The Permanence of Change: Perspectives on Instructional Delivery Changes Post-Pandemic in Community Colleges

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Abstract

Community colleges, like all of higher education, had to navigate extreme challenges during the onset of the Covid-19 virus. In particular, academic leaders had to identify strategies for effectively modifying instructional delivery during the pandemic, using new and existing strategies to meet student needs, schedules, and safety. Using data from community college instructional leaders, the study identified how colleges responded to the needed instructional delivery change, and noted that over a two-thirds of these leaders perceived that these changes will be somewhat to very permanent moving into the future. This may hint at the 'new normal' within the community college landscape. Higher Education overall is in flux and what changes become permanent remain to be seen. This study highlights how change is managed in complex adaptive systems and calls for increased flexibility, collaboration, and engagement of organizational members, in this instance, that of the faculty.

Keywords

Community college leaders, Pandemic response, Instructional practices, Student learning, College teaching

1. Introduction

Many higher education institutions have developed emergency response plans for any number of situations, including extreme weather, campus violence, and even electrical and power failures (Kenner, 2017). Despite this attention to planning, many institutions were unprepared for the fast-moving pandemic that swept the globe in early-2020. The leadership of many colleges and universities relied upon state government agencies and the advice of professional associations to develop strategies about how to modify their work while providing the best possible education for their students.

One of the impacts of the pandemic was to reconsider the process for academic course offerings for students. These challenges were particularly acute for community colleges which often rely on practical, hands-on instruction in many occupational fields of study. In addition to transfer coursework that might be more easily taught in virtual or online platforms, instruction tied to job-training programs was difficult, at best, to modify in a relatively short period of time.

After over a year of experimentation with instruction, many community colleges are now at a time when then can reflect on what has worked and what has not worked for instructional delivery. Moyo (2020) referred to the extent to which change within postsecondary education is adapted as the 'new normal.' From this experimentation, there may well be a variety of strategies that institutions can continue to use as they deliver instruction, thus becoming the new

normal.

Kolb (2020) highlighted one case study, noting the reputation for agility, innovation, and a quick ability to change among community colleges. Kolb in particular noted that there was a particularly strong need to consider alternative forms of assessment for instruction while considering the disparate populations served by community colleges. This call for social equity among community college students further highlighted the need to consider alternative instruction beyond simply accessing all instruction through technology.

The purpose for conducting the study was to explore the extent to which modifications to academic course delivery altered due to the COVID-19 pandemic, were anticipated to be permanent institutional changes. This notion of organizational change and the permanence of that change is typically referred to as 'sustainable change'.

2. Background of the Study

Community College Academic Organization. As community colleges evolved from their parentage of secondary schools, they have maintained a reputation, record, and precedent for being responsive to societal needs (Cohen & Brawer, 2008). Often this responsiveness is manifest in the creation of new credit and non-credit programs, and in recent years has especially responded to community education. At the center of the community college mission is an attempt to satisfy the needs of the community, and this means that institutions have to have a high ability to change.

Community colleges have evolved in their structures and behaviors, and this sector of higher education now encompasses a wide range of stand-alone colleges and those that are part of multi-campus systems. Most employ divisions of academic affairs, sometimes coupled with divisions of student affairs. Business operations range dramatically in what they encompass (Samuels & Miller, 2021), ranging from institutional research offices to police force oversight, human resources, and purchasing. The conclusion to be drawn from these observations is that there is no single model for the American community college, as environmental factors coupled with unique community attributes often dictate the roles and responsibilities of institutional leaders.

Perhaps the most common element across community colleges is the senior level organization of academic matters. These individuals, often holding the titles of dean or vice president of academic affairs, typically have oversight for the scheduling of credit bearing classes, the hiring of academic faculty, quality maintenance of academic programs, etc. These organizational units were among the most prominent in determining how colleges would respond to the pressures of the global COVID pandemic.

Although all functions of a community college have visibility and value, the academic offerings of these institutions were perhaps the most reported upon during the rise and initial response to the COVID pandemic. The ability of institutions to respond to the pandemic was primarily rooted in the desire to keep students off of campus and in stay-in-shelter environments where they would not be exposed to the virus. This meant that for almost all institutions, there was a desire to shift course offerings from in-person, face-to-face instruction to some alternative format.

