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Building Resilient Higher Education Communities: Lessons Learned from Pandemic Teaching

Christian Williams
Assumption University, ce.williams@assumption.edu

Carmen Veloria
Suffolk University, Cveloria@suffolk.edu

Debra Harkins
Suffolk University, dharkins@suffolk.edu

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Building Resilient Higher Education Communities: Lessons Learned from Pandemic Teaching

Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has left many educators grappling with uncertainties about the future of higher education while feeling exhausted from the stress and pressure to deliver quality education in unprecedented ways. While learning to incorporate new technology into remote, hybrid, and flipped classrooms, educators also find themselves responding to the psychosocial needs of students more than ever before. Yet the lack of established promising practices coupled with limited training and support on how to support students' emotional well-being creates confusion and self-doubt. This conceptual article explores teacher experiences of teaching during a pandemic, missed opportunities, and highlights the need to develop resilience in educators as the next phase of teaching unfolds. Recognizing the shortfalls of traditional definitions of resilience when applied to higher education, the best path forward for building resilient communities in higher education. Resilient communities include an emphasis on well-being at all levels, normalizing stress responses, creating spaces for members to co-create discourse, planning input into future teaching strategies, while providing resources around developing pedagogy and support to build confidence in the face of disruption. The next phase of teaching requires that we move beyond a focus on being content experts and develop collaborative learning environments for the betterment of society.

Keywords

resilience, higher education, building community, connection

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Building Resilient Higher Education Communities: Lessons from Pandemic Teaching

Introduction

Covid-19 created uncertainty and change, with a reach that was more widespread and pervasive than any other public health crisis in recent history. It influenced the ability of every individual, organization, and system to function and required transitions that many were not adequately prepared to face. Higher education is profoundly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, quickly shifting to emergency remote learning in the Spring of 2020, transitioning toward hybrid, online, and in-person classrooms with social distancing requirements and protective measures in place. University campuses, once vibrant and lively with students and faculty became quiet and disjointed with a minority of students and faculty returning to campus and a significant number remaining remote. The past couple of years left many of us feeling lonely, disconnected, overwhelmed, and uncertain about what the new normal entails for Higher Education. This conceptual article explores teacher experiences during the pandemic, missed opportunities, and highlights strategies to build resilient Higher Education communities.

Experiences of Pandemic Teaching

As faculty members working in education and social science departments at two universities in urban areas of Massachusetts, we experienced and witnessed the challenges that the pandemic brought to Higher Education communities, faculty, staff, and students. During the pandemic, we taught courses in human services, psychology, and education including in person, virtually, and hybrid formats. As trained practitioners, we felt the impact of the pandemic and societal unrest on mental health and emotional well-being of individuals, families, and communities.

Social distancing and the resulting safety precautions, while necessary for the safety of all, contribute to a loss of community and support. Zoom meetings replaced water cooler conversations, and opportunities to collaborate, network, and share ideas. Traditional student-educator interactions were replaced with black boxes on screens, virtual office hours, and less informal after-class conversations. Yet educators continued to be the direct sphere of influence for students, offering considerable, regular contact and guidance to shape not just their educational endeavors but also career trajectories. In the face of COVID-19 and societal unrest, educators found themselves attending to the psychosocial needs of students, in addition to educational and job readiness needs; engaging in more intense conversations than ever before to establish a sense of normalcy; addressing feelings of uncertainty; and allowing education to continue without disruption. This came while trying to create meaningful ways to bridge the space between students who were in person and those who were remote, to recognize and respond to disparities, and to create space that allowed each student the best opportunity to learn despite challenging circumstances. We attempted to ease their fears and ensure that despite everything else that was happening around us, they could count on. At the same time, many of us personally dealt with our own personal disruptions, attending to our families, our own concerns, and our own fears with little to no intervention.

Amid this we learned that classes could not continue under the auspices of business as usual. The struggles that we ourselves, and our students, experience did not simply disappear when virtual classes began, we could not put them down when we logged into zoom. Thus, many of us carefully crafted “check-ins" to build rapport and community, walking the line between light banter and earnest inquiry. The latter was often fraught with angst related to making space to unpack and discuss serious comments. How does one respond to “my

grandfather died of COVID-19 over the weekend", "I'm struggling with my sobriety", or "I find myself losing hope"? Under normal circumstances comments like these would be troubling. However, pre-pandemic these comments would be heard within the confines of an office, during a one-on-one meeting, not via Zoom where, most often the not, the speaker could be heard, but not seen. As educators we struggled with the impersonal nature of these interactions and how to best respond and reach without the benefit of expression, warmth, and positive regard. Many students watch their teachers for their response, all while thinking: how will our comments be received? Who are we when responding – practitioners, educators, or simply mothers?

