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THE IMPACT OF CRITICAL REFLECTION AND COLLABORATION

**Learning to Navigate the Unknown: The Importance of Critical Reflection and  
Collaboration for Community College Faculty During a Pandemic**

A Dissertation

Presented to the Faculty of the

Education Doctorate in Transformational Teaching and Learning Program

Kutztown University of Pennsylvania

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Education Doctorate

By

Karen A. Ladley

April, 2022

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THE IMPACT OF CRITICAL REFLECTION AND COLLABORATION

This Dissertation for the Education Doctorate in Transformational Teaching and Learning

Degree

By Karen A. Ladley

has been approved on behalf of the College of Education

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# THE IMPACT OF CRITICAL REFLECTION AND COLLABORATION

## **Abstract**

### ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION

Learning to Navigate the Unknown: The Impact of Critical Reflection and Crucial Conversations  
for Community College Faculty During a Pandemic

By Karen A. Ladley

Kutztown University of Pennsylvania, 2022

Kutztown, Pennsylvania

Directed by Dr. Brenda Muzeta

The COVID-19 pandemic caused sudden and dramatic shifts in educational systems worldwide, including colleges and universities. Students, faculty, and service staff found themselves navigating uncertain times and addressing challenges they had not faced previously. The use of critical reflection and collaboration became crucial for faculty as they struggled to engage students in different ways. Understanding students' needs and addressing them effectively became priorities with reflection and collaboration both cost-effective and convenient methods. Following this time of uncertainty, faculty can continue using reflection and collaborative learning communities to address new challenges and obstacles, especially at community colleges where money, time, and resources are often precious and limited.

Keywords: reflection, collaboration, COVID-19, learning communities, remote learning, community college, faculty training, professional development

### **Acknowledgements**

The COVID-19 pandemic was a disorienting time for all educators, including the administrators who had to appear to be holding things together. I often questioned my decisions, my role, and my actions related to planning and student support. I am humbled to know that my leadership was sought during this time and that any support I provided to my peers may have been helpful to them on personal and professional levels. I am also profoundly thankful to those who provided support to me as I grappled with my roles of administrator, mother, spouse, and graduate student during this frightening time. I have truly grown through this process, although not always in the most graceful ways. We can and do hard things together.

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Cohort 3 – we survived a pandemic and did amazing things. I am so proud to know each one of you. I am excited to see where our futures lead.

# THE IMPACT OF CRITICAL REFLECTION AND COLLABORATION

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## Introduction

“Everyone thinks of changing the world, but no one thinks of changing himself.”

—Leo Tolstoy

The title of this study, “Learning to Navigate the Unknown,” is a quote from a participant in this action research study, as the instructor and a group of peers participated in reflection and critical conversations during the COVID-19 pandemic. The “unknown” is how one instructor described the period of 2 years during the COVID-19 quarantine when courses were being taught and attended from home. The term “navigating” describes the process college instructors found themselves engaged with as both educators and learners—unsure of their effectiveness in either role.

Change is usually disruptive and often unexpected. This was the case when a global pandemic that started in Wuhan, China quickly spread everywhere, bringing unforeseen difficulties and disruption to all aspects of business, industry, and education (Crawford, et al., 2020). Impacts to education were felt for several years due to the contagion risk related to group gatherings in places like college classrooms and dorms. As a result of the pandemic, campuses moved to emergency remote settings turning homes into classrooms and many classroom-based educators into distance educators (Crawford et al., 2020). College leaders struggled with planning and decision making throughout, in many cases prolonging mandated distance education over preferred, in-person course delivery (Crawford et al., 2020).

Although the move to online instruction was sudden in the spring of 2020 and caused widespread disruption, colleges and faculty also needed to transition from emergency mode to quality distance education, transitioning courses from seated curricula and live interactions to virtual formats. This shift required training, curriculum design, and a change in mindset (McGill

et al., 2021; Roos & Borkoski, 2021). For many instructors and students, distance education was not only less preferred but also a difficult transition requiring additional support, services, and enhanced communication (Crawford et al., 2020; McGill et al., 2021). Higher education employees who provide both academic instruction and support services had to learn on the job and create improvements based on their lived experiences (Crawford et al., 2020; Roos & Borkoski, 2021).

The changes were enlightening for many during the spring semester of 2020, clearly highlighting technical issues and equity challenges for those without the means to purchase equipment and access to high-speed internet service (McGill et al., 2021). Colleges incorporated digital tools like lock-down browsers for test security and course-specific software only to be confronted with compatibility issues with outdated computers (McGill et al., 2021). Students' computers were often shared among multiple family members who were learning and working from home together (Crawford et al., 2020). The pandemic also did something revolutionary; it forced modernization in a field often averse to change and, in doing so, provided opportunities for reflection and response (Crawford et al., 2020; Limniou et al., 2021; McGill et al., 2021). There was opportunity to grow into the situation and transform in positive ways.

In spring of 2020, when college administrators moved seated classes online, students and college employees scrambled to learn technology and find ways to engage one another in new course formats and modalities (Crawford et al., 2020; Limniou et al., 2021; McGill et al., 2021). Some faculty completely rethought course requirements and assignments, but others merely continued in emergency mode without much change (Members of the National Council for Online Education, 2022). Many people struggled with isolation and fear because there was little knowledge about the virus and fear increased when supplies like toilet paper and basic groceries

became scarce (McGill et al., 2021). Adjunct faculty, who often feel isolated, were even more alone during this time as were marginalized students who may experience insensitivities or microaggressions in the typical college environment (Beaumont, 2020; McGill et al., 2021; Roos & Borkoski, 2021). For students who were also front-line workers, the need to work additional hours also created more conflicts with studies and time management and increased risk of virus exposure (McGill et al., 2021).

Increased certainty followed multiple semesters of uncertainty. The virus mutations and continued severe health impacts made preparation and planning nearly impossible. In spring of 2021, health experts were forecasting a resurgence of cases caused by COVID-19 variants while urging college administrators to keep classrooms empty (Limniou et al., 2021; McGill et al., 2021). Despite the variants, many colleges returned to in-person instruction but maintained choices for students to continue with remote and online coursework. College leaders struggled to balance budgets and, due to fewer new students, encouraged faculty, staff, and administrators to retain as many students as possible (Crawford et al., 2020; Limniou et al., 2021; McGill et al., 2021). This added additional work and stress to college employees, including faculty (Limniou et al., 2021).

The pandemic and related restrictions were overwhelming for both instructors and students. Students were burdened with figuring out details and understanding the college-speak of format changes and delivery methods while also coping with job loss, family illness, and changes to the school schedules for their own children. College students with younger siblings or children at home continued to share their time and resources (Limniou et al., 2021). This difficult time and the stories shared by students also gave rise to positive changes. Universal design, flexibility of deadlines, elimination of noncritical requirements, and a more personalized

approach to teaching were born out of necessity (Limniou et al., 2021; McGill et al., 2021; Sam, 2021). For those with opportunities to engage with peers, this period provided opportunities to rely on critical thought and discourse to innovate and bring growth from adversity (Eschenbacher & Fleming, 2020).

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative action research is to add to the growing body of research related to faculty and student experiences during COVID-19 but also to examine how one group of community college faculty used reflection and collaboration opportunities as a means of communication, sensemaking, and resilience during a unique and difficult experience. Although research about the educational response to the pandemic is an emerging area of study, little research is available at this time that focuses on community college faculty and how methods of communication and professional development affected awareness and potentially directed actions during remote and online instruction. The gaps in the research—specifically in postsecondary education and, even more specifically, community colleges—include how supporting faculty through collaboration and crucial conversations could increase communication and potentially provide positive effects for faculty and students. Further examination of these methods of continuing education and resilience-building could benefit higher education through future crises and sensemaking during times of change.

To begin this work, I examined existing practices for faculty reflection and collaboration and designed this action research to analyze ways groups are using these tools during a critical and unprecedented time. Data collected through the work of reflective journaling began as a way to process the sudden and unwelcome change in teaching and learning. This journaling became the subject of faculty professional learning and self-care. It expanded to professional learning

community conversations and included engaging faculty from across a community college campus. This research in action essentially became an embedded professional development exercise using events as they occurred in real time. I compared the phenomenological data with a student-directed survey that was helpful with data validity through triangulation. By analyzing the impact of these conversations and emergent similarities and differences, additional data were added to the study of the effectiveness of reflection.

I concluded my research and findings with a faculty-directed survey. The survey helped fill additional gaps in the literature by identifying next steps and promising practices resulting from this research. The findings show the value of this work and how implementation of a similar program would require extensive thought and planning. The questions on the faculty survey examined the interest faculty had in this reflective work and helped identify resources administrators should consider when implementing a similar strategy.

### **Study Background**

Reflection is a familiar term in higher education curricula. Jordi (2010) defines reflection as the process by which humans use their experiences to create knowledge. Boud (2013) refers to reflection as making sense of what has happened or taking part in experience-based learning. Prospective teachers, nurses, and psychologists are often trained through applied learning and either writing or discussing ideas about their experiences (Boud, 2001; Janson & Filibert, 2018; Loughran, 2002; Spiker, 2014). The act of thinking through classroom content and how it applies to real-world contexts is critical for students in fields such as healthcare and education, and students are often assigned journals during allied health clinicals and student teaching (Desautel, 2009; Loughran, 2002; Taliaferro & Diesel, 2016). Despite these practices, reflective journaling is less common once individuals enter the professional environment (Cyboran, 2005; Moon,



2006; Riskos et al., 2001). Faculty who required students to self-reflect admitted to seldom taking part in the practice themselves, especially during times of high stress (Campoy, 2010; Moon, 2006; Schön, 1983). Despite their hesitance, faculty encouraged students to use reflection, citing the positive effects and transformative change self-reflection brings to the life-long learner (Campoy, 2010; Cyboran, 2005; Schön, 1983).

Reflective practice is also even more uncommon among community college instructors (Beaumont, 2020; Cowan & Westwood, 2006). Many instructors are subject-matter experts but lack pedagogical education, having had years of work or research experience but little teacher training (Beaumont, 2020; Cowan & Westwood, 2006). Higher education does not require department of education licensing or training (Beaumont, 2020; Cowan & Westwood, 2006). Community colleges typically only require 18 credits of graduate coursework in the discipline being taught (Beaumont, 2020; Cowan & Westwood, 2006). For these subject-matter experts, it is often safe to provide lectures from the podium, but this often neglects key aspects of student engagement. Reflection can assist less experienced educators in navigating the classroom more effectively during times of calm and especially when confronting a crisis and changing course delivery methods (Rodgers, 2002).

In this qualitative study, I used the reflective thinking model, experiential learning theory, and reflection in action in the work with faculty reflective journals (Dewey, 1938, 1997; Kolb, 1984, Schön, 1983). I also used pieces of social network theory and transformative learning theories to understand the work of critical reflection and discourse in professional learning communities (Coburn et al., 2001; Mezirow, 1997). I used communication in crisis as a conceptual framework when assessing the student survey and in triangulating data during analysis (Huck & Zhang, 2021). These theories and phenomenological methodology provided

rich context for processing the pandemic and faculty response. The goal of this research was not unilaterally to solve a problem of practice but, instead, to add to the important literature by examining the positive effects of reflection and professional discourse. Although the overall goal of reflection and collaboration was to improve student support during a time of crisis, this goal will require additional study.

Much like national disasters (e.g., hurricanes or earthquakes), a pandemic presents unique challenges to educators, administrators, and students, forcing shifts in needs, expectations, and resources (Marler et al., 2021; Sims et al., 2015). Faculty require support and must develop confidence in times of change and use the lessons learned to improve their practice (Beaumont, 2020). I examined the themes that arise when instructors use reflective journaling to check their practice and the implications of their work. This research addresses how reflective practice affected them on an individual level. I also examined themes resulting from group communication in the context of professional learning communities (PLCs) and the critical conversations they use. The information gained through this study could reinforce the concept of reflective journaling and critical conversations as effective means of faculty professional development, specifically in the content of community colleges. In the process of data triangulation, I compared the faculty themes with those identified by students to identify similar or different priorities (Saldaña, 2021).

This dissertation was designed to follow established guidelines for the Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate (CPED), which aligns with the Kutztown University Transformative Educational Doctorate. The dissertation in practice includes five sections: (a) the setting and puzzle of practice, (b) review of existing literature, (c) design of the research and methodology,

(d) results and analysis of study findings, and (e) implications for the research (Kutztown Educational Doctorate Handbook, 2021).

Chapter 1 begins with the puzzle of practice, or how faculty at a community college in Pennsylvania struggled with the impacts of global pandemic that required dramatic and sudden changes to their work and to students' lives. In Chapter 2, I explore perspectives on the puzzle of practice or how theories support reflection as a method to develop professionally and as educators. I also present the concept of PLCs as agents of change and growth and examine how communication during times of crisis can serve as a means of building resilience. These concepts are reflected in the research design presented in Chapter 3, which outlines the phases of research and the methodology used in the study. Chapter 4 includes study findings, methods of data analysis, and subsequent meaning making. In Chapter 5, I review the implications of the findings, identify future directions for additional research, and make data-based suggestions for ways to continue the work started through this action research.

## **CHAPTER 1: PUZZLE OF PRACTICE**

Due to the unique nature of the COVID-19 global pandemic, the questions and conditions encountered in this study are valuable for higher education in general and, specifically, for the institution in this study, Middle Valley Community College (MVCC)<sup>1</sup>. The effects of the pandemic were similar to other natural disasters (e.g., campus closures, continuity of instruction, and other dilemmas), but many aspects of the college experience were affected differently than during fires or dangerous weather conditions (Marler et al., 2021). The pandemic was widespread and affected more than one region. Faculty in California were struggling alongside

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<sup>1</sup> The community college name has been changed to provide anonymity. Middle Valley Community College is a fictional name for a real college. All other details about the institution are factual.

individuals in Pennsylvania. There were few who escaped the impacts of the pandemic. Unlike the effects of a natural disaster like Hurricane Katrina, which were limited in geography, there were few resources college leaders could draw upon because no one could escape the difficulties presented during this time (Marler et al., 2021; McGill et al., 2021).

This phenomenological action research began with questions about faculty reflection and collaboration and grew to include related areas in the professional context. The critical reflections of college faculty who experienced the effects of COVID repercussions showed they used resources, strategies, and technology previously underused by college faculty. In the first stage in the research, faculty engaged in reflection through journal writing and participation in a professional learning community (PLC). In a secondary phase of research, faculty reflections were compared to feedback provided by students in a college-wide survey. The reflections and dialogue captured by this study are unique and previously unavailable in the literature. This phenomenological study provides useful data to add to a growing body of research specific to community colleges. Findings are beneficial for MVCC, but they are also relevant for future planning and for consideration in the development of new teaching strategies and technology use at community colleges.

Although the COVID-19 pandemic was expected to be a temporary situation, the effects have lasted for two academic years as of the completion of this study (Marler et al., 2021; McGill et al., 2021). Impacts are anticipated to continue for some time, though how significant and for how long are still unknown (Marler et al., 2021; McGill et al., 2021). Even when the pandemic is considered over, many impacts to enrollment, retention, and overall student success will continue to be realized and potential effects and benefits revealed (Overstreet & Matthews, 2011; Marler et al., 2021; McGill et al., 2021).

## Research Context

The college environment involved in this study is integral to understanding the research context. MVCC is a public, 2-year, open-admissions institution of higher education. MVCC is also a Hispanic serving institution (>25% of student population), which allows the college to qualify for grants and other funding opportunities. This designation also drives much of the strategic planning and equity work at the college (U.S. Department of Education, 2022). According to the annual factbook created by MVCC (2020; see Appendix A), the 2-year, public, open access institution enrolls approximately 8,000 students in both full-time and part-time curriculum and workforce development programs annually. More than 65% of those enrolled are female, and fewer than 35% are male. More than half of those enrolled identify as White, 26% identify as Hispanic, 7% as African American, and 4% as more than one race (see Appendix B). The main campus is in a rural area with two satellite centers. One center is in an urban setting with students who identify predominantly as Hispanic or Latino, and the second center is in a poor, predominantly White, former coal mining community with considerable economic challenges. According to the annual factbook (see Appendix A), more than half of the students at MVCC are (a) over 20 years of age, (b) first-generation college students, and (c) receive some type of financial aid. MVCC receives Title III funding for serving underrepresented, financially at-risk students. During this study and COVID-19 period, MVCC saw an increase in the number of students attending but an overall decrease in the number of courses taken by students (see Appendix B). This means the college had more students but received less revenue per student than prior to the pandemic.

MVCC is competitively priced as one of the lowest-cost community colleges in Pennsylvania, and students cite this advantage as the main contributing factor to their enrollment

at MVCC (RISC Survey, 2020). The tuition allows students who could not afford private, or even public, 4-year institutions to obtain a degree. Despite this feedback from students, the MVCC Factbook (2020) indicates low persistence rates and even lower graduation and transfer rates, specifically among underserved students. Persistence rates (fall to fall, 2019–20) were 62% for full-time and 47% for part-time students (U.S. Department of Education/IPEDS; MVCC Factbook). The graduation rate in 2016 was 18% (U.S. Department of Education/IPEDS; MVCC Factbook). For many students, completing an associate-level academic program at MVCC can take anywhere from 3–5 years if students persist and reach that goal (see Appendix A). Improving the success rate at MVCC is a top priority.

### **Researcher Positionality**

My positionality as a researcher is significant in this study due to my identity as both an insider and outsider. Herr and Anderson (2015) define action research as that which is conducted “by or with insiders of an organization” (p. 3). Herr and Anderson (2015) further clarified that researchers should examine their “relationship to their setting and participants” (p. 37), which can be fluid and multilayered. In this way, researchers can be clear about how the research validity and bias is impacted by their experiences and relationships (Herr & Anderson, 2015). In this research, I define myself as both an insider and outsider. I am an employee at the institution but am an outsider in the scope of research because it involves teaching faculty, which I am not.

I am employed as an administrator at MVCC. I am an associate dean, overseeing multiple areas of academic support, professional training and development, and facilitating the strategic planning process. I also define myself as an outsider because I am not teaching faculty and not part of the group engaged in this study. I do supervise a staff of service faculty who sometimes teach, but their regular roles are focused on providing academic support to students in

the classroom through tutoring outreach, disability-related accommodations support, and accessibility training and workshops. I also design and facilitate employee training programs, workshops, and a professional learning community composed of faculty. In these roles, my view of faculty and student data in this study can be influenced by previous professional experience. In this work, I have been mindful of the potential for conflicts and researcher bias and employed epoche, or the invalidation of assumptions, throughout the processes involved in collecting and analyzing these data (Moustakas, 2022).

Prior to my work at MVCC, I was employed at multiple large universities and both urban and rural community colleges. My work as an administrator in testing services, disability services, and tutoring centers allowed me many opportunities to research and develop cooperative programs and projects in collaboration with faculty and campus partners. I also have experience with developmental education coursework and am part of several related professional associations and affinity groups.

As an administrator, I am an insider of the college, and I am also an outsider to the faculty as a member of the nonteaching staff. Although I have the privilege of using my knowledge of the institution, departments, faculty, and academic programs to determine participation and process data, I am not teaching faculty and must also remain aware of my limitations in this way. I am not in the classroom environment and did not experience the changes in remote learning as they were taking place. In this research, I had to focus on the phenomenology of the individual faculty, their individual experiences in their own words, and the context of their classroom and subject matter to fully understand the data.

