

# An Examination of Community Colleges in the United States during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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## Abstract

Community College is an adult-focused academic institution emphasizing vocational training, two-year associate degrees, specialized health care training, advanced fire science, and community-based education. All aspects of our society, the economy, higher education in general, and Community Colleges, in particular, have been struck due to the Covid-19 Pandemic. The changing circumstances of the Community Colleges due to COVID-19 required key leaders to utilize resources to meet this unprecedented challenge. This research paper attempts to uncover the effects of Covid-19 on Community Colleges. This study found that higher education institutions should have recognized that students often need to prepare for College. Continued solidarity from all stakeholders and a multiprong approach will be needed to mitigate the negative impacts of a pandemic such as COVID-19.

**Keywords:** pandemic, higher education, strategy

## 1. Introduction

COVID-19 has affected the workplace in many ways. First, it has reshaped the physical workspaces that we show up to work in, such as offices or work from home. The Pandemic has affected the physical workflow within our workspaces, often requiring masks and social distancing in the work areas and the level of personnel needed to accomplish tasks. In addition, it has reshaped the socioeconomic paradigm between labor and management, giving workers much more power in the economy. Lastly, Covid-19 has shifted the social fabric of society by altering the priorities of families, especially those with children.

This paper aims to illustrate how academic program delivery, faculty, and students were disrupted and impacted by the COVID-19 Pandemic at community colleges in the United States. These impacts demanded that community colleges strengthen their preparedness, response, and coping with the new landscape of education delivery amidst an ongoing pandemic with long-lasting effects. This paper will explore the impacts of COVID-19 on the higher education industry and the subsequent changes to education delivery at community colleges in the USA.

## 2. Literature Review

Burnett et al. (2020), while surveying online general chemistry course data, revealed that some faculty who were comfortable teaching strictly using face-to-face format pre-COVID-19 struggled with the immediate shift to online methods of instruction, especially in averting students from cheating on quizzes, tests, and exams using social media, search engines, or online tutoring sites. In addition, faculty reported that altering exams to prevent academic dishonesty consumed much more time and resources than the previous in-class methods. These approaches required adapting numerous ways such as revised questions, unique chemistry course-related content, qualitative exams rather than quantitative answers requiring computation, only allowing single exam questions on screen at one time, rather than the entirety of the exam, reordering questions and solutions using random layout, limiting exam times, and allowing open book or open notes. Instructors with expertise in online tools and prior experience with online course creation assisted those who struggled with these formats, providing needed support and guidance.

Cosmina-Simona and Brunilda (2020) studied a sample of 108 students and teachers in Albania and Romania to discover the challenges they face due to COVID-19. One of the challenges teachers faced was regarding

students' motivation, which led to their low involvement in classes. They also needed help with slower internet connection speed. They also found that teachers and students perceive online courses to be more rigorous than face-to-face classes. In this study, 60% of teachers and 65% of students prefer face-to-face classes. They also found a formal training process, as 80% of respondents learned it alone.

Gedro et al. (2020) examined the impact of COVID-19 at Empire State College SUNY. They found a shift towards using communication technology such as Zoom, Microsoft Teams, Skype, and Google Hangouts to regularly speak and communicate with internal and external stakeholders and hold virtual meetings, conferences, lectures, and other presentations. As virtual became the new model, many educators, support staff, and students needed training to efficiently function using systems some had never seen or handled - much more knowledgeable staff spent time off hours providing this needed assistance and training. The flexibility of managers to accommodate employee differences in learning mode, willingness to adjust working hours on a limited basis, and transitioning staff and students from in-person formats to streaming platforms result in a workforce that can function, even when there is a scarcity of resources and little movement is necessary.

Jehi et al. (2022) conducted a literature review to explore the effects of the Pandemic on the anxiety level of students in higher education. This study indicates that about 33% of students suffered from anxiety before the Pandemic started. Some factors causing stress were isolation, long work hours, being afraid of getting COVID, and sudden shifts online without formal training.

Khan (2021) examined the effect of COVID-related changes on students in the UK. He found that the flexibility of course content evaluations and digitization of the content were the positives associated with the move to online learning. However, the lack of face-to-face interactions and the absence of a support system from the university were some of the negatives associated with the change to online learning.

Lovell et al. (2022) examined the state of organizational communication as higher education institutions moved toward online learning. They found that administrators failed to garner buy-in from the faculty due to the absence of two-way communication. They point out that a communication medium's genuineness is crucial in an environment with COVID-19.

