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Online Education and the Pandemic: A Narrative of the Experiences of  
First-Time Online Instructors During the Spring 2020 Semester

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A dissertation

presented to

the faculty of the Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis

East Tennessee State University

In partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree

Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership,

concentration in Higher Education Leadership

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by

David Smith

May 2021

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Dr. James Lampley, Chair

Dr. William Flora

Dr. Jasmine Renner

Keywords: emergency remote teaching, online teaching style, online student engagement

## ABSTRACT

Online Education and the Pandemic: A Narrative of the Experiences of

First-Time Online Instructors During the Spring 2020 Semester

by

David Smith

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore faculty members' accounts of their experiences as first-time online instructors during the Spring 2020 academic semester as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting mandatory shift to online instruction. The rapid and widespread nature of the outbreak created an unprecedented phenomenon that significantly impacted instructors with no prior experience teaching courses in a fully online fashion. I interviewed 10 professors from various disciplines with at least three years of teaching experience in the traditional classroom. Each instructor was asked to express how the pandemic affected them personally as well as how the mandatory shift to online instruction affected their teaching style. They were also asked to describe the role that institutional support played in their experiences during the pandemic and to share their feelings regarding how COVID-19 has altered the future of higher education. The analysis of this data identified the following common themes: the instructor, the discipline, the students, survival and adaptation, innovation and evolution, on-camera presence and etiquette, synchronous versus asynchronous, administrative leadership, technical support, the new normal and the lasting effects, the balance between in-person and remote instruction, and the notion that higher education is moving forward to a new reality rather than backward to a pre-COVID-19 atmosphere. These results can benefit institutional leadership and faculty in the development of hybrid and online courses.

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## DEDICATION

This study is dedicated to my wonderful wife. Thank you for always believing in me more than I could ever believe in myself and for never being afraid to convince me to step outside of my comfort zone, no matter how hard you had to push me. I know that I've not been the easiest person to live with these past sixteen years but I truly appreciate your patient and generous nature. We make an amazing team and we earned every bit of this together. Without the countless and thankless sacrifices that you made every day, I would have never even considered that I was capable of accomplishing such a demanding challenge. I'm sorry that I rarely stopped to acknowledge all of the seemingly endless things that you did each day so that I could reach the end of this path. You've always been the center of my universe and the best part of my day. You are a relentless force of inspiration to me and I'm still just as excited to see what we will accomplish together as I was when I first knew that I wanted to spend the rest of my life with you. Thank you for being you.

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## Chapter 1. Introduction

Online courses and programs serve as means for colleges and universities to deliver the higher education learning experience to students beyond the geographic boundaries of their institutions. In addition, the flexibility and convenience of online learning have made the dream of earning a higher education degree a reality for those shouldering significant professional and personal responsibilities. For students faced with these limitations, the traditional on-campus collegiate experience is often not a realistic option. Higher education administrators, faculty, and staff largely recognize online programs as the primary path to graduation for these students, but online education is also becoming an increasingly viable option for students who are able to attend on-campus classes. Technological advancements continue to evolve the design and delivery of online courses and programs that enhances the quality of the learning experience and further advances online education as a more desirable form of instruction for all types of students (Ward et al., 2010).

In the first quarter of 2020, the COVID-19 outbreak escalated in the United States and ultimately transformed the daily life of most Americans in an unprecedented fashion. As coronavirus infections, hospitalizations, and deaths occurred across the United States at alarming rates during these months, the virus forced educational institutions to confront the public health risks posed by the continuation of their traditional on-ground courses (Affouneh et al., 2020). In March of 2020 many colleges and universities across the United States had to convert nearly the entirety of their traditional on-ground courses to online instruction with remarkable and previously unfathomable swiftness. The COVID-19 pandemic became the catalyst for exposing a significant number of students and faculty members for the first time to teaching and learning relationships that existed completely in an online learning environment (Bozkurt & Sharma,

2020). The coronavirus outbreak rapidly and radically transformed entire campus ecosystems for students, faculty, and staff as public health experts issued guidelines that strongly discouraged all public gatherings and advised everyone to limit in-person interactions. As the outbreak continued to escalate in the United States throughout the Spring 2020 semester, many American higher education institutions committed to finishing most of their spring and summer courses through primarily online delivery. This dramatic shift to online instruction for nearly all traditional on-campus courses deeply altered the higher education experience for many students and instructors across America's colleges and universities (Rahiem, 2020). This unprecedented mandatory shift to online instruction essentially prohibited instructors from teaching in-person classes for the remainder of the semester. The experiences of the instructors that were forced to step into the role of the online instructor for the first time during the Spring 2020 semester represent a truly unique phenomenon in the history of online education (Affouneh et al., 2020).

Each faculty member's level of experience in the role of the online instructor likely played a pivotal role in how their courses survived the events of the Spring 2020 semester. For instructors with no prior experience in the role of the online instructor, the Spring 2020 semester formed their first impressions of teaching in a virtual setting. Without adequate time to plan and prepare a course for online delivery, these faculty members faced a challenging situation. The experiences of these individuals during the Spring 2020 semester are somewhat unique as online instructors because they were thrust so quickly into this role for the first time and their desire to teach online courses had also become irrelevant due to the severity of the pandemic. The combination of these factors created a phenomenon that may have otherwise never occurred.

Some faculty members may be reluctant to step into the role of the online instructor for reasons related to teaching style or pedagogy. However, the lack of desire to teach online for

some may be on a more personal level. Harrington and Loffredo (2009) explored the relationship between personality types and the perception of online education, including a preference for teaching in the traditional or online classroom. Their findings indicated that online instruction likely feels more comfortable and natural for faculty members who consider themselves introverts, while their extroverted colleagues may feel a hollow sense of distance and separation from their online students. For particularly faculty members with little to no experience in the role of the online instructor, the Spring 2020 semester may have possibly triggered a significantly different range of emotions depending on their personality types.

The drastic and unprecedented circumstances of the coronavirus pandemic consequently created a massive and mandatory online teaching and learning experiment. Faculty members that may have otherwise never stepped into the role of the online instructor can now share their experiences and perceptions of the online classroom. The feelings and interactions that these faculty members experienced because of involuntarily assuming this role may likely provide valuable insights regarding how institutions can enhance the online classroom. The emotions produced by these experiences could prove vital to furthering our understanding of how online education can better meet the needs of all individuals, particularly instructors and students who lack significant online education experience and those who exhibit more extroverted characteristics. Faculty members who had never stepped into the role of the online instructor prior to the Spring 2020 semester experienced a particularly unnerving and inconveniencing phenomenon with respect to their teaching duties. Their experiences, actions, emotions, and perceptions surrounding the outbreak may help to further our understanding of the dynamics of the role of the online instructor.

## **Statement of the Problem**

Rather than analyzing and debating the effectiveness of the online classroom as an instructional format, the question of why the role of the online instructor seems to feel particularly challenging and less appealing to certain faculty members warrants further exploration. Some faculty members may feel that online instruction is essentially incompatible with their disciplines or their teaching styles. Institutions may need to tailor their professional development opportunities related to online instruction to better align with different disciplines and personality types. For faculty members that feel their disciplines or their teaching styles are incompatible with online instruction, there are likely critical elements of the traditional classroom that they feel deprived of in the online classroom. Adapting these aspects of the traditional classroom environment is a vital step for an instructor in the development of crafting an online teaching style. The factors that shaped this process of personal and professional growth for faculty members when they stepped into the role of the online instructor for the first time following the coronavirus outbreak represent important areas of concern for higher education institutions. Due to the unprecedented nature of the phenomenon caused by the mandated shift to online instruction during the Spring 2020 semester, the resulting emotions experienced simultaneously by such a large number of faculty has never been studied in any comparable fashion. An analysis of interviews with faculty members with no online teaching experience prior to the Spring 2020 semester may serve as an enlightening blueprint for guiding additional instructors along the pathway to crafting the online classroom that best fits their personalities, teaching styles, and disciplines.

Despite the instructional development opportunities and support resources that many major colleges and universities are providing to faculty members in an effort to enhance their

online teaching skills, some individuals are still struggling to develop a sense of personal comfort and natural proficiency in the role of the online instructor. In some cases this difficulty may be more a result of their personality types than their skillsets. Perhaps their peers' experiences and emotions as online instructors can serve to revolutionize and reinvigorate their approaches to online education by allowing them to better understand the significance of their own personality types as a determining factor for how they must develop and hone their own persona as an online instructor.

Because of the short time that has passed since the initial COVID-19 outbreak in the United States during the first quarter of 2020 and the ongoing escalation of the pandemic in the months that followed, the higher education community has yet to thoroughly explore the effects of this phenomenon on instructors. The mandatory shift to online instruction forced all faculty members to step into the role of the online instructor simply because they had no alternative. Their lack of online teaching experience combined with the extremely stressful circumstances of the outbreak to produce a challenging opportunity for personal reflection and growth. The purpose of this phenomenological, qualitative study was to add to the limited but growing body of empirical research regarding individual faculty members' accounts of their experiences as first-time online instructors during the Spring 2020 academic semester and the resulting effects on their perception of and approach to online teaching.

### **Research Questions**

The overall research question is: How did the COVID-19 pandemic affect faculty members with no experience in the role of the online instructor prior to the Spring 2020 semester? The following sub-set of questions address these faculty members' core experiences

and feelings that were impacted by the shift to online instruction following the outbreak of the coronavirus in the United States during the Spring of 2020:

Research Question 1: How were faculty affected by the shift to online instruction?

Research Question 2: How were faculty teaching styles affected by the shift to online instruction?

Research Question 3: How did institutional support impact faculty experiences in the role of the online instructor?

Research Question 4: What perceptions do faculty have about how the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted the future of the higher education?

### **Significance of the Study**

The COVID-19 outbreak in the U.S. during the Spring 2020 semester created an unprecedented opportunity to examine the mindsets of faculty members in the context of the role of the online instructor as a result of the widespread institutional mandates to move all courses to online instruction. Unique to this phenomenon, within the context of online education, is the inclusion of faculty members with no prior online teaching experience or any desire to step into the role of the online instructor. The body of empirical research surrounding the link between personality types and instructor preference for the online classroom is also still relatively small and the outbreak presented a pivotal opportunity to explore these factors. In addition, some faculty members still seriously doubt the amount of knowledge students gain in the online classroom but the coronavirus forced even the most skeptical opponents of online education to use the online classroom as a means of facilitating the continued success of their students with respect to the learning objectives of their courses. For these reluctant faculty members, the online

classroom's relative inability to administer and monitor accurate testing, which many consider an indispensable component to the measurement of students' comprehension and retention, likely left a considerable void in their teaching strategies. The recent initial exposure of these skeptical faculty members to this virtual learning environment may have actually caused many of them to harbor even greater concerns regarding the value of online education as an instructional format because they were largely unprepared to conduct their courses remotely.

The number of online classes and online programs available to students at higher education institutions has grown over the past decades and the COVID-19 pandemic underscored the importance of these offerings (Affouneh et al., 2020). Administrators and faculty should be mindful of how the Spring 2020 semester impacted the inexperienced and unprepared online instructors as they transitioned their traditional on-campus courses into the online classroom, as these individuals were also likely some of the most skeptical opponents of online education.

Through an examination of the pedagogical practices employed by these instructors during the outbreak, perhaps a clearer sense of focus on the importance of fostering greater collaboration among online students by encouraging more creative and critical thinking in a dynamic and interactive setting will emerge. The process of developing the teaching style and classroom environment that best suits each faculty member's personality type, skillset, and discipline is extensive, complex, and largely unique. However, the accounts of faculty members that have stepped into the role of the online instructor, particularly those that lacked any online teaching experience and any desire to teach online courses, may provide a valuable sense of the challenge of encouraging more faculty members to embrace online education.



## **Definition of Terms**

For the purpose of this study, the following terms are defined as follows:

**Asynchronous Learning:** A general term used to describe forms of education, instruction, and learning that do not occur in the same place or at the same time. (Partnership, 2013a).

**Blended or Hybrid Online Course:** Most course activity is done online, but there are some required face-to-face instructional activities, such as lectures, discussions, labs, or other in-person learning activities (Sener, 2015).

**Blended Program:** A significant percentage, but not all, of the credits required for program completion are offered fully online (Sener, 2015).

**Online Course:** All course activity is done online; there are no required face-to-face sessions within the course and no requirements for on-campus activity (Sener, 2015).

**Online Program:** All credits required to complete the program are offered as fully online courses. Students can complete the program completely at a distance, with no required face-to-face meetings (Sener, 2015).

**Synchronous Learning:** A general term used to describe forms of education, instruction, and learning that occur at the same time, but not in the same place. The term is most commonly applied to various forms of televisual, digital, and online learning in which students learn from instructors, colleagues, or peers in real time, but not in person (Partnership, 2013b).

## **Limitations and Delimitations**

For the purpose of this study, participants were limited to faculty members from a single public four-year university who had no online teaching experience prior to the Spring 2020 semester. Faculty members were interviewed from one institution, but across multiple disciplines, because it could be assumed that the views and experiences would vary somewhat

across different disciplines. However, the study participants' individual views and experiences are not generalizable to other faculty at their institution or to faculty at other institutions. Their individual views and experiences are also not generalizable to any other academic semesters before or after the mandatory shift to online instruction as the outbreak of the coronavirus during the Spring 2020 semester in the United States created a unique educational phenomenon. Because of the unprecedented nature of the mandatory shift to online instruction and the extenuating circumstances it created, the decision was made to focus primarily on the events of the Spring 2020 semester. Faculty members had little to no time to prepare and will never again be able to feel these same emotions they experienced after stepping into the role of the online instructor for the first during the Spring 2020 semester.

### **Reflexivity Statement**

As a student with graduate level experience in a traditional program and an online program during the last decade, I have developed my own views regarding the differences between traditional education and online education. Based on my own experiences during these programs, I feel that the value of each course varied mostly as a result of the instructor's teaching style as opposed to the delivery format. During both programs, I was impressed by the quality of some courses and disappointed by the lack of engagement from instructors in other courses. However, I feel that a lack of instructor engagement is more likely to occur in online courses than it is in traditional courses and it is more detrimental to online students than it is to traditional students. I strongly feel that instructors must employ a teaching style that is tailored to the traditional classroom and develop separate teaching styles that must be crafted to fit the needs of the synchronous and asynchronous online classrooms. I also feel that faculty resistance to

embrace new technologies represents the primary challenge for online education.

### **Overview of the Study**

Chapter 1 presents the significance of the challenging and unprecedented collegiate teaching and learning environment that rapidly emerged in the wake of the COVID-19 outbreak in the United States of America during the Spring 2020 semester. The value and importance of this research study is established in chapter 1 by the inclusion of an introduction, a statement of the problem, research questions, the significance of the study, definitions of terms, the limitations and delimitations, and a reflexivity statement. The numerous themes and factors surrounding the dynamics of the roles of the student and the instructor in the online classroom, as well as the traditional classroom, are explored through a review of related literature in Chapter 2. Chapter 3 establishes the foundation of this research study through a detailed description and breakdown of the methodology. Chapter 4 provides an in-depth presentation of the findings of the study. Discussions, conclusions of the study, and the viable opportunities for further relevant research are contained in Chapter 5.

## **Chapter 2. Review of Literature**

There are many variables to consider when evaluating the effectiveness of online courses and online programs. Ni (2009) stressed the importance of approaching instructional excellence and student success in the online classroom in a different fashion from the traditional classroom. Researchers have encouraged institutions to place a greater focus on the link between the personality traits of online instructors and online student success (Harrington & Loffredo, 2009). According to Holmes et al. (2015) online instruction typically demands a greater level of agreeableness and flexibility from online instructors than traditional instruction requires, as they must be more cognizant of varying levels of understanding and learning paces present in online classrooms. Certain disciplines may also be more challenging for students and instructors in the online environment as opposed to in the traditional on-ground classroom (Ni, 2013).

### **Personality Types and Online Teaching Style**

Harrington and Loffredo (2009) identified personality traits as pivotal factors that influence a student or instructor's experience in the online classroom, often to the point of determining an individual's preference for face-to-face or online education. The results of their study illustrated a significant tendency for those classified as introverts to prefer online education versus traditional instruction, while extroverts typically expressed just the opposite preference. The predominate factors that introverts noted as reasons for their preference for online education were convenience and a desire to use computer technology. Extroverts stated a tendency to learn through listening and their need to gauge the emotional reactions of others as the primary reasons behind their preference for the traditional classroom. Harrington and Loffredo recommended increasing the visual and auditory components of the online classroom to enhance the atmosphere of the learning environment to better meet the needs of extroverts. The incorporation

of more collaborative learning exercises, such as video conferencing and live chatting, may prove to be critical steps in the process of crafting a greater feeling of inclusion in the online classroom (Harrington & Loffredo, 2009). Davies and Wilson (2020) noted similar findings in a more recent study regarding the correlation between personality types and teaching methods.

### **Strengths of the Online Approach**

The convenience and flexibility offered by online programs and online courses attract a significant number of students as they are vital components of the higher education experience for students balancing substantial professional and personal responsibilities as well as those that face logistical challenges (McGee et al., 2017). In addition, online students are provided more time to study in lieu of time that would be devoted to traveling to the classroom. Instructors often echo this same value for convenience with some faculty surveys reporting over 80% of respondents indicating the flexibility of the online classroom as their primary motivation for choosing this teaching format (Green et al., 2009). Results have indicated that the typical online student perceives himself or herself to have more knowledge and skills when compared to his or her peers in the traditional classroom as learning in a virtual setting often requires more discipline and focus, which promotes a deeper understanding of the course materials (Doyle & Hogan, 2004). Faculty often state the ease of sharing knowledge and the additional career advancement opportunities found in online education as highly motivating factors, as well as a desire to engage with students through new forms of technology (Green et al., 2009). Online courses can potentially foster a greater quality and quantity of interaction than traditional courses as participation may feel less intimidating to more introverted students (Ni, 2013). Students also typically state the financial benefit of online courses as they are not required to spend a portion

of their often-limited incomes on fuel and vehicle maintenance related costs as they would if they were attending classes in the traditional classroom (Ward et al., 2010).

### **Weaknesses of the Online Approach**

As the technology associated with online instruction continues to rapidly advance, faculty are faced with the challenge of navigating these classroom tools independently to meet the demands of their institutions and their students (Chiasson et al., 2015). The goal of delivering a convenient and readily accessible online learning platform should not take priority over ensuring a quality teaching and learning experience for all online students. Convenience seems to draw both instructors and students to this format. The consequences of a failure on the part of the faculty or the institution to also ensure a quality online learning experience is poorly educated students and ill-prepared graduates (Ward et al., 2010).

Engagement is critical to the success of online students and when online instructors fail to engage their students through the incorporation of technology that fits the learning objectives, poorly prepared graduates are often produced (Jones, 2015). For faculty members with years of experience in the traditional classroom, their initial transition to the online classroom could prove to be particularly challenging as they may be unwilling to adapt their teaching style and course design to fit the online classroom (Bennett & Lockyer, 2004). These seasoned instructors have grown accustomed to a certain level of organizational structure in the traditional classroom and if they refuse to let go of these expectations and resist learning new teaching methodologies, they will likely fail to engage their online students. Online students are also not a captive audience and online instructors that fail to continually seek new and innovative ways to foster learning and collaboration in the online classroom will struggle to keep students engaged. Writing and communicating create an atmosphere of active learning and are critical components of the online

classroom and the failure of online instructors to draw upon the unique experiences of all class members in open discussions undermines the true potential of the learning platform (Barrett, 2010). There is no single approach that works for every online course as the key to unlocking student engagement because the course content and the learning goals have a significant impact on how students and the instructor interact. A failure on the part of the instructor to recognize the need to devote enough time to planning and incorporating technology and learning activities that are tailored to enhance the learning process of their specific online courses may inhibit students' progress (Volery & Lord, 2000). Regardless of the technology and the design of the course, the instructor's presence as a living, accessible, and contributing member of this learning ecosystem significantly impacts student success. According to Volery and Lord (2000) instructors that fail to establish and maintain a sense of presence throughout the semester, in both synchronous and asynchronous online courses, are essentially creating a noticeable void in the classroom space. Institutions must accept more responsibility for ensuring that online instructors can and do make a genuine and passionate attempt to embody a learning catalyst role as the consequences of creating an instructor void within the classroom are disengaged and unmotivated online students (Volery & Lord, 2000).

### **Transitioning Courses from the Traditional Classroom to Online Instruction**

Gay (2016) stated that faculty members are typically faced with the reality that the process of development is more labor and time intensive for online courses than it is traditional courses. While these instructors often seek and receive guidance and assistance from instructional designers, technology experts, or even their peers currently teaching online courses, the transition to online delivery can often be too overwhelming and intimidating. Despite the various support structures in place at most higher education institutions, faculty resistance to

online instruction is still widely regarded as a substantial barrier to moving traditional classroom courses to online instruction (Barrett, 2010). Faculty members often cite the fact that a gap exists between the attainment of technology skills and the innovative use of these digital technologies in the online classroom and the time and effort required to bridge this chasm are some of primary reasons for their lack of desire to step into the role of the online instructor (Paiva et al., 2016). However, some instructors that have overcome these obstacles have admitted that the transition process forced them to grow as an educator, which changed their perception of online instruction and helped them evolve into better instructors (Martin et al., 2019). In addition to advancing their technical skills, instructors often indicated that this process also enhanced their ability to provide content to their students with a greater sense of clarity and strengthened their level of engagement with their students. Instructors that have successfully transitioned their traditional classroom courses to online delivery often rely heavily on their institutional support structures for assistance with technology but they tend to rely on their peers for matters concerning pedagogy or crafting their approach to the role of the online instructor, as well as the logistics of teaching an online course (Chiasson et al., 2015).

