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The Rapid Transition from Face-To-Face to Online Education Due to COVID-19: Observations of Higher Education Faculty in Texas

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Introduction

The pandemic, caused by the Covid-19 coronavirus, required faculty across the country to shift courses from face-to-face to fully online in March of 2020. As the world, and especially the United States of America hunkered down, higher education had to cope. It had to change. Faculty who had met their classes for years and years in-person were suddenly required to move fully online. Students who enrolled in in-person courses had to shift to an online presence.

The quantitative data and associated discussion presented in this article provide one perspective to understand the transition to online teaching and learning. Additionally, the authors have added a personalized element throughout the article referring to unique individual impacts that may resonate with readers. Although hypothetical in nature, these case examples are intended to remind, perhaps capture just a couple of possible scenarios readers may have experienced or witnessed.

Consider the example of a faculty member, highly sought on his campus, teaching undergraduate history. Dr. Brown's career started 25 years ago, when the technology of the day was using overhead slides. Over the years, the professor never had to change. Teaching evaluations were excellent, and students loved the classes. Dr. Brown taught with heart, passion and an exceptional degree of knowledge of the content. Then things changed, immediately and significantly. The doctor, along with thousands of other faculty members and millions of students across the country had to move fully online – with no real warning. Their challenges and successes provide a better understanding of the new the world higher education.

Consider the freshman in college who dreamed of the opportunity to sit in a college classroom with peers, discussing the merits of different theories and ideologies. The student's

last few years of high school were directed toward being accepted into a dream school. But now, due to Covid-19, this undergraduate is sequestered at home, isolated and alone. The experience includes meeting online via zoom, or doing homework assigned as “asynchronous”. Assuredly, the student did not sign up for this experience, and neither did the history professor. It is the stories and experiences of these two individuals who happen to be separated by many years and across generations (and thousands more like them), that led the researchers to ask faculty to share both their experiences and insights into their student’s experiences. From these voices, the profession of higher education can learn more about what is needed moving forward.

Undoubtedly, the landscape of higher education will change after the full impact of Covid-19 is realized and some semblance of normal (what came before) is resumed. Courses will remain online in some settings, faculty will need to be trained more fully in teaching online, and offices that support instructional technology will become more robust (as is possible under financial constraints). The data and analysis that follows serves as a starting point to the discussion that will need to emerge over the next few years regarding the increasingly complex relationship across higher education, technology, online teaching, students, faculty and IT professionals.

Participant Demographics

In May of 2020, the researchers sent a survey to deans at institutions of higher education in the state of Texas requesting they forward it to their faculty. While May is an interesting month in higher education in a normal year because of final exams, final grades due, anticipation of summer, etc., faculty across the state recognized the importance of the semester they were trying to finish and yet, more than 200 completed the survey.

Participants were asked to identify their current position, years teaching in higher education, and how many years they have been teaching online. When asked about their current

position within the institution, they answered the following: 16.75% (35) professors, 24.40% (51) associate professors, 24.88% (52) assistant professors, 14.35% (30) clinical faculty/instructors, 11% (23) adjuncts and 8.61% (18) selected other. See chart 1 for the graphical representation of this data.

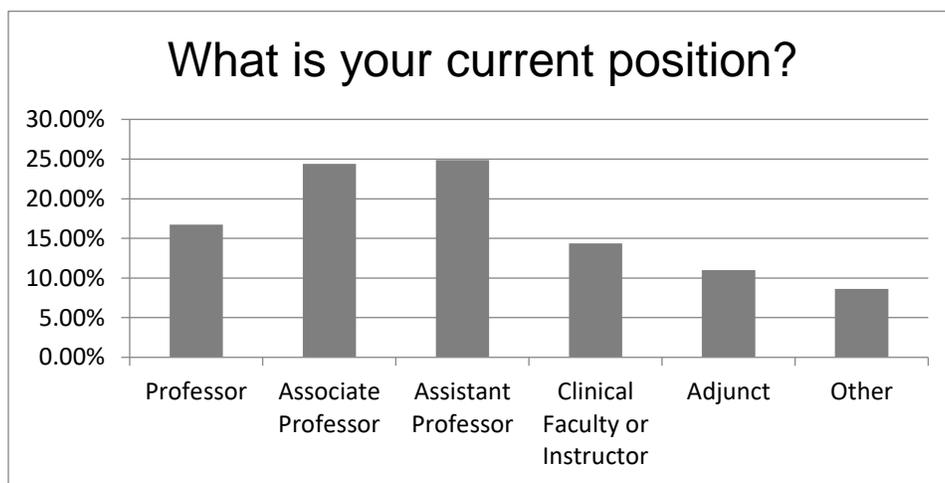


Chart 1

The data in Chart 1 suggests the sample contains a proportionate balance of faculty ranks. Because the respondents represented (in order of response totals), assistant, associate and then full professors, it can be understood that there was no skewing related to rank of the respondents.

