Teaching during a pandemic: Insights into faculty teaching practices and implications for future improvement

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Abstract
The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted courses at community colleges and forced a transition to emergency remote learning. This article focuses on the impacts of the rapid shift to online teaching on community college instructors and includes recommendations on ways for institutions to support faculty through professional development in curriculum, instruction, and virtual student engagement.

Community colleges in the United States are a heterogeneous sector of postsecondary institutions, but they are mutually bound by five interrelated principles that the COVID-19 pandemic has tested over the past year: open accessibility, comprehensiveness, lifelong learning, community centeredness, and teaching (Vaughan, 2006). These values took on new meanings as physical campuses closed, and course instruction and student services rapidly shifted from in-person courses and offices to remote or online access. But this dramatic alteration in how core college functions were delivered was not perfect or error free, and was complicated by the confluence of psychological, resource, and health-related challenges that affected both students and instructors.

For instance, colleges loaned or purchased laptops for the thousands of students who lacked their own computer, and supplied wireless hotspots so that students without a reliable internet connection at home could access their course materials online. In fact, limited access to the internet quickly became one of the most visible problems in the early stages of the pandemic, and community colleges responded by installing signal boosters to extend wireless signals to their parking lots, leading many students to watch lectures and engage in their coursework from their vehicles.

These and related actions taken by community colleges in response to the pandemic are evidence that community colleges often play the challenging role of providing comprehensive programs and services to the entire community. While the missions of community colleges mandate such an approach, during COVID-19 administrators and staff embraced this role and took this commitment to their students to new levels. They worked to ensure food-insecure students got fed after losing on-campus dining options or jobs to pay for...
groceries. They gave out emergency grants to students, foundations raised money to help students pay bills, and colleges partnered with local community agencies to refer students for other types of assistance. In a sector of higher education that is both student-centered and known for doing more with fewer resources, community colleges ironically may have been better prepared to deal with the challenges of the pandemic than some other sectors in higher education.

However, it is critical that the field also acknowledges that the emergency shift to online teaching, which was a tumultuous and disruptive change that the often used phrase “pivot to online” simply fails to capture, was not entirely smooth and that the sector can and should learn from the various challenges and problems reported from the field. The shift to remote instruction was rapid for faculty with minimal training; they had to quickly become familiar with online pedagogy and the technology to teach courses remotely. This was specifically the case for contingent faculty who often lack the time, resources, or access to professional development. It is also important to recognize the positive developments and strategies that arose during the crisis. With limited to no access to on-campus facilities or services and with students reporting feelings of isolation in the virtual college environment, the small actions of faculty and staff checking in with them by text or email just to see if they are okay has helped to make students feel supported as they work from home (Garcia, Adkins, & Bohlig, 2020). As the field enters an era where online instruction, limited resources, and persistent student economic and/or health challenges become the “new normal,” it is important to reflect on what appeared to work and not work in community college teaching during the pandemic.

In this article, we examine how one of the key community college principles—that of teaching—has been challenged during the pandemic, how faculty have embraced new or modified approaches to instruction, and implications for future practice.

COVID-19 PANDEMIC IMPACTS ON COMMUNITY COLLEGES AND STUDENTS

Since the beginning of the pandemic, much of the focus and press around the impacts to higher education have been centered on institutional action and student responses to the disruptions that COVID-19 wreaked on the college experience. Community college leaders made challenging decisions to close many physical campuses based on national, state, and local guidelines and considerations for the health and safety of students, faculty, and staff. Without the ability to offer in-person instruction, the U.S. Department of Education provided regulatory flexibilities and approval for higher education institutions to offer instruction via distance education. Some community colleges relied on existing resources to prepare for the changes to instruction, utilizing learning management systems and online platforms for course delivery, while others depended on the receipt of Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act funding to enhance their distance education capacity.

As higher education administrators encouraged students to leave campuses and to prepare for remote instruction, institutional decisions were also made to expand pass/fail grading options and to extend withdrawal deadlines, policies that were largely adopted across all higher education institutions. Typically, these options are only available to students on a limited basis and students must register for the course under this grading option rather than switch to pass/fail mid-semester; however, college administrators wanted students to have more course flexibility and to ease stress about the disruption to learning. Administrators also encouraged faculty to be accommodating with their assignments,
attendance policies, and grading to help students cope with the challenges of attending college remotely during a global pandemic.

