

Meh: Faculty Life After (During) the Pandemic

In the summer of 2020, we sought to measure the experience of community college faculty across one of the largest state systems of higher education in the nation (the Minnesota State Community College System) as they pivoted to online classes due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Peterson et al., 2020). We found that faculty were largely able to cope with the stressors of their professional roles. However, three key areas stood out among the responses at the time. Faculty reported having focused almost exclusively upon attending to the needs of their students. They also revealed a desire to find greater support among their faculty peers. Lastly, faculty across the state voiced frustration regarding a perceived lack of communication from the administrative leadership at their institutions (Peterson et al., 2020).

Since that initial study, Zoom and similar platforms have become a common modality for online and hybrid course delivery. This technology has become both a blessing and a curse as faculty develop the ability to stay connected with students while dealing with the mental and physical health issues that can arise from prolonged computer use. Indeed, the topic of “Zoom fatigue” has received quite a bit of attention during the past year (Bailenson, 2021). We thought it prudent to follow up our original study with subsequent data collection to monitor how our colleagues across Minnesota were faring as the global pandemic appeared to be winding down during the summer of 2021. Little did we know that the pandemic and its inherent challenges to higher education would remain into 2022.

Results

In the fall of 2021, we emailed a survey containing two open-ended questions to the 2,802 two-year faculty on the faculty union roster of the Minnesota State Community College System. We first asked our colleagues to consider the previous year since the pandemic pivot: “When you look back to the 2020-2021 academic year of teaching during the pandemic, what was it like for you?” We then asked them to look prospectively at the academic year that had just begun: “When you think about the current 2021-2022 academic year of teaching, what do you think it will be like for you?” A total of 429 colleagues responded to both questions (response rate = 15.31 percent) and represented every one of the 30 two-year institutions in the state system. We coded the response sets to the two open-ended questions and identified two major themes, thereby identifying one group of faculty who appeared to be *fine* with the previous year of change and another group of faculty who appeared to be *stressed* in response to the challenges of the past year. We used the Evaluative Lexicon (Rocklage & Fazio,

2015; Rocklage et al., 2018) procedure and computer application (<http://www.evaluativelexicon.com>) to meaningfully quantify the response sets to both open-ended questions.

In response to the retrospective question (Q1), faculty who were *fine* wrote about the past academic year with a positive valence ($M = 6.33$, $SD = 2.12$), rather little extremity of language ($M = 2.68$, $SD = 0.78$), and moderate emotionality ($M = 4.22$, $SD = 1.66$). The *stressed* faculty, in contrast, looked back upon the previous academic year and revealed a somewhat negative valence ($M = 3.67$, $SD = 2.57$), with similarly little extremity of language ($M = 2.59$, $SD = 0.76$), and moderate emotionality ($M = 4.61$, $SD = 1.57$).

In response to the prospective question (Q2), faculty who were *fine* wrote about the new academic year with positive valence ($M = 5.79$, $SD = 2.21$), rather little extremity of language ($M = 2.37$, $SD = 0.96$), and moderate emotionality ($M = 4.31$, $SD = 1.74$). In comparison, the *stressed* faculty looked toward the new academic year with neutral valence ($M = 4.00$, $SD = 2.60$), rather little extremity of language ($M = 2.46$, $SD = 0.97$), and moderate emotionality ($M = 4.89$, $SD = 1.72$).

These results in and of themselves appear unremarkable. However, we found the consistency of the report to be instructive. The *fine* group of faculty was quite consistent in the tenor of their perceptions looking back to the past year (Q1) and looking forward toward the current year (Q2) in the classroom. The *stressed* group of faculty demonstrated similar consistency across both points in perceived time. We interpret these results to suggest that there might be “haves” and “have nots” among the two-year faculty in the Minnesota State Community College System, and indeed across the country, in terms of the ability to successfully navigate the stressors of teaching during an ongoing pandemic.

Key Findings

A few related ideas appear evident as we consider the collective teaching experiences of our colleagues during the ongoing pandemic. When we sent out our survey, it was under the widely shared assumption that the pandemic would soon be over. Thus, we expected we would get insight from our colleagues as they retrospectively considered how they had navigated the previous year personally and professionally. Instead, the data suggest many community college faculty continued to struggle as the second year of pandemic pivoting became apparent on the horizon. The data also suggest a need for continued support among many of our colleagues. Some faculty are coping, and even thriving, in this altered teaching environment. Yet approximately

half of the faculty who responded to our study revealed they were not faring so well. In other words, it seems apparent there exists a stark division between the faculty who are fine and those who are stressed. If there exists such divergence in functioning among the faculty in one of the largest state systems of higher education, might this not also be true across the nation?

It could be that we are, as a society and especially in higher education, at a stage of the pandemic characterized by burnout. As we observed nearly two years ago in our earlier study (Peterson et al., 2021), campus administration has a major potential to support community college faculty during these uncertain times to counteract potential burnout. Additional post-pandemic research could illuminate evolving faculty support needs, as well as give insight into post-pandemic levels of educational technology acceptance and comfort. Presently, the pandemic continues to take a mental and physical toll on all people. It is imperative we remain mindful of reaching out to each other for the sake of our faculty and their students. While adapting to a continuously changing educational environment has become synonymous with teaching, our research clearly indicates that the need for faculty support remains one of the few constants during a pandemic.

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