Often with strong faculty governance, unions, and an attempt to build inclusive, democratic environments, community college academic leaders had an obligation and need to respond quickly to the pandemic. With a variety of options reported (Smalley, 2021), many institutions shifted to online or hybrid instruction almost immediately (Burke, 2020). This provided students the opportunity to continue learning and to complete their academic terms with credit. Some disciplines were able to respond better to this change than others, and many applied fields had difficulty determining how to conduct instruction and assess student learning. These same questions and challenges carried over into the next academic year, with institutional leaders attempting to continue instruction and allow students to continue making progress in their fields of study.

Higher Education's Response to the Pandemic. As the COVID-19 pandemic became wide-spread in the spring of 2020, higher education had a very brief period of time to prepare for a transition that would protect both employees and students. Shin and Hickey (2020) stressed that higher education leaders were generally unprepared for this kind of quick decision-making, and following peers, academic alliances, and the advice of state and federal agencies, most shifted to some sort of emergency remote teaching. This shift in pedagogy was intended to be implemented to complete at least the spring 2020 academic term and was allowed by different accrediting and governing bodies, broadly with the understanding that such course delivery would be modified upon the control of the virus (Hodges et al., 2020).

Barton (2020) studied the impacts of COVID-19 on field instruction and remote teaching alternatives. The research found that faculty generally thought that the change in instructional approaches resulted in lower learning outcomes and held negative views of the instructional changes. The study did find though that some faculty regarded some of the changes as more effective than the previous methods, although the general sentiment was toward a return to traditional instruction.

The Chronicle of Higher Education (2020) reported about two-thirds of all institutions returning to some fall

re-opening with differentiated instruction. This meant that some courses were offered online, in hybrid formats, and some in traditional face-to-face methods with certain precautions in place. These institutions similarly adjusted their calendars for the 2020-2021 academic year to help minimize exposure to individuals who might participate in higher risk activities (Gluckman, 2020).

As an important note to these changes, many community colleges have experimented with alternative modes of instruction since their inception. These instructional strategies include modified course delivery (weekends, evenings, executive formats), and over the past decade, have included shifting some instruction to an online platform. This precedence may have proven helpful for many colleges, but may also have not been integrated enough across the entire campus to satisfy the demand and rapid change necessitated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Organizational Change and Permanence. Change and permanence may seem like an oxymoron. An organization must strike a balance between creating a change and making it permanent, while simultaneously creating the conditions that facilitate the organization being adaptive and ready for the next change opportunity. Just like trying to make personal changes stick, organizations also are prone to creating change that does not stick. Many organizations struggle with creating change that lasts (Gilmore, et. al. 1997)**.** An organization typically wants the change to be permanent. The notion of the organizational change and permanence of the change is often thought of as sustainable change. The idea of permanence and sustainable are synonymous. Organizations are looking for change that is not fleeting, that meshes with the culture of the organization and becomes part of the fabric that represents how the organization functions. The idea of permanence can be seen in the early work of Kurt Lewin (1943) and his change model, with permanence being at the core of his third phase, that of refreezing. The refreezing representing embedding the change in the culture. It entails making the change permanent. A similar way to consider the permanence of change can be seen in John Kotter's 8-step change model (Kotter, 1995). Step eight in the model is to anchor the changes in the culture of the organization.

An important question to consider then is how much of the vast amount of organizational change that has been brought on by the global pandemic of COVID-19 will be permanent. Are the changes going to create a new normal? Do some organizations view the changes they made as only temporary? A key question is, does the organization actually desire these changes to be permanent? If the changes are seen as temporary, how challenging will it be for the organization to return to its former state? (Think in terms of Lewin's first step of unfreezing and imagine trying to refreeze to the state of how things were before the pandemic). Then, if the changes are seen as permanent, how sustainable will these changes be? Will the sustainable changes bring about a new organizational model or academic delivery model?

3. The New "Normal"

All of these issues call to mind the phrase we hear about 'normal'. People say they want things to return to normal. Others speak of the idea of a 'new normal'. Perhaps we need to rethink the "new normal". It is clear from searching the research literature that the global pandemic of COVID-19 has created a massive amount of studies and research efforts on its impact, including on higher education. Hung et al (2020) conducted one of the first empirical studies on the impact of the pandemic on dental education. Their findings were not all that surprising that students were experiencing stress and that the majority felt that their clinical education was suffering but viewed some online transitions as positive. The study did not mention if the changes to the dental program were intended to be permanent or were just temporary due to COVID-19. The topic of change in higher education is not limited to the United States. Longhurst, et al. (2020), studied a variety of universities in Ireland and the United Kingdom and the impact of COVID-19. The study identified such benefits as an opportunity to develop new online resources. They also pointed out the opportunity for new types of collaboration. The authors raise the question as to the possibilities that are being created in terms of various aspects of higher education. The changes were not just in terms of classroom activities but also creative possibilities around collaboration.

