Case Study of a Higher Education's Department's Responses to the Covid 19 Pandemic Implications for Policy and Practice

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Background

The Department under review provides graduate level programs for K-12 prospective Masters and Doctorate level students primarily seeking positions as principals, supervisors and superintendents in public and private schools in New Jersey. It has a twenty-year history of providing online instruction within its Masters program as well as supplemental on line instruction in it doctoral programs. The faculty have been trained in online instruction following the "quality matters" protocols for the development of online courses. The University is also known for its commitment to technology and offers its faculty and students continuous opportunities for professional development and training in instructional design and delivery within a digital platform. It is within this background that an analysis of one higher education department's response to the Covid-19 pandemic unfolds.

Christopher R. Marsicano, Kathleen M. Felten, Luis S. Toledo1, and Madeline M. Buitendorpin their April 2020 study offer a useful conceptual framework that will guide the analysis. It is the neo institutional theory of isomorphism which has a history of application to higher education department behavior (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). The concept advances three typologies; mimetic, coercive and normative behaviors. In particular, coercive isomorphism may be evident when the governor of New Jersey required all institutions to shift to remote learning resulting in potential mimetic behavior as higher education institutions examined how their counterparts responded. Another useful analytical framework is offered by Charles Hodges, Stephanie Moore, Barb Lockee, Torrey Trustand Aaron Bondin their March, 2020 study of " emergency remote teaching" They provided a distinction between strategic development of online learning and what they characterize responding to the emergency conditions the Covid-19 pandemic produced.

The faculty of the department under review collectively hypothesized that the response to remote learning would not be disruptive because of the history of online learning and the exposure that students already had with remote learning. To confirm that perspective it requested that identified faculty members survey the students to confirm or modify that perspective and to also interview faculty regarding their experiences in converting to remote learning.

Literature Review

The extant literature tends to fall within three categories. The first is descriptive analysis of what action institutions of higher education engaged in responding to the pandemic and the resulting shut down of on campus instruction. The second explores the relative advantages and disadvantages of various approaches to remote learning. The third attempts to derive meaning and insight into the events and actions and their implications to the future of higher education. Within the context of this study, the focus will be primarily on descriptive analysis of what institutions did during the pandemic crisis and then determine what policy implications emerged and what the implications might be for future practice in the higher education environment. In terms of descriptive analysis of the various responses, Marsicano, Felten, Toledo, and Buitendorp(2020), provide a comprehensive analysis of the unfolding of higher education's responses from the beginning of Stanford and Touro responding first in March, 2020 to over 1400 institutions closing by the end of that month. They confirmed their perspective of bounded rationality and isomorphism by noting the similarity in responses throughout the higher education community. Those responses were mimetic in orientation, with all the institutions using various forms of remote learning. Bao (2020) presented a case study of Peking University's responses. Noting the history of Chinese Universities in providing online learning, the results were traumatic as a result of the suddenness of the transition and the lack of faculty experience and preparation to implement the transition. Prokopenko and Berezhna (2020) explore the responses in the Ukraine institutions of higher education. They found similar levels of responses as described regarding China and the United States (advancing the isomorphic nature of the responses) and added a survey component of seeking feedback from students and teachers regarding their experiences. They identified issues related to technical preparedness, with not all institutions equally prepared and psychological dissonance because of confinement during instructional delivery(page 134).
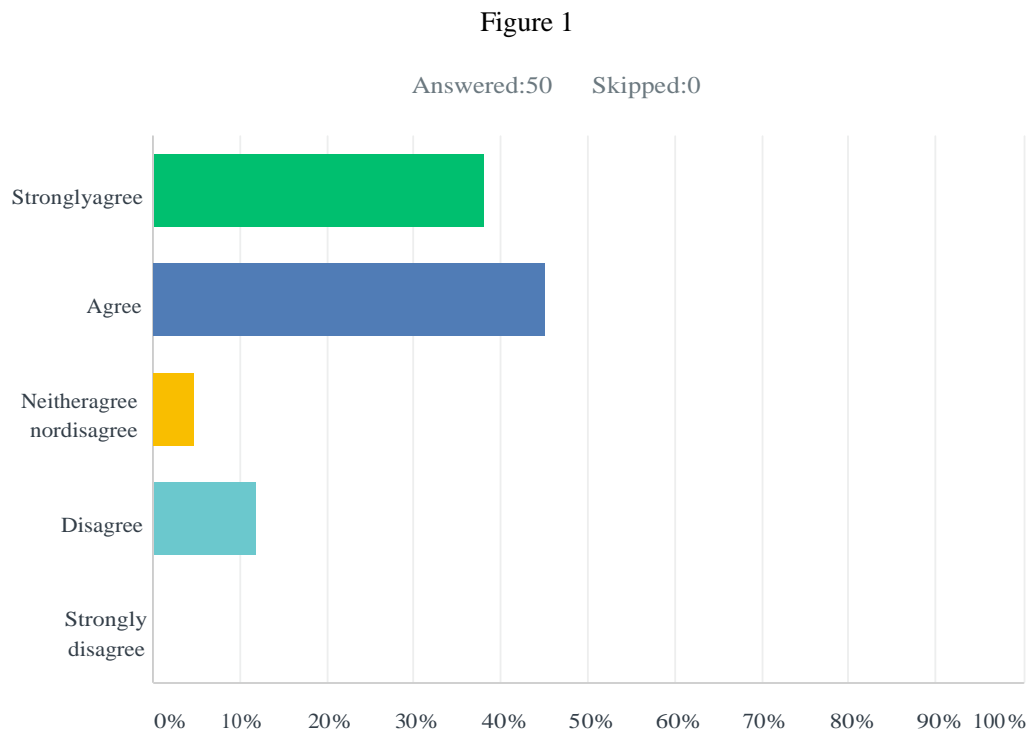
They concluded that online learning was not perceived as inferior to in seat instruction and positive effects on student-teacher relations. Hodges, Moore, Lockee, Trust and Bond (March 2020), in examining responses provided a useful distinction between traditional concepts of online learning and what they characterized as "emergency remote teaching(page 1)" They rejected the notion of comparing the relative merits of online learning with in seat and instead advanced a different conceptual framework which more precisely identified the situation – emergency remote learning.