The student response to subsequent changes from pandemic college closure protocols, especially in the community college sector, is concerning. Community college enrollments across the country were down 9.5% in the fall of 2020, the largest enrollment decline among all sectors of institutions of higher education (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2020). As an example, in the Los Angeles Community College District, over 32,000 community college students withdrew from classes in spring 2020, a 17% increase in withdrawals over the previous spring semester (Agrawal, 2020). Initial analyses of college enrollment data during the pandemic reveal that low-income, underrepresented minority, and rural students—all populations served by community colleges—are the most likely to drop out or to not enroll at all. Community college enrollment declines are unusual during economic downturns, when individuals usually return to college to retrain for jobs, but the pandemic has caused students to leave their programs of study for various reasons including the challenges of remote learning, losing jobs and income, familial responsibilities, and the overall stress and anxiety of attending college during COVID-19. For community college students who are homeless, the shift to remote learning was exceptionally challenging, as reliable wireless internet and shelter were not available.

The effects of COVID-19 on community college students are very crucial and deserve the public and policy attention they are receiving, but the impact that the pandemic has had on community college faculty and their teaching practices should also receive heightened attention given that community colleges are teaching-focused institutions, and instruction is one of the five main principles guiding the work of these colleges.

The remainder of the article is dedicated to better understanding teaching in community colleges before COVID-19, examining initial and long-term effects of the pandemic on community college instruction, and making recommendations for using what we have learned from our current situation to prepare for future disruptions to teaching and the types of research that would be useful in the decision-making about instructional modalities when normal college operations are not possible.

BACKGROUND ON TEACHING IN COMMUNITY COLLEGES PRIOR TO THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Some distinguishing characteristics of teaching in community colleges include the role of teaching in institutional missions and faculty workloads, required credentials, and the role of part-time faculty.

The primary responsibility of community college faculty is the instruction of students. They devote as much as 78% of their time to instruction (Snyder & Dillow, 2013), more than any other sector of higher education. A majority of full-time faculty in public 2-year institutions teach at least 15 hours a week, compared with 15% of faculty at public comprehensive institutions, 10% at public doctoral-granting institutions, and 6% at public research universities (Snyder & Dillow, 2013). Because community college faculty focus on teaching and teaching-related activities, they are rarely responsible for research like their counterparts at research or comprehensive universities. Their positions commonly require institutional service such as advising students, serving on curriculum committees, and professional development activities that collectively make for a heavy workload, but with teaching as the centerpiece.

Community colleges also offer a wide range of programs from general education and collegiate transfer to various career and technical education (CTE) programs, so the credentials required to teach in 2-year colleges differ across programmatic areas. For
example, higher education accrediting agencies often require 2-year colleges to employ faculty with master’s degrees or higher in a discipline or subfield to teach undergraduate general education courses. Credentialing of CTE faculty varies by states and colleges but is understood to be a combination of education, work experience, and other types of qualifications like professional licensure for the programs that require it. Generally speaking, most credentialing requirements do not include expertise in online instruction, and professional development on this skill is rarely mandatory for instructors at a given college.

In addition, community colleges rely on non-tenure track and part-time faculty, also referred to as adjunct or contingent faculty, for course instruction. Around 67% of faculty at community colleges teach part time, which is double the percentage of part-time faculty teaching at 4-year colleges (Achieving the Dream, n.d.). Overall trends at public 2-year institutions show the number of instructors is shrinking (from 351,000 in 2015 to 312,000 in 2018), with a substantial number of adjunct faculty jobs being reduced. With fewer teaching positions available, some part-time faculty teach at more than one institution. These instructors are also responsible for teaching 58% of all the courses offered by community colleges across the United States.

Research shows the demand for part-time faculty at community colleges is driven by both the academic and professional industry experience they bring to instruction as well enrollment demands at 2-year institutions in an era marked by lower levels of public funding for higher education (Bahr & Gross, 2016; Charlier & Williams, 2011). Findings from studies by Katsinas (1996) suggest that institutional type influences hiring practices for adjunct faculty members, while Charlier and Williams (2011) found that geographic service area (meaning rural, suburban, and urban) can impact community colleges’ reliance on part-time faculty to teach courses. The literature also reveals that dependence on part-time faculty to teach courses is an issue for deliberation, with scholars finding negative effects on certain student outcomes such as associate degree completion (Jaeger & Eagan, 2014) and college transfer (Eagan & Jaeger, 2009) and a sense of the lack of institutional engagement for adjunct faculty in community colleges (Jolley, Cross, & Bryant, 2014).