As an administrator during the pandemic, my role included supervising various academic supports and disability accommodations. During this period, my department facilitated the

academic accommodations for students with COVID and enforced student quarantine from on-campus instruction. I also had the added responsibilities of strategic planning, professional development, and faculty development, which formed the basis of this study as faculty approached me in my professional roles for advice in navigating student learning concerns. I am also aware that this role may impact my data participants and quality of data. I was careful to address my participants about the purpose of this work as academic and not to be used in a professional context.

From a personal perspective, I identify as a White, middle-class woman. I am a first-generation college student and a working mother. During the pandemic, my children participated in both online and hybrid learning environments, requiring me to manage their schooling in addition to my work and continuing education in a graduate program. In this way, I could easily insert myself in the student experience aspect of this study and remained mindful of that possibility throughout the study. Although I have worked in higher education for over 15 years, I have also worked in the private sector as a broadcast journalist. Due to my varied experiences, and my status as both an insider to MVCC and an outsider to the faculty, I relied on my research participants to provide the lived experience in this action research and consistently endeavored to put aside my own experiences, biases, and assumptions.

### **Study Development**

My awareness of and interest in this action research occurred organically. During the sudden move to online and remote instruction, a small number of faculty involved in MVCC professional development initiatives described themselves as feeling uncharacteristically negative about the change in course delivery. Two nursing faculty shared plans to retire at the end of the semester. I wanted to provide resources for these individuals for coping with the



workload, isolation, and anxiety related to the change and the tremendous stress they were experiencing. I had begun researching best practices during this time and shared options including reflective practice activities with the group. I invited them to begin journaling about their experiences. Five faculty volunteered to journal. After positive reactions to the work, those participating agreed to share their thoughts in this research. I immediately sought institutional review board (IRB) approval before knowing if the work would be beneficial. My intention was to assist my colleagues during this difficult time, but the research indicated the data might be useful as action research.

While the participants found the journaling helpful, others indicated they were seeking more interaction with their peers, especially due to isolation from campus. Farrell (2004) suggests critical friendships as a critical part of the reflection process, and I explored ways to expand reflection beyond journaling to help facilitate conversations. I suggested bringing the conversations and observations into our innovative teaching practices (ITP) committee. The ITP committee is designed to develop training and activities, but that work was paused during the pandemic. The group used this opportunity to transform into a PLC engaged in peer support. The journaling and meeting transcripts became additional data in this study.

My professional role and involvement in student retention initiatives allowed me the opportunity to implement a student survey prior to study development. The survey, a purchased reliable and validated tool, is designed to address customer service challenges in five campus departments. The data collected through open-ended questions and the timing of the instrument delivery made this another source of quality data. The survey provided student voices to compare to the faculty experiences; it asked students what the college could do to improve. MVCC

arranged for Percontor to administer the survey during the fall of 2020, when students were in the second semester of pandemic-related remote and online instruction.

### **Implications of Instructional Change**

In March of 2020, MVCC administrators received notice from Governor Wolf to move students off campus due to increased COVID-19 cases in the region (governor.pa.gov, 2020). The MVCC executive team, comprised of the president, three vice presidents, and a chief information officer, determined courses could be delivered in one of two ways—remote and online. The college differentiated the course delivery methods on the college website (Appendix C) as follows: *Remote classes* are synchronous or taught live and with real-time lecture through software like Zoom or Google Meet. *Online classes* are defined as asynchronous or taught through course materials or recorded videos students could view on their own time. *Seated classes* were suspended in the spring but are defined as courses meeting physically on campus. For the summer and fall semesters of 2020, only a few seated courses met biweekly on alternating schedules to provide social distancing. Seated classes were typically hands-on curriculum using science labs and allied health simulation technology, such as computerized mannequins. Seated courses were gradually added to the course schedule as COVID-19 cases decreased in spring of 2021 and subsequent semesters. The final course category is *hybrid*. Hybrid courses combine seated courses with online or remote classes (see Appendix C). Typically, students rotate between the two delivery methods.

According to survey responses included in Chapter 4, students in remote or online environments reported being simultaneously displeased about remote instruction while also understanding the need for the college to operate this way (RISC survey, 2020). Faculty indicated in their journals and through PLC dialogue hearing this feedback in student

communications. I will provide more detail about the research results in Chapter 4. Despite the student feedback, the change in instruction created opportunities for faculty and students. It was an opportunity to rethink instructional methods and assignments and the ways students could meet requirements and competencies (Crawford et al., 2020). Although the move to distance education in the spring semester was sudden, the summer months offered time to adjust before fall. This time allowed for reflection on what worked and what could be improved (Teo & Williams, 2005). There was also an opportunity for more intentional design prior to the fall of 2021. By spring of 2021, faculty had even more opportunities to develop new ideas and revise challenges they had experienced. As I will describe in Chapter 4, some MVCC faculty also used the time to pilot smaller scale studies and innovate with the assistance of distance education staff, their departmental deans, and faculty coordinators.

### **Research Questions**

The questions in this study stem from the research and gaps in research related to faculty practices and communication during the pandemic. The critical reflection that comes from journaling is integral for problem solving and promoting positive change (Taliaferro & Diesel, 2016). Instructors who were actively teaching during COVID-19 used meaning-making skills that, according to Mezirow (1997), increase knowledge and skills. Faculty can use this work to grow in their practice through transformational learning. In this research, I identified themes emerging from journal reflection and brought those topics to the group for dialogue and conversation, facilitating growth through conflict and change. I encouraged conversation and critical thought and reflection around the following research questions:

1. How do college instructors describe their teaching experience during COVID-19?

2. How do faculty describe the student experience they witness in reflective journaling and group discourse with other faculty?
3. In what way are faculty aware of and reflecting on student concerns through journals and professional learning community dialogue? How do student experiences align with faculty reflection?

By addressing these research questions, I hope to add to the growing body of research by providing evidence that growth and development can arise from conflict, reflection, and the implementation of growth and change. This research supports the ongoing work of reflection and collaboration as professional development but addresses this work in the community college context. Positive and negative changes learned and applied during the time of crisis can be used to benefit students long after it is resolved. Lessons learned can assist in developing promising practices for times of stability or possible future crises, thereby increasing the engagement of diverse learners.

This study contributes to existing literature on reflective journaling by Dewey (1938, 1997) and Kolb (1984) and more contemporary researchers who built upon the foundation of their work. Findings support the use of reflection as professional development, as encouraged by Schön (1983) and Mezirow (1997). I also examined the use of PLCs in educator collaboration as presented by Dufour et al. (2008) and Coburn et al. (2001) and extended their studies to postsecondary education and, more specifically, community colleges. This extension to postsecondary education has not been closely examined. Lastly, I used student comments about MVCC and ways key stakeholders felt the college should improve during the pandemic. These data will assist in determining the relationship between faculty reflection and collaboration and

student voice. The findings will also be helpful in examining how to extend these practices in meaningful and sustainable ways.

### **Anticipated Outcomes**

Based on the existing literature on reflective practice and collaborative social networks, I expected to find relationships between reflective and collaborative work and student survey responses. All three research methods examined the college learning experience process during the COVID-19 pandemic. Each required thought about current practices and their impacts on students, and each examined student feedback. Available research indicates both reflection and collaborative conversations provide increased information sharing, greater awareness, and improvements in practice (Coburn et al., 2012; Farrell, 2004; Roberts & Pruitt, 2008). It was my hope to show how the reflections, themes from the PLC, and student data were aligned and to affirm these practices as beneficial for community college faculty. Most existing data on these practices were collected from primary and secondary school settings.

I chose to utilize a loosely directed reflection prompt in the reflective journals despite the risk of a varied collection of responses that might not correlate to the more tightly directed PLCs, which I facilitated. The research supports very intentional facilitation for both journals and PLC work, which I discovered while this work was already underway (Coburn et al., 2012; Cowan & Westwood, 2006; Schön, 1983; Spiker, 2014). Initial coding work indicated the topics presented in journals and PLCs were very different. As a novice researcher, I continued through this process and analyzed the findings with as little bias as possible. I will discuss my reasoning and findings more fully in Chapters 3, 4 and 5.

## CHAPTER 2: PERSPECTIVE ON THE PUZZLE OF PRACTICE

“Study without reflection is a waste of time; reflection without study is dangerous.”

—Confucius

When I began this study, the literature related to COVID-19 was very limited. However, as the study continued, studies and peer-reviewed journal articles began appearing more regularly. Initially, I used studies examining the implications of other chaotic and challenging events, such as natural disasters. One such historical event that greatly impacted postsecondary students was Hurricane Katrina (Ali et al., 2018). Natural disasters, although occurring in a more focused area than a global pandemic, present similar challenges with physical campus limitations and impacts to both individual welfare and academic performance (Ali et al., 2018; Meyers & Wilson, 2011; Overstreet & Matthews, 2011). This research serves as a reference for any sudden, uncontrollable factors which bring change and the need for critical reflection, regardless of the cause.

One considerable difference between Hurricane Katrina and the pandemic is the available technology. Innovations available in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina did not yet include web-based video conferencing and learning management systems, which allow for more engagement in online learning (Meyers & Wilson, 2011; Sims et al., 2015; Vaughn et al., 2013). After the hurricane, colleges partnered with impacted schools, offering students temporary enrollment. Students either transferred to the partnering colleges or received correspondence materials and relied on mail delivery or faxing assignments to professors (Ali et al., 2018; Sims et al., 2015). Digital innovations made significant advances by the time the COVID-19 pandemic struck, allowing more flexibility of instruction and the continuity of coursework. Faculty can now use video meeting software to share information in real time, gauge understanding, and adjust course

spacing (Marler et al., 2021). Instructors can also use breakout room technology to meet with smaller groups, engage students in group work together, and employ interactive educational tools to increase engagement (Limniou et al., 2021).

The mandated move to online learning required technology, access to tools, and the understanding of how to use them fully. Faculty needed skills to use the products appropriately, and students required the knowledge to navigate them (Limniou et al., 2021; Marler et al., 2021). The technology was available, but faculty and students needed to become proficient using it to avoid frustration from wasted class time and to replicate activities previously done face-to-face (Limniou et al., 2021). College staff also needed to maintain training and certifications to ensure faculty proficiency. These realizations were made clearer during the COVID-19 pandemic; reflection and collaborative conversations can help develop policies and practices going forward (Limniou et al., 2021).

### **Reflection**

The benefits of reflection, metacognition, and meaning making—or thinking about thinking—can be traced to ancient philosophers who studied thoughts and reflected upon the application to daily life, or thinking about thinking (Schön, 1983; Zwozdiak-Myers, 2012). Using this practice to engage educators in continuous growth and improvement is credited to John Dewey in the 20th century who suggested teachers in training use reflective thought (Dewey, 1938). Many others since have posited that reflection be used in education for professional development and to further the connections between pedagogy and practice (Janson & Filibert, 2018; Schön, 1983). Schön (1983) took reflection in other directions by indicating that, without reflection, practitioners in all areas remain ignorant to their flaws, continuing to be unaware as

they work less effectively. Successful practitioners should be able to question themselves through the reflective process (Schön, 1983).

Dewey's (1938) reflective thinking model is a multiple step process which uses intentional reflection to create a deeper quality of learning. The method requires critical self-inquiry and evolving questions to deepen the reflective process and consider student feedback (Rodgers, 2002). Dewey (1938) also defined the term "problems" appropriately for the COVID-19 pandemic, stating, "Whatever, no matter how slight and commonplace in character, perplexes and challenges the mind so that it makes belief at all uncertain, there is a genuine problem or question involved in the experience of sudden change" (p. 8). In this process, the problem is identified, and the researcher identifies possible solutions. Those solutions are tested and assessed to determine effectiveness. Faculty navigating the pandemic could apply this method to understand how the problem or crisis impacts practice and adjust their practice, as necessary.

Dewey's theory provided the groundwork for many researchers, including Schön and Kolb, who further developed the concepts of problem solving through self-awareness and self-critique (Zwozdiak-Meyers, 2012). Dewey's (1938) theory of reflective practice, Kolb's (1984) theory of reflection, Schön's (1983) reflection in action, and Mezirow's (1997) transformative learning theories are all methods of solving problems through reflection and are very applicable to the changes caused by COVID-19. Each theorist suggested reflective thinking is the best way to manage change effectively, because it allows for assessment of new practices instead of blindly staying the course or changing for the sake of change (Dewey, 1938; Schön, 1983; Zwozdiak-Meyers, 2012). These methods may already be used by educators as they train future teachers, nurses, and counselors but can also be used by educators in this process for self-evaluation (Schön, 1983). The methods assist in identifying course objectives, clinical responses,



and best practices and help eliminate bias and inequities (Desautel, 2009; Mills, 2008). This experience is one of life-long critical thinking and transformative change, which are crucial skills for practitioners effectively engaged in the educational process (Dewey, 1938; Schön, 1983; Zwozdiak-Meyers, 2012).

More contemporary research, including Van Manen's (1991) active reflection, builds on Schön's (1983) work and supports using action research data to drive change in real time, as instruction is taking place (Farrell, 2004). This work supports an unknown element, such as students coping during the pandemic, and uses feedback to inform instruction and classroom policy (Farrell, 2004). Jay and Johnson (2002) added an additional component to reflective practice by suggesting educators consider alternative perspectives. This phase takes place after the initial reflection on the situation but before the process of thinking critically. It provides alternative ideas for consideration and presents alternative points of view. Farrell (2004) suggested looking outside one's own classroom and experiences to find these perspectives.

Boud et al. (2013) describe three stages for reflection in learning: preparation, engagement, and processing. The first stage involves preparing for the experience or activity (Boud et al., 2013). For students, this might include planning or research. In the context of this study, preparation includes developing a new strategy or concept for a class session. The second phase of engagement involves the actual experience or class session (Boud et al., 2013). Finally, the processing stage takes place after the experience and includes looking back and reporting on the experience (Boud et al., 2013). In this study, faculty used this stage to think critically about the strategies they implemented and determine through objective sensemaking what their next steps should be.

### **Social Networking and Learning Communities**

Although reflection on the individual educator's interpersonal communication is the basis of reflective work, there is significant value from outside perspectives (Farrell, 2004). Input from teacher networks can assist in problem solving, especially during larger challenges (e.g., the pandemic and the move to distance education). Reflective work can also lead to growth and change through shared experiences and perspectives (Bryk et al., 2010; Coburn et al., 2012; Farrell, 2004). Coburn et al. (2012) described professional learning communities (PLCs) as a method of assisting teachers in collective and collaborative learning while continuing to improve strategies for effective outcomes. These social groups have become effective due to the shared knowledge, social support, and immediate feedback provided by peers. PLCs are also cost-effective because individual schools can incorporate a mix of expertise across multiple departments or schools (Coburn et al., 2012; Dufour et al., 2008).

Coburn et al. (2012) related the work of PLCs to the theoretical framework of social network theory, which suggests social relationships form pathways for ideas (Borgattir & Ofem, 2010; Dufour et al., 2008). Social networks, like PLCs, can help facilitate individual or organizational work and provide ideas for improving processes and outcomes. According to Coburn et al. (2012), "Social networks influence the diffusion of innovation, knowledge transfer and implementation" (p. 142). Benefits of this work include problem solving, growth, and positive responses to change. Of course, not all PLCs are created equal, and the term "high quality" is used frequently in the research. Coburn et al. (2012) suggested PLC work builds strong relationships, demonstrates the need to reflect on the work, and involves regrouping as the PLC work continues. These groups also need (a) availability or release time from instruction, (b) resources such as research materials and data, and (c) the support of peers and administrators

(Hord, 1997). Without time, resources, and support, faculty may not see the value in the work or believe the administration supports it (Coburn et al., 2012; Hord, 1997).

Although PLCs are not a new concept and are used more frequently in the primary and secondary environments, research supports the concept for postsecondary education. Including PLC work in community colleges, where fewer full-time faculty are employed, could add consistency and quality to instruction (Beaumont, 2020). Adjunct and part-time faculty are paid only for the courses taught each semester and often lack additional time for the work conducted through PLCs (Sam, 2021). Social networks are also believed to be an effective solution to the isolation felt by new faculty and those who teach part-time and as temporary adjuncts (Hord, 1997; Sam, 2021). These groups provide vital information for onboarding but also develop relationships and socialization educators require for success (Sam, 2021). Sam (2021) connected feelings of belonging and connectedness to peers and resources with increased instructor performance and student achievement. Social networking is a cost-effective method for employee retention and provides support through relationships (Roberts & Pruitt, 2008; Sam, 2021). For community college faculty to create and maintain participation in PLC work, they may require some sort of enticement and administrative support to ensure the results of the work are used by the community college (Beaumont, 2020).

PLC work is not always beneficial. Groups that are too large or too loosely facilitated can be less effective at driving meaningful change (Beaumont, 2020; Coburn et al., 2012). According to Beaumont (2020), college faculty-based learning communities are best if created as a year-long program with no more than 15 participants. Beaumont (2020) suggested the group be no smaller than eight people and focus efforts on developing scholarship, improving learning processes, and building community. The following characteristics of PLCs are outlined in

Beaumont's research: (a) focus on course content and classroom teaching, (b) active learning to provide faculty with opportunities to try strategies in their own classrooms, (c) collaboration for sharing and reflecting on work, (d) models of effective practice to assist in developing strategies, and (e) mentors to provide more experienced support with regular intervals of feedback and reflection.

Content of social networking conversations needs to be elevated to discuss key topics such as reform, best practices, or course-specific content (Bryk et al., 2010; Roberts & Pruitt, 2008). Over time and with regular monitoring and maintenance, PLCs can use their social network to develop high-level conversations that drive educational reform and address changes to policy and practice (Bryk et al., 2010; Coburn et al., 2012; Hord, 1997). Mentors and more senior members of teams can also assist in providing more individualized support for PLC participants.

### **Crisis, Reflection, and Collaboration**

Mezirow's (1997) transformative learning theory was applicable to the process of critical reflection and collaboration during the COVID-19 pandemic because of its emphasis on crisis as instigator or disorienting dilemma in the process of reflection and growth. Mezirow (1997) identified a preceding event as a catalyst for change. In the context of this study, the cause of disorientation was COVID-19. Mezirow suggested this crisis phase is the initial one of 10 that brings about new meaning making, understanding, and assimilation of the new to the old (Eschenbacher & Fleming, 2020; Mezirow, 1997; Mezirow & Taylor, 2009). As the phases progress, the disorientation is replaced with new tools and renewed confidence (Mezirow, 1997):

1. Disorienting dilemma
2. Exploration of feelings – such as guilt or shame

3. Critical reflection on assumptions, which guided the learning process and meaning making.
4. Realization that others share our problems.
5. Learners adjust and find new ways to relate.
6. New courses of action are created.
7. New knowledge must be acquired.
8. We try out new roles.
9. We establish confidence in new roles.
10. New perspectives are assimilated into regular life.

