Summary

As colleges continued to adapt to the COVID-19 pandemic in fall 2020, TBR sought insight into the experiences of faculty and students in the new education environment. To this end, TBR conducted a survey which included questions about faculty members' experiences and their perceptions of student experiences in fall 2020.

Key Findings

- Many faculty shared concerns about student engagement during fall 2020. Concerns about student engagement were especially prevalent among faculty teaching courses fully online, in non-technical programs, and at community colleges.

- Two-thirds of faculty said student technology issues were a challenge. These challenges were especially common in Southeast and West Tennessee.

- Faculty in technical programs continue to express concerns about how to provide hands-on training in online courses and if it is a prudent methodology for their content areas.

- Most faculty believe students felt safe in the classroom, but faculty worried about their students' health and well-being. Likewise, faculty expressed frequent concern for their colleagues and for themselves.

- While faculty still expressed that they experienced some challenges with instructional and assessment technology, just over a third of faculty expressed that the quality of these resources had improved.

- A large portion of the faculty are feeling substantial stress related to the COVID-19 pandemic and related changes at their colleges. Furthermore, on the whole, it appears faculty do not feel like they are handling these changes and the associated challenges as well as they would like.
About the Respondents

1,557 Number of Survey Responses

41% of Full-Time Community College Faculty Participated

13% of Adjunct Community College Faculty Participated

47% of TCAT Faculty Participated

About the Survey

The survey was sent to all full-time and adjunct faculty across the system’s 13 community colleges and the 27 Tennessee Colleges of Applied Technology (TCATs). The survey was open for responses from November 2 to December 1, 2020. It included questions like:

- How did faculty and student experiences in fall 2020 compare to experiences in a typical term, prior to COVID-19?
- What new challenges did faculty face in fall 2020? Which challenges were most difficult to overcome?
- What types of changes did faculty make to their courses?
- How often did faculty feel overwhelmed by new responsibilities or worry about the health and well-being of their students?

In total, 1,557 full-time and adjunct faculty responded to the survey. About 75% of respondents were community college faculty and 25% were TCAT faculty.

The responses represented 41% of full-time community college faculty and 47% of TCAT faculty. The response rate was lower for adjunct faculty at community colleges; only 12% of the system’s 3,100+ community college adjunct faculty participated.
Survey Findings

Methods of Instruction

System wide, 64% of faculty moved at least some of their coursework online in fall 2020. Just under 15% of faculty who taught any in-person coursework in fall 2020 moved at least some coursework online.

Technical program faculty (44%) at both community colleges and TCATs were much more likely to teach a class with in-person instruction compared to non-technical program faculty (15%).1 This gap was even wider between all TCAT faculty (74%) and all community college faculty (23%).

What methods of instruction did you use in fall 2020?

Perceptions of Student Experiences

Students and Engagement

Concerns about levels of student engagement were common among faculty. When asked to rate levels of student engagement, 40% of faculty responded that engagement was worse than a typical term. These responses were similar to those found in TBR’s faculty survey in spring 2020. In that survey, 47% of faculty said that student engagement declined after the shift to online learning.

Compared to a typical term, how would you rate student engagement in fall 2020?

1. Faculty did not necessarily teach exclusively through a given methodology and were not asked to comment about their experiences in specific instruction methods. Rather, faculty were asked about their experiences and perceptions as a whole in Fall 2020.
Feelings of student engagement appear varied by method of instruction. While across all methods of instruction many faculty members said engagement was worse in 2020, faculty members who taught through fully online methods reported worse levels of engagement (45%). Meanwhile, those teaching in-person coursework reported worse engagement in about 30% of responses.

There was also substantial difference by college type and program type. While nearly half of full-time community college faculty said student engagement in fall 2020 was worse than in previous semesters, only a quarter of TCAT faculty said the same. Similarly, only 30% of faculty teaching in technical programs reported student engagement as worse while 50% of faculty teaching in non-technical programs reported student engagement had become worse in fall 2020.

When asked about new challenges they faced in fall 2020, 64% of faculty indicated student attendance and engagement were a new challenge in fall 2020 and 39% said it was the most difficult challenge to overcome. These experiences were similar across many faculty subgroups, even those who less frequently responded that engagement had become worse in fall 2020, including those at TCATs (60%; 36%) teaching technical programs (59%; 35%), and teaching in-person coursework (63%; 37%).