When participants were asked how many years they have been teaching in higher education, they answered the following: 2.87% (6) less than 1 year, 11.96% (25) 1-3 years, 13.88% (29) 4-7 years, 14.35% (30) 8-10 years, 19.14% (40) 11-15 years, 15.31% (32) 15-20 years, and 22.49% (47) selected more than 20 years. See chart 2 for the graphical representation of this data.

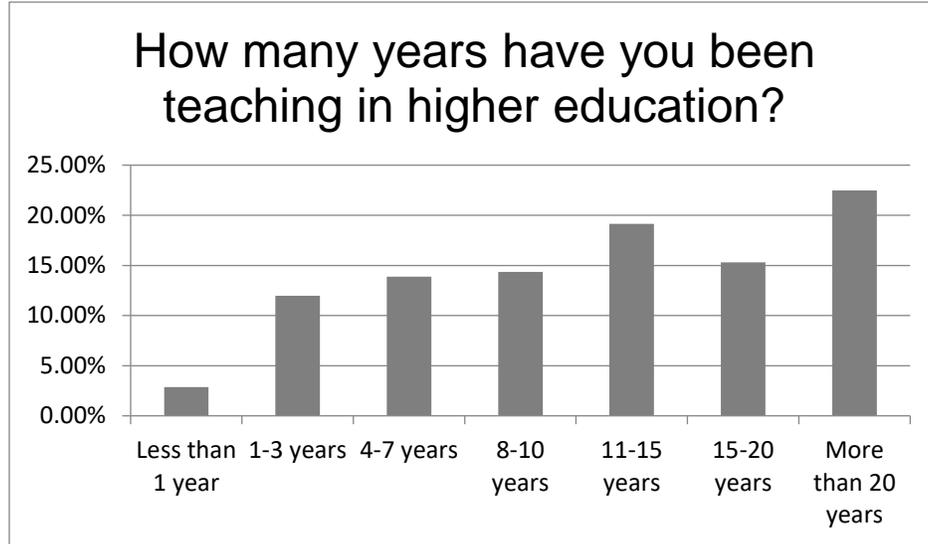


Chart 2

The data identified in Chart 2 indicates that nearly half of the respondents had been in higher education less than ten years, while the other half had been in the field over ten years. These results suggested the respondents were equally divided across years in the field and amplify the extensive range of respondents.

Participants were asked how many years they have been teaching online or hybrid courses in higher education. They answered the following: 27.4% (57) less than 1 year, 20.19% (42) 1-3 years, 21.63% (45) 4-7 years, 14.42% (30) 8-10 years, 11.06% (23) 11-15 years, 2.88% (6) 15-20 years, and 2.40% (5) selected more than 20 years. See chart 3 for the graphical representation of this data.

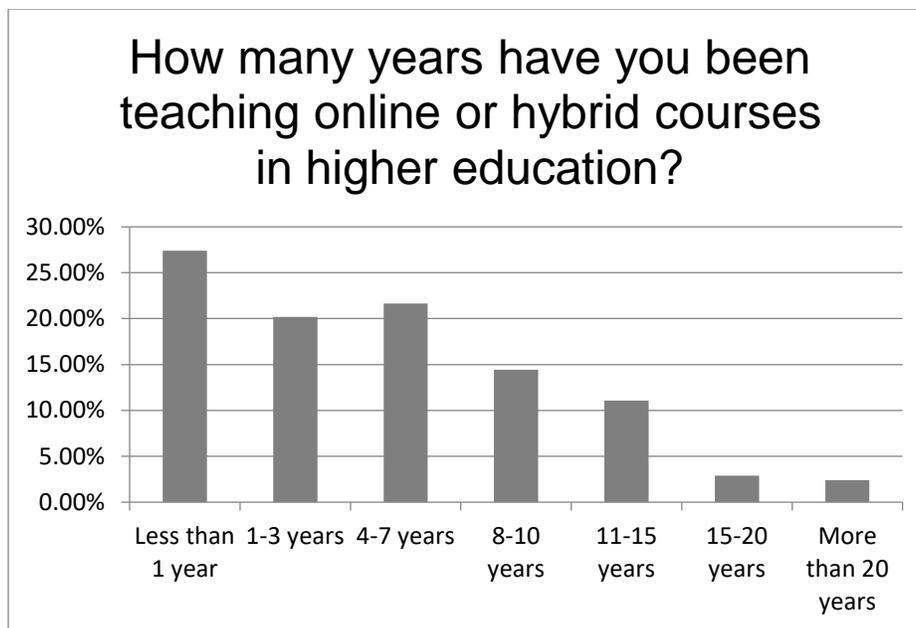


Chart 3

The data presented in Chart 3 have a slight skew that should be noted. The majority of respondents indicated they had seven or fewer years of online teaching (nearly 50% had less than three years of online teaching).