COVID-19 is not the first pandemic for the United States; it was certainly a crisis instigator or a disorienting dilemma and especially frightening for those who had not experienced an event like it (Sobral et al., 2020). Due to changes in technology, media, and communication since the last widespread plague in America, there were ways to overcome the crisis once individuals found ways to manage their disorientation (Mezirow, 1997; Mezirow & Taylor, 2009). It is with positive hope for growth and change that Mezirow suggested individuals embrace chaos, engaging with themselves and one another to develop opportunities to grow and create new perspectives (Marler et al., 2021).

Mezirow's second phase addresses exploring feelings, in a reflective manner, and addressing assumptions. This phase also includes the realization that others are experiencing similar emotions as they navigate the period of crisis. In the educational setting, faculty and staff indicated they were living through the same fears as students, due to the unknown elements of the pandemic (Marler et al., 2021). In March 2020, campuses closed to all nonessential personnel (Limniou et al., 2021; Marler et al., 2021). This meant a period of disorientation for faculty as

they moved classroom content to a remote modality and delivery system (Marler et al., 2021). Students and faculty had to rely on email and other campus communications systems to understand the changes happening around them (Marler et al., 2021).

Mezirow (1997) continued the explanation of phases with a period of adjustment and new skill attainment. In the context of this study, this period could last several semesters, as some students and faculty remained in the remote modality longer than others (Limniou et al., 2021). Students with limited resources were forced to ask for help or risk failing their classes while others chose to pause their education (Limniou et al., 2021; Marler et al., 2021). Faculty and staff without remote work experience had to learn to navigate their jobs differently, and students needed direction for completing their coursework (Limniou et al., 2021).

Using reflection and dialogue, teachers became learners again and found new ways to meet student needs (Coburn et al., 2012). Faculty with familiarity with computer programs, applications, and video-sharing technology became teachers to their peers, and the faculty who needed to learn became their students (Marler et al., 2021). As these new ideas, technologies, and strategies became accepted and used, confidence increased. Faculty and students developed improvements to their practice that encouraged them to embrace new learning modalities (Marler et al., 2021). Mezirow's (1997) final phase of assimilating change into regular life is how educators began to define their new normal.

### **Related Research**

Hyvärinen and Vos (2015) theorized that communication is vital to crisis survival and can build resilience during times of crisis or disorienting dilemmas. Their concept, communication supporting community resilience, served as an additional framework for this research and includes four phases for collaboration during crisis situations (Hyvärinen & Vos,

2015). This collaboration, seen in this study as PLC work in conjunction with individualized reflection, allows for sensemaking, multi-stakeholder dialogue, and engagement within the organization and among the public (Hyvärinen & Vos, 2015). In the community college context, this framework opens the opportunity for collaboration among faculty and the possibility for students to become participants in potential solutions. Those solutions must be evaluated to determine if they are effective; if not, the strategies can be modified.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, students and faculty were forced to communicate through technology such as learning management systems and web conferencing software (Limniou et al., 2021). For completely online students, communication could be more limited to the interpretation of typed words in the form of instructions, guidelines, and grading criteria. Students without classroom interaction resorted to emailing instructors for clarification and guidance (Marler et al., 2021). Delays in responses could lead to students' frustration and disengagement from the course. Students would likely define communication more critically during the COVID-19 pandemic, as it was often the only connection between them and their coursework (Limniou et al., 2021; Marler et al., 2021).

The same isolation and frustration identified by faculty before the pandemic could grow rapidly without necessary communication (Sam, 2021). Students demand relationships with faculty and staff that include two-way interactions through active listening, understanding, and responses deemed appropriate during such a stressful and difficult time (Beaumont, 2020; McGill et al., 2021). In this way, one-sided communication, or faculty merely delivering information, is insufficient.

Faculty, similarly, demanded more of administration in the way of leniency and sensitivity to their unique situations in and out of the classroom (McGill et al., 2021). Students

and faculty sought more communication to build resilience and direct their energy away from uncertainty and toward academic success (Hyvärinen & Vos, 2015). According to the conceptual framework of communication in crisis, relationships are built through preparation, reassurance, ongoing support, resolution updates, and the evaluation of solutions (Hyvärinen & Vos, 2015). These steps are often not linear but, especially during a crisis like COVID-19, shift back and forth with the resurgence of cases, the variability of stakeholder needs, and changes in the community (e.g., funding or political changes, policy adjustments, and other dynamic variables; Hyvärinen & Vos, 2015).

Communication in higher education can address areas such as policy clarification, accessing resources and technology, financial aid and emergency aid availability, process changes, and many other variables that can mean the difference between dropping out of college and persisting (Beaumont, 2020). Student resilience can mean the opportunity to persist to degree completion or feeling there is no hope to achieve that goal. There is little research about the ways COVID-19 contributed to declining college admission and persistence rates, especially at community colleges, but theories are beginning to emerge that suggest a connection (McGill et al., 2021). Many students enrolled at community colleges often work as first-responders and front-line workers, and other students were impacted by shortages in childcare and other social services (McGill et al., 2021).

Although COVID-19 is the most widespread crisis facing students and faculty alike, for many with pre-existing trauma or traumatic experiences during college, the pandemic is more significant (Overstreet & Matthews, 2011). Many individuals are believed to have experienced violence or repeated incidents of trauma as they mature into adulthood (Overstreet & Matthews, 2011). Students of color have an increased exposure to violence as do low-income students



(Overstreet & Matthews, 2011). The more frequently individuals experience trauma, the more likely they will struggle in other aspects of college life. Overstreet and Matthews (2011) discovered a link between previous trauma and the diagnosis of mental health concerns, including posttraumatic stress disorder, anxiety, and behavioral concerns. In the most extreme cases, trauma is believed to impact executive functioning, or the ability to complete ordinary life functions (Overstreet & Matthews, 2011).

The pandemic has been traumatic for all individuals but especially for those with at-risk family, essential jobs, spouses who must work, and for those unemployed due to the economic effects of the virus and stay-home orders (McGill et al., 2021). For individuals with a history of trauma or those with unsafe homes, stressful home lives, and those with young children, the risks can be more impactful. Hyvärinen & Vos (2015) suggested increased communication as a method for building resilience and the ability for students to persist through these uncertain times.

Many students have become resilient and can manage stress and difficulties more easily, but, for others, the additional burden caused by the pandemic can be too much. A low grade, confusing concept, or vague assignment parameters can be enough to cause disruption and disengagement (Hyvärinen & Vos, 2015). Students might decide that college is “not for them” and their lack of confidence is only exacerbated by ineffective communication or a lack of relationships. If students lose trust in their instructor, students who did not have relationships prior to an online course may not know where to go for help (Ali et al., 2018).

In this study, I sought the student voice through a campus-wide survey. This information was used to pinpoint areas students identified as needing improvement during the pandemic. This

information could help MVCC faculty communicate better with one another and with students and identify areas for improving student persistence and success.

### CHAPTER 3: DESIGN OF THE CONTEXTUALIZED INVESTIGATION

“But the teacher’s problem—as a teacher—does not reside in mastering a subject-matter, but in adjusting a subject-matter to the nurture of thought.”

—John Dewey

The purpose of this chapter is to provide an overview of the methodology, data collection, and data analysis utilized in this phenomenological study. This action research examines the faculty and student experiences during COVID-19 and the effectiveness of reflection and collaboration opportunities as a means of communication, sensemaking, and resilience. The primary goal is to add to the body of work related to COVID-19 as well as fill the existing gap in literature regarding professional development within community colleges. I collected data utilizing the phenomenology of faculty experiences and compared their observations and subsequent actions with student surveys.

While coping with the pandemic, instructors faced many unknowns and were required to step outside their roles and expertise related to student support and technology implementation (Limniou, 2021; Marler et al., 2021). Faculty also had to maintain their own wellbeing while teaching students who were also coping with pandemic impacts (Limniou, 2021). During previous national disasters, researchers identified three major factors separating successful and unsuccessful students: (a) relationship building, (b) communication, and (c) technology (Ali et al., 2018). Research has shown students need access to technology to be part of the educational and evaluative processes. Technology could include recordings or live technology, but the data suggests active engagement through technology is more successful than self-directed learning (Ali et al., 2018; Limniou, 2021). Ali et al. (2018) found students need human connection to process their feelings and to remain engaged in course content. Students also need to know what

is required of them and how to best meet those expectations. Students use this information to ensure they are on track and progressing successfully (Ali et al., 2018).

As stated in Chapter 1, the context of this study is an open-admissions community college that serves approximately 8,000 students annually. At the time of this study, Middle Valley Community College (MVCC) had moved classroom instruction to the distance education environment, either through remote instruction or fully online coursework. Like many colleges, MVCC had many instructors who already used learning management software and live or recorded instruction, but there were many faculty who had taught only in-person and had never used these tools (Limniou, 2021). Similarly, many students had some experience with online or remote instruction, but many had never experienced distance instruction (Limniou, 2021; McGill et al., 2021). The pandemic pushed many people out of their comfort zones while simultaneously created other disorienting dilemmas in their lives.

In this phenomenological study, my aim was to identify faculty and student needs during their lived experience at one community college (Moustakas, 1994). The data gathered through this work was used to answer the research questions related to connectedness and assess if faculty reflection and collaboration assisted in the awareness of student needs. I invited faculty to participate in this work because they engage in professional relationships. These faculty typically use MVCC support services at a high rate and are considered proactive student advocates. Dufour et al. (2008) described such individuals as “opinion leaders” (p. 351), or people who are trusted, knowledgeable, and willing to devote their time to this work. Enlisting opinion leaders in this research was helpful in achieving more widespread buy-in by other faculty and staff for future initiatives and research (Dufour et al., 2008).

In this study, five instructors journaled about their course experiences during the spring, summer, and fall terms of 2000. Participating faculty included part-time and full-time instructors with course loads of at least two courses at MVCC. The volunteers happened to be representative of the diversity in the faculty population at MVCC, representing a variety of culture and gender representation. The ages ranged from 30–60 years, and the faculty taught different subjects including reading, graphic arts, communications, mathematics, and education coursework.

Phenomenology uses the perspectives of those involved to understand both social and psychological phenomena (Welman & Kruger, 1999). As Vandenberg (1997) emphasized, everyone is born a phenomenologist, but some are better at sharing their stories than others. Vandenberg (1997) wrote:

Phenomena have something to say, which is common knowledge among poets and painters. Therefore, poets and painters are born phenomenologists. Or rather, we are all born phenomenologists; the poets and painters among us, however, understand very well their task of sharing, by means of word and image, their insights with others—an artfulness that is also laboriously practiced by the professional phenomenologist. (p. 41)

The five faculty members who agreed to participate in the reflective journal process of the research were integral to the study due to the need to balance the quantity of journal entries with a diversification of experience. Ideally, in phenomenology, journal data should include a range of participants from two to 10 to ensure sufficient saturation (Groenewald, 2004). The participating faculty journaled for 1–3 semesters, including the summer accelerated semesters. More than five participants would have generated too much information for effective coding and use for qualitative analysis (Groenewald, 2004). Fewer than two participants may not have

provided a breadth of reflection spanning coursework and experiences. Five participants provided more than adequate data for the study.

The faculty members journaled for as long as they were willing, up to three semesters. Journal prompts were used, and instructors were asked to contribute at least one entry per week for one semester. The prompts included directions to write about any topic related to the move to distance instruction. After the journals were collected, at the start of Spring 2021, I used an existing committee of faculty to form a Professional Learning Community (PLC). The innovative teaching practices (ITP) committee was already chosen by the administration and gathered monthly (except for some summer months) through the spring and fall semesters to provide feedback and planning for professional development work collegewide. During the pandemic this work was paused so the group focused on classroom experiences and problem solving to create a community of learning.

This design fulfilled two purposes: (a) to provide clarity and insight into the journal writing and (b) to provide opportunities for community among faculty. Although teacher reflection is integral to meaning making and navigating challenges, collaboration expands action research by providing additional experience and perspectives (Coburn, & Russell, 2008; Hord, 1997). The PLC helped in unpacking emergent themes and realizations created from reflective journaling through facilitation. The group was assured that all data would be anonymized to protect them and students and to encourage open and honest conversations. Lastly, I used a student survey conducted in the fall of 2020 to address areas of improvement through an open-ended response question. I will provide more information about this tool in subsequent chapters.

## **Data Collection**

This study includes two main phases of data collection. Phase one includes: (a) reflective journals submitted by five faculty actively engaged in student instruction (b) and a student-completed survey administered in the fall semester of 2020. Phase two includes: (a) transcripts from a series of professional learning community meetings engaged in collaborative conversations.

### **Phase One of Research**

In the first phase of data collection research, five MVCC teaching faculty participated in reflective journal writing. These instructors represent a variety of subject areas taught at the college and each one taught between two and six courses per semester. I provided the group with paper journals, delivered to their homes where they worked during this period. Some chose to use this method of hand-journaling, although others preferred digital journaling or using course-related tools.

Dufour et al. (2008) suggested using the opinion leaders of an institution to engage in new initiatives because they can often bring others to the table. Opinion leaders are members of a group who often take formal or informal leadership roles (Dufour et al., 2008). I identified opinion leaders by using the following criteria: faculty in leadership roles, faculty involved in committee work, and others who are engaged at MVCC as volunteers in other official or unofficial capacities such as coordinators of departments or pilot programs. These individuals have experience following through with committed projects and expressed interest in this research.

The group had previously reached out to me for assistance during the pandemic, as they were interested in ways to assist students more effectively. Dufour et al. (2008) defined leaders

of reflection and critical conversations as those who may only be a small group within a school but are both connected to and respected by their peers. Although I was concerned there would be few faculty willing to provide their time while coping with so much work and adjustment, that was not the case. The faculty who joined my group of participants also expressed interest in experimenting with new approaches during the pandemic.

Each journal I provided to participants included a typed prompt to serve as a guide for the work. Janson and Filibert (2018) suggest journaling activities are most effective with structure and direction. Faculty participants were asked to share their feelings relative to the pandemic and the change to online and remote instruction. They were asked to think about the impact the pandemic had and what they will take from the experience once they return to campus. Despite providing five paper journals, only one participant decided to use it. One used a video and graphic arts digital journal. Three others used Google Documents, which they shared with me through digital access.

The instructions were intentionally designed as semistructured (see Appendix D) for two reasons: (a) I wanted to know what topics the faculty naturally chose and how they would use the reflective exercise in a way that helped them and their students; and (b) the uniqueness of the situation called for flexibility because no one knew what the effects of the pandemic might be, how long it might continue, and when instruction would return to the on-campus environment. My primary concern was to direct reflection in ways that addressed the research questions and to allow the research to determine how the activity and the group discourse mirrored student input.

Although the faculty were given a deadline of December 2020, I began accepting journals after the end of the first semester. Although I could access the digital files, I still needed to collect the paper journal. The content of all journals was deidentified and the entries coded.



I reviewed the journals as they were received and then stored the journal submissions while I determined the possible coding methods best suited for my data collection sample. I analyzed the data using descriptive, or in vivo, coding to use the participant voice. The first phase of coding was done by hand in the paper journals and printed digital journals. Once I coded each experience, I categorized the codes by theme (Saldaña, 2021). This coding style allowed the data to be compared to the other data collected from the PLC and student surveys which I processed in a similar manner.

Some of the journals were very subject specific and others focused on student conversations and experiences. I anticipated specific research-related themes would be discovered in the reflections and areas of interest for additional development. I also anticipated similar codes would emerge in some areas, but I was unaware if the loose direction for reflective journals would create different codes than the more tightly directed PLC work. As I continued in the process, I began to see patterns emerging from the collected data.

### **Revealing Institutional Strengths and Challenges Survey**

Data collection was also conducted via an institutional survey. During the fall of 2020, the administration of MVCC conducted a Revealing Institutional Strengths and Challenges (RISC) survey of students. The RISC survey prompts students to provide reviews of five distinct college departments and includes two open-ended questions for student input. I used only one of the open-ended questions in this study. That question provides a phenomenological perspective of the student lived experience and asks students what MVCC can do better. The question I used for the study read: “If MVCC could change one thing to help students succeed in college, what should it change?” (RISC Survey, 2020). I chose this survey due to the official nature of the tool and the high rate of participation with greater than 25% of MVCC students participating. I chose

the questions because of its alignment with my research questions and the ability to triangulate the data between the journals, PLC meetings, and survey.

The survey was conducted during the COVID-19 campus closure when students were enrolled in remote instruction. Student responses assisted in a comparative analysis with the data from the instructors' points of view. These data addressed the last research question: In what way are faculty aware of and reflecting on student concerns through journals and professional learning community dialogue? I was interested in exploring if student experiences align with faculty reflection. Student responses on the survey did not answer the research questions directly, but a comparison of the findings with reflective journal entries and PLC data helped determine how closely the themes aligned between sources.

The RISC survey was initially developed by assessing 10 focus groups at three community colleges. Developers spoke with sixty community college students about the challenges they faced with college and their experiences with administrative offices at their college (M. Jones, personal communication, February 16, 2020; see Appendix E). The researchers designed an initial draft of the survey from the focus group data and continued to refine the survey through test administrations. Percontor spokesperson, Megan Jones (pseudonym), provided this information through a validity and reliability statement:<sup>2</sup> “We went through several iterations of administering draft versions of the survey and reviewing the open-ended responses to challenge areas when students chose ‘other.’ We added the more common “other” responses until the open-ended responses were mostly idiosyncratic” (M. Jones, personal communication, February 16, 2020; see Appendix E). Jones (2020) explains further that the survey was reviewed by two senior community college administrators, and comments were

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<sup>2</sup> Full validity and reliability statement is included in Appendix E.

followed by cognitive interviews conducted by an independent company. After further revisions, the survey was piloted with another six community colleges and a test-retest analysis was performed prior to implementation at MVCC (M. Jones, personal communication, February 16, 2020; see Appendix E).

The survey distributed to all enrolled students by Percontor using MVCC student email addresses. Students were given 45 days to complete the survey, though the survey takes most students fewer than 9 minutes to complete. Percontor compiled the results and shared them with MVCC for disaggregation and analysis. MVCC anonymized the data to remove any individuals named in open-ended responses before releasing the findings.

### **Phase Two of Research**

In the second phase of data collection, conversations from a series of PLC meetings were recorded and transcribed. MVCC maintains a variety of committees to address specific changes to academic programs, use of data, and diversity initiatives. Each fall, the executive team, composed of vice presidents and the chief information officer, assigns faculty and staff to committees. The innovative teaching practices (ITP) committee works with the administration to plan a variety of onboarding and professional development events. This group also plans service-learning philanthropic activities in conjunction with the Career and Civic Engagement Development Center. During the period of May through December 2021, I used the ITP as a PLC to communicate best practices in the classroom and collaborate on identified areas of difficulty.

The ITP committee met monthly for 90 minutes, except for June and August. PLC meetings included eight full-time faculty members, two part-time faculty guests and speakers invited to present on various topics. During each meeting, an agenda was shared to assist in

directing conversations. Faculty were encouraged to share topics of interest related to the COVID-19 pandemic or teaching in the distance education environment. Speakers were chosen based on feedback from the participants. The meetings were held remotely through zoom and recorded with live transcription. The transcripts were held until the end of the fall semester, then coded for in vivo codes which were then categorized by theme.

