

Navigating the Effects of Covid-19 at a Southeastern American HBCU

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ABSTRACT The Covid-19 pandemic has created a range of problems and concerns for college students both nationally and internationally. Rates of depression have increased along with an increase in financial pressures. Many first-generation college students have difficulties gaining access to the resources that increase academic success. As a result of these issues, instructors are examining their instructional practices to ensure that they are supporting their students' needs. The purpose of this article is to illustrate how the authors used the five high-touch personal needs and the Constructivist Emotionally-Orientated Model of Web-Based Instruction (CEO) to reflect on current practices and prepare for the upcoming academic year.

Keywords: Online education, Covid-19, Constructivist Emotionally Orientated Model, High-Touch Personal Needs

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INTRODUCTION

Pandemics are not a new phenomenon (Cheng, Lau, Woo, & Yuen, 2007), but the effects of a massive and rapidly spreading disease such as Coronavirus (COVID-19) on the modern economy remains unknown. With the rapidly increasing incidences of COVID-19 worldwide, institutions of higher education (IHEs) have been forced to respond quickly to new challenges presented (Klapkiv & Dluhopolska, 2020). Because of the pandemic, enforced social distancing has threatened the quality, and disrupted the routine work of education as a whole. Although the use of distance education is not new to our university, it has, in the past, been complementary to face to face instruction.

The new normal of this pandemic requires a systematic knowledge of delivering online instruction, remote communication with students and administration, and many other challenges that may not have been revealed. Some IHEs may not be ready for these institutional challenges. Many reasons exist such as the age of faculty, the reluctance to learn new things with students, and master modern technologies because of uncertainty in the future; and low salaries (Shostak, 2019).

The purpose of this article is to reflect upon our current resources and instructional practices as we continue to move forward during this pandemic. The authors will utilize the Five Personal High Touch Needs and the Constructivist, Emotionally-oriented Model of Web-Based Instruction

(CEO) as a framework for reflection, discussion, and analysis of our current practices. The Department of Teaching & Learning (DTL) is housed in a College of Education at a Historically Black College & University (HBCU) located in the southeastern portion of the United States of America. The DTL offers a myriad of programs approved by the State's Board of Education, with recognition from Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP). The undergraduate and graduate curricula both lead to teacher licensure by the Department of Education. In addition, the department offers a non-endorsed undergraduate program that is designed to develop professionals to work in community-based settings that focus on children and youth, adults, and the elderly

The mission of HBCUs provided us another reason to reflect on our practices as we move forward through this pandemic. Although we serve a diverse group of students, HBCUs were established to mediate and support the achievements of Black students. These institutions have had a long history of providing Black students with learning environments that affirm their talents and potential (Gasman et al., 2017). The next section will provide an overview of the challenges that are typically faced at this HBCU and others and why students choose to attend.

THE ROLE AND CHALLENGES OF HBCUS IN EDUCATION

HBCUs are a uniquely American institution. The Higher

Education Act of 1965, as amended, defines an HBCU as any historically black college or university that was established and accredited (or making progress toward accreditation) prior to 1964, and whose principal mission was, and is, the education of black Americans (Arroyo & Gasman, 2014). HBCUs emerged after the Civil War and were established to educate African-American students who were prohibited from attending other institutions of higher learning (Nichols, 2004).

Although the percentages of bachelor's and master's degrees conferred to Black students by HBCUs have decreased through the years, (NCES, 2020), these institutions continue to play a strong role in the development of young people. Students choose to attend HBCUs because of the opportunities to develop their racial identity and self-development. They also want to live in a community of students who are Black and feel they will belong to a welcoming environment that provides social, historical, and emotional benefits (Van Camp et al., 2009). HBCUs provide a nurturing faculty and staff who embrace each student's experiences and well-being, and are willing to have meaningful interactions and relationships with students. This environment provides a climate where students are less likely to deal with negative stereotypes and situations that undermine student's achievements (Gasman et al., 2017).

Despite being a part of the educational landscape for several years, HBCUs are misunderstood and have several myths about their quality. Many view them as lacking quality education and degree offering and not providing adequate resources for student support. They are also viewed as having limited student diversity and not preparing students for success. (NCES, 2020). According to NCES (2020), in 2018, 24% of non-Black students were enrolled at HBCUs. A Gallup study revealed that black graduates of HBCUs felt their college/university experience prepared them to thrive and grow in their finances and personal well-being (Seymour & Ray, 2015).