### **From the Traditional Classroom to Synchronous or Asynchronous Online Delivery**

Martin et al. (2019) found a need for an online instructor to develop a different set of instructional and technical tools from those employed in the traditional classroom, as well as even perhaps a different approach to pedagogy. However, recent studies are reporting that instructors often feel that while their technical tools must change dramatically, their approach to their instructional tools and pedagogy changes very little as they transition from the traditional classroom to a synchronous online classroom (Chiasson et al., 2015). These findings seem to indicate the majority of the challenges that faculty members must overcome as they transition



their traditional classroom courses to an synchronous online format largely involve mastering the technology as opposed to developing a different teaching style, “for those who taught synchronously, instructional styles were comparable to face-to-face instruction regarding how students participated in and led class discussions and presentations” (Chiasson et al., 2015, p. 237). To some degree instructors and students may perceive a minimal difference between a course taught in the traditional classroom and a course taught in the online classroom in a synchronous fashion. If the instructor and the majority of the students have mastered the technology associated with the synchronous delivery of a course and the instructor maintains a genuine online presence throughout the semester, then the transition from the traditional classroom to the online classroom could potentially be somewhat seamless (Chiasson et al., 2015). The same cannot often be said with respect to transitioning courses directly from the traditional classroom to an asynchronous delivery in the online classroom as this conversion process typically involves a fundamental redesign of the course’s instructional framework (Chiasson et al., 2015). Instructors are often more reluctant to transition their courses into the online classroom if the only option for delivery is an asynchronous format as a notable amount of additional effort and time would have to be dedicated to preplanning and rethinking the mechanics of the course in order to ensure student success (Ward et al., 2010). It seems advisable for faculty members with significant experience in the traditional classroom to first explore the online classroom in a synchronous fashion before attempting to deliver their courses in an asynchronous fashion. For some instructors moving their traditional classroom directly to an asynchronous online classroom may simply be too large of a step. Chiasson et al. (2015) asserted that, “participants who delivered their courses asynchronously also retained their conceptual,

pedagogical framework from face-to-face, but had to use different media and instructional tools for presentation of content and for student interaction” (p. 237).

Synchronous online courses provide the opportunity for the instructor to frequently interact directly with students in a face to face setting albeit virtually. This online meeting space can be used to drive classroom discussions, facilitate lectures, and address questions and concerns from students all in real-time. However, Acosta-Tello (2015) pointed out that instructors should not neglect other essential elements that can be incorporated into this environment without the incorporation of sophisticated software or extensive technical expertise. Just as the chalkboard, projector, and television have served as critical visual components in the traditional classroom, instructors should employ similar on-screen enhancements into their online class sessions. Websites, documents, diagrams, graphs, presentations, and numerous other educational resources can be narrated by online instructors in real-time, which provides an opportunity for students to absorb the content visually. Videos can also serve as an effective form of engagement when distributed throughout a class session in manageable durations. Even on-screen polls and quizzes can be incorporated as a means of boosting engagement. Instructors should also allow ample time to address questions and concerns from students. The success of these live face to face virtual class sessions depends significantly on the instructor’s dedication to thorough planning and ability to incorporate items of relevance and usefulness to the students’ individual learning goals as well as the course’s learning objectives (Acosta-Tello, 2015).

### **Abandoning the Roles of the Traditional Classroom**

Technology often presents the most obvious barrier to transitioning traditional classroom courses to online delivery for most faculty members that have significant experience in the traditional classroom. The inevitable shift in the dynamics of the role of the instructor and the

roles of the students also presents an often overlooked but notable barrier (Martin et al., 2019). It can be difficult for some instructors to accept that this process will essentially transfer some control within the course from the instructor to the students. According to Chiasson et al. (2015) “one of the most significant changes was in the role from lecturer to guide, from knowledge dispenser to resource provider, and from authority to facilitator” (p. 238).

Martin et al. (2019) stressed the need for instructors transitioning their courses from the traditional classroom to the online classroom to adopt a more dynamic and fluid teaching style than they previously employed in the traditional classroom. According to Martin et al. instructors that approach their online courses in a segmented and objective fashion tend to move through, “three sequential, nonlinear/iterative phases with specific competencies: (1) before: preparation, planning, and design; (2) during: facilitation, interaction, and feedback; and (3) after: reflection” (p. 201). In addition to recognizing that online students have a greater margin of control over their online courses than their peers in traditional courses are afforded, online instructors must also recognize that they personally cannot afford to approach the course from the same mindset or with the same expectations as they did in the traditional classroom. It is easier for instructors to overlook certain practices that lead to student success in the online classroom than it is in the traditional classroom because of the physical separation between the instructor and the students. Just as a higher level of continuousness on the part of the online student leads to greater student success, a higher level of continuousness on the part of the online instructor also leads to greater student success (Chiasson et al., 2015).

### **Overcoming the Online Education Stereotypes**

Tichavsky (2015) noted that just as all educational experiences in the traditional classroom are not equal, students can have significantly different learning outcomes in the online

classroom. However, the traditional classroom as a teaching and learning format seems to have less influence on students' preconceived expectations of a course in comparison to students' attitudes concerning the online classroom as they are generally influenced by a margin of bias towards online education as a format:

They tended to perceive online instruction according to an old typology of distance education as an independent form of study lacking in social interaction with peers and, more notably, with the instructor. This suggests that students do not view online discussion forums as equivalent to in-class interactions. Since students who had never taken an online course held the same perception, there is a possibility that stereotypes of online courses shaped their experience once they took an online course, thus making them less likely to engage with the instructor or course materials. (Tichavsky, 2015, p. 6)

This possible reluctance to embrace the online classroom presents a critical challenge for instructors as they strive to establish and maintain a genuine sense of presence, which is critical to overcoming these biases (Tichavsky, 2015). While students tend to automatically associate the traditional classroom with a sense of presence on the part of the instructor because of the physical proximity and regular interaction, online students tend to anticipate a lack of presence from online instructors because of the absence of physical proximity and the expectation of little or no interaction with the instructor. Even for online instructors that aim to create a sense of presence, their efforts may still prove to be less than fully effective. The practice of establishing and maintaining online presence need not be limited to strictly classroom discussions or lectures as instructors can significantly increase student engagement by simply making themselves available virtually on a regular basis. Something as simple as the incorporation of regular virtual office hours, question and answer sessions, or demonstrations by face to face video conferencing

software will help students perceive the presence of the instructor as a real living human being throughout the course (Tichavsky, 2015).

Sun (2016) indicated that one of the reasons many students state for their lack of desire to pursue online courses is the additional challenge of acquiring and maintaining the technology associated with the online classroom. An increasing number of instructors are incorporating the use of virtual desktops or remote computers as a means for providing a computer lab to their online students. For courses that involve sophisticated and expensive software, such as statistics, digital media, and geography, the responsibility for the installation and maintenance of these complex software programs is placed on the institution when virtual desktops or remote computers are employed. The absence of this burden on the shoulders of students will likely alleviate stress, reduce financial demands, and potentially increase their overall engagement in the course due to a higher level of satisfaction and the additional time they are afforded as well (Sun, 2016).

Sun (2016) opined that customization, creativity, and flexibility are crucial to the successful delivery of online courses and it is the absence of these elements in online courses that often perpetuates the negative stereotypes surrounding online education. Supporting online students often involves more continuous effort from instructors in the online classroom than is required in the traditional classroom because students are typically engaged at different times and often at varied paces. As a result, an online instructor is often teaching in a much more segmented fashion than in the traditional classroom because online students differ from students in the traditional classroom with respect to when and how they learn, as well as when and how they interact with the instructor. While students in the traditional classroom may approach an instructor for assistance after the class period ends or during the instructor's designated office

hours, online students tend to reach out to instructors via email or other forms of messaging at nearly all times (Sun, 2016). How the instructor responds to these communications can prove to be pivotal as online students typically anticipate a sense of distance and a feeling of disconnectedness with their instructors. Online instructors can likely overcome these low expectations by responding to written communications from students as quickly and as thoroughly as possible, by providing a regular online face to face presence for frequent real-time virtual interaction, and ensuring that struggling or confused students are encouraged to take advantage of the availability of the instructor as both a teacher and a means of support through readily accessible technology (Sun, 2016).

### **Separating Online Courses and Programs from Online Teaching as a Crisis Response**

The COVID-19 pandemic introduced a significant number of students and instructors to the online classroom. However, the reality is that many of these students and instructors were not engaged in a well-crafted and extensively planned online education experience (Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020). Rather they were thrust by the virus into an emergency remote teaching environment that required a different approach by learners and educators than an online course or program. The distinction between these two forms of virtual teaching and learning is that in general online courses and programs are often an option for many instructors and students but emergency remote teaching became an obligation (Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020). Institutions must factor this distinction into their specific and tailored approaches to the delivery of online courses and programs and the execution of emergency remote teaching measures (Affouneh et al., 2020). While online courses and programs should be approached with the primary goal of maximizing the value of the educational experience, emergency remote teaching should be approached with the primary goal of retaining the accessibility of the educational experience (Bozkurt & Sharma,

2020). Online courses and programs provide value to students most notably through enhanced quality of content and the incorporation of elements that promote greater instructor and student engagement. The core of an emergency remote teaching strategy is the continued facilitation of the teaching and learning process because instructors and students are likely shouldering elevated levels of stress and anxiety due to the changes in their professional and educational lives and also likely their personal lives as well during times of widespread crisis (Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020).

### **Crafting an Emergency Remote Teaching Strategy**

Hodges et al. (2020) underscored the need for higher education institutions to learn from that the fact that the COVID-19 pandemic forced them to rapidly implement emergency remote teaching measures in the face of insufficient planning or inadequate support structures. Whittle et al. (2020) detailed the adoption process of an emergency remote teaching strategy as being built upon a foundation of three core fundamental teaching practices: inquiry, the classification of resources into constants or variables among students and teachers, and the design of the educational experience. The initial inquiry phase provides an opportunity for instructors to gather all relevant information:

Teachers who considered their instructional responses to be effective began with an inquiry of the teacher's abilities, familiarity with technologies, and time; the students' health and safety, access to basic needs, and access to technologies; and their collective resources. By initiating an inquiry, teachers ensured that the pedagogies they put into place were actionable and based on available means. (Whittle et al., 2020, p. 303)

Whittle et al. further elaborated by noting that after instructors complete the process of evaluating the factors that will impact their virtual classroom they, "design a plan using the constants as a foundation for each aspect of the pedagogy and variables as a means of

maximizing individual learning” (p. 303). The cultivation of a well-crafted emergency remote teaching environment demands a different approach from the instructor in comparison to the traditional classroom. Faculty members teaching in any online setting should be particularly cognizant of the need for high levels of flexibility and adaptability from the instructor, but these traits are even more critical in emergency remote teaching situations (Whittle et al., 2020).

### **Setting Obtainable Goals for Emergency Remote Teaching**

Quality should be the primary goal of the approach to the development and delivery of any online course or online program. In the months that have passed since the outbreak of the coronavirus during the Spring 2020 semester, many institutions have taken steps to enhance their emergency remote teaching strategies. As institutions continue to evolve their approaches, they should remain focused on the overall goal of emergency remote teaching, “the primary objective in this context is not to re-create a stable educational environment, but rather to provide immediate access to education and training in a manner that is easy to develop and easily accessible during an emergency or crisis” (Rahiem, 2020, p. 4). Institutions, instructors, and students should factor the nature of the educational environment into their goals for the experience. Hodges et al. (2020) stressed that just as teaching styles and learning outcomes differ in the online classroom in contrast to the traditional classroom, administrators and faculty members should recognize the importance of divorcing the concept of emergency remote teaching from online courses and programs as these are separate educational ecosystems.

### **Promoting Online Student Success**

Keller and Karau (2013) stated that a fundamental requirement for success in the online classroom is conscientiousness. Researchers have indicated a higher probability for unfavorable



ratings from less conscientious students. In addition, students with significant career experience typically held online education in higher regard as a learning format. A lack of maturity represents a direct inhibitor to online student success as a model online pupil is often, “self-directed, independent, personally responsible for his or her learning, and has self-competence, proficient reading and writing skills, time management skills, and motivation to learn” (Kerr et al., 2006, p. 102). The impact that these traits have on student success in asynchronous online courses can be extensive. A student who lacks these skills will also likely struggle in synchronous online courses as well (Kerr et al., 2006).

Yoo and Huang (2013) indicated that students with extensive experience in the online classroom are more willing to learn new technologies and possess more long-term motivation. Universities and colleges must take steps to ensure that a student’s prior online experience, or lack thereof, is properly reviewed before he or she must employ the self-directed learning skills necessary for online success. Comprehensive instructional support systems must be readily available to novice online students in order to bolster their skills during the critical first year of a program (Yoo & Huang, 2013).

Sugilar (2016) identified a strong link between unpreparedness, regarding technology, and student avoidance of online classes. Online examinations represented one of the paramount reasons for their reservations. However, students indicated that a firm and reliable source of technology assistance would alleviate most of these fears. Findings of this nature underscore the importance of a customized support and delivery framework for online classes to ensure that a student’s technology related limitations do not hinder their ability to learn (Sugilar, 2016).

For anyone with a significant amount of experience as an online instructor or online student, discussion boards likely comprised a portion of most of those courses (Cho & Tobias,

2016). Online discussion boards are often assumed to be reliable way to promote student engagement, but all courses are not equally suited to the incorporation of this educational exercise. If the instructor fails to evaluate the appropriateness of online discussion boards in the context of the course content and learning objectives, forcing students to engage in mandatory discussions could prove to be counterproductive. Cho and Tobias (2016) shed light on the fact that a certain portion of online students simply complete the required number of discussions posts each week with little or no true critical thinking or effort. Under certain circumstances, online students would benefit from the omission of required weekly discussion activities in favor of other educational exercises, such as research activities or group projects. Online student success is deeply tied to the critical need to tailor the design of the course to the content with the desired learning goals in mind. The incorporation of mandatory but ill-fitting online discussion boards on a recurring basis can create an inverse relationship with engagement. As the course progresses and students tire of these required weekly discussions because they have come to feel mechanical and laborious, students could possibly resort to only putting forth the bare minimum amount of effort needed to pass the course. Despite these troubling outcomes, online discussions boards can be an extremely effective means of promoting student engagement when the course content and learning goals are relevant and applicable to this educational exercise. In addition, regular and genuine instructor participation in mandatory discussions boards will help to minimize the likelihood of students becoming dissatisfied and discouraged (Cho & Tobias, 2016).

### **The Critical Importance of an Engaged Online Teaching Style**

The foundation of an online class rests upon actual and perceived access to the instructor as, “findings indicate instructors also need to provide multiple ways of interacting with students

themselves to create their own social presence that the literature confirms is an integral component to a successful online course” (Dixson, 2010, p. 8). As technology such as face-to-face web conferencing and social media continues to rapidly evolve, numerous new avenues of communication become readily accessible to students and instructors. These additional forms of media provide innovative instructors with enhanced means of adapting the pedagogical tools they have developed in the traditional classroom into the online learning environment. The online instructor should strive to harness these resources as an integral component of creating a sense of continuous and timely presence in the online classroom, which drives collaborative learning (Bronack, 2011).

Kruger-Ross and Waters (2013) underscored the importance of proper course organization and clarity of instruction as being critical to avoiding confusion and creating additional stress for online students. As online students operate on widely varying schedules and may be managing substantial personal and professional responsibilities, any changes to the course requirements and expectations should be made by the instructor as far in advance as possible. Out of date and irrelevant content presents a significant obstacle to learning for online students, as they are likely to misinterpret the lesson as well as lose confidence in the instructor, which inevitably leads to diminished efforts from most online students as they see the instructor as lacking sincerity (Kruger-Ross & Waters, 2013).

McAlister (2014) found that some online students have shown particularly strong reactions to the inclusion of streaming videos personally created by online instructors as supplemental material for healthcare-oriented courses. Findings from this study indicated that these students watched each video an average of six times. In addition to repeat viewing, students are also able watch these videos at times that are best suited to their widely varied

schedules. This combination of repetition and round the clock access presents students with the opportunity to absorb this content when they feel most ready to learn and in a largely low stress fashion, which contributes to habitual learning that is central to their study routines and significantly boosts confidence (McAlister, 2014).

According to Paiva et al. (2016), online instructors must see their own role as that of a digital mentor and learning guardian as online students are more responsible for their own progress in this largely self-directed learning environment. Faculty members teaching courses that students may find exceptionally challenging in the online environment should incorporate additional web based face-to-face interaction to increase engagement and provide regular opportunities for students to receive assistance in real-time (Ni, 2013). Fostering complex and thought-provoking discussions is one of the most effective ways faculty members can promote student engagement but online instructors should encourage proper etiquette and avoid taking sides in order to maintain a welcoming and inclusive environment (Paiva et al., 2016). Effective online teaching styles invoke critical thinking and passionate debates within the online classroom and the instructor bears the responsibility of guiding the class as a source of motivation and guidance, particularly regarding the value of communicating in a scholarly and respectful fashion (York & Richardson, 2012).

Online instructors, particularly those teaching asynchronous courses, can foster a greater sense of engagement by setting an active and involved example by simply participating in various classroom exercises. For example, students are more likely to feel welcome and eager to participate if the instructor is the first to post an introductory video or paragraph (Glenn, 2018). Asynchronous courses in particular often involve less interaction between the student and the instructor, which makes engagement more challenging. However, faculty should not make the

mistake of assuming that an engaging asynchronous course is an unrealistic goal. While an introductory video from the instructor may seem simple, it makes it possible for students to begin the process of connecting a real person to the individual teaching the course (Glenn, 2018).

Lowenthal et al. (2017) proposed that engagement may also suffer during asynchronous courses as instructors may fail to attempt to interact with students directly. As technology and video conferencing software continues to improve, students and instructors are finding it easier to communicate face-to-face in a virtual environment. As a result, a growing trend in academia is virtual office hours as it presents all students the opportunity to interact with the instructor. Students have largely reacted positively to this enhancement to their courses, “students who attended the live, video-based office hours liked them, found them helpful, and even wished that other instructors used them in their courses” (p. 188). Relevance is critical to engagement when incorporating live virtual sessions into an asynchronous course as means for increasing student attendance in lieu of requiring attendance. A dedication to transparency will help students see the value of these sessions and allow students to add additional value (Lowenthal et al., 2017). For example, instructors should encourage students to submit questions before the live sessions and ask them to point out areas of concern or consternation during the live session. Thorough planning and an efficient communication style are essential to the successful incorporation of live virtual sessions and instructors can incorporate some key instructional elements to ensure that these activities promote student engagement levels. Instructors should avoid referring to these sessions as office hours and instead market them to students as something like coffee shop chats or brewery discussions. Lowenthal et al. (2017) also pointed to the need for a schedule to be made available to students at the start of the semester and instructors should remind students of upcoming sessions throughout the semester. Agendas and recordings of previous sessions

provided in advance will help students feel more comfortable. The role of the instructor during these sessions requires a margin of finesse in order to cultivate and sustain an engaging environment. While the instructor has the responsibility of leading these discussions, engagement may also be stifled if the instructor monopolizes control of the conversation and the direction of the discussion. Students should feel inspired to interact by the instructor's participation but should also feel empowered to forge their own path (Lowenthal et al., 2017).

Interaction is at the core of an engaging classroom environment and instructors should not allow the lack of a physically present classroom of students to compromise consistent and purposeful communication (Tichavsky et al., 2015). The students' perceived presence of the instructor influences engagement, "a statically significant positive relationship with immediacy and teaching presence such that when an instructor establishes clear patterns of communication, students perceive them as having a teaching presence. This in turn affects student motivation" (Tichavsky et al., 2015, p. 2). Faculty must strive to embrace technological advances, as these tools are essential to fostering greater engagement with online students.

Lee (2015) explained that importance of frequent interaction between the instructor and students in an online course as a key factor in promoting the perceived presence of the online instructor to students throughout the course, which will also help to foster a greater sense of understanding for students when faced with challenging content. For notoriously intimidating disciplines such as mathematics, engineering, computer science, and numerous others, clear explanations from the instructor are essential to a successful online learning experience. Without frequent interaction with instructor, these students are more likely to misinterpret the concepts and quickly fall behind (Lee, 2015).

## **The Value of Experienced Online Instructors**

Experienced online instructors have indicated that robust institutional support that nurtures the development of online teaching skills is critical to the cultivation of quality online programs (McGee et al., 2017). McGee et al. (2017) described the road to developing a highly skilled online instructor should begin with tailored institutional support that will, “address the needs of novices then initial training should focus on clear examples, basic principles and frameworks for online teaching and course design, and increasingly complex situational cases that can build confidence” (p. 346).

McGee et al. (2017) also wrote that instructional experience in the online classroom is often noted by teachers with many years of experience in the online instructor role as an essential ingredient of a quality online learning environment. Personal qualities such as persistence and determination are also typical characteristics of online instructors that have developed engaging teaching styles in the online classroom. McGee et al. (2017) explained that as faculty members progress in their roles as online instructors and gain critical confidence a shift should be initiated toward, “training that models best practices, support from an instructional designer, the use of a course rubric and participation in communities of practice should be considered by institutions as most helpful in the development of expertise” (p. 346). In addition, faculty members that have invested significant time and energy into the instructional design of their online courses as well as their approaches to the role of the online instructor have indicated that the process of learning, as opposed to the attainment of specific skills, is central to the development of a proficient online instructor. As online teaching experience is a critical characteristic of what ultimately produces a highly skilled and confident instructor in the online classroom, institutions should strive to ensure that the support these instructors receive is dynamic and tailored to

produce experts with a robust collection of first-hand knowledge (McGee et al., 2017).

### **Experienced Online Students Make Better Online Instructors**

It can be more challenging for faculty to provide a quality online learning experience to students if they personally lack significant experience as online students themselves. A growing number of institutions have developed comprehensive online teaching and learning courses in order to help faculty members familiarize themselves with the online environment and develop the necessary skills. As online instructors progress through these courses, they build a sense of experience and understanding from the perspective of an online student (Crosby, 2019). Crosby (2019) described this approach has been described as, “a structured process prompts instructors to re-examine assumptions of learning outcomes, student differences, contextual realities, teaching and assessment options, and media/technology use” (p. 32). One of the key elements of this approach to professional development is that it allows instructors to receive facilitator feedback on these instructional activities through the online course itself. These exercises strengthen faculty members’ instructional skills while also building a foundation of experience in a quality online learning environment and videos are often incorporated as a teaching and learning medium. As with other skills, the use of video is actively modeled within the program in order to allow instructors the opportunity to experience its capabilities first-hand (Crosby, 2019). Crosby (2019) summarized the primary goal for instructors is to emerge from these programs with a clear sense of, “how online courses can be structured within a CMS and how video is used within each module” (p. 32). Instructors are provided with the opportunity to experience facilitator feedback, delivery of content, marketing, orientation, formative assessment, and various other aspects of the course through the medium of video. These firsthand experiences provide online instructors with an excellent set of skills and confidence, which will directly



increase the likelihood that they will produce a learning environment for their students on a similar level of high quality (Crosby, 2019).

