

HIGHER EDUCATION DURING CRISIS: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF  
EDUCATOR PERCEPTIONS ON THEIR TRANSITION TO ONLINE EDUCATION  
DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

by

Carrie Marie Smith Curtis

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

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### **Abstract**

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study is to describe the experience of higher education faculty during the crisis-response transition to online learning as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. By gaining a perspective of the experiences of faculty during this crisis experienced during the 2020-2021 academic year, valuable insight can be gained for higher education institutions on how to better prepare for future crises. Phenomenology allows the participant's perspectives to be treated as complete truth and analyzed from multiple vantage points through horizontalization. This study uses Transition Theory to draw conclusions about the adaptability of faculty without prior experience teaching online that were rapidly forced to transition during the COVID-19 crisis. Given the global nature of the COVID-19 pandemic, the study uses a snowball sampling method and maintained a broad setting of the United States. The data collection plan process showed that faculty prefer in-person teaching to online due to control of class dynamics and a lack of online pedagogy. The study also found that there is a growing double standard with faculty expressing the need for online teaching training but not a willingness to participate.

*Keywords:* online teaching, rapid transition, crisis management, crisis response teaching

## **Copyright**

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## Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to my husband, Brent, in whose love and support I feel the most safe and confident. Thank you for seeing in me what I cannot and thank you for always being my person.

To my sons, Rhys and Cullen, who are my greatest treasures and accomplishments. Never stop learning and investing in yourself. Did you know that I love you? How do you know?

To my son, Audie, whose short life completely altered mine. Being your mom and loving you has redefined who I am and transformed what love has to mean.

To my parents, Toby and Kim, for instilling in my heart the value of education and for always loving me big. Thank you for showing up for me no matter what.

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### **List of Abbreviations**

Coronavirus (COVID-19)

World Health Organization (WHO)

Learning Management System (LMS)

High-Reliability Organization (HRO)

American Association of Junior Colleges (AAJC)

Borough of Manhattan Community College (BMCC)

Technical Pedagogical Content Knowledge (TPACK)

Coronavirus Aid Relief and Economic Security Act (CARES)

## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

### **Overview**

Online learning has been used for decades to enhance the accessibility of education. Online education has grown in popularity and demand as college populations continue to change the scope of offered degrees, age, and availability. Within crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the need for quality distance education is an extreme and immediate necessity. A critical factor in the quality and success of crisis-response education is the faculty who build and execute the courses. By studying faculty perceptions of their response to education during the COVID-19 pandemic, higher education can better prepare faculty and other stakeholders for future crisis responses. Retention and graduation rates can be maintained or increased, and accessibility and equity can spread despite the emergency circumstances.

This study aimed to determine how higher education professionals describe their response to transitioning to online education during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study focused on their responses to this transition, what supports they utilized, and how they believed future crises should be handled by higher education. This chapter discusses the historical, social, and theoretical contexts. The problem and purpose statements, as well as the research questions, are examined. Finally, the significance of this study, considering previous research, is reviewed.

### **Background**

The COVID-19 pandemic was a crisis that forced higher education institutions to move to remote settings to meet the requirements set out by the World Health Organization and federal and state officials (WHO, 2021). This transition was wholly new and overwhelming for many despite the years of study, implementation, and training offered before the outbreak. Studies have been conducted during the pandemic to study faculty reactions to the transition, but none have allowed for needed reflection and suggestions for future crisis response.

## **Historical Context**

On 11 March 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) announced that the COVID-19 virus was officially a worldwide pandemic (Ramlo, 2021). In light of WHO's declaration, federal and state officials took immediate and emergency actions to safeguard the public from coming into contact with the virus, including mandating quarantining, social distancing, and wearing a mask in public (Sullivan, 2021). Higher education institutions responded by canceling in-person classes and quickly transitioning to remote learning (Oliveria et al., 2021).

In the Summer of 2020, universities were determining how the next academic year would play out with distancing requirements forcing many to remain completely remote. Higher education institutions had to brace for the unknown consequences of losing money in additional revenues from on-campus living, lower admissions due to so many Americans losing their jobs during quarantine, and demands for lower tuition given the new normal circumstances (Burki, 2020). Although a large percentage of faculty felt the transition to online teaching and learning was the right crisis response, many noted that bringing back in-person courses as soon as possible was vital (Slaski et al., 2020).

Effective online learning has been studied for decades and is well defined, which is why Hodges et al. (2020) called this transition emergency remote teaching. For many faculty, the switch was completely new and did not provide the time and energy necessary to implement effective online teaching and learning (Hodges et al., 2020). With the long history of online teaching and learning in higher education, the irony of this transition is essential to study for proactive planning against future disruptions and crises (Oliveria et al., 2021).

## **Social Context**

A study conducted just before the outbreak of COVID-19 showed significant gaps in the

transitioning process for faculty moving into virtual education, despite the training on digital enhancements and LMS systems for seated courses (Alward & Phelps, 2019). A survey conducted early in the pandemic transition showed that nearly three-quarters of college faculty had to move their seated courses to an online platform and only half of the college administrators said they had some faculty who had taught online before the pandemic who could help with the transition (Lederman, 2020). Despite online education's long history, research shows that very few higher education institutions and faculty used it before the pandemic. Early research conducted during the pandemic on the faculty reaction to the transition to online learning show varying reactions, with many feeling overwhelmed by the lack of time to prepare and build online courses coupled with personal circumstances and concerns about COVID-19 (Ramlo, 2021).

While many argued that the crisis-response teaching conducted during the pandemic could not be compared to effective online teaching due to the lack of preparation time (Hodges et al., 2020), others argued that there was flexibility in the choices faculty made in delivery methods – asynchronous versus synchronous options (Iglesias-Pradas, 2021). Early in the pandemic, faculty tended to choose online pedagogies that were most similar to face-to-face ones due to a lack of time to train on using other digital teaching tools (Iglesias-Pradas, 2021). Immediately following the initial lockdown, many eLearning companies made their platforms accessible for higher education faculty to make the transition easier for universities not equipped for mass online teaching (Slaski et al., 2020). Although this aided in the initial rollout of crisis-response online teaching, the sustainability and economic impact were unknown without a viable vaccine in sight.



## **Theoretical Context**

The theories surrounding independent learning, or distance education, began in the 1960s and 1970s. Otto Peter (1971) argued that distance education was a modern, industrialized form of teaching and learning. Wedemeyer (1977, 1981) determined the essential elements of a distance learner and education, emphasizing responsibility, wide availability of instruction and mixed media, and flexibility with time. In the 1980s, Holmberg (1989) argued that distance education's theories must be centered around independence, learning, and teaching. By the 1990s, theories about distance education included new concepts such as transactional distance and the relationship between dialogue and structure (Moore, 1990). Interaction between learners, instructors, content, and interfaces also became part of distance education theories as technologies changed the overall structure and control provided to students over their learning (Moore, 1990; Baynton, 1992).

At the turn of the century, distance education had dramatically changed from its original form because of available technologies. Theorists sought to define learning theories for a new form of distance learning called online education. Garrison et al. (2000) defined it as the "community of inquiry" where interactions came cognitively, socially, and through teaching platforms. Siemens (2004) argued for connectivism, which is similar to Harasim's (2012) Online Collaborative Learning (OCL). Both emphasize the concept that all learning comes from the complex network of groups and their interaction. Pinning down one particular theory for distance education is currently difficult because of the various forms it can be manifested – traditional distance education, blended education, or online education.

There are various theories surrounding crisis response and crisis management. This study is grounded in resilience theory and stakeholder theory of crisis management. For institutions,

the resilience theory results in high-reliability organizations (HROs). These organizations have operating functions to safeguard stakeholders from the dramatic effects of crises, such as establishing mindfulness environments, investing in collaborative processes, and continually reflecting and refreshing processes (McNamara, 2021). Stakeholder theory of crisis management divides stakeholders into categories of type and degree of willingness to aid in a crisis, level of influence, and proximity to aid in crisis response (Qingchun, 2017). This study focuses on the faculty of higher education and their participation in crisis-response online teaching.

### **Problem Statement**

The problem is that higher education faculty may not be ready for the next crisis that would rapidly force online teaching as a response (Lederman, 2020; Ramlo, 2021). The crisis-response online teaching that took place to finish the 2019-2020 academic school year turned into fully remote teaching for many faculty across the United States in the 2020-2021 academic school year. When surveyed during the pandemic, faculty perspectives were divided into groups determined by their amount of prior online teaching experience (Ramlo, 2021). The perspectives of those with little to no prior experience with online teaching have yet to be singled out in the literature.

Effective online education is grounded in planning and quality design, which takes time, experience, and research (Adedoyin & Soykin, 2020). Because time was not available, many researchers during the pandemic suggested using evidence-based best practices and creating learning communities to aid faculty in their transition (Morra et al., 2021). Others argued that regardless of prior knowledge and collaboration, crisis-response teaching should never be equated with effective online education (Adedoyin & Soykin, 2020). The present study seeks to take the perspectives on crisis-response teaching during COVID-19 away from the immediacy of

the pandemic and allowed time to impact faculty's reflections and suggestions for future emergencies.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenology was to describe the experience of higher education faculty during the crisis-response transition to online learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The rapid transition to online learning is defined as the complete shift to in-person instruction into fully online courses covering the academic school year of 2020-2021. By gaining a perspective of the experiences of faculty during this crisis, valuable insight can be gained for higher education institutions on how to better prepare for future crises.

### **Significance of the Study**

Crises come in all forms from various sources and, most often, are sudden in their approach. Higher education institutions must attempt to be prepared to maintain their services for stakeholders regardless of the circumstances of a crisis. Data must be gathered on past successes and challenges to use online teaching and learning effectively in a crisis.

### **Empirical**

While the COVID-19 pandemic forced many higher education faculty members to make a rapid transition to online teaching, prior circumstances around the globe had forced rapid action due to crises and, data was collected about how the transitions. New Zealand higher education faculty were forced into crisis-response teaching in the aftermath of major earthquakes. A group of faculty and researchers determined to keep track of their successes and failure in transitioning to online teaching (Mackey et al., 2012). Similarly, researchers began almost immediately during the crisis-response teaching of the COVID-19 pandemic to study the effects of the transition to online teaching and learning on faculty and students with varying

feedback. Initially, researchers suggested embracing the opportunities this transition might bring for innovation and interventions (Adedoyin & Soykin, 2020); while others found a strong focus on the limitations such as a lack of quality communication, engagement, and inequities due to access to resources (El Said, 2021; Petillion & McNeil, 2020). Studies conducted during the pandemic found that the participants spoke temporarily about the current remote teaching environment. Without an overwhelmingly negative perspective, many felt paralyzed by the collision of personal and professional during the pandemic. They exhausted all means of transferring in-person experiences into the virtual environment without success (Ramlo, 2021). Although many resources and supports were made available during the transition, large portions of faculty did not join communities of practice (Oliveria et al., 2021), and out of the faculty who said they felt confident in their transition, only one-third said they would entirely shift to online teaching (Lemay et al., 2021). Because these studies were executed during the transition and crisis-response teaching, the results are quick judgments made without reflection. The current research seeks to allow for this needed time so that the results are better suited for future planning.

### **Theoretical**

The national and global response to the COVID-19 pandemic forced higher education institutions to respond and react to federal, state, and local restrictions. As a result, many faculty at these institutions were required to transition rapidly from teaching solely in person to teaching exclusively online. Schlossberg (1981) calls this a situation, part one of the Four-S Model of Transition Theory, that will trigger a change and, hopefully, an adaptation. This study, having defined the situation, seeks to determine the remaining three S's – support, self, and strategies – used by higher education faculty to adapt.

## **Practical**

At the start of the response to COVID-19, researchers sought to provide insight and recommendations for withstanding crisis-response teaching. From professional development training recommendations to a list of resources to focus on mental health, researchers sought to predict how to withstand the transition to online teaching (Lockee, 2021; Morra et al., 2021; Schildkamp, 2020; Wang et al., 2020). The current study pursues guidance to predate the next crisis that disrupts academic progress. Rather than reacting to the next crisis, higher education can use the reflections and recommendations from present faculty, who experienced the rapid transition to online teaching during COVID-19, to prevent future challenges and prepare for future successes for all stakeholders.

## **Research Questions**

The research questions are focused on two main areas: the faculty's perception of their experience of rapidly transitioning to online teaching and recommendations for future crisis response regarding academic courses moving to the virtual environment. Faculty are asked to reflect on their response to the transition and the training and support their institution made available to them during the shift. A quality list of recommendations for future crisis response teams in higher education can be determined by providing faculty the opportunity to reflect.

### **Central Research Question**

What are the experiences of higher education faculty who rapidly transition from in-person to online teaching during a crisis?

### **Sub-Question One**

How do higher education faculty perceive their training and support for the quick transition?

### **Sub-Question Two**

How comfortable are higher education faculty teaching in an online medium?

### **Sub-Question Three**

What does higher education faculty believe that higher education institutions can do to better prepare for crisis response in academic courses?

### **Definitions**

1. *Crisis-response teaching* – Also known as emergency remote teaching, is defined as a transition to a temporary instructional delivery because of crisis circumstances (Hodges et al., 2020).
2. *Online courses* – 80% or more of the content is delivered online and, there are no face-to-face meetings (Felege & Olson, 2015). These courses are also called distance courses, distance learning, virtual education/learning, or virtual courses.
3. *Rapid transition to online teaching* – After the announcement that COVID-19 was a pandemic, higher education institutions began moving to remote teaching and learning within two to three weeks for immediate use in the Spring and Summer 2020 courses (Smalley, 2021). For the 2020-2021 academic year, the faculty had slightly over four months to prepare (Smalley, 2021).

### **Summary**

Today's higher education institutions are in the aftermath of an international pandemic and quarantine. Online education grew in even greater significance, and necessity during crisis-response teaching, and just how close to pre-pandemic modes higher education institutions will get is yet to be seen. Research has studied the reactions to remote teaching and learning from faculty and students; however, most of these studies were conducted during the transition and

pandemic. Although this information is pertinent to future crisis preparedness, there is a need to study faculty perceptions on their overall experience and recommendations for future crises after time for reflection has been allowed. This study seeks to fill that gap by asking faculty who rapidly transitioned their seated courses to online courses during the COVID-19 pandemic to describe their experiences and perspectives, consider the available supports and the ones they utilized, and provide quality recommendations to strategize better so that academic endeavors can continue despite future catastrophic events.

## **CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Overview**

The COVID-19 pandemic thrust every sector of economics and society into a remote emergency setting, trying to maintain prior standards while surviving the unknown new normal. Higher education moved to either wholly online or hybrid courses requiring faculty to design online courses quickly without choice. While professional development for teaching online existed prior to the pandemic, the quick turnaround into a fully remote setting and the varying skill levels required of faculty had dramatic effects on the academic crisis response. Involving the transition experience of faculty in the planning and executing of this timely transition was crucial to ensuring relevance and value for all. The conceptual framework will be discussed in this chapter, and related literature will be examined.

### **Conceptual Framework**

Transition theory accepts that all human beings react and adapt to change differently based on multiple individual characteristics and external factors (Schlossberg, 1981). The theory seeks to address these differences and present a lens through which transitions can be viewed and processed to adapt to the change. Schlossberg (1981) defines transition as the occurrence of an experience, or the lack of an experience, that forces a different perspective of self and the world to the point of a change in behavior and relationships. Adaptation is the point at which a person ceases to be consumed by the transition and officially integrates the change into their life (Schlossberg, 1981). While numerous researchers have defined the term transition differently based on the scope and scale of the change, Schlossberg (1981) acknowledges that transition must be defined by the person experiencing it because all individuals experience transition events or the lack thereof, differently. What one person considers a minor adjustment, another



person may view as life-alerting; therefore, Schlossberg's transition theory allows for each transition's progress to adaptation to be examined and understood.

People are continuously moving into, through, or out of transitions continually being appraised and assimilated into the person's life (Anderson et al., 2012). Using the transition theory, Anderson et al. (2012) provides a process to aid in supporting individuals that includes identifying the kind of transition, identifying the resources available for coping with the transition, and finally filling in the gaps with new resources to help with assimilation. The second step of moving through the transition by identifying available resources is further broken down into the Four-S Model – situation, support, self, and strategies (Anderson et al., 2012). The situation requires a detailed breakdown of the experience or lack of experience that triggered the change. Schlossberg's (1981) research found that these typically fall into one of seven variables: role changes, positive versus adverse effects of changes, internal versus an external source of changes, the timing of the changes, gradual versus sudden changes, the duration of changes, and the degree of stress caused by the changes.

Support refers to the social support available to a person through intimate relationships, a family unit, and/or a network of friends (Schlossberg, 1981). Institutional supports such as occupational organizations, religious or political groups, and other community groups also play a significant role in the supports available to a person experiencing transition (Schlossberg, 1981). A look at the Self is an evaluation of the individual characteristics that may aid or hinder adaptation to the transition, such as psychosocial competence, understanding of gender and sex-role identification, state of health, race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, value orientation, and previous experience with a similar transition (Schlossberg, 1981). The final step of Strategies is devised from a look at the Situation, Support, and Self. These strategies are typically divided into

three possible categories – strategies that can modify the situation, strategies that can control the meaning of the transition, or strategies that help to manage the stress of the transition and its aftermath (Evans et al., 2010).