### **Action Plan Data Collection**

After the two phases of data collection were completed, I determined additional data was needed to assist with the action plan design. During preliminary planning for Chapter 5 of this study, I discovered an unanticipated gap in the research related to professional development for community college faculty. Despite numerous studies related to the benefits of this work, I could identify no published studies about methods for sustaining reflective practices, such as journaling and PLC work. There was also little research related to sustained professional development at community colleges. Following this realization, I added an element to my data collection plan. I developed a faculty survey to explore the types of professional development the faculty at MVCC wanted and the types of incentives, if any, they would require to participate in professional development. The study was created and reviewed by administrators and peers at MVCC to evaluate the clarity of questions and overall design.

Faculty received the survey instrument via campus email in the middle of December 2021, prior to winter break. All faculty classifications were invited to participate—teaching, nonteaching, part-time, and full-time. The survey closed after 45 days, yielding 47 responses with a nearly even split between full-time and part-time faculty. The results of this survey are included in Chapter 5 of this study and assisted in identifying the next phases of this research.

The results were also helpful in providing data for the gap in the literature related to faculty input about professional development.

### **Rationale for Methodology**

The research type involved in this study is phenomenology because I explored the lived experiences of participants through individual and group interview components (Creswell, 2014). I used theories related to reflective practice, social networking, and communication through periods of crisis in the planning of this study, and I used key aspects of Moustakas' (1994) phenomenological research methods as I collected and analyzed data. Moustakas (1994) described phenomenology as sensemaking and that our knowledge comes largely from perception. According to Moustakas (1994), "Descriptions keep phenomenology alive, illuminate its presence, accentuate its underlying meanings, enable the phenomenon to linger, retain its spirit as near to its actual nature as possible" (p. 52).

Moustakas (1994) emphasized researcher neutrality in the work of phenomenology, eliminating bias and awareness of our likelihood to process data through a particular lens. Moustakas (1994) suggested researchers pause often in this process and pursue additional steps to maintain intentional and conscious awareness. Other recommendations include growing quiet and listening to the meaning in the data, connecting with research questions, considering all possible meanings, immersion in the participants' perspectives, and constantly clearing all biases (Moustakas, 1994). Researcher reflection is key to eliminating bias and examining judgements and incorrect perceptions by using first-person experiences (Moustakas, 1994).

Moustakas (1994) also suggested employing epoche—the clearing of previous perceptions from the researcher's conscious or unconscious mind. This is done through the validation of data, invalidating assumptions, and striving to see experiences as if for the first time

(Moustakas, 1994). The process of epoche needed to be a conscious one for me as an insider who is aware of faculty, courses, and content. It was important because I am not faculty at MVCC, so my initial impressions of these experiences may not be valid. Using my own awareness of the propensity to insert myself into the data assisted in removing my bias.

One way I maintained epoche in the data collection and analysis in this study was to take breaks in the work. Moustakas (1994) suggested rest and repetition to step back from the data and possible bias and return to the process weeks or months later. In the context of this study, I reviewed the journals and PLC notes as I received them and as I transcribed them. I then stored them for several weeks before coding. During the coding process, I repeated the rest and repetition process by coding in cycles with periods of rest and repetition inserted.

Moustakas (1994) also suggested coding through multiple methods to improve the overall meaning making of the data. Focusing on the actual words of participants through in vivo coding helped me focus on the quality experience (Moustakas, 1994; Saldaña, 2021). Moustakas (1994) defined the process of look and describe as “knowing the horizons of the phenomenon” (p. 77). Through these steps, and through using cycles of coding, bias may still exist, but will be significantly reduced (Saldaña, 2021).

### **Data Analysis**

The data obtained through journals, PLC notes and transcripts, and student survey open responses were coded to capture participants words’ and further analyzed by combining codes into themes. Each aspect of the coding process was done manually using printed digital journals, meeting transcripts, and photocopies of physical journals. Data were color-coded and anonymized before being compiled into tables using a word processing program. The coding took place in several phases. Saldaña (2021) suggested the first phase of coding is analysis or

taking the data apart; the second phase is the opposite, as the researcher assimilates the data together or into meaning.

Those themes were further condensed to omit repetition and compared to determine if results answered the research questions related to faculty awareness of student concerns. I triangulated data through the initial three methods of data collection in the different phases of research. I assessed the reflective journals, the notes, and transcripts from the ITP PLC, and I used a survey to identify student areas of concern. The survey findings in the last and third phase were helpful in triangulating data from faculty journals and the PLC and assisted in answering the research questions (Creswell, 2014).

Throughout this coding process, I used a journal to record my own thoughts and omit bias through reflection. According to Herr and Anderson (2015), bias and losing objectivity are natural occurrences in action research. However, critical awareness is key to removing the effects of these elements on the outcome. I used the journal to focus on the qualities of the described experiences of my participants (Moustakas, 1994). For this reason, I coded in phases and took breaks between those periods of work to employ epoche and invalidate my own assumptions (Moustakas, 1994). Lastly, I used my doctoral learning scholar community classmates as critical friends through coding exercises to assess if members of the group used codes similar to my own (Herr & Anderson, 2015). This took place after my first and second coding phases and prior to data analysis.

### **Reliability and Validity**

Greenwood and Levin (2006) defined workability as the extent to which actions occur to resolve the question of study. Workability is just one method to ensure validity in action research. My plan to ensure study validity was to answer the research questions through a

comparison of all data sources rather than just one method of data collection and analysis. The research questions are as follows:

1. How do college instructors describe their teaching experience during COVID-19?
2. How do faculty describe the student experience they witness in reflective journaling and group discourse with other faculty?
3. In what way are faculty aware of and reflecting on student concerns through journals and professional learning community dialogue? How do student experiences align with faculty reflection?

I triangulated data with a college-provided student survey, faculty reflective journals, and group interviews. No single source of data was used to answer the questions; instead, data were coded by theme in the journals, PLCs, and survey, and the common themes were combined for efficiency and clarity. Although I intended to use the content of each of the five participant journals and the transcription of five PLC meetings, I also coded data from as many survey participants as necessary until I reached saturation. As a novice researcher, I anticipated I may not code every survey response but did not realize patterns were appearing until processing several hundred responses. Using in vivo coding allowed participant voices to carry the data through the coding process. Each method of data collection and analysis—and the process of rest, reflection, and repetition—helped minimize my biases in the process.

### **Assumptions**

At the onset of data collection, I knew only what my participants had shared through conversations, preliminary journal work, and PLC meetings. Participants had voiced concerns related to submitting content not relevant to my study or that their entries would be boring, too short, too long, or rambling. As a novice researcher, I had no assumptions about the data but



provided consistent messages to the participants to continue the best they could and not be concerned with the study or subsequent assessment. I did not know what the data would infer.

As an insider to this action research and as someone who chose opinion leaders and faculty champions, I did expect to find connections among themes from faculty and student data. I believed at least some faculty are in tune with the students and the research, journals, and collaborative conversations through PLCs would help faculty identify these areas of concern. Lastly, I was concerned that too few students and faculty would participate in the journals, PLC, or answer open-ended survey questions during an overwhelming time.

### **Limitations**

The primary limitation of this study is the generalizability across all community colleges. I only assessed faculty and students in action research at my own institution. Action research is designed to be conducted by professionals and assessed for purposes of improving our practice (Herr & Anderson, 2015). As an insider at MVCC, it was appropriate to focus on MVCC and use the data tied to my role as administrator and faculty trainer. However, I cannot be certain that the culture of MVCC and the backgrounds and situations of our faculty and students would be consistently seen at other community colleges. For this reason, I use the term transferability rather than generalizability (Herr & Anderson, 2015). The findings are transferable to other institutions by sharing the context from which they arose (i.e., the COVID-19 pandemic) and faculty experiences with reflection and collaboration. In this way, information can be applicable in other settings (Herr & Anderson, 2015).

Another acknowledged limitation to this study is the element of self-reporting throughout the data collection methods. Faculty self-reporting in journals and the PLC work and student self-reporting in the survey provide considerations for under reporting or over reporting variables

(Baker & Brandon, 1990). The PLC transcripts also involved observation in addition to participant reporting. While participants were aware the data would be anonymized, they may have consciously or unconsciously chosen to focus on specific topics or scenarios and avoid others. Similarly, students could raise concerns as a call to action since the survey was delivered through official channels.

I did not aim in this study to solve the larger issues of student engagement and success due to the number of factors impacting these phenomena, especially during a pandemic. Instead, I used the findings to add to the growing body of research related to community colleges and professional development. I assessed the faculty's use of reflection and collaboration during times of disorienting dilemmas—such as a global pandemic—and how the results of this study may be used going forward. Although I also acknowledge the limitations of a study with five to eight faculty participants in the journals and PLC meetings, the research confirms these data provided sufficient saturation for study validity (Groenewald, 2004). I believe these data will be transferable to many community college settings, and I believe findings are valid and beneficial to the postsecondary community. For MVCC, these data will also assist in decision making related to promising practices for professional development.

### **Conclusion**

The reflective process is recognized by numerous theorists as a vital practice for moving all learners and practitioners to deeper understanding of relationships and the connections with experiences (Rodgers, 2020). Although used regularly in many disciplines for college students, instructors admittedly forget to use it themselves (Schön, 1983). Reflection must be part of regular practice and used in collaboration to be the most effective. In times of unprecedented

challenges, stress, worry, and decision-making, reflection can change negative emotions to hopeful ones (Schön, 1983). It can promote positive change and growth.

This action research phenomenological study used faculty experiences during the move from classroom instruction to distance education during the COVID-19 pandemic. I examined the use of reflection and reflective practice in the group environment through PLC work. The faculty data from journals and the PLC community, combined with student feedback, provided triangulation between sources and showed the benefits of faculty reflection. Answering research questions related to commonality in the data and student/faculty perceptions can assist in determining the benefits of reflection and collaboration as professional development and coping strategies during times of crisis. The findings can help bring temporary fixes into the mainstream. Reflecting and growing from challenges can help us embrace discomfort in times of disorienting dilemmas and in times of calm. This research will be transferable and assist instructors in seeing the benefits of reflection as regular practice and a source of collaboration and professional development.

## CHAPTER 4: RESULTS OF THE INVESTIGATION

The purpose of this chapter is to review the processes used to collect and analyze the data from phenomenological action research conducted from 2020-22 at Middle Valley Community College (MVCC). The planned data collection included faculty reflection through five faculty journals and the content of a series of professional learning community (PLC) meetings of the innovative teaching practices (ITP) committee. The data were analyzed, and the findings organized by a coding process which yielded categorized themes that emerged from journals, meetings, and a student-completed measure, the Revealing Institutional Strengths and Challenges (RISC) Survey. The themes determined through the three tools were then compared to determine answers to the research questions:

1. How do college instructors describe their teaching experience during COVID-19?
2. How do faculty describe the student experience they witness in reflective journaling and group discourse with other faculty?
3. In what way are faculty aware of and reflecting on student concerns through journals and professional learning community dialogue? How do student experiences align with faculty reflection?

As a result of the findings from this study, an additional research question arose related to the action plan development. I will address this additional phase of research more specifically in Chapter 5. The question addressed professional development design preference identified by MVCC faculty:

1. What incentives would faculty require to encourage participation in training and community conversations?

MVCC faculty were asked to complete a survey related to professional development to evaluate if faculty would be interested in reflection and collaboration beyond the period of COVID-19. An open-ended question requested the types of additional training faculty would want to see and what incentives, if any, would be needed to encourage participation in training.

### **Emerging Themes from Journal Reflections**

Reflective journal participants provided their work, which was expected to address the first research question and subquestion related to faculty experience and their awareness of the student experience during COVID-19. Research Question 1 is answered through the journals and PLC meeting transcription. The same data also answers the next two questions, “How do faculty describe the student experience they witness in reflective journaling and group discourse with other faculty?” and “In what ways are faculty aware of and reflecting on student concerns through journals and professional learning community dialogue?” The last research question is addressed by the similarities or differences between student feedback and faculty awareness. It will be answered through student survey responses and the comparison among all data sources.

Data coding of the journals took place on three separate occasions to minimize researcher bias and ensure validity through epoche (Moustakas, 1994). The initial coding took place when each journal was received from participants between summer 2020 and spring 2021. The second round of coding took place in the fall of 2021, after the data had been idle for several months. The final round of coding occurred in December 2021 after PLC transcripts were finalized and several months after the second round of coding. All three phases used in vivo coding to allow me to analyze the content based on the actual voices of the participants (Saldaña, 2021).

The initial phase consisted of color-coding and transcribing in vivo codes. The second phase involved categorizing the data into broader categories or themes. The last phase included

collapsing redundant and overlapping themes. The first comparison of the data was done after the second phase of coding, and a second comparison was done in February 2022 when I had completed each cycle of coding. I repeated my work intentionally, as a new researcher, to ensure I was aware of and limiting bias at each pause in this process. The work often coincided with course requirements that allowed for an introduction to this work and the ability to receive faculty feedback.

### **Emerging Patterns**

Participant topics in the reflective journals ranged from technology to student care and were generally subject-specific based on the courses taught by each participant. The math faculty discussed student struggles related to math, and a nursing faculty member discussed unique challenges faced by their students. As a novice action researcher, this diversity of responses initially appeared to lack a synthesis in topics, which at first review would not indicate relationships between the data. As the data coding process continued, patterns began to emerge in the data especially as themes were combined to incorporate related areas.

After using the process detailed by Moustakas (1994) of listening, processing, connecting with the research, and considering all possible meanings, I was also able to discover new insights in the journals. For example, faculty exhibited self-doubt but rectified it through increased communication with students. I often had to consider both the obvious and the more hidden meanings as well as the faculty insights. By taking breaks and repeating the coding or analysis phase, I could ensure I was considering all options (Moustakas, 1994; Saldaña, 2021). The second coding phase or synthesis included combining codes into more general themes such as

empathy and communication (Saldaña, 2021). As I continued this work, I continued to broaden the themes to reduce overlap. The results are illustrated in Table 1.

**Table 1**

*Journal Data and Coded Themes*

Journal participants	Subject taught	Codes	Themes
JP1	Graphic arts/communications	relationships, creativity, self-care, technology	Relationships, Teaching Strategies
JP2	Career exploration/education	frustration, self-care, creativity, resources, and relationships	Relationships, Teaching Strategies, Resources
JP3	Developmental reading, ESL, bridge	flexibility, empathy, relationships, technology, and communication	Relationships, Teaching Strategies
JP4	Mathematics	empathy, creativity, relationships, flexibility, communication, and quality of instruction	Relationships, Teaching Strategies, Quality and Value
JP5	Nursing	creativity, technology, flexibility, relationships, self-care, empathy, adjusting policy	Relationships, Teaching Strategies, Quality and Value

### Journals

As detailed in Table 1, the data revealed a diversity of responses categorized into several themes. Participant one (JP1) submitted a subject-specific journal using software from the communications course as a means of video and graphic journaling. Images of student engagement efforts and videos created by the students served as examples of the content presented (JP1 journal). Participant one struggled initially with ways to teach the subject of

technology while using technology as a tool, stating, “One of the coolest features in an online class is the ability to use tools that we may already have to heighten engagement such as tablet mirroring.” Images included in this entry show the use of the technology. JP1 focused on technology as a method of engagement and communication with faculty and students alike, journaling about assisting faculty peers with the adjustment to online learning:

I hosted a faculty Zoom party a few days prior to semester restarting to help folks get acquainted with Zoom in online practices, but, more importantly, to hopefully help them get the jitters out of the way prior to classes starting. This allowed them to explore and try new things without testing during class.

In this context, the entry was coded for both relationships and empathy toward colleagues. JP1 wrote about providing similar training for students. These two entries provided insight into the instructor’s teaching and the struggles experienced by faculty and students related to a realization that others were less experienced and needed assistance. In this entry, JP1 addressed the first research question and second research question: (a) How do college instructors describe their teaching experience during COVID-19? and (b) In what way are faculty aware of and reflecting on student concerns through journals and professional learning community dialogue? In a subsequent entry, JP1 used humor and levity to engage students and to empathize with the seriousness of the pandemic with Weird Week:

It’s time to mentor for our students. I wanted to ensure they could be silly and free in my classes. Humor is a big part of my curriculum. Weird week as I dubbed it, was an invite for my students to wear something weird, silly, or different (JP1 journal).

The journal included a photo depicting students and the instructor in a Zoom grid wearing costumes. They were participating and were smiling. I coded this entry as relationships. JP1 then



wrote several entries about gadgets that are helpful for them and their students when recording content for the course. These included gooseneck phone holders, cell phone applications, and other tools they use throughout the semester to bring different visual perspectives of the curriculum. JP1 also wrote about some free applications they located for students to use as students progress through assignments. I coded these entries for relationships, empathy, flexibility, and creativity.

JP1 concluded the journal with a post coded for empathy and self-care related to the quarantine:

In today's life there are so many factors that force us into isolation in lockdown because of this complete lockdown and isolation many of us are forced to work from our homes. Working from home sounds comforting up to a point, but we faced several issues whether it's related to attending group meetings or Zoom meeting.

JP1 also participated in the PLC group and provided input and guidance to peers in that venue. I present more from the PLC later in this chapter.

Participant two (JP2) is an instructor who teaches education and career exploration courses at MVCC. JP2 teaches part-time and is employed full-time at the college as a learning specialist. The journal rotated between the two different courses they were teaching while participating in the study. JP2's entries were coded for frustration, faculty self-care, creativity, and relationships. The posts detailed the struggles with engaging students in a lecture-style, special education course and the efforts they made to support those students. JP2 wrote:

Our first research paper on learning disabilities was due tonight and tonight was an exercise in patience. I have 12 students in my class and five of them reported tonight that they either need support with the paper or did the paper incorrectly.

JP2 documented and reflected on these struggles in their journal and brainstormed through their writing for ways to assist students. JP2 decided to use resources in the classroom by inviting a tutor to present APA format and other writing tips and then allowed students to resubmit their work. JP2, “The one thing I realized is that I should have done a more in-depth presentation on tutoring services at the beginning of the semester. I will have a tutor in my class next week.”

JP2 also wrote about trying different technology and creativity in the classroom with games as a content review tool. They wrote reflectively about the strategies employed, their feelings about flexibility being taken for granted by students as the semester progressed, and the struggle to balance rigor and reasonable expectations during the remote course delivery. JP2’s entries answered the same research questions as JP1 related to description of the student experience. In one entry, they compared the two courses and described their reflections and ways to improve the curriculum to increase engagement. JP2 considered both academic and nonacademic concerns but also their own self-care in the reflections:

Although I have had to manufacture engagement opportunities for EDU 105 using breakout rooms, small groups, and guest speakers, this class has had no problem sharing laughing and learning. Is it because this class is not intense in terms of grading? Is it the difference in content? Is it the time of the day? I don't know, I want to keep exploring my feelings about this topic.

Journal participant three (JP3) teaches developmental reading courses and English as a second language courses (ESL). They also teach a bridge program that is offered by MVCC for free to students who place below college-level courses on the placement exam. The course provides remediation so students can move into college-level work. JP3 wrote during the spring

and summer semesters of 2020 amid the emergency move to online learning. JP3 described the initial struggle to move course content to a remote modality:

When this whole change ever happened, I think I went into robot mode. I had to push emotion aside and get'er done. I was so grateful for the support and knowledge of colleagues who guided me through the process.