### **e-Ready Instructors Must Master More Than Technology**

Gay (2016) noted that technology often presents the first challenge for faculty members to overcome as they transition their traditional courses into online courses. In addition to learning new technological tools, instructors must also be willing to make certain lifestyle changes to foster a high level of engagement with their online students. For example, the timeliness of grades, feedback, and responses have a much greater impact on the level of engagement in an online course in comparison to the traditional classroom. For instructors that are willing to make the lifestyle decision to maintain a more frequent online presence and remain dedicated to meeting immediate deadlines for returning grades and feedback to students, their students will perceive a relatively high level of connectedness to the instructor. After an instructor has developed this type of rapport with students, they will see the instructor as present and engaged in the class, that in turn motivates them to remain more engaged and dedicated. Instructors need to also consider certain pedagogical changes as they adapt their traditional classrooms to the online classroom. However, e-Ready instructors must first master the technology associated with the online classroom and make the necessary lifestyle adjustments as required to maintain a true online presence (Gay, 2016).

### **Chapter 3. Research Method**

The purpose of this phenomenological qualitative study was to explore individual faculty members' accounts of their experiences as instructors during the COVID-19 outbreak in the United States of America during the Spring 2020 academic semester and the ensuing mandatory shift to online instruction, as well as the various factors responsible for shaping their perception of and approach to teaching online. The transition to online instruction following the coronavirus outbreak affected instructors in unique ways and an exploration of their emotions and actions through in-depth interviews served to chronicle their experiences. The insights provided by these instructors may help to shed more light on critical pedagogical elements central to the role of the online instructor and possibly help faculty members that may be struggling to develop their own sense of comfort and proficiency in the online classroom. Interviews with faculty members that stepped into the role of the online instructor, without prior online teaching experience, because of the COVID-19 outbreak may uncover valuable aspects of the how different individuals approach the role of the online instructor. As institutions endeavor to better equip their faculty with the necessary skills and confidence to engage the online students of the future, the experiences of these faculty members during the Spring 2020 semester may prove to be crucial. Insights provided by these instructors may shape significant aspects of how institutions further develop the framework of their online education environments, their professional development opportunities for faculty, and their overall teaching and learning strategies.

A mass email was sent to all faculty of East Tennessee State University to solicit interest and those that responded and met the criteria were contacted by me to be interviewed (Appendix A). Only instructors with at least three years of teaching experience in the traditional classroom and no online teaching experience met the criteria for inclusion as interview candidates.

Interviewees were asked to volunteer their time for this study by elaborating on their experiences, emotions, and perceptions through in-depth interviews covering their responsibilities as online instructors during the Spring 2020 semester following coronavirus outbreak.

The research design for this study was a phenomenological qualitative approach. Burks and Robbins (2012) summarized this approach by stating, “the data analysis is limited to subjective describing and understanding of the participants’ experiences, with emphasis on commonalities, unique differences, and variation within the data” (p. 99). The participants’ personal descriptions of their experiences, emotions, and perceptions represented the primary focus of this study rather than my interpretation.

As described by Creswell (2013), a phenomenological qualitative approach consists of the identification of a phenomenon and then the researcher, “collects data from persons who have experienced the phenomenon, and develops a composite description of the essence of the experience for all of the individuals” (p. 58). The composite description of the essence of the experiences of the faculty members interviewed does not represent a generalization of the experiences of any other online instructors and preserves the anonymity of the participants. These interviews served as a window into what these specific online instructors experienced and how certain events affected them as educators and as individuals during the Spring 2020 semester following the outbreak. I encouraged all participants to detail their experiences and perceptions as online instructors in terms of personality types, technology, teaching styles, student engagement, and perceived learning outcomes all within the context of the events of the Spring 2020 semester following the outbreak. Lastly, I asked interviewees to express and describe the lasting impacts of these events on them as educators.

## **Research Questions**

The overall research question is: How did the COVID-19 pandemic affect faculty members with no experience in the role of the online instructor prior to the Spring 2020 semester? The following sub-set of questions address these faculty members' core experiences and feelings that were impacted by the shift to online instruction following the outbreak of the coronavirus in the United States during the Spring of 2020:

Research Question 1: How were faculty affected by the shift to online instruction?

Research Question 2: How were faculty teaching styles affected by the shift to online instruction?

Research Question 3: How did institutional support impact faculty experiences in the role of the online instructor?

Research Question 4: What perceptions do faculty have about how the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted the future of the higher education?

## **Instrumentation**

Participants were required to complete a consent form before interviews were scheduled. This form stated that these individuals were not from vulnerable populations and the topics under scrutiny were not sensitive in nature. The primary purpose of these forms was to document that each interviewee voluntarily agreed to participate in this study. In addition, interviewees reviewed and acknowledged a statement informing them that this agreement of consent did not in any way obligate them to complete the interview as everyone reserved the right to refuse to answer any question and to terminate their involvement in this study at any time. I informed all interviewees that they were entitled to a two-week period to review the content of their

interviews, during which time they could request the omission of certain portions or the entirety of their interviews. The nature and purpose of this study was clear and transparent to all interviewees, as acknowledged on the participant consent form prior to each interview.

My study focused on a population of instructors derived from a single institution, the inclusion of faculty members from various disciplines through a triangulation of sources approach, served to promote an enhanced sense of credibility. To help establish a deeper sense of credibility, a member-checking approach was also employed which allowed interviewees the opportunity to review and clarify their responses.

The in-depth interview approach employed by this study served as a means of establishing transferability through the thick description approach. Creswell and Miller (2000) defined this approach as, “the purpose of a thick description is that it creates verisimilitude, statements that produce for the readers the feeling that they have experienced, or could experience, the events being described in a study. Thus, credibility is established through the lens of readers who read a narrative account and are transported into a setting or situation” (p. 128-129).

A form of purposive sampling was employed to gather a group of faculty members with no experience as online instructors prior to the Spring 2020 semester. The experiences and perceptions of these faculty members during the mandatory shift to online instruction that followed the Spring 2020 coronavirus outbreak formed the body of this study. Each faculty member’s perceptions, beliefs, emotions, and personality type were also relevant to the study.

I incorporated an audit trail strategy to establish a sense of confirmability. The primary goal of this approach was to encourage a stronger and more dependable sense that the findings of this study derived directly from the interviewees’ insights rather than my own interpretations and

biases. Central to this approach was an open and transparent description of the data collection process, as well as the subsequent data analysis process. Examples of the coding process and the rationale of associating individual codes with certain themes served to develop a sense of dependability.

I also employed a reflexivity technique in an effort to remain aware of how my background and opinions could have potentially influenced the study. As a means of maintaining reflexivity throughout the study, I engaged in regular journaling sessions regarding the research process. This approach provided me with regular opportunities to address my own personal feelings and experiences regarding online education with a minimal amount of influence on the experiences and opinions shared by interviewees.

### **Sample and Participant Selection**

Potential interviewees from various disciplines were contacted by a mass email that was sent to all faculty of East Tennessee State University to solicit interest and those that responded and met the criteria were contacted by me to be interviewed (Appendix A). The goal was to interview enough faculty members as needed to develop an overall sense of what steps instructors took in order to transition their traditional on-campus courses to the online classroom, as well as the resulting impacts. The instructor's field of expertise was also specifically relevant to the interviewee selection process to further the diversity of the population across multiple disciplines. The population of this study consisted of a relatively small number of faculty members, with at least 3 years of teaching experience in the traditional classroom but no prior online teaching experience, who expressed a desire to elaborate through in-depth interviews on their experiences as online instructors during the Spring 2020 semester following the coronavirus outbreak in the United States.

For the purpose of this study, interviewees were limited to faculty members with no previous online teaching experience from a single public four-year university that imposed a mandatory campus-wide shift to online instruction for all courses during the Spring 2020 semester. Interviewees hailed from various disciplines and academic backgrounds from across the university. All interviews employed a remote virtual setting via various online video conferencing interfaces to ensure the health and safety of all interviewees in accordance with current Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommendations regarding the spread of the coronavirus.

### **Data Collection**

An informal interview protocol was utilized to appropriately and uniformly address each faculty member's core experiences and perceptions regarding the mandatory shift to online instruction during the Spring 2020 semester following the coronavirus outbreak. Limited follow-up questions, based upon each faculty member's answers, constituted the remainder of each interview. These follow-up questions varied significantly due to the unique nature of responses from each instructor. This design encouraged individuals to expand on the primary questions through elaboration when they were inclined to do so as needed to express their experiences in detail. These interviews facilitated the collection of responses regarding their experiences as online instructors following the mandatory shift to online instruction. The interview protocol was designed to foster a relaxed and reserved atmosphere with the intention of encouraging each respondent to be more comfortable expressing their feelings as well as describing their experiences, with no general restrictions imposed on their responses. The goal behind this approach was to encourage these faculty members to offer their accounts and insights openly with minimal input from me. The intention of the study was to gather a body of detailed

phenomenological qualitative data with ideally minimal bias from me as the interviewer.

### **Data Analysis**

The qualitative data from each interview underwent a singular data analysis procedure in order to help me isolate the process and avoid the tendency to generalize the responses of these faculty members. Each interview was examined for noteworthy and unique responses that offered significant insight into the dynamics of faculty perceptions regarding online instruction because of the mandatory shift to online instruction following the outbreak of the coronavirus during the Spring 2020 semester. While the interviews were not analyzed directly as a whole, common themes did emerge across the collective body of interviews after a review of all individual analyses as similar elements were highlighted in multiple interviews.

These responses were refined into an interview summary that was designed to represent each faculty member's relevant experiences regarding the events following the outbreak of the coronavirus during the Spring 2020 semester in the United States. These interview summaries were then assembled into a collective body of qualitative data to serve as a representation of the views expressed by each interviewee. Each faculty member offered their personal account regarding the events of the Spring 2020 semester and their responses were not interpreted as or intended to serve as a representation of the views of other faculty members at their institution, faculty members at other institutions, or to be construed as indicative of any other time period.



## **Chapter Summary**

A phenomenological qualitative approach was employed to gather experiences and perceptions regarding online education from the position of instructors with no prior online teaching experience following the mandatory shift to online instruction during to the Spring 2020 semester as a result of the coronavirus outbreak. The findings of this study represent solely the experiences and perceptions of instructors interviewed. My study was designed to document a specific and unprecedented series of events that took place during a unique time in the history of online education. The objective of this study was to gather a body of qualitative data relevant to the portion of the Spring 2020 academic semester following the coronavirus outbreak in the United States. The design of this study included a collective review of all interviews to identify common trends or unique characteristics. The objective of the collective review was to then form an accurate composite of the factors present across all interviews. The goal of the research design was to extract a sense of the genuine lived experiences from these online instructors, as well as the resulting impacts, with minimal interpretation from me as the researcher.

## **Chapter 4. Findings**

The purpose of this phenomenological, qualitative study was to explore the perceptions of faculty members from East Tennessee State University regarding the experience of teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic. This research focused primarily on the latter half of the Spring 2020 semester, after the decision was made to shift all instruction to online delivery. Related experiences of the subsequent Summer 2020 and Fall 2020 semesters were secondary focuses of the study. Data were collected from each participant during a single one-on-one Zoom interview with me in January of 2021, prior to the beginning of the Spring semester. Interviews typically ranged from an hour and half to two hours in length, with the shortest interview lasting just over one hour and the longest interview lasting in excess of two hours and 15 minutes.

### **Description of Participants**

The 10 faculty members from East Tennessee State University who participated in this study met the following two criteria with respect to their instructional disciplines: at least three years of college level teaching experience and the Spring 2020 semester was their first experience teaching a course in an entirely online fashion. No other selection criteria were used in terms of demographics, discipline, rank, college, or department. A mass email was sent to all faculty of East Tennessee State University to solicit interest and those that responded and met the criteria were contacted by me to be interviewed.

**Table 1**

*Participants' Backgrounds*

<b>Teaching Discipline</b>	<b>Teaching and Professional Experience</b>
Arts & Sciences	Teaching 10-15 Years
Arts & Sciences	Teaching 25+ Years
Arts & Sciences and Honors	Teaching 20-25 Years
Business & Technology	Corporate 40+ Years, Teaching 1-5 Years
Business & Technology	Business 1-5 Years, Teaching 20-25 Years
Education	Teaching 25+ Years
Clinical & Rehabilitative Health Sciences	Practice 1-5 Years, Teaching 5-10 Years
Clinical & Rehabilitative Health Sciences	Practice 1-5 Years, Teaching 25+ Years
Pharmacy	Teaching 5-10 Years
Pharmacy	Teaching 15-20 Years

**Analysis of Data**

The primary question of this study was: What impact did teaching online for the first time, following the outbreak of the coronavirus in March of 2020, have on faculty from East Tennessee State University?

Research Question 1: How were faculty affected by the shift to online instruction?

Research Question 2: How were faculty teaching styles affected by the shift to online instruction?

Research Question 3: How did institutional support impact faculty experiences in the role of the online instructor?

Research Question 4: What perceptions do faculty have about how the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted the future of the higher education?

## **Perceptions of ETSU Faculty Members**

I explained the nature of the study at the beginning of each interview and provided each professor with the opportunity to ask questions. Each professor was then asked to give a brief synopsis of their career in higher education as an instructor to provide context and background for their experience during the Spring 2020 semester. All professors were eager to share this information and it seemed to help set a comfortable and friendly atmosphere for the interview. I structured every interview around the four research questions of this study, each of which was thoroughly discussed with every professor. Most of the professors had to often take a few seconds to gather their thoughts before responding to a question. Many of them noted that they had not yet taken the opportunity to consider how this experience had affected them or their students. As these professors reflected and expressed their perceptions of the phenomenon they had lived through, the following themes were present across their stories.

### **Overwhelming Effects of the Shift to Online: Frustration, Anxiety, Stress, and Workload**

Every professor expressed a keen awareness of how incredibly challenging their teaching responsibilities became following East Tennessee State University's decision to shift all instruction to online during the Spring 2020 semester.

Professor 1 stated:

I find myself with almost a total lack of enthusiasm. Thank God for the vaccine, if I couldn't see a light at the end of the tunnel, I think I would be tempted to quit, even though I'm not ready to financially. I am hoping this is the last semester that we have to do this though.

Professor 2 stated:

I did not feel as connected to the students because a lot of times you're teaching to a

bunch of rectangles. Usually when you teach a class in-person, I can eyeball and see who's there and who's not. It's harder to do that with names on a computer screen, to see who's missing and who's not. I'm not sure if they were learning as much and that's very discouraging for me.

Professor 3 stated:

It's been sad and depressing and if we don't go back to on-campus classes, that's going to get worse without any question whatsoever! Since we shifted to online, I've had two overdoses in the Johnson City Medical Center, I've had to talk to one student who was telling me that they were planning on attempting suicide and I filed the care report on them. I've had three students literally drop out and abandon their scholarships, not be dismissed by me and it's only gotten worse since the Spring semester. It's absolutely made it more challenging for me to feel any sense of fulfillment in terms of my teaching responsibilities without any question whatsoever. It has inhibited my ability to do my job and meet my teaching responsibilities as well as what my expectations are because I have not met my own expectations and I've been very, very unhappy about that.

Professor 4 stated:

Relationship building really took a big hit when we went online, which is critical in this course both in terms of between the instructor and the students but also between the students themselves. You don't get to take these college students out for a beer, you don't get to socialize. You don't get the feel like your building that lasting relationship. So, we didn't build the camaraderie the we would have had if it had been all in-person. I would say that it wasn't terribly uncomfortable for me to teach online though, despite the fact that the technology was brand new to me. But I spent a lot of time in the days between

when we stopped teaching in-person and we started teaching virtual familiarizing myself with the technology. I worked as hard as I could to make sure that when I came back, I was as prepared as I could have been. My workload increased significantly though, and it was stressful keeping everything on track.

Professor 5 stated:

The lines became such a blur between professional and personal. I think that was a huge part of the stress because when I used to go to work, I was at work and I could focus on work. And when I was at home, I could focus on the kids and then work after they went to bed, usually that's when I would grade. So literally after we all went remote and my kids are all home doing their schoolwork, we were dealing with all of these emotions and I was trying to teach a class in this room and all this chaos and commotion is going on in my house. If anything was stressful, it was that blur to where I couldn't just be professor and I couldn't just be mom, ever, it was everything, all the time, all at once. Honestly, that is probably the hardest part of what we've gone through, I think for everyone.

Professor 6 stated:

We had a meeting right before spring break about this and I basically said you guys, we're not shutting down, this is stupid. Why are we even talking about it? I was just in denial and had not accepted what was happening. And then I worried about their competency a little bit more than I did before and I worried about their ability to graduate on time because some of our rotations shut down. I worried a lot about their ability to get their license and graduate on time, and then start jobs. I was just more worried about them in general than I was before we shifted to online.

Professor 7 stated:

I could see that some students were struggling in the course. I reached out to them, but in a virtual environment it was very different, it felt unnatural and not intuitive for me. It was not allowing me to do the best job I could to reach the students and I really felt so disconnected. I was missing that level of engagement that was so natural with in-person, where you can see the body language and the facial expressions, where you get a lot of feedback to help you.

Professor 8 stated:

Here's the problem I have with online teaching, I got up at 4:30 a.m. on Christmas morning and worked for four hours because I agreed to do this dissertation, to be an external examiner for another university. My work-life boundary has gone to hell, absolutely. And just the way that I feared it would. And I still worry about keeping up with students. I've had three students that I know of who have been sick. One of them was desperately sick and in the hospital. There's reason to try to pay a bit more attention to students and that does take a lot of time if you sit down and take account of who has not been in class for the past week. And it's not very easy to get attendance records from Zoom.

Professor 9 stated:

I have a love hate relationship with working from home because you just can't escape it. I would walk by my computer when I got my cup of coffee in the morning and it was so tempting to log on immediately and it was really easy to hop on after dinner and finish up as well. But to keep in contact with students and faculty, you just have to communicate everything five times as much as you would have normally in five different ways in order

to make any progress and it was very bogged down. It all felt like it took 20 steps where normally it would take three. It just resulted in a lot of redo and adjust, so throughout the whole semester, I would say my workload remained very very high. On the flip side though, I am so thankful that I have been able to work at home, I've gotten to spend so much time with my family and have so much flexibility. So, for as much as the pandemic has had a lot of negative impacts, that's been an exceedingly positive thing for me. I think my satisfaction is probably up because I have the flexibility.

Professor 10 stated:

It was definitely a roller coaster emotionally. There were moments where I was so irritated about just everything, it didn't matter, I was just irritated. Then I would just feel so emotionally burdened and weighted down by what the students were going through and just how they were struggling.

### **The Unique Makeup of Each Experience**

How the pandemic affected these faculty members was shaped by three factors that determined the characteristics of the events they faced.

#### **The Instructor**

The mindset of the individual professor when the decision was made to shift all instruction to online was the factor that formed the DNA of each faculty member's existence in this new environment and it triggered a ripple effect that would go on to have an impact on how the experience would unfold for each of these individuals. While many similarities existed across the emotions that these faculty members experienced after this decision was made, their immediate reactions and deliberate responses to this development largely created the climate.



Professor 1 stated:

The thing that makes teaching for me wonderful is that regardless of who else I have to report to, when I walk into that classroom, that classroom is mine. And the relationship that I form with my students and the experiences we have together, that's what makes the job and makes my life meaningful. Missing all of that is really hard and if it wasn't for financial reasons, I'd be gone now.

Professor 2 stated:

I feel like I'm a pretty adaptable person, but I need time to adapt, the more I know ahead of time, the better I can plan. It's like the Boy Scout motto, be prepared, I like being prepared but that often takes a considerable amount of time. There's a quote from SunZu, most wars are won before the first battle is fought. If I had had more forewarning before I was told to shift my courses to online, it would've made a huge difference for me as an instructor.

Professor 3 stated:

I had refused to teach online despite the urgings of different people, including the chairs of my department. I come from a very old school, traditional approach to lecturing and if I could walk into my classroom wearing a big giant British style academic gown and pontificate for an hour and a half to students who are rapidly scribbling every word that I say, that would be my ideal situation. So yeah, online was definitely something I'd been avoiding as hard as I possibly could.

Professor 4 stated:

You could say that I'm a fairly free-form kind of instructor when we are in a classroom

on-campus but after we shifted to online, I just had to stick to the script a lot more. There's just not as much opportunity to go off script when you are on Zoom, you can't just draw something on the board when a thought enters your head. So, it was a little more constraining, for me as a professor. We're all different personalities too and if you're a warm, extroverted personality, you're going to find lots of approaches that just work well for you, but if you're an introvert or even a warm introvert, you have to really work at it as far as engagement. When you're online, it's hard to get that feedback that you can feel when you are in a classroom on-campus and that affects you as an instructor.

Professor 5 stated:

After we shifted to online, I saw myself as becoming more of a partner, more of a learning guide, a facilitator, less of a, I don't know that I would ever say I was a dictator necessarily, but much less of that type of instructor to more of the type that would say, I would love for you to get to get this and this is why and this is how it will benefit you kind of instructor. I definitely became much more compassionate; I was trying to put myself more on their level. I wanted them to know that I recognized what they were going through, and I'm going through it too, and we're all going work through this together. If you've got something going on, please tell me, let me be a part of that so that we can get through this.

Professor 6 stated:

I like the way I teach and online didn't seem to make sense, why would I do that? It's so much fun to be with them in-person and they always came to class anyway, so there's never been any need to think about online.

Professor 7 stated:

I realized I really missed being in the classroom with students, I missed that environment. That's part of what gets me excited about being in this profession, after we went online it was like I was just delivering content and that didn't feel as meaningful to me personally.

Professor 8 stated:

Students have always complained, especially in introductory level courses, about me being obtuse but I've stuck to my guns because you have to get used to the technical language and I'm not going to dumb things down. We do not need to dumb things down for ETSU students, contrary to popular belief. I have failed to know what students don't understand in the past though and you can miss a lot of questions when you are on-campus. So, it's made me a bit more responsive to students and having the chat in Zoom is a great way to ask questions that doesn't involve having to speak in front of classmates.