The truth of the matter is that the shift to teaching in a variety of modalities came with some uneven technical training. Many programs lacked faculty training or support to build confidence, measure success, and ensure readiness to occupy this new role. Again, while faculty development took place, it was often in the form of learning new or existing technology, developing teaching strategies for interactive remote or hybrid classrooms, and left out the challenges of being present for students and assisting with their psychosocial challenges. Conversations about the development of pandemic pedagogy were scarce and an understanding of how to integrate new frameworks into the classroom emotionally impacted educators leading to confusion and self-doubt. Institutions of higher education often did not provide enough direction around best practices in the classroom such as the use of cameras and students' decisions to turn them on or off seeking consensus on best policies to implement (Castelli & Sarvary, 2021). While policies favored student autonomy in the decision, educators reported more positive experiences when they were able to see students and an overall greater sense of satisfaction in online instruction (Castelli & Savary, 2021). Educators are trained in providing face-to-face instruction and without the resources to address discomfort with teaching

to the void of black boxes we are ill-prepared to face our own emotional responses and discouragement.

While many faculty did not have access to training at all, some were provided some training on how to navigate in classroom technology and the learning management systems. These trainings stopped short of recognizing that being present for students means engaging in conversations about their psychosocial well-being, before and often in lieu of lessons planned for that class time. Being present with students meant listening to stories about loss, sadness, worry, lack of resources, loneliness and exacerbated mental illness. Being present for students meant finding grace and latitude and reconceptualizing our roles as educators. Being present for students required recognizing our own humanness and the trauma and emotions that we carried with us.

While we found ourselves faced with unique challenges and learning environments, we would be remiss if we did not recognize that COVID-19 did not create the problems that we faced this year. It placed a spotlight on needs that already existed, barriers that students and educators were facing, disparities in resources, support, and learning environments, and created a unique opportunity to utilize these experiences to build resilience and capital moving forward. Resilience in higher education should move beyond the conventional definitions that emphasize perseverance in the face of adverse life events (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2013; Luther et al., 2000) to include an emphasis on well-being for all members of higher education communities. This requires recognizing the importance of personal well-being of our faculty, students, and staff as well as the professional and community well-being throughout institutions of higher education.

Some educators may have ended the year thankful that they can return to traditional teaching methods next year, excited to leave it all behind, while others may have uncovered

creative instructional methods that they will incorporate moving forward. All of us will be carrying several experiences and lessons learned that will not quickly be forgotten. While the COVID-19 crisis may subside, if we choose to return to business-as-usual mindset, we will discard the positives and negatives of what this year has taught us. The experiences of educators and students during COVID-19 including opportunities missed, can provide valuable insight into how to navigate future landscapes with resilience and preparedness as it will take a long time before feelings of normalcy return.

Missed Opportunities in Pandemic Education

While the spring of 2020 gave us a window into some of the challenges that COVID-19 may pose for educators, it was impossible to predict the events that would ensue and the impact that it would have on our lives and the lives of our students. This year more than ever we have seen that education takes place in the real-world context and how difficult it can be to focus, concentrate, study, and educate in quickly changing contexts. Despite our best efforts to plan and create meaningful learning communities, in the face of multiple stressors, we may have inadvertently missed opportunities to enhance our capacity for resilience in higher education, to mourn the opportunities lost, and to affirm the experience of stress and trauma that was inherent in many experiences. We need to recall that resilient higher education communities emphasize a culture of well-being for all members including students, faculty, and staff.

We often found ourselves wondering how our colleagues were fairing, recognizing that much like students our experience, comfort, and skills in online technology varied significantly across faculty. Some faculty regularly teach online courses and/or have fully integrated the learning management system (LMS) into their courses, while others experienced online pedagogy for the first time. Skill level variations posed barriers for consistent delivery of

instruction across courses and disciplines and faculty from social science backgrounds may have experienced increased comfort in acknowledging and validating student experiences due to their own training and background.

In an ever-changing landscape, confusing messages, often conflictual in nature, failed to normalize the experiences in the classroom. How do we honor the need for a rigorous academic experience? Can we do this while attending to the individual needs of students and also leaving room for latitude and accommodations?

