



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

Pivoting in a Time of Pandemic: The Faculty Experience

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Between Across the landscape of American higher education, there exist over 1,000 two-year colleges. These institutions account for 23 percent of all colleges and universities while educating 29 percent of their students (Carnegie Classification of Higher Education Institutions, 2019). Indeed, much attention in recent years has been afforded to the needs of students. Far less consideration has been paid to those who teach, especially those 21 percent among them who teach in our nation's two-year colleges (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2019). Often, these faculty teach at two-year colleges that are part of broader state systems. One such system is the Minnesota State System (MinnState). The third-largest higher education system in the United States, MinnState, encompasses 30 colleges, seven universities, and over 54 campuses. It annually educates more than 340,000 students (Minnesota State Colleges and Universities, n.d.).

Like elsewhere across the nation, the COVID-19 pandemic has dramatically impacted MinnState and its two-year colleges. Over the past decade, the system has experienced a sharp decrease in enrollment (Minnesota State Finance Division, 2020). The pandemic has exacerbated this decline (Verges, 2020) and resulted in steeper declines (Palmer, 2020). The result has been that tuitions have been frozen (Verges, 2020), and some institutions within the system have declared financial exigency. Budgets have been frozen or cut, and there has been a hiring freeze as MinnState prepares to experience a revenue cut of \$75 million to \$280 million (Keuhen, 2020) as enrollment appears to have been affected.

Amidst this change, MinnState two-year faculty have sought to navigate the pivot to online coursework, synchronous and asynchronous, prompted by the pandemic. Having responded midstream during the spring 2020 semester as institutions began to close their campuses, it now appears that the resultant challenges will continue into spring 2021 (Miller, 2020).

To examine the faculty experience with the online transition due to the pandemic, we sought to examine perceptions of stress, coping, and campus leadership across the 30 MinnState two-year colleges. We specifically measured perceptions of stress and coping skills. We also asked faculty to share their perceptions of their campus administrators' communication, patience,

and ability to relate during the online transition. Finally, in an effort to allow faculty to provide greater insight into their experience, we asked them to share through an open-ended response what they had done to cope with their responsibilities regarding teaching, research, and/or service.

The Data

In late summer 2020, we sent a survey via email to all 4,500 two-year faculty in MinnState, asking them to respond to a brief series of questions regarding perceived stress, coping mechanisms, and perceptions of campus leadership. More than 300 of our colleagues completed our survey in its entirety ($N = 336$, response rate = 7.5 percent). The typical faculty member was female (66.96 percent), white (90.48 percent), 50.74 years of age, and in the tenure stream (80.48 percent). In other words, far from representing the MinnState two-year faculty as a whole, the data revealed insights into what might be considered a best-case scenario among faculty in the pandemic.

In response to the Perceived Stress Scale (PSS; Cohen, Kamarck, & Mermelstein, 1983), faculty reported equivalent perceptions of stress among tenured ($M = 18.36$, $SD = 7.21$), tenure-track ($M = 18.96$, $SD = 5.97$), fixed-term ($M = 20.67$, $SD = 6.31$), and adjunct ($M = 17.87$, $SD = 8.39$) faculty. It should be noted that these responses indicated a moderate level of perceived stress.

In response to the Brief COPE Inventory (BCI; Carver, 1997) and parsed through one of our adaptations of the instrument, our colleagues reported that they primarily relied upon problem-focused coping mechanisms such as seeking solutions among tenured ($M = 2.82$, $SD = .53$), tenure-track ($M = 2.83$, $SD = .63$), fixed-term ($M = 2.80$, $SD = .42$), and adjunct ($M = 2.80$, $SD = .46$) faculty. Emotion-focused coping mechanisms such as seeking support from others were reported as second-order utility among tenured ($M = 2.28$, $SD = .52$), tenure-track ($M = 2.27$, $SD = .56$), fixed-term ($M = 2.22$, $SD = .43$), and adjunct ($M = 2.19$, $SD = .48$) faculty. Notably, maladaptive coping mechanisms such as drinking or other drug use were reported with some regularity among tenured ($M = 1.72$, $SD = .40$), tenure-track ($M = 1.76$, $SD = .38$), fixed-term ($M = 1.84$, $SD = .39$), and adjunct ($M = 1.78$, $SD = .50$) faculty.

Finally, our colleagues reported that administrators on their campus clearly communicated plans fairly well according to tenure ($M = 7.63$, $SD = 1.46$), tenure-track (M

= 7.71, SD = 1.52), fixed-term (M = 7.52, SD = 1.28), and adjunct (M = 7.21, SD = 1.30) faculty. Administrators were similarly viewed as having demonstrated a fair amount of patience making decisions according to tenured (M = 7.34, SD = 1.26), tenure-track (M = 7.58, SD = 1.25), fixed-term (M = 7.33, SD = 1.24), and adjunct (M = 7.21, SD = 1.30) faculty. Faculty also perceived their administrators to have related to colleagues to a fair extent across tenured (M = 7.62, SD = 1.45), tenure-track (M = 7.67, SD = 1.52), fixed-term (M = 7.44, SD = 1.22), and adjunct (M = 7.40, SD = 1.29) faculty.

These results suggest that those faculty who responded to our survey were successfully coping with the elevated stress of the online pandemic pivot. Yet, in response to a final, open-ended item asking what they had done since the online transition due to the coronavirus pandemic to cope with the stress of teaching, research, and/or service at their colleges, faculty revealed a great deal of distress. Specifically, three themes emerged from their detailed and emotive comments: Faculty reported an emphasis on attending to students' needs, especially beyond content; faculty reported with high frequency a reliance on their college colleagues; and faculty reported with high frequency a frustration with administrator communication and/or leadership.

Lessons Learned

Given that the majority of individuals who completed our survey were in the tenure stream, it is our impression that these results reveal the best-case scenario of an educated, intelligent, high-functioning group of faculty who benefit from the personal and professional fortune of their positions.

Indeed, the reality is that a large number of faculty voices are conspicuously absent from the findings. Faculty of color comprised less than 10.5 percent of our sample. This is likely representative of the continuing underrepresentation of racial diversity among faculty in American colleges and universities. People of color account for 16.2 percent of the population of Minnesota (United States Census Bureau, 2019). Contingent faculty were similarly uncommon among the sample, comprising less than 20 percent of the total. Yet, contingent faculty account for more than 65 percent of academic appointments in America's two-year colleges (American Association of University Professors, 2018).

Faculty want to find their feet on solid ground during times of change. Our results suggest that those two-year faculty with the greatest affordances due to position are struggling to cope with the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic. How much more difficult must the situation be for our colleagues who lack such privilege? This question begs a major potential for college administrators to demonstrate the potential of leadership to better support their faculty. Faculty at two-year colleges are already asked to do a significant amount of work in teaching and mentoring students across the country. These educated and capable

individuals need support structures in place that allow them to continue to do what they do best. The pandemic looks to continue to bring significant challenges and uncertainty. It is imperative that campus leadership listen to, and truly hear, what our colleagues are saying.

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