Professor 9 stated:

I feel a little disconnected from my colleagues and I do miss my students, I miss my students a lot. I like to learn everybody's name and our class sizes are reasonably small. And this is the first year with our first year class that that I don't know them and it's kind of unnerving to be in a classroom and feel like you just have this disconnect, I don't enjoy that at all as an instructor. And I derive a lot of satisfaction out of those connections. I feel distant in more ways than just than the physical distance. It's emotionally distant, I think from the class, you just don't have the same rapport that you would otherwise and that's so important to me as their teacher.

Professor 10 stated:

I adopted a very lenient mindset and a very aware and compassionate approach to my

expectations for the students. And the course did not remain the most important thing to me, it just didn't.

### **The Discipline**

The nature of each discipline was the factor that created an ecosystem of a pre-determined opportunities and limitations that formed the environment for each professor's experience. Variances in required pedagogical elements, such as presentations, discussions, comprehension, emotion, relationships, presence, tangibility, and technology, all influenced the transition from on-campus to online as engrained aspects of each course.

Professor 1 stated:

I don't think students can care about what they're learning if they don't feel that you care about them. That's critical in the courses that I teach.

Professor 2 stated:

One of the things I used to do, especially in my lower level classes, is spend maybe the last ten minutes of class to give the students a group assignment based on that day's lecture. And they turn in a paper with all of their names on it. This is an easy for me to take attendance and it's a way for the students to see that this is maybe not as easy as he makes it look, while it's fresh in their minds and maybe I should not wait until the night before the test to learn how to do it. When we went to all being isolated and all doing things remotely, all that had to change.

Professor 3 stated:

One of my classes was an epic failure, to say the least, during the Spring 2020 semester because with the way the course had been set up, it absolutely required in-person

participation and interaction. Then it just got worse in the Fall because the program really relies on developing a cohort community among the students and there was no way a cohort community was going to develop with a group of incoming first year students doing solely an online course. I think we did six or seven meetings face-to-face in the Fall, like outside in front of one of the buildings. Then we secured permission to use the Mini-Dome as a classroom space. So, I spent much of the Fall semester teaching in the Mini-Dome and this coming Spring semester we will be using it as well.

Professor 4 stated:

There is a lot of dialog in this kind of course, more than just the rough lecture environment. Which made it very difficult going to the Zoom platform. So, I think there were three things that were important. The fact that we knew each other before the shift to online and that they worked together, they created a product and had feedback from me. I think that was the key to their success. The investment that ETSU put into D2L and Zoom and the ability to then kind of translate that to folks and I think it paid off handsomely. Had they not done that; it would have been a train wreck. It was also important for the students and the professor to up their engagement.

Professor 5 stated:

Any time you've got a very technical field, students really have more anxiety already. Am I going to get it? Because this is not just memorization, this is something you have to understand to learn and you have to apply that, and you have to logically think things through. I find that somewhat more difficult online than in-person, so I was worried about that.

Professor 6 stated:

I pared down some of the content just because I knew what was not on our licensure exam, I knew that we had to drill that stuff that was on the exam. So, we lost a lot of that fun and cool stuff to learn about, because they'll likely never encounter those situations after they graduate. It had always been pretty cool to talk about these topics and their origins, just to get their engagement up and peak their interest, but because it wasn't on the exam, we just didn't have room for it once we went online. That decreases fulfillment because it's fun to see them get excited about something that's kind of neat that they've never learned about. By doing that, you just eliminated a lot of that sort of discovery process as far as learning how the stuff that we do have to learn fits into the bigger picture. After we shifted to online, it literally just came down to, here's the facts that you need to know, go with it.

Professor 7 stated:

Not reacting with frustration and instead pivoting and being able to reach out and engage others to solve a problem, that would be what I would consider to be an important character trait to develop, that's even more important now. And that's what I ended up spending the majority of my time in the classroom with students focusing on, conditioning them to be confident in their skills and abilities so that they can navigate the unknown, it's like coaching and it's really more effective in when you are in-person.

Professor 8 stated:

I have discussions in class and they're very focused, we don't waste any time, because we have so much material to discuss. And there are actually things about Zoom that are an advantage, I get a lot of interesting and good questions in the chat mechanism because

students don't have to say anything in front of classmates and that's a huge advantage, but the challenge is that I'm not very good at multitasking. So, I'm getting more involvement than I might have gotten in on-campus lectures and that really matters because let's face it, not all questions are equally worthwhile for other students but if you're in a classroom any question takes class time. I think I maybe do a little bit better at addressing questions on Zoom than I did on-campus. So, moving our discussions to Zoom as a result of the shift to online, has actually enhanced them in some ways.

Professor 9 stated:

Some of the classes that I taught really translated easily to the online environment, they were very easy to adapt. But I had a skills lab course that involves standardized patients, which are like actors that play patients and to try to figure out how to do something that normally would happen in a face-to-face interview when they're in two different places was just not something we had ever tried before. So, there was a lot of unknown.

Professor 10 stated:

It was just anxiety producing honestly to try to determine and figure out what I was going to do with my classes because one of my classes was very much hands on and project based learning in the classroom with guest speakers. Some tangible experiences that they were going to be part of, they just didn't get to do because it was simply not possible for the students to physically interact with the equipment in a remote fashion. That got completely wiped out. So, it was nerve racking to try to figure out how to provide an experience that would be equivalent to face-to-face for SACS accreditation type things, which may not be that big of a deal currently under COVID, but that that kind of pressure was very stressful honestly.

## **The Students**

The response of the students in each course to the shift to online was the factor that created the other organisms that inhabited each environment with the professor. This was often the most powerful of the three factors as the hardships and emotions expressed by students often had a significant emotional impact on their instructor. The formation of a symbiotic relationship between the instructor and the students, as well as amongst the students themselves, and a sustained collaborative effort to hold true to the learning goals of each course, often emerged as the single most important characteristics in determining the fulfillments and disappointments each professor experienced.

Professor 1 stated:

I started finding myself relying much more, and I think this is one of the good things I did learn, on them teaching themselves. Graduate students can read and think and understand on their own, and I think I knew that, but I don't think I operated on that as much. I think I do operate on that more now and will do that more when we get back to in-person.

Professor 2 stated:

The institution can train us to do these things like D2L, Dropbox, Zoom, and Smartboards, that's great but I sort of just figured all that out on my own. The real need is training the students to take advantage of all the resources that are available to them. We are always under this mistaken impression that the students have grown up with a smartphone in their pocket, they have grown up with the internet, so we just assume that they are more tech savvy than us but you know what, they're not and that's just how it is and it's simple stuff like what's the best way to email a professor? I've had students that would email me and basically say, sorry I missed class, talk to you later, bro types of



things or I would get an email and there's no capitalization, no punctuation and half of it is in text abbreviations. I mean honestly, I can't read this email, email me back and use proper English please.

Professor 3 stated:

We really abandoned one class, a few students finished up their projects because they really liked them, and they wanted to see the projects through, and they could do them online. But I had a group of students who wanted to do a project that had to be filmed live, in-person as a group. And at one point they said to me, we can't get together on campus, but we'll just get together at my house and do it. And I had to say, you're not doing that, your project is now done, you can't do the assignment that you wanted to do because the way that you wanted to do it is no longer possible. That was incredibly depressing for them and for me...that was really [expletive deleted] hard.

Professor 4 stated:

The students were highly motivated because this was the last course they had to pass in order to earn their graduate degrees. I said we're going to make a promise together, and by doing that, we're going get through this. And the promise was that unlike a lot of other classes, this is not something you could just study the night before, you have to live and breathe it and you're going to have to put some effort into this and I'll try to do a better job of making sure that you understand what's important. I'm a tough grader but I think the lowest grade we had was a B minus because they worked harder and everybody, without exception, said this was the best class they ever had. And that's not a reflection on me.

Professor 5 stated:

I was actually absolutely surprised at my attendance. My attendance is always good because I'm in a senior level advanced class and my other class is a graduate class. So, my students usually don't miss but they were at every single Zoom session and they were there the whole time. Participation was not as bad as I thought it would be and honestly, in some ways, it was better.

Professor 6 stated:

With our students, their job ultimately will not be a remote work type of job. So, I tried to sort of sell it to them like they can still get what they need in this online environment, they have to learn on their own no matter what and that's going to continue their whole careers. It's about morale, you're not going to perform if your morale is zero. I've always found that to be true, if you treat them with respect and promote their own morale then they'll come with you. Now, our students have also invested a lot of time and money in their education, so they were more motivated to say let's do this however we got to do it. So, that's an advantage that I have for sure.

Professor 7 stated:

I had to change my point of view and say, look, the students are getting mental fatigue. They can't last eight hours and maybe I need to look at trying to break up the duration by giving them a shorter duration yet more intensive organized segments of information, to then let them digest that. I basically was moving away from this reliance on whatever I delivered in the classroom, it can be totally expected that the students would get it.

Professor 8 stated:

I worried a great deal, because the class requires three substantive papers of about 2000

words each, but I got the best papers I've ever gotten for that course. I think the reason is that students had less distractions.

Professor 9 stated:

We've had this recurring discussion in the College, when these students come out in their fourth year from this program, they will spend month blocks with professionals in this field. And it'll be interesting to see how they translate the knowledge that they've gotten in this very different environment to a real world application setting, because while we would have been able to kind of ease them then through some of those experiences in the past, that's not been the case this year. We've also heard time and time again just how time consuming this is for students and I don't know that it's more time necessarily, but it's more time in the same place, like their butts in the seat. And it's always the same seat for a much longer time than maybe they would have been moving classrooms or moving places where they're studying but now everything is happening kind of in the same spot, which feels exhausting. And we told them, we feel it too, we're kind of always every tackling meeting, every email, every class, from the same spot. So, I definitely get that the fatigue too. And so that's been a huge impact on students and they certainly have felt it just like we felt it.

Professor 10 stated:

I just couldn't reach the students, most of them, because a lot of them were just going to work or whatever and there was a decent percentage of students that it didn't matter what I tried or how I tried to change anything, they still didn't engage. I felt like students were aware that they were in the position where that they had more impact. Maybe impact is not the right word but that they could be more of a decision maker on how they weren't

going to participate as opposed to in class when I put you in a group and you're literally sitting in front of those people and sometimes there are group evaluations by your peers. So, they had more control over how they engaged with material and a lot of them just chose not to or maybe they just didn't find what I was doing helpful but it just didn't seem that anything I did was helpful for some of them. Now, others were great, they were very appreciative, and they said this has been great, and said thank you. Half a semester is not a wealth of experience, but boy, it was a war zone. Essentially, and I was definitely wounded a few times on my learning curve for how to adapt and change. As we moved into the Summer and the Fall, some of the students became even more passive with their approach to learning and they kind of figured out how to game the system a little bit with regard to some of the digital things. So, if the students had had different expectations regarding what was expected of them, maybe there would have been less of the mindset of I'm just going to do what I need to do and get out of there. Maturity for undergrad students is a big part of this too because I've delivered content to grad students and it's just like talking to adults but the same content with undergrad students was really like talking to adolescents.

### **Teaching Style and the Consequences of the Shift**

The mandatory shift to online instruction forced every faculty member outside of their comfort zone in the role of the instructor because it required them to reflect and grow with respect to how to drive engagement with their students and how to best conduct their courses.

Professor 1 stated:

To me, the students were this kind of flat image on Zoom, there is no roundness to the people, there's no sense of human contact. And in addition to that when I teach in the

classroom, normally I'm really experiential and I'm very physical, I move around a lot, but you simply can't do that with Zoom. I mean, I tried a few minor experiments with my classes but from a distance it just doesn't produce anything close to the same effects.

Professor 2 stated:

I know most of my colleagues, I genuinely consider as friends, not just work friends but I've had dinner with most of them at one time or another. The ability to go to them in-person and talk about things that are happening in class, just if I'm walking by their office and they're in there, it's so easy to say, hey you've taught this class before, how did you do this? Or I did this in class today and I really feel like they didn't get it. Even simple things like the comfort of, oh well, it's not your fault that they didn't get this in class, most students don't get that the first time. It's that advice and that support you get from your colleagues that sort of just happens on the spot. Of course, I could email them, or I could talk to them on the phone, but there's a huge difference in the sense of feeling like you are being imposing. I would also consider one of my colleagues to be one of my best friends and I haven't seen him in-person in over nine months.

Professor 3 stated:

The delivery method changed and therefore it changed the style with which I teach. I do my best to have a certain degree of interaction with my students, to develop a degree of critical engagement with them, with the material that I'm talking about and hopefully that they're talking about as well. I feel that shifting to online just really nullified that almost completely at times, especially during the spring semester. The students were coping with the adjustments as best they could, and I think there was even a certain kind of odd gallantry about us all at that time that we're all going to get through it together. We

laughed about it and we cracked jokes about it but it became far less a sense of engagement on their part and for more of a sense of we just need to have this content and we need to listen to what you're saying and I had to cope with that. So, I really just dropped a lot of my expectations of what I could demand in terms of style. There was no questions or answers, there was no real dialog taking place and not just from me, but from them as well. And I just did my best to support them and get through it.

Professor 4 stated:

Zoom and D2L required a heck of a lot more purposeful communication than normal in terms of the relationship between the student and the professor. There was none of the casual come to class a few minutes early and hey can you help me with this or I'm thinking about that. Everything also has got to be preplanned down to the minute and time management is a huge piece of that preparation. I think shifting to online put a lot more pressure on the professor to communicate not just what was going to happen that day, but to communicate the key dates so we were all able to plan, because the students can't wait to the last minute do anything because they have other classes. So, preplanning both from the professor and student, became so much more essential for success after we shifted to online.

Professor 5 stated:

It was overwhelming and there was a little bit of initial panic and there was a little bit of initial worry or anxiety because there is a lot of fulfillment when you're interacting in-person with someone and you see those lights go off. But because I chose to teach synchronous, I still saw those lights go off and I still felt like I was making a difference. I still had students meet with me, they asked for individual Zoom sessions where I could

interact with them. It was probably harder in my three-hour night class, because three hours in front of the camera, it's much harder than three hours in front of people and I don't know why necessarily, they say Zoom fatigue or whatever...but it just felt long and it just seemed exhausting. I still had fulfillment as a teacher and I still felt like I was able to do my job though. And a lot of my evaluations said that they felt like it went well, I actually had really good evaluations. I also tried to be very compassionate because I knew a lot of people had a lot going on. My family members also had to realize that even though I'm home, I'm really still working. And...that guilt that you feel when you're not answering the question that your kids need, right then, even though you're present together, juggling all that, that's the hardest part.

Professor 6 stated:

I really can't speak to personal fulfillment in the Spring because we were in crisis mode and I was just trying to get the information out there in the clearest and most manageable way and hope for the best. As we got into the summer though, the feeling of personal fulfillment started to kind of bubble back up because I was getting to develop something brand new and I was getting to be really creative and the students I was teaching had to interact with me. They can't turn off the camera and they can't go work at Wal-Mart; they have to engage with me.

Professor 7 stated:

If there's anything that we've learned from this it's the word pivot, that's the operative term that's been used quite a bit throughout this pandemic and my interpretation is that word is being used a lot because people are having to adapt to things that they're unfamiliar with. That's just the way it is and those that adapt and can cope with it better,

seem to be at least positioning themselves to be more successful. I wouldn't necessarily say we can be prepared for whatever the future brings because it's really hard to prepare for the unknown but an attitude of being willing to reach out and try to seek answers will be vital because most things can't be solved by one individual, they will require a team, a collaboration.

Professor 8 stated:

I think what's challenging is just figuring out how to deliver a lecture and make it clear when you're making a transition from one part of that lecture to the next. When you're in the classroom, the sort of dramatics of personal presence makes that easier to achieve and that's not so easy to do on Zoom but we still have to give lectures and I guess we're still performers, it's just performing now in a way that I was not used to doing. I think that the challenge is to figure out how to communicate emphasis and how to impart the structure of a lecture students. I also get more emails from students than I used to and I have more interaction with students now through what we would think of as office hours via Zoom and I also left the Zoom window open at the end of class and students get to hang out and ask questions for 15 more minutes and I always had takers. Online requires a very different approach to communication.

Professor 9 stated:

It felt like just a mountain of work and just a huge challenge. So, from a style standpoint, I think I was just really creative with the technology resources and that probably would not have happened had it not been for that shift to online.

Professor 10 stated:

After students started exhibiting some behaviors that indicated that they were emotionally



having a rough time, I kind of started looking at it more in the scheme of things, is this course really the most important thing? In my mind, it wasn't because some of them were in environments that may not have been the most conducive to learning. Some of them had to literally move away, they lost their apartments, they lost their jobs. And the course just really paled in comparison as far as importance to me, considering the other things I was hearing from them about how their lives had changed so drastically beyond school.

### **Survive and Adapt**

The rapid and unprecedented nature of the COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting mandatory shift to online instruction ultimately triggered a survival instinct from each of these faculty members. In an effort to overcome the challenge of teaching in a remote fashion, these faculty members all naturally sought to adapt their teaching styles to fit this new environment.

Professor 1 stated:

In the Spring 2020 semester especially, I just wrote off the first 20 minutes of every class and I started by asking how they were doing, how were they handling this? I also kept emphasizing the need for them to stay safe. I think that to a certain extent, even when I go back to on-campus, I think there's going to still be some of that too. Overall though, I could say it's probably true that I made a conscious decision to change my teaching style as little as possible when we went to online, at least in the spring because it took me quite a while, three or four months, to figure out that online is really a different environment and you could do things differently.

Professor 2 stated:

There is an incredible difference between showing someone how to do something when you are actually sitting in front of them versus just explaining what the pieces of the

puzzle are and how they fit together when you are talking over a screen. But students may need to view your lecture at a time other than when the class normally meets and that's possible because you can record it with Zoom very easily. There're legitimate reasons why you might do that. I know that one of my students last in the Spring, a very good student, worked in a grocery store. Being an essential worker, they had to work during class. But they asked if they could just watch the lectures later? Well, of course I said they could. I mean, that's not optimal, but you'd have situations like that.

Professor 3 stated:

In one of my courses, in the end we gave up, the students and I we literally abandoned the learning outcomes of the class. We abandoned the expected results that we wanted to get out of the class because we as a group were not prepared and not capable of following through on what we had wanted to achieve with the semester. We struggled and worked our way to try to get through a few things, but we really just said [expletive deleted] it, this is over with. We still met and we talked, but we didn't accomplish any of the actual stated goals and learning outcomes of the class that were on the syllabus. That was just...sad and depressing.

Professor 4 stated:

I was concerned because the relationship building and the informal interaction that takes place before class and after class when your on-campus was no longer present after we shifted to online. And even office hours were gone too, as far as in-person, plus I couldn't really use class time for any of that stuff. Which meant that I had to find different ways to communicate. So, I did three things: I set up a Zoom, open to the entire class, forty-five minutes before the start the class, which was on Tuesdays and Thursdays. I also setup

break rooms in Zoom for the teams to handle all the logistics as far as scheduling and the division of labor, all of which normally would just happen in the hallway after class when you are on-campus. As the semester would drag on, your energy level, your attention span, and your engagement wanes though. We all live in a world where multitask all the time and technology allows us to do that, even while you are listening to a lecture. So, I had to do things to keep them engaged, there were videos, there was dialog, there was processing these current event presentations, guest speakers coming in. But it was all just more and more time in front of the computer, which had an impact on both me and the students. So, the challenge was really trying to keep it fresh.

Professor 5 stated:

I worried that my teaching would be less effective on Zoom because I'm very hands on, walking around the room and making sure people are on task, so I can try to help them and motivate them. And I was afraid I would lose that, and I wanted to try to find ways to do that. I think a lot of teachers do enjoy that performance too. To a certain extent, you feel like that's kind of what you do after a while, and that interaction helps. Because I kept my class synchronous, all of that didn't go away. Jokes and attempts to be funny aren't as easy to do on Zoom as they are in an in-person, that's obvious, but I still felt like I could communicate fairly well. I guess synchronous interaction is so important to me because I feel like that engagement is a big part of the learning, and they are more comfortable when they are with you as a person, even through Zoom. I do think you remember the things that caused you to be sad or to laugh too, and I still tried to keep that in my teaching style. And that's why synchronous was absolutely essential to me, I

wanted them to see my eyes and I wanted them to see that I was looking at them because I think that helps keep them motivated.

Professor 6 stated:

What I opted to do was record a couple short lectures to kind of introduce them to the stuff. I gave them some readings and then I gave them still the same exercise. But at the time, I didn't have the skills to figure out how to allow them to work in groups, I do that now on Zoom, but in the spring of 2020 I was like, I don't know so just do it on your own. I told them they could work together if they had a way to do that but otherwise, they were on their own. And rather than engaging with each other to discuss the answers, I just had them do a D2L quiz. And they could take it as many times as they wanted and it was the main concepts, what I wanted them to take away. That's how I handled my content and it was sort of anticlimactic, I felt like I was shortchanging them but, in the spring specifically though, things had completely disintegrated, I was just in emergency crisis mode.

Professor 7 stated:

ETSU has not reached that critical enrollment threshold where they have to lay off any more faculty, although that remains to be seen for the spring 2021 semester but the preliminary indicators are maybe that's not going to happen. So as long as that's the case, then it's likely that the support will still be there for faculty, but the economics of this are another situation that is real and you can only do so much if you don't have the revenues there. And luckily ETSU right now has survived a lot of that, and really the State of Tennessee in general has survived a lot of that too, at least compared to a lot of other states. So, we're fortunate here at ETSU that we have the funding here now. And

hopefully, will continue to have enough funds to operate at this level or better...we just need to think positive thoughts.

Professor 8 stated:

The method of delivery has become as important as content and maybe we should have been more mindful about it when we were giving lectures with everyone on-campus, because now I spend a lot more time thinking about delivery and preparing. Before we shifted to online, I tried to get to class five minutes early, so I could write everything on the board and not be distracted by writing a lot of stuff during the class session and now all of that has to be done usually on Sunday night. And if you send it out students, they begin to expect it and they need it.

Professor 9 stated:

We definitely looked for ways that the technology could help us out. We had to really stretch in terms of what D2L and Zoom could do to find ways to make things logistically possible. We also totally had redundancies in our curriculum and some of them were unnecessary. So, it was really a good look at consolidating.

