

“We Will Not Go Back to What We Had”

Faculty’s Efforts to Deliver Effective Distance Education in the Los Angeles Community College District

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A longstanding strength of community colleges has been their accessibility for students, reflected in their open-access policies, low tuition costs (Hanson, 2021), and flexible enrollment options, such as part-time enrollment (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center [NSCRC], 2023b). Among many challenges, the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic threatened community colleges’ ability to remain accessible to students and prompted an increased investment in remote learning options.

In the Los Angeles Community College District (LACCD), the setting of this research project, campuses were temporarily emptied, and district staff, faculty, and students undertook a massive effort to transition not just instruction but student support services to a new, fully remote environment. When the district brought back in-person instruction in fall 2021, it became clear that neither faculty nor students desired a return to the pre-pandemic status quo.

Instead, as one faculty member reflected, “Having options, I think, is key to help each student and give them the opportunity to get in the door, whether it’s through the computer or in person at the school.” This perception that students value having multiple options for how to attend their classes can also be seen in the course registration data, with asynchronous courses often filling up more quickly than in-person options. Student preferences for distance education courses are a key consideration for LACCD moving forward, as student enrollment has seen double-digit percentage point drops in the semesters following the onset of the pandemic, with the entering fall 2022 cohort comprising over 12% fewer students than the entering fall 2019 cohort (LACCD, n.d.). This is similar to a national trend: The national cohort of students entering public two-year institutions in

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fall 2022 (722,600 students) was 15% smaller than the cohort entering in fall 2017 (852,100) (NSCRC, 2023a).

In response to student demand, LACCD has modified its course offerings to allow for more online and hybrid options even as COVID-19 restrictions on in-person gatherings lifted. In fall 2022, nearly 70% of courses in LACCD were in an online modality—up nearly 50 percentage points from pre-pandemic levels. While it is clear that LACCD will not return to a model of exclusively, or possibly even primarily, in-person instruction, it is not clear what the new status quo of course modality offerings will or should become to maximize student learning and success. Through a research partnership with LACCD, the Leveraging Technology and Engaging Students (LTES) project is examining course modality options, prevalence, and effectiveness, as well as the challenges and costs that accompany these innovations.

This brief explores these questions through the lens of faculty experiences with and reflections on various course modalities offered in LACCD. It draws on analysis of 10 focus groups conducted with 26 LACCD faculty in spring 2023 to illuminate some of the benefits and challenges associated with online learning, as well as considerations for LACCD moving forward.

Several key themes emerged from the faculty focus groups. First, faculty commitment to student success spurred instructors to take on additional responsibilities addressing barriers to student learning. Faculty described taking on new roles to provide students with emotional support, connect students to resources on campus, manage and troubleshoot technology for themselves and their students, as well as to adapt their instructional strategies, assignments, and teaching philosophy to strengthen student success. Second, faculty and students have faced numerous technological challenges shifting to new course modalities, whether in setting up courses, running course sessions, ensuring device availability, or building digital literacy. Faculty often turned to each other to help navigate these challenges. Third, faculty reported that students are less connected to their instructors and their peers. Faculty perceived real repercussions stemming from these changes, including burnout, loss of instructional time, and students not accessing needed resources. Finally, looking forward, faculty offered suggestions building on the lessons learned over the past three years to strengthen their practices across modalities, support each other, and help build systems that can deepen and sustain innovations.

Los Angeles Community College District

LACCD consists of nine campuses in the Los Angeles area and is one of the largest community college districts in the country. Pre-pandemic unduplicated enrollments were typically over 120,000 credit students annually, with current enrollments closer to 90,000 (LACCD, n.d.). The campuses range in size, with the smallest campus, Southwest, serving around 5,000 students and the largest

campus, East, enrolling over 20,000 students per year. Over two thirds of LACCD students enroll part-time, and almost half of all entering students report intending to transfer to a four-year institution. LACCD serves a diverse student population: In fall 2022, over two thirds (69%) of entering students identified as Latina/o/x, with the cohort including Black (8%), Asian (4%), Filipino (2%), multiethnic (3%), and White (13%) students as well. The faculty at LACCD are similarly diverse, with over 60% identifying as people of color, most of whom are Latina/o/x, Black, or Asian/Pacific Islander (LACCD, 2017).

