



Lessons Learned During the Pandemic Response of Spring 2020: Practical Advice for Teaching, Learning, and Educational Development in Fall 2020 and Beyond

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Across higher education, Centers for Teaching and Learning (CTLs)¹ were thrust into the spotlight during the pandemic response of Spring 2020. As players in this process ourselves, we set out to capture how CTLs and their campuses managed the transition to remote teaching through a series of interviews and surveys. We interviewed colleagues at a range of institutional types--doctoral institutions, small private schools, and community colleges--and we surveyed over 140 CTLs to discern what worked well, what barriers they faced, what lessons they learned, and what advice they would offer for Fall 2020. From these findings, we offer recommendations that can impact students, faculty, CTLs, and campus leaders as we all work to prepare for the upcoming academic year.

So what challenges did institutions face during Spring 2020? What worked well? And how did experiences vary (or not) depending on institution type? Here's what we discovered.

Doctoral University Experiences

Respondents from doctoral universities pointed to many faculty members' lack of experience teaching with technology as one of their biggest challenges. It became a mad scramble to train faculty in the use of learning management systems, web conferencing, and other technologies. CTLs and information technology offices (IT) were called on to do an unprecedented number of trainings without warning in a short period, which quickly became a drain on time, resources, and mental and emotional stamina. While many CTLs were well poised to take on the challenges, a good number of others were understaffed and overworked; almost 25% of respondents from doctoral institutions said their CTL felt unprepared to aid faculty during the transition to remote teaching. Of those who knew of faculty members' choice of modality, respondents estimated that 60% held classes primarily synchronously (56%) or entirely synchronously (4%); 24% chose to offer the remote spring instruction mostly (21%) or completely (3%) asynchronously.

¹ We use the term CTL to refer to Centers for Teaching and Learning as well as faculty/staff who serve in educational development roles on campuses without a teaching center.

Faculty members faced a number of other challenges, in addition to their concerns with learning new technologies and providing instruction at a distance when courses had not been designed accordingly. Instructors experienced intensified workloads as they revamped their courses for remote learning under extreme time pressure even as they moved into home work contexts that, for some, included childcare and other responsibilities. Instructor concerns and teaching conundrums were compounded when students struggled with technology. Some students did not have adequate access to the internet, laptops, and webcams to make remote learning feasible. A number of faculty, particularly in STEM disciplines, were concerned about academic honesty and how to conduct high stakes assessment in a remote setting. Many faculty felt academic integrity was a primary concern during Spring 2020. Beyond concerns for students who lacked adequate technology and internet access, faculty members wondered how students could stay engaged and motivated in a remote learning situation. Some also worried about students' home situations or the emotional toll levied by the disruption and uncertainties associated with the pandemic. Many CTLs developed targeted resources and pages under the moniker of "Keep Teaching." Student Academic Support units developed complementary resources and documents to help students persist: "Keep Learning."

For all stakeholders, preparing for remote instructional challenges was exacerbated by communication shortfalls. The communication gaps were particularly vexing for CTLs. And some leadership decisions and choices added to what was already a taxing job for CTLs. Many respondents noted a lack of a coordinated response to the shift to remote teaching--resulting from the necessary rapidity of decision-making--which created confusion and communication bottlenecks. Some CTLs reported being sidelined by campus administrators or found it difficult to collaborate effectively with other offices in the process of trying to meet faculty needs. Some expressed frustration at a perception on the part of leaders and faculty that distance learning was simply a technology issue or fix, rather than also fundamentally about pedagogy: "we've had some difficulty a) reminding leadership that not everything is about digital learning and b) separating out in faculty minds what we're doing for emergency support and what is long-term online course development planning." The dichotomy between technology and pedagogy is a false one; and the "remote teaching" of Spring 2020 was triage, rather than an attempt to encourage the development of strong distance learning approaches and designs. In addition, almost 20% of survey respondents from doctoral institutions had faced or will face decreased CTL budgets. One person noted, "Continued defunding of our CTL by campus leadership put us in a precarious position when we had to move to remote instruction. While one instructional designer held deep knowledge in digital and online pedagogy, the two others did not have extensive experience in online delivery. We were already taxed for time and resources and this change just exacerbated our lean team's ability to respond."