Professor 10 stated:

It was a complete overhaul of the course midway through the semester because I was trying to figure out how to provide opportunities that could somewhat resemble what we've already discussed was going to occur in the course. So, my workload increased exponentially. I spent 10, 12, 13 hours a day, preparing and delivery and trying...trying to salvage because that's the way I really saw that course was trying to salvage something where students are going to get their money's worth, that was going to be of educational value. I was also being realistic about particularly undergrad students that carry a full

load and trying to be mindful of not only what they were going to have to do for my course but their other courses too. I was trying to keep their mental health in mind because mine was deteriorating. So, I was trying to be realistic and not trying to shoot for the moon necessarily and being kind of grounded in reality of what was happening. Trying to figure out what was appropriate and what would be useful but what wouldn't be over burdensome for the students, and that was exhausting, quite honestly.

### **Innovate and Evolve**

As the weeks progressed following the mandatory shift to online instruction, these faculty members progressed from the initial phase of survive and adapt to a mindset of innovation and evolution. After they had the opportunity to reflect on their experiences during the previous phase, they regrouped and applied what they had learned in order to expand on what had worked and also shift away from what had not worked during the previous weeks.

Professor 1 stated:

I've come to the conclusion that it's a gigantic waste of time for me to teach what they can read and learn on their own. So, I think there have been some good learnings for me out of all of this, but I hate every minute of it.

Professor 2 stated:

After we went online, I started giving them more of a formal homework assignment and gave them a couple of days to do them and turn them into the D2L dropbox. Another change was tests and there may be better ways of doing this, but I would send them a PDF with the test and have an honor code. I did catch a couple of them cheating and it's kind of hard to call cheating if they are right but not if they all do something wrong. It's also much harder to get them to ask questions in the online environment because one of

the things that that I've noticed is despite all the technology, there is still there is a bit of lag between me talking to them and them reacting, plus they usually have to turn on their mics to speak up and say something, and then for me to receive it. I don't know that necessarily works as well, so I realized that I had to adjust to teaching a little more independently of my students.

Professor 3 stated:

I wanted to feel like they were getting something more out of this rather than just being cast aside. I was going into more detail about certain topics than I would normally have an opportunity to do in on-campus classes. I was expanding on details and bringing in guest speakers that I normally would not be able to include. Not because they're not interesting or important, but because simply I didn't have enough time in a normal on-campus lecture situation to deliver that amount of content. Students responded really well to that and I took it as an opportunity also to be a little bit more relaxed about things, a little bit more freewheeling in my content. But it was overly ambitious on my part and it really sucked a lot of energy out of my life. During those last few weeks of the semester, I really found it to be not only a struggle simply to prepare those recordings, but also emotionally and intellectually draining. I also nearly eliminated any reviewing during class time once we switched to Zoom but I've compensated for that by increasing my availability in terms of office hours. I have office hours now, twice a week for two solid hours each day and to my surprise, it's regularly attended by students from different classes. It's a Zoom address that I send out on Outlook meetings, so it pops up on their calendars.

Professor 4 stated:

The task was to finish the class and finish it well. I tried to approach it from the level of, they're going to be in a different environment, they might not have the technology, they're going to have a lot of other things going on in their lives. So, what can I do? Make sure that at least in this class, they don't have major issues when it comes to doing things online. That was the mindset I adopted, giving them planning documents, dates, outlines, reminders. I held virtual office hours; I would answer e-mails at all hours. I tried to do everything I could to make them successful. That doesn't mean they didn't earn their grades, but I did not want technology and not being able to be face-to-face to be a barrier to their learning goals, that was kind of my mission. Gradually, we found a way, no matter what was put in front of us, we found a way. You learn just much about what did work as what didn't work. And I think the students learned that they've got a confidence now when they go out in the workplace. They've been through something that's not easy and it boils down to learning to keep my head down and keep working. It's all part of if I'm smart enough, if I'm committed enough, if I've got enough passion, then I can manage well, I can compete with anybody else. That's what pivoting to online during a global pandemic means to me, look at all that you've learned. It's the covenant, that has to be it's getting tougher but I as a teacher, I'm not going to give up on these students and as students, they will stick in there, they will learn everything they can. That's what a covenant is all about and I can't think of a better time to have a covenant than the pivot to online in the middle of the semester because of a global pandemic. I mean, I was so proud of those days.



Professor 5 stated:

I did a lot of the same things, but I had to make them work for Zoom, so I would teach for a little while and then I would say, I want you all to try this and then I'll come back to you and ask you about it. Even though we were on a computer, I still wanted to hear what they had to say, and I wanted them to know that I was going to call on them. I had to make it feel like we were all still actually sitting in the actual classroom together on-campus.

Professor 6 stated:

They like to use their phones, so they like apps much better than email. So, I started communicating with them through apps because they felt more comfortable doing it that way but that's not something I normally would have thought about doing. I was just kind of shocked, but they liked being prompted. Every now and then, I would send out a question every day for the whole course over the app and it was cool because it meant they were thinking about it every day. Whereas in the on-campus classroom, I would post that on D2L, and nobody would read it. And yeah, we may or may not be able to talk about it eventually, but with the app they were learning much more on the spot or just in time kind of learning. That was cool, and it all came from the students, not me.

Professor 7 stated:

I started to kind of gradually move toward hybridizing my approach to teaching. I realized that I needed to give them shorter bits of information in the classroom. I need to mix up the mode that I give them the information: some video, some didactic, some hands on, maybe more varieties so I can address all the learner styles. That was my gradual evolution about teaching and learning.

Professor 8 stated:

My students have always been interested in having some sort of study guide and I kind of resisted that before going online because I used to say, look at the learning outcomes and the syllabus, there is your study guide. But now I actually provide weekly study guides and it has all of the notes, with everything that I want people to review. I do that every single week and I spend hours on those things, easily the time that I spent commuting to campus in the past is taken up focusing on delivery. And I think that you can't just assume that you can do all that once and play it over, especially with my courses because the content evolves, and students never have the same questions.

Professor 9 stated:

We had to figure out how are we going to do remote exams and are we going to do any sort of remote proctoring and who's going to do that? And gosh, we probably better write whole new exams because we don't know if the integrity of our exams is going to be fine. Every time I think we dug a little deeper, it was just more fact-finding questions about how are we going to do this? We just uncovered more things that we were unprepared for, unfortunately. It felt very much like we were sort of flying by the seat of our pants and I have gotten very used to doing as a faculty member, living with that feeling of not having full control over things. I've learned over time that the only way you can really function in a faculty role is to be a little fearless and kind of just go rogue sometimes. But this was that to the extreme and I think I was very cognizant of the students not having a poor experience or not losing the deliverable, not watering down the educational outcomes and objectives of what we were trying to achieve. But to do that on a very short order was difficult.

Professor 10 stated:

I tried to shift their focus from what I would consider the sage on the stage lecture, which is not my style anyway, to tiny activities where they had to physically do something aesthetically. This was important because so many of them were not leaving the house and they were watching TV on their phones and social media and all this stuff, and I knew their bodies needed to move a little bit, to help their brains. So, I tried to adapt things, the best I could to really keep them focused as human beings and not just as students.

### **On-Camera Presence and Etiquette**

Every faculty member was eager to share their perceptions and experiences regarding their students' tendency to turn their cameras on or off as well as their various behaviors in-front of the camera. Some professors required all students to turn their cameras on at all times while others only subtly encouraged their students to keep their cameras turned on.

Professor 1 stated:

I would never want to teach over Zoom but I do think that there was more class participation over Zoom than in-person though, and I think that's because when you're in their presence, they will send you physical cues about whether they want to be called on or not. The cues aren't so obvious in Zoom and sometimes people actually leave their camera off. So, I found myself just saying, okay, let's think about this and I would randomly call on someone, people I would have looked at earlier in my teaching career and thought, they don't want to be called on, and they not only had responses, many of them were quite amazing.

Professor 2 stated:

When most of them either do not have a camera or do not turn one on, I can't see how they're doing or if they're understanding. Usually when you are on-campus, maybe they were looking up or they were still furiously jotting down notes and suddenly you realize that you need to pause for a little bit. I would agree that teaching to those blank Zoom screens zapped my enthusiasm for teaching if you were to compare it to teaching face-to-face on-campus because I didn't necessarily know if the students were getting it.

Professor 3 stated:

I had 35 students in one of my classes and 4 of them would turn their cameras on and...honestly I think it would have been better for me emotionally, and for them, if all of them always had their cameras on and of course knew how to conduct and present themselves properly on-camera. And, when we are on-campus and I'm lecturing in-person, I can see all of them and what they're doing, I see their body language, I see their level of engagement or lack of engagement. I'm not cruel either, I'm not one of those professors who calls out somebody who's clearly just doesn't care but if someone's looking like they have a question and they don't want to raise their hand just yet, I'll pause because I'll see them out of the corner of my eye and say, do you have a question? Or I'll pause and ask if anybody has a question to give them that opportunity. It's simply impossible to do that in Zoom, so any opportunity for engagement, any opportunity for dialog, just disappeared, just completely evaporated. There's very much a performative element in being a professor and lecturing, and my ability to be performative was just absolutely inhibited and just crippled when we shifted to online.

Professor 4 stated:

One part of the grade that I give is participation, they do current event presentations and we discuss what's pertinent to what we're studying. They do a survey of it and educate the class at the end of that and they ask probing questions. When we went to the Zoom environment, obviously it was difficult to do that but one of the requirements I had from the start was that everybody had to have their camera on. We didn't talk to the black screens with people's names. We talk to people's faces and we tried our best to maintain a level of engagement. Even though on Zoom you sometimes step on each other, but we worked through all that together.

Professor 5 stated:

I asked them to turn on their cameras on, but it wasn't an absolute requirement, I had a few students that I let turn them off because their computers kept crashing on them because their connection just wouldn't hold it. But I wanted the feel of a classroom and so, yes, I was a big, big advocate for cameras on. When we are there in the classroom on-campus, we're all there where we can see each other, so it would have been next to impossible for me to be able to do what I felt like I needed to do if I was just starting at a bunch of blank Zoom screens. I would have felt like I was talking to thin air and I really wouldn't have expected them to be sitting there if their cameras were off. I think it helps keep them accountable. I didn't have any problem with people not being dressed or being in bad situations, but I know some professors have.

Professor 6 stated:

When we got on to Zoom their screens were all black and I could only see their names but that doesn't tell me that they are there, or when a camera was on but I could tell that

the student is working at Wal-Mart right now. That all created a feeling of absence that was profound, so I worried a lot more about their engagement and are they with me and are they getting things? Whereas normally when you have on-campus classes, you might have one or two students that I'm kind of concerned about, but I just like felt like they were all gone and that was a huge difference as far as my emotional engagement with the students. I worried about their preparedness because we have a licensure exam. But I didn't require them to turn their cameras on in all my classes because I felt like they are going through the same thing that I am, like they are in shock too and they're trying to figure out how to manage their lives in this new environment. I would say right now though, maybe a third of them turn their cameras on, unless it is required as it is in some classes like if they're expected to be interacting, where they have to dress a certain way too. There's a lot of our courses that require that level of personal appearance type of preparation. For my classes in general though, I'd love to see your face and if your face is not ready, it's fine, just be dressed, I don't care in what, and I don't care where you're sitting, so like they'll join their pajamas and be on their couch with the dog, it's fine. I had my first class with a new group of students, and I made cameras and actually attendance optional but everybody that came had their cameras on, and it was so much fun. So that made getting to know them a little bit easier but it's still not important enough to me to force in all classes.

Professor 7 stated:

I held virtual office hours via Zoom and interestingly a hundred percent of my students that took me up on that, kept their cameras off. That was one-on-one and I kept my video on of course but their video was always off and...I have to say, it felt very rude. I don't

know if the students were feeling insecure, but I could hear in some of their voices that they were nervous. So I tried to use a tone that was very engaging and understanding, but I wasn't successful in getting them to get their turn the video on and I didn't ask them to turn them on but it was this really odd. And I think the level of my frustration would have been escalated if I had chosen to teach synchronous and they all had their cameras off during class on Zoom but I also think it would have had the same effect on me if their cameras were on and I could tell they were not engaged.

Professor 8 stated:

In the spring, I didn't think about requiring cameras to be on and so a certain number of students would have their cameras off or they would have it in the mode where you just see a photograph up there. I absolutely required cameras to be on in the fall and I think that's absolutely the right thing to do, and I put that in my syllabus. If there is any reason why you cannot have your camera on, make sure that you write me a letter before the beginning of the semester. Their environment is not something I've had a major problem with at all. I have not had the problems that some other people report, I haven't had students showing up half dressed with the camera on. I think that to some degree, instructors invite what they project. So, I still get dressed up a bit. I'm always going to look like hell, but I still try to have a little bit of formality, a little bit of dignity and so I get it from students. And so sometimes students are working or trying to take care of their children and none of that bothers me. I can live with all of those things because I think it's beneficial to require the cameras to be on and the fact that students have to be present with their cameras on is probably one of the reasons why a certain number of them have not failed. I think it's always important to put all of that clearly on the table at the

beginning. You can make exceptions as they're needed, and students understand that. I've always allowed people to bring their children to class and that's never been an issue either. I don't care what anyone says, I'm not going to exclude people who cannot afford childcare.

Professor 9 stated:

I prefer for my students to have their cameras turned on, although I kind of have mixed feelings about it because it certainly can be distracting. I certainly understand that people have their own circumstances that they're trying to deal with which creates privacy issues, so they might feel more comfortable turning their camera off. It can be equally as distracting though when the camera is on and the student is very clearly not engaged from their own home environment. It's one thing to look out in an auditorium at a class and see somebody surfing the internet, but it's almost worse when you're not really interacting with them in the same physical way to see them disengaged. When all the cameras are off, you sort of feel like you're in a room all by yourself and at that point, I could just record this lecture and post a video as opposed to kind of yelling into the wall, as it feels like when no one has their camera on, it doesn't feel like you're very impactful. It doesn't feel like anything's hitting and you can't reach the audience to know if it makes sense to them or if they might have questions. There's a give and take that's completely lost without being able to see your audience. Ideally, it's probably one of those things that's a professionalism awareness piece because it's so much better when they all turn their cameras on and are clearly fully engaged. I'm not sure that students really realize necessarily what the proper etiquette is because I don't think we have ever really come out and said from an expectation setting standpoint, here's what we expect of you. In



contrast, when students come into a classroom on-campus, they generally know what's expected. If I'm just straight lecturing, I do prefer having the cameras on, to be able to interact with the audience. But for any class where we're doing more like application or discussion, obviously, you must the cameras on for that. I just ask students to e-mail me if for some reason they're unable to do that because you actually have to be ready for class if it's class time. That's created its own interesting set of problems, lots of unique situations.

Professor 10 stated:

There are some topics that we cover that are very sensitive and extremely personal issues and that was when I saw the most black screens through the entire course. Clearly the discomfort for that topic was very noticeable and unlike in the on-campus classroom where I would pick up on their body language and maybe them not looking at me or kind of folding into their bodies, on Zoom they just turned their cameras off. I call it statement leaning, you've made a statement when you've decided not to show your face or when you flat just leave the meeting. And to me, turning the camera off, it's a statement that you are leaving the discussion. It was very difficult getting them to talk about this material and the discussion is an essential part of the class because it requires them to examine things that they had never considered as being part of their job. There's been pros and cons to them having their cameras turned on. I've felt like it was a privacy issue because maybe their environment is not something, they want projected. And I know we can put up these fake backgrounds, but I have found that students are really good at social media, but they're not really good at technology and they didn't know how to do that. There was a little bit of a comfort issue for me too because I was not comfortable with

seeing students laying in their beds. After I saw that a couple times, I would make subtle comments like, why thank you for getting up and getting ready and being present, just like you would in our classroom on-campus. I was hoping that would translate into please don't lay in the bed in your pajamas, but it did for some and for some it didn't. So, I just didn't feel comfortable requiring all cameras to be on because I was concerned about how some of the students might be uncomfortable with that. It honestly felt a little disrespectful and like they weren't valuing what I was saying or the course when their cameras were off, it made me doubt their attention. It really felt like in a lot of ways, I was speaking to a void and it was kind of a morale buster. But even if they all had their cameras on, it can be visually and auditory distracting, which is absolutely exhausting for me to look at a Zoom screen with all these faces because you'll have people with pets or kids and it was just visually overwhelming at times, a stimulus overload. It honestly just takes something out of you, like it drains the life force from people if you want the truth. It's not even remotely equivalent to being with human beings.

### **Synchronous versus Asynchronous**

Only one instructor elected to transition from the traditional on-campus classroom directly to the asynchronous online classroom. The other instructors felt that it was either simply too much of a substantial change for them to even consider during a short transition period or they feared the engagement level of their courses would plummet.

Professor 1 stated:

My students in the spring and the fall both uniformly say they like the Zoom experience way better than the asynchronous stuff.

Professor 3 stated:

I just simply wasn't ready for asynchronous. I really didn't understand what that would be, what that would involve. And to be honest with you, it was a little bit frightening to think about going into an asynchronous teaching relationship with my students. I really believe that it would lose a lot of the value and input and the opportunity for interaction with them. So, I instead really attempted to reproduce at least the lectures that I did, and I realized that it had to be more objective and less collaborative, at least for one of my classes.

Professor 4 stated:

With asynchronous, you can forget relationships because there's absolutely no feedback. You might as well just be doing a podcast. I would go as far as to say that asynchronous instruction is a poor substitute for learning, whether you're a freshman or whether you're a senior. If you're in a college class, it should be all synchronous, full stop because the ability to learn and to be able to ensure that learning is happening, is all about building a foundation of relationships. That's going to serve you as you go further too, whether it's into your next level classes or into the working world. Think of any job you've ever had, if all you ever did was all online training and then you're asked to actually do that job, without the relational feedback, I mean, you're not prepared. Asynchronous it doesn't really allow for drama either, for real world situations where flexibility and constancy of purpose is all you're doing that gets you through the day. In order to be effective, you've got to be able to learn to manage that drama, you've got to be able to forge those relationships. You can learn academics all night, but until you're able to apply it

consistently and encourage other folks to work together as a team, you're not going to be successful.

Professor 5 stated:

When COVID hit and I saw what was about to go down, I kind of panicked because to me asynchronous is not an option. Not with the content that I feel responsible for helping them attain and conquer. I just could not get to that comfort level. Please don't get me wrong, I'm not saying that people can't do an asynchronous class. I just did not feel comfortable with throwing it out there and saying go get it.

Professor 7 stated:

What I decided to do was to make the course asynchronous and to not use Zoom. I talked with a number of colleagues in my department and they had complained and cited many concerns about when they had done Zoom instruction. They mentioned they couldn't see the students faces because they turned their cameras off. And when they did see the students faces, they weren't getting visual cues that they were engaged. Based on that feedback from those faculty that had prior online course experience, it didn't seem like the Zoom format was really working. So, I just made an executive decision and said, I'm not going to do online Zoom. And I'm a fairly detail oriented person and I figured I could capitalize on those skills to make my text and my prerecorded videos as clear as possible. It wasn't such a big leap for me to say let's completely go asynchronous because I was already kind of working towards that mode.

Professor 8 stated:

I'm fortunate that I had already started preparing, or at least seriously considered teaching online prior to the pandemic but that was only because synchronous was a realistic form

of delivery. I would never have made the decision to start exploring teaching online if asynchronous teaching was the only way that I could have taught online, or at least I would have explored it with a lot of resistance.

Professor 9 stated:

One thing I would hear from my students once we went online was that watching asynchronous lectures made them really miss being in the classroom. That made me really think about the format, as far as putting something in a video or doing it together over Zoom. The one thing that the pandemic certainly has taught us is there has to be a little more flexibility and now we have the means to teach online so we have to ask when is it important to have the class meet in-person and what can be delivered online, either asynchronous or synchronous via Zoom? And how can we kind of utilize the tools that we have to build on these efficiencies? I do think it probably has changed, and I don't know that's necessarily a bad thing.

Professor 10 stated:

I think from a mental health and emotional standpoint, you need a purpose. But the purpose, doesn't mean to burden you further. It's about being engaged, and I changed to doing a synchronous Zoom meeting so that we could interface in real time and I started doing lecture guides with a lot of supplemental material so they could absorb that in an asynchronous fashion. I went beyond the textbook, but I didn't try to burden them with a ton of reading because I don't think that's appropriate.

## **Institutional Support and Decreasing Faculty Anxiety, Stress, and Workload**

Each professor seemed prepared to discuss the role institutional support played in their experiences and they seemed to all largely regard the decisions, responses, and actions of those individuals in an extremely positive light.

### **Administrative Leadership**

The majority of the discussion surrounding institutional support centered around the timeframe of the decision to shift all instruction to online and the overall quantity, quality, consistency, and timeliness of communication of information and resources from executive leadership and other administrators to faculty.

Professor 1 stated:

There was obviously a real effort to ensure that there was a lot of resources available to faculty, more was available than I made use of it, and there's even more available now. Overall, I think the support has been good.

Professor 2 stated:

I think we could have been given more notice before shifting to online, but the pandemic surprised a lot of people. If we were given, maybe more forewarning in the spring though, maybe I could have used some of that time to get things ready, even if they had just said that this is a real possibility earlier without actually deciding to shift to online at that time. I would have spent some time during those weeks leading up to it to get things ready. Maybe I would have done things a little bit differently in terms of my planning.

Professor 3 stated:

I think that they were trying to reproduce the normal, what went on before and that's not necessarily just in terms of a classroom setting, but in many different respects. And at

times that really was an epic failure on their part. You know the very phrase; the Bucs are back...I find it little bit offensive and insulting because they never came back. So, there's this weird mix between that and other things like how Zoom is working well and they're communicating information really well to us as faculty. There was obviously a structure in place that was easy to fall into as an instructor, even if you had to learn a bunch of new technology and details and little things like that. I know that [Employee] was really stepping up to the plate, she did an amazing job of holding little seminars about how to teach better online and all that sort of stuff. There was a lot of effort that was being made and really good effort but then there were just sometimes epic failures too. Overall, I think ETSU actually did a really good job though because there were administrators and faculty members who I think did an amazing job of providing me and others with a high level of support that got us through things and if that wasn't there, I think it would have been even worse as far as what we were dealing with emotionally as instructors. ETSU's handled this better than almost any other institution that I'm aware of and with a few exceptions, most of my colleagues that I've talked to have felt the same way. It's been horrible, ETSU's made bad decisions but I think it could have been so much worse, but I don't think we have much rope to keep holding on to before we drop off the bottom.

