Chapter 9
Transforming Crucial Academic Support Services During a Pandemic:
An Experiential Autoethnography

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores the transformation of teaching and leadership practices at the Student Academic Success Services office (SASS) at the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities (UMN) in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The sobering reality of the disruption to on-campus instruction due to the escalating pandemic required a multi-pronged approach for a workplace geared towards advancing the academic progress of its students. Through a collaborative autoethnography, the authors, who work with students to improve academic performance through courses and individualized coaching sessions, chronicle how they were able to pivot rapidly and transition effectively into virtual modes of teaching and supporting students. SASS students are some of the most vulnerable to abrupt changes to their learning routines and styles; this includes students on probation, those with learning disabilities, and students struggling to stay motivated and balance their social, personal, and academic demands.

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has fundamentally changed and continues to change how people organize their lives. Part of that reorganization is the change in how people learn, as well as how academic services have adapted to support their students through an extraordinarily stressful time. The unprecedented disruption to on-campus instruction due to the global pandemic required an innovative and multi-pronged approach for a workplace such as the Student Academic Success Services (SASS) office, at the University of Minnesota, that is aimed at advancing the academic progress of its students. In the rest of this chapter, the jigsaw of tactical responses and strategies developed by the authors is outlined - to maintain engagement, academic progress, and a sense of resilience, not only for their students, but also for themselves. The self-care facet of these strategies was a crucial component in order to help their team to manage feeling overwhelmed, and so that they could continue to commit to their work of supporting students. These responses encompass the practices of: normalizing struggle, strategizing in solidarity with students, cultivating pedagogical and policy flexibility, and designing new ways of navigating boundaries, technology, and access.

In addition, this reflexive and collaborative autoethnography serves to interrogate and expand the means through which such support services are provided for the wellbeing of its staff and students, in an effort to make them more accessible, trauma-informed, and responsive to meet the differing needs of students. Other leadership, instructors, and emergency response practitioners within student affairs spaces in higher education that are similarly invested in their students successes, will hopefully be able to gain insight into: i) what those initial few weeks looked like for our organization, ii) what lessons can be learned from the ensuing months of remote learning and iii) how, through practicing solidarity, vulnerability, and compassion, the authors were able to co-construct solutions to unexpected challenges — alongside their students and with each other.

BACKGROUND

Adaptation and innovation present a fundamental challenge to the organizational culture of higher education, given its hierarchical, bureaucratic operational norms (Birnbaum, 1988; Tierney, 2008). The COVID-19 pandemic required an immense and immediate transformation of university protocols, pedagogies, and response procedures. In the middle of the 2019 spring semester, as the realities of the COVID-19 pandemic set in, many universities reeled with a torrent of decisions and dilemmas. Should university life resume after spring break? What about after the summer break? Is it safer for international students to stay put or return home? How will students and instructors adapt to online learning and remote instruction? Do students have adequate technology access? How can students and faculty be kept safe while delivering on learning outcomes and developmental experiences? As universities strived to adapt and communicate at the administrative level, instructors forged ahead with resiliency and resoluteness, making mid-semester curricular adaptations on a daily and hourly basis, and cobbling together student support interventions. This unprecedented moment was the catalyst for a marked shift in university life, and the transformation is ongoing. Thus, as higher education is reconceptualized in the time of COVID-19, it is critical to understand the ways that instructors experienced, responded, and adapted to this unparalleled moment in history.

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