Relevant to the issue of academic changes brought on by COVID-19 are the broader, deeper impact on students. The impact on student well-being during COVID-19 has also been studied internationally. Ye et al (2020) studied the role of resiliency and social support as factors in college student's mental health. A possible consideration is how will the need for resiliency and social support be impacted by the academic changes that have occurred. It is important to consider what impact (both positive and negative) the changes in academic delivery will have on areas outside of academic learning and performance. In an article from The Successful Registrar, Hope (2021) described several lessons learned from COVIID-19. Among the lessons was the need for students to have consistent access to the internet and sufficient computers. Teachers likewise required training and on-going support for the shift to online learning.

4. Purpose of the Study

With the changes brought about by COVID-19, this study explores how permanent are the changes that have oc-

curred. For instance, will the shift to online learning continue? Will the increased focus on student well-being continue after COVID-19? Will the support provided to faculty continue? Is it possible that some of the instructional changes are making institutions' approaches more student-centric? This brings up the possibility that some of the changes will stay because they result in better student outcomes and not just automatically go back to the way education was delivered before the pandemic. Overall, the impact of COVID-19 has illuminated the need for empathy, flexibility, increased communication, and nurturing a sense of connection and community across all organizational types, including community colleges.

5. Research Methods

The sample for the study was comprised of academic program leaders in public community colleges. The question of academic leader is difficult to standardize within the community college sector, as there is a lack of standardized nomenclature and titles among institutions. Some institutions, for example, make use of traditional department chairs and academic deans, while others make use of divisions, programs, and areas (Miller & Smith, 2021). Despite these differences, the current study made use of a sample of 300 academic leaders at 300 different community colleges. The institutions were first identified using the American Association of Community Colleges membership directory, and from each institution, one senior academic leader and one department or program-level leader was identified using the institution's website. This selection was used to represent both senior leaders as well as faculty leaders. This provided a total of 600 possible academic leaders for participation in the study.

The researchers developed a brief, 10-item survey instrument to collect data on college responses to academic program delivery during the recent pandemic. Survey questions were designed to specifically ask about how the institution changed course offering delivery, and how likely these changes would be to remain as the campuses returned to a more normal state of operation. The survey was developed using an online software, and was pilot tested with a group of 10 sitting community college department chairs at three different mid-western community colleges.

6. Findings

Of the 600 surveys that were emailed to academic leaders in community colleges, 33 usable responses were ultimately returned for use in data analysis (5% response rate). The response rate, although limited, was determined to be acceptable for the exploratory and descriptive nature of the study, with the goal of increasing the response rate in follow-up studies.

As shown in Table 1, responding academic leaders made use of a variety of instructional adaptations during the pandemic. Nearly all (32 of 33; 97%) reported that they offered courses in person with some restrictions, and moving courses to self-directed study formats (n=23; 69.7%) and offering courses exclusively online (n=18; 54.5%) were also reported to be used by over half of the respondents. Responding academic leaders also reported that faculty were involved or somewhat involved in making these instructional offering changes (combined n=30; 90.9%) and that this instructional change had impacted the faculty's working culture (n=20; 60.6%). Additionally, nearly all (n=29; 87.9%) of these leaders noted that there was resistance from faculty in making these instructional adaptations. And importantly, respondents indicated that the student culture was impacted (n=28; 84.8%) by the instructional changes.

Approximately three-fourths of the respondents indicated that these changes to instructional delivery would be either somewhat or very permanent (n=26; 78.8%) and that there will be permanent changes to their colleges based on the pandemic (n=25; 75.8%).

Academic leaders were then asked to identify any new teaching strategies that might have been implemented or developed in response to the pandemic. This question received 30 responses that ranged from the response of "*none*" to the broad statement "*Everything. We did everything we could to accommodate students who did not feel comfortable coming into the physical classroom.*" Some additional comments included "*experiential based courses had to be changed, and faculty were quite creative in trying to address that. Lots of faculty freedom meant lots of student freedom, and in the end, we got through the semester, although I don't know how well it worked.*" Another comment was "*flipped classes with live teaching and students both in the classroom and online.*"

Overall, the most common written comments included that institutions primarily recorded lecture or lesson material and broadcast that to students (including narrated presentations, video recorded lectures and discussions, etc.), and many courses became self-paced or self-directed, requiring the students to read or consume information and then complete assignments (such as tests, writing papers, or engaging in a virtual oral conversation with the instructor). Respondents also indicated that they used flipped instruction, where the majority of material was presented in some online or virtual format, and then several in-person class meetings were held to reinforce student learning.