Professor 4 stated:

What was really so valuable from an institutional support perspective was that previous investment in manpower, the fact that you had other human beings that were there helping you work through it in real time. Ever call customer service and don't get to talk to a real person? How do you feel about that? Are you going to buy it? You going back to

company again? Not only was that investment in one-on-one support necessary, it would have been impossible to shift to online that fast without it.

Professor 5 stated:

It was more mentally exhausting because it happened so fast and it was just so much so quick, plus it was in the middle of the semester. I did not feel like it was exhausting in the summer or fall of 2020 because I knew I was going to be online and I had it planned that way. I already had a vacation planned during Spring break with my kids and so we were gone. And while I was on the beach, I had my computer literally watching a Zoom session on how to do Zoom. And then I remember coming back and going, well, here we go, and tests were my absolute worst hang up with the whole thing because I have a real problem with online tests. If I had had another week that might have maybe helped my anxiety. I don't want to sound critical of the University, but I think in an ideal world, we would have had at least another week because the critical importance of every second, once that decision was made, it cannot be understated.

Professor 6 stated:

I don't think it would have necessarily made a difference if we had more time to prepare after the decision was made to shift everything to online because it really took me several weeks to really, internalize that things were really different. Part of that was having kids in school myself, so I don't think an extra week would have made a difference. It was still just such a shock and such an emotional and intellectual adjustment that I probably didn't come to grips with everything until May, after we were through graduation. I initially responded by just doing nothing, it's like I was frozen, just inaction. I probably spent a week of just doing nothing like reading a lot of news and just being kind of being sad. I



also felt like we were inundated with information and discussion at ETSU, especially at the leadership team level. We were just talking for hours and hours about the closure and what does this mean and how are we going to do things? And I honestly just wanted somebody to just say, hey, we're going to do it like this. And that sort of continued into the summer semester where we were talking about teaching online in the fall semester, but I think people still just really wanted someone to tell them what to do, they wanted more similarities in the sense of here's what other colleges or departments are doing that seems to be working or here's what's not been working for them, and not on a philosophical level, like practical information that you can directly and immediately apply.

Professor 7 stated:

If ETSU had not made such a substantial investment in instructional support prior to shifting to online, I probably would have reached out to publishers of electronic textbooks and relied solely on that platform and whatever support resources they had readily available. Basically, I would have gone a third-party route and I think I would have looked at myself as just a commercial manager. I'm in the business of knowledge and working with a third party that's resourced out and I think I might have felt more disconnected from the University's environment and just saw myself as part of a business. If I had seen that the University was offering less support for faculty, then I would have interpreted it as, well then that's less of a priority, so then the University has a lower priority for my teaching expectation, because they're not helping me to be able to do my job. It likely would have reduced the rigor and polish of the course because I wouldn't have felt like it was important because it wasn't supported. The culture of the

University, the culture of support and engagement, is really important to me. And if I'm not feeling that, it really affects my motivation. There were people here at ETSU to help me and that made teaching more fun and engaging because I was doing something that was valued. The administrators were really making a statement that said we need to help empower the faculty to learn new strategies for teaching in this COVID pandemic environment and that made a real difference because they didn't leave us hanging, they said, we have these expectations for you as teachers and here are these resources that will help you meet those expectations. It was...very proactive.

Professor 8 stated:

My department has done very well as far as supporting each other since we shifted to online, but my Department Chair is absolutely exceptional. We had meetings all summer, long meetings, all via Zoom and we talked about all of these issues we were facing because we've always wanted a great diversity of approaches to teaching. I got a lot of help from my colleagues, a lot of ideas about how to set up assignments. And a lot of motivation to be well ahead of the game, we decided as a department, we were going to have our D2L sites open weeks in advance. So, I think having that level of cooperation in my department has been enormously helpful and that my Department Chair is a wildly hardworking person. I don't know how my Chair ever sleeps. [Employee] is very good at making resources available for people and she was also someone who I spoke with very early about the importance of being ahead of the game. However, I think things like that seem very abstract unless your colleagues take it seriously, and my Department Chair was the first person to suggest setting that bar.

Professor 9 stated:

As a department we had to really scramble to figure out how we can make it operationalized in a remote environment. We cut what's not essential and what's fluff, what said what can we trim down? And all those conversations had to happen very, very quickly. I think if we would have had a little more time it would have helped if we had another week to prepare for the shift to online but I don't know if we had been given all the time in the world, that we would have able to really think everything through because we had never tried most of it before and there were just so many unknowns.

Professor 10 stated:

For me especially initially, I got analysis paralysis. I was like, I can't prepare enough, I can't get enough information. And I kind of went off the deep end in that regard. Because I was like, what does this look like, what does the research say about this kind of method? And so, it became just an exhaustive burden to try to do what will be the most successful thing for students. For most of the spring semester, after I was consumed and went over the edge in terms of analysis paralysis and buying books and trying to, do all these things from a pedagogical standpoint, I just really kind of had to pause and go okay, wait a minute. Is this really the biggest deal? No, it isn't. So, I really just told the class let's just do the best we can and hopefully we'll all be okay, and you let me know if you need something. In the Fall semester it shifted a little bit because by then I became really tired. After about a month, I was just emotionally and mentally exhausted from going back to online learning, even though the prep was easier. It became almost more difficult because the students were even less engaged. But despite all that, I felt that administration was supportive as much as I could tell because I feel like they made sure

the resources were there. But what I felt was lacking was some form of a reality check and understanding because I felt like my role began to evolve and began to increase and take on many different hats in a different way than it had previously. So, my involvement in some students lives increased just because they just told me so much personal stuff, it was like I became an extension of a lot of different departments.

### **Technical Support**

Each professor took the opportunity to share their feelings of appreciation and respect for the efforts of ETSU's Information Technology Services staff, particularly those that specialized in instructional design and support. In addition, several professors made remarks regarding the vital role that ETSU's Center for Teaching Excellence played in their experiences.

Professor 1 stated:

Considering that they were dealing with a highly resistant faculty member, I think IT did damn well. The Zoom classes were quite good, and the woman was enormously patient. I also appreciate that if I wasn't totally screwing everything up, they would leave me alone. It would have been completely different without all that support, I would have wound up doing some nonsense on D2L, which I kind of knew, so I probably would have tried discussion boards for the first time and other crap like that. I would have been worse than I am by far and it would have drastically impacted my students if I had not had their support because it was critical.

Professor 2 stated:

I've had a couple of issues with the technology. Internet service at home is very slow and that makes things very frustrating. Also, how many of our students own a computer right now? How many of them have access to a good quality scanner? I know a lot of them

take pictures of their assignments with their smartphone but the quality there varies quite a bit between students. Sometimes they manage to get it right and sometimes it's quite blurry. If we could train students to use your smartphone to take a picture of something that they've written, how do you do this in such a way that it's really readable? Best practices for that would help tremendously. It doesn't take a whole lot of time to email one student that submits something that you can't read but when you get 10 of them in a week, it starts to add up in terms of time.

Professor 3 stated:

I think they did a really good job providing technical support to faculty. It was the fact that ETSU did communicate all the little things like the inclusion of a Zoom tab on D2L and other things where they explained, here's how you do this thing or that. The IT people did a really great job of trying to provide a kind of an online support structure for students too. I found particularly the IT people were responding to requests for help much faster than they normally do and that was very much to their credit. I think ETSU said what can we do to support everybody? In the grand scheme of things though, I don't think that anything ETSU institutionally in terms of supporting classroom instruction as far as the delivery of content or anything like that really actually made things better for us though because it really just created different options for us and those different options became part of our arsenal. The support was great to have and it helped us as faculty cope, but it didn't change the reality or circumstances of what we were going through. Also, it would be very, very helpful if students understood how important the expectations are for them as online students, as far as the methods and the best practices, the students need to learn those nowadays right from the very beginning. And I don't

know if ETSU has done that, I don't know if our students have been adequately prepared for that, even simple things like what's acceptable for submitting an assignment in D2L as far as the file format or the clarity of the image. But I can't blame anybody because I don't think any of us were ready to make this kind of shift. I hope those things are more in place now with students, especially incoming first year students.

Professor 4 stated:

Let's assume all that support we received as faculty was delivered asynchronously. How do you think we would have all felt about being able to do all this? Because it was delivered synchronously, you could either interact in-person or you could at least have a conversation with someone over the phone or on Zoom. As a result, learning took place. You were able to get what you needed in order to move the ball. If you had to just learn all that online asynchronously in a short period of time, good luck with that.

Professor 5 stated:

I can't say enough good about our instructional support and I know that I can be candid, so I'm not saying that just because, I am serious. I had to be somewhere when this happened, and I'm so thankful I was at ETSU. I felt like IT supported me in any way possible. If I had a question, I got through to the helpdesk and they were patient and they were helpful. The Center for Teaching Excellence offered those workshops and I attended. IT put on those Zoom workshops that I also attended, and they encouraged you to call. I mean, customer service was like Disney World, that was my experience, but others might have had different experiences. I felt like if you wanted it though, it was there. I guess that I would have still figured something out if all that support wasn't present, but it would have been way more stressful in a time that was already stressful. If

I hadn't been here and I hadn't had those opportunities, it would have been a heck of a lot harder and I'm not sure it would have ended up as pretty as it did. And not that it was beautiful, but I did not feel like my Spring semester, my summer semester, or my fall semester were wastes. And I have a lot of friends who do, not necessarily at ETSU. I do not feel like my students didn't learn anything and everything was just a wash, sure maybe I left out a chapter here or there but overall, I still felt pretty good about it and I'm not sure that would have happened had I not had the support I had at ETSU.

Professor 6 stated:

My spouse actually teaches at ETSU too and having them in the room next to me for advice and guidance really helped, more than anybody else just because the person was right there. My spouse was also helping a lot of other faculty over the summer semester too, so I was just stealing their best ideas pretty much. Because my spouse was literally in the next room, I didn't have to email somebody or wait to hear back, I was very fortunate.

Professor 7 stated:

The resources and support here at ETSU were much greater for teachers than they were at my previous institution. It was great. I was able to reach out to Academic Technology Support. I was able to reach out to other colleagues who had taught similar courses in the department and all of those individuals were very helpful. They provided resources and more beyond what I had asked for and Academic Technology Support actually got on Zoom with me and we set up the structure of the course right there over a series of meetings, they truly went above and beyond. [Employee], many of the faculty I spoke with singled her out and said, she's your go to person. So, I probably had a dozen Zoom meetings with her over six weeks. I felt that she went above and beyond the call of duty, I

was impressed. She not only assisted me in creating the course structure, but also providing some feedback based on her experiences with other faculty members. I found it was very, very helpful.

Professor 8 stated:

I became probably one of the most burdensome clients that Academic Technology Support has ever dealt with in the spring of 2020. [Employee], [Employee], and [Employee] are all very patient and maybe if we had had a bit more time, I would have been able to depend a little bit less on them, but they have been marvelous. And I also think that campus support has been very good. I have no complaints at all, the institutional support has been very good. I did also participate in something with [Employee] regarding best practices for teaching online synchronous courses and it was productive, it was helpful to hear about the experience that some other people are having and about some of challenges that online teaching poses for other disciplines.

Professor 9 stated:

I really appreciated [Employee] tips and everything that her center put out to try to assist faculty. A lot of their programing and a lot of their information over the Summer semester was really quality. I definitely utilized ITS and appreciated their support. I know ITS was very very helpful to a lot of people. And our Office of Academic Affairs really stepped up and tried to create best practices, they created some kind of standardized wording for our syllabi related to COVID. Our college has someone over student academic success, [Employee], she basically coordinates the student tutoring and sort of the academic delivery since none of us have any formal training in education. She keeps us in line, and she sent out a lot of resources most recently. [Employee], our educational



technology guy, he's our lifesaver all the time, he is great. Dan put out like a dummy D2L course, he made a shell D2L course to kind of show best practices of how we can organize things in a way that's helpful for students and kind of maximize how that works. So, I thought the institutional support was as good as you could ask for but I think the challenge for all of us was we were just sort of trying to get it done by the time we had to get done. So, just finding the time to be able to take advantage of it was sometimes a little tricky. It would have really been overwhelming and much more stressful, as a faculty member, to not have any sort of network, and we pooled all the resources, the College was great about saying, if there's something that needs to be done, we're all going to do it as a team. And so if I was on an island, by myself without any support, certainly the quality would have suffered and probably would have resulted in something that was very basic and probably not very engaging at all to students because I wouldn't maybe necessarily have had the choice to be able to have some of the enhancements that I would have been unfamiliar with.

Professor 10 stated:

My perception was the institutional support was positive. I felt like they were doing the best they could. I felt supported as a faculty member, I didn't feel like an island. And I felt like, especially the ITS and D2L support people, they were fantastic and very patient, and I definitely commend them. But I was the teacher and I started being IT support for my students, and not like for big things because I couldn't resolve those issues, but for little things and it became really painful. I became aware of how little students really know about technology. And so their ability to navigate Zoom and some of those features or how do you record something, and then I'm like, oh my goodness. I don't feel like

students we're given enough information, or some even knew how to go about accessing technology support. I mean it was just like, all of a sudden, they became incapacitated in some way. And so, the only person they had was the first line of defense, which I felt like was the instructor. I think that was a huge gap because the students didn't have what they needed to make that transition to online.

### **The Future of Higher Education in the Wake of the COVID-19 Pandemic**

Each faculty member appeared to take more time to reflect as the discussion turned toward the future. Many of them seemed to not be fully prepared to discuss the reality of what teaching may become as a result of the pandemic. However, others were optimistic about the many positive effects of the pandemic regarding higher education.

### **The New Normal and the Lasting Effects**

Each professor cautiously offered their outlook regarding how their role, their courses, and their students may be affected as the world moves forward after the COVID-19 pandemic.

Professor 1 stated:

I think we're going back to where we were as far as having classes on-campus once everyone has the vaccine. And I don't think there's going to be a lot of lasting change in the courses I teach. Now in terms of, other folks, other programs, other undergraduate work, I have no idea but I don't see an increased desire for online classes in our programs because our students gave the lowest ratings we ever had to the one or two summer online courses we have now. As far as the rest of ETSU and higher education in general, I don't think I know an answer to that, but I do think we need to make better use of technology. It would be fair say that I believe the pandemic has shown us that we need to

change the tools we use to teach but not necessarily change the delivery format from on-campus to online, not once we all have the opportunity to be vaccinated.

Professor 2 stated:

I've said before, in our departmental meetings, I'm not sure that online instruction is something we need to be doing. Obviously, we're in a situation right now where we don't have a whole lot choice and I'll continue to do my job the best that I can. I would I hope that this coming summer or fall semester of 2021 my courses will be able to get back to on-campus. I had never had any interest in teaching online, I was never trained to teach online, and I never personally took an online course. So, I don't know how they're supposed to go or if I'm doing things the right way or the wrong way. The students didn't sign up for this either and I would like to say that I would prefer to go back to in-person teaching as soon as it's available. In terms of long term, I think that will be by and large what we do because we've had online classes for several years now. The existence of online classes has not diminished our need to do things in-person. And I think that we will go back to that, hopefully in fall of 2021. I hope that they are positive changes in the long run, but I hope that students don't decide, well we've had online and it's not terrible, let's just do that forever. I don't want to be talking to rectangles for the rest of my career because there's a certain amount of pleasantness and joy in interacting with 18 to 22 year-old kids.

Professor 3 stated:

I'm looking forward to all of us being vaccinated, maybe then by the fall 2021 semester, it'll be like the year that never happened. But I don't think that's going to be the case, even from a public health perspective because I think we're still going to have hot spots

that show up and people are still going to get ill with this every once in a while. I also think we're all going to be much more reluctant to hold large meetings in-person. For instance, my college used to hold meetings with well over a hundred of us packed into a huge room together. I don't know if I want to do that ever again, even if we might all be completely healthy and none of us are infected. It's really altered that sense of let's get hundreds of people together, it's totally eroded our confidence and our ability to do that. A large number of students have also said exactly that to me. But also, many of them don't want to pay for online courses and that's why some have left ETSU or dropped out of the college because they said, this is not the experience I signed up for when I decided to go to school here. I'm worried, even though I'm not hearing this from ETSU, that higher education is going to say that online technically worked, and it worked for a whole year, so why do we need classrooms for lectures if we can just put everybody in Zoom and not have to worry about it? It saves money on so many different levels. You don't need a new building if you could just have a class online. I'm also worried about government sources of funding, the State of Tennessee, thinking that way too. I honestly can't even say whether I think we going to emerge positively out of this or negatively out of it, I literally just don't know. For example, every initiative that my college has tried to put in place for international travel in the last year has gone nowhere, and I'm worried that ETSU is just going to say, you know what maybe we really don't need to have that anymore even when things get better.

Professor 4 stated:

This is a statement for students entering into the workplace, the fact that they endured this change and met that challenge. It immediately indicates that they are flexible, they aren't

going to lock up or give up and go home at the first sign of trouble. They've also got lots of capabilities to deal virtually with people that many of the ranking staff in their future employers may not have because these graduates are coming into the workforce now with a whole different mindset about how to do business. In fact, they will be the future of how business is done. I told the students at the end of the class that, I wouldn't wish a global pandemic on anybody but what a great case study. It went from being a soundbite to shutting down the entire global economy, in a semester. What a great opportunity to learn. Also traveling will never be the same, things like getting on a plane early in the morning just to attend a one-hour meeting and then flying back that same day. That was fairly commonplace before the pandemic, they wouldn't even think about that now. We will largely continue to conduct business like we are now because things can be accomplished basically immediately and it's not realistic to assume that we will go back to something that was slower and less efficient now that basically everyone has learned how to do things remotely.

Professor 5 stated:

I realized that my life was really out of control and I guess that made me realize, oh, everybody's life is right now. So, I just tried to be more compassionate and in my emails to my students, instead of saying students to start it out, I would say friends, and I've never done that before. Before all this happened, I just didn't have that in me, but I thought, you know, people need that right now. I am still their Professor, I still have expectations, and I'm still going get on them if they don't have their homework done, but they need to know that I'm not out to get them and that I'm not trying to pull power on them. In my evaluations, they talked about that and how it made them feel. And I

thought, I'm going keep that, even if I go back all in-person forever, I'm going to keep that because I heard in my evaluations over and over again that it created a friendly environment that was easier to learn in compared to what they had seen in some other classes. But I fear that shifting to online is going to lessen the quality of and amount of knowledge our students achieve, because I do feel there are professors that threw in the towel. I know that we had similar situations in my own department. So, I dread what happens when those students get to me because I'm not sure they'll be prepared. I am worried about that gap. I'm really hopeful that people start to embrace this, and they don't just live in this temporary mindset of I can just throw this year away. Because really this year continues, it's perpetual. It's the building block for all the other years. I think what we've seen is people that have become more compassionate, but we've also seen people that have become bitter and quit. And I'm not faulting anyone on that, everybody's surrounded by all these different issues and colliding things, but I do think it's caused people to go in such different directions and some of them are volatile, and I worry about that and what that'll do to education. My hope is that it will make people appreciate education more than ever before but I'm not sure that we've all embraced it in that way. I know we lost a lot of kids that said I don't want to go to school if it's all going to be online and I can't blame them, but I can't help but wonder if we had all just tried a little harder, maybe we could have made it through this without losing a good chunk of those people. We were also not ready to be this versatile, to teach this way...not yet.

Professor 6 stated:

For our college, we have seen more students opt to delay the start of their program than ever before. Our incoming class this year was down by at least a third or more and a big

chunk of that is because people said, I know that I'm admitted this year, but I'm going to defer to next year and I'm going to wait to see if it's better. And I think that's going to ripple through every discipline. It's like, I don't want to do online college, so I'm just going to wait till it's no longer online. Now, that level of acceptance may change over time as they see that you can do it online and still be ok. But I think that we're going to see some kind of long-term consequences related to enrollment until we get back to what people would consider normal.

Professor 7 stated:

Like it or not, there is somewhat of a proof of concept now that instruction can be done online, without a student being present in the physical classroom. And I think a lot of colleges and universities are looking at online now and saying that maybe it's not the most effective format, but we are doing it, students are still enrolling and they're still graduating. So, online education is here to stay but part of their learning is how to engage with people and this disengagement I'm seeing doesn't bode well for their preparation. So, that's a concern that I have and I don't know necessarily a solution for this, but it's kind of an unwritten rule with a lot of these courses that students also need to be engaging because that's part of their job and their career that they're preparing to enter.

Professor 8 stated:

A lot of lectures and conferences will never be anywhere other than online because universities don't have to pay the cost of travel for us to participate. I also think that we're never all coming back to campus because probably a lot more of our teaching will be online synchronous and I don't think that's necessarily a bad thing. I also I think it's maybe not a bad idea to rethink about how we use campus space and I think having

classes on the ground is very important and I'm looking forward to the day when we can return, but I'm willing to bet we'll never have a semester where all of my teaching is on the ground and now I think I'm okay with that. I think there will be a new normal and I can't think we know what that's going to be for maybe another year or two but I think it's going to be a normal where almost all of our conference attendance and much of our teaching remains online by way of Zoom or Microsoft Teams. I don't see going back, a return to a world where a lot of our scholarly communication is done in person. I think that's history but let me add, I think it's going to offer us some opportunities for collaborating more frequently on a global scale. I think a larger percentage of our students may probably either never or rarely ever set foot on campus as well.

Professor 9 stated:

I think it changed how we communicate as faculty. We went from being able to go next door to a colleague for assistance with trying to figure out something, to how can I be efficient and concise with an email and timely with e-mail responses. It's so difficult to figure out how walk through something when we can't talk in-person like we used to though. I think most Americans are probably in for somewhat of a rude wakeup call anyway as far as the pandemic too, because I don't think any element of our lives is probably ever going back to normal. Originally when the pandemic started and people kind of would talk about, oh, when we return to normal, when things get back to normal. I don't think the normal that we knew will exist anymore because the pandemic's not going away anytime soon with the way the vaccination rollout is going, plus the virus is adaptable and mutating. So, I think we're going to continue seeing spikes. We've clearly shown that we cannot keep things under control through social distancing and mask



wearing either, we've proven that we cannot be trusted. I think it's just going to be different.

Professor 10 stated:

Prior to the pandemic, I felt like online education was in some ways more accessible and it might allow people to have financial break potentially. But also some of the students had trouble with their internet, some of them live in places where internet isn't available, this is Appalachian, so some of them really struggled with it. And that was not within their means and so I was trying to be mindful about that. I feel like because of technology, especially since the world has been forced to do this, not only for the delivery of education but how the workforce shows up to work, we now know that we can do a lot of things remotely. Meetings and conferences will not necessarily have much to do with traveling anymore. So, I think online education will become a key player in the delivery, a lot of educational experiences for students.