Transition theory and Schlossberg's Four-S Model serves as this study's conceptual framework, explicitly focusing on the last three S's – support, self, and strategies. This study defines the situation as the transition from teaching solely in person to teaching exclusively online due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This study focuses on faculty and their support, self, and strategies in conjunction with transitioning to online teaching. By looking at how faculty without prior online teaching experience transitioned successfully or unsuccessfully, this study provides insight for future crisis management in higher education that may involve a significant shift in the execution of academic courses. Transition theory shapes my study through the sub-research questions, data collection, data analysis, and reporting. By focusing the research questions on faculty experiences, the study more closely describes the essence of academia's response to crises and more effectively respond to future transitions to online teaching.

### **Related Literature**

Crisis response in higher education institutions is a necessity. Fires, tornadoes, war, economic depression, mass shootings, suicide, terrorist attacks, and hurricanes are just a tiny sampling of the potential crises that could completely halt the academic pursuits of students on a college or university campus. While most colleges today have a crisis management plan and team, surveys show that most act as either an emergency response team, focusing on natural disasters, or as a business continuity team, focusing on continuity in the institution's business functions (Wang & Hutchins, 2010). Major issues facing higher education following a crisis are how to retain students in their academic courses to completion to fulfill their mission to the

community of producing graduates who advance society. In addition, higher education has a responsibility to its stakeholders to lead, showing quality crisis management. Addressing these issues is multi-faceted in that students' needs and the needs of society following a crisis vary; depending on the crisis, many require multiple avenues and functions.

Because of the immediacy and seriousness of the COVID-19 pandemic response, higher education institutions and faculty who were not previously teaching online courses were forced to make the transition from in-person to online rapidly and without training. Many institutions and faculties had one to two weeks to transition to entire online teaching and learning amidst the public backlash that it was not what students and stakeholders thought they were investing in (Anderson, 2020). Research shows that under normal conditions, online courses take months or even years to construct and navigate to their full potential (Dhawan, 2020). Faculty without prior experience with online teaching struggled to cope and adjust to the transition, given the lack of time and the stress-inducing adverse circumstances of the pandemic's impact on higher education.

The pandemic of COVID-19 has potentially created a fundamental shift in higher education's pedagogies, delivery, and culture (Hanstedt, 2020). With an international swing to remote learning, time will tell just how far the pendulum will swing back to the classroom. Virtual higher education courses may grow even more, and the faculty's role and responsibilities to teach fully online and/or hybrid courses may expand to meet the demand (Hanstedt, 2020). In addition, future crises may thrust higher education back into the utterly virtual world again, and these institutions must be prepared for that transition. The COVID-19 pandemic and the transition to online teaching must be a gauge and a turning point for academia and its stakeholders. Considering the challenges faced - such as inadequate hardware and software,

accessibility to technology and the internet, and untrained faculty in designing and executing online courses – will be crucial when planning future crisis responses (Nworie, 2021).

Understanding that there are a plethora of virtual resources and that the environment and culture of online learning are different than in a face-to-face classroom, the specific and dedicated training and planning provided to faculty on these differences could be the essential element to the success of future online courses and programs. As the mission of higher education has evolved into a service for both the individual and society, preparing faculty is a crucial element of crisis response. Faculty must be prepared to address the immediate needs of students while making founded predictions about future needs in their chosen fields. During a crisis, continuity is essential for restoring order and progress, but faculty also must be prepared to continue pushing their programs forward, seeing past the current crisis.

Higher education institutions need to take stock of their crisis response to COVID-19 and the emergency thrusting of all faculty into online teaching. This gathering of information should be an effort to prepare for future crises where online teaching and learning could be the solution to student retention and continuity of services. Higher education must reflect on which pedagogical methods allowed for continuity and were simply band-aids on an open wound. Pedagogy throughout American history has changed based on research, in response to national and international crises, and as a consequence of societal transformations. Some crisis responses were planned, while others, due to their sudden nature, were reactions often to individual issues rather than the crisis in its entirety. Higher education institutions cannot hope to remain relevant or productive without a quick and efficient response to crises.

## **History of Higher Education and Pedagogy in America**

Throughout American history, higher education has seemingly adjusted its format and curriculum to meet society's needs and demands. Over time, the institution of higher learning has grown into a force leading America into the future through various curriculum or pedagogy changes that address the issues of the present time. Crisis management and the response have also allowed higher education institutions to become part of national and global solutions.

### ***Colonial American Education***

Colonial higher education options were few as the British Parliament, and colonial governments saw a greater financial yield from mercantilism (Thelin et al., 2021). Early higher education institutions were created for various reasons, but most were religiously based (Thelin et al., 2021). This early college and university aspect often odds it with the government structure (Brubacher & Rudy, 2017). Following the American Revolution, higher education sought to change aspects of its curriculum to reflect a new American style. Noah Webster's 1783 American Spelling Book helped to create a common language distinct for American education (Lynch, 2016). Thomas Jefferson's advocacy for public education in Virginia would force the issue of allowing all social classes access to education into the public education discussion, and the eventual opening of the University of Virginia without a religious focus displayed a new potential for higher education (Lynch, 2016). Higher education was not required to attain any particular occupations in the early American period; instead, students were trained by professionals or parents through apprenticeships. As a result, higher education institutions focused on the common good enticing those who could financially afford a college degree that their motivation for attendance should be less personal and more communal (Dorn, 2017). While this was the social pressure and despite the stricter rules for student behavior, many students

attending liberal arts institutions lacked dedication and purpose without the necessity of a college degree for wealth.

Access to higher education was denied or separated for many within American society (Dorn, 2017). Although women were seen in the early American republic as responsible for their future children's education, they were only allowed into specific types of schools and not into higher education until the late nineteenth century (Encyclopedia.com, 2019). Abolitionists fought for education for free blacks but were forced to open separate schools and institutions (Lynch, 2016). Methodologically, early American higher education followed the traditional lecture method tracing its roots to medieval European universities and even classical times (Brubacher & Rudy, 2017).

### ***Industrial American Education***

The Antebellum period saw a rise in practical higher education with government support of vocational colleges in agriculture, mechanics, and mining (Dorn, 2017). In response, methods of teaching vocational courses versus traditional liberal arts courses became more defined and varied. These changes came from industrialization and the growing desire to gain international prestige and power. To parallel countries like Great Britain, America had to recognize the needed focus on education in areas that would advance its industrial goals. While much progress was made in advancing higher education, the impact on all facets of society and stakeholders was not equal. Stein (2017) argues that early American higher education gave Manifest Destiny and its supporters cause and justification in its supposed national motivation while forcibly removing indigenous populations for their land and using enslaved people as campus staff.

In 1862, the Morrill Land-Grant College Act granted 30,000 acres of federal public land per representative for colleges for the industrial classes (Stein, 2017). The land and colleges were paid for by stock profits tying higher education to the capitalist, free-market system (Stein,

2017). Post antebellum, in 1867, the Department of Education was created at the federal level, and, in 1890, an additional Morrill Act was passed that required colleges and universities to be established for black citizens (Wright, 2019). While this act made higher education more accessible to more people, it also federally condoned racial segregation in higher education institutions (Thelin et al., 2017). These land-grant colleges would pay off for the American economy and many citizens in the early 19th century as education shifted to industrial credentials (Stein, 2017). During this time, women gained more access to higher education, although their fields of study were typically limited to teaching (Thelin et al., 2021).

Post-Civil War America saw rapid expansion and industrialization. Higher education built many of its defining features from post-Civil War to World War I, such as letter grades, departments, electives, majors, and credit hours (Mintz, 2017). The American university went through a dramatic shift, following the example set by Germany, of transforming higher education institutions into less like secondary schools and more accelerated research graduate formats to meet the growing demands of current and future professions (Brubacher & Rudy, 2017). Pedagogy was not significantly different from early America, as lecture, laboratory, and recitation were seen as tried and accurate delivery methods; however, the curriculum radically changed to meet growing needs (Brubacher & Rudy, 2017). With a growing middle class and leisure innovation, higher education experienced dramatic changes mimicking society. College and university students brought extracurriculars onto campus through fraternities and athletic clubs (Brubacher & Rudy, 2017). These student gatherings, often without faculty supervision, began a culture of student independence and activism while encouraging the societal premise that higher education was meant to create a man first (Brubacher & Rudy, 2017). While dialogue between professors and students was commonplace in higher education institutions, students and

faculty sporadically became divided on significant issues impacting America (Brubacher & Rudy, 2017).

### ***The Introduction of Community Colleges in America***

Higher education also saw the emergence of junior colleges during the late-nineteenth century and early twentieth century. These schools were part of a growing argument that the first two years were preparation for actual degree studies (Drury, 2003). Because tuition was inexpensive and the student population was often varied, these junior colleges were heralded as people's colleges (Trainor, 2015). In 1920, the American Association of Junior Colleges (what is now the American Association of Community Colleges) was founded to determine the future for this growing sector of higher education – was it to be a preparatory college for degree studies or a vocational college focused on the needs of the community (Drury, 2003). The Great Depression answered this debate as enrollment spiked on both fronts, and the AAJC began formulating a standard curriculum (Drury, 2003). In the coming decades, the junior college would change its name to a community college to reflect its connection with the surrounding region, whose needs it was trying to meet (Trainor, 2015).

### ***Post-World War II American Education***

The post-World War II era saw a dramatic increase in higher education enrollment with the introduction of Pell Grants, subsidized loans, and the GI Bill (Dorn, 2017). Community colleges took this period of growth as an opportunity to revolutionize admissions processes with the open-door policy allowing anyone with the means, whether private or scholarship, to attend (Trainor, 2015). This significant change made higher education more accessible to more individuals across America, especially those who previously had been denied entrance. Dorn (2017) argues that it was at this point that higher education began to be seen as a pathway to social status and professional achievement. Continuing the previous notion that higher education



can serve a communal purpose in meeting the needs of society and in response to the growing Cold War, federal funding was sought for research in health, national security, and economic prosperity (Stein, 2017). Colleges and universities became vital to the research conducted during the Cold War by using professors and students to focus on issues that would place America in positions of power over the Soviet Union (Mintz, 2017). The budgets available to these colleges and universities conducting research skyrocketed, and public pressures for safety and intelligence found their way onto college campuses and administrations (Brubacher & Rudy, 2017). Higher education campuses became centers of intellectual, social, and cultural conversations and change with protests, activist clubs, and debate clubs (Mintz, 2017). Higher education institutions became excellent environments for integrating new technologies and pedagogies such as the calculator and the computer in the 1970s (Wright, 2019). It was also during this time that higher education saw the emergence of an openness trend in areas such as entry qualifications, course choices, and delivery methods (Menon, 2016). Throughout this period, higher education institutions were forced to confront their admissions policies regarding minorities in America. In the later decades, these method and pedagogic shifts would expand tremendously with digital technologies and online course options.

### ***Modern American Higher Education***

Today, higher education holds a solid and growing presence in American society. In addition to its significant employment and revenue numbers, higher education impacts public opinion through research and experts (Selingo, 2013). It sits at the forefront of change, responsible for predicting economic, social, and cultural shifts before they occur to prepare students for post-graduation. Higher education institutions dominate towns with university hospitals, publishing companies, and many other businesses birthed in the classrooms and dormitories (Selingo, 2013). The twentieth century also saw a pedagogical shift from recitation

and memorization to more personalized, self-paced, experiential, and interactive learning (Mintz, 2017). Community colleges had the most significant impact on modern pedagogical shifts by introducing such methods as summer courses and distance learning (Trainor, 2015). In addition to boasting the most diverse campuses based on race and gender, community colleges have recently paved the way for age diversity and helped with mid-career changes and economic pressures (Trainor, 2015).

***Online Learning.*** Pedagogy, today, has evolved with movements currently seeking to address the rigidity of memorization or the oppression of self-interested motivations. Many higher education professionals seek authentic understanding experiences for their students using product-based learning, peer learning, and dialogue assessments (Serrano et al., 2017). While higher education has become more individualized to meet students' specific needs, studies show that collaborative practices best serve students and society in the long run (Serrano et al., 2017). Rather than seeing students as content consumers, the pendulum is swinging toward students as creators and colleagues of content and learning (Raman et al., 2016). An aid to this shift is the predominance of technology use within academics. From course delivery platforms to fully online courses, online education can trace its roots back more than 30 years (Visual Academy, 2021).

In a survey conducted in 2003, results showed that nearly 2.35 million students had enrolled for online courses in just one fall semester (Bonk & Kim, 2006). The medium of the internet for interaction, communication, and collaboration has grown exponentially since this study (Baran et al., 2011). Throughout the last decade, researchers have studied two aspects of the online educational experience – student achievement and satisfaction and faculty training and support (Bonk & Kim, 2006). These studies have pushed higher education to rethink the

traditional roles that students and faculty play within a classroom setting to meet the challenges of virtual education. Specifically looking at the differing role of instructors, research suggests that transitions from face-to-face to online settings require training and support (Bonk & Kim, 2006). Compora (2003) found early in the 21st century that this training and support system was not readily or easily available to faculty teaching online courses and that most were transitioning with little more than content expertise.

A recent study by Alward and Phelps (2019) shows significant gaps in the transitioning process for faculty moving into virtual education, despite the training in Web enhancements for seated courses. There is a general agreement that successful online teaching requires different skills and pedagogies (Baran et al., 2011). Much of the issue lies in faculty bringing successful classroom pedagogies into the virtual arena without regard to the immediate challenges to its success in an online setting (Baran et al., 2011). With little to no experience in teaching virtually, educators bring these tried-and-true methods into their online courses. Bonk and Kim (2001) found that even instructors with strong opinions about new and innovative pedagogies for online learning rarely used them in their actual online instruction. In addition to pedagogies specific to the online learning environment, the research found that essential aspects of successful virtual faculty were communication, relationship building, and emotional intelligence (Alward and Phelps, 2019).

Throughout American history, pedagogy has shifted with the societal demands and expectations of higher education. The purpose of higher education has dramatically changed from preparing only America's elite to think critically to preparing the modern workforce and citizenry for active participation. Pedagogy, too, has changed dramatically from recitation to active participation. From academic to personal, online education for faculty and students offers

modern higher education a unique environment and opportunities for universal usage. It offers a potential solution for crisis management and academic response. Historically, higher education's crisis response has been short-term and varied based on need and the possible crisis management plan already in place.

### **Higher Education's Reaction to Crises**

Higher education's strong position in American society puts great value on its reactions to change and crisis. Recognizing the value of education, American universities and colleges lead the way in critical moments when the flow of educational opportunities is interrupted or halted. Education is a public good, and despite the solid individualized focus in recent years, thus the reactions to crises are vital nationally and globally (Phelan & Lumb, 2021).

### ***Historical Responses to Crises***

The early twentieth century showed massive changes in all facets of political, economic, and cultural life. These national and global events forced higher education to respond as the changes impacted their student bodies and surrounding communities. World War II dramatically reduced student populations, especially in European institutions, and left universities with no alternative but to seek government assistance (Taylor, 2020). Although this move was concerning for many, it was justified and supported by the training and research completed by higher education institutions to benefit the war effort (Taylor, 2020). The Great Depression only financially strained universities and colleges, with their size and pre-Depression status playing a significant role in how much they were impacted (Schrecker, 2009). Most higher education institutions saw a decline in enrollments, government assistance, and funds for additional resources such as guest speakers, library purchases, and research grants (Schrecker, 2009). In addition to upholding tenure and showing little to no turnover in faculty, higher education institutions pushed through the Great Depression despite the financial cutbacks. World War II

brought massive changes to higher education across the globe. In America, institutions became active partners with the federal government by providing training to students focused on wartime efforts and researching to benefit victory during and following the war (Tierney, 2021). Most universities and colleges completely rearranged their degree programs to accelerate the overall process making many bachelor's degrees achievable in two to three years rather than four (Solis, 1942). Because of these efforts, the U.S. federal government continued to lean on colleges and universities following the war by providing grants and the G.I. Bill to returning veterans utilizing the community good aspect of higher education (Tierney, 2021). During the Second World War and the Cold War, American universities and colleges were perceived at large by most in society as a public good that could be used to advance its overall goals rather than a means of individual economic advancement (Labaree, 2016). Given the ample federal financial support provided during this time, higher education expanded campuses, practical options, and its power as a molder of the liberal democratic workforce (Labaree, 2016). Although pedagogy and delivery methods did not change dramatically during these significant events of the twentieth century, higher education was forced to adapt to the current national and global circumstances. During these responses, universities and colleges stood as centers of change and acted as examples providing support and growth opportunities for society.

### ***Modern Higher Education International Responses to Crises***

Historically, higher education has been forced to respond to crises from war and genocide to natural disasters and terrorist attacks. In recent years, many nations worldwide have faced crises of varying degrees and descriptions that forced a reaction from higher education. In South Africa, the simple change of leadership in 2017 brought massive changes to higher education resulting in their student population nearly doubling and significant economic benefits for the nation (Bawa, 2019). Because of student activism and higher education's eventual willingness to

change to meet the needs of society, the entire South African university system did not collapse, which would have created disastrous economic results (Bawa, 2019). The 2011 Syrian refugee crisis left Turkish higher education institutions with significant decisions, with over three million Syrians now living in Turkey (Khalid et al., 2020). Recognizing the many benefits of providing higher education to refugees - such as eliminating radicalization, creating social options, integrating into the Turkish economy, and creating a workforce for the rebuilding of Syria – the Turkish higher education system began eliminating typical boundaries for entrance including exams and widening scholarship programs specifically for refugees (Khalid et al., 2020).