JP3 credited the first few weeks of in-person instruction with providing initial student-faculty relationships but listed technology and their own learning curve with it as the toughest adjustments. JP3 frequently expressed self-doubt as a teacher, writing, "It makes me wish more than ever I was teaching face to face." JP3 journal entries were coded as flexibility, empathy, relationships, technology, and communication. Their journal entries addressed the first research question and two of the sub questions: (a) How do college instructors describe their teaching experience during COVID-19?, (b) How do faculty describe the student experience they witness in reflective journaling and group discourse with other faculty?, and (c) In what way are faculty aware of and reflecting on student concerns through journals and professional learning community dialogue?

As the semester progressed, JP3 became more comfortable with the technology but found the need to extend flexibility of deadlines to their students, especially ESL students. JP3 indicated many students in these classes were working as front-line employees. JP3 also wrote that they chose to provide their personal cell phone number to students in the courses so they could text directly for support. JP3 detailed the ways in which they adjusted courses, based on feedback:

My students have so many worries beyond just academics. So many are on the front lines whether they're working in hospitals in some capacity, one-on-one home care, or

warehouses, or in the grocery stores. I've had to scale back some assignments and more importantly loosen due dates.

Journal participant four (JP4) teaches developmental and college level math. The faculty member is part-time but teaches at multiple community colleges in the region. JP4 says they are comfortable with technology and covered COVID-19 related topics in the entries. They also mirrored comments from the student-completed RISC survey that are not pandemic-related, specifically their feelings about the developmental math course they teach. Codes for JP4 included empathy, creativity, relationships, flexibility, communication, and quality of instruction. In their reflections about the move to remote learning, JP4 indicates students seemed to lose their motivation:

Students did not want to go to the board and process, they basically wanted everything handed to them. That is not how I teach. My classroom is a cooperative learning environment in that my students and myself work together to learn each concept.

JP4 wrote that students were interviewed for feedback and they learned that the combination of remote instruction and computer-system based homework was not working. JP4 shifted to creating their own math work to ease the workload and to maintain enrollment, describing it this way:

Because my students in the beginning did not want to do the online homework, I told them it was optional, and they could decide to do it or not. I strongly suggested they continued with both assignments in class and online. However, I did give a lot of points to my students through in-class participation and assessments prior to spring break.

JP4 used colleague resources (e.g., the dean of online instruction) to reach out to inactive students or those who were not logging in to class or completing work. JP4 expressed frustration

that students did not reach out to them, but they maintained focus on the issue and possible solutions. JP4 then celebrated the work that led to student retention:

This was the result of students feeling so stressed, yet for reasons I cannot understand, they did not reach out to me or to the other resources at the school. I requested a dean to reach out to a shortlist of students. We were able to get three of the five to succeed. I will take it as a win.

JP4 also used creativity when grading a practice exam and realizing students did very well. JP4 decided to count the practice as the actual exam and eliminate the second test. JP4 explained this helped in two ways: (a) it increased student course grades and decreased their anxiety; and (b) it also replaced a final exam with a project, which had not been done previously in a math course at MVCC. JP4 explained: “The success of this course was seen from the beginning, which is why I was so excited for their term projects. These projects were overall wonderful for the first time, and I'm hopeful they will continue to be employed” (JP4 journal). JP4 shared that the students all earned grades of A or B for the semester.

Instructor JP4 credited another faculty policy for student resilience. They stopped giving zeros for incomplete work; instead, students received a 50 and could replace that score with the assignment. According to JP4, students were more resilient because the zero caused them to lose hope and, in many instances, made recovery from that score too difficult. I will discuss this journal and the student surveys later in this chapter and include a discussion of the intersection of faculty reflection and awareness of the student voice.

Journal participant five (JP5) is a nursing instructor. They are also one of the department coordinators who helps develop policies. JP5 submitted the journal last, writing in the fall of 2020 and spring of 2021. JP5 had a unique situation of needing to be flexible while working in

the accredited area of nursing. JP5 wrote about policy and needing permission from the board of nursing to adjust the rules during the pandemic. JP5 also reflected on changes to the programs (e.g., replacing clinicals at hospitals and medical offices with alternatives during the pandemic) due to safety concerns and the inability of staff to supervise students. Due to these situations, they wrote that some colleges paused their programs:

We decided to continue teaching classes through Zoom to continue with our program since the PN. The program is hourly. This was a big learning curve for us all because we had not taught classes remotely prior. Adrenaline kicked in and we were ready for the challenge.

JP5's entries were coded for creativity, technology, flexibility, relationships, self-care, empathy, and adjusting policy. They wrote about students struggling to find appropriate spaces for Zoom sessions, using web cameras, sharing bandwidth, and managing without childcare while logging on from home. JP5 reflected on the policy to require web camera use in the virtual classroom.

Many students tried to find a quiet area in their home to attend lectures and many were in closets and in their basements. It was humbling to see a husband and wife, both students, sitting next to their hot water heater in their dark basement. Also, so many did not have the sufficient bandwidth to resume with their cameras on.

As a result of these challenges, faculty changed the policy and did not require the use of a web camera. JP5 reflected on the use of technology for student testing. During the pandemic, students were permitted to test from home with the use of lock-down browsers that restricted internet and digital file access. They also used an outside vendor to replace many of the skills

typically acquired in the clinical environment. JP5 and other nursing faculty increased student interactions daily to help them cope with the challenges during this time:

We encouraged instructors and student interaction with critical thinking exercises and to meet with students at the start of the day, conduct a preconference and review and assign video case studies. Then meet with the entire group again mid-morning midafternoon and at the end of the day postconference (JP5 journal).

JP5 explained that this was an increase in the workload for faculty but that they knew it was a requirement for students to succeed during this time, stating, “This has been a journey packed with emotions; however, emotions do not drive progress the act of doing accomplished continued progress.” Unlike other journal entries shared in this chapter, JP5 indicated students shared many positives about the online experience. JP5 was also the only journal participant who documented increased support across all student courses:

In discussion group, students express that they thought they would not like remote lecture compared to face-to-face classes. However, they felt that there were many benefits such as having time to eat breakfast, saving gas money, not leaving the house so early, listening to lecture because it was taped and posted to Canvas, being able to meet with faculty before and after class.

Throughout analysis of the journals, I developed a total of 11 codes. This was the case throughout each phase of coding. When adjusted for overlap, the 11 codes were reduced to three themes: Relationships, Teaching Strategies, and Instructional Quality and Value. These themes incorporate multiple areas. Relationships includes empathy, flexibility, communication, and self-care. The Teaching Strategies theme incorporates codes like technology, creativity, and

resources. Instructional Quality and Value incorporates policies and quality of instruction. A similar coding and analysis process follows for PLCs and the student survey.

### **Professional Learning Community Meetings**

The ITP committee is an existing committee that meets on the third week of each month and switched to virtual meetings in March 2020, when MVCC moved all courses and services off-campus. Meetings in the first few months of quarantine served as opportunities for venting and frustration and, as the facilitator, I maintained the meetings as a venue for faculty interaction and communication. The committee's original purpose is to plan and develop professional development opportunities, such as fall convocation events, but during the period of transition to remote learning, this work was paused. The group continued to meet and transitioned to address pressing needs as a PLC.

Meetings used for this study began in May of 2021 and continued through November of 2021, when the administration disbanded the committee due to a college-wide reduction in committee assignments. Each of the five meetings took place over Zoom conferencing software and were recorded and transcribed using the auto-transcription feature. Due to the successful outcomes from this action research, I have begun formal efforts to reinstate the committee, as I will explain further in Chapter 5. PLC participants expressed their disappointment in the PLC ending when I shared the change in the November 2021 meeting.

Each PLC meeting featured a focused topic: (a) tools for remote learning (May 2021), (b) the return to campus (July, 2021), (c) how to best support diverse learners (September, 2021), (d) new faculty learning/service learning programs (October, 2021), and (e) recap of fall/preparing for spring term 2022 (November, 2021). Guest speakers were invited to the sessions in July and September. The PLC did not meet in June, due to the summer break, or in August, because of a



schedule conflict with the faculty division meetings. In the next section, I present the data chronologically from each PLC meeting. PLC meeting participants varied slightly from meeting to meeting, so the data will be attributed by faculty description instead of anonymized codes.

**Table 2**

*PLC Data and Coded Themes*

PLC Meeting	Codes	Themes
May	Flexibility, Creativity, Empathy, Microaggressions, Technology, Resources and Self-Care	Relationships, Teaching Strategies, Instructional Quality and Value, Microaggressions
July	Relationships, Communication, Self-care, Adjustment, Technology and Strategies	Relationships, Teaching Strategies
September	Communication, Relationships, Empathy, Faculty Strategy, Microaggressions, and Professional Development	Relationships, Teaching Strategies, Instructional Quality and Value, Microaggressions
October	Self-care, Creativity, Technology, Communication, Professional Development, Empathy	Relationships, Teaching Strategies, Instructional Quality and Value
November	Empathy, Relationships, Communication, Self-Care, Frustration, Flexibility, and Policy	Relationships, Teaching Strategies, Instructional Quality and Value

The May 2021 meeting was the first recorded meeting following the study IRB approval. Faculty who had offered to present software products they used in their classrooms, were invited to present. This meeting included codes such as flexibility, creativity, empathy, microaggressions, technology, resources, and self-care. JP1, also a member of the PLC, provided a demonstration of products used in graphic design and communications courses. Some of those tools included cell phone applications that can be used with Zoom to present various images to students. After the presentation, faculty discussed their primary concerns with student

engagement and the tools or other strategies that are working. The PLC members assisted one another with ideas.

Several participants identified methods they found helpful (e.g., daily student check-ins). Others shared their difficulty with technology during Zoom sessions. One participant, JP3, said their struggle with technology helped connect with students, saying, “There needs to be training for instructors and the students going through the same thing on different sides. Students do enjoy seeing technical issues on the instructor’s end.” JP1 offered to assist individually with training, and other participants shared stories of technical challenges.

A math instructor described their policy for using web cameras and their frustration with unruly home environments, which was coded as microaggression for the purposes of this study because the comment launched a conversation about equity within the group. The instructor stated, “We should offer bonus points for a well-behaved home environment.” I also coded this as a microaggression due to the equity concerns it raised. Other members of the group responded this would be unfair because MVCC is not offering all courses on campus and this prevents students from choosing their home-classroom environments. In response, a participant who teaches developmental English shared, “The lack of student confidence and lack of help-seeking, students just want to be heard and they need continued flexibility to move on and off remote and in-class options.”

The June meeting was canceled due to a faculty non-report day. The July 2021 meeting was scheduled during the summer session, and three faculty attended in addition to the presenter, an MVCC student counselor. The transcripts were coded as follows: relationships, communication, self-care, adjustment, technology, and strategies. The counselor opened the meeting with an explanation of the types of mental health concerns being seen with MVCC

students and offered ideas for welcoming students back in-person and remotely. The counselor shared the need for continued flexibility and empathy, stating, “When there is a clear boundary when students know exactly what they can expect, I think it brings a comfort level that they may not necessarily love, by saying hey we're all in this together.” The counselor commended the work being done by the faculty.

Faculty shared ways they have used both flexibility and empathy in their remote classroom environments. One participant, a math instructor, explained the policy of one-on-one meetings for relationship building. Their statement was coded for relationships and empathy:

Trying to relate to the students even if you can't necessarily give them what they're asking for is something I've been doing for a few semesters. It's really time intensive at the beginning of the semester, but I have every single student in my class, I give them an assignment. You have to sit down with me for 5 minutes, even on Zoom.

The instructor records videos in their online classes, introducing themselves and sharing hobbies and other personal details to build rapport. A communications instructor (JP1) shared the benefits of remote learning for certain elements of his courses, including sharing detailed videos through Zoom and learning student names from their Zoom account screen names:

It's so hard to remember, you know I might have 150 plus students in a semester between two schools, so what I do, I'll take notes and whatever, you know. I think of what reminds me of something that will help me remember the student is really helpful.

This comment was coded for relationships. The faculty member also talked about struggles with teaching remotely from home, saying, “We're just mindful of ourselves that, like, maybe I'm already at my limit so I can give the best of myself to my students and sometimes I think as professionals we feel the need to, you know, do more and be helpful.” The counselor

agreed with the faculty and suggested more student and faculty use self-care during the pandemic, especially with some in-person classes returning.

The next PLC meeting took place in September and followed a convocation presentation in August about MVCC's designation as a Hispanic serving institution (HSI). Codes for this meeting include communication, relationship building, empathy, faculty strategy, microaggressions, and professional development. A psychology instructor who was also hired to serve as the HSI coordinator presented at the meeting and provided ideas for reaching Hispanic students more effectively. They suggested providing subject-specific resources in Spanish for students who are native Spanish speakers and explained how this resource can be used to clarify and build confidence for English learners. The HSI coordinator offered to assist with identifying quality options, saying, "Some of us are bilingual. If you want to run something by, I'll be happy to help and let you know that it's actually pretty educational and good."

The HSI coordinator also shared how students often feel shame instead of looking for validation; faculty could share praise for bilingual skills and encouragement for improvement in speaking English effectively. The coordinator shared that those students who have learned, or are still learning, English may present themselves as quiet and shy when they really need to communicate their needs. They elaborated, "Sometimes they are struggling with those basic needs. Sometimes they are struggling with food, and where they are going to sleep. That doesn't always allow them to be successful in academics."

Several faculty contributed to the presentation, including a nursing instructor who indicated the MVCC nursing programs are very diverse and often have numerous students who are not native English speakers: "Teaching nursing lends itself very nicely to incorporating cultures because we see a diversity of culture not just in patients but in families." The presenter

encouraged the instructor to continue having open conversations about cultural differences for both student comfort and belonging and for educating future nurses who will work in the community.

Faculty participants expressed concerns about seeming racist by using the wrong words or phrases. The facilitator encouraged them to ask questions of the students and not make assumptions, suggesting it might be helpful to include a diversity statement in the syllabus and have open conversations about making mistakes and learning from them. The facilitator also shared a policy for communication in the classroom space, saying instructors should encourage relationships of trust:

You can talk to me one-on-one privately, you know? Just different steps on how we can have a conversation but not keeping it to themselves and leaving. I am also a human so if I say something please talk to me and we can come to a resolution.

The presenter shared a recorded interview with an MVCC student. The student was telling a story about the use of a racial slur in the classroom. In the student-shared scenario, the faculty member did not address the student who used the word. The facilitator then asked the PLC members to share how they would address the situation if it happened to them. A math instructor shared frustration about the scenario, saying,

I'm Jamaican by birth, and I spent most of my life there so coming to the United States and accepting a certain culture, there are certain things for me that are totally unacceptable from where I come from. But it's just a norm here.

A science professor shared how they would take an academic approach:

I think I might have scolded that student for using unacceptable language. In biology I have an advantage, there's a website called Howard Hughes Medical Institute and they

have some really good videos. Maybe like the very next class, there's one about human biological diversity and I would have just sort of said, let's talk about this.

The October PLC session began with an introduction to a new member of the PLC. An English instructor with experience at MVCC had been asked to lead faculty professional development events. The professor presented suggestions for quality remote and classroom instruction and asked the PLC participants to share their experiences. The codes assigned to this meeting included self-care, creativity, technology, communication, professional development, and empathy.

In the October meeting, faculty shared feeling burned out and that their students were as well. An administrator suggested, “The faculty are feeling overwhelmed. Could we create some sort of faculty mentor/buddy program, just for the day? This would give the new people a face or person with whom to connect.” A math instructor suggested improvisation classes, asking, “Could we find someone who teaches improvisation? It’s great for stress relief and it's different.” Other input included demonstrations on successful flipped classroom design, micro-credentialing for faculty through distance education, and other ways to manage stress and emotional burnout. The presenter suggested wellness workshops, saying, “I want to offer restorative healing and contemplative rest—maybe an interactive presentation.”

As the facilitator, I asked participants about returning to service learning while still being cautious about COVID-19 and minimizing student and faculty exposure. One math instructor suggested outdoor events and outdoor collection boxes. An English instructor stated that students should still do their own events but having community would be beneficial, saying, “We should encourage students to seek their own opportunities. I am concerned about isolation and COVID.” The group concluded with the idea for starting a book club activity at spring convocation,

suggesting an assigned a reading related to diversity and asking their peers to read and discuss the reading at the formal gathering. Participants indicated this would provide more context for conversations about HSI and diversity policy development. A communications instructor (JP1) shared excitement for the idea, saying, “I like other departments joining in together. It is inspiring to see what others are doing in different departments.”

The November meeting was the last PLC meeting for MVCC. Senior administrators determined committee work should be minimized due to faculty burnout and appointed a stipend-based faculty trainer for this work. Participants used the meeting to seek suggestions for students with significant personal struggles. The codes assigned to this meeting included empathy, relationships, communication, student self-care, frustration, flexibility, and policy. The first example was about domestic violence. A math instructor shared several stories about increasingly serious legal issues, saying, “Students experiencing domestic violence, students being arrested and going to court. I’ve never had these problems before.” An English professor agreed with this comment and shared a similar experience about providing a listening ear to students with personal challenges. The instructor allows students to have exceptions to policies like having their web camera on, adding, “This job would be easier if I just didn’t care. I just want to fix everything.” The math instructor agreed and said they cannot do that. They cannot separate their feelings enough not to care about students.

Several participants shared additional stories and experiences with more intense emotions than they typically see so early in the semester. A communications professor said, “I’ll be so grateful for Thanksgiving break. I have been more lenient with soft deadlines. The students need a break; they need more time to talk.” The professor shared efforts to provide policy leniency and to allow students to leave class early if they report something that distracts them from

participating. A science professor shared their experiences as well, saying, “Students are increasingly burned out. The shock of coming back was overwhelming.” Faculty agreed individualized approaches and continued flexibility were necessary. They also described how these experiences were difficult for them as well.

This conversation brought participating faculty to the topic of a problematic policy—granting incompletes. The MVCC policy requires students complete most work during the semester to receive an incomplete. During the 2 years of the pandemic, many faculty extended this policy to students who had completed half of the work or even less. Members of the PLC discussed their experiences with this leniency and student results. According to the faculty, most students who received incompletes had unsuccessful results. The communications professor said, “Incompletes should first ask, does the student know the material, can they complete the work in a reasonable amount of time, and do they have the resources to do it?” Instead, the professor suggested providing the grade the student has earned at the end of the semester with a contract to change the grade if additional work is submitted through a 30-day period. The professor piloted this approach with several classes of MVCC students and with students they taught at a 4-year university. This approach yielded better results. The instructor shared, “Changing a grade provides more incentive.”

The group then expressed their disappointment that the committee work was ending. The December meeting was scheduled for a few days after the faculty reporting schedule, so most indicated they would not be available to meet. PLC members indicated, however, they were interested in meeting in January. The meeting concluded with an informal poll of the eight participants. They were asked to indicate, by using the raise hand feature in Zoom, if they would like to continue meeting. Each of the eight participants raised a hand. This informal assessment



and lack of available research about postsecondary professional development caused me to add a larger poll about learning communities, reflective practice, and professional development at MVCC. I requested an addendum to the IRB proposal and received permission to create a poll to distribute to the MVCC faculty. I review these data more fully in Chapter 5.