### **The Balance Between In-Person and Remote Instruction**

Every faculty member seemed eager to discuss how they believed that traditional on-campus instruction and online instruction will continue to blend together at an accelerated rate as a result of the pandemic. Each professor acknowledged the possibility of advancements with respect to hybrid forms of instruction.

Professor 1 stated:

I emailed this hugely famous author, a person who's done Ted talks, and asked her, would you mind Zooming in for 45 minutes to talk to my students and answer questions? And not only did she do so, she also asked them questions and learned some stuff from them. And in a normal on-campus class that probably just wouldn't happen. Of course, I

could bring her up via Zoom during an on-campus class, but I wouldn't even have thought of that and it wouldn't have been the same.

Professor 2 stated:

Online teaching may work but it also requires a certain amount of self-sufficiency on the part of the students. I think for the most part, it takes a student that knows that they want to do this, they're willing to be a self-starter and they're willing to take the initiative. And we've not done that, we've not trained our students to be good online students.

Professor 3 stated:

One of the things I'm considering doing, even post pandemic, is continuing to advise my students through Zoom because it has been easier than it was for them to come to by my office. I expect that to be real positive outcome out of all of this and for that to continue. There's certain things that that won't come back though, like the sense that higher education was always going to be the same, that feeling of continuity and that I could rely on it to still being very similar to what it was a few years ago, and that it will still be that a few years from now. That sense of confidence has been very much eroded as far as the continuity of institutional identity and character.

Professor 4 stated:

I think probably the saving grace of the entire shift to online was Zoom, I think that was a strategic investment from the University that paid off a great deal. The ability for a student to be able to go back and look at the recorded lecture is incredibly valuable. So, even if they lost connectivity the during class, or had to be absent, or just wanted to review something again, they could go back and do that without any assistance from me. The ability to talk to them and conduct business and do it in a much more efficient way,

sharing lots of data over an online platform, it's become the way that business will be done. Now do I think everything will be virtual going forward? I don't think that's going to be the case, but I think virtual will enhance our capabilities. I mean, let's face it, we can be much more efficient over a Zoom meeting because we stick to the script, we're looking at the clock, we get in, we get it done, and we get out. I can see a whole lot more people and accomplish a whole lot more things in a much shorter period of time, all while never leaving my desk except to get a cup of coffee or use the bathroom. So, there is obviously an inherent efficiency. Will virtual ever replace the value of building relationships in-person? No, but it will certainly enhance those relationships. For example, I had guest speakers speak to the class, people I likely could have never gotten in-person. Someone like [Employee], who probably doesn't have time to walk across campus, he was able to talk to us for just a few minutes right from his desk. And it was very seamless and easy for me to bring in a lot more expertise in an interactive fashion because we were all already collaborating through Zoom. They were sharing a tremendous amount of knowledge with us but only sacrificing a bit of their precious time and even though he only joined us for two to three minutes, he was able to take the time to encourage these students in the middle of the pandemic to finish, and it made all the difference in the world. It's just made higher education realize that there are more things on the table now, it's opened up more opportunities, more avenues.

Professor 5 stated:

Well, I know one thing, online is definitely going to be a part of higher education in the future, we've debated for years about whether we should go that way or not. Anytime I got any kind of faculty development type email before the pandemic about online

teaching, I trashed it immediately because I was like, that's not for me. Suddenly after we shifted, if I get an email that mentions online teaching, I keep it now. I do think that, like it or not, online has become a part of our world. That being said, I also think students appreciate in-person now more than they ever did before and actually ask for it. Who knew that they would be that excited to be sitting in the classroom? So, I think we're going to find the need to be more well-rounded and able to teach in any format or platform. We can't just say, I'm an in-person teacher only. We've got to be able to accept that part of our role is not just the content, but it is definitely being able to deliver that content effectively, no matter what our format is and if you want to be good at that, you have to recognize that online is here to stay. I think it's going to cause people to reevaluate their content and what is important and their skills and what that balance is, the value of content versus the skills to communicate? I think it's going to cause everybody to reevaluate that balance in their courses as far as what's doable and what's not doable in-person or online.

Professor 6 stated:

I think that continuing to develop all these resources, whether we are back in the classroom on-campus or still remote, there's got to be some ways to really get the best of both worlds. And that will be something I want to try to figure out. I put a ton of time into shifting to teach online, so moving forward how can I continue to use some of this stuff to its maximum potential even if I get back to in-person? I don't want this to be a one-off thing. That's what I hope can happen, I like the whole idea of the high flex model but if you were to present that to me a year ago, I would have immediately said that is too much work, I'm not doing that. But now part of that work is done, and you could create that

environment if you had the opportunity to be in-person again, but you could still provide a lot more flexibility for your students. That's what I hope comes out of the pandemic as far as higher education.

Professor 7 stated:

I'm developing a graduate program right now that's going to be a flipped classroom approach where all the content is going to be prepared in advance and it's going to be available for students to access online and they'll be expected to absorb that prior to coming to the classroom so that when they come to the classroom, we can have a deeper conversation and explore topics that they already reviewed but that they aren't understanding, that is critical. So, that way the instruction theoretically can be more targeted, it can be more efficient, and it can keep the faculty on point. A lot of the feedback I received over the years from students really showed that they felt that it was not important for me to be giving all the instruction in-person, and they would have preferred a hybrid approach to give them the most important points in a video or some readings in advance. I see the future of the graduate program we're developing to be more of that flipped classroom but it's important for them to be present and they'll have more expectations to view the content in advance. Also, having access to content online if a person is sick or incapacitated, where they can't physically get to the physical classroom is a huge resource to help students keep from falling behind. The challenge of the instructor is to find a way to motivate and inspire the student to get interested in the content and you can only do so much in an online format and likely you might need a hybrid a mix.

Professor 8 stated:

It would be good to do some part of my teaching as online synchronous courses in the future because it does offer a degree of flexibility and accessibility to students that they don't have if classes are meeting only on campus. I miss being on campus though and I really, really miss seeing students in person. And so, I hope that I will at least have one class on the ground in the future in an age when we have all been vaccinated with an effective vaccine. That's a future that I would like to see but I think that probably there will be a new normal and the new normal will be that there are a lot more courses that remain online and probably through synchronous instruction, and synchronous instruction is the bottom line for me.

Professor 9 stated:

The investment in Zoom has been fantastic but they've invested a lot of resources to make the quality of teaching and make the availability of those best practices possible for a smaller institution. I think that's really valuable too that they made the investment to try to help instructors and also help the student experience because I think we're going to have a more hybrid model in the future. I think students will in some ways expect it. I do think though, from hearing from students, that a lot of them do miss the classroom environment too, which sometimes has been surprising to me because we had some attendance problems before the pandemic but our attendance actually got better once we went online.

Professor 10 stated:

I don't think on the ground instruction will go away. Some of it I think by necessity needs to be dependent on the area, but I think it can free up capital in terms of physical

buildings that are needed, maybe some programs need to really transition to online only. I think that you would potentially reach more people through online because you have to look at population data in a few years. People entering college is going to dramatically reduce just because the population isn't there. So how do you address that? Maybe high school graduates are no longer the primary focus for your target group and online learning is a great way for adult learners, second or third career people to be your college graduates. I think online learning has a real practical utility that hasn't been utilized before and I feel like will be forced to look at that in order to remain competitive and relevant. I think for those institutions that refuse to address that, their growth and existence may be in jeopardy. I feel like the flipped classroom model, which that's not new, more people may understand the value and potential of that better now and be more willing to adopt that kind of thing. And so, I feel like you've got to look at the degree and ask is this degree something that truly needs to be in-person? We also have to remember the value of interpersonal skills too though, so I think hybrid learning is a good option to consider, as you have a more hands on opportunity if you're going to have in-person but students can also say I can do this at home if I wish and it's realistic. Faculty need to recognize that they have an opportunity to be able to really think about how they want to deliver their courses in the long-term because students have experienced online learning now and that's given them a new perspective about how they really think about their education. Am I getting my money's worth and was this worth my time and is this what I want to do? I don't think students are going to be as likely to just float on through those decisions like they did before the pandemic.

## **Moving Forward, Not Backward**

Each interview generally concluded with a discussion surrounding the future of how the higher education experience will be delivered. The majority of the focus was on instruction but several faculty members also mentioned how they could see other aspects of campus life transforming into something new in the wake of the pandemic, such as social interactions and advising. I asked each professor to simply consider the hypothetical possibility that the majority of higher education courses may be conducted in an entirely online fashion at some point in the near future and to then describe on how that reality might affect them as instructors.

Professor 1 stated:

I would never voluntarily teach online and if that's what education is to become, it's time for me to retire.

Professor 2 stated:

It would suck if we never go back to face-to-face on campus, this online teaching is not something I signed up to do and it's not something that I ever wanted to do. I think that we are at least fortunate that online is an option, but I know some of my students don't have enough technology and they are only listening to my lecture by essentially calling into that number on Zoom. That's a very horrible way of learning, especially with the visual presentations and demonstrations that you need in my courses.

Professor 3 stated:

I really love higher education and the goal of being a professor has been my career goal since I was an undergraduate. It would be very, very difficult for me to imagine being in a different career. I know I would expect if this were to continue, I would make adjustments and I would do my best to make adjustments, because the responsibility that



I feel towards my students is it's really deep and important to me. I would do my best to try and actually make their education worthwhile. But it's just been absolutely brutal, how difficult this has been. And it's been brutal to see the effect on them, not just from my classes, but to have them speak to me about how other professors have worked with them and how they've been affected by their other classes and the changes elsewhere. I haven't given any thought to a world without in-person classes, and honestly, it's a little bit upsetting to even have think about that possibility. If that ever became our reality, I would have to rethink very seriously my career choices and my future. I think I would hope to avoid having to make that type of decision as much as possible though, but I might decide maybe that I've had enough at that point. Facing that possibility would require almost an existential level of reflection on my part. The bottom line is that I'm going to have to be physically present with my students in order to feel that same level of synergy and collaboration that we had before and teaching online really just sucks. And my students hate it too, they really, really hate it. They really feel crippled and debilitated by this shift to being online, that it's really affecting their education. It's not what they wanted to get out of it. And it's not just about hanging out in fraternities or hanging out with their friends, they really feel like they're not learning as much as they would have if it was in-person. I think if this continues past this Spring semester, I think we should all be genuinely concerned about our enrollment. And I know a lot of students are saying that they won't come back if this continues past the Spring semester.

Professor 4 stated:

I really wouldn't want to teach purely online. Would it have a bearing on how long I might teach? I think that's a decision based more on; do I still have the ability to make the

investment? You've got to stay current on what's going on, because if you get stale, you're basically teaching history. My decision on how long I'm going to teach is really; am I still relevant? Am I still being impactful? I think that has more to do with the what you're trying to accomplish but one of my strengths is learning because I love to learn. When you get to the point that you're not learning anymore, I think that's when it's time for you to hang up your spurs.

Professor 5 stated:

I would definitely miss in-person and that interaction if it wasn't something that was really part of higher education anymore as far as the future. I would have to find a way to better separate myself from my family while I was working, if I knew this was ongoing so that I could feel like I was totally focused on what I was doing at the time. But I still feel like I could do my job effectively as long as I did it synchronously. I still think I would have similar satisfaction and similar fulfillment. I would have to figure out better approaches to things like testing, but I could make it work. It's not ideal, it's not the way I love to teach. What's ironic is that I feel like I recognized the kids in my online class better through Zoom than I did my in-person students in masks. Because their faces were so covered up by the masks, I actually felt like I knew my Zoom students better than my in-person ones. I hate going to conferences and presenting virtually though, that part is not fulfilling to me at all. I honestly can't say that I have any sense of enthusiasm for doing that online because I love going to conferences and interacting in-person with other professors and the little side conversations you have as you do that. I can't get excited about watching a video. I think that's why I hate it for the students that are just watching videos because there is no excitement in that. That is so frustrating, that part of it would

not be fulfilling, I would hate that part. So long as I can keep the teaching interactive and be a part of their journeys and help them figure things out, that's what really matters to me. I have no intentions of changing professions because I love what I do but if I have to figure out a different way to do it, I'll do that. I won't be less enthusiastic about teaching if it's online forever, I don't necessarily prefer that format, but it doesn't make me any less passionate about teaching.

Professor 6 stated:

I will be pretty sad if teaching on-campus isn't really part of the future of higher education because that's really by far the best way to get to know your students, especially the new ones. Building that relationship has always been valuable to me and so I would really miss that aspect of it, it would be sad. This year I've been trying to bolster that enthusiasm online though just because I want to convey it to them. It's like, sure, I know this kind of sucks, but we're going to do it anyway, you're going to do well, just trust me. But maybe in the long-term, it would be hard to sustain that level of enthusiasm if we were purely online. I don't have any plans to make any career changes either way, so I would probably just stay with it and make the best of it because I like my job and it's I feel like it's an important job and I want to do it well. It wouldn't prompt me to make any career changes if in-person teaching never really comes back.

Professor 7 stated:

I would imagine that more resources would be put in place to train the field work persons to be better educators if in-person wasn't really on the horizon anymore. Now that's going to put a stress on the school because somebody's got to pay for the resources to train this person and the release time that they're going to need away from their actual job to

train the trainer. All academic programs are beholden to their accreditation requirements and some of the students that are leaping from an online instructional environment at the University and going into their field work experiences too, and they're not prepared and so some of the fieldwork coordinators are letting the students that are failing still progress, they're actually reducing the standards. They're lowering the pass-fail bar because they know that the students are less prepared, but they want to get them through anyway. So, there's a conundrum in that students are graduating, even though they have had a less rigorous fieldwork clinical experience. And we don't know yet, but my fear is that they're going to fail their exams and they're not going to be able to advance to becoming full-fledged professionals because the system let them down. I guess though if the pandemic was the foreseeable future and on-campus instruction wasn't an option, then we would have to continue to do things as much as possible online and I would need to accept that but I would also say, given those constraints, how can we be creative, how can we creatively come up with a new solution? Shedding some of the convention of the past, how can we rethink a new solution here? This is a really good time for people that are interested in change and thinking to the future, what a great opportunity because we're forced to do it.

Professor 8 stated:

I think a larger percentage of our students may probably either never or rarely ever set foot on campus again. Some of our colleges at ETSU already probably had a majority of their students online. And I'm guessing that students will be drawn to the fact that they can have classes that are setup more like on-ground classes without them actually having to be on-campus. I think synchronous classes offer a great opportunity but you really

have to hold to the University schedule and make sure that everything happens in that framework so there are not conflicts. I'm a little wistful about the move to that future but I think it'll make the institution accessible to some students that it was not accessible to before and I think we will be expected to adjust things like tuition accordingly, there'll probably be political pressure to do that as well. It will affect me because I'm not ready to retire, I don't feel like I'm at a point in my career that I should be thinking about retirement and I'm certainly not there in any other way. I'm hoping that maybe we can take advantage of all the work that we've had to do to put into teaching online. If we're going to be able to reach a population of students who couldn't otherwise enroll or seek a degree or completed a degree then maybe online instruction will be a way that we can do that and do it more efficiently for a larger number of students. So, I think that's not only likely to be the future but we should just kind of get used to that idea and figure out how we're going to put that together with the research and the service sides of our work in a more effective way. That's what I'm working on right now. We talked about a new normal, I'd rather talk about a new stable, we're looking for kind of an equilibrium that enables us to get our work done well. Over the past year, that equilibrium has been about all of the attention that we have had to give to shifting our teaching to being online. The only efficient way to proceed is to not think of that as a temporary change. One of the results of doing that is that we have as individuals and as an institution developed a new infrastructure but now, I do need a new equilibrium. I think we cannot possibly imagine that it's going to be a return to the past, because it'll be a new stable. I think most education will be online once that new stable is established and we'll eat all the ambiguities, having to do with cheating or whatever, because I think probably online

synchronous teaching is going to be the norm for most courses in the future but I don't think there's going to be a huge volume of new asynchronous courses though. Zoom will also continue to be a substantial part of our work in a way that we would never have imagined before the pandemic. I don't think that's a bad thing necessarily either. I think we can't afford to merely be reactive. It's understandable that many people were in a purely reactive mode when the pandemic hit but now we've all had time to process and reflect and unless we truly have our heads in the sand, we can't deny that the circumstances have changed in the long-term. We can either adapt to the new situation or refuse to evolve.

Professor 9 stated:

If in-person instruction isn't really part of the future of higher education, I think it would just be the new normal, we would continue the adjustment. And there have been a lot of good things that have come out of it, but I just think that it is the new normal, it's this is how things are now. So, for your standard twenty-three-year-old who's in my courses generally, no, I think they do miss kind of the traditional classroom feel but for people who have kids, who have caregiver responsibilities, for anyone that kind of requires that level flexibility, they have loved it, they have absolutely I think really enjoyed having more options. It may just be people getting comfortable with that sort of change. And that's not just been in the classroom, it's how we recruit, it's how we celebrate because we've moved all of our awards, celebrations, our graduations online. We've just found new ways to connect with people and new ways to engage. I'm sure there are things we'll miss but I think it's just getting used to kind of different ways of doing things and certainly there have been positives for people who need that kind of flexibility. I would

agree that we're probably not going to ever really have a parking problem on our campus again because even if every employee and every student happens to be coming to campus from time to time, I still don't think we will ever see those days again when the vast majority of employees and students are all on-campus simultaneously. I think people are kind of coming around to this being the new normal and also kind of accepting and embracing why it has to be that way.

Professor 10 stated:

If you're a pioneer thinker, you'll figure it out, and you can provide experiences that might in some ways be better because at that point it's going to require someone to really step up. So if in-person learning isn't really part of the future of higher education, we have to really understand that part of the experience of learning for our future students will be immersive activities in the community with real people, outside of the sterile controlled learning environment. I think that can and will still need to happen to meet the objectives of our courses, but I think setting clear objectives will be of the utmost importance. I think it's quite possible to reimagine, should we go to an extreme situation of we're never seeing people again in-person, that if you're innovative, your creativity will be rewarded. I think we need to be out of our comfort zones routinely as instructors because that's what moves it forward. Students are only going to mimic what they know, and we will struggle in front of them, we will show them that we don't have all the answers, and sometimes we will just see what happens. I think mistakes are fine but as long as the resources can continue to support online learning and also adapt to include students better, I don't see why it can't work in the long run. It might look like ugly there for a little bit, but I feel like I it would come together.

## **Chapter 5. Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore faculty members' perceptions of the short-term and long-term effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the higher education teaching and learning landscape, but solely through the experiences of first-time online instructors. The primary research question for this phenomenological study was: What affect did the mandatory shift to online instruction have on professors with no prior experience teaching courses in an entirely online format?

### **Discussion**

An analysis of the interviews revealed four primary findings shared across all 10 faculty members: each professor was significantly affected by the outbreak both personally and professionally, the shift to online instruction inevitably altered all of their teaching styles, the role institutional support played in all of their experiences was crucial, and pausing to reflect on how the COVID-19 pandemic will impact the future of higher education was something that each of them pondered very seriously as an obvious point of substantial concern. These primary findings mirrored the four research questions of this study because I structured each interview around these questions. However, a dozen themes were present across the majority of the interviews as well, and many of them emerged naturally as I allowed each professor ample time to process and articulate their perceptions and experiences: the instructor, the discipline, the students, survival and adaptation, innovation and evolution, on-camera presence and etiquette, synchronous versus asynchronous, administrative leadership, technical support, the new normal and the lasting effects, the balance between in-person and remote instruction, and the notion that higher education is moving forward to a new reality rather than backward to a pre-COVID-19 atmosphere.



## **Research Question 1**

I devoted the largest portion of each interview to an in-depth discussion of the primary research question of this study: how each faculty member reacted to the Coronavirus outbreak and the effects of the subsequent shift to online instruction, as well as the consequences of the ensuing delivery of their courses through an online platform. I encouraged each professor to share how this experience affected them emotionally and all of them described at least some sense of frustration, anxiety, stress, and increased workload, in many cases to an extreme level. A decline in teaching enthusiasm and professional fulfillment was also illustrated by each professor, albeit to varying degrees. Each professor freely and openly spoke at length to the extent of the personal and professional effects they felt following the COVID-19 outbreak and the resulting mandatory decision to shift all instruction to online. While each professor was certainly impacted more significantly in certain areas than the other professors in this study, all of them spoke to a phenomenon that had altered their lives in an unprecedented fashion. The combination of three elements molded the online environment that shaped their experiences: the ethos of instructor, the nature of the discipline, and the culture of the students. I began to take serious notice of these themes after conducting the fourth interview, Professor 4, as it marked a dramatic shift in the tone of all three of these elements from the previous interviews that had been conducted beginning with Professor 1 and then Professor 2 and Professor 3.

### ***The Instructor***

The primary theme that I observed regarding this shift in tone was that the individual instructor's mindset was a determining factor in how the experience unfolded for each professor. As I progressed through the remaining six interviews, each professor's personality continued to emerge as a factor that strongly influenced their experiences during this phenomenon. Harrington

and Loffredo (2009) stated that personality traits often influence instructors' experiences in the online classroom, and typically influence faculty members' preferences for on-campus or online education as well. Professor 4 spoke to personality types with regard to the greater challenge that is presented to introverted instructors in the online classroom in terms of cultivating and nurturing student engagement, in contrast to their extroverted colleagues that often find more success with a greater array of approaches to online student engagement. The experience level of the instructor also influenced the instructor's mindset following the shift to online instruction. As identified by Bennett and Lockyer (2004), highly seasoned faculty members in the traditional on-campus classroom often find their initial transition to the online classroom to be more personally challenging than less experienced professors. Professor 1 and Professor 3 each have some of the highest numbers of years of in-person teaching experience of the professors interviewed during this study and their perceptions and experiences following the mandatory shift to online instruction seem to correspond with this relevant literature.

