


Faculty's Role in Creating a (Remote) Sense of Community Among Faculty and Facilitating Contexts of Care for Students


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Abstract

Objectives: This qualitative study employed a sensemaking approach to understand faculty members' sensemaking of their roles during the COVID-19 pandemic and the emergency transition to remote teaching and learning.

Methods: An email invitation to participate in the study was sent to faculty who taught in an MBA program during both the 2019–2020 and 2020–2021 academic school years. Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 14 faculty members who self-selected to participate in the study.

Results: Two salient themes emerged from the research: *creating a (remote) sense of community among faculty* and *facilitating contexts of care for students*. These findings highlight the mission-central importance of faculty, the role of teaching, and the need to support faculty as they support students in higher education.

Conclusions: As a result of the emergency transition to remote teaching and learning, faculty gained an increased awareness of the importance of human connection and interaction, which made them develop a whole-person approach both to colleagues and students.

Implications: How well institutions plan for and support their faculty during times of crises will influence the institution's capacity for student support and the personal impact of the crisis on faculty.

Keywords: *COVID-19; faculty; sensemaking; sense of community; ethics of care*

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Introduction

COVID-19 was a worldwide pandemic that transformed and affected individuals' perceptions of health, family, work, social relationships, and education. The COVID-19 pandemic prompted mass school closures, as many education system stakeholders were ill-prepared for the disruption (Quezada et al., 2020). An estimated 1.3 billion learners at all levels from 142 countries entered lockdown mode (m_adjiwanou, 2020).

Simultaneously, academic institutions had no choice but to react to the pandemic by transitioning academic coursework to emergency remote teaching in order to accommodate their existing student bodies (Pokhrel & Chhetri, 2021). As the public health crisis quickly unfolded, the leadership focus switched from providing academic excellence to maintaining the functioning of the educational process (Karalis, 2020; Pokhrel & Chhetri, 2021).

Initial efforts to maintain operations included transferring desktops from office to home, staggering staff work schedules, and deploying instructional designers to facilitate workshops for faculty in order to learn how to teach online (Piotrowski & King, 2020). Institutional resources hurriedly assisted faculty in creating or recalibrating their courses and developing their online delivery skills to sustain the educational process (Ranf et al., 2021).

The change in the modality of content delivery between brick-and-mortar and the virtual environment, however, was a significant challenge in many ways (Kingsbury, 2021). Transitioning from face-to-face to online learning was unfamiliar for many (Colclasure et al., 2021; Pokhrel & Chhetri, 2021; Roy & Covelli, 2021). Faculty and students who experienced the transition, for example, reported less focus, interest, and participation in classes, reduced social interactions with peers, and a decline in the perceived quality of the learning process (Kecojevic et al., 2020; Ruiz-Alonso-Bartol et al., 2022). Additionally, for faculty, teaching remotely resulted in distracted work environments at home, which contributed to the challenge (Colclasure et al., 2021; Delaney et al., 2021).

Since the onset of the pandemic and initial lockdown, the narrative has transitioned from isolation to vaccination to adjustment to the new “normal,” as faculty have returned to their brick-and-mortar institutions. However, this experience warrants further reflection on how faculty made sense of their role during the pandemic, while also leveraging technology to deliver academic content. Thus, the new “normal” has equipped faculty with a newfound lens to reexamine their concept of teaching and learning, the modality of how their content is delivered and garnered by students, and an awareness of the inherent tradeoffs between virtual and face-to-face delivery of academic content.

Literature Review

Faculty Experiences During the Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic had an extraordinary impact on teaching in a brick-and-mortar structure, as teaching was no longer confined to a particular space, and specific time frames of activity no longer constrained the nature of the work (Dean & Campbell, 2020). Studies examining faculty experiences during the pandemic reveal several common experiences. Prior to the emergency transition to remote teaching and learning, many faculty identified as having low online teaching efficacy (Belikov et al., 2021) or no experience

teaching online (Fox et al., 2020). As a result, many felt uncomfortable during the emergency transition to remote teaching and found the transition difficult (Day et al., 2021; Roy & Covelli, 2021). Faculty often expressed concerns with transitioning content delivery and assessments to online formats, given unfamiliar technology and the hurried speed of the transition (Belikov et al., 2021; Colclasure et al., 2021; Cutri et al., 2020; MacIntyre et al., 2020).