At the same time, CTL respondents from doctoral institutions overwhelmingly reported being very engaged with leadership and included as part of planning and decision-making groups during the transition process. Over 70% reported having been well connected with leadership during transition, "intimately involved from the start." Such CTL representatives or leaders sat

on taskforces, were asked to collaborate with other units to engage in planning, were charged by provosts and vice chancellors with creating and offering a broad slate of programming and resources, and even found themselves on daily calls with leadership. One commented, “Our CTL has pretty much needed to take the lead on the transition to remote learning. The leadership seemed to back up all of this work for the most part.” Fewer than 10% of CTLs at doctoral institutions had little or no involvement with leadership and the institutional response. Many CTLs cited strong team collaborations within the unit as key to their success, despite the intensity of the challenges, but many also commented on constructive partnerships with IT. To exemplify “what worked,” one respondent highlighted the “close cooperation with our IT units, which increased our available staff in the webinars, and provided tech and [instructional design] expertise that is limited on my staff. They also served as back-up on consultation requests when we were overwhelmed.” A “culture of collaboration” on these campuses contributed in many cases to productive working relationships and outcomes.

Master’s College/University and Baccalaureate College Experiences

Master’s colleges and universities and baccalaureate colleges faced a number of challenges similar to those faced at doctoral universities. A primary issue involved faculty members’ lack of comfort with necessary instructional technologies and lack of familiarity with effective distance teaching approaches. Additional major faculty concerns also included the expanded workload involved in learning to teach remotely, difficulty with juggling competing commitments in the home work context, and concerns about engaging students in remote learning. To some degree, some faculty choices and behaviors--which may have resulted from uncertainty about how to engage students well in a distance format--proved demotivating or alienating for students. Faculty behavior proved to be a barrier for some students as well. One respondent wrote, “We did a survey of students’ remote learning and though the response rate was very low over 250 students reported having terrible experiences. They described faculty who lacked compassion, abandoned their courses, didn’t use our LMS to post any grades, it was truly disheartening.” Of those respondents who knew of faculty choice of modality, it was estimated that 57% of faculty held classes primarily synchronously (55%) or entirely synchronously (2%); 28% chose to offer the remote spring instruction mostly (26%) or completely asynchronously (2%)--similar to the estimates at doctoral institutions.

An additional constraint for some of the schools in this category--most likely the small private baccalaureate institutions among them--emerged from a strong cultural tradition devoted to residential on-site teaching and learning. Online teaching had always been rare or nonexistent on some of these campuses, and thus there was little in the way of infrastructure or local expertise to draw on in the shift to remote instruction. This cultural difference at such institutions also showed up for students. While few CTLs mentioned the disconnect between the existing literature about online learning, which is based primarily on adult learners, and the lived experiences on the ground during remote teaching, one respondent noted that “traditional age students who chose to attend a small residential liberal arts college do so because they are

looking for a particular type of experience. Although we encouraged our faculty to design courses for asynchronous engagement our students complained.” Faculty also expressed concern about the increased burden involved to help prepare students for the additional self-driven work necessary to succeed.

Like CTLs at doctoral institutions, CTLs in this category reported being understaffed in face of the size and scope of the need, and almost 20%--10% more than at doctoral institutions--felt unprepared to aid faculty during this transition, though a full 65% self-assessed their readiness as strong despite obstacles. As at doctoral institutions, 20% reported facing or having recently faced budget cuts. In contrast to educational development support units at doctoral institutions, 56% of which reported having 6-20 staff members, 52% of CTLs in this category were staffed by a single person or by a developer working only part time on the basis of a single course release; some literally responded to the question about barriers with the phrase: “center of one.” The number of IT staff members was also much smaller at some of these institutions, and these colleagues were also stretched beyond capacity. Unsurprisingly, the themes of overwork, exhaustion, and the sheer inadequacy of available time to serve all faculty showed up regularly through these CTLs’ responses. Yet a note of accomplishment and even pride also rings through, as respondents again and again celebrate rising to the challenge in an important moment: “What we lacked in staff we made up for in strategy.” “CTLs had the knowledge; what they lacked was the capacity. They are reaching an unprecedented number of faculty.” “We weren’t prepared in the sense that we had documentation at the ready, but we were prepared to mobilize and take quick action.” Interestingly, a number note that their preparedness stemmed from previous contingency planning for the event of shutdowns due to weather, fires, hurricanes, and the like.

Communication proved to be challenging in a variety of ways at these institutions: among collaborators, with faculty, in relation to leadership. Like those at doctoral institutions, and in approximately the same ratio, CTLs leveraged 1) their own staff, 2) campus IT groups or individuals, 3) faculty and/or graduate students affiliated with the center, 4) faculty not affiliated with the center.