Students and Technology

Due to the increased reliance on remote learning, faculty were asked about their perceptions of students experiences with technology. About a quarter of faculty disagreed or strongly disagreed that students had access to the technology required to make remote learning possible. Only small variations were present among responses by college type, program type, or instruction method. However, variations among community colleges were more sizeable. Faculty disagreed or strongly disagreed that students had access to technology necessary for online learning most frequently at Chattanooga (30%), Cleveland (31%), Jackson (29%), and Southwest (29%).

When asked about new challenges in fall 2020, student technology issues were reported by 62% of faculty, the second most frequently cited challenge of listed options. Only 14% said this was the single most difficult challenge to overcome. This challenge was slightly more common among faculty teaching in wholly online coursework (67%), but, still, only 15% listed this as the single most difficult challenge to overcome. At Dyersburg, Chattanooga, and Southwest, student technology issues were the most frequently cited challenge.

In which of the following areas have you faced new challenges in fall 2020?

- **Student attendance/engagement**: 64%
- **Student technology issues**: 62%
- **Redesigning lessons/assessments**: 45%
- **Student communication**: 36%
- **Instructional technology**: 33%
- **Assessment technology**: 30%
- **Maintaining a safe classroom environment**: 18%

2. Dyersburg and Motlow had the lowest rates of faculty disagreeing and strongly disagreeing on this item (0% each). However, these colleges had the lowest response count among all community colleges (less than 35 each), so responses may not be as representative as those from other colleges.
Other Aspects of Student Experiences

Faculty were also asked about their perceptions of other aspects of the student experience.

- 16% of faculty responded that the quality of campus supports available to students had gotten worse in Fall 2020, yet 30% said it had become better.
- 24% of faculty responded that student communication with faculty had gotten worse in Fall 2020; 20% said it had become better.
- Just under a quarter of faculty disagreed or strongly disagreed that students were able to attend classes regularly.
- Only 7% of faculty agreed or strongly agreed that students felt safe in socially distant classroom environments.
- 29% of faculty disagreed or strongly disagreed that students had access to hands-on experiences necessary for their courses.

In almost all cases related to these topics, faculty were less likely to respond negatively to these topics if they taught at TCATs, in technical programs, or in-person.

Instructional and Assessment Technology

In the spring 2020 survey, faculty frequently cited challenges with the technology available to them including their lack of experience with technology and tools available to them, lack of access to specialized software, and lack of access to reliable devices.

While about 60% of faculty in fall 2020 reported that the quality of teaching resources available to them was about the same as in prior terms, 35% responded that the quality had improved. When asked about new challenges for fall 2020, issues with instructional technology and issues with assessment technology were among the less frequently cited challenges, only indicated by about a third of faculty each.

Additional Challenges and Changes for Faculty

While challenges related to student engagement and student technology were the most commonly cited by faculty, other challenges were also shared. Challenges related to redesigning lessons were the next most commonly cited. Across all respondents, 45% responded they faced challenges in this area. But while this was a common challenge, only 12% said this was their greatest challenge. Other potential challenges listed in the survey included those related to student communication and maintaining a safe classroom environment.

Faculty Concerns

Health and Well-Being

A notable difference was found between faculty’s perceptions of students’ feelings of safety in the classroom and faculty’s concerns about students’ health and well-being. Ninety-four percent of faculty teaching in-person or hybrid courses said students seemed to feel safe in the classroom with social distancing. However, 56% of all faculty said they frequently worried about the health and well-being of their students and only 10% responded that they rarely or never worried about their students’ well-being.

Given the changes caused by COVID-19, how often do you worry about the health and well-being of your students?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Frequently</th>
<th>Sometimes</th>
<th>Never</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All Faculty</td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching In-Person or Hybrid Courses</td>
<td>57%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TCAT Faculty</td>
<td>63%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Faculty also were commonly concerned about the well-being of their colleagues and their own well-being; 46% of faculty responded that they frequently worried about their own health and well-being and 46% responded they worried about the health and well-being of their colleagues.

**Work-Related Responsibilities**

While faculty generally responded that they had the tools and support necessary to do their job effectively (48% frequently, 45% sometimes), many faculty also frequently expressed negative feelings about their work-related responsibilities.