The Study

Given the interests of the department faculty in the university under review and the extant literature, the focus was the students and faculty and their perceptions of the sudden convergence to remote learning. It was hypothesized that the department was strategically positioned to accommodate the changes as a result of the history of online instruction and the training and experience of its faculty in providing remote instruction. Ninety-one (91) students were identified who met the criteria of having been directly impacted by the shutdown of the university and the provision of only remote learning. Using Hodges, Moore, Lockee, Trust and Bond's (2020) concept of emergency remote learning, a survey was constructed which avoided comparing the relative merits of on line versus in seat instruction and only examining their perception of the department's implementation of emergency remote learning. Faculty were also identified based on their participation in converting to emergency remote learning and interviewed regarding their perceptions.
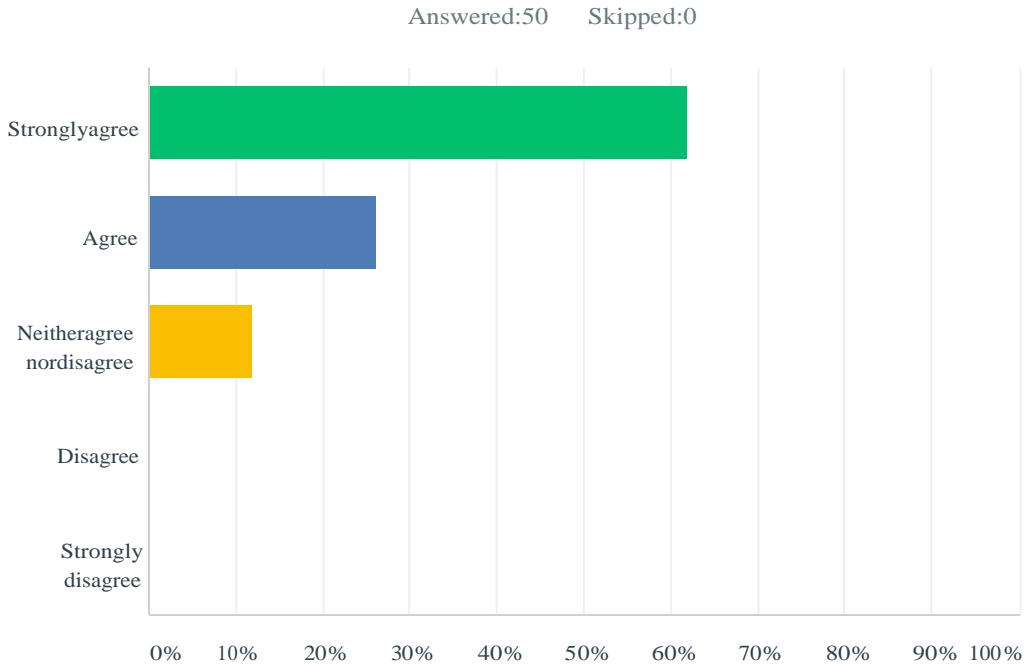
Results