Ultimately, the pandemic and the emergency transition to remote learning negatively affected the faculty's sense of teaching effectiveness (Aubry et al., 2020; Colclasure et al., 2021). Its impact on teaching effectiveness was significantly related to prior online teaching experience (Hebert et al., 2022), as faculty with previous online teaching experience expressed having an easier time during the emergency transition (Colclasure et al., 2021; Manokore & Kuntz, 2021). Thus, having prior online teaching experience contributed to online teaching efficacy (Culp-Roche et al., 2021), online teaching readiness (Cutri et al., 2020), and remote teaching comfort level (Roy & Covelli, 2021).

Given the emergency transition during the COVID-19 pandemic, faculty reduced the number of assignments and exams, changed grading policies, and lowered expectations to accommodate students (Fox et al., 2020; Johnson et al., 2020; Moser et al., 2021). Additionally, given the lack of in-person contact during the social distancing public health measures, faculty indicated an increased amount of time spent communicating with students via phone, video conference, and email (Belikov et al., 2021; Colclasure et al., 2021; Cutri et al., 2020; Fox et al., 2020; Manokore & Kuntz, 2021; Moser et al., 2021).

The burden of emergency transition to remote teaching and learning was most prominent for those with heavier teaching loads, heavier student advising loads, and larger class sizes (Tugend, 2020). Faculty expressed challenges interacting with students, particularly in courses that previously relied on more hands-on activities (Day et al., 2020). Similarly, faculty expressed concerns related to increased caregiving responsibilities, as they were expected to assist students and colleagues who were experiencing trauma-related stress or having navigational and coping issues (Porter et al., 2022; Shalaby et al., 2020).

Despite this burgeoning literature on faculty experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic, less is known about faculty sensemaking with regard to their roles and responsibilities. The pandemic presented faculty with the opportunity to reflect and ask themselves, “Who are we?” and “How do we do things?” How faculty answer these sensemaking questions can provide insight into how they constructed their identity and defined their relationship with their academic institution during this time—including how their attitudes and actions contributed to the institutional culture and campus climate (Mills et al., 2010).

Purpose of the Study and Research Question

The purpose of this study is to interpret, identify, and analyze faculty experiences during the transition to remote learning at a Southwest university (located along the U.S.–Mexico border) during the COVID-19 pandemic. By employing a sensemaking framework (Dervin, 1998; Naumer et al., 2008; Weick, 1995), researchers wanted to understand how faculty made sense of their roles and environment during the emergency transition to remote teaching and learning.

Theoretical Framework

Sensemaking Theory

We draw on sensemaking theory to explore how faculty adapted their roles and responsibilities during the COVID-19 pandemic emergency transition to remote learning. *Sensemaking* is an exercise that begins with moments of uncertainty—like the pandemic—and focuses on turning stories into explanations.

According to Weick (1995), “[T]o understand sensemaking is also to understand how people cope with interruptions” (p. 5). In those moments of uncertainty and interruptions, “questions, such as who we are, what are we doing, what matters, and why does it matter,” often arise (Weick et al., 2005, p. 416). The construction of “the who,” “the what,” and “the why” are the central questions in the sensemaking process (Weick, 1995). Rather than placing the focus on faculty actions alone, sensemaking focuses our attention on how the faculty’s interpretation of those actions is shared in their stories. According to Evans (2007), “Sensemaking is generally understood to be the cognitive act of taking in information, framing it, and using it to determine actions and behaviors in a way that manages meaning for individuals” (p. 161).

Maitlis and Christianson (2014) described sensemaking as a “process to understand issues or events that are novel, ambiguous, confusing, or in some way violate expectations” (p. 1). The sensemaking framework disciplines the discord between complexity and normalization in unknown situations (Dervin, 1998). Moreover, sensemaking lies within the human need to make sense of reality in an often incongruent and “gappy world” (Naumer et al., 2008, p. 3), as the sensemaking moment occurs when a gap is identified between a context-laden situation and the situation’s outcome.

Naumer et al. (2008) offer that sensemaking allows bridges to be constructed by people in unfamiliar situations who want to articulate what they are experiencing, while moving through time and space. These bridges fill the gaps and connect particular situations with outcomes using “ideas, thoughts, emotions, feelings, hunches, and memories” (Naumer et al., 2008).

Dervin (1998) reinforced how assumptions are embedded in the sensemaking framework. As humans assume the nature of reality, information, and knowledge, sensemaking—accordingly—makes the inference that people operate between states of certainty and uncertainty by using ontological and epistemological assumptions to identify “certainty, simple patterns, and order” (Naumer et al., 2008, p. 3).