The coding process for the PLC transcripts resulted in 12 codes. I combined codes to reduce overlap and identified four emergent themes: Relationships, Teaching Strategies, Instructional Quality and Value, and Microaggressions. Relationships includes empathy, flexibility, communication, adjustment, and self-care. Teaching Strategies incorporates codes such as technology, creativity, resources, and strategies. Instructional Quality and Value incorporate policies, resources, and quality of instruction. Microaggressions stands alone to represent the bias and lack of awareness exhibited through presenter information and participant comments. It is possible that instances of microaggressions were underreported due to the self-reporting aspect of this study.

### **Emerging Themes from the RISC Student Survey**

In the fall of 2019, administrators at MVCC contracted with Percontor to deliver a survey designed to examine reasons students withdraw from the college and to strengthen weaknesses in the service areas, including customer service (Percontor, 2020). The RISC questionnaire is a digital survey instrument that is customizable and delivered through student email (Percontor, 2020). Results are compiled by the company and shared to college offices of institutional research for further disaggregation and application. The deans and directors at MVCC designed the survey for delivery in fall of 2020 to focus on five specific departments. The areas of focus included admission, advising, financial aid, the testing center, and the business office (RISC Survey, 2020). The findings about those individual offices are not included in this study due to

the enormous amount of data that is not directly applicable to my focus and research questions. The survey measure featured two open-ended questions: (a) What are MVCC's greatest strengths? and (b) What can MVCC change to improve student success?

I eliminated the first open-ended question from this study, because it appeared to lead students to answer with a positive response by only asking for strengths. This action research is not about identifying areas of strength but asking faculty to reflect on classroom experiences, identify areas of struggle, and suggest ways to address them. As a result, I chose to use answers to the second prompt, because it led students to indicate areas of concern, which could and did include COVID-19 struggles, and ways faculty and college services could assist in addressing these challenges. As the researcher, I felt these responses allowed for triangulation with faculty reflection and PLC critical conversations.

The study prompt was shared with more than 6,000 students via their college email accounts in October of 2020. Students who participated were offered entries in a raffle for three prizes (i.e., an Apple iPad and Amazon gift cards). This information was shared in their invitation email. MVCC students were given a period of 45 days to respond. Reminder emails were sent during that period. Results were received in December, and I was provided access and permission from the IRB to use the data in both my professional role and for this study.

The second open-ended survey question (OEQ2) received approximately 900 responses. Due to the large number of participants, I coded a small section of 50 responses through the first round before providing the sample my leader scholar community. Through this process, I received feedback from three peers I considered critical friends. Their feedback confirmed my initial coding work and reflected similar themes.

I resumed coding responses to QEQ2 in the next phase, until patterns appeared in the data. This happened after approximately 300 responses, but I continued until I coded 400. As a novice researcher, I wanted to confirm the patterns and ensure I was truly seeing repetition and not allowing researcher bias in my analysis. As I coded, the frequency of codes became repetitive. The codes and their corresponding frequency (in descending order) included the following:

- no areas of improvement (80),
- flexibility (52),
- instructional quality (48),
- resources (47),
- in-person course modality preference (39),
- relationships (32),
- communication (30),
- financial (23),
- technology (17),
- empathy (15),
- policy (12),
- student self-care (8),
- access (6),
- creativity (5),
- microaggressions (4) and
- student self-doubt.

As with the previous methods of analysis, I coded by hand multiple times over a period of 6 months to reduce bias in my analysis. A small sample was coded once and presented to a peer group. The selected sample of 400 responses was coded on two separate occasions with several months rest between the analyses. Some survey responses were coded with multiple codes. The initial 16 codes were consolidated to remove overlap and reduced to seven themes:

- Relationships (138 codes),
- Instructional Quality and Value (89 codes),
- No Suggestions (80 codes),
- Resources (47 codes),
- Modality (39 codes),
- Teaching Strategies (22 codes), and
- Microaggressions (4 codes).

Analysis of student survey data indicated Relationship was most frequently noted by students. In fact, the Relationship theme was the most frequently noted in all forms of data analysis. In journals, PLC meetings, and student survey responses, the need for connection, communication, and understanding were most frequently identified. Students asked for empathy and flexibility during the COVID-19 pandemic, and they indicated frustration when they could not connect with their instructors. The next most common theme, Instructional Quality and Value, includes financial, policy, and access challenges. Students indicated admission to preselected programs like nursing was an area of improvement, as were policies related to incomplete course assignments and consistency across schools. Although 80 students indicated there was nothing MVCC needed to improve, another 47 asked to have face-to-face courses added back to the schedule (RISC Survey, 2020). Twenty-two students wanted faculty to be

more engaging and creative and use more appropriate technology in better ways. The results and frequency of codes and themes are provided in Table 3 and Figure 1.

**Table 3**

*RISC Survey Summary and Coded Themes*

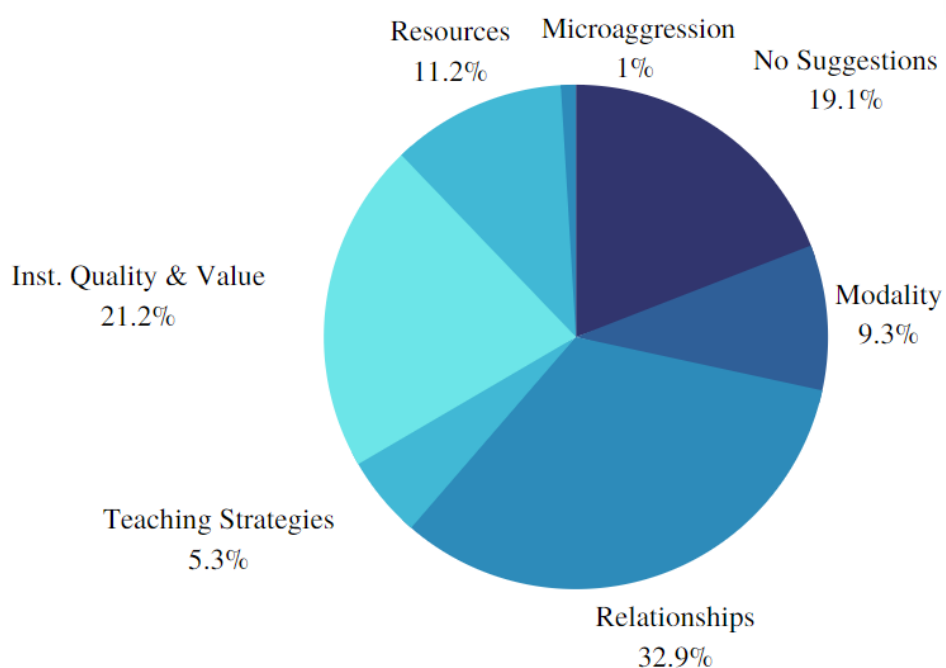
Themes	Codes	Frequency	Example
No Suggestions	No suggestions	80	“I cannot think of anything.”
Modality	In-person classes	39	“I would like to attend classes on campus like normal, but I understand the current circumstances prevent that and place it out of the scope of reason.”
Relationships	Flexibility	52	“A change I would make would be to not give out zeros for assignments whether they had valid excuses or not.”
Relationships	Relationships	32	“I believe online courses should have a mid-semester check-in, even if the class does not have midterms. I believe the instructor should contact each student individually about how they are doing in class and if they have any questions or suggestions that may help them.”
Relationships	Communication	30	“Forms of communication should be easier. It's often difficult to get a hold of someone and if you do, they do not usually know what they're talking about. Classes are also not what you signed up for. “
Relationships	Empathy	15	“Carefully listen to complaints about professors because our futures are in their hands, and some cannot handle that responsibility properly.”
Relationships	Student self-care	8	“Advocate for mental health check and these need to be personal and accurate. People everywhere are struggling, and college is one place where competent professionals have the ability to really help them.”

Themes	Codes	Frequency	Example
Relationships	Student self-doubt	1	“Provide a preview of what classes are going to be like from Professor so that students don't have to think about or debating if we should drop the course because it's not what we expected.”
Resources	Resources	47	“Extra tutoring because we only get minutes for being helped on.”
Teaching Strategies	Technology	17	“Develop an SOP for the use of canvas. It is ridiculous that everyone has to learn each professor's preference on how they use it additional stress has been created because the courses are not available until the first day of class you are not given the opportunity to focus on just course content.”
Teaching Strategies	Creativity	5	“For the online classes make sure there is interaction with the students to prevent sleeping in class.”
Instructional Quality and Value	Instructional quality	48	“Change the format of the math literacy course. This course does not provide the necessary lecture assistance needed to complete the course successfully. The setup of that course and its materials are extremely flawed.”
Instructional Quality and Value	Financial	23	“Access to books because not everyone can afford to get the books we need. Not everyone can get financial aid to get the books they need. college book extremely expensive for us to just use for 1 to 3 months.”
Instructional Quality and Value	Policy	12	“For remote classes, professors shouldn't make having your camera on mandatory. I live in a very remote area, which means I struggle a lot with my internet connection.”
Instructional Quality and Value	Access	6	“Availability of classes. Classes get full quickly.”
Microaggressions	Microaggressions	4	“Be more accepting and accommodating of lgbtq students, especially transgender people. I'm

Themes	Codes	Frequency	Example
			transgender and though I changed my preferred name, the email I received was addressed to my dead name, or the name I no longer use.”

**Figure 1**

*RISC Survey Results with Consolidated Themes and Frequency*



### **Researcher Reflections**

While coding, I maintained a journal to make notes and remain aware of my thoughts and any bias as a researcher. I also worked to question any bias I discovered in the work. During analysis of the faculty journals, I noticed the wide range of topics in the initial coding. There did not appear to be relationships between the topics until later in the coding process, when themes emerged.

I noted PLC meetings were more exciting in real-time but seemed to lose energy when working with the transcriptions. Working with in vivo coding practices and the text transcripts provided the opportunity to focus on the participants' voices. The RISC survey analysis was challenging for me. During the coding of student comments, I reflected how utilizing breaks was helpful because the comments challenged my objectivity. Students shared incorrect information at times, and, when I paused, examined my feelings, and resumed the process, I was able to identify the code as something more than the initial messaging. A complaint about hours of operation and convenience that reflected errors could also mean ineffective communication about the hours of operation (Moustakas, 1994). The misinformation students shared was very useful for my study because it reflected the need for more accurate and thoughtful communication and communicating using different methods. I also noted how students often commented about preference in addition to needs. Given the time of disorientation and crisis, it was sometimes difficult to analyze comments to determine how important these changes might be. I was determined to disregard my personal response to the data and consider all comments with equal weight.

As I coded, I also struggled to find appropriate ways to consolidate codes into themes. I wanted to develop broad categories to synthesize the results, but the themes that emerged during the second phase of coding mirrored the themes presented by both students and faculty. Students who participated in the RISC survey identified many of the same issues faculty did in both the reflective journal entries and the PLC meetings. Students also identified concepts that were related but not identical to those in faculty journals and PLC meetings. I was able to effectively consolidate codes into themes to reduce overlap. The relationships between the data sources were even more evident after this step.



The data indicated a connection between reflective faculty exercises through journals and PLC conversations and student-identified needs and concerns. Opinion-leader faculty and their peers were able to articulate the types of struggles students reported related to technology, the need for relationships, communication, access to services, and the desire for high-quality instruction. Many comments in the RISC survey were very similar to those captured through reflective journals, specifically related to technology, relationships, and quality of instruction. In fact, JP4 and a surveyed student both discussed the same developmental math class as ineffective and in need of redesign. Faculty and students indicated the problematic aspects of the web camera policy, as recorded in all three data sources. Students provided greater detail about their struggles for financial needs such as childcare, books, and transportation. It seems likely that faculty were aware of these challenges, as many of the same topics were mentioned in journal entries and PLC meetings.

Faculty technology use was another commonality specifically mentioned in all three data sources. Although faculty were concerned about using creativity for engagement purposes, students indicated faculty creativity is necessary to prevent sleeping in class. One could argue that engaging students may reduce student sleeping in class. Students shared some inaccurate information (e.g., limitations to tutoring availability and lack of accessible textbooks) in the RISC survey. These inaccuracies were identified because of my status as an insider to MVCC and access students and staff have to information in various formats and the intranet. They were coded as communication because the correct information may need to be communicated more effectively. Some students indicated concerns outside the control of MVCC (e.g., policy, rigor, and course and program requirements directed by federal, state, or accreditation requirements that cannot be changed). This information could be a helpful addition to the college

communication plan. One example is the mandated nursing GPA requirements. This was coded as both policy and communication because students were unaware of the reason for these requirements. Open-ended survey responses with inaccurate information and information with misunderstanding were few but required additional thought to both reduce bias and code effectively. Overall, the student-directed survey, faculty feedback, and PLC conversations provided connections between the data from participating faculty and students.

### **Emerging Themes from the Faculty Survey**

Findings provide data that support professional development programs using reflection and collaboration at community colleges. These tools assisted faculty in identifying and sharing concerns students also identified as important. This information provides additional support for quality and authentic relationship-building between faculty and students and emphasizes the importance of flexibility, when possible, in both policies and deadlines. Professional development using reflection and collaboration is already well used in primary and secondary education systems (Coburn, 2001). The challenge is how to design and maintain these programs in ways that are effective and sustaining in higher education. Although I did find evidence supporting this work, there is little available indicating best practices in the design and participation for effective community college programs.

As indicated earlier in this chapter, I added an additional piece of data collection to this study when I discovered this gap in the literature. I struggled to find studies related to faculty motivation for participation in reflective and critical conversations in their peer communities. I also struggled to find research related to effective encouragement for professional development participation with community college faculty. These data are necessary when developing next steps in this process. If reflection and critical conversations are helpful in identifying the

challenges and needs of students, it is important to identify next steps in developing these efforts as promising practices in community colleges. To identify some of these next steps, I developed a survey for MVCC faculty to gauge their levels of interest in promising practices and to identify what incentives, if any, would be necessary to encourage participation in this training. I discuss the results of this survey and implications in Chapter 5.

### **Summary of Results**

The findings presented in this chapter describe phenomenological data from faculty and students during the COVID-19 pandemic. Journal entries from five community college faculty, PLC transcripts from five ITP committee meetings, and 400 student survey responses were collected, analyzed, and synthesized to identify codes and themes in this action research. The data were processed to develop answers to the following research questions:

1. How do college instructors describe their teaching experience during COVID-19?
2. How do faculty describe the student experience they witness in reflective journaling and group discourse with other faculty?
3. In what way are faculty aware of and reflecting on student concerns through journals and professional learning community dialogue? How do student experiences align with faculty reflection?

The first question is answered both through the reflective journals and PLC. Faculty described scenarios and conversations with their students ranging from daily check-ins to personal stories of balancing work, school, and children. Faculty described improving practices such as technology and creativity and discussed legal struggles, burn out, and the need to expand flexibility. In both the journals and collaboration through the PLC, faculty indicated a readiness to assist students and one another during a time of disorienting dilemmas (Mezirow, 1997).

The second question is answered through reflective journals and PLC transcripts. Faculty provided examples of the student experience throughout the qualitative research, and their examples focus on three themes: (a) Relationships, (b) Teaching Strategies, and (c) Quality and Value. Each theme represents codes that include relationships, communication, empathy, flexibility, and self-care. Faculty recounted these challenges to their teaching practices as they connected with students during the shared experience of a pandemic.

The third research question examined faculty awareness. By triangulating the data among the three sources, faculty were reliably identifying student concerns and reflecting on them and ways to respond through their journaling and PLC group. The last research question also explored how student experiences align with faculty reflection. The evidence strongly supports the conclusion that faculty and students had similar perspectives. Although some of the codes were unique in the student survey, which resulted in more themes, students were asked to suggest overall institutional practices in need of improvement and not just faculty-perceived items. Students indicated concerns that were outside of classroom engagement.

Based on the similarity of codes among faculty journals, PLC transcripts, and student surveys, it is very likely that opinion-leader faculty are engaged with their students and hearing the feedback presented in their courses. These leaders among the faculty also demonstrated the ability to include and engage one another and anyone who joined the PLC meetings. These data suggest a strong relationship between faculty reflection, both individually and collectively, and student-identified needs. Based on the large body of research related to reflection, similar research will likely yield similar results at other postsecondary institutions (Coburn et al., 2012; Schön, 1983).

## **Conclusion**

The purpose of this study was to examine how community college faculty used reflection and collaboration opportunities as a means of communication and connection with one another and students to build relationships. These relationships helped faculty and students remain resilient during a unique and unprecedented circumstance. The results add to a growing body of research resulting from the difficulties experienced by students, amplified by the COVID-19 pandemic, and for overall value in professional development involving reflection and collaboration.

These data were collected during the COVID-19 pandemic, and participants noted feeling overwhelmed, isolated, and afraid. Faculty used this time to experiment with policies such as projects in place of final exams and providing students with opportunities to raise their grades even after the semester ends. Although these practices and piloted ideas likely would have happened without formalized reflection practices, the addition of this work was helpful in conducting these initiatives intentionally, documenting the results, and sharing the data as promising practices to their peers.

The benefits of reflective journals and PLC work are to provide critical thought and conversation to daily practice and challenge those practices (Coburn, 2001; Coburn et al., 2012; Schön, 1983). These data provide support for this work during times of calm and times of crisis, when faculty might be hesitant to take time for reflection and professional development work (Schön, 1983). Providing the groundwork for these groups and programs is critical to improving the efficacy of higher education instruction and developing new and innovative ways of engagement through relationships, strategies, instructional quality and value, and resources.

## CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION OF THE RESULTS

### Implications for Practice

The product of this research is data confirming promising practices enacted at Middle Valley Community College (MVCC) during a time of uncertainty helping connect students and faculty. The group of participating faculty were motivated to engage in community building, communication, reflection, and professional development. During the study, a fourth research question emerged: How do we continue to engage faculty in critical and meaningful conversations?

Although the pandemic is the first crisis of its kind to impact the world in just over 100 years, there have been many other natural disasters and weather-related crises impacting in-person and campus-based education (Limniou et al., 2021; McGill et al., 2021). If faculty and students benefit from an increased awareness of and conversations about critical areas, such as communication, relationships, and flexibility, these findings create a strong argument for continuing this practice. Research indicates students benefit from access to communication, technology, and relationships during a period of crisis (Ali et al., 2018). This study confirms those findings and adds additional factors such as the importance of in-person teaching, improved strategies, instructional quality, and value, and access to resources. The study also identifies the presence of microaggressions as an additional area of both student and faculty concern. By triangulating data gathered from faculty engaged in reflection, professional learning community (PLC) collaboration, and student surveys, this study adds to a growing body of research related to overall faculty awareness through reflection and collaboration. Faculty indicated their interest in creating and piloting new approaches and policies during their

reflection and critical conversations further adding to the possible benefits of this work in the community college setting.

The remote campus environment accentuated many weak spots in higher education. Access, equity, and microaggressions are among the most highlighted areas (Crawford et al., 2020; Limniou et al., 2021; McGill et al., 2021). Faculty often reported they found themselves with an opportunity to see into the homes of students, which led to many frustrations when students logged into their classes from crowded rooms. Faculty and staff reported filling roles like counselors and social workers, listening to student worries and stories of hardships, acquiring laptops for students without computers, and talking them through economic and childcare concerns, in addition to teaching (Crawford et al., 2020). For at least three of the participating faculty, assisting students with nonacademic needs required many hours more than developing the instructional components. Multiple faculty participants commented in the November PLC meeting that their jobs would be much easier if they did not care so much. These demands created emotional exhaustion over long periods and led to a shift in faculty priorities and teaching methods (Crawford et al., 2020; Limniou et al., 2021; McGill et al., 2021). Along with identifying areas of concern, reflection and PLC work provided faculty with the critical thinking and resources to gain assistance for themselves. With this research supporting reflection and collaboration and the data gathered through the work at MVCC, it is important to consider how community college administrators can develop support for reflective practices and collaborative groups.

