

Alt-Instruction: Faculty Development Programming to Address Campus Equity Issues During the Pandemic

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This chapter highlights a strategic faculty development effort to address equity issues when a university campus pivoted to emergency remote instruction during the COVID-19 pandemic. The authors describe the development of an online faculty development summer program, 'Alt-Instruction', targeted to help all campus faculty make the rapid pivot to remote learning, while keeping student equity issues front and center. This COVID-19 program was not designed haphazardly but rather based on years of designing and offering educational development that 1) assumed the necessity for collocating instructional technology support with teaching resources, 2) considered teaching from a student-centered perspective, and 3) anticipated the need to carefully model best practices for faculty. The 2020 Alt-Instruction program, which close to 1,000 faculty participated in, used a highly structured approach to educational development, including the employment of online resources and modeling templates. These contributed to a relatively fast, if unprecedented, campus migration to remote learning.

SETTING THE STAGE

In the spring of 2020, the California State University, Los Angeles (Cal State LA) campus faced an historic challenge as it shut its doors to the COVID-19 pandemic for 18 months. Faculty and students experienced steep learning curves. Faculty who had never used Canvas, the campus learning management system (LMS), found they needed to rapidly upskill to reach their students remotely—and were given less than a week to pivot. Many instructors, especially those who had not used technology prior to the shutdown, were unfamiliar with the structural demands that remote learning would place on their formerly face-to-face courses. In addition to rapidly learning the ins and outs of the campus LMS and video-conferencing tools such as Zoom, faculty were doubly challenged by the fact that the new online environment carried with it a separate set of realities. Many former in-person practices could not be reproduced without inducing anxiety or exhaustion (e.g., holding classroom discussions live in Zoom amidst a sea of black boxes). In the absence of nonverbal cues and physical proximity, newly remote courses needed to be overly structured, if not redundant. Any new faculty development efforts had to address not only technology training, but also address equity issues to ensure students were successful in the remote learning environment.

The abrupt switch to remote learning challenged Cal State LA students as well. Campus survey data suggested that one third of students did not have access to unlimited, reliable internet from home, while half of students reported lacking access to a laptop or desktop computer. Historically the campus had limited fully online course offerings; many students lacked the experience and technology to be successful in a remote learning environment. The student experience and local data had to be incorporated in faculty development efforts so that faculty could best support students during this transition.

Cal State LA, a comprehensive state public university located in East Los Angeles, is a federally designated Hispanic-Serving Institution, Minority-Serving Institution, and Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander-Serving Institution. Over 60% of the student body are first-generation Latino/a/x students, the largest Hispanic population of any four-year institution in California, and one of the largest universities in the nation serving first-gen Latino students. Sixty-four percent of students report an annual household income below \$40,000. The campus is notably ranked among the highest in the United States for the upward mobility of its students (Chetty, et al., 2017).

The faculty development efforts described in this chapter were organized, planned and implemented by the campus Center for Effective Teaching and Learning (CETL), where the co-authors respectively serve as Director of Academic Technology and CETL Executive Director. CETL promotes teaching as an area of scholarship for communities of faculty who want to deepen their classroom practice. The center, which was relaunched in 2011, supports all instructors of record, including lecturers and graduate student teaching assistants. As part of a teaching institution, CETL's goal is to increase student success by growing a culture of teaching excellence across campus. The center is collocated with a faculty academic technology lab, which provides a single point of service to address technology or teaching concerns. Combined teaching and technology services became critical for faculty during the pandemic.

CETL tripled its staff between 2013 and 2021. Current staff includes the center's executive director, director of academic technology, two instructional designers, LMS administrator, and technology coordinator. In 2020, three curriculum (eLearning) specialists were hired to meet the increase in demand due to the pandemic. A lead multimedia specialist, two additional instructional designers, and several technical support personnel were added to staff or are in the process of being hired.

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