Conversely, how assumptions are embedded in the sensemaking framework can identify uncertainty, complications, and confusion in people’s perceptions of a situation (Naumer et al., 2008). In this instance—in addition to transitioning to remote learning—faculty continued to play an essential role in building meaningful student–faculty interactions, as well as increasing a sense of belonging among students.

Throughout this process, faculty experiences included fluctuations between moments of uncertainty and certainty. Given this context, employing sensemaking helps us understand faculty experiences as they transitioned to remote learning during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Method

The purpose of this study was to explore how faculty made sense of their role and responsibilities during the emergency transition to remote teaching and learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. Qualitative research allows the researcher to examine lived experiences, as well as the ways in which research participants interpret and assign meaning to these experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). As such, we utilized qualitative research and data analysis approaches to better understand these experiences.

Positionality

Individuals cannot remove themselves from the context that gives meaning to their experiences (Heidegger, 1962). Wojnar and Swanson (2007) indicated that the “researcher and the participants come to the

investigation with fore structures of understanding shaped by their respective backgrounds” (p. 175). Emphasizing this central tenet of qualitative research, the lead researcher and first author of this article utilized his positionality as Director of Master of Business Administration (MBA) programs at the university to collect meaningful data regarding faculty’s sensemaking during the COVID-19 pandemic. As part of his role and responsibilities in the MBA programs, the lead researcher witnessed firsthand how faculty transitioned and adjusted to the virtual environment by leveraging technology to resume institutional operations and instruction. The unique nature of his working relationship with program faculty provided rich and deep insight into how they initially reacted to, dealt with, and ultimately adapted to the challenges embedded in the health crisis from March 2020 to December 2021.

Context

The university is close to the U.S.-Mexico border, enrolls over 24,000 students, and has an 84% Hispanic student population. It is one of 19 Hispanic-serving institutions to simultaneously achieve Research 1 (R1) status by the Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education, enrolling the highest percentage of Hispanic students of any R1 university in the United States. The University Graduate Business Center is the brick-and-mortar facility where faculty teach face-to-face MBA courses.

In March 2020, all academic programs at the university transitioned operations and teaching from purely brick-and-mortar delivery to emergency remote teaching. University staff was instructed to create a skeleton crew comprised of office and remote work rotations upholding social distance protocols. Eventually, the university transitioned completely to remote work and the physical campus became closed or unavailable. Employees were required to review the “Temporary Remote Work Expectations Policy” document and submit a “Temporary Remote Work Agreement Form” to the human resources office. The university operated remotely for the remainder of the spring semester, through the summer, and for much of the fall semester—until social distancing protocols were embedded within all functions of the university, and the COVID-19 vaccine became widely available.

Data Collection

This study was approved by the university’s institutional review board. An email invitation to participate in the study was sent to all faculty at the university who taught in the MBA program during both the 2019–2020 and 2020–2021 academic school years. Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 14 faculty members who self-selected to participate in the study. The 14 faculty participants were sufficient to achieve data saturation (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Interviews were recorded using Microsoft Teams and ranged from 45–90 minutes. All interviews were conducted in English. Interview questions were crafted using the approach to sensemaking proposed by Naumer et al. (2008). This approach was used to elicit action-based answers from faculty regarding the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on their professional roles. Questions included the following: How has COVID-19 impacted you professionally? How did you feel about your role at the onset of the pandemic? What challenges did you identify, and how did you address them?

Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted utilizing a thematic analysis framework to identify themes and patterns embedded within participant responses. Responses were organized in a manner that reflected the situation and meanings of the respondents and provided answers to the research questions. A particular code was assigned to specific words and expressions to help organize and conceptualize the data (Lichtman, 2014). Using elements of similarity, the data were grouped into coded categories to identify the patterns and relationships within the data (Merriam & Tisdale, 2016). Collaboration with participants via member-checks

(Lincoln & Guba, 1985) ensured that interview transcripts aligned with participant narratives and meanings. During each interview, the lead researcher paraphrased and summarized responses and inquired about the accuracy of interpretation. Participants were then provided the opportunity to clarify any misunderstanding or confirm the preliminary interpretation.

Results

Table 1 lists the interview participants (pseudonyms) and information regarding their teaching experience, including in-person and online. Ten participants identified as men and four identified as women. While, collectively, they averaged almost 22 years of teaching experience, only three participants had ever taught online.