Ninety-one (91) students through the platform of survey monkey received a three question survey with opportunity for open ended comments and specific demographic information requests. Fifty (50) students responded. In terms of the first question, "my experience with exclusive remote/online learning provided a meaningful educational experience", the results are indicated in Figure 1 below
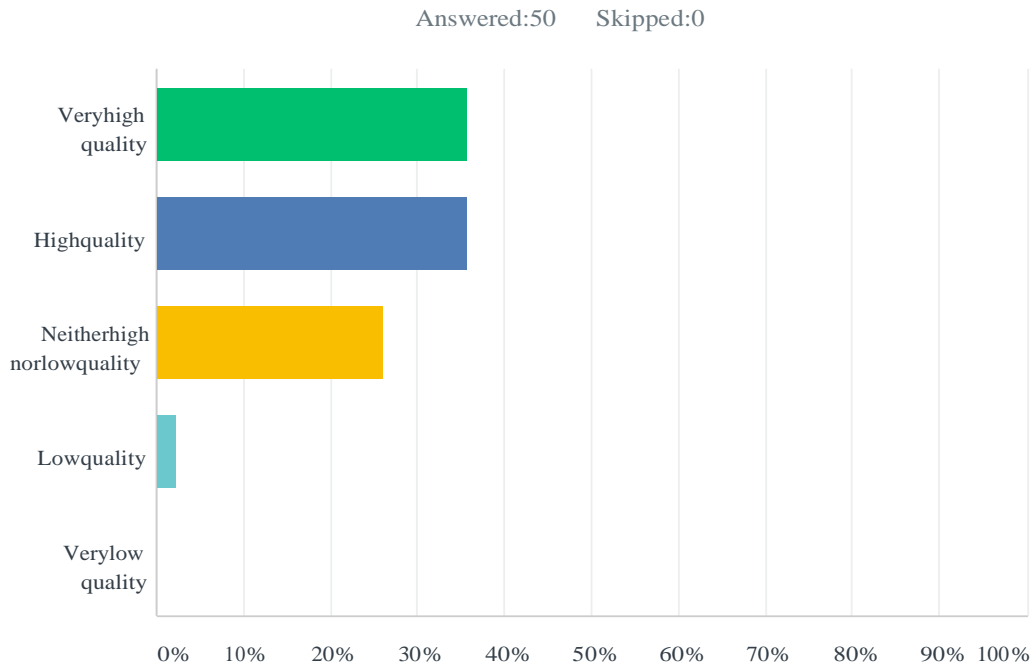
Figure 1

In response to the second question, "my instructor attempted to accommodate my personal needs in the transition to remote learning," the results are indicated in Figure 2 below:

Figure 2

Answered:50   Skipped:0

In response to the third question, "I would categorize my transition to remote learning as" the results are indicated in Figure 3 below:

Figure 3

Answered:50   Skipped:0

There were also opportunities for respondents to provide comments regarding their transition to remote learning. Forty (40) of the fifty (50} respondents commented on their experiences. Ascribe verbatim analysis was applied to the responses and three thematic conclusions emerged. Although efforts were made in the instructions to respondents regarding the avoidance of comparing remote and or online learning with in- seat instruction, students consistently indicated a preference for in seat instruction. There was also an appreciation for the personal accommodation's faculty provided in transitioning to remote learning. Lastly, the theme of consistent rigor both in content and course expectations emerged.

