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Post-Covid Community College Online Instruction: Applying Lessons Learned

The term "unprecedented" has been overused in the last year and a half. What was unprecedented is now precedented. Students, faculty, staff, parents, and administrators experienced a major disruption in all education sectors, and this disruption has changed community college education forever. The question that arises is, "What changes in the status quo created by the pandemic do we keep?" For example, students and educators have deemed the online education practiced pre-pandemic as "insufficient," especially for marginalized student populations (Kizilcec et al., 2021; Mangan, 2022). Many community college students are first-generation, non-white, lower income, and generally nontraditional (Bosley & Custer, 2021). Also, students have begun to expect more from online learning experiences and desire more interactive and meaningful learning experiences that use the latest technology. Reverberations from this shift in technological expectations will be felt throughout the entire PK-20 pipeline over the next decade. The purpose of this article is to overview the literature on the pandemic's influence on online learning and synthesize its implications for community colleges. Implications include technological developments to counteract any learning loss created initially by the pandemic and the development of educational application software and policies to facilitate teaching and learning flexibility and innovation.

Adaptability and Community College Instruction

College and university students ranked the following as the biggest challenges they faced during the pandemic: Stress, lack of motivation, lack of academic support, internet connectivity issues, lack of a suitable place to study, anxiety, health concerns related to their family or themselves contracting COVID-19, decreases in income, unemployment, lack of knowledge about learning management systems, increased workloads or hours, and trouble accessing technology to access course materials (Seaman & Johnson, 2021; Şenol et al., 2021; Stewart et al., 2021). The most prominent challenges that community college students reported facing were lack of access to computers and reliable internet at home, lack of student-faculty interactions, lack of access to materials, and lack of authentic lab and research experience (Barzilai-Nahon, 2006; Bosley & Custer, 2021; Hart et al., 2021; Mazur et al., 2021). College computer labs were closed, which students relied upon for a stable internet connection to complete assignments (Bosley & Custer, 2021). Instructors used synchronous platforms such as Teams or Zoom, but did not adapt lessons to the online environment, often simply transferring in-person class learning to the online platforms and reducing content (Senol et al., 2021). Community colleges that lacked many technological and student resources pre-COVID focused on developing virtual services, while community colleges that had many of these resources pre-COVID were able to focus on training students and faculty to use virtual resources effectively. Additionally, the number of resources that a community college had was often related to its location and its student population. Colleges with a large White student population had more resources than community colleges with higher numbers of students from marginalized backgrounds (Hart et al., 2021). Prothero (2020) suggests that students' mental health concerns will increasingly need to be addressed due to a myriad of circumstances created by the pandemic. Administrators and faculty reported similar challenges for students; however, they rated support from their institution lower than students did (Seaman & Johnson, 2021). A study carried out in the wake of COVID-19 found that many community college instructors were not equipped with the technological skills needed to teach online (Bosley & Custer, 2021). Faculty, in general, complained about being overwhelmed, feeling inadequate, and experiencing mental and physical exhaustion (Bosley & Custer, 2021).

Advantages of Online Instruction

College students appreciated most of the benefits associated with online learning, such as access to information, access to education from various universities and instructors, increased online interaction, personalized learning, the ability to learn from anywhere they had internet access, increased access for students with disabilities, flexibility with due dates and learning time, access to visual learning materials, increased student learning collaborations, opportunities for individual work, and access to courses at a relatively low cost (Şenol et al., 2021). Faculty digital communications increased, and faculty learned how to be effective across platforms such as WebEx, Teams, and Zoom. Also, faculty learned about the inherent disparities students faced and methods to promote equity (Bosley & Custer, 2021). Also, some students may thrive in the virtual environment, such as students who prefer independent learning or students who were bullied (Stewart et al., 2021). Other studies confirm the many benefits of online learning, such as convenient access to materials, cost-effectiveness, the ability to provide up-to-date information, rapid access to information, safe and secure access, consistent interactions and collaborations, the ready availability of diagnostics for task-tracking, students' improved technology skills, and the ability to provide a wide selection of courses (Bosley & Custer, 2021; Chandra, 2020; Josep, 2020). Students tended to find diversions in creative activities and learned new technical skills during the pandemic to cope with isolation and boredom from the pandemic, and students began to develop social-emotional intelligence through remote learning (Chandra, 2020).

During the spring 2020 semester, instructors incorporated a variety of instructional methods to increase student engagement, such as interactive feedback on assignments, video presentations, critical questioning to assist with problem-solving, relating learning to real life, discussions, collaborations, relaxing music exercises, and the use of visuals and PowerPoint slides to demonstrate learning (Şenol et al., 2021). To evaluate students, instructors used take-home assignments and projects, online exams, and essay assignments. Educators developed their own PowerPoint presentations, videos, and online reading materials, and used articles and videos they found on the internet (Şenol et al., 2021).

Conclusion and Lessons Learned

Researchers have gathered suggestions from postsecondary educators about ways to improve equity, such as the government providing free internet, improving internet infrastructure, and providing computers or laptops for all students and instructors. Instructors have suggested that they should meet regularly to discuss curriculum and pedagogy issues, have access to continuous professional development, continue to offer hybrid education, provide seminars to students to encourage health and wellbeing, decrease the number of students in in-person class sessions, and increase salaries for instructors when circumstances increase their workloads (Şenol et al., 2021; Zhang et al., 2020). To enable faculty to harness technological tools effectively, it is essential that instructors receive guidance and support on what tools to use, why to use these tools, and how to use the tools (Hart et al., 2021). Equally importantly, educators at all levels need support, such as counseling, teaching resources, and professional learning communities, from administrators as they navigate professional and personal challenges related to the pandemic.

Online instructors learned many lessons during the pandemic, and research has provided many insights. Adult learners need active engagement, challenging activities and projects, meaningful assignments connected to their lives, time for peer interaction and collaboration, time for instructor interaction, interactive materials, and personalized learning. Online educators should condense content into smaller and more digestible modules for students to spend 20-25 minutes on each module so they can better focus (Bao, 2020). Online instructors should provide interactive feedback, video presentation lessons, and video presentation assignments. While some students are anxious to return to face-to-face learning, many have adapted to online learning and expressed interest in further hybrid learning opportunities. Online and in-person students need additional support such as health-related assistance; assistance during self-directed learning time; programs for those who have been disproportionately impacted by the pandemic; support structures for managing time, schedules, and completing assignments; and educational software that assesses needs and delivers customized curricula to meet students' needs.

Online education in all sectors is here to stay, proliferate, and evolve. During the pandemic, instructors had no choice but to be flexible; this flexibility is reflected by the more personalized online learning developed during the pandemic (Will, 2020). The pandemic presented opportunities for online instructors to spend more time with students during self-directed learning time and to support students who need additional assistance. Students also needed more support managing time, schedules, and completing assignments. Instructors have the opportunity to continue these effective online teaching practices even after many courses have returned to face-to-face or hybrid modalities.

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