Table 1. *Demographics*

Faculty Member	Years of Teaching Experience	Years Teaching at University Pre-Pandemic	Years Teaching Online	Gender
Park	27	13	0	M
Brown	40.5	10.5	0	M
Ramirez	34	26	0	M
Adams	18	13	0	M
Singh	20	20	2	M
Smith	14	9	0	W
Fernandez	22	18	0	W
Jackson	11	3	0	M
Lewis	5	6	0	W
Garcia	11	11	0	M
Gonzalez	15	6	0	M
Costa	20	17	0	W
Silva	24	20.5	1	M
Patel	36	14	6	M
TOTAL	303.5	187	9	W-4/M-10

Two themes emerged from the data: (1) *creating a (remote) sense of community among faculty*; and (2) *facilitating contexts of care for students*. The first theme is situated in the context of faculty-to-faculty relations, while the second theme speaks to faculty-to-student relations.

Creating a (Remote) Sense of Community Among Faculty

Participants described having to create new work norms, as the transition to working from home and teaching remotely was abrupt, disruptive, and resulted in social isolation. This relatively new experience for faculty left

them feeling disconnected from the campus community and challenged them to reflect on their roles and relationships with their work in this next context. As professor Park described:

Something interesting happened. I did not know if we could actually come to the office and work from the office. So, in the beginning, there was also a lot of uncertainty about the location I was going to use for my job. I was actually commuting and coming to campus. Then we were told that nobody could come to campus. Then we were told we could come to campus, but we needed to report when we were on campus. So, I was coming in and not, and then eventually, I just decided to move to my home, so I took everything home.

As most faculty hurriedly relocated their office equipment to their homes to work remotely, participants noted significant changes in the availability of social and professional support structures. As professor Brown shared:

I live alone, and my job was actually most of my life. It was my social life as well as my work life. When COVID came along, and they closed campus to the students and everybody, I pretty much went into the office every day. That is where I worked. I tried to keep home and office separate. It got me out of the house, out of bed, and into work mode. So I just went to work. Much of the time, I was one of maybe two or three people in the building. Even though there were other people there, I did not see them. So I did not really change much in terms of my pattern of working. What changed was who I talked to, who I saw, and so on because nobody else was around.

The COVID-19 pandemic led to the implementation of unprecedented social distancing strategies crucial to limiting the spread of the virus. However, for several participants, social distancing also led to social disconnection. This was particularly the case for faculty who may have been experiencing loneliness and social isolation prior to the enhanced social distancing imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic public health measures. As professor Ramirez described:

We had many faculty members who did not have any family around. I felt those faculty members needed the most support because they did not have anybody to lean on. They could not see their colleagues at the office or school and could not talk to human beings face-to-face. So I tried to make it a habit to try to reach out to everybody at least once or twice a week and make sure that whatever issues they were facing, we would address those issues even with small talk. I asked them how they were doing, if they needed anything, and whether there was anything I could do for them. So, keeping communication open was very important.

Participants described the importance of human connection. Empathy and support for faculty well-being demonstrated a culture of care, which several participants described as contributing to their sense of mattering. By maintaining human connection with faculty, albeit remotely, faculty developed a sense of community and collegiality. As professor Brown shared:

Well, one of the things I did with a few of my colleagues, I would go out of my way to call them or Zoom with them just so that we would touch base so that we were trying to keep up with the information that was coming from the university or the department or the college. If there were some message or something that came from an administrator, we would talk about things and try to get on the same page about our interpretation of things.

Connectivity enabled participants to establish support for one another on both a personal and professional level. Some participants, for example, described relying on other faculty for support as they transitioned their courses to online. As professor Adams described:

I recall having these long conversations with my closest colleagues. Well, what are you doing? What is working? What is not working? We would share best practices.

Such conversations provided opportunities for demonstrating an ethics of care toward colleagues by fostering a sense of community and creating a context-of-care facilitated connection among faculty. As professor Ramirez shared:

I was trying to motivate them, educate them to do certain things, and ensure that we maintained the high quality of our courses and provided great service to our students. How do you meet that challenge in an online environment? Everything was very new to all of us.

Consequently, several participants described feeling part of a collective they could lean on to experience a sense of solidarity and connection. Their roles and responsibilities during the transition to emergency remote delivery meant creating a sense of community among colleagues and offering care and concern that prioritized their human and professional connection.