One consequence of the reliance on part-time faculty is that while these instructors are often skilled professionals (Wallin, 2007), they may have less formal pedagogical training than full-time faculty, particularly in online or digital modalities. According to a survey of over 70,000 community college faculty and 32 focus groups conducted by the Center for Community College Student Engagement, part-time faculty frequently cited the lack of important resources like professional development, administrative and technology support, and interaction with peers about teaching and learning (Center for Community College Student Engagement, 2014). Regardless of appointment type, however, observers have long argued that community college instructors need far more institutional support and professional development opportunities when it comes to their role as educators (e.g., Murray, 2002).

**INITIAL IMPACTS OF THE PANDEMIC ON COMMUNITY COLLEGE INSTRUCTION**

Community colleges are recognized for their capacity to adapt and change quickly, and their instructional response to COVID-19 was no exception. Following recommendations by governmental authorities to close physical campuses to curb the spread of the virus within communities, most community colleges shifted course instruction from in-person to online. With the spring 2020 semester already underway, this meant faculty already begun course instruction by whatever modality they planned to use for the semester. Aided
by the U.S. Department of Education’s policy guidance for providing emergency distance education, faculty rapidly redesigned course formats for remote instruction.

The disruption of the semester required swift action to gather resources and develop training for faculty to teach all courses remotely. Online education requires faculty to develop and teach the content, and to utilize the technology to deliver and enhance courses. The structural and procedural changes normally preceding implementation of online instruction at a community college can take years and instructors who teach online usually have extensive training in online pedagogy (Garza, 2014). Because of the serious and abrupt effects of the coronavirus on communities across the country, college leadership acted quickly to equip faculty with technological tools and to train faculty in distance education delivery.

Some college faculty were in a strong position to teach remotely, like faculty at Albany Technical College in Georgia who, since early 2018, have been required to deliver online courses such as CTE programs where students might take a safety course online (St. Amour, 2020a). Formal training programs for teaching online are becoming commonplace at community colleges (Garza, 2014), and some community colleges have also created centers for teaching and learning like those found at 4-year institutions to assist and support faculty with their courses in a variety of ways. However, research has shown that historically community college faculty have been reluctant to engage with online learning, citing barriers to embracing the use of technology as an instructional tool for a range of factors such as the time investment to develop new programs and the belief that online education is of lower quality (Garza, 2014; Parisot, 1997). Faculty concerns also center on perceptions about obstacles to student success and student equity, access to technical support, and sufficient professional development opportunities for online teaching (Lackey, 2011; Lederman, 2020; Wingo, Ivankova, & Moss, 2017).

At the forefront of challenges to online instruction during the pandemic is the digital divide, the gap between people who have ready access to technology and the internet and those who do not, exacerbated by the closing of on-campus computer labs. Community college faculty are justifiably concerned about creating online course content knowing some of their students cannot participate in learning through a distance education modality, particularly the economically vulnerable student populations and students with accessibility needs enrolled at community colleges.

Despite technological concerns, community college faculty received training on designing and implementing courses remotely from their centers for teaching and learning, from colleagues at their own institution, through collaborative networks of higher education institutions, and from a plethora of external resources shared by many organizations with expertise on online instruction. In many instances, community colleges extended their scheduled spring break to allow faculty time to convert their classes to the virtual environment. While it is unclear at this time how community colleges adjusted part-time faculty contracts for the additional professional development necessary to redesign courses for remote instruction, one of the positive outcomes of COVID-19 is the collective effort of higher education professionals to do whatever it takes to support students in their learning during these challenging times.

As the spring and summer semesters of 2020 wore on, many community colleges entered a phased re-opening of their physical campuses. College administration planned to permit faculty teaching courses in designated programs, particularly those with required in-person laboratory or experiential learning components, to teach students on campus. Courses with these technical elements can be difficult or impossible to convert for online delivery of instruction because they require clinical interactions with patients like for nursing degrees or hands-on learning for auto technician diplomas. Consequently, it was
imperative for colleges and faculty to figure out ways to provide students in these programs with the opportunity to complete their degrees by completing their coursework in person, especially for those in essential COVID-19 frontline worker positions such as agricultural technology, health care, manufacturing, truck driving, and supply chain management and logistics.