Results of Interviews with Professors

There were 13 professors and adjuncts affected by the Covid-19 lockdown who were teaching in spring 2020. Seven (53%) responded to a request for a short interview. The interview was recorded during a meeting in Microsoft Teams. The interviews ranged from 8 to 11 minutes with an average of 10 minutes per interview. There were six questions that were presented in a semi-structured interview format. It was shared with each professor that the interview was an assessment of the process of converting to remote learning. Specifically, an attempt was made to understand readiness for the conversion in the graduate department of Education Leadership, Management and Policy (ELMP). The following questions were presented to the faculty interviewed:

1. Describe the accommodations you made in moving exclusively to online instruction.
2. Indicate the greatest challenges in moving exclusively to online learning.
3. Describe your present skill level in developing online learning. Do you consider yourself Expert, Knowledgeable, or Novice?
4. How successful were you in moving to exclusive online learning? (No issues, some concerns, major headaches) Describe your obstacles, if any or what happened.
5. Open ended question – explain any other issue, challenge, etc., that might explain the overall experience of converting to exclusively online learning due to the lockdown.
6. What do you know about the effect of the Corona Virus lockdown on your students?

All the interviews were recorded and transcribed for further analysis. The transcripts were uploaded into Atlas.ti a qualitative software program. A quick analysis of the transcripts provided quotes which indicated that overall, the readiness and availability of the professors to move to an online format was relatively seamless using the software that was made available by the university. Many of the courses already had a format for asynchronously delivering online via the university learning management system (Blackboard.) It was further determined that all the professors interviewed also chose Zoom for their online video conferences and chats during the conversion process.

Microsoft Teams produced a video of the professor's interview. The transcripts were initially transcribed using Sonix, a website for this type of project. Then, they were reviewed and edited. Analysis of the transcripts produced eight codes which are indicate in Figure 4 below:

Figure 4

Code	Comments	Quotes
Benefits	Advantages discovered	16
Challenges students faced	(self-explanatory)	24
Challenges to teaching	(self-explanatory)	33
Concerns of Profs	Anx that profs experienced	6
Learned by Prof	What profs got from the experience	23
Ranking	How profs ranked their knowledge of online delivery	11
Reducing Stress	Profs response to students during crisis	18
Techniques for teaching	Changes made by profs for various reasons	35

Significantly, the greatest number of quotes was produced by the *Techniques for teaching* code. This was a result of what was learned and what the professors changed to make the online course relevant, pleasant, and yet significant for their students. See representative quotes in Appendix A.

The second greatest set of quotes fall under the code *Challenges to teaching*. Here it was found that the professors indicated what they needed to learn, what techniques they quickly had to adapt to maintain their student's attention and how the process was implemented. The challenges that the students faced was the next most significant set of quotes. A review of representative quotes is in Appendix B

In the *Challenges student faced* quotes, it was discovered there was an intimate nature of the teacher to student relationships in the instructional delivery process. All the professors had comments about the high level of student stress, specifically, the challenges the students faced in their personal and professional lives.

Analysis of the quotes using the codes *Challenges student faced* that cooccurred with the code *reducing stress* provides a snapshot toward understanding the accommodations that professors were making to meet the needs of the students. See Appendix C.

What professors learned?

Cross code analysis was done to understand specifically what was learned. For example, when analysis of the codes, "what professors learned" cooccurred with "techniques for teaching," it was found that professors made accommodations for students previously not required. More online face-to-face meetings were held via video conferencing. Also, note that innovative changes to teaching online were mentioned including adding more video conferencing in the form of office hours, differentiating assignments and moving away from threaded discussions (TDs) as a requirement.