Although HBCUs may have been viewed by some as inferior in higher education, they have consistently shown that they are indispensable members of the American higher education system. Despite their success in the education of African-American people, these institutions continue to face many challenges today. Since their inception HBCUs have grappled with students who are underprepared, inconsistent management, dwindling financial resources; low endowments; competition for students and faculty members; an alumni base without high levels of wealth; and students from low-income families who may be unable to pay ever increasing tuition rates (Nichols, 2004).

The mission and purpose of teacher preparation programs located in HBCUs are very much the same as those of majority institutions which is, to prepare quality teachers and leaders who are effective in fostering student learning and achievement (Dilworth, 2012). However, what distinguishes HBCUs from other institutions is the condition of their founding during a period of U. S. history when the nation—the South in particular—was antagonistic toward the education of African Americans.

CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

Prior to the onset of COVID-19, administration and faculty in our college began working collaboratively with both the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education's Special Education Networked Improvement Committee (AACTE NIC) to reduce the shortage of special education teachers; and BranchEd Alliance, a non-profit organization dedicated to strengthening, growing, and amplifying the impact of educator preparation at Minority Serving Institutions to identify what is working well and to strengthen program weaknesses to drive continuous quality improvement and ensure program sustainability.

As part of our improvement process, the DTL recognized the need to provide online options for working adults seeking licensure in teaching through upgrades to our graduate program in special education. Program credit hours were reduced from 48 to 36 credits, synchronous, asynchronous and hybrid courses were created to support full time teachers in obtaining licensure. In addition, Bachelors of Science in Education (BS. Ed) majors were developed in Special Education, Elementary Education and Middle School Education. Also, our university began its push towards training faculty in online teaching through workshops and training sponsored by the Office of Distance Education.

With the advent of COVID 19, the DTL was primarily prepared to teach online due to faculty participation in university sponsored workshops and trainings. However, the undergraduate programs were designed to be taught face to face, which led to a need to help prepare our students to move to an online environment without advanced notice. Students were asked to leave their dormitories with three days' notice and asked to continue classes, leaving many confused and potentially traumatized. Graduating seniors were left with questions regarding their ability to successfully complete their degrees. These events were also problematic for faculty due to the fact that we are a 'high touch' program, heavily invested in the well-being of our students

THE FIVE PERSONAL HIGH-TOUCH NEEDS

Kobasa et al., (1982) identified the five “high-touch” personal needs or learning dispositions, i.e., challenge, commitment, control, creativity, and caring as key factors in contributing to individual and organizational successes in coping with cognitive and emotional changes. These “high-touch” needs have also been identified as critical to the successful short-term acquisition and long-term sustainability of newly learned knowledge and skills and/or behavioral changes (Hall & Hord, 2006).

The first personal high-touch need, challenge, refers to how students value learning the new skills and knowledge. The need for can be met by providing students with opportunities to reflect, question, and evaluate course materials. Challenging activities enrich and extend students’ academic abilities, allowing them to “stretch” their limits, and are great motivators because they reinforce student engagement and interest; and foster student growth and the ability to adapt to new environments. To meet the need for challenge, we implemented research-based problem-solving strategies such as case studies, role-playing, reflective and collaborative assignments. These strategies require students to define a problem, plan, require, and reflect (Polka et al., 2014; Ornelles et al., 2019). Discussion boards, forums, journals and blogs were used to employ problem solving strategies

The second personal high-touch need, commitment, refers to the students’ desire for personal connections and experiences in the learning process. Supporting the high-touch area of commitment must involve creating active and collaborative activities that foster learning. To achieve this, instructors should consider themselves as mentors to their students. This role goes beyond teaching the course materials because it includes providing guidance on academic and professional goals. Responsibilities include: providing instructional support to students by answering questions on assignments, helping students complete their work, assessing their work, and helping students find support in technical services or student support services (Martin et al., 2019; Polka et al., 2014). To support this need, we drew upon Darby (2020)’s work e.g., we made personal connections with students by creating introductory videos welcoming them to the respective programs; intentionally communicated with students; and demonstrated flexibility in assignments and due dates

The learner’s need to influence how knowledge is acquired describes the third high-touch personal need for control. Student interest, dispositions, and attitudes are factors in

this area. To help learners develop control, or autonomy, over their learning, instructors need to develop courses with good design, structure, and consistency. Features of good course design include clearly stated expectations, course goals, assignments, and instructor availability. Course design increases student emotional interest and is a strong predictor for student engagement and learning. Students engage in courses that have materials, activities, and outcomes that are aligned with their personal and professional interest. (Ornelles et al., 2019; Polka et al., 2014).