Similarly, the German government and higher education system responded to an increase in refugees by creating language courses, eliminating proof of eligibility documents, and relying on non-state organizations to support the needs of these students (Jungblut et al., 2018). The University of Canterbury in New Zealand was closed for two weeks in 2011 due to more than one earthquake (Ayebi-Arthur, 2017). Their quick communication and IT support response that ensured the continuation of academic courses has led to further research about crisis response preparedness in higher education institutions worldwide (Ayebi-Arthur, 2017).

### ***Modern American Crisis Responses in Higher Education***

The United States higher education institutions have seen numerous crises and have been forced to deal with them in various ways. In August 2005, Hurricane Katrina hit the Gulf Coast dealing a devastating blow to institutions in Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama, forcing many to shut down before the school year could even begin (McDonough, 2015). Nearby colleges and universities sprang into action and, within the week, had opened their doors for transfer students eliminating application and even tuition requirements (McDonough, 2015). While the community effort to support and rebuild these Gulf Coast institutions was admirable, many argued that the reaction was inequitable. Students who spent their last remaining dollars to move

away from the coast for safety or college could not afford the return trip, and many could not afford to evacuate initially (Perry, 2020). Hurricane Harvey hit the coast of Texas in Fall 2017, impacting more online students than on-campus students (Holzweiss et al., 2020). After a six-week delayed start, compressed, 7.5-week online classes were offered to ensure student retention (Holzweiss et al., 2020). In 2018, California State University-Chico was forced to close for two weeks because of devastating fires (Mello & West, 2020). Butte College was forced to allow students to drop courses without penalty, and they handed out essentials such as laptops and gas gift cards to continue holding classes in the wake of these fires (Mello & West, 2020).

The terrorist attacks on 11 September 2001 brought challenges to higher education's resilience, especially for the most impacted New York colleges and universities. Borough of Manhattan Community College (BMCC) is the only college in America known to have lost a building due to terrorism, and its recovery was long and hard (Ho, 2021). In addition to destroying one of their buildings, there was extensive damage to most buildings, eight students died, and all records were destroyed (Ho, 2021). Carving out spaces to meet in lobbies and cafeterias while investing in early online teaching options allowed BMCC to conclude the 2001 academic year (Ho, 2021). New York University, too was forced to reroute classroom sites, and many students were evacuated out of their university housing due to safety concerns (Reynolds, 2021). The immediate aftermath of the attacks forced colleges and universities across the nation to grapple with mental health, growing debates on the potential impact on America and its history, and honoring those lost in the tragedy (Chodosh, 2002). In addition to these short-term effects, 9/11 brought systemic changes in the long-term for higher education offerings, with a rise in programs dealing with cyber terrorism or security, information security, and disaster response (NewsCenter, 2011).

*Crisis Management Teams.* In the wake of national and international crises, many American colleges and universities began planning for potential crises before they happened. Crisis management teams, communication lines, and specialized plans for specific types of crises are some ways that higher education has tried to increase its preparedness. Many of these plans, however, only address short-term actions and do not include how academic courses will continue in the case of a prolonged crisis. These immediate plans additionally do not account for the community-wide rebuilding and support efforts the institution may become involved with following a more large-scale crisis. Following the devastation of floods, attacks, fires, and more, higher education institutions provide food to the community, convert buildings into shelters for displaced people, and provide mental health services to students and community members (Mello & West, 2020). All these actions impact student learning and future graduation rates. By providing for the needs of stakeholders, higher education institutions seek to mitigate the potentially devastating effects of crises on their purposes and goals.

Many higher education institutions were unprepared for the length of the COVID-19 pandemic crisis, especially in the area of sustaining institutional and stakeholder ethics. One major problem facing many higher education crisis management teams was the lack of representation of the varied perspectives needed to produce a forward-thinking plan (Coombs, 2019). Expertise in critical decision-making, environmental risks, mental health, disasters, health services, public relations, and many more are necessary for a team to adequately build a crisis management plan that can withstand unknowns (Coombs, 2019). Liu et al. (2021) argue that ethics are typically an afterthought rather than an essential part of planning. In a qualitative study of 55 interviews with 30 U.S. higher education leaders, it was found that leaders must recognize the perspectives of their stakeholders, taking into account their unique perspectives on the crisis



and the institution's mitigation of the consequences (Liu et al., 2021). The Graduate School of Education at Harvard University offers specialized training to higher education administrations and professionals on crisis management preparation, focusing on diagnosing the crisis, preparing the campus, managing policies and concerns during the crisis, and overseeing the long-term recovery of stakeholders following the crisis ('Crisis Leadership,' 2022). Training like this better prepares institutions and places them on offense rather than defense when a crisis occurs.

Although unknowns will always exist, considering stakeholders in the crisis management process allows higher education institutions to serve their institutional mission and goals better.

Early in the COVID-19 pandemic crisis, professionals at Jacksonville State University in Alabama, having experienced the crisis response to an EF 3 tornado in 2018, offered their advice about higher education's response to crises and how to move forward with academic success successfully. From getting creative in transparent communication styles and meeting the needs of students to documenting everything, the advice promotes a proactive crisis response rather than reactive (Robinson & Jones-Wright, 2020). McNamara (2021) suggested using mindfulness techniques to improve communication and create shared culture and values. These mindful techniques are better and more easily incorporated before a crisis and do not aid faculty and stakeholders in the current COVID-19 pandemic. Universities and colleges worldwide that previously dealt with such crises as bushfires, typhoons, tsunamis, and epidemics seemed better prepared for the Coronavirus pandemic because emergency disaster response procedures were already in place (Sharma, 2020).

### **Online Teaching Preparedness Before COVID-19**

Online teaching and learning have been topics of study for decades, as well as the methods that best work for faculty transitioning to online teaching. This field of study is growing

in importance as information and communication technology integration increases through both face-to-face and online teaching. As professional development is seen as a change agent for faculty's practice, attitudes/beliefs, and student outcomes (Guskey, 2002), professional development must recognize that faculty are adult learners who may find change difficult, need continuous feedback on the impact of their efforts, and require follow-up support. Adult learners want a variety of instruction methods that fit their learning style and skill level (Feist, 2003).

### ***Professional Development and Integration***

Koehler and Hershey (2004) would argue that professional development for online teaching would require more than the traditional methods of workshops, tutorials, and technical support groups. In a rather foreshadowing manner and with great success, faculty were placed in a learn-by-design course to build an online course while learning the technology and virtual tools (Koehler & Hershey, 2004). Active learning for faculty's immediate needs was in contrast to professional development designed to prepare faculty for future potential needs (Feist, 2003). This professional development seemed cutting edge in the early stages of technology integration in higher education. Some research results, and the main requests of faculty, were challenging to oblige, such as defining expectations, workload, and guidelines for online courses (Feist, 2003).

With time, higher education institutions began increasing their integration through technology-enhanced learning, replicating or replacing traditional teaching methods (Kirkwood & Price, 2013). Professional development sought to encourage this integration through peer learning, reflection on personal experiences, and experiential learning for faculty (Kukulka-Hulme, 2012; Salmon & Wright, 2014; Viberg et al., 2018). They treated educators as experimenters, as Koehler and Hershey (2004) had initially suggested, allowing for needed cultural shifts in higher education institutions toward innovation (Kukulka-Hulme, 2012). This type of professional development also provided authentic development that faculty could use

immediately, which addressed the argument that prior professional development was not worth the time invested (Salmon & Wright, 2014).

Research then turned to understanding the faculty's perception of technology integration, which still showed varied results (Kopcha et al., 2015). Although most of the faculty surveyed agreed that technology within a course required a complete redesign (Kirkwood & Price, 2013), they differed on their overall concerns for student outcomes (Kopcha et al., 2015). These differing perspectives concerning student understanding of the content, student's connection with the community, or the seeming absence of deep discussion through online platforms (Kopcha et al., 2015) were confronted with Baran's (2016) faculty technology mentoring program. Previously, Baran and Correia (2014) found that the faculty's success with online teaching was an interplay of various personal and professional factors resulting in very individualized needs from professional development. By proposing a mentoring program with both expert and experienced faculty and students, the individual comfort and skill levels could be addressed for each faculty member (Baran, 2016). Teras (2014) found that faculty wanted rigorous and scaffolded professional development to best prepare for teaching online.

No professional development sessions are helpful if attendance is low; therefore, developers must create sessions with both a format and focus that meets specific needs (Elliott et al., 2015). Given the endless possibilities and the sometimes limited financial resources of institutions, finding the right combination could feel difficult. Elliott et al. (2015) suggested providing faculty with online professional development and focusing on best practices unique to the online education environment. One example of this unique environment is social media. According to Pew Research Center (2021), 72% of Americans use social media, and the majority are between the ages of 18 and 21. Donelan (2015) suggested, to which most higher education

institutions have complied, that universities begin using social media to network. Faculty can also use this powerful tool to communicate with students and participate in communities of practice and professional learning communities (Luo et al., 2020). Universities providing professional development specifically for using social media could address the expressed barriers faculty face, which is a lack of skills and available time for learning and implementing this resource (Luo et al., 2020).

In the few years before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, higher education e-learning held 51.8% of the global market for academic e-learning (Cision, 2021). Wisner (2019) argued that prior research about technology integration and online teaching and learning was insufficient and often had a silo attitude. Even when professional learning networks were implemented to address the silo effect, most faculty felt they lacked diversity and merely shaped rather than changed their teaching practice (Trust et al., 2017). Most faculty who claimed to benefit from professional learning networks were members only informally (Trust et al., 2017).

### ***Professional Development During COVID-19 Pandemic***

Taking a broader, more global look at the literature, it is apparent that while the methods of technology integration are different internationally, the methods are similar, meaning that the understanding and make-up of higher education have changed globally. Wisner (2019) found there to be a belief that online teaching and learning was an agent of change for institutions. In this light, Philipsen et al. (2019) studied the literature to provide higher education professional development planners with concise guidelines for online and blended learning professional technology development. Critical components included maintaining culture, time for planning and implementation, addressing faculty's personal identities and beliefs, student learning outcomes, reflection, and evaluation (Philipsen et al., 2019). Published in January 2019, this study gave perinate guidance and provided ample time to develop professional development for

online learning before the pandemic. Likewise, Koh (2020) would offer approaches to support technological pedagogical content knowledge (TPACK) that included modeling technology and realigning pedagogy for unique content to include technology but having been published a mere four days after the national state of emergency declaration, institutions had no time for implementation. Lidolf and Pasco (2020) published their study in May 2020, suggesting that rather than looking at faculty as merely learners and designers, professional development should focus on faculty as researchers. However, as previously noted, this research practice would take dedicated time, which the pandemic would not provide.

In 2019, Martin et al. conducted an open-ended qualitative survey of online faculty focused on their perspective of their unique needs for professional development. The framework of the study was the professional development framework developed by Baran and Correia (2014). The framework claims that professional development for the needs of online teaching in higher education must have three levels: teaching, community, and organization (Baran & Correia, 2014). Recognizing that successful online courses and instructors require time for design, a solid cultural and environment shift, and involving all institutional stakeholders, the framework addresses previous research findings (Baran & Correia, 2014). Martin et al. (2019) found that faculty's perceptions of their professional development fell within this framework as they requested administrative support through time and value, involvement of students in design and feedback, and the need for relevant hardware and software. These desires of online faculty match the needs of students for successful practice after graduation. Implementing this type of professional development would benefit all stakeholders in higher education. Unfortunately, the COVID-19 pandemic would thrust students, faculty, administrations, professional development designers, and communities into learning by design in an emergency scenario.

## **Faculty As Stakeholders in Higher Education**

Involving faculty input in the crisis response and management of COVID-19 should have been a given based on many studies and theories. Stakeholder theory, for example, addresses how companies and people interact and create value together (Freeman et al., 2018). Originating as a business model (Freeman, 1984), stakeholder theory's center is the firm, or business, with many primary and secondary stakeholders who play vital roles in the firm's overall success. Rather than placing shareholders as the main priority (Freeman et al., 2018), stakeholder theory maintains a management style that places stakeholders first, seeking to create economic and non-economic value for all stakeholders through ethical decision-making. In higher education, the firm is considered the most internal to the school - personnel and students (Kettunen, 2015). There is debate about the exact placement of other higher education stakeholders in the primary and secondary rings – including parents, alumni, government bodies, the media, employers, and more – and some argue that the boundary between these two groups is fluid (Falqueto et al., 2020; Ferrero-Ferrero et al., 2017; Freeman, 2018; Kettunen, 2015). Regardless, researchers and theorists who expound on stakeholder theory argue that it broadens the definition of the customer, especially in higher education (Hickman & Akdere, 2017). Jongbloed (2008) argued that higher education has a public character or responsibility that makes it the intersecting point of all sectors within society and economics. With this perspective, the number of stakeholders for higher education is many, if not limitless. Once the stakeholders are identified, the theory requires a discovery period of the value and power of the stakeholder groups, which requires research and often voluntary participation from both the firm and the stakeholders to form relationships of trust (Freeman, 1984; Freeman et al., 2018). The final step is determining stakeholder-based objectives that bring value to as many stakeholders as possible (Freeman et

al., 2018). Opponents of stakeholder theory argue that the fluidity of definitions makes it problematic, and its ethical rhetoric is just a smokescreen for self-promotion (Soin, 2018).

Including stakeholders in the area of crisis preparedness and management, as well as technology integration, is crucial. Making graduates ready for the workforce is a significant aspect of higher education institutions' responsibilities regarding their employer, community, and government stakeholders (Borg et al., 2019). If higher education holds the power to design the future (Ackoff, 1974), conversations and actions must be taken to build relationships with recent graduates and employers (Borg et al., 2019). Using the stakeholder theory, Borge et al. (2020) researched the shared interests of universities and these stakeholders regarding technology transfer. The top two clusters of importance were 'Interdisciplinary collaborations' and 'Support for innovation' (Borge et al., 2020). Having proven the value of implementing stakeholder input in higher education, COVID-19 should have only encouraged its usage in the quick transition to online learning.

The onset of COVID-19 worldwide and the subsequent move to remote teaching impacted higher education and its relationship-building and engagement of stakeholders. While the duration of new norms, such as social distancing and remote work, was unknown, it was considered imperative to continue research and business-as-usual operations where possible (Tobin et al., 2020). For higher education, a large piece of this puzzle was stakeholder engagement and involvement in decision-making dialogue (Tobin et al., 2020). This engagement would seem even more urgent during a global pandemic as the entirety of higher education's culture, physical appearance, and execution had to change and adapt. A problem with trying to engage stakeholders during the pandemic is the similarities and differences of impact on each stakeholder and the state of mere survival of higher education institutions (Nandy et al., 2020).

Researchers recommended regularly checking with stakeholders to measure adaptability, gauge confidence in future decisions and processes, and get advice about how to adapt and survive (Nandy et al., 2020). Stakeholder networks and strong relationships proved to make an institution more sustainable during the pandemic shutdowns and quarantine periods (Obrenovic et al., 2020). The current study looks at the perceptions of faculty, a highly valued group of stakeholders, on the crisis response academically to the COVID-19 pandemic. The study will provide a national range of perspectives about the transition to online learning from faculty who had no prior online teaching experience, how these faculty believe students and academics were impacted, and how they feel higher education institutions can better prepare for future crises.

### **Faculty's Initial Reaction to COVID-19 Pandemic**

After the Trump administration declared a public health emergency in January 2020, it would not be until March that the U.S. Department of Education began taking action to halt on-campus activities (Acosta et al., 2021). Student loans, accreditation renewals, and study abroad programs were suspended, and by the end of the month, Congress had passed the Coronavirus Aid Relief and Economic Security (CARES) Act, providing nearly \$14 billion to higher education institutions (Acosta et al., 2021). Colleges and universities across the United States began transitioning rapidly to virtual distance education in an attempt to finish Spring 2020 quickly. Throughout the Spring and Summer, the U.S. Department of Education updated guidelines and procedure suggestions that corresponded with the current research on the COVID-19 virus.

The COVID-19 pandemic forced higher education institutions to make rapid decisions about how their courses would continue amid the advice and guidance from public officials and the World Health Organization. Many institutions had well-established online teaching programs



and faculty, while others were unprepared. In March 2020, Hodges et al. suggested that universities recognize the difference between effective online education and emergency remote teaching. While effective online education is planned over months and years, emergency remote teaching happens fast and amid personal responses to the crisis by all stakeholders (Hodges et al., 2020). The transition to online teaching and learning was removed from the optional category for higher education institutions due to the COVID-19 pandemic and became a necessity instead (Dhawan, 2020). Colleges and universities found themselves on the judgment block of society in how they would respond to this crisis (Dhawan, 2020). Expectations and reactions to academic experiences during the pandemic vary, regardless of the predictions, warnings, and previous judgments.

### ***Immediate Reactions***

Immediate reactions seemed hostile as students struggled to cope with distractions at home, find the same level of interest and engagement, and adhere to a personal schedule (Petillion & McNeil, 2020). While Hodges et al. (2020) warned that flexibility would be critical, students wrestled with the lack of structure for communication, interaction with peers and faculty, and technology-use protocols (Petillion & McNeil, 2020). Faculty initially reacted similarly in that many did not change their typical mode of disseminating information to students by videoing lectures and maintaining the same assignments as before quarantine (Rupnow et al., 2020). Professors struggled with communication, arguing they could not read body language, and they recognized the impact of less interaction on student performance (Rupnow et al., 2020).

