Reimagining Expectations and Rigor in the College Classroom Amid the Global Pandemic: Lessons from the Field

By Daniel D. Liou and Leticia Rojas

The prolonged COVID-19 pandemic has placed postsecondary institutions in unfamiliar territory. As reported by Esteban Aucejo, Jacob French, Maria Paola Ugalde Araya, and Basit Zafar in their June 2020 National Bureau of Economic Research working paper, disproportionate numbers of students of marginalized backgrounds are expecting delays in their graduation, while others report how the pandemic has negatively impacted their health and ability to focus on their education (also see Pettit, 2020). Undoubtedly, postsecondary education must adapt to the realities of the pandemic, finding new ways to define academic expectations and rigor. Currently, COVID-19-related conversations among educators often default to focusing on students’ race and economic and psychological vulnerabilities. While students’ contexts must be taken into account, these dominant default discourses can also signal a dangerous lowering of faculty’s expectations for some students, creating inequitable opportunities and outcomes that have unintended impacts on student learning.

In our observation, these dynamics have historically been rooted in deficit ideologies that often draw on false generalizations about students’ life experiences to inform faculty’s expectations in the classroom. Though well intended, in effect, such an “at-risk” perspective, which is often racially coded, can consciously and unconsciously exempt postsecondary institutions from assuming responsibility for students’ intellectual development. According to research, these overgeneralizations can hinder faculty’s abilities to affirm and reinforce students’ assets and strengths in dealing with the pandemic. As Richard Valencia (2012) explores in his book The Evolution of Deficit Thinking: Educational Thought and Practice, when faculty stops viewing students as agentive and capable, students are subjugated to self-fulfilling prophecies associated with their academic dissatisfaction. In short, the COVID-19 pandemic should not serve as a blanket determining factor in deciding students’ abilities to learn.

The purpose of this paper is to encourage faculty to reimagine rigor in the college classroom without
compromising student learning. This conversation is important given that online education will continue to play a role in students’ learning modalities after the pandemic. As postsecondary educators, we intend to highlight some of the lessons learned in our own efforts to enact high expectations for students during these difficult times as we taught online synchronously and asynchronously in a non-certificated teacher education program in a community college in California and an educational doctorate program in America’s southwest. As researchers who study the sociology of expectations, we have collectively been thinking about what high expectations look like in practice for the past five years. When the pandemic shifted postsecondary education to online learning, we came together to collectively think about ways to redefine and enact rigor as a safeguard to enrich students’ education and ensure that we fully prepared them for the profession.

We intentionally elicited examples from our respective institutions, a four-year university and a community college, for two specific reasons. First, we believe that four-year institutions can learn from two-year institutions, and vice versa about how to respond to students’ needs during a crisis. Second, we included both institutions in this paper because we want to actively avoid reinforcing dominant narratives that often exclusively associate rigor with four-year institutions. We see the importance of including community college as a part of this work, as they can be potential sites of innovation. We believe they must be part of this conversation, not because these students need more rigor, but rather because all higher education institutions should learn from each other in reimagining rigor through online education. Our multi-institutional perspective enables us to speak broadly on instructional strategies for mediating our expectations for students who come with various socioeconomic backgrounds, career aspirations, and purposes for taking our classes. We rely on our ongoing discussions since the beginning of the pandemic, as well as our collective experiences teaching in online classrooms, to lay out three key lessons learned from this past year. Our goals are to ignite new conversations about effective online instruction, provide concrete examples from these efforts, and draw attention to the importance of creating conditions for assisting students in reaching their learning objectives.