LACCD offers a variety of degree options for students, including certificates, terminal associate degrees, and associate degrees for transfer. Three-year completion rates (whether completing a certificate or degree or transferring to another institution) were roughly 20% for students entering between fall 2017 and fall 2019. All campuses in LACCD have implemented guided pathways reforms, and counselors work with students at entry to create education plans. There are a number of wraparound support programs LACCD students may be eligible for, including the Los Angeles City Promise, Extended Opportunity Programs and Services (EOPS), and others.

Course Modalities in LACCD

In this study, we focus on five course modalities offered in LACCD:

- In-person: The course is taught in an assigned room on campus, with faculty and students expected to attend in the classroom each session.
- Asynchronous online: The course does not have an assigned room on campus; all work is completed on students' own schedules with recorded lectures.
- Synchronous online: The course does not have an assigned room on campus; there are live class sections/lectures via an online platform such as Zoom.
- Hybrid/blended learning: The course has an assigned room on campus, with part of the class taught in-person and part taught online, with a pre-specified schedule of what will be in which modality.
- HyFlex/dual delivery (certain LACCD campuses only): The course has an assigned room on campus with built-in or portable technology (cameras and microphones that automatically pivot to the speaker, such as Owls) to facilitate communication between in-person and virtual attendees; faculty lead in-person class sessions and students choose day-to-day if they will attend in-person or virtually.

In this brief, we follow the terminology used by LACCD to refer to all non-in-person modalities as “distance education.” We also follow our focus group participants and collectively refer to asynchronous and synchronous courses as “online courses,” specifying each when possible. Participants had varying

experiences with the modalities, but across all participants we heard from faculty with experience in all the modalities, and all faculty had taught in at least two of the modalities.

We also note that these definitions may be blurred depending on context—for example, faculty mentioned adding a synchronous option for their in-person courses if they or a student were ill and could not attend in-person, and faculty teaching asynchronous courses mentioned offering optional in-person or synchronous sessions to increase engagement and offer additional assistance. We categorize courses based on how they were scheduled and discuss the ways in which faculty leverage the flexibility afforded by blurring these definitions to support students.

Data Collection and Analysis

The data for this brief was collected during a series of 10 focus groups with 26 participants in the spring of 2023. Participants were faculty members who teach at three of the nine LACCD campuses; focus group information was shared with each campus's Distance Education Coordinator(s), who support faculty with online, hybrid, and HyFlex instruction. Campus Distance Education Coordinators were asked to share information about the virtual focus groups with faculty at their college, and purposeful sampling was used to schedule in-person focus groups at three campuses, using selection criteria based on distance education course offerings, campus size, and location in the district. These faculty represented a wide range of disciplines and academic appointments, with tenure track and adjunct professors from English, chemistry, global languages, economics, and child and family studies. All participants have taught in multiple modalities since the onset of the pandemic, including in-person (23 participants), hybrid (13), asynchronous online (23), synchronous online (15), and HyFlex (3), and almost half taught online prior to the pandemic (15).

Focus groups were conducted online via Zoom and in person and lasted between 60 and 75 minutes. Each interview was recorded, with participants' permission, and professionally transcribed. In addition to the transcripts, the researchers took notes during each focus group and completed a debrief after each session. Using a semi-structured protocol, the researchers asked faculty about their experiences teaching in distance education modalities. Questions probed about challenges faculty faced in distance education environments, strategies they used in their courses, student engagement, and professional development. Two researchers analyzed the transcripts using a deductive thematic coding scheme developed from the research questions and study goals. We also introduced emerging codes as they arose in the data. Examples of codes include challenges with technology, engaging students, and humanizing online teaching. Researchers then discussed initial findings as a team and checked these themes against notes and debrief materials.

Findings

Faculty Commitment to Students

A clear theme throughout the focus groups was faculty's commitment to their students and to doing their jobs well. As one participant summarized, "Nobody wakes up and says, 'I'm going to do a lousy job today for the students.'" The most common word faculty used to describe their approach toward their students was "compassion"; many discussed how the pandemic and the shift to distance education meant they had a front-row seat to students' personal lives and struggles. In response, participants described implementing a number of changes to their course practices and approaches to interacting with students.