Consideration and Compassion are words that express the challenges to teaching that the professors faced and how they met the challenge. Each professor made comments about how their students were meeting the Covid-19 challenge. Some even had students who dropped out because of the overall stress

More than one professor indicated that students longed for the in-seat weekends, which were originally scheduled, before the pandemic hit. Most students wanted to meet in person and indicated that they preferred the live synchronous classroom to asynchronous, which is how they were studying in their other course that semester.

Often what student's experienced was dependent on the demographics of the district. Poorer, more urban districts were, "particularly stressed" expressed one professor. Also, personal situations affected the student's responses. One professor had a student who had four young children and during synchronous meetings found it difficult to be online. Here are a few quotes that are a result of cooccurrence of the stress and challenges students faced. The professor remarked, "They would prefer this live remote synchronous better then the asynchronous because they're taking both kinds of courses, obviously…The hybrid method" There were also responses to what professors learned and how they accommodated their students during the Covid-19 event.

Ultimately, we learned that professors need to be proficient using online tools and are ready to handle the stress undertaken by their students. Meeting the challenges of emergency events everyone must be in a constant state of readiness. This includes having a compassionate and caring attitude throughout both the conversion and delivery process.

Discussion and implications for policy and practice

It appears from the data that the move to "emergency remote learning" transpired in a uniformly efficient manner with both students and teachers responding favorably to the conversion process. It also appears that rigor and content were not adversely affected. Although not directly asked, both teachers and students commented on the preferred delivery method of in–seat instruction. Ultimately, we learned that professors need to be proficient using online tools and are ready to handle the stress undertaken by their students. There also seemed to be no differences in responses depending on the programs the students were enrolled in (Masters, Doctorate, Educational Specialist), the gender and race. From the faculty perspective, meeting the challenges of emergency events meant everyone being in a constant state of readiness and exhibiting a compassionate and caring attitude despite the stress and frustration. The influence of isomorphism in term of the mimetic accommodation prevailed, with the department under review mirroring other institutions of higher education in their program responses. It is this area where policy and practice are most impacted. Not all higher education institutions are similar in terms of the students they serve, the resources they bring to bear and the expertise of faculty to respond to emergency situations (in this case emergency remote learning). Engaging in mimetic behavior is an inappropriate response in terms of accommodating the diversity and complexity of the higher education instructional delivery process. In fairness to higher education institutions, the suddenness and complexity of the pandemic encouraged the isomorphic behavior. This limited study also indicated the need for professional development beyond the technical aspects of online delivery. Students' responding to our survey, noted the compassion and sensitivity of the professors in accommodating the needs that emerged as a result of learning remotely, as issues of child care, finding a quiet spot for interacting and the added pressures of the students who were in the majority teachers themselves, trying to also accommodate on line instruction for theirstudents.

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Appendix A

Techniques for teaching

Quotation Content	Codes
they were scheduled to be in-seat and we did zoom conferencing with them for the weekend. They were schedule. We put them on Zoom.	Techniques for teaching
And in between that, we did Facetime. Individual one-on-one conferences with them.	Techniques for teaching
We basically tried to do what we would do in the classroom.	Techniques for teaching
. Half hour later or whatever. We did that a couple of times during the weekend. We gave them assignments, so they'd be prepared. It worked out pretty well. We cut the weekends by an hour because we had individual hour conferences with them about their projects, about all sorts of things have to do with the courses during those in-between the weekends.	Techniques for teaching
Our syllabus remained the same. Our expectations remain the same. Did we give them a little bit more time? Yes.	Techniques for teaching
We maintained the three consecutive days, Friday, Saturday morning, afternoon, and Sunday morning. But we converted the weekend syllabus for that second weekend because the first weekend was in-seat. The second weekend had to be converted to online and we did it synchronously.	Techniques for teaching
We tried to engage students and keep them engaged as opposed to have them sit there and listen for three hours. So, we established various scenarios and activities and we were able to break them up into groups, into teams different, which I call that when you bring in different rooms.	Techniques for teaching
Well, it was pretty easy… because Brian and I shared the class law. We just went to zoom. We just went to zoom.	Benefits Techniques for teaching
And so… we did very, very little lecturing. We, you know, miniscule. But there was a high level of student engagement and we structured that engagement.	Techniques for teaching
Well, certainly, you know, putting students in chat rooms was a new technique.	Techniques for teaching
a couple of things that I started doing was I started holding voluntary video conferences like we're having now.	Techniques for teaching
Absolutely. Office hours. I would also call them open labs will do, because it wasn't just one on one.	Learned by Prof Techniques for teaching
. And that was also very helpful when we had more than one person, because they're all kind of going through the same thing. And so, this person, one person was talking about some …some interesting modifications that she made to her class. And another person took those ideas and said, well, you know, I can use that. So I think it just became more of a support group	Reducing Stress Techniques for teaching