Somewhat fewer CTLs in this category than the doctoral one reported having had tight involvement with leadership and decision-making during the transition in spring. Though 63% still reported good levels of involvement in the process and communication with leadership, a full 20% experienced little to no connection. Evidence of this lower level of engagement showed up in descriptions of disconnects between leadership’s planning and decisions about development initiatives which pre-empted already prepared responses on the part of CTLs. A number of CTLs also reported with chagrin and puzzlement being left out of the planning team for instructional transition, as the responsibility for preparing faculty had been entirely assigned to IT. In some cases, a CTL’s inclusion in emergency planning for instruction came only after lobbying, or when a campus partner recognized the potential for a CTL’s contribution: “At first the CTL was ignored. Then our CIO contacted me and said I had to be involved. Now we are being charged with summer pedagogical training.” Leaders who helped various stakeholders

come together to clarify “who was doing what” paved the way for CTLs and IT units to navigate the important challenge of partnering across areas of expertise and even some cultural or territorial divides.

As was clear in the case of doctoral institutions, leaders that seized the opportunity to draw on the expertise in CTLs as well as their pre-existing connections with faculty, and then to facilitate constructive collaborations across units or to heartily support and promote collaborative efforts, paved the way for more efficient and effective work alliances--essential in face of the instantaneous large-scale need that characterized the shift to remote instruction:

“At the initial transition to emergency online instruction, our CTL established an effective collaboration with IT and later the instructional & research folks in our library. The recommendations we made and trainings (mostly technology support from IT) made were effective and they have been working with us ever since. After the semester ended, roughly the same group started organizing a ‘June Pedagogy Institute’ to support course instructors in their attempts to make courses more resilient to changes in on-campus instruction. The Provost has embraced this effort and heavily advertised it.”

Baccalaureate/Associate’s College and Associate’s College Experiences

Once again, faculty members’ lack of familiarity with requisite teaching technologies for remote instruction was a significant challenge for baccalaureate/associate’s and associate’s colleges. Students also faced issues with access to adequate technology in order to learn remotely. But unlike the other two groups, respondents in this category pointed to faculty as well as student access to technology--laptops, internet, headsets, and webcams, as well as home internet access--as another challenge. As was true for those at doctoral universities and master’s colleges/universities and baccalaureate colleges, faculty were additionally concerned about increased workload and competing responsibilities while working from home. However these colleagues mentioned concerns about students’ access to necessary technologies above concerns with student engagement.

While CTLs in this group registered a sense of being stretched and overwhelmed with the onslaught of need, much less commentary addressed concerns with understaffing, despite the fact that 30% were staffed by a single person (or a person working less than full time in the role). 39% reported staff levels of 2-5 members, and 22% of 6-10. To some degree, this was because a number of institutions were part of a larger university system and benefitted from shared resources with other regional branch campuses. These CTLs also self-assessed as higher in terms of their preparedness to support the remote transition, with 75% agreeing or strongly agreeing they were well prepared, 15% neutral, 10% unprepared, and none very unprepared. There was little report of intended budget cuts, and, in fact, in addition to steady levels of resources, quite a number registered the likelihood of increased staffing and budgetary resources. As in the case of the other groups, CTLs registered a sense of pride at what they had been able to accomplish despite the challenges: “In three weeks, we provided the

equivalent of the amount of training that we do in a year. We were able to immediately offer training to get people who were interested off the ground.”

Interestingly, though, respondents from this category did not cite lack of coordination with or support from campus leadership as a major challenge during Spring 2020. A representative comment insisted that “our Vice President of Instruction directly oversees our CTL, and is deeply invested in the work of the CTL, and therefore was in constant communication with those of us in the CTL, so we were able to work together quite well.” Collaborations across campus, and particularly with IT, seemed to go more smoothly for baccalaureate/associate’s and associate’s colleges as well. In one case that did register understaffing, a collaboration with adjuncts was established by the leadership: “Though we had the expertise, we were seriously understaffed for the need. The administration did pull together funding to pay adjunct instructors to work part-time in the CTL to support our efforts.” Collaborations were a central theme of many contributions by CTLs in this category. One respondent shared, “We have faculty who are mentoring others, helping their departments, sharing their online courses--there is a ton of cooperative work happening from a variety of people. So ask--you will be surprised at what you get from people. There can be generosity in academia!” Another highlighted an already existing set of strong relationships and partnerships as foundational to the successful work of Spring 2020:

“We already had a functioning and well-supported CTL, and . . . we have long-standing collaborations between our administration, online learning department, and faculty professional development committee. Our ability to collaborate with each other, our online learning department’s quick work to give all faculty online meeting software licenses, and our online learning department’s ability to reassign staff to support faculty during the transition, all made a huge difference.”