Factors Influencing the Difficulty in Moving Online

Consider the following: of the 20,008,434 students enrolled in higher education nationwide in 2018, 34.7 percent were enrolled in at least one online course (Lederman, 2019), while only 16.6% of all students were enrolled in only distance education courses (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). In Texas, 2018 data indicated that 22.5% of all courses offered in the spring semester at public universities were offered via distance education and 19.1% in fall of the same year (Texas Higher Education Data, 2020).

In mid to late March of 2020, face-to-face education in Texas came to a screeching halt; 100% of all higher education courses in Texas moved online. This rapid change had some negative effects on instructors and institutions alike in the areas of technical infrastructure and accessibility, distance learning competences and pedagogies as well as the fields of study (Marinoni, van't Lant, & Jensen, 2020). Texas institutions of higher education sent their students, staff and faculty home, leaving faculty without online teaching experience in trouble pedagogically. Having honed their andragogy in their traditional environment, the little to no training in online teaching that many instructors realized produced crippling effects in teaching. Remember that history professor who knew the subject but had little to no technological skills in teaching online?

While institutions of higher education typically offer a portion of their courses online and have an appropriate number (arguably) of course designers to address these courses, but, needless to say, this portion is rarely 100%. Reality took a darker turn when the already taxed course designers/LMS specialists/instructional technologists began working with this *new* group of faculty, revealing a previously unrealized lack of university resources. How many hours did it take a course designer or other IT staff member to get the history professor to a place of simply being able to utilize the basic elements of the learning management system?

Online vs. Face-to-Face

The first queries requested centered on the concept of current technological skills. In essence, faculty were asked to what degree they felt prepared to technologically meet the needs of their students. On a scale of 1-5 (1 = poor and 5 = excellent), the mean was 4.14. This result indicates faculty perceived they were more than ready and capable to meet their student's needs using technological teaching methods. In a fascinating juxtaposition, the same respondents

indicated (3.8 on the same scale), that they believed teaching face-to-face was easier than teaching online. At first blush, the data may suggest some degree of arrogance or falsity in the responses. The reality that so many faculty members considered themselves prepared to teach in a fully online setting could represent a limitation; the assumption that survey participants represent a high-level of technology comfort cannot be ruled out. However, the researchers believe these results signal two distinct observations about the current experience of faculty in higher education today.

First, that there still exists the belief, and therefore the reality, that in-person, in the classroom teaching is much different than technology-based teaching (Brown, 2019). In today's ever-changing higher education landscape, there needs to be a greater valuing on the various and creative use of technology in the classroom as a means to not only increase learning but also expedite the educational process (Huffman, Fox, & Colvin, 2020). Technology-based education does not have to be a greater challenge than in-person classrooms. But the reality of this difference persists.

Second, if in fact faculty hold the knowledge and skills to deliver online or technology-based educational experiences (as was indicated in the responses), then how does the field of higher education promote the use of such skill sets in the classroom to enhance and develop the college student experience?

Further enhancing the separation between online and face-to-face instruction was the mean score the researchers found to the question posed as to whether students prefer face-to-face or online instruction. An overwhelming number of respondents reported they believed students preferred face-to-face (3.72).

Therefore, if faculty believed students learn best in a face-to-face environment, and that they were best equipped to teach in such a footprint, it should follow that overall faculty (while reporting the skills to teach with technology) leaned toward a face-to-face learning environment. While course content should have made a difference here (for example, there continued to be the inherent belief that science labs, counseling courses and singing courses were best in-person), the researchers found no difference across the variety of schools/disciplines/content areas assessed.

Use of Others in Teaching On-line

Another domain that was assessed was the use of instructional technology staff during the transition to fully online. While IT staff and offices varied across institutions in both numbers and job duties, it was clear from the data that faculty leaned heavily on their IT professionals to make this transition (3.89). The reported data suggested a need to further explore the value and need of staff to support the ever-growing infusion of more and more technology into the classroom. Institutions of higher education should carefully review their practices and staffing of IT offices.