For example, when one of us raised the need to incorporate more training and support sessions for us to unpack and learn strategies to hold space for complicated conversations, the response was to call a “1-800” number. This is the same number that the university uses to connect staff and faculty to counselors, not an organized attempt at university wide support and development. This response created missed opportunities for the faculty in psychology and social science departments to lead workshops, discussion groups, and raise awareness about psychosocial stressors. These workshops could have normalized what many of us were feeling and informed how we responded to students. Direct support could have helped to remove some of the anxiety several of us felt in anticipating what a benign in class prompt may bring to the surface.

We struggled with navigating pandemic teaching, and yet there was no acknowledgment by leaders in higher education of the complex task in front of us. Instead, administrators and support staff provided more training and resources such as videos and blog posts on how to incorporate polls and embed live links. We did not need more training on technology and online tools, what we needed was a way to attend to our insecurities, an environment that signaled that we were all in this together, and the recognition that we needed help. We also struggled with

caring for family members, partnering, parenting, income insecurity from the loss of student housing revenue and decreasing enrollments, and increased fatigue and stress along with the myriad of other woes already mentioned. Yet, the expectation was that we needed to show up, motivate, teach, and support our students all while not stressing them further, for example, by not asking them to turn on their cameras and making additional allowances for incomplete or late assignments all while preparing students to become career ready.

As psychologists and educators, our training in counseling and intervention techniques uniquely positions us to provide support to students, our colleagues, and our friends. However, the outlet for this internal capacity for mutual care and support was not realized or utilized. Opportunities for meaning-making would have benefited many of us who lacked this in our programs and provided outlets to do our part at the forefront as helpers during this crisis. Yet it also left us wondering about the experiences of faculty from other disciplines and whether they experienced the same struggles. Was it harder knowing that we could help and not being afforded an opportunity or forum to provide it? Or was it harder to lack training and preparedness for difficult conversations about psychosocial challenges?

Lessons Learned from Pandemic Teaching

In our programs, we quickly realized that none of us could do this alone, or without support. In the absence of campus communities of support, some of us sought support from on-line communities, list-serves or simply started our own support group, meeting whenever our complicated schedules allowed it. We found ways to complain, commiserate, and show compassion to one another as we exchanged stories, unpacked, and debated responses, and showed one another love and grace through a healthy mix of cursing, tears, and laughter. In

exchanging tips, tools, and resources we learned to capitalize on unexpected opportunities to connect content to lived experiences.

In many ways our roles as psychologists and educators provided us with unique opportunities to model critical and compassionate helping and teaching during this especially stressful time. However, we quickly learned that this pedagogical approach cannot occur in a vacuum and that for it to be widespread there would need to be support, clear messages, and trainings. We were moved by conversations with our colleagues about how they could create better classroom experiences and helped us recognize how much faculty were driven to be the best versions of themselves for students in some of the most challenging times. We were regularly asked questions about classroom protocols and policies such as “should I ask them to turn their cameras on?” “How do I know that they are understanding what I am trying to teach?” How can I be a great educator when I am feeling so defeated?”

Our own experiences very much mirrored these questions. One of the authors used check-ins in all her classes before COVID-19 to model active listening skills, recognizing its power to transform students into critically engaged helpers. She also appreciated that it took some students more time to understand the importance of hearing each other’s stories to their training as future practitioners. In person, she observed student’s nonverbal signals to determine if they are uncomfortable and intervened as needed. Most students found these weekly check-ins extremely helpful and would often comment in their check-ins and in end-of-semester evaluations that they were glad they had a place to share their challenges.

Unfortunately, during pandemic teaching, many students kept their videos off unless called upon or if they were in small groups and our universities, like many higher education institutions, did not require students to keep their videos on. Other institutions did not offer clear

guidance on this, leaving individual course instructors to use their best judgment, when we would have preferred clarity and consistency. Without being able to "see" students, we were left little to no cues on how students were experiencing the class. The lack of nonverbal feedback also created challenges for us in how to best situate potentially sensitive check-ins while also allowing students a place to find support and validation for the many challenges they were facing. Fortunately, some of us found support from on-line higher education communities and conversations with colleagues helped shift the check-in process to something much briefer and sadly less pedagogically sound. Yet the value of check-ins and attending to psychosocial needs of students was reinforced during COVID-19 and ways to integrate these practices in post-pandemic education should be at the forefront of faculty development trainings.