For courses requiring instructors to teach on physical campuses, community college administrators rapidly instituted a variety of measures to ensure the safety of faculty, students, and staff: laboratory capacity was reduced to allow for social distancing; faculty and students were required to undergo COVID-19 screening, wear facemasks and personal protective equipment; and classrooms and equipment had to be regularly sanitized. Besides the rapid shift to online teaching that many faculty and institutions made in response to the pandemic, the alterations to how in-person courses were taught also represented effective and sometimes innovative institutional responses to an unfortunate situation.

THEMES OF LONG-TERM EFFECTS OF THE PANDEMIC ON COMMUNITY COLLEGE INSTRUCTION

Based upon what we have learned in the short term about the effects of COVID-19 on higher education, we can only speculate what the long-term effects will be. With community college enrollments decreasing, both prior to and as a result of the pandemic, it can be assumed that colleges will make challenging decisions about reducing courses or sections if there is less student demand. Administrators at 2-year institutions regularly review programs and services in connection with expected future revenues because of tight budgets. Because adjunct faculty contracts are commonly on a per-course basis, courses taught by part-time instructors with limited contracts and no tenure or shared governance protections could be reduced. Conversely, higher education institutions have increasingly become dependent on adjunct instructors because of the relative lower cost of salaries, compared to full-time faculty. Reductions in instructional spending at community colleges due to budget loss could also result in laying off full-time faculty or not hiring for open positions and instead growing the number of contingent instructors who historically have not been provided with adequate institutional support.

Evidence of this workforce reduction is already occurring; analysis of federal data reveals that hundreds of thousands of employees have been pushed out of higher education since the pandemic began, with the postsecondary education workforce decreasing by 7% between February and August 2020 (Pettit, 2020). Furthermore, about 50% of community college faculty identify as women (Townsend & Twombly, 2007) and the pandemic has been harmful for working women who are traditionally familial caregivers and for whom the lack of childcare and having children in secondary education also learning remotely has exacerbated challenges for women in the workforce.

In addition, preliminary responses from instructors and students about remote courses are mixed, although across all sectors of higher education, faculty confidence in online learning grew stronger during the period of mandated remote instruction (St. Amour, 2020b). Research examining the academic performance of community college students in Virginia following the shift to remote learning in response to the COVID-19 pandemic found an approximately 7% decrease in course completion as characterized by both course withdrawals and failures (Bird, Castleman, & Lohner, 2020). Along with faculty concerns about students having poorer course outcomes in online courses, undergraduate students still prefer in-person to online learning, most believing they are not learning as effectively through distance education as they would have in an in-person class environment (Lederman, 2020). Following multiple semesters of online courses where the stresses of
COVID-19 have affected course performance, both faculty and students may desire the social benefits of on-campus interaction with each other making it essential that community college leaders and faculty consider innovative ways to integrate online courses with in-person experiences.

It remains a fact, however, that the number of college students taking courses online was already on an upward trajectory prior to the pandemic and community college students are more likely than 4-year college students to have taken an online course and to prefer online instruction (Gierdowski, 2019). Online courses and programs appeal to many students at community colleges who work, have families and dependents, and other responsibilities which the flexibility of online coursework provides the opportunity for them to attend college. As a result, faculty continuously engage in professional development to learn new technologies (e.g., course learning management systems), teaching strategies, and methods for helping students learn while also making them feel connected to the college and with each other. While the hope is for community college faculty to continue to meet the challenges of remote instruction, consistently developing their teaching abilities while also keeping students virtually connected, they will need considerable support from their institutions with respect to paid time to pursue professional development, adequate supplies and equipment, and the facilitation of local support and professional networks and learning communities.