**Lesson #1: Know Your Students as a Strategy to Create Conditions of High Expectations**

**HISTORICALLY, STUDENTS MAY EXPERIENCE** a sense of anonymity when they first enter college. An online learning environment can further exacerbate such feelings of depersonalization and isolation, as well as a lack of live interaction and connection with faculty and peers. It is also a common practice to expect college students to meet faculty expectations regardless of their contextual circumstances. Amid the pandemic, we did not want to assume that all students were navigating COVID-19 in the same manner. To combat any sense of isolation and to get to know our students’ personal and professional contexts, we both sent a welcoming email and video prior to the start of the semester, making us visible and accessible to students. In both contexts, we then asked students to upload a video of themselves replying to both closed- and open-ended prompts to get an impression of who they were and what their expectations were for taking our classes. Through using the Canvas online learning management system, students had the opportunity to view and comment on each other’s introductory videos. In the graduate course at the university, these videos allowed students the opportunity to interact with one another, share updates on the development of their dissertations, and leverage existing group dynamics to increase their sense of attachment with peers. In the undergraduate course at the community college, the use of the FlipGrid video discussion tool within Canvas allowed students to use videos as a response tool and to get to know each other and build networks.

As the semester progressed, we as professors kept ourselves informed on the severity of COVID-19 in students’ ZIP codes through data from the media, governmental websites, and local health agencies. At times, students also kept us informed about their individual health statuses, along with their changing pandemic contexts. For the graduate program, some of our students were living abroad, so we were in constant communication with them through instant responses on email and Zoom, working across time zones.

In both contexts, we utilized the information about our students to identify ways to better support them in learning and in completing assignments, without using the deadlines in the syllabus as a

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In the graduate course at the university, many stated that they had questions about graduate writing, time management, and ways to overcome isolation and the inability to interact face to face with their colleagues. To help with that, we added a weekly, optional synchronous session to the asynchronous course, wherein students could develop graduate writing skills, gain deeper insights into the reading assignments, collaborate with one another, and have discussions relevant to their professional settings and dissertation projects. Such an online space was intended to increase personalization and collective resiliency as a cohort. We found students were much more motivated to learn when they gained clarity in the weekly expectations, understood how the assignments were related to their dissertations, and experienced incremental and consistent levels of success over time.

Amid the pandemic, it is important for faculty expectations to be co-constructed between faculty and students to ensure that teaching, learning, and expectations for both are not static but rather dynamic and mutually reciprocal.

In the synchronous course at the community college, students were asked to participate in a beginning-of-the-semester survey to learn if they had access to technology and the extent to which their lives had been impacted by the pandemic. Additionally, they were encouraged to check in with one another at the beginning of each class in structured breakout rooms. Some students felt comfortable enough to openly express the need for resources outside of the classroom. As a response, we actively connected students to community-based resources such as counseling, food pantries, and medical services to address immediate needs. We understood that, in order to co-construct rigor and high expectations for students, our classroom could not operate in a vacuum or discount students’ life circumstances. These approaches allowed us to demonstrate an ethic of care and our vision of the students as people who are agentive and resourceful. Through these interpersonal relationships, we were able to help them stay on track in class as we co-created an intellectually stimulating learning environment to maximize their time with us.

Lesson #2: Supporting Students to Meet High Expectations

In many cases, faculty arrive in class already expecting students to perform at a high level. Some faculty operate with the understanding that students know how to help themselves when they encounter issues that may hinder their academic performance. Through our experience, we realized that the universality of such expectations is inadequate in responding to students’ diverse learning needs and assisting all students in performing at a high level. Amid the pandemic, it is important for faculty expectations to be co-constructed between faculty and students to ensure that teaching, learning, and expectations for both are not static but rather dynamic and mutually reciprocal.

In the graduate course at the university, we openly communicated to the students that we wanted them to focus on their learning in the forms of knowledge creation and continuous improvement instead of worrying about grades.
and deadlines. We prioritized students’ accurate, critical, analytical, and evaluative interpretations of the texts by providing them encouragement and line-by-line feedback on their writing. This approach allowed us to encourage students to develop their voice, be confident in telling stories, and promote new theories and criticisms instead of having to focus on being compliant with the technicalities of writing.

We then utilized the grading system to provide detailed feedback for students to understand how to make improvements on their next writing assignment. This feedback often appeared as questions rather than judgmental remarks regarding their ideas, so they could take the time to reflect on the course content as a method to scaffold their writing development. Given the realities of COVID-19, we ensured that we were flexible with the course deadlines, as we believed such an approach would insist on their learning instead of punishing them for not meeting particular deadlines. We then accompanied this approach with active and consistent communication with students on the importance of working ahead and improving the quality of their work.