Surveys and studies conducted several months following the shift to online education also varied, suggesting that time and practice were not factors. Faculty held one of three categorical viewpoints: faculty who already embraced technology and online learning in higher education,

so they thrived, faculty who could not adjust to experiences they felt could not be replicated in an online environment, and faculty who were overwhelmed by professional and personal factors related to the pandemic (Ramlo, 2021). Those with optimistic viewpoints embraced the forced aspect of the transition as a needed push and invited students with more technical skills to aid in the rapid development of their courses (Cutri et al., 2020). When surveyed months into the 2020-2021 academic year, many faculty mentioned a renewed sense of engagement and focused on the practice of teaching experienced and shared by themselves and colleagues (Miyagawa & Perdue, 2020). Faculty did have to grapple with not attaining the learning outcomes desired, fighting fraud and dishonesty, and being resilient in their teaching philosophy (Adedoyin & Soykan, 2021; Oliveira et al., 2021). Research reported that emergency remote learning increased empathy and humility, allowing for mistakes from faculty and students (Oliveira et al., 2021). Many faculty and students who held positive perspectives of online teaching and learning did, however, express strong concerns over the lack of equity based on available support systems (El Said, 2021; Lemay et al., 2021). Faculty and students surveyed claimed that more time was spent discussing hardware and software issues during synchronous class meetings than time spent teaching and learning (Wu, 2021). In the face of these varying viewpoints and arguments, the higher education administration had to react quickly to prepare all stakeholders for online education.

Because of the quick turnaround from face-to-face to online, administrations had to produce rapid professional development, or training, for faculty that could produce results fast. Although faculty were provided with many virtual resource banks that opened the door for collaborative learning and communities of practice, most resources lacked content and pedagogical content knowledge and did not fully engage faculty in their specific needs

(Schildkamp, 2021). In addition, the faculty struggled to find the time to develop online courses and platforms fully. Internationally, faculty had free access to conferences, peer-reviewed journal articles, and virtual professional developments that previously had high costs for admission (Morra et al., 2021). Tucker and Quinteros-Ares (2021) studied the use of Professional Learning Communities to best meet faculty needs at a private university in Connecticut, basing their professional development on prior research (Baran, 2016; Banasik & Dean, 2016). Their results supported this prior research showing very high numbers of positive responses to the overall experience of transitioning to online teaching during the pandemic (Tucker & Quinteros-Ares, 2021).

### **Looking Forward**

Researchers who approached the rapid transition to online teaching during the pandemic crisis have suggested that higher education institutions prepare for future crises by integrating blended learning as a mandatory aspect of in-person courses (Turnbull, 2021). Although some studies show that students are anxious to return to in-person sessions, other studies show that many prefer the online setting and are looking to continue their education (McKenzie, 2021). As a result, higher education faculty will need to accommodate these demands and prepare for future complete transitions.

Following the 2020-2021 academic year, the first full academic year implementing COVID-19 guidelines, the U.S. Department of Education released a handbook for higher education utilizing information gained from listening sessions across the country from various higher education stakeholders (Press Office, 2021). Since the initial rollout of COVID-19 policies and guidelines, multiple vaccines have become available to most age groups, and more studies have been conducted showing the usefulness of certain mitigation practices. In the

summer of 2021, many students felt the worse of the pandemic was over and that they would get the vaccination if their institution required it for Fall 2021 on-campus courses (Klebs et al., 2021). Concerns about the lack of interaction with professors and peers, contracting the virus and spreading it to loved ones, and returning to normalcy permeated the considerations of students, faculty, and other stakeholders. The biggest concerns of the students surveyed centered around the practicality of their semi-online degree in the new pandemic and future post-pandemic economy (Klebs et al., 2021). Rising costs of higher education were a pre-pandemic controversy. Students now fear that the new policies of online teaching and learning, fewer in-person academic experiences, and less interaction with classmates will reduce the profitability of their degree in the workforce and, therefore, not worth its cost (Adler, 2021). For degrees that require or benefit from clinical experiences or apprenticeships, students especially felt their education was, in many ways, incomplete (OECD, 2021). The coming consequences of the COVID-19 adjustments to higher education are yet to be seen in the economy and students' economic and human value to employers.

The consequences of the initial reaction to the COVID-19 pandemic began to surface by the summer of 2021. Enrollment numbers had dwindled, forcing institutions to make cutbacks to academic experiences and other areas. The group impacted the most by these financial cutbacks was adjunct faculty, who were the most vulnerable to pay cuts and layoffs (Adler, 2021). Many colleges and universities, especially community colleges, rely on the part-time status of adjunct faculty to fill in content gaps for full-time faculty members. Without the support of tenure, these faculty members, who get paid by the number of courses they teach, saw their opportunities decline or disappear entirely. Institutions greatly suffered from this loss. Students were delayed in finishing their programs because courses could not be offered frequently. Full-time faculty

were forced to take additional courses, naturally diminishing the overall quality of their teaching by stretching them too far. Another unintended consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic was the impact on female faculty, who were more impacted than their male colleagues as they were often caregivers for sick family members or friends. The long-term impact could be gender inequities with male faculty who had more time for research and career advancement than their female counterparts (Adler, 2021). The question facing higher education is how to respond to these consequences. Time and these inadvertent consequences cannot be easily reversed, and the response to these concerns could cause additional issues that higher education institutions are unprepared to handle.

Students and faculty surveyed following the 2020-2021 academic year reflected on the impact of the pandemic on higher education. Many found issues of inequity and access to be the most pressing (UNESCO, 2021). Providing the necessary hardware and software, internet access, mental health support, and basic needs of all stakeholders was extremely difficult given the reduction in enrollment despite government assistance and support. Using surveys and federal, state, and local guidelines, many campuses across the United States chose to open on-campus courses in the Fall of 2021, while over half chose to continue solely online education (OECD, 2021). Most concerning for higher education institutions was the dramatic drop in enrollment. Between the 2019 and 2021 academic school years, undergraduate student enrollment in the U.S. dropped by almost eight percent, and community colleges lost 15 percent of their students total ("Stay Informed," 2021). In November 2021, Andy Pallotta, President of New York State United Teachers, spoke to the New York Assembly Committee in Albany about the impact of COVID-19 on higher education. He committed to the pandemic of students dropping from higher education rather than turning to it for new opportunities, which is the historical response to the

economic downturn (Pallotta, 2021). The New York government was encouraged to make more specific investments in higher education faculty so that more courses and degree offerings could be made available in fields that will pay off college and university graduates (Pallotta, 2021).

### **Summary**

America's higher education institutions have changed dramatically from their early days of recitation and religious focus. Over the last three centuries, higher education has become a leader in American society, working with all levels of government to serve the community by preparing students for the workforce and citizenship. In addition to its purpose, higher education has adopted new forms of pedagogy to meet the demands of society and the American economy by creating specific institutions for necessary fields, opening research opportunities and funds, and becoming forerunners in using modern technologies. Because of this vital position in America, higher education institutional response to crises must be planned and executed with stakeholders' best interests in mind.

The COVID-19 pandemic made higher education a rapid transition to online teaching and learning. Although there were faculty teaching online before the nationwide quarantine period and professional training was available for all faculty on integrating technology and online teaching, many faculty were caught off guard. They were utterly transferring their in-person courses to online within weeks. The research shows that developing quality online courses takes months of preparation time. Professional development during the pandemic was vital; it had to address various needs for faculty transition and involved as many stakeholders as possible to address current issues. Reactions from students and faculty on the transition to online learning and teaching varied widely, with some showing confidence in their experience while others argue there were inequities, lack of support, and little to no communication and interaction. By

using the stakeholder theory and viewing the higher education institution as a collection of stakeholders who create value for one another, the present study adds to existing literature the specific perspective of faculty who transitioned without any experience in online teaching. Much is known about the essential elements of online teaching and the transition to teaching in this environment. However, this study addresses the faculty perception of the rapid transition to online teaching during the pandemic and how higher education can better prepare for future crises that might push academia back into a completely virtual space.

## **CHAPTER THREE: METHODS**

### **Overview**

This hermeneutic phenomenology aims to determine higher education professionals' perceptions of crisis-response teaching. This chapter describes the research design, including the research questions to be used, the specific requirements for participation in this study, and how the participants were recruited. I explain the data collection process and data analysis processes for potential replication. Finally, this chapter provides details of the factors embedded in this study that supports its trustworthiness, credibility, and dependability, along with addressing any ethical considerations.

### **Research Design**

To conduct this study, I determined a qualitative hermeneutic phenomenological approach to be the best fit because it allows participants' voices to be heard and analyzed rather than simply equating their perspectives to a numerical value (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The study is grounded in open and free-flowing dialogue about the participants' experiences recognizing my opinions or perspective on the phenomenon being studied (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Because all participants and I have experienced the COVID-19 pandemic both professionally and personally, it is critical to first acknowledge my personal story before seeking out the participants' lived experiences (Guillen, 2019). Doing this provides authentic value to each participant's input in the study. Specifically, the processes embedded in this study - phenomenological reduction, imaginative variation, and the final synthesis of meaning - encourage taking the experiences of each participant from a fresh perspective without prejudgments or bias (Moustakas, 1994). A description of the essence of the rapid transition to



online teaching experience during COVID-19 creates an understanding of academia's crisis-response methods and consequences for more efficient future preparedness.

A hermeneutic phenomenological approach is the most appropriate method for this research because of the global nature of the COVID-19 crisis. Given the shared consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, I have been impacted by the topic of the study, which meets van Manen's (1990) requirements, and these influences can be included in the findings while maintaining validity. Hermeneutic phenomenology is a human science that brings reflexive meaning to a person's lived experience (van Manen, 1999). Phenomenology accepts that knowledge is only actual as it appears in one's consciousness and the unfolding of what one knows and perceives is a process that combines science and philosophy (Moustakas, 1994). Hermeneutic phenomenology seeks to discover the essence of experiences with a phenomenon that, at first glance, is complete and unbiased but then recognizes the researcher's and the participants' direct contact with the topic (Guillen, 2019). The researcher then engages in the reduction of the data into the textural description (what was experienced) and the structural description (how it was experienced) (Moustakas, 1994).

Using a phenomenological research design, the study is grounded in open and free-flowing dialogue about the participant's experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). A phenomenological approach is valid for this study because it allows for the phenomenon of virtual teaching as a response to crises to be viewed through the experiences and perspectives of educators. Discussions and proactive preparations can occur in higher education for future crises using the results and discussion from this study. It explains the essence of the participant's experience with the phenomenon of crisis-response online teaching to aid in further developing processes that strengthen the faculty's confidence in their abilities to transition effectively.

Hermeneutic phenomenology searches for themes and expressions in all participants' input and provides overall clarity of the phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

### **Research Questions**

The central research question focuses on the experience of higher education faculty in responding to the COVID-19 crisis with online teaching. Asking about the experience of transitioning to online teaching, I then explore the central phenomenon with three sub-questions that provide a more in-depth understanding of the experience. These sub-questions focus on the available supports and the individual comfort level in making the transition.

#### **Central Research Question**

What are the experiences of higher education faculty who rapidly transition from in-person to online teaching during a crisis?

#### **Sub-Question One**

How do higher education faculty perceive their training and support for the quick transition?

#### **Sub-Question Two**

How comfortable are higher education faculty teaching in an online medium?

#### **Sub-Question Three**

What does higher education faculty believe that higher education institutions can do to better prepare for crisis response in academic courses?

### **Setting and Participants**

Because the focus crisis for this study was a pandemic, the setting requires breadth, and the participants' location is irrelevant to the focus of the research. Therefore, the setting for this study has only been limited to the United States, and the participants have only been limited by

their prior experience with online teaching and learning. These requirements will allow the results to apply to all higher education institutions' crisis management planning.

### **Setting**

The higher education institutions used for this study meet two general criteria: geographic and situational. The setting for this study is not a specific location but is open to a national sampling of higher education institutions within the United States. A crisis can hit anywhere in various circumstances, but COVID-19 offers a unique research opportunity regarding its global impact. The colleges and universities where the faculty participants are or were employed rapidly transitioned to fully online teaching and learning in response to the local, state, and federal recommendations associated with the COVID-19 pandemic. Situationally, the participants of this study are described as having no experience with teaching a fully online course of any kind before the rapid transition to online learning due to the COVID-19 crisis.

### **Participants**

Participants in this study are people who served as higher education faculty during the 2020-2021 academic year and were forced to rapidly transition from in-person instruction to fully online instruction in response to the COVID-19 pandemic crisis. There are no other specific demographic requirements for participation in this study.

### **Researcher Positionality**

Because the crisis used for this study was experienced worldwide, a social constructivist interpretative framework and nominal ontological assumption were chosen to recognize the collective and individual aspects of the phenomenon. As the researcher, I bring a unique lens to the study from my experiences. The hermeneutic phenomenology design method allows for broad questions and analysis that embraces the various perspectives of participants.

## **Interpretive Framework**

Social constructivism is a social learning theory that asserts that individuals actively participate in their learning by formulating meaning through social interactions (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This worldview allows for many realities to exist simultaneously and results from the combination of conversation, social rituals, language, artifacts, and experiences (Jackson, 2010). For research, this interpretative framework permits the research questions a broad stance to lead the participants in constructing meaning (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Social constructivism corresponds well with the hermeneutic phenomenological study approach by listening to and synthesizing participants' experiences to create an essence or complete description of a phenomenon. It also allows for the researcher's experiences in formulating the final data analysis. The present study uses the social constructivist framework as a lens because it recognizes the voices of and validates the experiences of diverse groups.

## **Philosophical Assumptions**

For this study, the nature of reality is defined as subjective, and its sources are multiple and varied. The epistemological assumption is that perspectives are layered; therefore, broad questions are used to help participants discover these layered facets of their experiences. Because the COVID-19 pandemic was experienced by myself and the participants, the hermeneutic phenomenology allows my perspective to be present without bias in the study.

## ***Ontological Assumption***

My study takes the nominal ontological assumption that reality exists within individual interpretations of experiences (Hirokawa, 2005). True to the ontological assumptions, the world comprises humans with individual perspectives and meanings applied to everyday experiences (Ahmed, 2008). When reality is subjective, multiple sources of knowledge can be used as

interpretations (UKEssays, 2018). This interpretation acknowledges the value of each person, their conscious understandings, and the layered facets that build their perspectives. For a crisis-response study, this allows the voices of each participant to be heard as a new and valuable perspective.

### ***Epistemological Assumption***

The layered facets of a person's perspective are built over time. This scaffolding effect creates an ever-changing aspect of knowledge creation and limits the knowledge within an individual's consciousness (Hiller, 2016). Because epistemology addresses how one comes to know what they think they know (Hiller, 2016), my study seeks to build the participant's descriptions of their experiences by synthesizing the processes that built their perspectives.

### ***Axiological Assumption***

I seek to understand the experience of faculty during the transition to online teaching during a crisis, specifically the COVID-19 pandemic. Rather than explain or predict how the pandemic had impacted faculty (Davis, 2021), I am offering an opportunity for clarity and authentic, reflected descriptions to aid in preparation for future crises. Although I experienced the rapid transition to online teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic, my bias will not skew the data toward a particular result because I had experience teaching and learning online prior to the COVID-19 crisis response. Thus I have not experienced the phenomenon as my participants have. To ensure that my bias is not interjected into participants' perceptions, each participant will have the opportunity to review the study's results before submission or publication.

### **Researcher's Role**

Within the present study, I actively recruit participants from higher education faculty I know and, with the aid of recommendations from each participant, conduct all interviews,

facilitate focus groups and letter-writing collection, and administer the data analysis procedures. Aside from the first two to three participants, I have no prior relationship or even knowledge of the participants before recommendations and introductions from previous participants in the study. Using the snowball sampling method, prospective participants can be contacted confidentially while creating a more extensive network than one institution or geographic location (Naderifar, 2017). Because the pandemic impacted higher education in various ways, this sampling method allows me to broaden the scope of data collected for national analysis and results.

As both a higher education instructor and student, I have a firsthand personal account of the transfer to online learning during COVID-19. However, it is starkly different from the participants as my teaching was hybrid rather than fully online, and the learning was conducted online prior to the pandemic. In addition, I had experience developing and facilitating online courses before the remote education crisis response.

### **Procedures**

The snowball sampling method is used for this study to seek a broad representation of higher education faculty. Participants were approached after being recommended by previous participants and were asked to participate in the study through formal methods. The participants are higher education faculty without prior online teaching experience that taught using a remote online platform during the 2020-21 academic year.

### **Permissions**

Once acquiring the necessary approval for the study from my committee and the Institutional Review Board of Liberty University, as seen in Appendix A, the research process began (Institutional Review Board, 2021). Initial participants were contacted based on my

knowledge of their situation during the rapid transition to online teaching. Initial and recommended participants were contacted via email using the formal letter seen in Appendix B to explain the study and participants' expectations. Participants were surveyed using a Google form with questions seen in Appendix C. Participant consent to use their words and experiences in the study was gained by acquiring a signature on the document seen in Appendix D. Before beginning the study interviews, the twelve open-ended questions were vetted by the research committee to test the clarity and sequence of the questions.

### **Recruitment Plan**

The purpose of the study is to describe the experiences of higher education faculty during the rapid transition to online teaching during a crisis requires a snowball sampling method. Originally used to study the structure of social networks (Kirchherr & Charles, 2018), snowball sampling allows the researcher to begin the study with a small number of qualified participants and then requests that each participant recommend at least one additional contact that meets the study requirements (Parker et al., 2019). This method allows the participants to represent various demographics to cover a national sampling.

### **Data Collection Plan**

Data collection for this study is divided into three parts: interviews, a focus group discussion, and finally, a requested letter prompt analysis. These three data sources trace the participant's experiences from personal to institutional and foster participant reflection. Participants will use their thoughts and reflections to offer advice for higher education for better preparedness for future crises.