Nearly all faculty mentioned changes to their course policies regarding late work, with some faculty removing all deadlines, others accepting late work for the first time, and others allowing make-up work. One faculty described how this change had become a permanent feature of her class, saying, "I've always been pretty good with letting students catch up if they need to, but even more so it really drew out the compassion in me that I needed to have for students. ... So I've sort of continued those policies since the pandemic and since that experience." When faculty explained why these changes to course policies were important, they talked about the challenges facing students trying to complete their education. Common examples included: taking care of siblings, children, or other family members; sharing devices within a household; navigating a work schedule; issues of safety at night around campus or other places where they could access Wi-Fi; mental health challenges; and other personal challenges that could interfere with students' ability to complete their coursework. Faculty were motivated to make these changes not only to facilitate students' continued enrollment and success in the course but also to demonstrate care for their students and to offer whatever help they could as students navigated obstacles.

Faculty also described how they took on new roles as a way of expressing their care and commitment to students. A common example of this was an increased focus on connecting students with resources offered through the campus. While these resources were sometimes related to academics, faculty more frequently mentioned working to help students get devices or Wi-Fi, mental health care support, and other services to address basic needs. Transitioning to this role was challenging for faculty—in some cases more challenging than shifting from in-person to distance education. As one faculty who transitioned from in-person to online during the pandemic described:

I experienced them [the students] actually transitioning from classroom to online and just the sheer panic because it was cases of six people in the house all needing to use one computer, trying to navigate school care, and pandemic, and job, and everything else that our students were really trying to work their way through. So, I felt unprepared. I felt like I didn't have the resources at my fingertips to just dole out and say, "Okay, well here's this person, there's this resource, here's this office. Are you struggling with food? Are you struggling with housing?"

Faculty want to meet the needs of their students; however, stepping into these roles—which they described as “more therapist than teacher”—and being students’ sole source of information about resources, took its toll. Many participants described the work as “non-stop” and “24/7.” Nearly every participant talked about burnout, with one summarizing, “There seems to be a level of burnout that has come with having done so much for so long in every modality that folks are reaching their limit.” Faculty genuinely care about their students and are committed to supporting them in whatever ways they can; however, they are also looking to the district “to put in some more resources for faculty, because we won’t be able to survive this way.”

While faculty expressed a great deal of concern about their students’ academic and personal success, the online learning environment posed unique challenges as they worked to deliver effective instruction and support students. These challenges fell into two categories, technology and engaging students, which we discuss below.

Technological Challenges of Distance Education

Perhaps unsurprisingly, faculty discussed multiple technological challenges associated with the widespread adoption of distance education course modalities. The challenges faced by our focus group participants were not largely driven by asynchronous courses, as many participants had taught asynchronously prior to the pandemic and already had Canvas shells prepared. Indeed, many of the participants discussed how they or their Distance Education Coordinators helped their peers who never taught online create Canvas shells and move their courses online during the pandemic. Even for those who had taught online prior to the pandemic, peer support was crucial in helping faculty further refine and improve their Canvas courses and instructional practices.

The technological challenges faculty discussed were varied, but generally fell into three categories: learning new applications, issues with devices, and helping students adapt to online learning environments. First, many faculty struggled with learning new applications, whether specific functions in Zoom or specialized apps designed to facilitate instruction in a particular subject area. These challenges were compounded by unexpected changes in the availability of apps to faculty, as subscription decisions worked their way up from individual faculty to departments, campuses, and ultimately district review and purchase.

Second, and particular to hybrid/blended and HyFlex/dual delivery courses, faculty discussed challenges with in-classroom devices related to log-ins, device availability and basic functionality, and Wi-Fi stability. Some examples include Owl cameras not registering sound in classrooms during HyFlex meetings, outdated Chromebook computer software preventing students from accessing Canvas, and spotty internet connectivity causing students to leave Zoom meetings. LACCD did invest in Wi-Fi hotspots and devices to provide access to students during the pandemic; while faculty appreciated these efforts, they did not fully address the barriers students faced or address faculty members’ lack of technological

infrastructure at home, particularly for adjunct faculty who do not receive work laptops. Technology-driven disruptions not only “throw [faculty] completely off,” but also “if [faculty] are able to get back into that class, some of the students are no longer there.” Faculty described how, in these situations, they would rely on Distance Education Coordinators, peers, students, and, when possible, IT staff to troubleshoot, but that these challenges often resulted in loss of instructional time. One faculty described how he was always “pack-muleing emergency supplies to my classroom to be able to teach in case tech fails me.” Faculty described these challenges as stressful for them, but more importantly as detrimental for students.