Table 1. Instructional Changes Made in Response to Covid-19

	n	*%*
Offered course exclusively online	18	54.5
Courses offered in person with restrictions	32	97.0
Programs suspended operations	12	36.4
Courses moved to a correspondence format	9	27.3
Courses moved to a self-directed study format	23	69.7
Courses canceled or postponed	16	48.5
How permanent do you perceive these changes will be		
Very permanent	12	36.4
Somewhat permanent	14	42.4
Not permanent	7	21.2
Faculty resistance to change in instruction		
Not at all	4	12.1
Somewhat	25	75.8
Strong resistance	4	12.1
Has instructional change impacted faculty culture		
Yes	20	60.6
No	13	39.4
Has instructional change impacted student culture		
Yes	28	84.8
No	5	15.2
Do you perceive that there will be lasting changes at the college based on the pandemic?		
Definitely yes	12	36.4
Probably yes	13	39.4
Might or might not	6	18.2
Probably not	2	6.1
Definitely not	0	0
Were faculty involved in making instructional changes		
Yes	13	39.4
Somewhat	17	51.5
No	3	9.1

Respondents were also asked to identify possibly permanent changes to the ways that instruction would be delivered on their campuses. They generated a list of 22 different responses that broadly fell into three categories: switch to more online instruction, increased collaboration, and an increased use of technology. Several of the comments that reflected these categories include *"the options of using remote live teaching will definitely be present in the future,"* and *"I think that there will be much more creativity in thinking about how classes will be offered and how students will be assessed."* Another comment was *"more faculty engagement with instructional designers, more faculty engagement with adminis-*

tration in determining delivery methods, more faculty involvement in using technology to teach their classes."

7. Discussion and Conclusion

Change is inevitable in society and higher education as an industry is not exempt from this. There have been waves of change that have occurred in how courses are designed and delivered, and how faculty are prepared and qualified (Rainie & Anderson, 2017). For community colleges, change is occurring at a rapid pace, and was even before the Covid-19 pandemic. What students want for programs of study, the types of credentials they need for employment, and how they access faculty members for assistance have all changed radically in the past two decades. Additionally, the types of business and industry that employ the American workforce has exerted new and different demands on community colleges.

The COVID-19 pandemic of 2020-2021 forced institutions to respond in a fast manner, using the tools that they had at their disposal at that time. They used the prominent video conferencing software (mostly Microsoft Teams and Zoom) of the time and fell back upon strategies as basic as correspondence education and self-directed learning to deliver instruction. The option of not delivering instruction would both be a failure to serve their students but would also spell financial ruin for these institutions. Out of necessity, these institutions adapted in a fast and timely manner to serve their constituents and remain financially viable.

The landscape of higher education instruction in unclear in the future, particularly what it will look like post-COVID-19. Higher education is in flux and grappling with short-term challenges and therefore what changes will be permanent remains to be seen. This is consistent with other industries as they attempt to navigate a world of more remote work, virtual offices, and increased flexibility.

Recommendations for Practice

As the current wave of COVID concerns recedes, institutional leaders are now given an opportunity to develop a long term and perhaps more thoughtful or strategic response to what instruction of the future looks like. Leaders should begin this conversation by assessing what students liked and found useful in this adapted instructional world, and then use that as a beginning for conversations with faculty members and instructional designers about how classes can be structured. Additionally, leaders need to scan and understand the rapid pace of technological innovation to be creative in envisioning future instruction.

Faculty members need to play an important role and be fully engaged in this process, and ultimately, need to be at the forefront of new instructional design. Their work, however, cannot be within a closed context, and must embrace the realities of societal interaction, use, and reliance on new and emerging technologies. As evidenced from the comments written in the current study, the keys to future instruction are creativity and flexibility.

Although the study included a relatively small sample, the findings resonate with both the existing literature on change as well as the managerial literature on community college administration. In both cases, the ideas of how change is managed within complex systems stresses the idea of inclusive decision-making. This means that multiple stakeholders must be addressed and consulted as institutional leaders decide what to keep, or not keep, from the COVID experience.

A by-product of a more dynamic approach to instructional offerings is the heightened need to embed learning assessment as part of the design process. The only comment offered in the current study regarding alternative assessment was that at one institution a faculty member had one-on-one video meetings to meet with students. There is room for institutions to try and do more in this area, drawing upon activities such as portfolios and the use of computer-based artifacts to demonstrate comprehension and learning. The use of assessment, though, will continue to be critical in demonstrating the value of education.

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