Facilitating Contexts of Care for Students

During the COVID-19 pandemic, faculty understood they no longer had the opportunity to share the same physical place and space with students. The transition to emergency remote delivery meant that faculty had to resort to technology, such as video conferencing platforms, to facilitate the classroom experience and engage students. As professor Ramirez described:

I tried to simulate the face-to-face or classroom environment in a way that allowed students to think that this was a real classroom and to let them know that there was an instructor that is very concerned about how they were doing in class and personally. We are willing to devote the time necessary to bring them up to speed to be successful in the course.

Faculty understood their role as facilitators of student learning. However, in this new virtual environment, faculty realized they needed to find an empathic balance between student attendance, classroom management, and faculty–student expectations. As professor Singh shared:

Before COVID, I was maybe a little insensitive to their personal concerns. So, during COVID and after COVID, I learned that I should be more sensitive to personal situations. I had to pay extra attention to the students because they were going through a mental process of “how do I learn in this new system?” In addition, they had this anxiety, and some of them had a problem in the family with parents, grandparents, and all these things, so I basically learned to be more patient with the students.

This expressed empathy translated into changes in classroom policies in order to accommodate the reality of the human condition during this public health crisis. As professor Park described:

Attendance became optional, not mandatory. I could not penalize students for not being in class, and I could not grade participation. ... It was wrong to penalize students if they were sick or if some family member was sick. So, I eliminated the points for participation and team projects.

Participants described being flexible and accommodating to students in order to foster student resiliency. As a result, participants described extending deadlines, moving beyond restrictive office hours, and changing grade policies in order to remain responsive to students in need of support—academic or otherwise. As professor Ramirez shared:

It used to be the case that I would teach in the morning and then have office hours right after class. Most of the students were already there, and I felt that was the best time to offer office hours. With online asynchronous classes, I offered office hours at different times during the week and one session in the evening because it was convenient to do online. ... Typically we would offer 3 hours for each course of office hours, and I offered three times that number—9 hours for my students. Now I offer office hours over Zoom and in-person instead of just in-person pre-COVID, and I doubled the number of office hours.

Professor Smith similarly shared, “I gave them my phone number, and I said, ‘[L]ook, I am not going to be the most responsive by email, but here is my phone number. Call me if you need anything.’” By increasing their availability, participants aimed to accommodate students through a culture of care that acknowledged the impact of the pandemic on the learning process.

Holistic student needs required participants to remain responsive and to practice empathy and patience, particularly as students adapted to the digital educational platform. Faculty described reaching out to students more often than before in order to ensure learning and academic success. However, there was a keen awareness that their academic success was tied to their personal wellness. In this way, participants described personal attention to students as a significant marker of their role as faculty during the emergency transition to remote learning. As professor Fernandez shared:

Communication and feedback from students were interrupted. Many students did not participate in class discussions and would turn off their webcam even after encouragement to leave it on, so the back-and-forth discussion was not there.

Student disconnection happened when students turned their cameras off during lectures and practical activities. Consequently, participants sought ways to reconnect with students to reinforce their role as faculty and a resource for students. Some faculty, for example, created email campaigns to engage with students, ask how they were doing, and provide support. As professor Lewis shared:

When we went online, I did not see them anymore. I did not see their faces anymore. I did not see why they were not showing up in class. I asked my TA to follow up with messages where students were not showing up and falling behind on assignments, and we would contact them and ask them, “Hey, what is going on? Let's make an appointment. You can still make it. Let's come back.”

Corresponding with students via email promoted a strong social online presence and rapport with students. To combat the disconnection and create further engagement in the virtual classroom, faculty leveraged their learning management system features to engage students both personally and academically. Professor Lewis, for example, explained how she leveraged discussion boards for both academic content and as a platform for student connection during the isolation phase of the pandemic.

I created a couple of discussion boards. One discussion board we used to just talk about the pandemic and how it was affecting us and how to cope with it. We had to support each other, so we had this very active discussion board where students could talk about their daily lives. Some students would post pictures of themselves studying in their yards. Those posts inspired and relaxed me and made others feel good as well. We just encouraged each other beyond the course material. We also had another discussion board, but it was more class-related, like Q&A, where any student could pose questions, and any student could answer them. That discussion board was very active as well. We all tried to help each other. Professor Jackson similarly utilized the institution's learning management system to create a shell for students to engage with each other.