Finally, faculty described the challenges students encounter when trying to use technology to engage in class. Participants described how students struggled to navigate Canvas courses, as there was no common set-up across faculty, departments, or campuses. Compounding this, faculty reported that navigation within a Canvas course shell varied by the device students used to access the site. One described meeting with a student to help them troubleshoot access to the Canvas site and remarked how it was “no wonder you [the student] have no idea how to be successful in this online course.”

Participants discussed the additional work needed to manage the technology required for distance education. One faculty member felt that the demands of keeping up with software and applications for their distance education courses consumed a great deal of their time and energy, stating “You all of a sudden find yourself becoming more of manager of tech applications. You’re managing this, the next version is coming onboard, got to get training for this. All of a sudden, your energy, your focus is all about managing the technology.” Another participant echoed this sentiment saying, “I think teaching online, synchronous, asynchronous—we’re working a lot more than what we expect. I mean, having to do videos, that takes a lot of time. Having to manage, again, both the screen, keep the engagement going, the content. We’re working a lot more than what we have been used to.” While time-consuming, faculty view these efforts as necessary to support student success. One faculty member said:

To a large extent the student success and outcomes have a lot to do online with the way that an instructor teaches, and the way that they’re presenting the material. ... We take a lot of time to implement multimedia resources and videos, and try to make it as in-person as we can when we’re not in-person. I think that contributes heavily to how the students are doing, and how also they feel connected to us as people.

Faculty’s commitment to students fed their determination to work through technological challenges, but, as with the other changes implemented by faculty to support students, the sustainability of these efforts is jeopardized by feelings of overwork and burnout.

Connections With Students

The majority of faculty in the focus groups reported that online learning environments hamper student engagement with both faculty and their peers. Faculty felt that, in hybrid and in-person courses, they were able to develop “close intimate relationships” with their students. However, in their fully online courses, faculty often reported feeling that they did not know their students. One faculty member remembers encountering a student whom they had taught in an online asynchronous course. “I ran into somebody out at the child development center the other day, and they’re like, ‘Oh, Ms. Professor, I took your class.’ I’m just like, I don’t know this person and it makes me feel bad. I feel like I’ve not done my job.” Faculty’s sense of disconnection from their students is not unique to the asynchronous course format. Many faculty who taught synchronous and HyFlex courses expressed that they felt unable to engage students in class because most students do not turn their video cameras on. One faculty member noted, “The hardest thing is just black boxes. That’s what I’m staring at. And I have no idea if those students are there or not.” Faculty also reported that students in synchronous and HyFlex courses often do not engage in discussions with faculty or answer questions during class. This was particularly difficult for faculty because “lectures tend to be more conversational; it’s really hard to speak when no one’s speaking back to you.”

The disconnect between faculty and students in online courses has consequences. Faculty reported that it is much more difficult to “gauge where the students are, personally as well as educationally,” in online courses. For this reason, many faculty seemed to prefer the in-person classroom experience. “It’s one thing when they’re quiet in a classroom and I’m getting body language; I can read body language and I can see [that] a light bulb went off and I can see it in their face. ... But online, behind black boxes, that could be happening and there’s no way for me to know.” Faculty also reported that they were much more likely to lose track of students in their online courses. “[Online options are] more convenient and everything, but I find myself having a lot more students that fall off the radar, and I don’t know where they are, especially in these asynchronous classes.” This likely has implications for student success, as faculty are less able to step in and provide support when they sense a student is struggling.

In addition to a perceived disconnect between faculty and students in online courses, our participants also noted that students were less likely to engage with each other in the online format. One faculty who taught in the HyFlex format said, “I did notice there were fewer class discussions when I did it HyFlex. Again, because the online folks just chose, generally speaking, not to chime in even when I invited their chiming in, or they would chime in in the chat. And that’s not really meaningful discussion to be honest.” This faculty member worried that students were losing crucial learning opportunities, saying “Learning happens in a social environment. ... It’s mutual uplift and mutual empowerment. And that’s if you’re engaging and wrestling with the question together.” Overall, faculty felt that the lack of student engagement both with instructors and peers in online courses

affected their ability to deliver effective educational experiences, which in turn may affect student success.