- Just over half of faculty responded that they frequently had too many things to do.
- 39% of faculty responded that they frequently felt under pressure from deadlines.
- 40% of faculty responded that they frequently felt overwhelmed by new responsibilities and challenges.
- Only 29% of faculty responded that they frequently felt on top of things.

As in other areas, faculty from TCATs and technical programs had slightly different experiences from the system as a whole. These faculty members were slightly less likely to respond they frequently felt they had too many things to do, felt under pressure from deadlines, felt overwhelmed by new responsibilities and challenges.

Remote Learning in Technical Programs

As technical programs are understood to be more reliant on in-person instruction and hands-on coursework, faculty teaching in these programs were asked additional questions about their experiences.

Among faculty teaching in technical programs, 43% moved most or all of their coursework online and 44% moved some of their coursework online. When asked how much of their coursework can be successfully taught online, 5% responded none of the instruction, 45% responded some of their instruction, 29% responded a majority of their instruction, and 21% responded all of their instruction.

Faculty from TCATs moved less of their coursework online than faculty at community colleges. Additionally, TCAT faculty were more likely to respond that less coursework could be successfully moved online than their peers at community colleges. For faculty who could not deliver most or all their instruction in an online format, 46% said that the lack of hands-on training was the most significant barrier, the highest among the listed options.3

Which factors influence your ability to deliver technical courses in an online or remote format?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Students need hands-on experience with equipment, and they can’t get that in a remote model.</td>
<td>46%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students are uncomfortable with a remote learning model and prefer to be in-person.</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students have limited internet/computer access, which makes online and remote learning difficult.</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simulation software is insufficient or unavailable.</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3. Other potential barriers listed were 1) students are uncomfortable with online learning, 2) students have limited access to internet/technology, and 3) simulation software is insufficient. Faculty response rates for each option were 21%, 18%, and 15% respectively.
Student Engagement

There seems to be a fairly strong sense that everything is lining up that students should be successful in online learning. Generally speaking, students are attending classes, faculty have the technology needed for teaching, students have the technology needed for learning, and students are communicating with faculty.

Yet there is a continuing and large concern with “student engagement” among TBR faculty. It is possible that the term “student engagement” is ambiguous, meaning a wide variety of things to different faculty members. Also, it’s possible that how an engaged student presents in a remote learning environment is substantially different than what faculty expect (i.e., students are engaged but faculty do not recognize it given the changes to the learning context).

Student engagement is likely an area in need of further exploration, including additional research into how faculty define engagement and analysis of student course outcomes relative to prior terms.

Student Technology

It is important to distinguish potential differences between student technology access and student technology issues discussed in this area.

Using the experiences from Dyersburg as an example, no respondents responded that they disagreed that students had sufficient access to technology for online learning, yet respondents from Dyersburg had the second highest rate of responses indicating student technology issues were a new challenge.

One possible explanation for these diverging responses is that the concept of technology access was limited to whether or not students had access to an appropriate device or had an internet connection.

Meanwhile, the concept of technology issues may have been seen as including other technology related challenges such as difficulty using technology or the usefulness of the technology available to students. These differences were not explicitly parsed out in the survey and would be an area to consider in future surveys.

About the Respondents

In total, 1,557 faculty responded to the fall 2020 survey.

Responses were received from faculty at every college in the system. 41% of full-time community college faculty, 13% of adjunct community college faculty, and 47% of TCAT faculty participated in the survey. About 75% of respondents primarily taught at community colleges and 25% at TCATs. Just under half (47%) of respondents taught in technical programs (TCAT programs or applied programs at community colleges).

Faculty from community colleges most frequently taught in fully online formats (83% synchronous online; 56% asynchronous online). TCAT faculty most frequently taught in formats with at least some in-person component (74% in-person; 55% hybrid).

By years of teaching experience, the largest group of respondents was those with over 20 years of experience (26%). Only 5% of respondents had a year or less of teaching experience.
Interactive Dashboard

An interactive dashboard shows the full survey results.

The dashboard allows users to filter the results by college, faculty experience, and teaching subject.

The dashboard is available on the TBR website at tbr.edu/policy-strategy/presentations-and-papers