I set up Blackboard Collaborate Ultra sessions not only for my own office hours but I also set up a student-only session for my graduate-level classes for students to set up study groups so they could go in to work through homework problems and chat and make it more social.

Such efforts enabled students to interact with each other academically for the purpose of facilitating student success. Perhaps more importantly, however, these efforts also provided venues for meaningful, personal faculty–student and student–student interactions that supported student well-being.

Discussion

This study employed a sensemaking approach to understand 14 faculty participants' sensemaking of their roles during the COVID-19 pandemic and the emergency transition to remote teaching and learning. Two themes were salient: (1) *creating a (remote) sense of community among faculty*; and (2) *facilitating contexts of care for students*. These findings highlight the mission-central importance of faculty, the role of teaching, and the need to support faculty as they support students in higher education.

Study participants agreed that embodying “an ethics of care” towards colleagues and students was important, especially during the pandemic. After the announcement of the transition to emergency remote delivery, several participants offered and received caring assistance to transition their courses online. Consistent with previous studies (Porter et al., 2022; Shalaby et al., 2020), faculty supported each other professionally when they were expected to transition courses quickly and were allotted very little time to do so. Additionally, faculty connectivity during the social distancing public health measure enabled participants to demonstrate care and support for each other on a more personal level. During the COVID-19 pandemic, participant roles as faculty meant creating a sense of community among colleagues by offering care and concern that prioritized human and professional connection.

Participants similarly recognized the vital role that faculty play with regard to student wellness and the need to innovate and improve teaching and learning in response to student needs. During the COVID-19 pandemic, students controlled the direction and pace of classes, and faculty provided support. Faculty demonstrated care and empathy regarding the human experience by implementing academic accommodations similarly enacted at other institutions (Fox et al., 2020; Gares et al., 2020; Johnson et al., 2020; Moser et al., 2021). This shift in role and expectations often meant stepping down from the pedagogical role and interacting with students at a more humanistic level. Faculty establishment of a strong social presence in the remote learning environment was extremely important for promoting engaged teaching and learning (Perrotta & Bohan, 2018), as these efforts ensured the continuity of learning. Hence, participants made sense of their role as faculty as facilitators of student learning through personal attention to student wellness.

The findings of this study indicate how working online has made faculty more aware of the importance of human connection and interaction. Participants in this study promoted a more holistic approach to their roles as faculty by nurturing colleagues and students in intellect and spirit, responding to public health needs. As the pandemic eradicated the physical teaching and learning features embedded in the institution's physical structure, its absence prompted a disconnection among faculty and students. Other studies have similarly documented this phenomenon: Faculty lost touch with colleagues and students as a result of the transition to remote learning (Fox et al., 2020). Consequently, the lack of regular in-person interactions with colleagues and students has caused many faculty to feel isolated and disconnected from their academic communities, specifically, faculty who lost access to their on-campus office during the social distancing public health measures.

Consistent with previous studies, faculty invested significant time finding ways to reconnect with colleagues and students as they navigated the teaching and learning landscape together (Belikov et al., 2021; Colclasure

et al., 2021; Cutri et al., 2020; Fox et al., 2020; Manokore & Kuntz, 2021; Moser et al., 2021; Porter et al., 2022; Shalaby et al., 2020). Increased faculty–student interaction was an important outcome of such efforts: easier and individualized communication with faculty, availability of faculty, openness shown by faculty, and open dialogue (Stoian et al., 2022). Faculty–student interactions, in particular, contributed to student motivation and engagement with the educational process (Gares et al., 2020). Student–student interaction was another important outcome, fostering connection, dialogue, and communication and supporting productive learning (Tsang et al., 2021).

The findings of this sensemaking study evidence how faculty enact, organize, and develop constructs to make sense of their environment as they act on their circumstances and the events that impact them, such as the COVID-19 pandemic (Weick et al., 2005). These findings meaningfully contribute to the time capsule of faculty experiences during the pandemic and the increased faculty awareness of how impactful students’ personal lives are on their learning environment, coupled with the changed support role that faculty are now expected to play.

Limitations

This study was conducted within one department at one institution during the COVID-19 pandemic. Hence, generalizing the findings of this study to wider populations and other institutions and programs cannot be done with any degree of certainty, as sensemaking studies are influenced by the broader economic, political, societal, and cultural context of the time (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Despite these limitations, we believe this study is a meaningful contribution that may help other institutions and programs explore their own experiences with the emergency transition to remote teaching and learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. The implications for research and practice that follow reflect additional contributions of this study to our understanding of these phenomena and the field.