An interesting and perplexing series of responses emerged around another set of data. Faculty responded that when they were uncertain about a technology, they rarely asked a student (1.97) for assistance, while they were far more likely to seek help from an internet search engine (3.57). The largest proportion of responders indicated (3.8) that they consulted with IT staff when needing help. Additionally, the faculty indicated they were clear on how to find answers to technological questions (4.02). Inherent in the responses was a confused acknowledgment of how and where to access meaningful and useful information about technology. Faculty appeared to believe that knowing who to question regarding use of technology in the classroom was one thing while actually using the right resources was a very different. The researchers understood

the most effective resource for use of technology in classroom settings was the IT department. The lower-than-expected result signaled, perhaps, a lack of understanding of the value of IT in teaching online. Further, while most likely challenging at some level to faculty, the use of students has been shown to be an effective and useful way of integrating technology into the classroom.

Again, consider the history professor. Perhaps the struggle to find answers and limited IT support created a shift in focus from teaching the material to worrying about the right way to use technology (e.g., Zoom[®] white board on Zoom, Canvas[®] or Blackboard,[®] etc.). Now imagine that freshman who was so excited to be in classes and had heard how wonderful this instructor was – how was the student’s experience of the professor’s teaching changed by a lack of technology skills?

Challenges Faced by Students

The researchers were interested in the view of faculty on the experience of students during the transition from face-to-face to fully online classes during the pandemic. Inherent in the response were results that support the assumed reality that students probably faced a multitude of issues beyond the classroom.

An overwhelming response by faculty was that they recognized the challenges faced by many when Covid-19 hit and relaxed their assignments. Specifically, faculty reported that (4.01), they allowed students turn in assignments late, a rarity for academia. Further, faculty clearly recognized that their students faced additional financial challenges based on the pandemic (4.25).

However, while a seemingly high score (3.74) in response to the perceived increase in students exhibiting emotional stress was reported by faculty the number appears to represent an

understatement. Based on the impact of the pandemic, even in May, the researchers expected a much higher score in this regard.

In the Future of the Pandemic

The responses provided by faculty regarding current and future expectations were both expected and unexpected. Several questions were asked to try to understand what faculty perceived moving forward in should the pandemic not be resolved by following fall semester.

On the expected side, the faculty responded fairly resoundingly that teaching online will keep people safe in the next year or so (3.89). However, of great interest was the response to whether faculty had concerns related to accessibility to online instruction. In this regard, faculty reported an average of 3.66 on the scale to 5. This potentially meant that the faculty were not fully concerned about the possibility of students (especially those with disabilities) successfully accessing the course information and materials, or perhaps many faculty did not consider this in their rush to create online content. While most learning management systems addressed accessibility (Bocevaska, Savoska, Ristevski & Blazheska-Tabakovska, 2018), the American with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990 and sections 504 and 508 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 included distance education and deemed it discriminatory if courses were not accessible (Roberts, Crittenden, and Crittenden, 2011).

Future Research

Marinoni, van't Lant, & Jensen (2020) discussed that the sudden shift to online teaching and learning were connected by the following: technical infrastructure and accessibility, distance learning competences and pedagogies, and the field of study. This research yielded much of the

same conclusions. Future research should continue to look at the digital divide, specifically the inclusion of internet access inequities. Education opportunities will continue to be inequitable until the digital divide issues are addressed.

Conclusion (and Recommendations)

In lieu of calling this section “**Things to Never Forget**”, we went with the social norm of ‘Conclusions’. In our current state, Covid-19 does not appear to be leaving us soon. The data described in this article represented beliefs and views by faculty in the position of teaching students in colleges and universities.

First, it seemed clear that faculty can and have been able to adjust to a fully online teaching space. Assuredly, this transition was made by utilizing various and varied resources including peers, students, internet searches and IT personnel. In the future, higher education will benefit from even more robust messaging regarding the use and utility of IT personnel. Accompanying this information should be strategic and meaningful additions to IT offices.

Second, doctoral programs preparing the next generation of faculty would be wise to include training and experiential education in the use of technology as a pedagogical tool. Based on the reported data, faculty from across the landscape of disciplines have both interest and need in enhanced technological skills.

Third, institutions of higher education would benefit from creating or enhancing existing mentoring opportunities specifically targeting the use of technology in the classroom. While this type of mentorship occurred often in an ad hoc fashion, peer-to-peer, regularly scheduled trainings would likely be a low-cost and highly effective way of increasing campus-wide knowledge and skills in infusing technology in the classroom.

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