Although the first step in gaining faculty support for these efforts is sharing the benefits to students and educators, sustaining this work takes time and effort. The pandemic provided motivation for participating in this action research, but the stress and rigor associated with the

pandemic was also a significant reason for many to choose not to participate. For some, there may be a benefit to incentivizing participation. To gauge interest in a program such as the one used in this action research and to identify which types of motivation would be most successful, I surveyed the faculty at MVCC. Survey respondents included teaching and service faculty who work both part-time and full-time.

The questionnaire was developed using Survey Monkey and consisted of four questions with the opportunity for open-ended “other” responses. The electronic questionnaire was distributed to the campus community through departmental deans and coordinators the week after final exams in December of 2021. One of the questions was used to gauge overall engagement at MVCC and asked if the faculty were involved in committee work. Another question asked the status of the faculty (i.e., part-time, full-time, adjunct, or service-related/nonteaching). As indicated in Figures 2 and 3, respondents self-identified as eight adjuncts (17%), six service faculty (13%), fourteen part-time teaching faculty (30%), and 19 full-time teaching faculty (40%). This is not representative of the faculty at MVCC, with more identifying as part-time faculty and adjuncts than full-time faculty.

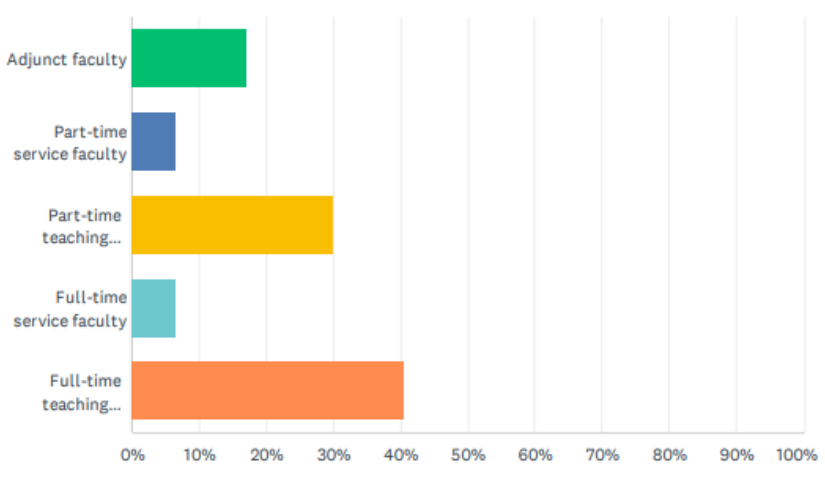
Of the 47 faculty who participated, 28 indicated interest in participating in reflective and collaborative work. An additional four respondents were interested, depending on the days and times of the meeting and any potential conflicts with teaching. Fourteen (29%) indicated no interest in reflection and critical conversations related to their student-facing instruction. One respondent did not answer the question. The next question addressed the need for compensation and examined the attraction of monetary options and release time from teaching (see Figure 3).



**Figure 2**  
*Faculty Survey Data*

**Q1 What faculty category would best describe your status at LCCC?**

Answered: 47 Skipped: 0

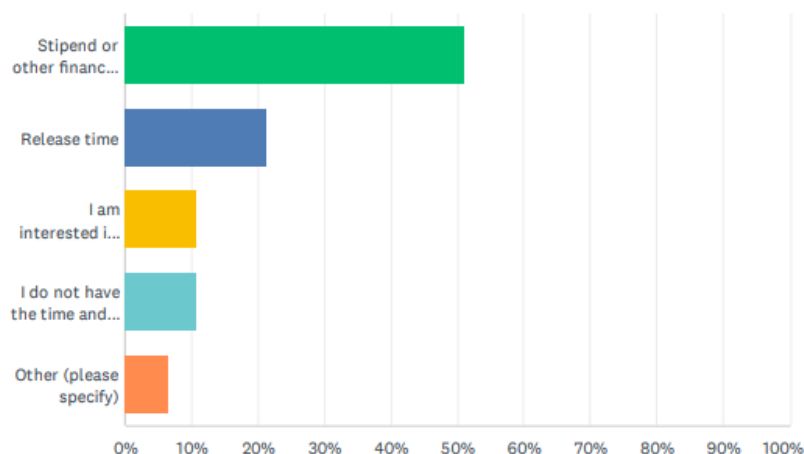


ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Adjunct faculty	17.02%	8
Part-time service faculty	6.38%	3
Part-time teaching faculty	29.79%	14
Full-time service faculty	6.38%	3
Full-time teaching faculty	40.43%	19
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>47</b>

**Figure 3****Faculty Incentive Data**

Q4 What incentives would help encourage your participation in professional development or professional learning communities (PLCs)?

Answered: 47 Skipped: 0



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Stipend or other financial compensation for time	51.06%	24
Release time	21.28%	10
I am interested in development opportunities without compensation	10.64%	5
I do not have the time and/or interest to dedicate to this work (no incentives)	10.64%	5
Other (please specify)	6.38%	3
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>47</b>

Based on the responses, the survey supports the development of a program with stipend or release time provided to participants. More than half of respondents favored financial incentive, and an additional 21% chose release time. Ten percent did not expect to receive compensation and eight (16%) were not interested in the work, regardless of incentive. The data indicated more faculty at MVCC would participate in reflective and collaborative work with incentivization, although some would join without. Some faculty were just not interested in the

work, based on the survey description. It is possible that opinion leaders could help bring people on board once the programming is designed and implemented. Dufour et al. (2008) advocated for starting PLC work with a few, interested educators and that those opinion leaders will bring others in by sharing the opportunity and benefits with their peers.

The survey also provided an open-ended response for faculty to suggest professional development topics. The faculty suggested the following: student engagement and empowerment, crisis management, pedagogy, technology, academic integrity, gender/sexual-orientation issues, techniques for teaching inadequately prepared students, self-care for instructors and students, social time, learning styles, student mental health, teaching in mixed modalities, time management, curriculum design, working with vulnerable populations, differentiated instruction, and equity and inclusion. Faculty also listed specific course software such as ALEKS, Cengage/WebAssign, Hooks, Canvas, Microsoft suite, and Gimkit. Other faculty suggested learning communities, quality matters, authentic assessment, selective program selection, qualification, evaluation, and course performance as outcomes, sharing best practices, teaching tips and tricks, and placement test alternatives.

### **Recommended Actions**

Based on my action research, I propose the development of multiple professional learning initiatives for MVCC and other community colleges interested in improving faculty-student connection.

### **Professional Development Opportunities That Use Reflection**

The use of student reflection is already in place at MVCC through programs including teacher education and nursing but is not currently used with faculty outside of this study. MVCC should implement two new programs to encourage the use of reflective practice. The first is a

book club that meets quarterly and uses current topics of interest such as diversity and equity. Participants could use the books in similar ways as in this action research, with prompts relating classroom experiences to the supporting material. To begin, the established group would select a book and period for reading and reflection. The groups would gather in-person or remotely and discuss the books, especially critical, mediator-selected aspects of the books that relate to MVCC students, faculty, and staff. Topics from the books can also be taken back to departments for further discussion that are more closely related to those areas. For example, books about disparities related to developmental education can begin subject-specific conversations in both the math and reading divisions. Cyboran (2005) suggests reflection can assist participants in recording observations, keeping records, and analyzing previous experiences while constructing new approaches. Uses reflection in this way can utilize a neutral scenario as presented in a book and allow for application to the MVCC experience with potential outcomes such as pilot programs.

The second program is a mentor initiative for new faculty. Janson and Filibert (2018) suggest that theory and technique are often ineffective unless engaging with an experience for meaning making. In this program, more experienced faculty would be paired with new instructors at the start of the semester. The new faculty would be provided with a journal and Farrell's (2004) *Reflective Practice in Action* and asked to reflect on their experiences. The book includes a series of prompts for inside and outside the classroom and includes lesson preparation exercises as well. Mentor teams would attend college events together including the convocation and scheduled fall training day. At the mid-term and end of the semester, the groups would gather and discuss the journal entries together. This program allows for both individual and team meetings and reduces the amount of time required from experienced faculty. However, by

reflecting on the new faculty experiences, both individuals are utilizing reflection. In this way, new faculty may feel supported by their partner, and experienced faculty can use the information to revitalize and refresh their practices and perspectives.

### **Opportunities for Collaborative PLC Work**

The innovative teaching practices (ITP) committee should be reinstated, or a new committee should be established to address faculty and student experiences at MVCC. The PLC can be facilitated by an administrator or faculty member but should be tightly organized and maintained to cover topics of interest and concern. Administrators should be aware of the need to reorganize the group as necessary to allow for new views and input from participants (Dufour et al., 2008). After 2 years, facilitators should consider expanding the group to include collaboration with colleagues at other institutions to help expand ideas and collaboration. Coburn and Russell (2008) suggest changes and expansion of PLC membership to maintain purpose and excitement in the work. The ITP committee used virtual meetings, which could be continued to remove barriers like transportation costs, schedule flexibility, and space allocation.

### **Institutional Support for Professional Development**

Based on my research and existing literature, professional development work should use reflection and critical conversations to be effective. Reflection and collaboration can help facilitate critical conversations and renewed thinking, leading faculty to reassess and improve their practice (Coburn, 2001; Schön, 1983). Coburn (2001) suggested PLC work be facilitated and directed to address key issues and concerns. PLC work can help faculty problem solve, collaborate, share ideas and research, and teach one another to innovate. As indicated in the faculty survey, enthusiasm in doing this work is not universal and for many, it would require

some sort of incentive. Part of the reason may be the part-time and adjunct faculty who are only paid for their contracted time.

The uncertainty of community college funding makes the availability of financial incentives problematic. However, faculty may continue to be interested in this work once it is underway. Collaborative and reflective work like book clubs and social supports may also feel less like work than more structured initiatives. The social interaction could also assist with engagement. College administrators should use creativity to find initial funds through grants or other identified funding sources. Although providing release time can be more affordable, the college still needs to pay faculty to teach when others are dedicating time to this work. Instructors using release time are not actively in the classroom during those hours.

Another possible option is mandating professional development, which could be comparable to continuing education credits required for teaching licenses in primary and secondary education. Faculty facilitators could assist in leading a PLC and membership could be part of the expectation for full-time employment. Additional funding could be provided to increase adjunct or part-time staff hours. Mentoring relationships could be minimized for affordability with the caveat that mentor/mentee teams could volunteer to meet more often. Mentors could provide short, occasional sessions that require a smaller commitment such as a few days per semester, spread over 14 weeks. Faculty could meet every few weeks and build relationships through the mentor/mentee connection.

There is a precedent for mandating meetings at MVCC. Currently, committee assignments are required for all for full-time faculty and staff. PLC work can also be mandated as part of this requirement. Faculty can be assigned to groups and shuffled each semester or year to provide multiple perspectives (Coburn et al., 2012; Dufour et al., 2008). These specific

suggestions are just a starting point to bring this reflective and collaborative work to MVCC but are not required to utilize book clubs or mentoring to be effective. Based on the data, even a small-scale initiative like this action research assisted some faculty during this difficult period.

### **Limitations and Challenges**

The faculty in this study participated, in part, to help themselves cope with an unprecedented situation. Additional studies and data collection in times of calm would be helpful in exploring the best ways to use reflection and PLC work outside of a pandemic. These initiatives are most successful over time and when reflection and collaboration become part of the campus culture (Dufour et al., 2008; Schön, 1983). Additional data from other community colleges would also be helpful in determining if these findings are only transferable or if they are generalizable for community college faculty in the United States. Studies examining regional or statewide PLC work would also be helpful in determining the effectiveness of collaboration beyond a single campus.

It is also important to consider the element of self-reporting throughout the study. Faculty self-reporting in journals and student self-reporting in the survey provide considerations for under reporting of specific themes or themes not being addressed (Baker & Brandon, 1990). Participants may have consciously or unconsciously focused on or avoided specific topics such as microaggressions and work-life balance. Additional studies focused on these topic could assist in providing more insight.

Although the topic of COVID-19 is critical to this study, it both directed and complicated the research at times. The pandemic required journals be delivered and left at doors or in mailboxes. It required PLC meetings to remain remote due to social distancing. Faculty who taught from home were also disinterested in driving to campus for meetings. The pandemic also

created an opportunity for an isolated group of individuals to reach out for peer support. Participants checked in with each other at the start of meetings and had personal conversations. They encouraged each other offered their time and expertise. Additional data collected outside the pandemic would be an interesting comparison to help determine if levels of engagement and interest are better, worse, or unchanged.

### **Suggestions for Future Research**

The lack of research related to community college faculty reflection, PLC work, and professional development indicates a significant need for colleges to support action research on their campuses. Action research related to this study could help develop best practices for providing training in effective, time-efficient, sustainable, and affordable ways and provide stronger institutional support. Colleges engaged in data-based decision making would also benefit from more information sharing to create plans that prioritize continuous improvement and identify effective methods for training and development. Regional or statewide collaborations would help stretch resources, providing each member-institution with access to shared training and collaboration. Because adjunct and part-time faculty may seek work at colleges in a specific geographic area, regional collaborations could ensure a more prepared candidate pool.

Another area of future study relates to the microaggressions identified in this study. MVCC is identified as a Hispanic Serving Institution indicating a large percentage (>25%) of students who identify as Hispanic/Latinx. Within the period of this data collection, numerous instances of microaggressions are identified. Since this study involves self-reporting, the data could be under-reported specifically because this topic was not singled out in the journal prompts



and a related topic (HSI) was presented only once in the PLC meetings. This is worthy of additional research that would continue the work started through this study.

There are always challenges facing education; the COVID-19 pandemic was just one of the largest and most widespread (Ali et al., 2018; Limniou, 2021). Faculty networks of support focused on reflection, self-care, and collaborative networks could also lead to a more resilient faculty (Beaumont, 2020). Additional research related to recruitment and faculty resilience could also help build this work into the campus culture.

### **Conclusion**

Educators do not have time for self-development when they are being handed new initiatives, priorities, and campaigns aimed at attracting and retaining students (Coburn, 2001; Coburn et al., 2012). There are often conflicting demands and very limited resources (Sam, 2021). Faculty in the PLC group in this study shared feeling tired and burned out the week before Thanksgiving break, though they simultaneously expressed frustration at the PLC ending. It is important to consider if professional development is one more unnecessary drain on an already overextended group or if the benefits are worth the investment.

Research shows educators crave their own education and value an employer who provides opportunities of interest and self-discovery (Sam, 2021). Many faculty are interested in low-stakes training opportunities, especially those that (a) empower the individual through reflection, (b) provide stronger connections, and (c) lead to positive change (Beaumont, 2020). This type of professional development also helps new or part-time faculty feel connected to their campus community (Beaumont, 2020; Sam, 2021). Sam (2021) linked reflective and collaborative training to equity because many students at community colleges identify as underserved populations. It is often more affordable to provide training than to issue raises and

improve health and retirement benefits. Sam (2021) also pointed to professional development as a win for both students and the institution, overall.

In this study, I examined a specific type of faculty development related to reflection and group collaboration in PLC groups. I also examined this work through one of the most challenging and stressful times experienced in recent memory, a global pandemic. Faculty reported awareness of the issues impacting their students through this work, reflected on these stories, and brought them to their peer discussions. Students identified very similar issues to those expressed by the faculty, and, in many cases, the stories were about the same topics. Students identified problem courses, policy frustrations, and ways MVCC could assist them more effectively. This information mirrored what the faculty were experiencing in their virtual classrooms and in student meetings. Faculty openly shared these concerns in reflective journals and detailed their work to help students through their struggles; they then brought these concerns to the PLC meetings and received support and assistance. In many cases, faculty worked through ideas to address the concerns; they listened and commiserated with one another.

This study concluded with additional data from a faculty survey about professional development. Despite 2 years of COVID-related teaching and final exams for the fall semester of 2021, more than half of participants expressed interest in college-facilitated professional development using reflection and collaboration. Although many requested some sort of compensation for their time, others expressed interest in the work without payment or release time.

This study shows the benefits of reflective and collaborative practice during a time of intense stress and discomfort, and it shows interest in continuing and expanding this work. It provides additional data in areas where little data exists—community college faculty

development. Findings also lend further support to nearly a century of documented benefits of reflective practice (Dewey, 1938). Although funding and scheduling are unknowns that will always require adjustments, findings support the time and energy required to provide these opportunities.