## **Individual Interviews Data Collection Approach**

Brinkmann and Kvale (2015) describe the craft of qualitative interviewing as the researcher and interviewee constructing knowledge together. Following this definition, the interviews for my study serve as the central piece of research for this study. Rubin and Rubin (2012) theorized that qualitative interviews should be a fluid practice where changes can be made within the process. As a result, the interviews utilize open-ended questions that allow immediate follow-up questions for clarity and further observation.

### ***Individual Interview Questions***

1. Please tell me a little about yourself including your career pathway to your current position specifically regarding virtual teaching. CRQ
2. Describe your preparedness for the transition to online teaching during the 2020-21 academic year. SQ2
3. Describe your initial experience in transitioning to online teaching due to the COVID-19 pandemic from March 2020 – August 2020. CRQ
4. Contrast your comfort levels with online teaching between your first semester and second semester in the 2020-21 academic year. SQ2
5. Describe challenging experiences teaching virtually throughout the 2020-2021 academic year. CRQ
6. Describe changes or adjustments made to your teaching practice (e.g. assessments, pedagogies, strategies, communication) throughout the 2020-2021 academic year. CRQ
7. Describe the supports and training you utilized internally during the transition and throughout the academic year to aid your online teaching practice. SQ1



8. Describe the supports and training you utilized externally during the transition and throughout the academic year to aid your online teaching practice. SQ1
9. Describe the measures you will take to better prepare for possible future transitions to online teaching due to crisis circumstances. SQ3
10. What advice might you give new higher education faculty on preparedness? SQ3
11. What measures do you believe higher education administrations could adopt immediately to better meet the needs of faculty during crisis response teaching? SQ3
12. Are there any additional comments, thoughts, or experiences you would like to make regarding any challenges or successes you've experienced transitioning to online teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic? CRQ

Question one opens the interview by creating confidence and comfort for the participant and provides me with background knowledge and understanding that may be crucial in synthesizing the participant's perceptions. Bolderston (2012) argues that "it is essential to try to understand the participant's life experience and how it relates to the phenomenon being studied (p. 70). These opening questions allow the participant to set up their story in their way.

Questions two through nine walks the participant through the experience of transitioning to and executing online teaching under the unique circumstances of a global pandemic. These are central questions to the research study, along with sub-questions one and two that further expand the experience descriptions (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Questions ten and eleven focus on sub-question three, which asks faculty participants to reflect deeply to provide suggestions for future personal and institutional preparedness. These questions take reflection, both internal and external, to highlight interactions with their institution and higher education in general (Agee, 2009). Question twelve allows for any final comments

and follow-up from the participant to conclude the interview. Phenomenological research interviews are meant to elicit meaning; therefore, throughout the interview, spontaneous follow-up and explanative questions are asked (Morse, 1994). This fluid aspect of phenomenological research allows for changes in the questions or additional questions to be added during the interview or in future discussions (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

### ***Individual Interview Data Analysis Plan***

Data analysis for a hermeneutic phenomenological study involves several steps that first require the researcher to write out their perspective to provide a clear vantage point for viewing the topic (Creswell & Poth, 2018). After writing the personal anecdote, the following steps include horizontalization of the data, formulation of meaning units, and writing the textural and structural descriptions of the experiences described by the participants.

To discover my anecdote, I must describe my personal experiences with the phenomenon and then, through self-reflection, describe in detail my experience with online teaching or learning during the COVID-19 pandemic that might impact my data analysis. This is vital to ensure objectivity and allows the readers to judge my objectivity throughout the study.

"Significant statements in the database from participants" must then be identified and clustered "into meaning units and themes" (Moerer-Urdahl & Creswell, 2004, p. 21). After transcribing the interviews, I highlight significant statements and list them in a table for analysis. This step allows me to take an intimate look at the data before formulating broader units of meaning. To formulate the meaning units and themes, I determine where the statements overlap in meaning and clusters by deleting repetitive statements and themes and narrowing down the units of meaning (Moustakas, 1994).

A series of coding is conducted with the data throughout the research process. Pre-coding is completed during the interviews and their transcription. Key quotes that stand out as potentially necessary for the coding, categories, and eventual themes are then determined (Saldana, 2016). From there, the data undergoes an initial coding and at least one re-coding (Saldana, 2016). The interview transcriptions are coded as they are conducted to allow for changes in questions or the coding process. After the coding is complete, the codes are combined into categories, then analyzed for potential themes (Saldana, 2016). I will utilize the computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software Atlas.ti to store, code, and analyze the data (Saldana, 2016).

Taking the resultant themes, I describe what the participant has experienced through a textural description and how they experienced the phenomenon through a structural description (Moerer-Urdahl & Creswell, 2004, p. 30). To accomplish the textural description, the research must focus on what the participants experienced regarding the phenomenon and describe it with specific verbatim examples and then chronologically combine the participants' stories into a dialogue about what the participants experienced using their words to support the description. This element allows for the voice of the participants to be heard in a way that combines their experiences and finds commonality. To accomplish the structural description, I must focus on how the participants experienced the phenomenon describing the setting and context of their experiences with specific verbatim examples, and then describe the commonalities of the setting and context experienced by the participants. The final element in the data analysis is formulating the phenomenon's essence or the composite description giving context to the participants' experiences.

## **Focus Group Data Collection Approach**

This study's second form of data collection is a focus group session with participants asked to attend at least one. The focus group session is held via a virtual conference which is recorded for future transcription. I facilitate and monitor the discussion but that operates independently of my input (Gill et al., 2008). Eight guiding questions are used to keep the discussion within an hour window while utilizing initial interview data to seek clarification of potential meaning units and themes (Gundumgula, 2020). A focus group session was chosen for this specific study to help triangulate the data due to the participant's varied demographics and shared experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic crisis.

### ***Focus Group Questions***

Qualitative phenomenological research allows for fluidity and flexibility in the questioning of participants by using the data as it is being collected (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Using the initial data from early interviews, the focus group discussion questions were flexible to facilitate productive conversation.

1. What was the most challenging aspect of moving from in-person to online course instruction at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic? CRQ, SQ2
2. What strategies or activities for your content and focus area successfully transitioned to an online platform during the COVID-19 remote learning response and why? CRQ, SQ1, SQ2
3. What strategies or activities for your content and focus area failed to transition successfully to an online platform during the COVID-19 remote learning response and why? CRQ, SQ1, SQ2

4. What steps did your institution take to transition to remote online teaching and learning in response to the COVID-19 pandemic? SQ1
5. Describe the experience of balancing the transition to online teaching with the toll of COVID-19 on your personal life. CRQ
6. How do you believe your institution fell short in its transition to online learning? SQ1
7. How do you believe your institution excelled during the transition to online learning? SQ1
8. Describe any adjustments to the crisis management procedures of your institution that you believe are necessary for the next crisis that would result in online teaching and learning. CRQ, SQ1, SQ3

Question one is meant to begin the discussion with open dialogue and finding similarities among the participants. Question two transitions the discussion to the topic of online teaching and learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. Question three allows participants to describe the chronological steps their institution took in transitioning to remote online learning and to find similarities or differences in the participant's experiences in the focus group. Question four addresses the differences and similarities among the participants in the focus group. It also addresses the shared experience of balancing the personal with the professional while pointing out specific differences that might impact the overall usability of the data. Questions five and six are interview questions meant to provoke reflection through group discussion and analysis. These questions ask participants to separate the positives and negatives of the transition to remote learning from the institutional perspective. Question seven encourages participants to begin discussing specific suggestions they might make to their institution regarding immediate actions that would better prepare faculty for the next crisis that results in online teaching. This

question will also allow participants to gather ideas they could use in the following data collection phase.

### ***Focus Group Data Analysis Plan***

Developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967), the constant comparison analysis method is used to analyze the focus group data. In this method, data are grouped into small units in a process called open coding; axial coding groups these units into categories, then themes are created in selective coding (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2009). The constant comparison analysis method allows for the cross-referencing of the different group discussion transcripts and reaches data and theoretical saturation (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2009).

### **Letter-Writing Data Collection Approach**

Letter-writing is an excellent additional data source for this study because it circumvents potential embarrassment or hesitation to discuss personal information. The invisibility factor helps participants to reflect on the data they are supplying in the exact way they wish by providing time to get the wording precise and exact (Harris, 2002). The letters produced by the participants of this study are written to the administration of their institution providing feedback for future crisis preparedness. Participants are instructed to address in the letter specific suggestions for future transitions to online teaching and learning that would speak directly to the needs of their content area and personal technological skill level. This data source brings the full research circle – the interview is the intimate conversation with the interviewer, the focus group is the public collaboration with colleagues across the nation, and the letter is the reflected analysis of the individual (Salmon, 2018).

### ***Letter-Writing Data Analysis Plan***

As with the analysis for the focus groups, constant comparison analysis is used to code

and analyze the letters as they are submitted. Using this method, both sources support the interview data and allow the researcher to triangulate the data. Since higher education faculty are the main stakeholders being researched in this study, although many other stakeholders will benefit from the findings, the chosen three methods for data collection address a holistic approach to faculty and their experiences and thought processes regarding their transition to online teaching during a crisis (Guion, 2002).

### **Data Synthesis**

Because this study requires a great deal of coding to create meaning units, themes, and essence explanations, the qualitative data analysis tool Atlas.ti is used to store and arrange the data for organization, clarity, and flexibility. Using an inductive approach, I create codes for specific texts from all three data sources and then cross-reference them to create themes. The Atlas.ti software makes the data more comprehensive and useable throughout the research process (Rambaree, 2012).

Data analysis for a phenomenological study begins with phenomenological reduction. This process begins with a descriptive account of the researchers' experience or personal anecdote (Guillen, 2019). Then the researcher writes a textural description of what was experienced with the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). This process requires looking and relooking at the experience from as many different horizons as possible (Moustakas, 1994). Each horizon is given equal value and importance before brackets, or meaning units/themes are formed (Moustakas, 1994). Immediately following phenomenological reduction, imaginative variation occurs where a similar process is used to write the structural description or how the phenomenon was experienced (Moustakas, 1994). The final step in the analysis process is the synthesis of the two descriptions to formulate the phenomenon's essence using intuition and

knowledge of the universal (Moustakas, 1994). Despite this entire process, the truth of phenomenology holds that the absolute essence of any phenomenon is constantly fluctuating because of the changing nature of time and perspectives (Moustakas, 1994).

### **Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness is a crucial aspect of any study and is given even greater weight in qualitative studies as questions of reliability and validation are easily made given the interpretive aspects of the research (Creswell & Poth, 2018). For this study, various validation methods are used to ensure the trustworthiness of the research and results.

### **Credibility**

Three sources of data collection have been determined for this study. These sources are meant to gather information and validate it from multiple angles. By corroborating participants' interview answers with focus group transcriptions and letter-writing notes and themes, credibility increases because it supports or disproves interpretations of the faculty's perception of transitioning to online teaching during a crisis. This triangulation of various data sources allows the study's results to carry weight for future research (Creswell & Poth, 2018). While the questions and prompts for each data collection method are different in focus, the information and perspectives they address should be represented throughout each participant and corroborated by participants' overall themes (Guion, 2002).

### **Transferability**

This study has transferability through its research design and participant pool. As a national study seeking representation across the United States, the results quickly transfer to other contexts and settings (Lonny, 2020). A global pandemic may not be the next crisis faced by higher education; however, the data collected through this study merely uses the COVID-19



pandemic as a lens to examine crisis management in higher education. The results of this study are transferable and applicable to the next crisis that requires the solution of remote online teaching and learning.

### **Dependability**

To increase dependability, a dependability audit is conducted to validate the data collection and data analysis processes. This process will provide insight into the repeatability of the study in addition to determining the success of the strategies for credibility and transferability. (Williams, 2018). To perform the audit, an audit trail is maintained throughout the coding process to show how participants' experiences were interpreted and what themes emerged. This trail will then be made available to be evaluated by a research auditor to ensure that the study's dependability was maintained if required by Liberty University (Williams, 2018).

### **Confirmability**

Member checking is conducted by participants who wish to take this extra step in the study to provide feedback on the transcription, horizontalization, and meaning units determined by the researcher. This increases confirmability, specifically in a phenomenological study, by increasing the participants' voices and minimizing the researcher's prejudices (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

### **Ethical Considerations**

The Institutional Review Board might have been reluctant to allow this study if it feels the purpose is to point a condemning finger at an institution's potential lack of support for faculty during the transition to online teaching or the institution's other COVID-19 policies not associated with academics. Focusing the study on the participant's perspective of their transition could be presented as an effort to help the institution focus its future preparedness for crisis-

response in academics. With the participant's sign consent for the three data collection methods – interviews, focus groups, and letters – the researcher has permission to use the information shared when reporting study findings. The researcher is careful to determine what is confidential information and exclude it from consideration in the interpretations. All documents, whether paper or virtual, have been locked safely inside a specifically labeled envelope or flash drive for three years past the study's publication. Reporting the interpretations in a phenomenological study could also create ethical issues if the participants are not properly credited for their thoughts and experiences. The researcher and research committee take extra precautions to ensure participants' thoughts and perspectives are credited without breaking confidentiality. The researcher uses pseudonyms to protect the anonymity of participants as well as pay careful attention to not lose a voice in the categories and textural/structural descriptions.

### **Summary**

To conduct this hermeneutic phenomenological study about faculty perceptions on their transition to online teaching during the COVID-19 crisis, nine faculty members were recruited from across the United States that had no experience teaching online courses before the COVID-19 pandemic. Each participant was asked ten planned questions with follow-up questions for clarity, participated in an online focus group session, and wrote a reflective letter addressed to their administration. Data analysis consisted of horizontalization of the data, formulating the meaning units, and writing the textural and structural descriptions of the participant's experiences to find the phenomenon's essence.

## **CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS**

### **Overview**

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenology was to describe the experience of higher education faculty during the crisis-response transition to online teaching due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The study seeks to understand the essence of the experiences of faculty who made this transition without prior online teaching experience. This chapter includes participant information, descriptions of the themes and outlier data garnered from data analysis, and narratives of the research question responses.

### **Participants**

The nine participants in this study fit the criteria of being higher education faculty members without prior online teaching experience during the rapid transition to online teaching due to the outbreak of COVID-19 in the academic year 2020-2021. After using a snowball sample method, six participants were gained. Participants two, three, four, five, eight, and nine were acquired through the snowball method of asking participants to suggest colleague that fit the criteria of the study. The first participant in the study was an initial contact already known prior to the research. Participants six and seven responded to an email sent to hundreds of higher education faculty around the United States asking for participation in this research study. All nine participating faculty members consented to share their experiences and perceptions of the rapid transition to online teaching. Table 1 below represents the faculty participants showing the geographic location of their institution, gender, highest degree achieved, and the content area of focus.

Table 1

*Participant Information*

Participant Name	Geographic Location of Institution	Gender	Highest Degree Achieved	Content Area of Focus
Magnum	MI	Man	Masters ABD	Computer Science
Harry	MD	Man	Doctorate	Strategy & Policy
Lily	FL	Woman	Doctorate	Educational Technology
Molly	NC	Woman	Doctorate	School Administration
Arthur	MD	Man	Doctorate	Aerospace
Luna	NC	Woman	Doctorate	Curriculum & Supervision
James	ME	Man	Doctorate	History
Ronald	MD	Man	Doctorate	Strategy & Policy
Neville	MD	Man	Doctorate	Leadership

Hermeneutic phenomenological research aims to seek out participants with lived experiences with the phenomenon being studied and be willing to discuss these experiences (van Manen, 1997). The number of participants in this type of research is not specific but should bring the research to a point of saturation which is aided by the diversity of the participant's experiences (Sandelowski, 1986). Fusch and Ness (2015) argue that data saturation is reached when the information provided allows for replication of the study and it becomes impossible to conduct further coding with the data. Based on the criteria for participation in this study and the coding conducted through analysis, the participants represent enough variety to saturate the research topic.

After organizing the various data sources collected during research, each transcription was considered individually for overall tone and themes. Agar (1980) suggests that researchers immerse themselves in the details of interviews to get a general sense of the essence being conveyed before breaking them into themes. Themes were then derived from the data by horizontalization, finding significant statements, and gathering these statements into meaning units (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The textural description, or the *what*, and the structural description, or the *how*, were then written using the themes as a guide (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

## **Results**

After analysis of the transcriptions of interviews, a focus group session, and writing prompts, two themes emerged to describe the experiences of higher education faculty who rapidly transitioned to online teaching without prior experience. The themes were a desire to return to in-person teaching and a double standard between the need for training and the willingness to participate in training for online teaching. The themes and subthemes are explained through narrative in this section.

### **Return to the Classroom**

Each faculty participant in this study advocated or desired the return to in-person teaching after the rapid transition to online education due to the pandemic. Arthur said, “While they [faculty colleagues] did adapt and try to overcome as much as they could, they much preferred in-person and were happy to see the virtual go.” All participants could name several positive outcomes of virtual teaching and acknowledged the future reliance on online teaching and learning. The participants, however, were also steadfast that some in-person aspect to learning was necessary for optimal results. A couple of participants showed a complete refusal to ever return to online teaching. “I was the first one to come back, I opted to come back as soon as

we could,” commented Luna. Molly declared, “I totally tried to get away from Zoom and everything else. When I could, I ran back to the way I wanted to do things.”