As with their colleagues at other types of institutions and, again, in approximately the same ratio, CTLs leveraged 1) their own staff, 2) campus IT groups or individuals, 3) faculty affiliated with the center, 4) faculty not affiliated with the center.

Lessons Learned and Recommendations for Fall 2020

Given these experiences, what actions might campuses consider taking in preparation for Fall 2020? Luckily, respondents shared their successes and advice with us. On the basis of their contributions, we provide aggregated recommendations for all institutions, regardless of their category.

Communication and Collaboration

Because the importance of productive communication and collaboration echoed consistently through of the respondents’ comments, we recommend that campus leaders actively encourage and promote partnerships across campus, and we recommend that CTLs and other key

stakeholders be at the table for important instruction-related planning efforts. This is particularly important for CTLs, IT groups, and online learning offices as the possibility for productive partnerships greatly enhances the support they can provide for the educational program. Creating a culture that rewards and celebrates meaningful collaboration will position diverse stakeholders to work well together under stress in extreme situations. Where such a culture exists, it is possible, as one respondent noted, for all to rise to the occasion together: “The spirit on campus also was ‘all hands on deck’ and folks took pride in supporting each other. This went FAR beyond the CTL but we were glad to be able to help.” In addition, campus leaders should elevate and support CTLs as key contributors through ensuring, as far as possible, adequate staffing and resource allocation.

We also recommend campus leaders centralize or coordinate communication efforts and create opportunities for all voices to be heard, including student voices, and then address emergent needs, especially when it comes to access to technology. Share information proactively and as early as possible with key stakeholders, especially CTLs and IT units, so they can prepare in advance of campus announcements and decisions. In contrast to a number of cases in which CTLs learned of the move to remote through the same email announcement the rest of campus did, one CTL commented: “no one could feel totally prepared for an event at the scale of this pandemic, however we were brought into conversations at least two weeks ahead of any provost actions/announcement so we had a window to get things prepared and up on our website so that when everything hit we were ready to go.”

Collaboration and communication can help faculty manage the increased workload. We recommend that faculty members reach out to colleagues and campus support units for feedback and assistance with Fall 2020 courses. In designing courses, especially for distance delivery, faculty can increase the chances for student engagement and make disaffection less likely by building in robust communication. Communication with students is essential during this time, so aim to be especially clear about course requirements and expectations. One respondent recommends, “Being transparent about goals, methods, and outcomes is imperative for student motivation and success (and our own sanity as instructors). We can’t just show up in a space and expect our students to learn—now everyone seems to be acknowledging the amount of planning and strategizing that goes into successful teaching...” Recognize the critical need to humanize education and create multiple channels of communication so students can reach you. Be open to learning new technologies to make this happen. Short messages from faculty that are delivered frequently actually save time by reducing confusion and miscommunication.

CTLs with successful collaborations and effective communication internally and with other units reported having better experiences in Spring 2020. So we recommend that CTLs continue to build partnerships with other campus units. Since so many CTLs are understaffed, these collaborations can increase the impact of their efforts. For example, one CTL shared, “This summer, we have partnered with the university’s online learning branch to offer an intensive, three-week online institute (offered 4x) to more than 300 faculty in all, and a series of one-week

workshops whose content will reach at least a couple hundred more faculty.” We also stress the importance of recognizing faculty members as potential partners who can serve as champions and as collaborators, whether in their own departments and schools, or as leaders of sessions or learning communities.

Because communication between CTLs and faculty was sometimes difficult, we recommend CTLs explore creative ways to share information and advertise their services. Here’s a CTL communication success story: “The daily blog, to which all faculty could sign up to get updates in their email inbox, was extremely successful. We also set up an informal Facebook page for faculty to share ideas and resources, and it was incredibly active all spring.” We also recommend CTLs build good proactive communication with administrative leaders, and be sure to communicate successes as well as challenges.

Preparing and planning for faculty development and training

Because everything takes much longer than expected, and because the design approaches that will be necessary to support success either in distance learning formats, hybrid formats, or on-site in masked and socially distanced contexts are new and bound to take additional time to envision and plan for, start preparing development opportunities as soon as possible. In addition, operating at such a large scale is likely to require multiple iterations or work with larger than usual groups. As a first step in planning after determining the institution’s target approach to instruction, take time to engage in needs assessment work, in order to discern faculty members’ needs, preferences, and also areas of strength. Planning should also build in what developers can learn about student experiences during the Spring 2020 remote instruction. Draw on student survey data (if your institution has collected it) or consider findings from national studies about the student experience of remote learning. Engage faculty in discussions about pedagogy from the perspective of students.