In our efforts to support this need, we structured courses to provide easy access to course information, lecture notes, and class-related resources, e.g. PowerPoint presentations, journal articles, and materials through the use of Blackboard Learn, our university-wide Learning Management System (LMS).

Blackboard Learn provided a consistent way for students to retrieve and store information, thereby allowing students control over the learning materials needed for course success, supporting student satisfaction and promoting positive learning outcomes (Dhillia, 2017). Further, we ensured that instructor contact information, links to institutional services, and accommodations for students with disabilities were outlined in our syllabi, along with other valuable information that showed how the assessments are connected to course goals. (Baldwin & Ching, 2019).

The fourth personal high-touch need for creativity describes how the learner adapts new knowledge and skills into diverse applications and strategies, and how a learner applies multiple new strategies to formulate or revise a problem. Creativity is an ability to think in new and different ways by modifying an original idea into something unique (Polka et al., 2014; Yalcinalp & Avci, 2019). Creativity has some overlap with the high-touch need of challenge. Both areas utilize problem solving skills and techniques. However, creativity is a critical skill that requires an individual to review a situation from a different perspective and see new opportunities. In an online environment, learners need creative strategies to engage in learning. Effective online teaching goes beyond lecturing, as learners require creative and multiple approaches to engage in course materials. To support this need we implemented digital tools such as, podcasts, videos, infographics, chat, phone (Google Voice), and video conferencing (Montelongo, 2019).

The fifth high-touch personal need, caring, addresses the students’ need to experience a nurturing family atmosphere (Polka et al., 2014). Methods for creating this type of environment include using effective feedback and culturally rel-

evant strategies. Feedback provides students' information on their strengths, provides suggestions for improvement, and is proactive communication that cultivates mutual trust and respect with students (Duesbery et al., 2019). In order to be effective, feedback to students should be clear, timely, personalized, and relate to the context of a course. Frequent feedback provides student self-efficacy which impacts their motivation and level of engagement (Dhillia, 2017; Leibold & Schwarz, 2015).

We will continue our efforts to provide effective feedback but will incorporate video and audio messages for student feedback in order to add a personal touch to feedback (Steele & Holbeck, 2018). We will also continue to gather student feedback after course completion via course evaluations and disposition surveys. Student feedback gathered after the course extends beyond the instructor's instructional delivery, and can bring light to any technical issues experienced. We are in agreement with Duesbery et al. (2019) who found that faculty viewed open and honest feedback from students as helpful, used it to make course adjustments for future classes, and created an atmosphere of respect.

Creating a caring learning environment also requires instructors to know how to communicate with all learners. Culturally relevant teaching (CRT) strategies are centered on how we connect with students from diverse backgrounds (Montelongo, 2019). CRT reflects pedagogical practices that range along a continuum, and recognizes the existence of, and differences between low-context and high-context learning. Low-context learning relies on written words while high-context learning relies on both verbal and non-verbal techniques to guide communication. High-context communication strategies tend to promote a more democratic and engaging environment. Online instructors need to have an awareness of both learning styles. We will continue to implement high context approaches suggested by Montelongo (2019) e.g., video introductions and synchronous meetings, and explore others such as; video grade feedback to support student success.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The Vision of the Conceptual Framework of the College of Education is to 'Produce Reflective Practitioners that create Educational Justice for All'. Reflective Practitioners examine all aspects of teaching and learning using essential dispositions to create positive, unbiased learning environments and educational justice for all. The Mission is to promote quality programs, using current research and technology-based learning to prepare effective reflective

practitioners that are competent, caring and culturally-responsive. The five personal high-touch needs can be readily incorporated into our conceptual framework as a means to navigate the effects of this pandemic (see Table 1). Table 1 outlines the connections between our Conceptual Framework, the CEO Model and strategies that we currently use to support the five personal high-touch needs of challenge, commitment, control, creativity, and caring. These five areas provide a framework for planning and preparing for the upcoming academic year as we move towards a primarily online learning environment.

THE CEO MODEL

The Constructivist, Emotionally-Oriented Model of Web-Based Instruction (CEO) Model developed by MacFadden et al, (2005), is based on a constructivist approach to online learning that places an emphasis on the emotional dimensions in teaching, and on utilizing these dimensions in learning. The model is learner-centered with less focus on detailed content and more emphasis on assisting the learner to formulate and reformulate ideas and meanings. Within a context of safety and trust, learners are challenged to analyze and fully develop their positions.