Despite the recognition that their most used pedagogy transferred easily to the online medium and despite the growth of confidence in using online tools to deliver their content, faculty participants expressed desires to return to in-person education. These sentiments come from feelings that online class dynamics cannot match, nor can they replicate those of in-person class dynamics. Every participant also cited a strong need for pedagogy that was specifically designed for the online medium, specifically suited to their content, and that would make it possible to potentially replicate the in-person experience. The lack of this type of pedagogy was seen as the reason in-person education in some form was vital moving forward.

### *Positive Outcomes*

The intent of in-person pedagogy could be replicated relatively easily by the faculty participants because of the content focus areas they represent. Over time participants noticed that skills gained over years of in-person teaching paid off when utilizing the online medium. James said, “I think for my discipline the lecture still has some strengths and so I had some skills that I brought into online learning where I was able to record.” Lily recalled, “Collaboration and allowing students to work together is really important in the classroom and I figured out that Zoom had breakout rooms and I could kind of force students to get together.” Luna added, “We don’t come to campus for dissertation defenses anymore. We’re all getting it done, and nobody has to leave their kitchen.” The majority of faculty participants exhibited increased confidence in using the online medium as a teaching tool. Molly admitted:

I went from like I told you; I was in panic mode to now. I feel very comfortable teaching a class online. If we have a night where something happens, or there’s bad weather or

whatever, I'm totally great with teaching the class online.

Despite this growth in assurance that the online medium could deliver education in a satisfactory way, faculty participants showed a strong disposition toward in-person teaching and learning.

Aspects of the online classroom seemed lacking compared to the in-person classroom that faculty participants were not willing to sacrifice.

### *Class Dynamics*

Class dynamics were cited by every faculty participant as an area of needed improvement in their online teaching due to physical factors that are lost in an online classroom, but are available in-person. Reading students' body language or eye contact, using their physical presence as cues for behavior modification, or being able to monitor a full class in group discussions were some examples of missing pieces faculty participants felt ill-prepared to replace. Molly said:

It's very hard to read the room and that would present a shock to me because I'm so used to being able to read the room and know how to go forward as a result of how people are feeling or expressing themselves with body language and facial expressions.

Luna commented, "When I'm in the room, I can see if someone looks downtrodden or I can see if someone looks excited. I know how to navigate that dynamic, which is almost absent through a computer screen."

The teaching philosophy of the faculty participants was uprooted by online teaching. Participants see their profession as one that connects with learners by cultivating rapport that encourage buy-in to the relevancy of the content focus. Each participant noted a serious lack of connection with students throughout their time teaching online during the pandemic. Harry stated:

When I started online, there was immediately a challenge of how do you make those connections through the computer. I'm not sure what you can do about that, because it's just not the same as being in person. There's a real barrier, a real physical barrier between you.

This loss of connection and relationship building was cited by the study's participants as being associated with burnout for faculty and students, a loss of energy for seeking out content innovations, and a lack of participation in class activities by students. Magnum argued, "If you don't have that personal connection with many of these students, you don't get the buy-in that you need, that's required, and so I felt that was sort of a problem."

Molly argued that the needed experiences that in-person education and interaction provide cannot be replicated online. "We moved all our dissertation defenses and our proposal defenses online and now many of us are back in the classroom, but those defenses are still being done online. I think that they are not better." Magnum stated, "Our overall struggles with online education really led a lot of us to believe that it's not the wave of the future that people think it is." Faculty participants, even those with positive relationships with technology, declared that the experiences of online learning do not produce the same results as face to face and that it was impossible to get close to the in-person experience.

### ***Online Teaching Pedagogy***

Faculty participants overwhelmingly noted the lack of online teaching pedagogy as a deterrent to quality online teaching that could mirror in-person best practice. After years or decades of teaching utilizing pedagogy that was tested by time and experience, faculty participants struggled to adapt mentally to the new medium. Lily noted, "We had a lot of



professors that left the profession that had been teaching for decades that said, this is not what I signed up to do.”

Magnum noted that other academic programs not represented by the participants of this study - such as Biology, Physics, and Engineering – had to wrestle with state and federal laws when trying to provide lab experiences for students. “Many students lost those co-ops or had their co-ops postponed or pushed off because of COVID. There’s just so much to think about and the ripple effects.” Lab courses, internships, and other non-traditional education settings either disappeared or were drastically altered due to regulations associated with the pandemic. Faculty participants worried that the students they were graduating would not have the real-world skills as a result. Molly said, “I really worried about, are they going to be able to get back into a real situation and know what to do because they’re just here in meetings online all year.”

Without the proper training in the methodology of teaching through the online medium, participants felt only certain aspects of their courses transferred successfully to the online platform while other aspects were lost almost completely. Activities, simulations, and classroom management techniques perfected over years of experience and professional development seemed to be lost in the newness of the online teaching environment without hope of reproducing the in-person results.

### **The Double Standard**

Although most faculty participants confirmed that their institutions provided training and resources during the transition to help with hardware and software, every participant admitted to not utilizing these resources in their entirety or not at all. Participants used their family, friends, or colleagues as aids or simply used external sources to find specific answers. These sources, participants argued, were convenient and could get to the root of their issues in a timely manner.

This dissonance between the recognition of a need and push for training while not being willing to participate in them is the essence of this theme. Harry admitted, “I would say that I was totally unprepared” for the rapid transition to online teaching. However, when discussing the technical supports that were made available by their institution they said, “I didn’t need it.” Later, when Harry was asked about what institutions can do to prepare faculty for future crises, they responded, “Certainly training.”

### *Insecurities & Need*

Faculty participants exhibited insecurities in how to operate the needed technology for online teaching and a general frustration in their lack of knowledge on how to use the technology as a tool for teaching. Arthur commented:

How do we start? It was like, we can’t get the video to work. We can’t get it to work so everyone dial into this phone, because we have phone conference lines, and we will do it over voice. How do you raise your hand? How do you let your instructor know that you’ve got a question besides just jumping in and everyone’s stepping on everyone. It was very much rudimentary.

Technology was seen by the participants as the physical hardware, such as laptops, desktops, cameras, microphones, iPads, etc., as well as the software such as their institution’s learning management system and other virtual programs accessed through the internet. Molly stated, “Initially, it was just learning how to turn on Zoom, download it, know what all these things mean. All of that stuff was extremely challenging for someone of my age. I’m not that adept at technology.” Lily stated, “I was having students email me assignments instead of uploading them into the platform because I wasn’t sure where it went. Some of them uploaded, some of them emailed. Where’s your paper?”

The need for supports in the form of trainings and resources was quoted by each faculty participant. Participants recognized the immense need to understand the technology and the methodology of teaching through an online platform. Arthur said that the focus of their supports “was predominantly on the software and how to use it rather than on the instruction.” While some supports were available during the rapid transition to online teaching during the pandemic, most participants stated they were broad in scope. The training videos produced by the higher education institutions represented by faculty participants were lengthy and would often attempt to provide as much content as possible all at once. The faculty participants of this study spoke of wanting short, concise videos or time-stamped videos that could address their specific needs quickly. Luna recalled:

I’ll tell you what was absolutely infuriating to me, I learned who to reach out to and I would be at a certain point in the process and all I needed to know was which button to push and somebody would send me a 30-minute video. I didn’t have 30 minutes, so I just didn’t go back to those people.

The recognized necessity for trainings and supports due to a shortage of grounded knowledge in technology and using technology as a teaching tool was evident in the data gathered from the faculty participants of this study.

### ***Hypocrisy***

Faculty participants exhibited the need for guidance and training without the willingness to take advantage of the resources. This dissonance was not acknowledged by the faculty participants but noticeable in the narrative of their responses. When asked about preparedness for online teaching, for example, Luna stated:

She [a colleague] came in my office and said, are you ready for what’s about to happen?

She said, you're about to have to teach online, everybody's going to go online. I said, absolutely not. I've never even used Canvas. I mean, they provide Canvas for us, but I've never used it. I just didn't need it.

Later when asked about their comfort level with online teaching based on their preparedness, Luna admitted, "I was completely unprepared, completely uncomfortable." Finally, when asked about internal supports provided by their institution and their use of these resources, Luna stated:

I was so frantic trying to survive from week to week. It's kind of like a new teacher, you know, slapping stuff on a new teacher that are not going to get to it. They're just trying to get through, what did I do today? What am I doing tomorrow? So, I didn't do that. I didn't even look because I knew I could pick up and call either a colleague or my daughter.

The comparison to a novice educator just starting a career is glaring and connects to the feelings of lost control over class dynamics and online teaching pedagogy.

Reasons were unconsciously given across all faculty participants for this dissonance between the need for and the willingness to participate in trainings, such as the length and breadth of the resources, the time needed to use the resources, and the relatability of the recommendations to their teaching philosophy. James stated, "I don't want to say it was too much because I'm sure that there were faculty members out there that needed every piece of it, but for me, I just kind of wanted to know specific things." Ronald added:

I found the internal ones [resources] useful at first but I found them both too detailed and sometimes counterproductive. As time went on, I felt they started to include a lot of suggestions which I thought were bad pedagogy and they would just come from anybody who was teaching.

Between juggling personal responsibilities to family and professional responsibilities to students, participants argued they had little time to invest in trainings or provided resources. Molly described the personal and professional life balance as “total chaos” adding:

On top of trying to manage, you know, my job and the panic that comes with now you’ve got to do this online, I also had kids here with me in the house. That made it really hard, you know, to homeschool, fix their lunch and work around meetings I had.

James discussed the issue of time and respecting faculty as professionals when reflecting on the consequences of the online teaching during the pandemic. “We can’t expect teachers to be online 12 hours a day no matter what the emergency is, so we have to be respectful of their time and energy.” Faculty participants’ lack of skill to teach online and yet their lack of time and energy to participate in trainings to cultivate needed skills is a noticeable dissonance that has consequences for future rapid transitions to online teaching and learning due to crises.

### **Outlier Data and Findings**

The themes that surfaced through the analysis of the study data fit into the above categories except for the theme of academic freedom. In March 2022, the Academic Freedom Index revealed that one out of every five people worldwide lives in a nation where academic freedom has decreased over the past ten years (Kinzelbach, 2022). While the United States is still noted as having high academic freedom, it has experienced a major increase in limitations to academic freedom directly coinciding with the outbreak of COVID-19 (Kinzelbach, 2022). Faculty participants in this research study spoke passionately about this topic after it was raised during the focus group session.

### *Academic Freedom*

One participant noted her experience and feelings of losing academic freedom due to the aspect of online teaching of recording class sessions. Molly stated during the focus group session, “When this whole nature of recording came in, I just felt like people behave differently and they were more cautious. I feel like we lost some of our academic freedom when everything was being recorded.” While this aspect of online teaching was cited by others as being a benefit for overall planning as absent students can easily stay up to date, these same participants now spoke about their feelings of being out of control of their intellectual property and the freedom to have an open discussion in their class sessions. Magnum argued, “I feel like our lectures are our intellectual property, and having those recorded and stored, you run the risk of your intellectual property being given out without your express consent or used in different contexts.”

### **Research Question Responses**

This section supplies answers to the research questions of this study. Highlighting the themes previously discussed, this section provides narrative answers to the research questions with evidence from participant data.

### **Central Research Question**

What are the experiences of higher education faculty who rapidly transition from in-person to online teaching during a crisis? Higher education faculty who rapidly transitioned to online teaching during the pandemic experienced a sudden and unexpected force that pushed them into the online classroom environment. Without experience, they were forced to seek aid from resources that were close and timely. Initially the goal was to transfer their in-person classroom to the virtual setting, but once it was determined that not all aspects could be transferred, surviving until in-person teaching return became the main goal.

All faculty participants had no experience with online teaching prior to the pandemic. “I was coming in blind; I had no experience. I felt I had trial by fire,” stated Ronald. Half of the participants were forced to rapidly transition in March 2020 while the other half benefited from several months of observing their colleagues and family before making the transition to online teaching. James said:

I was on sabbatical for the academic year 2020, so when the world went on lockdown in March, I saw my children have to equip themselves to the online world of learning. I had a little bit of a soft opening.

Only two participants had prior experience as online students within ten years prior to the pandemic. Two participants pointed out their working knowledge and interest in technology that helped with their transition. Neville said, “I think I am very comfortable with technology,” after having taken a few online college courses years earlier and being a career submariner in the U.S. Navy. Several participants, however, mentioned having little to no interest in technology in their personal or professional life prior to the pandemic and were therefore woefully unprepared for the transition.

Faculty participants were panicked by the rapid transition to online teaching due to COVID-19 and several openly resisted the transition and technology. Luna admitted, “Suddenly, I’m not in a classroom with a bunch of people. I’m sitting at my kitchen table with my laptop, and I was terrified. I didn’t know how to do any of it.” A lack of basic understanding of the hardware and software being utilized by their institutions was a common complaint. Magnum recalled various learning management systems – such as Blackboard, Google Classroom, and Moodle - being used by various colleagues which caused a lot of confusion until the administration chose one to use across the institution.

Participants admitted that most of their pedagogy transferred to the online medium with relative ease once the initial shock wore off and their knowledge of the technology increased. “My teaching philosophy involves a lot of student-driven activities, and I was able to do most of these as effectively online as I was able to in person,” admitted Harry. The pedagogical area that participants adjusted most to their online platforms was assessments, providing more choice to students to accommodate the personal circumstances brought on by the pandemic shutdown.

Participants noted their lack of preparedness for the rapid transition to online teaching, while also pointing out the unprepared state of their institutions and the available technology. Many participants found the technology available to them through their institutions outdated without the necessary pieces to accommodate the new mode of course delivery. Ronald mentioned the lack of accommodating technology, “If you have students with any kind of learning disabilities or physical handicaps, that can be difficult.” Faculty and students were also using a wide variety of personal devices and equipment that the institutions could not mandate or control. Ronald continued, “So it’s an institutional issue where the technologists really believe that they have the best technology and that this should work, but they don’t spend a lot of time in the classroom to see what’s happening.”

The abrupt transition to online teaching caught institutions without plans or funds to provide needed equipment and software. Magnum said, “I didn’t have the technology that I wanted to teach the way that I wanted and so I ended up spending quite a bit of money on my own.” Faculty participants noted the struggles associated with students who did not have access to devices or internet connections making teaching these students impossible. James argued, “In a supposedly democratic society that values education, at a minimum, people need the technology. People need laptops, people need access to the internet.”



### **Sub-Question One**

How do higher education faculty perceive their training and support for the quick transition? All faculty participants were provided training and support during the rapid transition to online teaching due to the pandemic, but no participant claimed to have taken full advantage of the provided resources. The trainings were perceived as too lengthy to meet the demands of faculty's time and too broad in scope to address specific faculty needs. As such, most faculty participants felt forsaken by the available supports and sought assistance from external sources.

Struggles with the transition to online teaching came in various forms such as managing the online classroom environment, forming connections with students to encourage buy-in, student and faculty burnout from a lack of energy, and the challenges of technology malfunctions. All participants claimed to have institutional online teaching supports available throughout the pandemic; however, most admitted to utilizing very little of these internal resources and choosing close colleagues, friends, or family members as go-to aids. Lily said, "There was a group of us angry, a herd of angry professors, we just kind of banded together and started bouncing ideas off of each other and this is what worked for me."

The reason cited for preferring external resources was the specific nature of faculty support needs. Most participants argued that institutional supports were too lengthy and cumbersome to fit into their hectic schedules. Molly complained, "They want to send me an hour-long video for me to sift through to find the three minutes I need, and I didn't like that at all." "People were just trying to get out as much information as possible," stated Ronald.

A few participants stated that their institutions could not or did not provide training due to funding or due to the faculty member's adjunct status. Lily said, "The individual departments would reach out to their people and then oh, we forgot to include adjuncts." A couple of

participants mentioned using students as a resource because they understood more about the technology and its mechanics.

### **Sub-Question Two**

How comfortable are higher education faculty teaching in an online medium? Higher education faculty participant's comfort level with teaching online without prior experience seemed to correlate to their personal interest in and experience with technology prior to the outbreak of COVID-19. Those that interacted with technology through personal interest or other professional duties, such as military responsibilities, were more likely to adjust quickly to the transition and continue using online resources in their post-pandemic classroom. Those that had rejected technology in their personal life resisted the intrusion into their professional life as well.

Comfort levels with an online teaching medium fell into three categories – confident, cautious, and incomprehensible. “Let me tell you, I was in a panic, total panic mode,” recalled Molly. Conversely, Magnum stated, “I didn’t really make use of much of that [institutional supports] simply because I’m pretty comfortable with figuring out technology on my own.” However, when asked about their training and preparedness for teaching online, Magnum admitted, “...virtually nothing, virtually no training.”

These comfort level categories aligned with the participant's prior experience with online communication tools, being an online student previously, or personal interest in technology. The less interaction faculty participants had with technology, in their personal and professional life prior to the pandemic, the more likely they were to resist the rapid transition to online teaching. Because of little to no prior experience with technology, some faculty members struggled with feeling confident to learn what felt like an entirely new skill after years of perfecting their in-person teaching style and practice.

### **Sub-Question Three**

What does higher education faculty believe that higher education institutions can do to better prepare for crisis response in academic courses? Faculty participants overwhelmingly suggested that in the face of future crises that might result in online teaching and learning, higher education institutions need to increase the technology provided to faculty and students as well as increase trainings. “Number one is they could invest more in the development of the staff that already exists for education across the board,” suggested Arthur. It was acknowledged that these actions take funding and preparation, but this was seen as vital to the continuation of academics under crisis conditions. Participants felt that trainings needed to be provided for both students and faculty. Students, they argued, need to understand and practice the disciplines required for online learning. Faculty need to master the mechanics of the required technology, but also learn pedagogy that relates to their content area. Harry noted, “We are professors, we are professionals that need to be able to do these skills. We have to learn them and be prepared. Mandatory training, if it doesn’t exist already, probably needs to be part of the onboarding, or annual certification process.”