Teaching and practicing as critical educators, psychologists and practitioners has provided tremendous opportunities to depict for students the connection of how and why helping is so difficult when working with underserved, oppressed, and marginalized people. Students could see and hear firsthand, and we could and did discuss the issues deeply. Located in urban areas in Massachusetts, which are deeply divided racially, ethnically, and economically, students could see and hear the experiences of the other as they worked virtually with community members throughout the semester. In this way, students may have learned more about social justice issues than students pre- COVID-19.

Lesson One: Need to redefine and build resilience in Higher Education

Traditional definitions of resilience that describe bouncing back (Tugade & Fredrickson, 2011; Werner, 1995), maintaining equilibrium in the face of stressors (Bonnano, 2004), positive adaptation to adverse events (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2013; Luther et al., 2000), having a capacity to recovery with positive outcomes despite challenging situations (Garmezy, 1990) may not fit post-pandemic higher education. This COVID teaching experience provides an opportunity to

redefine resilience in higher education and to build the capacity for community resilience on college campuses. Research reveals a direct relationship between resilience and perceived well-being with the experience of resilience decreasing student's perception of distress (Sood & Sharma, 2020). Further, resilience empowers individuals to face stressors (Robbins et al., 2018; Sood & Sharma, 2020) and more importantly the connection between stress responses and academic performance highlights that resilience is a mediating factor in an individual's ability to cope effectively with stressors (Robbins et al., 2018) highlighting the need to build resilience in faculty and students alike.

It is time to rethink the rugged individualism embedded in notions of "bouncing back." A refocus onto community resilience reframes the conversation to include personal, professional and community wellbeing. Pathways to healthy higher education communities can be founded on the creation a culture of well-being for staff and faculty, the recognition that much like students, faculty and staff experience barriers, low-confidence, and feelings of being overwhelmed and need access to services and supports to meet these needs. Faculty can serve as role models of wellness for students only after they have the tools to both understand wellness and to incorporate into their lives. Recognizing that we can build resilience and provide resources and training to do so is an investment worth making in our educators, shifting the terrain of higher education to one poised to respond to the psychosocial needs of all members of the community.

Lesson Two: The Landscape of Resilience in Higher Education

Research on resilience in higher education primarily focuses on sustainability in response to financial strain and demands and not on the experience of resilience as a psychosocial factor. The experiences of the past year ironically pulled the curtain open to reveal a need for more

support in this area. Brammer (2020) incorporating the work of Carl Rogers' highlighted the experience of connection and disconnection related to self-image and our ideal image. Researchers recognize the role of stress in higher education faculty as contributing to an overall dissatisfaction and leading to burnout and how ongoing demands for productivity coupled with a climate that fosters insecurities contribute to stress responses in faculty and toxic stress. While COVID-19 brought its own unique set of stressors, this experience shined a light on the need to address stress responses and build resilience for faculty to the forefront.

For example, we recall the unnatural feeling of watching our selves while teaching. This was unnerving to say the least and often distracting. In online discussion boards, Higher Education faculty came up with several innovative solutions to this shared issue with some who taped a piece of paper over their own image box so students could still see the professor, but the professor would not have to look at themselves while teaching. Faculty remains an untapped source of information, resources and ingenuity for higher education administrators interested in finding ways to go beyond awareness and move toward informed approaches to collective trauma. However, administrators need to attend to faculty psychosocial needs so that professors can continue serving students in the frontlines.

Lesson Three: Need to Focus on Educator Well-being

Educator emotional well-being involves the building of self-esteem, self-worth, and the opportunity to make positive contributions to the learning community (Turner & Braine, 2013). The fostering of these skills allows educators to not only monitor their own emotional well-being but model emotional regulation, resilience, and mental health to students (Turner & Braine, 2013). The positive correlation between educator self-efficacy and learning environments (Bohannon, 2019) proved challenging this year as many of us experienced self-doubt,

apprehension, and struggled to effectively self-evaluate the effectiveness of our teaching performance.

Lesson Four: Need to build resilient Higher Education communities

Taking a community resilience model in higher education would harness the capital in its community members and the existing resources at all levels to provide support and opportunities for coping in the face of uncertainty (Feng et al., 2018). A resilient higher education community recognizes the interconnected nature of our experiences including collective traumas and co-constructed discourse and utilizes connection building to build competence and social connections in the face of uncertain landscapes and demands of the COVID-19 pandemic (Feng et al., 2018). Much like other times of adversity, we reflected on our higher education experiences retrospectively, recognizing COVID is not the first widespread crisis, nor will it be the last. Using this opportunity to open dialogue, normalize our experiences, and decrease the stigma associated with stress responses, mental and emotional health (Stanley et al., 2021); providing forums for modeling vulnerable emotional disclosures reduces apprehension and fear of judgment while encouraging other to share their own emotional experiences (Stanley et al., 2021); and prioritizing educator well-being through support and community building can decrease isolation and restore self-efficacy for educators.