With an eye toward moving our undergraduate programs online, we recognize that these changes will evoke a range of both positive and negative emotions and that we will need to design our programs to address this mix of emotions, and manage them in ways that will allow for constructive learning outcomes. MacFadden et al. offer the following three-stage process for managing these emotions, (a) establishing safety, (b) providing challenges to participants' existing thought, and (c) providing new knowledge and facilitating new ways of thinking. In their study, safety was established by developing non-blaming supportive "ground rules" and having participants review them at the beginning of the course. Rules were constructed to foster free communication and ensure safety, and communication was monitored to ensure compliance and safety.

Challenging participants' thinking occurred in a non-threatening manner. Exercises and processes that allowed participants to step outside their existing ways of thinking were introduced. These exercises were designed to critique one's own thinking on a private, individual level and participants were given the option of publicly debating the personal challenges that the course evoked. Finally, whenever disequilibrium occurred the authors introduced new information and models to provide alternative knowledge and ways of viewing the world.

Incorporating the CEO Model into Current Practices

Based on the model of learning stages presented above, MacFadden et al. developed a web-based course with an emphasis on learner emotions, and incorporated the following eight structural components: (a) rules about communication and netiquette, (b) autobiographical area, (c) assignments, (d) interpersonal support, (e) a special group area, (f) individual and shared group assignments, (g) feedback mechanism, and (h) course content. Upon reviewing this model, we scrambled to incorporate the structural components into our courses in the middle of the spring semester. Rules about communication and netiquette were included in our syllabi and discussed on the first day of online classes in order to enhance empathy and positive emotions; and decrease potential negative emotions such as, fear, envy, and anger. An autobiographical area was created in the course for informal biographies and pictures in order to facilitate interpersonal connection and empathy amongst students. Although we did not include an area for faculty autobiographies during the spring semester, we are in the process of incorporating them in the fall in order to create a sense of connection among faculty and learners.

In our rush to put our courses online we discussed, but did not dedicate the first assignment to mastering, the required technology; navigating within the course; sending and receiving emails; viewing online content; and web access. We have added this component to our fall courses with the hope of reducing the frustration that can occur when learners are exposed to new technology. We will continue to include individual and shared group assignments, provide timely and specific feedback, and deliver course content through a variety of media including PowerPoint with real audio, text-, and web-based information. In addition, case examples, humor, cartoons, and fun exercises will be incorporated into the delivery of course content to reduce fear and increase positive emotions.

We will continue to provide direct and timely support in order to minimize fear, anger, and envy and maximize empathy and positive emotions. However, due to limited resources, we were and are unable to provide substantial interpersonal support, but readily refer students to the IT department for technology related issues. Finally, due to small class sizes and our high touch approach, we did not create a special group area within the course website for each small group where learners communicated with each other. However, individual groups were encouraged to communicate with one another during and outside of group assignments.

CONCLUSION

The components of the above frameworks helped us to reflect on and plan for the upcoming school year especially in light of the pandemic. As a result of the pandemic, college students are experiencing higher rates of depression and have increased stresses related to financial concerns. Many have difficulty accessing mental health care (Redden, 2020). First-generation college students also experience other difficulties. The pandemic has increased our awareness of the digital divide, i.e. unequal access to computers and the internet due to geographic or socioeconomic barriers, that many of our college students face. Many of them do not have the resources and tools at home to work effectively on course work and assignments. These students rely on cell phones and working in parking lots that have Wi-Fi access. Prior to the pandemic, schools, libraries, and other public resources were typically used to bridge this gap, but are now closed or limited to stop the spread of the virus (Dennon, 2020). These students also tend to have other family obligations such as taking care of younger siblings and/or sick family members (Garces-Jimenez, 2020).

The five high-touch personal need areas and the CEO model help us see more clearly how to support our students as they navigate the “new normal”. As an HBCU, we may not have access to the same resources as other universities such as, high level technology support, but we can use the components of the online model available to us, e.g. rules about netiquette, collaborative assignments, incorporating faculty autobiographies in the autobiography section of the course, timely and specific feedback, special group areas, humor and fun activities to reduce fear and anger and increase feelings of safety and control. We will continue to evolve as we embark on this new journey and remain dedicated to the success of our students.

Table 1*Alignment of Conceptual Framework to Personal Needs and CEO Model*

Conceptual Framework	High Touch Personal Needs	CEO Model	Strategies
Competent	Challenge	Challenge	Key Assessments, problem-based learning, case study analysis
Reflective	Commitment	Safety	Discussion boards, blogs, journals
Effective	Control	Safety	Group work, learning communities, good course design, technology support
Culturally Responsive	Creativity	New Thinking	Project based learning, high-context techniques
Caring	Caring	Safety	Hybrid courses, advising, timely and effective feedback

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