These ideas carried over into the advice that faculty participants gave to their colleagues who may have to rapidly transition to online teaching. They advised their colleagues to have a working knowledge of the required platforms used by the college, to create a personal collection of resources that can be used online, and to always have an emergency plan in case the transition needs to happen immediately. The biggest piece of advice offered to future online faculty during a crisis was to seek out training for how to teach online rather than simply how to use the software. Harry suggested:

If you’re a teacher now in this environment, you should be asking your bosses when you

get the job, what resources do we have to transition to online teaching? You should find out what institutional supports are available. You should absolutely be asking that question, which we may not have done before the pandemic.

Despite admitting to not taking full advantage of the supports and training offered by their institutions throughout the pandemic, all faculty participants urged their institutions and colleagues to consider thoroughly training for the next crisis that might push academics back to fully online.

### **Summary**

Faculty participants in this study came from a variety of locations and content areas. After transcribing and analyzing the interviews, focus group, and writing prompts, two themes emerged from the data – returning to the classroom and the double standard. While each faculty participant experienced subtle differences, the majority experienced a period of initial shock that forced them into survival mode, a period of learning the technology’s mechanics, and a period of confidence growth with the online medium of teaching. Insufficient technology and the lack of access to technology were the main causes of insecurity among faculty participants who found the lack of control and expertise discomfoting. Despite admitting positive outcomes of online teaching, such as increased availability and new teaching practices, the majority of participants argued that in-person teaching and learning was their preferred mode due to class dynamics, the biggest struggles for faculty during online teaching. All faculty participants encouraged institutions to prepare for the next crisis that may result in online teaching and learning by taking immediate actions such as mandating trainings, establishing an online teaching requirement for all faculty, and training students in the disciplines of online learning.

## **CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION**

### **Overview**

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenology was to study the experience of higher education faculty who rapidly transitioned to online teaching as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Faculty participants were teaching at colleges and universities based in the United States and they had no prior experience with online teaching before this rapid transition. By focusing on the experiences of faculty, higher education institutions can better prepare for future crises that might result in a return to online teaching and learning as a tool for retention. This chapter will discuss my interpretation of the findings of this study, the implications for policy and practice, the theoretical and empirical framework, limitations and delimitations, and recommendations for future research.

### **Discussion**

The purpose of this section is to discuss the study's findings in light of the developed themes of the return to the classroom and the double standard. By studying the lived experiences of my faculty participants, I was able to glean valuable information about how to prepare faculty for a future crisis that would result in online teaching and learning. This chapter will discuss my interpretation of the findings of this study, the implications for policy and practice, the theoretical and empirical framework, limitations and delimitations, and recommendations for future research.

### **Interpretation of Findings**

After diligent analysis of the data and subsequent themes, consideration of how these themes overlap and what they mean for faculty and higher education institutions was considered.

### *Summary of Thematic Findings*

Individual interviews, a focus group session, and writing prompts were each analyzed for significant quotes which were then categorized into the following themes: the return to the classroom and the double standard. These themes emerged as the dominant factors of higher education faculty who rapidly transitioned from in-person to online teaching due to COVID-19. Faculty participants argued that class dynamics and online teaching pedagogy were the biggest challenges to feeling that their online teaching experience was successful. As a result, in-person teaching was strongly considered the option to produce ideal outcomes. They spoke about feelings of insecurity with technology due to a lack of access and the insufficient state of technology at their institutions. Because of these insecurities, they expressed a need for supports prior to, during, and after online teaching, but showed little to no interest in taking full advantage of these supports themselves. When the interaction of these themes are considered, the realization emerges that higher education faculty prefer in-person to online teaching due to feelings of professional regression and they are not embracing the growing trends of online education.

**Feelings of Regression.** The results of this study show overwhelmingly that higher education faculty need to feel like professionals whose years of experience are being applied with quality results. Twenty years prior to the rapid transition to online teaching due to the pandemic, Palloff and Pratt (2000) observed that the online classroom requires different techniques for developing community and faculty must be trained in these unique techniques. Throughout the pandemic online teaching, faculty were learning basic mechanics of how to record a video, how to upload a video, how and where to leave feedback for students, and other skills that aided in using hardware and software as tools for delivering content. Trainings

provided to faculty during the pandemic were numerous, but most lacked contextualization to help faculty determine where the tips and tricks work best (Rapanta, et al., 2020). This allowed education to continue throughout the pandemic, but it did not create an environment that supported faculty's need to innovate and add to their fields of study through pedagogical means. Without available training in how to teach their specific content through online mediums, faculty participants felt powerless and ignorant.

Without proper knowledge or policy support, faculty felt incapable of utilizing their established pedagogies and skills. Lily stated, "We were told, don't force them to turn on their cameras, so I would have two people with their camera on and I just feel like I'm by myself in here. My participation went downhill." Magnum struggled to manage participation levels online that was considered an irrelevant issue in an in-person environment, "...there were times I would come into a breakout room and it was completely silent and they've been sitting there doing nothing or playing on their phones for the entire time." Faculty participants were discouraged by what felt like a loss of professional competence due to the new environment. Many often felt they were salvaging what they could of their expertise until in-person teaching returned.

The in-person classroom affords higher education faculty a mental barrier casting them and their expertise in a classroom setting. Although cultivating relationships with students is considered critical to quality teaching results, there has typically been a barrier for most students between the types of assistance requested from faculty and at what times. These aspects of the faculty profession were lost during the pandemic online teaching and as a result faculty found themselves in what felt like a habitual state of work. Flaherty (2020) reported during the pandemic that two-thirds of higher education faculty were being asked to address the emotional and mental health needs of students without proper training and certifications. Magnum stated:

Many students turned to me to talk about their issues; I had to let them know that I am not a trained counselor and therefore was unable to help with many of their issues.

Students in a mental state that is not conducive to learning, needs more help than a professor can give.

Other faculty participants spoke of students seeking technical assistance from them instead of from technical support professionals. Harry spoke of having to factor the pandemic into every assignment and class session plan as it was personally playing out differently for every student. In-person courses allow faculty to address these types of issues on an individual basis or provide students with the proper information to seek aid elsewhere. Teaching online during the pandemic seemed to require more expertise than faculty participants had which left them feeling inadequate to many tasks.

Daumiller and Rinas (2021) studied faculty reactions to online teaching during the pandemic and they reported that faculty who feared appearing incompetent perceived the transfer to online teaching as a threat and reported a decrease in the quality of their teaching. Lily stated, “I had to learn how to narrate PowerPoints which was embarrassing to me because I teach technology.” Luna recalled:

Suddenly I’m not in a classroom with a bunch of people. I’m sitting at my kitchen table with my laptop and I was terrified that I didn’t know how to use Zoom. I didn’t know how to do any of that. I didn’t even know how to show all the pictures of my students on the screen. It was dramatic.

Morgan and Kennette (2021) discussed the imposter syndrome being experienced by faculty throughout the pandemic online teaching. Being considered experts in their respective fields and holding academic titles made it difficult for the faculty participants of this study to



accept the notion that teaching online was potentially regressing their career or skill set. Prior to the pandemic, teaching online was considered a dangerous career move for higher education faculty and teaching on campus was the commitment necessary for climbing the academic ladder (Ubell, 2017). The faculty participants in this study showed a strong desire to return to in-person teaching due to feelings of comfort and security offered by their base of knowledge and expertise. Going back to in-person, even if it was for only a small portion of the course, was viewed as progress while online teaching as the optime of career regression.

**Faculty Are Reluctant to Embrace Trends.** Despite the recognition that online teaching and learning is now a mainstay in higher education, faculty participants did not feel that in-person education is in danger of going extinct anytime soon. Although commonly used pedagogies did transfer in a usable and successful manner to online mediums, the challenges of building interpersonal connections and maintaining class management were undoubtedly too irreplaceable for even seasoned faculty to remedy. Without these aspects of education, faculty participants felt the overall experience and results of higher education were completely different and not for the better. Ronald stated, “The real cost is that you simply don’t have the sense of community, the sense of excitement, and a good sense of, you know, what I call a beneficial argument.” Every study participant encouraged colleagues and institutions to attend and host trainings for the next crisis, but only a couple of participants mentioned utilizing institutional supports and never to the fullest. Recognizing the need yet not seeking solutions was a common theme throughout the individual interviews conducted for this study. Participants, overall, see online teaching as a crisis management solution rather than a value-added teaching medium. Lily described the situation:

There’s another echelon of the digital divide that’s beyond the haves and the have nots,

that's the professors that don't have the technology skills to do this and don't have the desire and I get that as well. I mean, you become a professor to interact and have that human connection and to do your lectures.

A study showed that 51.8 percent of students were taking at least one online course during the 2019-20 academic year before the pandemic rapid transition (Smalley, 2021). Before the start of the 2021-22 academic year, 73 percent of U.S. college students wanted to continue taking some or all of their courses online (Cooke, 2023). Recent studies have shown that post-pandemic higher education enrollment has decreased by 10 percent due to a lack of faith in a return on the cost and time invested (Rosensweig, 2023). With shifting student demographics and the growing negative perceptions of the benefits of a higher education degree, faculty participants' perception of the value of in-person over online education reveals a glaring disparity in the purpose of higher education. Aside from crisis scenarios, higher education institutions need to address this gap in perspective about the value of higher education degrees and online teaching and learning.

Molly confessed, "I still don't know how to do a Canvas course, and if they ever made me learn it, I'm going to quit my job because I'm not doing that." Although some faculty participants have actively embraced aspects of online teaching to form a more hybrid classroom, collectively the focus has been fixed on getting back into a physical classroom and interacting face-to-face with students. Studies show, however, that only 53 percent of adults thought in-person education was worth the cost (Whiting, 2020). One reason for this disparity could be that the hybrid experience that faculty think they are providing is not truly immersive and experiential connecting students with real-world learning (El-Azar, 2022). Caron and Muscanell (2022) argue that simply utilizing a learning management system for communication of feedback

is not enough of a hybrid learning environment to best prepare students for the working world that has recently seen a major increase in hybrid and remote work.

The data from this study shows that the faculty participants are not embracing the online teaching medium to a degree that matches the changing trends in higher education. Because of rising costs, over one-third of higher education enrollment is part-time and roughly 74 percent of college students are enrolled in at least one online course (Welding, 2023). The average age of college students is rising, as well, to 23 for full-time undergraduate students and 30 for full-time graduate students (Welding, 2023). These statistics are vital to understanding the growing trends in online and hybrid higher education course options that meet the needs of shifting demographics. Without higher education faculty who embrace these changes, institutions and students will suffer.

### **Implications for Policy or Practice**

The perspective of faculty who rapidly transitioned to online teaching due to the crisis of COVID-19 has various implications for both policy and practice at higher education institutions. Policies can be negotiated, and practices can be fine-tuned to meet the growing needs of faculty who are using the online medium as the vehicle for learning.

#### ***Implications for Policy***

Higher education institutions must take immediate action steps to prepare for the next crisis that might impact or halt the academic progress of their students. The first step is to build faculty confidence and abilities in regard to online teaching practice. By building requirements for personal skills and training attendance into institutional policy, higher education administrations will set a standard that redefines the faculty profession. In coordination with the Department of Education and accrediting agencies, policies focusing on the preparedness of

faculty for online teaching need to be a focus (Baker, 2020). Per recommendations from participants of this study, institutions may generate policies that require every faculty member to teach at least one online course in their first year of employment or a policy that requires all faculty members to show proficiency in specific technical skills as part of their onboarding process. Faculty participants in this study suggested making online teaching training part of the required trainings for all faculty, just like safety and emergency trainings.

As the capabilities of technology continue to grow and higher education demographics continue to shift, online teaching and learning will continue to be the best option for continuing education during a crisis or providing education to non-traditional students. In order to meet this demand while addressing the insecurities of faculty members, the need for ever-growing and ever-changing technology is present because students need to be prepared for proper use post-graduation. This requires faculty to maintain an active role in utilizing the latest innovations in their courses. Funding is an area of needed policy attention as the lack of access to proper technology and training will reproduce similar faculty experiences of ignorance and burnout during the next crisis resulting in online teaching. Quality technology costs money and without proper equipment that is equally distributed among faculty and students, quality teaching and learning cannot take place. Colleges and universities around the U.S. have already begun to pass policies that provide technology for students through leasing programs or building the technology into their offer or scholarship (Brereton, 2022). Lily admitted after realizing one student was traveling to various parking lots to get WIFI, “I didn’t take it into consideration right away, I just thought everybody can do online learning.” A recent report from The Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights reported that reliable broadband access had the power to shape the future of students and directly correlated to their ability to contribute in a democratic

society (Hitchcock & Mittal, 2022). With the future of students hanging in the balance, maintaining a minimum standard for technology access and availability aids faculty in preparing students.

By creating policies that set minimum standards for technology and technology use, higher education institutions encourage faculty to embrace the online education trend and change the stigmas for the profession. Wood (2022) argued that access to quality online education was vital to “future-proof their skills and seek new opportunities for growth and development.” As the stakeholders of higher education that prepare students for post-graduation professional requirements, faculty need to be required to adopt more technology into their pedagogy and professional development in order to remain relevant in the changing marketplace.

### ***Implications for Practice***

Institutional practices should cultivate faculty members who have confidence in using the online medium as a tool for teaching their specific content area. This encourages the professionalism of faculty and reduces feelings of career regression. In addition to designing policies that increase preparedness for the next time online teaching will be used during a crisis, it may be beneficial for higher education institutions to adopt practices in preparing and providing for the technological needs of faculty. Aside from academic expertise requirements, institutions could set a minimum for technological skills required for each professor and hold faculty accountable for developing and maintaining these skills. Arthur argued that institutions should hold faculty accountable stating, “If you understand that this is my profession, so what baseline is my university going to ask me to use. Your college should say this part is our baseline.” Faculty members may profit from placing technical and online teaching skills on the list of necessary competences for continued professionalism. Seeing the skill set needed for the

profession of the higher education faculty member as being more than simply content knowledge might increase the ease and success with which faculty can move into an online teaching platform. It may also eliminate the need for buy-in because it would be a required aspect of the profession.

Online teaching pedagogy is another area where institutional practice and requirements could increase. Providing training in pedagogical practices that are content-specific, creating professional learning communities by content area focus, or creating incentives for gaining knowledge and sharing with colleagues are all potential practices that institutions could adopt. This knowledge for educators might facilitate improved online class dynamics and thus faculty enthusiasm and commitment to the medium. It was suggested by the participants of this study that institutions choose a new pedagogical strategy to use and demonstrate during every required faculty meeting. “Maybe using either department meetings or college-wide meetings to incorporate and tell everyone bring your laptop to meeting. We are going to get together and learn a new skill,” suggested Luna. Other recommendations included requiring online observation hours for all faculty, holding surprise virtual learning days to prepare students and faculty for rapid transition, or forming faculty cohorts that share pedagogical ideas to enhance their online teaching resources.

Higher education institutions should also adopt practices that address and prioritize the mental health of students and faculty. Devoting resources to maintaining mentally healthy faculty and students might prevent burnout and mental blocks toward trend advancement. “The biggest issue with teaching online was the mental health challenges my students faced. The university’s response to such an incredible upheaval of my student’s lives was completely inadequate,” shared Magnum. By making mental health a priority during crisis response online

teaching and learning, institutions can empower faculty to embolden students, increase retention, and decrease burnout. Neville shared, “With the virtual environment, I would just say it’s an online brain drain. We called it Zoom fatigue.” Higher education institutions across the U.S. are starting to incorporate practices such as providing resource guides to faculty, offering role-play workshops, and determining across-campus strategies that encourage healthy student and faculty behavior (Greenberg, 2022). Faculty participants in this study argued that practices that benefit mental health should be prioritized.

### **Theoretical and Empirical Implications**

This research study provides theoretical and empirical implications and adds to the current research. By allowing time for reflection and introspection, this study provides the findings that higher education faculty want to return to the classroom and hold a double standard in regard to online teaching training and participation.

#### ***Theoretical Implications***

This hermeneutic phenomenology utilized Schlossberg’s transition theory as the conceptual framework naming the pandemic as the first S, situation, of the Four-S model and then formulating the questioning of faculty participants around the remaining S’s – supports, self, and strategies (Anderson et al., 2012). By focusing on faculty without prior online teaching experience and using this model, this study contributes to the current literature by adding the perspective and experiences of novice online teaching faculty during crises. This study allowed the voice of participants to be heard and analyzed after open and free dialogue and it allowed for the global nature of the crisis that was experienced by me and the participants in various ways. This embracing of all perspectives gives this study a unique character in the collection of literature on how faculty perceive their online teaching during COVID-19.

An aspect of Schlossberg's Transition Theory that does not align with this study is the concept of adaptation, the point at which a person ceases to be consumed by the transition and officially integrates the change into their life (Schlossberg, 1981). The rapid transition to online teaching happened during the crisis of the pandemic and as a result, it was not a permanent transition. Every faculty participant in this study is now back teaching mostly in-person courses. Some participants have institutional requirements to teach at least one course online and some have migrated to a rudimentary hybrid model to maintain their technical skills. However, without the transition being a permanent change, the adaptation phase of Schlossberg's theory was never reached to its full potential. Only a few elements of the online teaching experience were embraced by a small portion of the participants.