Magd et al. (2021) explored the challenges of COVID-19 faced by faculty and students in Oman. They found that most challenges were common to both subgroups: technical training, motivation to do work without someone pushing you on your face, and assignment submission and grading difficulties.

Moessenlechner et al. (2021) presented the results of an online survey with a sample size of 674. They conducted this survey among the whole and part-time faculty at MCI Innsbruck. Most of their respondents perceived the transition to online learning as successful and used live synchronous lectures as their primary medium of instruction. However, they needed help designing and developing material for their online classes. As a result, they hope to see better training and ongoing online teaching and learning support.

O'Shea et al. (2021) found that the COVID-19 Pandemic has widened the socioeconomic divide among students in Australia. They suggest that higher education administrators should evaluate the student's life at their institution instead of just focusing on a small pandemic period.

Shaw et al. (2020) point out that as important as physical health, employee and student mental health and wellness are also severely affected by the Pandemic and subsequent lockdown. Many employees and students are fighting mental distress, unease, economic burden, loneliness, family illness, uncertainty with childcare, and ambiguity about their children's elementary, secondary, or college education. In collaboration with health providers and resource groups, human resources and student affairs must encourage wellness support and resources toward these challenges to positively impact employee and student morale, particularly throughout the lockdowns.

The literature review has shown that the higher education landscape is still evolving and will need further study to provide a framework for college and university leaders moving forward. Therefore, this paper examines the case of community colleges during Covid-19.

### 3. Case Study

Community colleges are two-year educational institutions that offer affordable postsecondary education as a conduit to a four-year degree. The objective of community colleges is to provide affordable education. The highest degree available at a community college usually takes about two years to complete if attended full-time. However, now, many community colleges are also offering bachelor's degrees. Community colleges have historically provided a low-cost alternative for students who need more financial funding from their parents or academic preparation for four-year colleges. They also are a crucial education ground for students seeking jobs

in local businesses, from plumbers to respiratory therapists. Community colleges enroll about 17 million college students, roughly 27 percent of the nation's students in higher education (Saul, 2021).

Saul (2021) points out that community colleges lost 9.5% student population due to the coronavirus, twice the loss of four-year institutions. She points out that the drop among Black students was 19 percent and Hispanics at 16% between the fall of 2019 and the fall of 2020. She attributes this loss to the non-transferability of skills taught at community colleges, such as welding, to an online format. As virtual became the new model, many educators, support staff, and students needed training to efficiently function using systems some had never seen or handled - much more knowledgeable staff spent time off hours providing this needed assistance and training. The flexibility of managers to accommodate employee differences in mode of learning, willingness to adjust working hours on a limited basis, and transitioning staff and students from in-person formats to streaming platforms result in a workforce that can function, even when scarcity of resources and little movement is necessary (Gedro et al., 2020). Community College education and skills training programs include several courses for personnel, training to be or those already licensed as nurses, EMTs, firefighters, and emergency/first responders. These essential programs are vital to continue despite lockdowns and pandemic restrictions. Due to the clinical requirements of these programs, the state-mandated in-hospital and ambulance training hours, and the need for personal protection equipment stock, the Board of Trustees at these colleges authorized emergency purchases of masks, gloves, face shields, and sanitizers for these students and faculty. As the difficulty in procuring PPE has become exacerbating due to international shortages, authorized departments can bypass central purchasing and obtain these necessary protective supplies using business credit cards or other means for reimbursement up to monthly spend limits imposed by the Offices of the President and authorized by the Board of Trustees.

During the first few weeks of COVID-19 lockdowns in March 2020, the Presidents of community colleges sent emails to all internal stakeholders - students and employees - informing them of CDC and their State guidelines and providing links to County and local health websites. All departmental and divisional leaders were requested to direct questions from the media or the public to the Office of Public Affairs, which took guidance from the Board of Trustees and the President on campus closures, remote faculty teaching, and staff remote work. Faculty, departmental leaders, and current students were informed by faculty, departmental leaders, and the College told current students through email, the College website, and media that all courses would be delivered via online formats until further notice, instructing all in-person labs, clinical, hospital, and ambulance training halted.

Human resources were tasked with reassuring employees that no current employees are expecting to be laid off despite halted classes and College closures. HR tasks should include providing weekly updates to all internal stakeholders about the state of the College, including the number of employees ill with COVID-19 symptoms, the number of those who are in quarantine, how many have returned to work after recovery, and any other relevant non-private statistical information. This weekly email would also relay information on where to be tested, sign up for County and State vaccination updates, and provide a directory of vaccine sites. HR would also list mental health support services available by remote access through employee insurance providers, state health agencies, health organizations, and charities.