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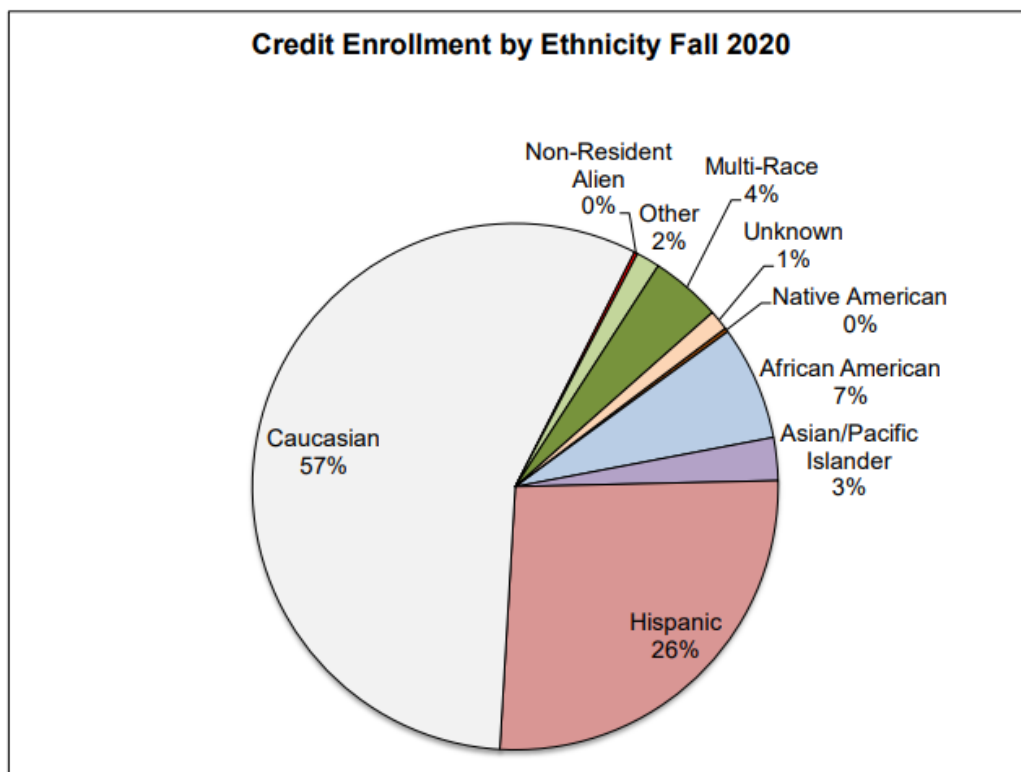
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## Appendix A

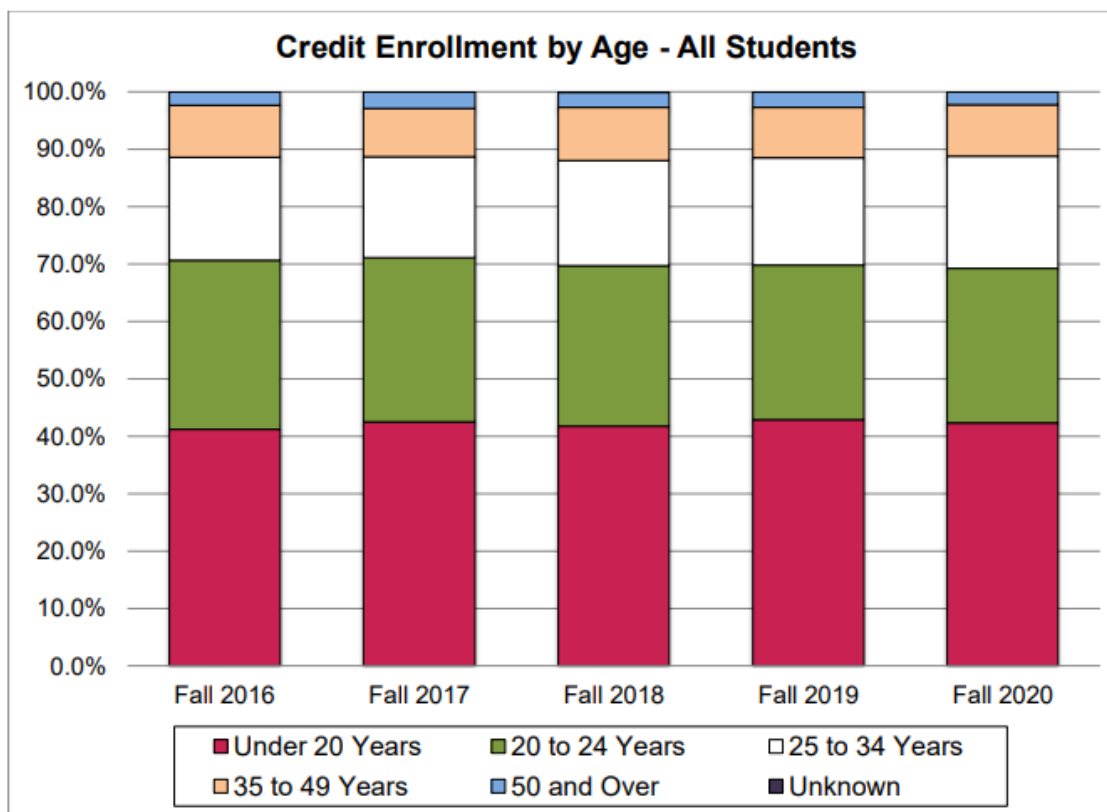
## MVCC Factbook

Figure B1



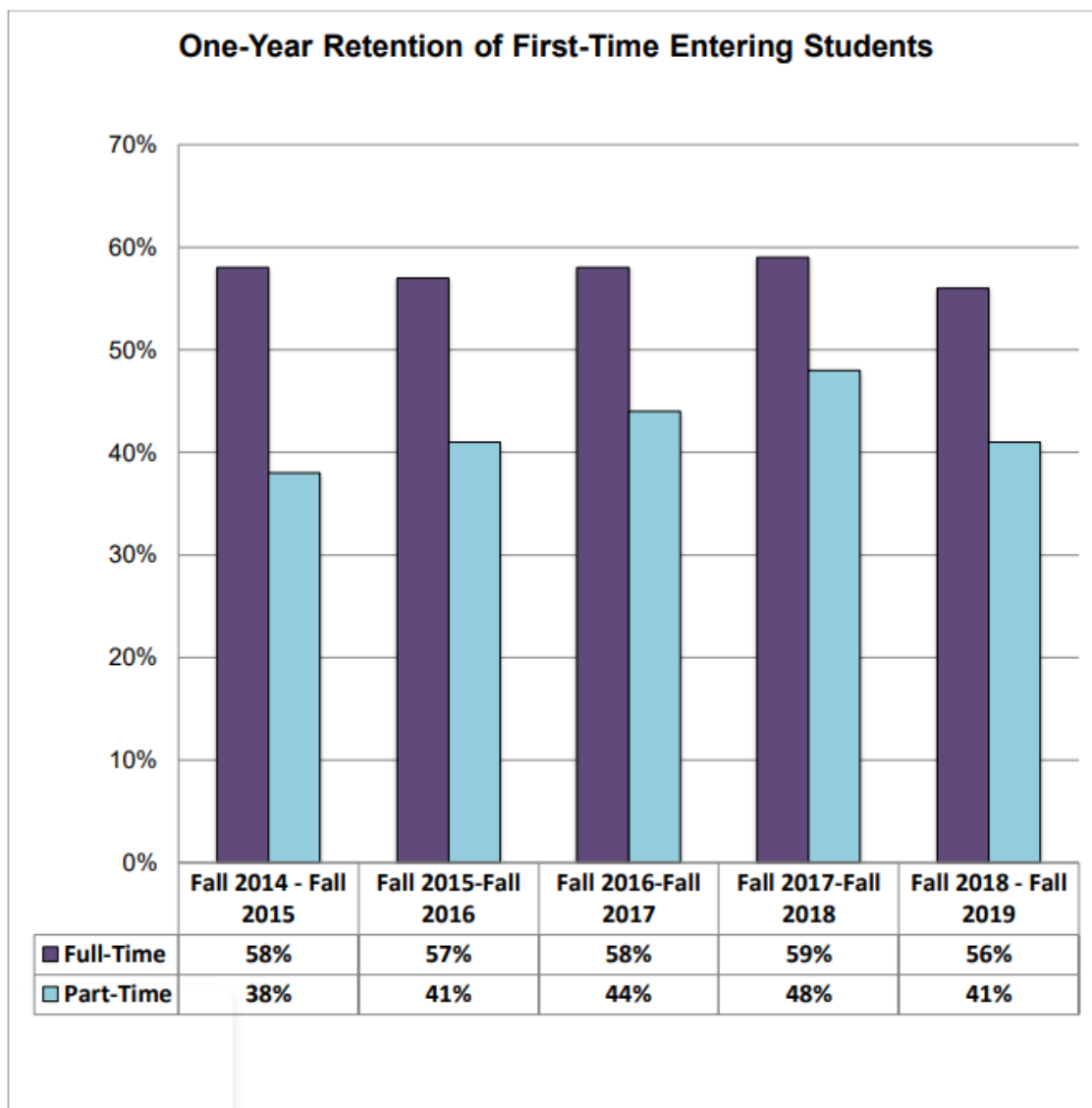
	Fall 2016		Fall 2017		Fall 2018		Fall 2019		Fall 2020	
Native American	11	0.2%	8	0.1%	17	0.2%	23	0.3%	16	0.3%
African American	399	5.9%	459	6.5%	429	6.0%	459	6.7%	440	7.0%
Asian/Pacific Islander	153	2.3%	180	2.5%	188	2.6%	169	2.5%	165	2.6%
Hispanic	1,334	19.8%	1,599	22.5%	1,793	25.2%	1,858	27.0%	1,648	26.3%
Caucasian	4,058	60.3%	4,077	57.4%	3,905	54.9%	3,728	54.2%	3,543	56.6%
Non-Resident Alien	30	0.4%	30	0.4%	21	0.3%	20	0.3%	13	0.2%
Other	214	3.2%	250	3.5%	140	2.0%	99	1.4%	91	1.5%
Multi-Race	269	4.0%	283	4.0%	294	4.1%	287	4.2%	272	4.3%
Unknown	267	4.0%	213	3.0%	327	4.6%	237	3.4%	77	1.2%

Figure B2



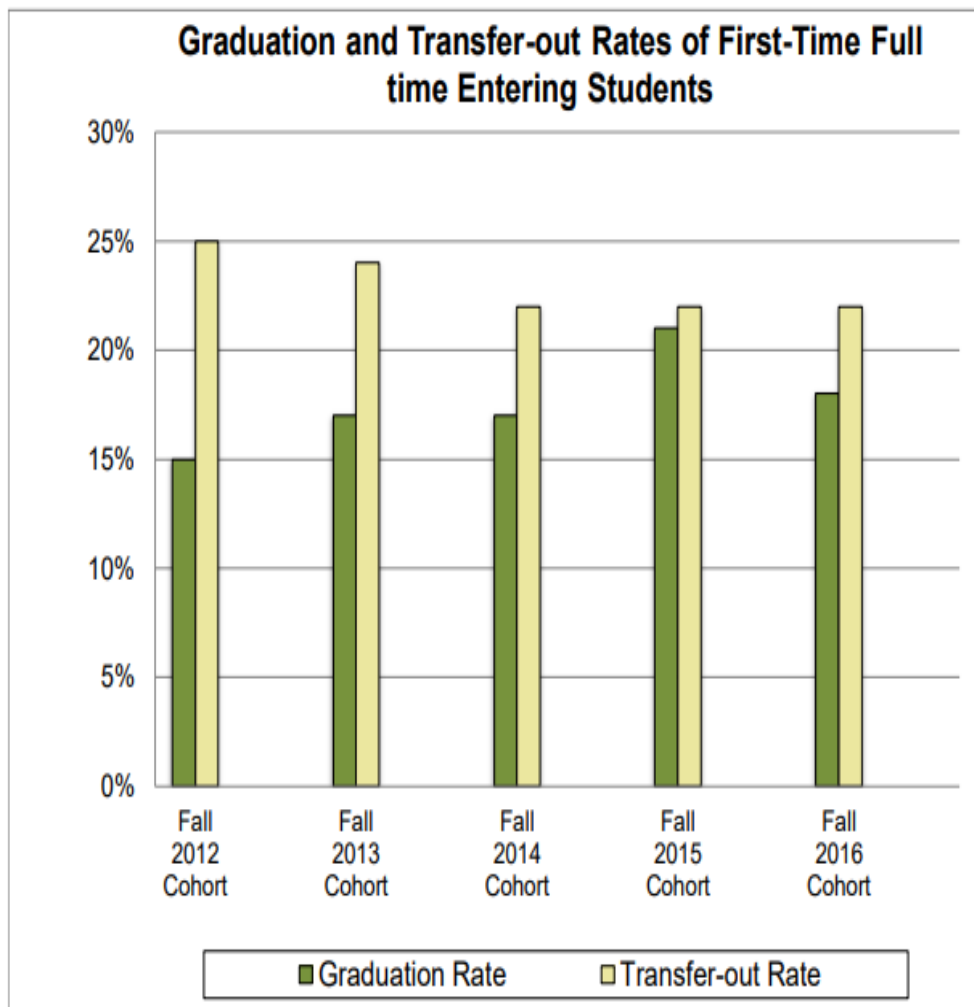
	Fall 2016		Fall 2017		Fall 2018		Fall 2019		Fall 2020	
Under 20 Years	2,777	41.2%	3,020	42.5%	2,972	41.8%	2,950	42.9%	2,654	42.4%
20 to 24 Years	1,981	29.4%	2,026	28.5%	1,988	27.9%	1,850	26.9%	1,686	26.9%
25 to 34 Years	1,206	17.9%	1,247	17.6%	1,303	18.3%	1,290	18.8%	1,222	19.5%
35 to 49 Years	614	9.1%	601	8.5%	657	9.2%	604	8.8%	564	9.0%
50 and Over	154	2.3%	204	2.9%	188	2.6%	183	2.7%	138	2.2%
Unknown	3	0.0%	1	0.0%	6	0.1%	3	0.0%	1	0.0%
<b>Total</b>	<b>6,735</b>		<b>7,099</b>		<b>7,114</b>		<b>6,880</b>		<b>6,265</b>	

Figure B3



Source: US Department of Education IPEDS Statistics

Figure B4



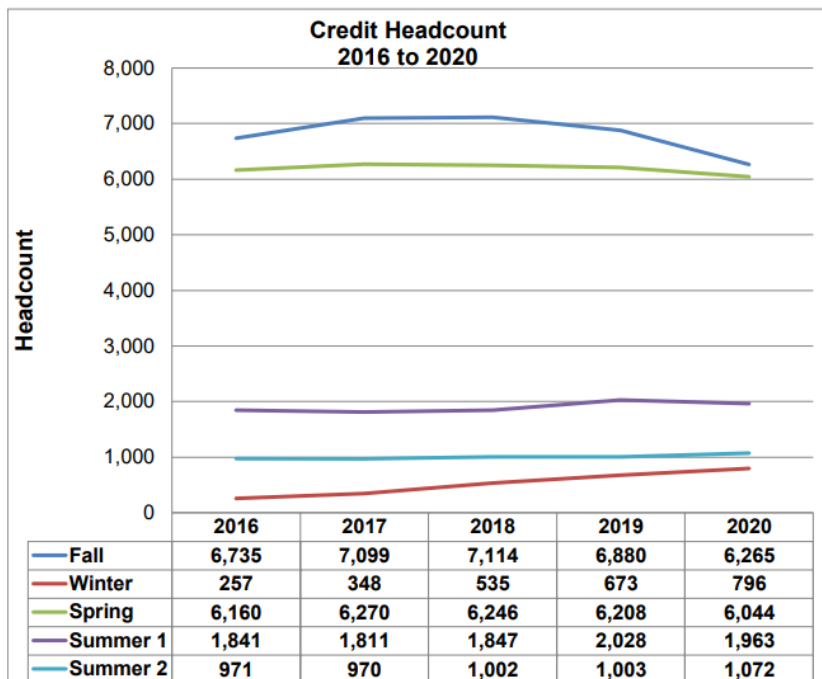
	Fall 2012 Cohort	Fall 2013 Cohort	Fall 2014 Cohort	Fall 2015 Cohort	Fall 2016 Cohort
Graduation Rate	15%	17%	17%	21%	18%
Transfer-out Rate	25%	24%	22%	22%	22%

Source: US Department of Education IPEDS Statistics

## Appendix B

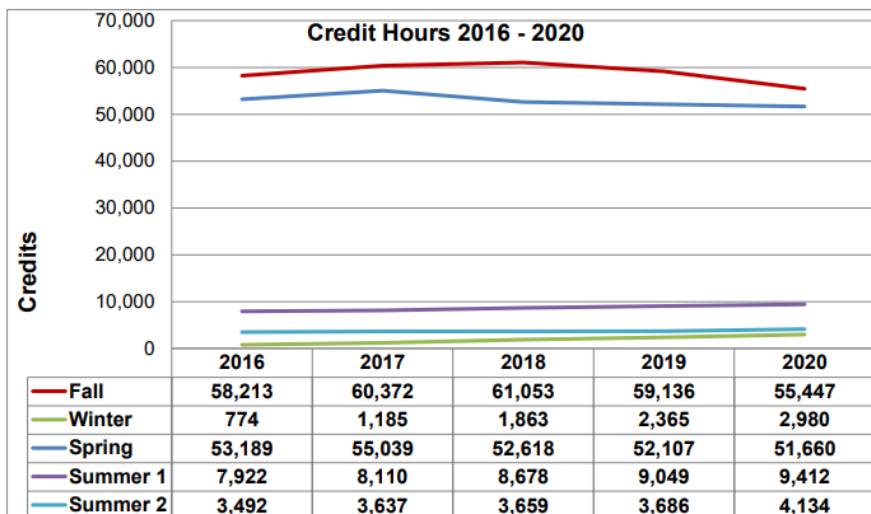
### MVCC Enrollment Dashboard Fall 2021

Figure C1



Winter Term began in 2016.

Figure C2



## Appendix C

### Modality Types, External Communication, 2020-2022

[Lookup All Courses](#)

[Lookup Courses By Subject](#)

[Lookup Courses By CRN](#)

[Lookup Courses by Subject and Course Number](#)

[Lookup Courses By Day/Time](#)

[Lookup Courses by Instructor](#)

[Lookup Face-to-Face, Online, Remote, and Hybrid Courses](#)

[Lookup Courses by Location](#)

[Lookup Quality Matters Courses](#)

**Part of Term** - Selecting courses by Part of Term means that you may search on courses that are scheduled for the full term or shorter weeks (10 weeks, 7 weeks, 5 weeks) by start dates other than the full term during the semester.

**Instructional Method** - Selecting courses by Format means you can choose the format by which you attend your courses.

- **ONLINE** courses deliver content through Canvas, with no set log in times and you follow instructor directions for deadlines.
- **REMOTE** courses are a live, virtual classroom, class is held during designated times with attendance and participation required.
- **HYBRID** courses are designated with an HY and are a blend of more than one instructional format, such as: face-to-face PLUS online, remote PLUS online, or face-to-face PLUS remote.
- **FACE TO FACE** courses provide traditional instruction in a classroom at the [REDACTED] campus or at the [REDACTED] or [REDACTED].
- **Extended Classroom** courses combine a face-to-face class with a remote class. Instructor uses 360° camera in the classroom and Zoom web conferencing system to conduct class. Students sign up for either the face to face or remote section.

[REDACTED] offers a variety of ways for you to meet your academic goals while balancing your personal and professional needs.



## Appendix D

### Letter to Journal Participants

“Hello and thank you! This journal is part of a year-long study of how the Coronavirus (COVID-19) and subsequent stay-home order has impacted your teaching and supports. Moving from face-to-face environment to a virtual one in a very little time carries with it a lot of change and learning. What impact, if any, will this have on us as educators once we return to campus? I am hoping to examine our feelings relative to this change for you and your students. I would like to collect this journal at the end of the semester, or if you are teaching over the summer, I can wait and collect it in August.

In approximately one year, at the mid-point of Spring 2021, I would like to interview you about how these feelings and experiences influenced the teaching you do at that time. I may also ask you to answer a follow-up survey in Fall 2021. As I do not yet have a committee some pieces of this study are subject to change. Again, thank you, thank you, thank you! All data will be anonymized.”

## Appendix E

### Percontor Email Shared 2/16/2020

The Revealing Institutional Strengths and Challenges survey reliability and validity statement. From Megan Jones (pseudonym), [xxxxxxx@xxxxxxxx.xxx](mailto:xxxxxxx@xxxxxxxx.xxx)

We held 10 focus groups at three different community colleges, talking with a total of about 60 community college students about the challenges they faced with college and their experiences with administrative offices at their college.

We used this material to design an initial draft of the survey. The main difference from this version and the current version, other than the number of detailed challenges, is that each section allowed students to choose “other” and then give a written explanation of what they meant by “other.” We went through several iterations of administering draft versions of the survey and reviewing the open-ended responses to challenge areas when students chose “other.” We added the more common “other” responses until the open-ended responses were mostly idiosyncratic.

We then conducted an expert review, asking two senior community college administrators to review and comment on the survey. Next, we hired RTI International to conduct cognitive interviews with five community college students. Based on the results, we revised the survey to the current version.

When we conducted the pilot study of the survey with a half-dozen community colleges, we ran a test–retest analysis by contacting respondents 2 weeks after their initial response and asking them to fill out the survey again. The average reliability for challenges items was .91, for the five office survey items was .73, and for the institution items .77.