### ***Empirical Implications***

This study contributes to the current literature on the topic of faculty experiences with transitioning to online teaching due to the COVID-19 pandemic in four vital ways: it shows that higher education faculty prefer in-person teaching to the online medium because they are concerned with professional regression, it shows that faculty are not embracing the trend of online teaching by highlighting the double standard that faculty recognize the need for online teaching training but do not participate, it provides distance from the pandemic and time for reflection, and it reaffirms research conducted during the rapid transition despite the separation of time.

Two years after the initial transfer of academics from in-person to online due to the pandemic and after tremendous skill growth with technology, faculty participants still feel that in-person courses offer more productive class dynamics and provide a better platform for their expertise. Early research found that many faculty were embracing the forced change as an



opportunity for innovation (Cutri et al., 2020). This study adds to the literature a finding that after time and reflection faculty are ready to get back into a face-to-face classroom because they feel their expertise and career pathway are more suited to this type of learning.

Prior research showed that institutions are considering a blended learning approach as trends in higher education move toward more online teaching and learning (Turnbull, 2021). This study adds to this finding that faculty are not recognizing and adjusting to these trends and therefore will cause major blocks to these initiatives by institution administrations. This study shows that higher education faculty are admitting their weaknesses, acknowledging the need for training, and then not accepting this professional development as a natural part of their career progression.

Another contribution of this study is time separation from the pandemic resulting in deeper reflection on events and perceptions. This critical aspect provides the field with much more clarity on the experiences of faculty during the crisis remote teaching. It corroborates many initial research findings that may have been labeled as reactionary such as the notion among faculty that online teaching was temporary, the focus on limitations to communication and engagement (El Said, 2021; Petillion & McNeil, 2020), and the focus on survival rather than innovation (Ramlo, 2021). This study continues to highlight the lack of preparedness by many faculty for the rapid transition to online teaching (Oliveria et al., 2012).

### **Limitations and Delimitations**

The main limitations of this study concern the participants. Because a snowball sampling method was used as the main recruitment methodology, some institutions are represented multiple times. There was also no criterion that specified gender, age, ethnicity, geographic

location, or any other demographic category. As a result, more men participated in this study than women, the geographic locations of the participants are predominantly in the eastern United States, and there are some ethnic groups not represented. The age differences between participants do provide a quality range, but this was not an aspect of recruitment so not all age groups are represented. The aspect of age was mentioned by faculty participants as a defining feature of experiencing this phenomenon. Lily recalled, “I think we lost probably 20 percent of our staff, you know, that have been there. They were ready to retire anyway and were going out the door kicking rocks.” A final limitation of this study was the number of participants. Hundreds of faculty members were contacted about participating in this study. A few responded that they did not qualify because of prior online teaching experience.

Delimitations of this study are that faculty from outside of the United States or those with prior online teaching experience were excluded from participation. The rationale for this decision was that by focusing on the experience of those without prior online teaching experience the true essence of the experience of rapidly transitioning to this medium could better be captured. The fresh and new aspect of online teaching coupled with the crisis of the pandemic was best represented by this population of faculty. Those faculty members who had prior experience with online teaching could have overlapping experiences based on the commonality of the pandemic and those perspectives are not present in this study.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

Future research could be conducted using the same questions and methodology but opening participation to all faculty members regardless of their prior online teaching experience, as well as, opening participation to faculty members worldwide. Because COVID-19 was a

global pandemic, studying international experiences would provide more wide-reaching results and suggestions for higher education institutions.

Another approach to this study would be to use the same questions and methodology but make distinctions for participation based on demographics. By choosing to have the same number of men and women and comparing the results, vital information can be gathered about how gender roles play or do not play a part in the experiences of online teaching. Age is a demographic that was brought up by a couple of participants of the current study as a descriptor of those willing to embrace online teaching and those who were not. Further research could be conducted to compare the experiences of faculty in different age brackets. Likewise, using ethnicity as a factor in this research would prove beneficial in determining perceptions of equality during crises.

Interpretations on whether academic freedom continued to operate the same under pandemic online teaching came up during the focus group session of this study as a potential future research topic. Studying faculty's varying perceptions of academic freedom and how the crisis remote teaching impacted these perceptions could impact higher education institutions policies and practices for ensuring quality online education.

Understanding the phenomenon of online teaching due to crises, such as the pandemic, also could be studied using different methodologies. A narrative research study could provide a deeper look into the cultural, social, and institutional narratives in which this phenomenon took place (Creswell & Poth, 2018). A grounded theory research study could provide a more focused theory on the process of faculty transferring their in-person courses to online. This could benefit institutions in creating progressive policies and practices.

## Conclusion

The problem this study was faculty preparedness and experience in transitioning to online teaching under crisis. Crises that halt the continuation of higher education courses happen every day in various forms. Higher education institutions need to be prepared for these crises and the consequences to one of their largest stakeholders, faculty. The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenology was to discover the essence of the experience of faculty who rapidly transitioned to online teaching due to the crisis of the pandemic. The study focused on faculty without prior online teaching experience and who taught at higher education institutions based in the United States.

Schlossberg's Transition Theory was used as the conceptual framework labeling the pandemic as the situation and formulating research questions around the supports, the self, and the strategies, representing Schlossberg's Four-S Model. This theory proved an excellent framework as each faculty participant experienced the transition differently and yet each had supports, strategies, and personal characteristics that made their experiences overlap.

After conducting interviews, hosting a focus group session, and collecting writing prompts from nine participants, the data analysis began with highlighting significant statements and then forming meaning units where the statements overlapped (Moustakas, 1994). Qualitative data analysis software, Atlas.ti, was used to code the transcriptions, categorize the codes, and finally formulate themes through analysis (Saldana, 2016). The final step of analysis came from writing the textural and structural description and then ultimately discovering the essence of the phenomenon of rapidly transitioning to online teaching during crises.

The essence of the experiences of faculty participants in this research study fall into two themes: the return to the classroom and the double standard. Faculty participants all expressed a

desire to return to the classroom, even braving the coronavirus, in order to gain a more secure grip on class dynamics and pedagogy. Participants also advised colleagues to seek out training in technology and pedagogy and encouraged their institutions to offer incentives or to force faculty to participate in these trainings because of their relevance. However, few participants of this study took advantage of institutional supports during the pandemic, nor did they recognize this disconnect.

This research study added to the current research literature by showing the desire of higher education faculty to return to in-person teaching despite a growth in individual confidence with the online teaching medium. It adds the finding that faculty hold an unspoken double standard arguing for trainings because of the increased importance of online teaching skills, but not participating in these trainings themselves. This study also corroborates initial research that took place during the pandemic arguing that faculty were ill-prepared for the transition, class management was a challenge to faculty, and online teaching pedagogy is an area of needed professional development. Higher education institutions can use this study immediately to productively and effectively prepare for the next crisis that would result in online education.

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## Appendix A

### IRB Approval

# LIBERTY UNIVERSITY

## INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

December 5, 2022

Carrie Curtis  
David Vacchi

Re: IRB Exemption - IRB-FY22-23-433 HIGHER EDUCATION DURING CRISIS: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF EDUCATOR PERCEPTIONS ON THEIR RESPONSE TO EDUCATION DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Dear Carrie Curtis, David Vacchi,

The Liberty University Institutional Review Board (IRB) has reviewed your application in accordance with the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP) and Food and Drug Administration (FDA) regulations and finds your study to be exempt from further IRB review. This means you may begin your research with the data safeguarding methods mentioned in your approved application, and no further IRB oversight is required.

Your study falls under the following exemption category, which identifies specific situations in which human participants research is exempt from the policy set forth in 45 CFR 46:104(d):

Category 2.(iii). Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording) if at least one of the following criteria is met:

The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects can readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects, and an IRB conducts a limited IRB review to make the determination required by §46.111(a)(7).

**Your stamped consent form(s) and final versions of your study documents can be found under the Attachments tab within the Submission Details section of your study on Cayuse IRB.** Your stamped consent form(s) should be copied and used to gain the

consent of your research participants. If you plan to provide your consent information electronically, the contents of the attached consent document(s) should be made available without alteration.

Please note that this exemption only applies to your current research application, and any modifications to your protocol must be reported to the Liberty University IRB for verification of continued exemption status. You may report these changes by completing a modification submission through your Cayuse IRB account.

If you have any questions about this exemption or need assistance in determining whether possible modifications to your protocol would change your exemption status, please email us at [irb@liberty.edu](mailto:irb@liberty.edu).

Sincerely,

**G. Michele Baker, MA, CIP**

***Administrative Chair of Institutional Research***  
**Research Ethics Office**

## Appendix B

### Recruitment Email

Subject: Online Education & Crisis Response

Dear [Potential Participant's Name],

As a graduate student in the School of Education at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a Ph.D. in Higher Education Administration. The purpose of my research is to study the perceptions of faculty on the rapid transition to online teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic, and I am writing to invite eligible participants to join my study.

Participation includes:

- An individual recorded interview with myself answering twelve questions
- Attending a recorded focus group session with other participants addressing eight questions
- Writing a letter addressed to your institution's administration providing reflected feedback about how to approach future crises that prompt rapid transition to online teaching and learning.
- Verifying the accuracy of the interview transcription and subsequent analyzed themes through member checking

The time commitment would be three to four hours and there is no compensation provided for participation.

The criteria for participation in this study are:

- You must have been a faculty member during the academic year of 2020-2021 at a higher education institution based in the United States
- You must have had no experience with teaching online prior to the rapid transition to online teaching and learning in response to the COVID-19 pandemic (Prior online teaching experience is defined as designing and delivering content curriculum in an online platform either through a fully online or hybrid course.)

If you are interested in being a part of this research study, please use the link below to complete the screening survey for participation. I will be sending a follow-up email with the consent to participate form, to schedule the individual interview, and to provide dates and times of the focus group sessions.

[Screening Survey to Participate Form](#)



If you would like additional information about this study, please contact me at [REDACTED] or you can call me directly at [REDACTED].

Thank you for your consideration, and once again, please do not hesitate to contact me if you are interested in learning more about this Institutional Review Board approved project.

*Carrie Curtis*

Principal Investigator

Candidate, Ph.D. in Higher Education Administration

Liberty University

## Appendix C

### Participant Screening Survey

Screening Survey to Participate

Please type your full name and title.

Date of Screening Survey.

During the academic year of 2020-2021, I was an employed faculty member of a higher education institution based in the United States.

Yes

No

I had no experience with teaching online prior to the rapid transition to online teaching in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Yes

No

Please provide your email address of choice for communication about the study.

## Appendix D

### Consent to Participate Form

#### Consent

**Title of the Project:** Higher education during crisis: A phenomenological study of educator perceptions on their response to education during the COVID-19 pandemic

**Principal Investigator:** Carrie Curtis, Doctoral Candidate, School of Education, Liberty University

#### Invitation to be Part of a Research Study

You are invited to participate in a research study. To participate, you must have been a faculty member of a higher education institution based in the United States during the academic year 2020-2021 and had no online teaching experience prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. Taking part in this research project is voluntary.

Please take time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to take part in this research.

#### What is the study about and why is it being done?

The purpose of this study is to use the COVID-19 pandemic as a crisis lens to determine the experience of faculty who rapidly transitioned to online teaching in response to the crisis, but who had no prior experience with building or delivering their content in an online/virtual format. This study will add needed insight into the perceptions of higher education faculty members on their experience during the transition. The study will allow faculty to reflect upon their experiences and provide feedback to their institutions about future crisis preparedness and management.

#### What will happen if you take part in this study?

If you agree to be in this study, I will ask you to do the following:

1. Participate in an individual recorded interview that takes approximately 60 minutes.
2. Participate in a recorded focus group session that takes approximately 60 minutes.
3. Complete a writing prompt that takes approximately 45 minutes.
4. Review transcription and themes through member checking that takes approximately 30 minutes.

#### How could you or others benefit from this study?

The direct benefits participants should expect to receive from taking part in this study include the opportunity to reflect on your own experiences of transitioning to online teaching due to the COVID-19 pandemic rather than including student or institutional experiences. This will benefit faculty by providing an opportunity for your voices to be heard and valued in regard to the transition and crisis response. Participants will also learn from other participants what the challenges and successes at other institutions and potentially receive important and useful recommendations to begin using in their online teaching environments.

Benefits to society are that higher education institutions can use the results of this study to better prepare for the next crisis that has the potential to halt academics and where online education is seen as the logical response. When colleges and universities can continue their work, their many stakeholders, including the community around them, benefit from their support and productivity.

#### **What risks might you experience from being in this study?**

The expected risks from participating in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life.

#### **How will personal information be protected?**

The records of this study will be kept private. Published reports will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records.

- Participant responses will be kept confidential by replacing names with pseudonyms.
- Interviews will be conducted in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation.
- Confidentiality cannot be guaranteed in focus group settings. While discouraged, other members of the focus group may share what was discussed with persons outside of the group.
- Data collected from you may be used in future research studies and/or shared with other researchers. If data collected from you is reused or shared, any information that could identify you, if applicable, will be removed beforehand.
- Data will be stored on a hard drive kept in a locked safe. After seven years, all electronic records will be deleted.
- Recordings will be stored on a hard drive kept in a locked safe for seven years and then deleted. The researcher and members of her doctoral committee will have access to these recordings.

#### **Is study participation voluntary?**

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

#### **What should you do if you decide to withdraw from the study?**

If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address/phone number included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you, apart from focus group data, will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study. Focus group data will not be destroyed, but your contributions to the focus group will not be included in the study if you choose to withdraw.

#### **Whom do you contact if you have questions or concerns about the study?**

The researcher conducting this study is Carrie Smith Curtis. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact her at [REDACTED]

and/or [REDACTED]. You may also contact the researcher's faculty sponsor, David Vacchi, at [REDACTED].

#### **Whom do you contact if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?**

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, **you are encouraged** to contact the IRB. Our physical address is Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA, 24515; our phone number is 434-592-5530, and our email address is [irb@liberty.edu](mailto:irb@liberty.edu).

*Disclaimer: The Institutional Review Board (IRB) is tasked with ensuring that human subjects research will be conducted in an ethical manner as defined and required by federal regulations. The topics covered and viewpoints expressed or alluded to by student and faculty researchers are those of the researchers and do not necessarily reflect the official policies or positions of Liberty University.*

#### **Your Consent**

By signing this document, you are agreeing to be in this study. Make sure you understand what the study is about before you sign. You will be given a copy of this document for your records. The researcher will keep a copy with the study records. If you have any questions about the study after you sign this document, you can contact the study team using the information provided above.

*I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.*

The researcher has my permission to audio-record/video-record me as part of my participation in this study.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed Subject Name

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature & Date

## **Appendix E**

### **Research Questions**

#### **Central Research Question**

What are the experiences of higher education faculty who rapidly transition from in-person to online teaching during a crisis?

#### **Sub-Question One**

How do higher education faculty perceive their training and support for the quick transition?

#### **Sub-Question Two**

How comfortable are higher education faculty teaching in an online medium?

#### **Sub-Question Three**

What does higher education faculty believe that higher education institutions can do to better prepare for crisis response in academic courses?

## Appendix F

### Individual Interview Questions

1. Please tell me a little about yourself including your career pathway to your current position specifically regarding virtual teaching. CRQ
2. Describe your preparedness for the transition to online teaching during the 2020-21 academic year. SQ2
3. Describe your initial experience in transitioning to online teaching due to the COVID-19 pandemic from March 2020 – August 2020. CRQ
4. Contrast your comfort levels with online teaching between your first semester and second semester in the 2020-21 academic year. SQ2
5. Describe challenging experiences teaching virtually throughout the 2020-2021 academic year. CRQ
6. Describe changes or adjustments made to your teaching practice (e.g. assessments, pedagogies, strategies, communication) throughout the 2020-2021 academic year. CRQ
7. Describe the supports and training you utilized internally during the transition and throughout the academic year to aid your online teaching practice. SQ1
8. Describe the supports and training you utilized externally during the transition and throughout the academic year to aid your online teaching practice. SQ1
9. Describe the measures you will take to better prepare for possible future transitions to online teaching due to crisis circumstances. SQ3
10. What advice might you give new higher education faculty on preparedness? SQ3
11. What measures do you believe higher education administrations could adopt immediately to better meet the needs of faculty during crisis response teaching? SQ3

12. Are there any additional comments, thoughts, or experiences you would like to make regarding any challenges or successes you've experienced transitioning to online teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic? CR



## Appendix G

### Focus Group Questions

1. What was the most challenging aspect of moving from in-person to online course instruction at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic? CRQ, SQ2
2. What strategies or activities for your content and focus area successfully transitioned to an online platform during the COVID-19 remote learning response and why? CRQ, SQ1, SQ2
3. What strategies or activities for your content and focus area failed to transition successfully to an online platform during the COVID-19 remote learning response and why? CRQ, SQ1, SQ2
4. What steps did your institution take to transition to remote online teaching and learning in response to the COVID-19 pandemic? SQ1
5. Describe the experience of balancing the transition to online teaching with the toll of COVID-19 on your personal life. CRQ
6. How do you believe your institution fell short in its transition to online learning? SQ1
7. How do you believe your institution excelled during the transition to online learning? SQ1
8. Describe any adjustments to the crisis management procedures of your institution that you believe are necessary for the next crisis that would result in online teaching and learning. CRQ, SQ1, SQ3

## **Appendix H**

### **Writing Prompt**

Write a letter addressed to your institution's administration discussing specific suggestions for future transitions to online teaching and learning that speak directly to the needs of your content area and personal technological skill level.