Finally, one challenge that we hope is only a temporary one caused by the pandemic is that some students in CTE programs did not have sufficient opportunities to complete foundational curriculum because of shortened semesters and/or remote learning. Instructors have been working on strategies to help students catch up by combining new program competencies with course content they should have covered in previous courses. Organizations like the Association for Career and Technical education (ACTE) and state systems responsible for oversight of CTE postsecondary education like the Minnesota State Career and Technical Education office and the California Department of Education provide open educational resources for any CTE community college instructors to use in their course development (ACTE, 2020). While these responses may not be required over the long term, colleges should document such promising and effective responses to crises that will inevitably arise in the future for individual students, colleges, or the entire world.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR TRANSLATIONAL RESEARCH ON TEACHING IN COMMUNITY COLLEGES

Based on this brief review of the ways that the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted teaching in community colleges, which has included both promising innovations and troubling trends, we offer three recommendations for translational research that are ultimately aimed at improving teaching practices and student outcomes. The intent of translational research, which originated in medicine but now is influential in the social sciences, is to apply research findings to important problems or challenges in the field. In developing these recommendations we draw upon a particular strand of translational research known as practice-based research, which rejects top-down approaches to reform or change and instead uses descriptions of educator work “in the wild” as the basis for designing educational interventions (Coburn & Turner, 2012).

Essentially, we argue that future efforts to improve teaching and learning in community colleges should eschew the notion of “best practices” that should be universally adopted, and instead meet faculty where they are to develop interventions, programs, and policies that are responsive to the realities of the post-pandemic community college classroom.
Document and address factors influencing faculty use of instructional technology

While it may be tempting to unilaterally attempt to train all faculty in how to use particular learning management systems or to adopt effective online teaching strategies, research on technology adoption (e.g., Wingo et al., 2017) clearly shows that a variety of factors impact whether or not a person embraces a new technology. These factors include individual-level cognitive phenomena such as personal self-efficacy beliefs and opinions about technology, institutional procedures and norms, and the nature of the workload, to name but a few. With insights into the constraints and affordances that shape faculty decisions, administrators and college leadership can design online teaching workshops and related professional development programs that truly meet faculty where they are (Hora & Holden, 2013).

However, research on teacher cognition and decision-making around instructional technology is more common in K–12 and university contexts, with less work conducted on the unique settings of a community college. Therefore, it would be helpful to investigate the ways faculty responded to student learning needs during the pandemic and to what degree they used (or did not use) technology, synchronous and asynchronous course instruction, and other media to facilitate student learning from afar. Some of these software products and modalities were likely available before COVID-19 forced instructors and students off campus, but future research is warranted to understand the adoption or rejection of these tools or the adaptation of instruction to the situation at hand.

Develop new and accessible faculty development opportunities

Prior to COVID-19, institutional support for the professional development of all community college faculty was inconsistent. Adjunct instructors, who teach the majority of courses in 2-year colleges, historically report a lack of resources and inclusion in professional development opportunities (CCCSE, 2014). Given the vast number of different programs across these colleges, coordinated support for teaching can be challenging. However, the current system of focusing the majority of support and resources on full-time faculty could not be sustained during a global emergency requiring the rapid shift to remote instruction for all faculty, regardless of contract status.

Higher education scholars have examined faculty development opportunities with many critiques, including that the extant literature collects data on what colleges do and then attempts to generalize “what works” across institutions (Twombly & Townsend, 2014). What is needed in the literature is a greater depth of understanding about the types of professional development that best help community college faculty confidently and effectively teach the established learning outcomes for their courses, regardless of modality. By exploring faculty feedback about the types of pedagogical training full-time and part-time faculty found helpful in response to the pandemic, the field could gain stronger comprehension about how to advance new professional development opportunities and how to make them inclusive of all community college faculty.

Catalogue and enhance institutional systems for supporting students in crisis

Exploring the impact centralized teaching and learning resources have on supporting community college faculty in transitioning a face-to-face course to an online modality or training faculty how to engage students using available tools would be illuminating,
especially if community colleges provided adjunct faculty with the same opportunities and training resources as full-time faculty. Prior to COVID-19, a small percentage of 2-year institutions dedicated resources toward these type of systems where faculty collaborate with each other and various programs across campuses to offer workshops and presentations about learning, pedagogy, assessment, and supporting students. While existing institutional models will not be uniform in their effects, knowing more about how instructors view their efficacy in serving as a centralized resource for faculty—particularly in light of disruption to normal college operations—could provide further evidence to college leadership about replicating or enhancing these practices.

For CTE programs offered in community colleges, additional research about the ways faculty adapted their coursework when on-campus instruction was not possible during the initial stages of COVID-19 and how they are continuing to offer the necessary hands-on instruction with social distancing and strict health and safety protocols in place would be notable and helpful in planning for future events that require remote instruction. It could also help inform us about ways CTE faculty can engage learners in instruction and collaboration when students have to remain at home to learn.

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