things were before. This is probably true for almost every activity from travel to how we shop to the way that education happens in our schools and colleges. The COVID-19 pandemic has changed higher education in some very fundamental ways.

The pandemic has done what most believed could never happen—moved practically all instruction across all disciplines and institutions around the world to a completely online modality in a matter of weeks. Faculty who may have had little interest in teaching online were suddenly teaching all of their classes fully online. Students were taking all of their courses online whether they wanted to be “distance learners” or not. We all had varying degrees of success at figuring out new technologies and how to teach and learn with them.

Now that many schools, colleges, and universities are coming back to in-person classes and activities, we are at a point where we can consider what can be learned from the pandemic. What worked? What did we miss? What do we want to keep? How has teaching and learning during the pandemic changed the paradigm of teaching and learning—or has it?

Over the past 42 years, New Directions for Teaching and Learning has explored teaching and learning theories and practices across higher education. But the COVID-19 disruption brought new challenges that most had never seen before. In addition, technology has advanced that almost all institutions had at least some tools available to design new online ways to deliver virtual courses and programs.

Many things changed during the pandemic. The purpose of this volume is to look back at one aspect of teaching and learning that has been greatly impacted by the pandemic—that of being in community with others. Many faculty and students have shared that one of the things that they missed during the pandemic was that of meeting together—in class, in the hallways, and in the spaces together. There are concerns about safety in coming out of isolation, most certainly, but there is also a desire to return to a sense of togetherness and to find ways to connect with others again.

I have had the honor of serving as Editor-in-Chief of New Directions for Teaching and Learning since 2010 and have read every chapter in every volume since that time (and many before that, too). Looking back at the wisdom and insight of the many authors who have offered their experiences and perspectives provides us all with a lens for moving forward. The COVID-19 pandemic is certainly not the greatest disruption that higher education has faced and we can be certain that there will be many more disruptions in the decades to come. But our past can prepare us for whatever the future holds. I hope that you re-read these chapters (or read them for the first time) and recognize the depth of insight and knowledge that these authors have shared—all before the pandemic.

- The first chapter briefly explores the concept of “community” in higher education and attempts to set the stage for the following pre-pandemic chapters which all focus on some form of the importance of developing community.
• Chapter 2 was originally published in 2014 by Wallace Daniel and shares his personal learning and teaching journey and the role that being part of a community of learners has played in his own personal development.
• Chapter 3, originally published in 2000 by James L. Cooper and Pamela Robinson provide strategies for increasing student learning by creating student engagement with small group inquiry and reflection.
• In Chapter 4, originally published in 2018 by Emad A. Ismail and James E. Groccia, the authors provide a review of different forms of active learning and how they impact student engagement. This type of engaged learning can help students to not only learn better but also to enhance their cognitive, psychomotor, and affective skill development.
• Chapter 5, originally published in 2000 by Jean MacGregor, focuses on how to decrease student feelings of isolation that often occurred in large classes. These initiatives can help us now as students return to campus after having experienced isolation brought about by the pandemic.
• In Chapter 6, originally published in 2008 by Jillian Kinzie, Robert Gonyea, Rick Shoup, and George D. Kuh, the focus is on exploring student success indicators and how these were impacted by particular educational practices for historically underrepresented students. Engaging students and creating a sense of belonging impacted persistence, among other positive outcomes.
• Chapter 7, originally published in 2014 by Cornell Thomas, discusses the crucial importance inquiry learning and the role that we play in creating community with each other.
• Chapter 8, originally published in 2012 by Michael D. Hall, reminds us that community building isn’t something that only occurs in academic classroom settings. Student-based organizations can also offer additional ways to create connections among students and with others across the institution.
• Chapter 9, originally published in 2017 by Joanne Dolan, Kevin Kain, Janet Reilly, and Gaurav Bansal, provides context to building community and engagement in online courses. And, while technology continuously changes, the need for community in our teaching and learning practices is constant.
• Chapter 10, originally published in 2020 and written before the pandemic caused major disruption in higher education, provides Claire Major’s perspective on the importance of collaborative learning where students are actively participating in their own learning within a course or a group of learners.

Together, these chapters provide us all with a look at the importance of developing community for engaged and ongoing learning regardless of the modality of the course design. Our students are not learning in a vacuum and we are not teaching by ourselves (even though we may have felt that way during the isolation of the pandemic). Our students learn best when they are engaged with each other, with our faculty, and with the knowledge that comes from the course content. Building a community of learners has always been important to teaching and learning—and the COVID 19 pandemic has shown us how essential that community is to our continued success.

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