For example, there was one doctoral student, Abigail (pseudonym), who was performing at a high level throughout the semester until COVID-19 cases escalated in her country of residence. In our individualized office hours, she expressed her fear of contracting the disease, along with the emotional and psychological effects of being isolated in a country that was also impacted by disinformation regarding the pandemic. After our Zoom meeting, Abigail did not submit any assignments for six weeks, despite frequently asking for and being granted extensions on these assignments. In the final month of the semester, she was able to revisit the weekly instructional videos and complete all assignments prior to the end of the semester. We noticed that there was not a drop in the quality of her writing, simply that she needed more time to finish the class.

Lesson #3: Make Course Content Relevant in Redefining Rigor

For some faculty, rigor requires students to learn a large amount of content that may or may not be directly connected to their lives. For others, rigor is defined by having students sit through long online lectures without experiencing active learning techniques. While such practices may work for some students, we find these practices ineffective when addressing students’ diverse learning needs, especially for those with disabilities. The online learning environment calls for structured ways to have students interact with one another to build a community of learners. The pandemic challenges us as educators to determine what counts as knowledge and how students learn.

We believe that the pandemic is an opportunity for faculty to elicit intellectual engagement by making connections between the course content and students’ own environments. In the undergraduate teacher preparation course at the community college, we redefined rigor in three intentional ways. First, we encouraged students to prioritize knowledge construction and collaborative intellectual engagement through small discussion groups. Second, we emphasized the importance of critical thinking and deep processing of information as opposed to rote memorization of facts. Third, we created assignments that asked students to connect course content to their current experiences in the pandemic, increasing their sense of relevance and ownership of their education.

During one of our Zoom classes in the community college course, the aspiring teachers were expected to learn the role of technology in TK-12 classrooms, a course outcome associated with the state-mandated teacher performance expectations. This topic is both urgent and significant during the pandemic due to teachers’ increased reliance on technology to effectively facilitate TK-12 classrooms. We engaged in several group activities that had the aspiring teachers deepening their understanding of the role of technology in
education. We started with a whole-class discussion based on the weekly readings, some of which highlighted the impact of remote learning on grade-level students. Those students who were also parents were able to speak from a different vantage point, enriching discussions with information about how these instructional deliveries come across for students at home. After our discussion, we divided the aspiring teachers into breakout rooms to explore TK-12 tech tools and brainstorm the implementation of these tools in their own classrooms. In doing so, we redefined rigor as mastering important knowledge through collaboration and activating this knowledge to meet the challenges of the pandemic in students’ professional settings.

Conclusion

FOR US, EXPECTATIONS AND RIGOR are not about the level of difficulties that college students must endure. Rather, they are about our collective ability to increase the relevance of knowledge creation and the translation of ideas into concrete actions to meet real-life challenges. In our reflection of our experiences working with students like Abigail, we learn that faculty must be adaptive and develop a system of monitoring and support. At the end of the semester, Abigail sent us a personal note regarding her experiences with our classroom expectations:

At the start of the semester, the instructor established connections with his students through individual meetings. Throughout the semester, he also held a weekly synchronous seminar, which he recorded and posted, to provide further support for students...During one synchronous seminar, the instructor had a student share the work she had completed on a particular assignment. With just that one additional example, I was able to envision how I could improve my methods and work more effectively. I was able to see the connections I could make from one course to another, and particularly at the end of the semester, his encouraging words helped motivate me to finish strong.

In retrospect, we find the quality of work from Abigail (and others) stellar when compared with those who may have rushed in submitting their final assignments. The greatest lesson is that expectations and rigor must be fostered as verbs through concrete actions instead of nouns imposed on students. It is worth noting that our perspectives are limited to our experiences within the field of education and our classrooms. It would be important to learn how faculty members are effectively redefining high expectations and rigor in other types of institutional contexts, and in fields such as art, business, science, and those that require different sets of student outcomes. In this time of crisis, we as educators must attempt to remove obstacles that prevent students from learning while we take actions to instill confidence in them to succeed.

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