### ***The Discipline***

I anticipated that the interview with professor 4 would be somewhat of a contrast to the previous interviews conducted with Professors 1, 2, and 3 simply because of how the characteristics of the discipline differed from the previous three interviews. While Professor 4 noted numerous challenges and limitations of remote instruction, the shift to online instruction did not present substantial obstacles to accomplishing the learning goals of the course. However, Professors 1, 2, and 3 all described several elements of the teaching and learning relationship that must be present in their discipline that could simply not be adequately replicated in the online environment. Volery and Lord (2000) acknowledged that transitioning a course to the online environment can significantly alter the relationship between the instructor and the students

because the content and learning goals of one course may not be as well-suited to remote instruction as courses from other disciplines. Professor 3 expressed a deep sense of powerlessness and exasperation in the face of the unreasonable expectation of transitioning a course with a foundation of in-person interaction into the online classroom. Professor 10 also described a similar sense of futility with respect to transitioning certain staples of courses to the online environment, such as interactive exercises that presented students with the opportunity to engage in hands-on demonstrations with guest speakers and various types of assistive equipment. This theme was present in all ten interviews as each faculty member detailed numerous components of their courses that had to be significantly altered or eliminated completely following the shift to online.

### ***The Students***

Each professor spoke at length to how the shift to online instruction changed the nature of the relationship they shared with their students. The maturity level of the students emerged as the essence of this theme as the professors that were usually teaching students on the cusp of graduation expressed a greater sense of motivation and engagement than did the professors that were typically teaching students that were further from earning their degrees and thus were somewhat less motivated and engaged. As online students are afforded more autonomy by default than students in the on-campus classroom, the mood of the students impacted the experience of the instructor much more significantly after the shift to online instruction than it did in the in-person classroom. A palpable feeling of disconnectedness was often expressed by some instructors because of how their students' motivation and engagement waned much more noticeably in the online classroom than they did in the on-campus classroom. However, for the professors that were primarily teaching seniors or graduate students, they often spoke very highly

of how their students did their best to remain motivated and engaged despite the shift to online instruction. Chiasson et al. (2015) detailed the natural and ideal progression for an instructor when transitioning a course to the online format, “one of the most significant changes was in the role from lecturer to guide, from knowledge dispenser to resource provider, and from authority to facilitator” (p. 238). Professor 1 alluded to a progression through these phases by stating the need for a greater reliance on graduate students to teach themselves after the shift to online instruction, because graduate students can think, learn, and understand independently to a greater degree than younger or less experienced students. The amount of power the students in each course possessed with respect to the culture they perpetuated and how it affected every professor’s experience throughout this phenomenon was clearly evident.

## **Research Question 2**

The second research question of this study was explored with each professor: how the pandemic and the resulting shift to online delivery specifically affected their teaching style and approach to instruction. Each instructor was asked to elaborate on the steps they took as they adapted to varying degrees in an effort to preserve the survival of their courses, as well as the resulting innovations they adopted as they evolved in the weeks and months that followed. Each professor was eager to share their feelings on the pivotal impact that webcams play in the online classroom. I did not ask every professor to offer their preference for synchronous or asynchronous online instruction, but many of the faculty expressed strong opinions on this subject.

### ***Survive and Adapt***

While there was substantial variance between how each of these ten faculty members reacted immediately to the decision to shift all instruction to online, they all ultimately entered a

inevitable triage phase as result of their very natural desire to initially attempt to at least salvage the primary course objectives. This phase was more laborious and trying for some of these professors than it was for others because of the relationship between the elements of the instructor, the discipline, and the students. But every professor did adapt their teaching styles to varying degrees in order to fit the online classroom. Ni (2009) underscored the need to approach instruction in the online classroom with a teaching style that's different from the style that's employed in the on-campus classroom. Professor 9 stressed the immediate need to rely much more heavily on D2L and Zoom following the shift online instruction, as well as the importance of an assessment and elimination of redundancies in course content. The instincts of survival and adaption that these professors exhibited following the shift to online instruction is a theme that emerged from this study that illustrated how unprepared these faculty members were when the COVID-19 pandemic escalated in the United States during the Spring semester of 2020.

### ***Innovate and Evolve***

As the phenomenon of the COVID-19 pandemic and the shift to online instruction was not concluded in a matter of weeks or even months, these faculty members progressed from a state of survival and adaptation to a mindset of innovation and evolution. However, I observed noticeable variances in the levels of initiative each professor expressed in terms of making substantial changes to their teaching style throughout the weeks and months following the shift to online. As with the preceding stage of survival and adaption, this phase was more restrictive and discouraging for some of these professors than it was for others because of the relationship between the elements of the instructor, the discipline, and the students. Regardless, every professor's teaching style did evolve during this stage, to varying degrees, as the extended duration of their time in the online classroom presented the need and opportunity for innovation.

Also present was the need for enhanced communication between the instructor and the students after transitioning a course to an online format as noted by Dixson (2010), “instructors also need to provide multiple ways of interacting with students themselves to create their own social presence” (p. 8). Professor 6 followed the students’ lead and integrated social media apps into the teaching style employed in their course, which capitalized on their preference for their phones instead of their laptops as well as their greater proficiency with texting over sending emails. Similar aspects of this theme of innovation and evolution was also detailed by the other professors as the weeks and months passed after the shift to online instruction, and they recognized more of the need to engage with their students in a different fashion in the online classroom.

### ***On-Camera Presence and Etiquette***

The impact of students turning on their webcams during synchronous Zoom sessions, and presenting themselves in an appropriate manner, was a powerful theme across all 10 interviews. Despite the fact that many professors expressed a lack of desire to require their students to turn their cameras on, every professor agreed that it would be a substantial benefit to the learning atmosphere of their online classrooms if all of their students did turn their cameras on while participating in Zoom meetings. However, most of these professors caveated those statements with the crucial need for students to conduct themselves properly on camera with minimal distractions and interruptions. Lowenthal et al. (2017) noted that the instructor must take the lead with engagement and inspire their students to interact on a deeper level. Despite the fact that Professor 7 adopted this mindset and took the initiative to enhance engagement with students after the shift to online instruction by appearing on-camera regularly during virtual office hours via Zoom, all of the Professor’s students failed to turn their cameras on during these sessions.

Professor 7 also stated an awareness to the fact that the students' voices sounded nervous even though Professor 7 deliberately tried to project a presence of understanding. Ironically, Professor 7 took many of the steps outlined by much of the current literature with respect to forging a greater sense of engagement with students in the online classroom but other factors likely influenced their lack of engagement with regard to leaving their cameras turned off.

### *Synchronous versus Asynchronous*

Every professor, except Professor 7, elected to transition their on-campus courses to synchronous online instruction and those that elaborated on their reasons behind this decision were adamant that synchronous delivery was the key to salvaging the learning objectives of their courses after the shift to online instruction. Professor 7 referenced conversations with colleagues that had poor previous experiences with teaching in an synchronous online fashion as a result of lackluster student engagement, which encouraged Professor 7 to transition directly from synchronous in-person delivery to asynchronous online delivery immediately following the mandatory shift to online instruction. Professor 7 noted two pivotal factors that enhanced his ability to make this leap; Professor 7's highly detail-oriented nature and the fact that Professor 7 was already planning to deliver this course in an asynchronous online fashion in a future semester. The professors that elected to transition their courses into a synchronous format relayed heavily on Zoom to try to replicate the feeling of the on-campus classroom as much as possible. These instructors expressed an essential need to interact with their students in real-time for their teaching style to remain effective. In addition, these professors also noted that they incorporated more online content into their courses via D2L and other platforms. Acosta-Tello (2015) highlighted the importance of supplementing synchronous online instruction with other web-based resources that students can absorb in an asynchronous fashion, which will allow more

time for collaborative interaction during synchronous online class sessions. Professor 10 hybridized the layout a specific course in this very fashion following the shift to online instruction as synchronous Zoom sessions served as a space for interaction but were supplemented by online lecture guides to deliver a portion of the additional course content. As with other themes present in this study, this theme of synchronous or asynchronous delivery is heavily impacted by the relationship between the other themes of the instructor, the discipline, and the students.

### **Research Question 3**

The third research question of this study was the most straightforward and the easiest portion of the interview for each professor to address: the effects of institutional support on their experiences following COVID-19 outbreak and the ensuing mandatory shift to online course delivery. Institutional support was also explored with each professor in two contexts: specifically the administrative leadership of their institution and the information technology and instructional design support teams.

#### ***Administrative Leadership***

The unprecedented and rapid nature of the coronavirus outbreak during the spring semester of 2020 was genuinely taken into consideration by each faculty member when I asked them to describe how institutional support affected their experiences. These considerations factored heavily into their assessment of how the leadership of their institution handled this crisis. Most of the professors were largely pleased with how their leaders responded to these events. However, I then asked each professor if an additional week of preparation time between the decision to shift all instruction to online and the first day of subsequent classes would have significantly impacted their experiences, and to my surprise their responses to this question



varied substantially. The common thread that all interviews shared with respect to this theme of administrative leadership is that when the decision was made to shift all instruction to online, it solidified the reality of the pandemic in the minds of faculty and the initial impact it would have on their teaching responsibilities. The moment that decision was publicly announced, a cascade of all the other themes discovered during this study was instantly released.

### ***Technical Support***

The most common theme that emanated from these interviews was the stellar assessment of the level of technical support these professors personally received from the information technology and instructional design professionals at their institution. Many of them referenced specific employees that went above and beyond to provide assistance and guidance. The most notable exceptions were Professor 2 and Professor 10, but their technical support challenges were not related to their requests for assistance as instructors but rather the apparent lack of adequate technical support their students failed to receive. As a result, their students repeatedly sought technical support directly from them because it was possibly more convenient for the students to simply ask their professor for assistance. It seems that their institution did not address technical support for students as effectively as it handled technical support for faculty. Rahiem (2020) stated the need for institutions to remain focused on the goal of emergency remote teaching, which is to provide immediate and easily accessible access to education and training to facilitate the continuation of teaching and learning. Professor 2 expressed a great disapproval of many students' inability to communicate effectively via email or properly submit legible versions of their assignments in a digital fashion. Professor 10 described how some students seemed to be incapacitated with respect to navigating Zoom and other aspects of the technology, which resulted in Professor 10 engaging in painstaking troubleshooting scenarios repeatedly with

students. Professor 3 also expressed much of the same level of irritation as Professor 2 and Professor 10 in terms of the lack of awareness of technical best practices on the part of the students. The resulting challenge to the institution is to develop innovative approaches for increasing the technical prowess and understanding of acceptable online best practices for the overall student body.

#### **Research Question 4**

I concluded every interview by asking each professor to address the final research question of this study: how do faculty believe that the coronavirus outbreak has impacted the future of higher education? The COVID-19 pandemic was currently still very much a facet of the daily life of each professor at the time that each interview was conducted in January of 2021 as active cases of the virus were at record levels across many areas of the United States. By asking professors to explain what they believe will be the new normal for higher education in the years following the coronavirus outbreak, I was able to extract a sense of how important they feel online education will be to the survival of their institution, as well as the survival other colleges and universities. As many of these professors explored their assumptions of how the higher education landscape will change as a result of the pandemic, the need for a greater reliance on the blending of traditional on-campus instruction, synchronous online delivery, and also asynchronous online delivery was expressed.

#### ***The New Normal and the Lasting Effects***

A common theme that ran across all interviews was an awareness of that fact that the world was permanently changed by this pandemic and it's effects touched everyone. Each professor recognized that while their lives were personally impacted, so too were the lives of each of their students and in some cases to a much greater extent than their own lives were

impacted. As a result, many of these professors expressed the elevated need for a strong sense of community and fellowship in the wake of the coronavirus outbreak. Many of these professors stated that the experience of shifting to online instruction, while enduring the ongoing effects of the pandemic, transformed them into more compassionate and understanding instructors. Martin et al. (2019) stated that the process of transitioning to online instruction often drives instructors to evolve into better overall educators. Professor 5 alluded to the subtleties of how an instructor addresses the students in their courses and the impact that can have on the atmosphere of the online classroom. Professor 5 mentioned becoming more compassionate personally with students and permanently adopted the practice of purposely addressing the class as friends rather than students in emails. Professor 5 also noted that this is something that would have never occurred prior to the pandemic and the resulting shift to online instruction. In addition, Professor 5 stated that this practice will be a staple of all of Professor 5's future courses, regardless of if the delivery format is in-person or online. The combination of experiencing the pandemic and transitioning their courses to online instruction helped many of these professors become more understanding and compassionate, and thereby ultimately caused them become better educators as well.

### ***The Balance Between In-Person and Remote Instruction***

One of the clearest themes to emerge from this study was the value and potential of the blended or hybrid classroom. Even the professors that expressed the most distain for online instruction still expressed assumptions that in general the higher education teaching and learning experience will incorporate substantial elements of hybridization in the future. In addition, professors often noted that this was not a bad thing for higher education and in many cases, they felt it was essential to the survival of higher education institutions in general. Many of these

professors identified this theme as one of the more positive impacts of the pandemic on higher education.

### ***Moving Forward, Not Backward***

As each interview neared its end, I asked each professor one final question: how would it affect you if higher education never returns to in-person instruction in any greater capacity than we are seeing presently in January of 2021? This proved to be the hardest question of the interview for many of these professors to address, in some cases the question was noticeably upsetting for them to consider, but a final theme emerged as each of them processed the emotions triggered by the presentation of this hypothetical scenario. While none of them spoke to a future for higher education that will be completely and perpetually devoid of any form of in-person instruction, a sense of acceptance and acknowledgement of moving toward the horizon in front of us, rather than turning backwards, formed the core of this final theme. These professors largely recognized that whatever the future holds for the higher education landscape in the years to come, simply returning to the same teaching and learning atmosphere of February 2020 is unlikely, but instead we will move forward to a new reality. McGee et al. (2017) identified the convenience and flexibility offered by online education as factors that can increase an institution's enrollment, specifically for students shouldering professional and personal responsibilities, as well as logistical hardships. Professor 8 stated that a greater number of students in the future will likely seldom, or possibly never, be physically present on the campuses of their higher education institutions. In addition, Professor 8 pointed out the fact that students will have an increasing number of options for completing synchronous online courses, without ever having to commute to campus, that can in many cases be delivered in a very similar fashion to in-person courses. Many of the professors were cautiously optimistic as they looked to

the future of higher education in the years to come and some of them expressed a desire to continue to evolve as online educators. Others underscored the critical need for some courses to return to in-person instruction on-campus as soon as possible. Professor 8 spoke of the need for higher education to reach a new stable rather than a new normal, a new equilibrium for efficiency and well-being. An aspect of this final theme that emerged from all of these interviews is the fact that this balance will look different depending on the relationship between the instructor, the discipline, and the students.

### **Conclusions**

The COVID-19 pandemic has permanently changed many aspects of how human beings will conduct their lives regardless of the presence of a global public health crisis. As the world moves forward with vaccinations and additional steps towards the resumption of some sense of normalcy regarding in-person daily life, we will not see a return to the way of life we all knew in February of 2020 but rather the emergence of a new reality. The rapid nature of the outbreak and the extended duration of the necessary transmission mitigation practices forced an unprecedented majority of the global population to adopt new methods for performing their work, educating themselves, and interacting with others. These lessons cannot be unlearned, the adaptations will not be forgotten, our evolution is not capable of reversing.

The survival of higher education institutions in a post COVID-19 world will depend greatly on the integration of technology to continually cultivate a rich campus ecosystem that thrives on a seamless blend of between in-person and remote interaction. The climate of this hybridized ecosystem will be dynamically and continuously driven by three factors that are ever present in every classroom: the instructor, the discipline, and the students. The combined power these three forces exert over the fragile and unique environment of each blended or online

classroom cannot be overstated. However, these forces are not beyond influence, they can be molded by other forces present in this ecosystem as all its inhabitants yearn to maintain a healthy and harmonious equilibrium with each other and the environment.

The mindset of each instructor will continue to be a key factor that shapes the environment of the hybrid and online classrooms but the power exerted by the institution or even the actual faculty member over this force pales in comparison to that of another far more abundant inhabitant of this ecosystem, the students. Despite the immense authority of the institution and the vast knowledge and wisdom of the faculty, the culture of the students exerts far more influence over each instructor's mindset. The engagement, enthusiasm, work ethic, professionalism, and humanity the students bring to the delicate world of the classroom has more of an effect on the instructor than all other influences combined. When the students take the initiative and purposely seek innovative solutions and exciting opportunities in the blended or online classroom, even the most reluctant and resistant instructors will often follow their lead. While the instructor possesses the control over how the business of the classroom is conducted, much like a government, the students possess the control over the culture of the classroom, much like a constituency. The students have a much greater plasticity than any other force present in the blended or online classroom because they have the freedom to choose how deeply they will engage, thus their potential for shaping a rich classroom experience through the influence they exert over the instructor is unrivaled.

The discipline is the most rigid of the three core forces that combine to shape every blended or online classroom environment, but even it is not beyond influence. The individual faculty member shoulders the ultimate decision regarding the approach to the discipline in their classroom. However, the greatest influence over the discipline rests with the department. The

collective power of a collaborative and supportive group of colleagues, led by their department chair, wields a far greater power over how the discipline can be shaped to better fit the teaching style of the instructor and the learning goals of students in a blended or online classroom. A flexible and innovative department will be a crucial element to ensuring that the curriculum of each discipline is continuously molded to adhere to the ever-changing technology of our world to deliver the most efficient, engaging, and highest quality higher education classroom experience.

While the students possess the greatest collective power over the potential of a blended or online classroom, they are perhaps the most responsive to influence as well. Professors exert a tremendous amount of influence over the individual student or even a small group of them, but the faculty often simply cannot bear the burden of cultivating the drive, the professionalism, and the engagement of the collective student body. This responsibility falls to the institution. The students are far more responsible for determining the richness of their own destinies as learners in a hybrid or online course than they are in a traditional on-campus course. The less effort and consideration students bring to this ecosystem, the more their fulfillment and education will suffer. The institution holds a far greater power over the student body's code of conduct than any other influence because the institution sets forth the core values that every employee and every student is to uphold as a member of the campus community. While those same norms do extend beyond the physical campus to the hybrid or online classroom, the online environment is yearning for the establishment of specific principles to be upheld by both the instructor and the students as they interact in a remote fashion. A clear message from institutional leadership regarding the expectations of students, specific to acceptable practices and behaviors in the hybrid and online classrooms, and the promotion of the necessary readily available student-focused training and support resources, specific to efficiency and prowess in the hybrid and

online classrooms, are critical for students to thrive because their culture does and will continue to directly and significantly impact the quality of their experience as online learners.

### **Recommendations for Practice**

Stepping into the role of the online instructor is often an overwhelming process for instructors because of how drastically different the online classroom can seem from the traditional classroom. When faculty are faced with the challenge of transitioning to the online classroom, they should seek input from their colleagues and from their students. The practical, current, and relevant information that can typically be learned from these sources may seem trivial but minor adjustments often have profound effects on the engagement level of an online class. For example, a new technology may be readily available that could foster a greater sense of collaboration or perhaps a particular exercise is no longer regarded as a worthy investment of class time for online students. The key for each faculty member is the realization and acceptance that online instruction is very fluid by nature because it's so closely intertwined with technology. A deliberate effort by instructors to keep their online instructional styles in sync with technological advancements and trends as much as possible will likely increase engagement.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

The findings of this study could prove beneficial to higher education leaders and faculty as they refine their delivery of efficient and high-quality online programs and courses, but also as they refine their approaches to emergency remote instruction. This experiment was limited to the disciplines of these 10 professors and an exploration of how the pandemic affected a wider array of first-time online instructors could produce a much greater number of valuable insights. A study of instructors that have returned to the in-person classroom after only teaching online because of the pandemic would also likely allow for an exploration of an entirely different series



of experiences and perceptions. In contrast, a study of instructors that never returned to the in-person classroom after only teaching online because of the pandemic would possibly uncover a very different series of experiences and perceptions. There is also a need for more in-depth knowledge of how the pandemic and the resulting mandatory shift to online instruction affected higher education students with no prior online learning experience. In addition, there is a need for studies regarding sensitivity, emotional support, and digital citizenship as elements of the online classroom during the COVID-19 outbreak and in the wake of the pandemic. Lastly, further exploration is warranted with respect to the dynamic between the instructor, the discipline, and the students in the online classroom.

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APPENDIX: Introductory Letter, Potential Faculty Participants

RE: Request for Interview Participants, ETSU Higher Education Leadership Dissertation - Online Education and the Pandemic: A Narrative of the Experiences of First-Time Online Instructors during the Spring 2020 Semester

Dear ETSU Faculty,

My name is David Smith and I am the Director of Financial Systems and Technology as well as a doctoral candidate in the higher education leadership program at East Tennessee State University. I am conducting research based on the experiences of instructors during the Spring 2020 semester following the COVID-19 outbreak in the United States as a requirement for my dissertation. This study will help to further the body of research regarding online education as a teaching and learning format. The involvement of experienced faculty members that had never taught in an online format before the Spring 2020 semester is vital. If you have passed your three-year tenure review and your first experience in the role of the online instructor was during the Spring 2020 semester, your participation in this study could produce valuable insights. For those instructors that meet these criteria, I am inquiring regarding your interest and availability to be interviewed during this study. If you would like to meet with me over Zoom for a one-hour interview during the coming days or weeks to discuss your experiences as a first-time online instructor following the coronavirus outbreak, please contact me via email at [smithdm1@etsu.edu](mailto:smithdm1@etsu.edu) at your earliest convenience. I will be happy to conduct your interview when it best fits your schedule. I'm available seven days a week as well as in the morning, afternoon, or evening. I understand that it may be difficult for you to schedule a time to meet with me as we are all still dealing with ongoing changes and inconveniences to our daily lives due to the COVID-19 pandemic. I wouldn't ask for your participation in this study at this time if the involvement of ETSU faculty wasn't critical to the completion of my dissertation. I hope that this study will lead to some valuable improvements as ETSU strives to make online education a more engaging and valuable experience. Please don't hesitate to contact me if you have questions or concerns.

I truly appreciate your time and consideration.

VITA  
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Doctor of Education, Higher Education Leadership – Spring 2021
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- East Tennessee State University, Division of Business & Finance  
Financial Systems Manager, January 2016 – October 2020
- East Tennessee State University, Office of Human Resources  
Technical Manager, July 2009 – January 2016
- East Tennessee State University, Staff Senate  
Senator, 2012 – 2015
- Wolfe Inc.  
Freelance Technical Consultant/Designer, March 2015 – Present
- Mars Hill University, Liston B. Ramsey Center  
Freelance Consultant/Designer, June 2008 – January 2010
- Aflac Insurance  
Independent Agent and Business Owner, August 2003 – July 2009
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