Operational leadership to fill the immediate need to provide at-home employees with laptops, IT support, remote access, and hardware was supplied through joint efforts and interdepartmental collaboration by General Administration, campus police, and the IT department. Campus police were responsible for orderly traffic direction, maintaining social distancing, requiring masks, scheduled access, and limited entry points for employees coming on campus for access to pick up the hardware. At the same time, the general administration provided hourly surface and aerosol cleaning of all characters, filled replaced hand sanitizers, and placed distancing notices and CDC guidelines throughout the campus. IT departments procured and distributed equipment to all staff within four weeks of closures, shifted to providing phone and remote desktop support, and acquired software licenses for remote access to make the transition from the office as seamless as possible at home.

Research on college student activities, behaviors, and mental health shows that the lockdown orders have increased depression symptoms and lowered exercise activity. As leadership recognized the emotional, mental, and psychological hurdles and challenges students were struggling with throughout the Pandemic, guidelines to extend the counseling hours and to hire additional Licensed Clinical Professional Counselors (LCPC) to provide mental and emotional support to any students who realized they were having difficulty with the Pandemic in general or the transition to remote learning, were implemented. Students were already emailed contact information through the College's Student Wellness Center; the wellness campaign encouraged students to contact counselors through phone, email, or video conference and provided regular strategies to reduce stress.

Counselors specializing in care for the diverse student population are also offered, as studies show stressors, symptoms of depression, and anxiety for different student population groups vary. Some population groups had unique stressors associated with their cultural and social context. Elevation of stress and anxiety was shown among the incoming student population relative to those students graduating. The counseling service in orienting these new first-year students (Coughenour et al., 2020). Wellness Center counselors were placed on call and made available to students 24 hours a day, seven days a week. The college Employee Assistance Program, a parallel program for staff well-being, provides counselors and other professional assistance to staff and faculty struggling with stresses or anxieties.

#### 4. Conclusion

The higher education institution leadership should see this Pandemic as an opportunity to improve themselves. The enormity of the challenge that COVID-19 presented required leadership to take unprecedented action in providing students and employees stability, educational flexibility, emotional and mental services, tuition reductions and waivers, federal assistance, food, and essentials distribution, provide protective supplies, childcare assistance, and housing/rent aid. The stay-at-home orders, the government-ordered lockdowns, and the aftermath of COVID-19 led higher education institutions to react swiftly, using a multi-pronged coordinative effort to positively impact students, staff, faculty, and its wider community. Due to the fluidity of COVID-19, sticking with the comfortable *normal* was not feasible. Instead, leaders designed, developed, and implemented a *new normal* with input and continuous feedback from their stakeholders. The collaborative effort from all stakeholders blunted the initial negative toll from COVID-19 at the height of pandemic restrictions. Continued solidarity from all stakeholders will be required as this epidemic mutates into different deadly.

This Pandemic unearthed several problems, such as colleges/universities failing to recognize that students are often ill-prepared for college education. The motive has been to generate revenue to cover their high cost of operation, which usually meant compromising the admission of those not well prepared for the challenge of a higher education classroom. These actions include removing admission barriers such as standardized tests and minimum GPA. The growth of online education will make low-funded, high-in-debt small private schools lose their total pay students to better brand schools as more and more branded schools are putting complete degree programs online. These programs are quite affordable and provide employment opportunities compared to low-tier schools. The more agile colleges/universities will be able to capture new market share by offering low-cost, on-demand, online, high-quality content relevant to an individual's needs for education and employment. The problem concerning access to higher education has been about affordability, availability, and relevance. It disproportionately affects students of color and lower-income backgrounds. They are also prone to getting into debt and getting themselves into a worse economic situation. That is where online education can work to get rid of income inequality.

#### 5. Limitations and Future Research

We recognize this study's limitations, including the need for more research to support the strategies and applications offered. We also recognize the limitation of this study's sample size, which limits the generalization of its results.

Future research should focus on understanding the complex nature of the response of students and academic communities due to COVID-19 to help further define the distinct phases of this disaster, which has been chronic and occurs over time rather than as a one-time Disaster Event. A follow-up study should be conducted in five years to determine whether there has been a change in the response factors discussed in this study. Further research and development of strategies would help guide university leadership on what services, programs, personnel, and support structures will help students and the academic community during COVID-19 and potential future disasters.

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