Looking Forward

Across the focus groups, when asked about their ideal mix of courses offered in online and with some in-person component, faculty largely coalesced around a 50/50 split at each campus, while recognizing that the mix would need to vary by department and type of instruction (e.g., more lecture vs. hands-on or discussion-based). As one faculty remarked, “It’s so important to provide all the different modalities so that students can find the fit that they like and that works for them.” Through the focus group discussions, a number of suggestions surfaced for the types of support that could support faculty and make this new status quo sustainable:

- 1. Additional training and support, particularly for new faculty.** Faculty described their first-year teaching online in LACCD as “very much sink or swim” and suggested having distance education training be a larger part of the onboarding experience. Faculty also suggested that, when teaching a new course, it would be helpful to have a built-out Canvas shell prior to the start of the semester to build from, or a review process for Canvas courses to help ensure quality and continuous improvement. Faculty, whether new or experienced, also suggested that future trainings focus more on strategies for fostering student engagement rather than just on the technology required for distance education. They recognized that these trainings were being offered in some ways, but time constraints made them difficult to access. Faculty recommended incentivizing these trainings, either through compensation or requiring recertification for distance education instruction every few years to ensure skills and knowledge stay current.
- 2. Campus-based support for instructional design and accessibility requirements.** One of the challenges students face when accessing online courses is that there is no universal template for Canvas courses, making it difficult for students to navigate different course pages. Faculty also felt that some Canvas shells did not meet the standard of quality they, and the district, would want. Faculty suggested that having an instructional designer outside of typical departmental hierarchies (and thus not part of any faculty evaluation processes) would help improve online course quality. Similarly, faculty described spending long hours struggling to ensure all their online content met accessibility standards. Faculty recognized the importance of these requirements and worried about accidentally failing to meet some of these when posting videos or certain types of files (e.g., PDFs). Having accessibility coordinators at each campus who can serve as a resource to faculty would help ease this uncertainty and improve the accessibility of online courses.

- 3. Increased access to IT support.** Faculty discussed how it could be challenging to reach IT staff, particularly if they encountered an issue during a live class session. They tended to rely on the Distance Education Coordinators, other faculty, and students for support. Faculty praised the support they did receive from IT but were concerned that their colleagues in IT were “drowning” and perceived them as “very busy.” Increasing the availability of IT support, particularly with rapid response capabilities for in-class technological issues, would reduce much of the stress and workload for faculty leading, in particular, the HyFlex/dual delivery courses.
- 4. Spaces for faculty to share best practices.** The breadth of faculty’s network of peers and their comfort in reaching out with questions, getting feedback on their Canvas shells, or getting ideas about how to engage students in distance education courses varied greatly by their department, tenure track status, and prior experience. Faculty noted that the Canvas Commons was a useful source of information and inspiration for them. We also noticed that, during the focus groups, faculty were taking notes as others shared successful practices for getting students to engage with online asynchronous content, fostering discussions in a HyFlex course, and building strong relationships with students in an online modality, among other things—suggesting there is a need for more cross-departmental faculty networking and learning. While time is scarce, creating spaces for faculty to come together across departments and campuses to share what is working in their classes and collaboratively problem-solve could be a powerful way for faculty to continue to strengthen distance education instruction.

Conclusion

LACCD faculty are committed to their students and to sustaining the innovations in distance education that have emerged from the pandemic. Overwhelmingly, faculty see these innovations as critical for attracting and retaining students in LACCD, as providing students with flexible course offerings will allow them to maintain enrollment, even in the face of disruptions in their personal lives, and successfully complete their intended credential. Faculty recognize that these innovations come with challenges, such as worrying about students “falling off the radar” in online courses, wrestling with finding effective ways of building a strong classroom community in a distance education setting, and trying to stay on top of technology to leverage these tools effectively in the classroom. The district does provide support for faculty, through the distance education certification curriculum, Distance Education Coordinators, voluntary trainings through the district and 3CSN, and, for new faculty, Project Match. However, faculty identified areas in which they would like additional support and recommended instituting additional incentives or requirements to encourage instructors to take up these opportunities.

Faculty are feeling the strain of having taken on new roles to support students, shifting their instruction, learning and helping others learn new technology, and dealing with their own personal circumstances over the last few years. Regardless of these challenges, LACCD's new course modalities are exciting to faculty and are attractive options to students. By working to balance these innovations with the need to support faculty's practice and well-being, LACCD can work toward leveraging these innovations to maximize student success.

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