Educators throughout the country experienced the challenges of the pandemic, even if experiences differ based on our social identities and socio-economic background. In the classroom, we helped to problematize these notions with students by being in community, focusing on their psychosocial needs, and demonstrating our humanity, letting them see how we also struggled from time to time. In our view, our students benefitted from this approach. Teaching is about modeling behavior, co-constructing ways of being in community, and

fostering an environment conducive to teaching and learning in bi-directional ways. While colleges and universities struggle to make enrollment numbers, reinvent themselves and push for more of a career readiness focus, faculty remain at the forefront – connecting, modeling, and teaching/learning. We are the ones readily available to make these important connections, but we posit this cannot happen until we make human connection and attend to students' psychosocial and emotional needs. Is higher education interested in having this conversation? If so, how can higher education make the shift?

Resilient higher education communities would emphasize the well-being of faculty, provide support and in doing so develop the capacity of faculty to model resilience for students. We are not immune to the effects of tragedy, stress, or trauma and neglect of natural human responses that pathologize normal adaptive responses. Rutter (1993) recognized that for resilience to foster adaptation, we must have access to the right resources and systems of support. Redefining resilience for higher education must include the recognition of the context in which students and faculty live and engage in learning, harnessing both personal and collective agency (Schwartzman, 2020). We must recognize the way nontraditional means of learning coupled with pandemic stressors that create new demands in the lives of students and educators, exacerbate disparities, and make access, equality, and inclusive education important considerations.

Recommendations for Building Resilience in Pandemic Era Education

There is much to be learned from our experiences over the past year that if embraced can shape and strengthen the terrain of higher education. As the front line of the higher education community, educators provide unique insight into the impact of the pandemic on learning environments and should be actively involved in conversations about the "new normal" or re-

imagining higher education in a new context. COVID-19 highlighted the need to be proactive rather than reactive to meet the needs of students, faculties, and our campus communities. Harnessing the opportunity to incorporate lessons from the field positions higher education uniquely to create responsive and resilient communities.

Normalizing the experiences of adversity, stress, trauma, and mental health allows for increased conversations about mental and emotional health at all levels. Everyone experiences stress and emotional health needs and normalizing this taboo reality should be supported. This year, we stopped asking people if they were ok and instead assumed "of course you aren't, how could you be" and this afforded us the opportunity to move beyond our day-to-day superficial greetings to truly being engaged in these experiences. In retrospect, this was the premise of our carefully crafted "check-ins." However, no one asked if we were ok, just if needed more information, training, or tech gadget to get the work done. We can support one another by creating opportunities for dialogue about mental health and emotional well-being at all levels and open spaces to unpack the challenges and emotions experienced in the classroom and in our personal lives.

We can provide professional development training and workshops on not only how to address the psychosocial concerns of students but also self-care, work-life balance, and mindfulness. We can train educators to look for signs of psychosocial distress and stress responses in students and provide skills to respond to connect with confidence (Bohannan et al, 2019). We can ask what worked well when supporting our students such as check-ins, making space for real conversations, open communication, and implement these at multiple levels across the institution, not just for students but for faculty, staff, and administrators. We can identify formal mentors to help one another, while some institutions did this, the burden remained on the

faculty to reach out for help rather than regular contact being the understood norm. While we were repeatedly asked to attend to the needs of students with flexibility, understanding, and latitude, building similar infrastructure for faculty and an environment that emphasizes mutual concern, interpersonal connection, and belonging can lay the groundwork for communities of resilience.

Lastly, we can establish promising practices in pedagogy by focusing on the educator experiences that allow for meaningful academic careers and resources that help through challenges, while developing resilience in the face of academic stressors and competing pressures. By providing opportunities to situate learning in the real-world experiences of multiple pandemics, institutional leaders can engage in their own professional development as it relates to attending to faculty and staff needs from a humanistic perspective. If we are to still hold on the notion that education ought to be transformative, enlightening, and foundation for life and career success, then investments in educators remain the key.

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