So, I started differentiating my assignments by product. So now most of my assignments in a summer course have at least two, but mostly three options. So, you can choose option A, you can choose option B, you can choose option C. And there are three different products. So, option A might be threaded discussion. So if only if two people want to do that, they can do that. Option B might be, hey, make a podcast with your …to demonstrate your understanding of the topic. Option C might be, hey, make a video of your …of your understanding. Option D is some people just like to write. So do a response journal. Option E is sometimes I give them an Infographics. So, I have a menu of ways that students can respond. Now based on the topic that	Challenges to teaching Learned by Prof Techniques for teaching
I now create pre-recorded videos. And they and I … I have them open up every one of the modules. So, I give them about a 20 to 30-minute lecture. Right. That overviews the content and the key concepts that they're going to run into.	Techniques for teaching
They said that these introductory videos have made the readings. They're getting more of the readings because of the pre-reading assignment that I'm doing with them.	Techniques for teaching

APPENDIX B

Challenges to Teaching

Quotation Content	Codes
it's been the best thing for me as an instructor because it pushed me to do all of these different things that I had never done before. And it really changed the face of my summer course. And I like teaching online better now because it's I've made it way more interactive.	Challenges to teaching Learned by Prof
Always learning it because I hadn't had experience with Blackboard Collaborate previously, so I didn't do any sort of video prior to that because I just didn't anticipate needing to know that. So that was the biggest challenge,	Challenges to teaching
I was learning more about it. So, the call I wish I would had known this for that weekend in March when I had that final weekend with the stats class	Challenges to teaching
We met for two hours at a time instead of you know an hour a week for how many weeks.	Challenges to teaching
I had a concern because I don't have the advanced version of Zoom.[00:06:20] And I know that the university seems to be embracing teams and encouraging professors to use teams	Challenges to teaching
I have to say it was trying to figure out how to take activities and put them together in such a way so that four hours of straight Zoom time would be productive	Challenges to teaching
1] But. We made the best of a bit of a bad situation, and I think it really went well. But I don't think it replaced us being together.	Challenges to teaching
You can't ask them questions the same way, right, because you have to wait till they finish. Then you can put something on chat. Or you can talk to them. It just I just found it to be different.	Challenges to teaching

APPENDIX C

Challenges Students Faced COOCCURENCE Reducing Stress

(4) Quotations

Yeah. The pandemic did affect my students because they're all teachers. [00:01:27] So what happened was initially there were some lapses in assignments. So it took it took much longer ….for oh, I would say half the students needed …needed more time than even me to make an accommodation in terms of time that they could have to finish the assignments because, you know, while they were going through the course concurrently as teachers, literally, you know, within a weekend or one day, they had to pivot and put and go from teaching face to face to online themselves
2 Codes:
○ Challenges students faced /○ Reducing Stress
The stress factor building toward our weekends was there because they had so much to do with their own schools and their own personal lives and working from home, etc., and we did speak to them about that in a before the course or facetime and told them to kind of relax.
2 Codes:
○ Challenges students faced /○ Reducing Stress

They would prefer this live remote synchronous matter then the asynchronous because they're taking both kinds of courses, obviously. Yeah. The hybrid method.
2 Codes:
○ Challenges students faced /○ Reducing Stress