Implications for Research

Pollitt (2000) indicates that the literature on organizational learning is plentiful, but not much is written about “organizational forgetting” (p. 5). Institutional amnesia refers to the intentional or unintentional ways in which institutions no longer remember or record relevant lessons from the past (Stark & Head, 2019). We believe that the numerous lessons learned by higher education institutions during the COVID-19 pandemic have not all been properly documented by the institutions or through research. To prevent institutional amnesia from occurring and curb the propensity to return to “normal,” further research must be conducted on the impact of the pandemic in all facets of higher education. Future studies should consider the ways in which adaptations during the COVID-19 pandemic are abandoned or sustained, particularly as institutions transition back to “normal.” For example, pedagogical adaptations have proven to be crucial, as the traditional lecturing in-person models do not translate to remote learning environments.

Remote teaching and learning have allowed us to transcend the restrictions that the physical nature of an in-person classroom imposes on the students we serve, particularly students from marginalized communities. It is important to continue to research the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on teaching and learning from the perspectives of faculty, staff, and students and to examine its impact on student success and how institutions have adapted their management and operations strategies as a result. As additional research emerges, it is similarly important to utilize the findings to continue to reflect on educational advancements to improve in-person education by contextually adapting it to address students’ expectations and needs—most likely in the form of blended learning, which might counteract some of the online learning disadvantages (Dung, 2020; Horváth et al., 2022).

Internet connectivity problems, a lack of technical support, faculty inability to facilitate online learning, lack of interaction, and the unsuitability of home-learning environments are among the issues that challenged the transition to remote education during the COVID-19 pandemic (Horváth et al., 2022). Further analysis of the ways in which institutions have responded to—and are mitigating—these issues is needed in preparation for the integration of technology-enhanced learning in higher education in the future.

Implications for Practice

Institutions will need to reflect on the crucial role faculty play in student support and the ultimate success of higher education. In this study, faculty were serving a student support role, providing emotional and mental health care for students while simultaneously experiencing the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on themselves. The nearly overnight transition to online teaching and learning was a disproportionate burden felt by faculty. Recognizing that faculty are expected to do more necessitates making appropriate modifications to workload, compensation, and evaluation structures. Rather than returning to “normal” after the pandemic, institutions must reflect on the reality that faculty workloads are higher, faculty morale is lower, and faculty work–life balance has been disrupted (Tugend, 2020). There is a need to shift our thinking about productivity and acknowledge that the capacity at which faculty were expected to perform at the onset of the pandemic is not sustainable. Institutions must recognize that faculty roles and responsibilities have changed and that institutional success moving forward will depend on how faculty are supported in these expanded roles.

Similarly, institutions need to address the fact that the educational system expects faculty to assume these additional roles, responsibilities, and pressures with sometimes little organizational support. Institutions need a functioning care system in which faculty feel like they are part of a larger team with the proper resources and support structures available. Crises are inherently stressful and often involve uncertainty, unpredictability, and increased work intensity. Rather than limiting efforts to a focus on individual resilience, a systems approach is needed for developing institutional resilience. Action steps taken by institutions before, during, and after a social crisis will reduce the psychosocial stress experienced by faculty and decrease the risk of burnout or the decision to leave the field (Tugend, 2020). How well institutions plan for and support their faculty during times of crises will influence the institution’s capacity for student support and the personal impact of the crisis on faculty.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has transformed the way faculty interact with each other, students, and the community they work in. Consequently, faculty have developed a whole-person approach to colleagues and students, acknowledging their lives beyond the classroom. The COVID-19 pandemic enabled faculty to understand each other and their students in ways that were not readily possible in an in-person modality. This public health crisis allowed faculty to empathize with colleagues and students based on the shared human experience and make accommodations that promoted student success.

Since transitioning back to on-campus instruction, the university has created a student success manager position within the MBA program to serve as a bridge between faculty and students. The student success manager advocates for students and helps to identify and address their academic, personal, and social needs. This position is specifically aimed at supporting faculty in their role of supporting students. As academic institutions return to their brick-and-mortar spaces, it is imperative to remember what we have learned from the COVID-19 pandemic in order to continue challenging what we do and why we do it. Our hope is that institutions of higher education will adopt what worked during the COVID-19 pandemic to create forward-looking strategies that care for and are responsive to the shifting roles of faculty.

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