In considering what to offer, be strategic. Don’t reinvent the wheel. Use already existing resources that are openly available online or with Creative Commons licenses, or share/exchange materials with peers at other institutions. Develop a plan or a framework that is as sustainable as possible in its simplicity and selectiveness even as it seeks to respond to a range of content and format needs as well as faculty skill and comfort levels. Be flexible in imagining new approaches to familiar practices. For example, introduce “quick consults” rather than scheduling an hour block for each conversation. When building larger programs, design for reuse. Think in terms of modules that can be repurposed and recycled. Focus on what faculty members need rather than what you have to give them. Also, don’t overwhelm faculty with resources; be selective. Curate a targeted set of resources and provide easily navigable roadmaps. Some CTLs noted that with the best of intentions, they pulled together an extremely large number of possible resources, only to find their faculty participants overwhelmed. Ensure that participants in programming take away at least 1-3 actionable items for each hour of participation.

Recognize that faculty, like students, are experiencing the impact of multiple intersecting stressors and levels of trauma. Many of the CTLs emphasized how fundamental a concern inclusive teaching and anti-racist pedagogy must be in the work ahead. Humanizing faculty development work as well as teaching approaches is a valuable first step. For some CTLs, holding space for participants in programming or consultations to process their experiences, frustrations, questions, concerns, and emotions was an important role.

Continue to ground programming in the essentials of good teaching, even while recognizing that many faculty will also need technology skill development. As one respondent put it: “ use this opportunity to help faculty design better courses that can be taught remotely and in person. Better courses that align learning outcomes to evidence-based teaching strategies have super powers that can withstand all forms of pedagogical disruptions. Better courses increase transparency, so that students grasp the big picture and how all of the elements of a course support their learning.” Encourage faculty to design as if for distance delivery, then add face-to-face element back into the design. Doing so will allow for greater flexibility in the eventuality of a sudden shift from in-person to remote instruction.

As always, model best practices, but especially in engaging faculty online and remotely in development as they learn to teach online and remotely. Encourage faculty to use and integrate the Learning Management System (LMS) at the institution in their teaching from day one. Make sure to post materials from any synchronous sessions as soon as possible afterward to provide access for those who couldn't attend or need to engage with the materials in varied ways (e.g. using screenreaders, etc).

And, finally, plan for your own needs as a CTL. Be prepared to shift on a dime, and plan flexibility into your own offerings with a range of contingencies in mind. Remember that those institutions that had already been engaging in some form of contingency planning found themselves better positioned to help with the shift. And, because this work is exceptional in its intensity and scope--at a time that is already taxing for all--build in self-care, pace the work, set reasonable expectations for the CTL staff, and manage stakeholder expectations. Consistently recognize and celebrate staff members' or collaborators' contributions and achievements.

Recommendations for faculty members

Recognize that this is an extraordinary time that is making extraordinary demands on you as well as your students. As you set out to learn to teach in new ways, start from your strengths and existing expertise, adopting a growth perspective about your own learning, not a deficit approach, even as you would encourage the same of your students. Prepare yourself for the likely eventualities in the fluid future ahead, as surge in COVID-19 infections in fall or winter may lead to remote shifts for those teaching on campus. As you design your courses and make your teaching plans, approach them flexibly. Learn about design frameworks such as “[adaptive teaching](#)” or “[resilient teaching](#),” and take this opportunity to plan your courses to make them

easiest to adapt in the event of change to remote instruction. And, finally, recognize the critical role you play in the lives of your students, who are also facing enormous challenges. See this as a moment to humanize education, and consider learning about the lessons offered by “trauma-informed pedagogy.”

Conclusion

And finally, we recommend that all campus constituents recognize the immense mental and emotional toll the pandemic has taken on everyone. It is key that campus leaders, faculty, and CTLs build in self-care, pace the work, and set reasonable expectations for themselves and others. As one respondent put it, “Listen. What do your faculty need and or want? Don’t overburden yourself with things that might be helpful. Conserve your efforts as much as possible.” This a time to be strategic by curating a targeted set of resources and providing easily navigable roadmaps. Plan flexibility into your own offerings with a range of contingencies in mind. And be sure to consistently recognize and celebrate everyone’s contributions and achievements. This is truly a moment to humanize education and make it more equitable for all learners.

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