

WTAMU Faculty Senate Response to Fall 2021 Prompts

April 2, 2021

Introduction

On behalf of the WTAMU Faculty Senate, and the faculty we represent, we present this short report sharing responses to the prompts provided by Dr. Wendler in his January 28th, 2021 memo to the constituency group leaders on campus. Faculty appreciate the opportunity to contribute to the reflective visioning for what Fall 2021 (and beyond) might look like for us. Whereas all have responded to the COVID-19 crisis in a very personal manner, we recognize the importance of collective comprehension as we are all members of the WTAMU and Panhandle community. As such, the perspectives shared here vary according to the personal, professional, and disciplinary disposition of the respondents. Where common themes were possible, those are characterized. Points of divergence are also useful to provide a broad perspective and these are also characterized.

Faculty notably alluded to collective/community responsibility as a significant component of our WTAMU community citizenship. The five provided prompts were sufficient to elicit a broad range of thinking which we have attempted to condense in this report.

Method

The information summarized in this report was gathered using an informal process whereby Faculty Senators engaged with their immediate constituents and collated any input received in a synoptic summary. Anonymized and detailed responses were retained to assist in developing this overview.

We will proceed with a synoptic account of the five prompts, followed by summary thoughts and recommendations moving forward.

Remote Work

“Has remote work been effective from your perspective?”

As faculty productivity is broadly classified as being related to their intellectual contributions, their instructional responsibilities, and their professional service activities, responses varied accordingly. Foremost, an overwhelming majority of faculty from whom we received input expressed gratitude at the opportunity to realize the continuity of operations in light of the pandemic. Many recognized that not all in the broader community had this option. Further, notable praise and recognition were offered for both the administration's quick and flexible responses and for IT's facilitation throughout. Many faculty positively cited our institution's overall resilience and adaptability during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The responses to this prompt suggest that a cost/benefit analysis of remote work would predicate on what aspect of faculty responsibilities are considered, and the inherent nature of that faculty's discipline. In cases where the discipline is applied in a predominantly face-to-face mode, the drawbacks to remote work were reported as being more numerous. Conversely, some faculty identified that their programs were better equipped to cope as their programs had an extant online/remote disposition.

Many faculty mentioned flexibility, work/life balance, reduced costs, and the affordability of online conferences as net positives of remote work. Others reported that remote work is not a valid substitute for face-to-face interaction for activities related to collegiality, learning, and community. As such, tools such as Zoom were not deemed an adequate substitute when the development and nurturing of shared context is necessary. As a corollary, many observed that not all face-to-face interactions are necessary either – some meetings can be handled well via Zoom.

On the whole, for work that involves acute focus with fewer interruptions (research and course development), most report that the benefits of remote work are compelling. In areas where human interactivity is key to performance – aspects of student development and collaborative work – remote work presented challenges. Given time, the university could learn to extend these benefits, where they make sense, and to focus on situations whereupon face-to-face interaction matters most. Of note is the observation that uniformly-available, quality broadband is a necessary predicate for any remote work success.

Impacts on Teaching and Learning

“Are there special challenges that have arisen with digital teaching, learning, advising, or hybridized activity that you did not anticipate or have been amplified with a year of experience?”

The broadest answer here is related to the nature of the faculty member's discipline and the predominant expectation, for both faculty and students, regarding modes of instructional delivery in that program. Any program already designed for online delivery presented fewer, if any, challenges for either the faculty or the students. However, for students and programs where expectations of on-campus experiences are greater, feedback on the outcomes of hybridization were mostly negative.

Perhaps measures designed to partially accommodate many interests has resulted in deficiencies for all, for a variety of reasons. In this regard, Hyflex was generally cast in the feedback received as a net failure with few exceptions. The motivations of Hyflex were not in doubt as much as the actual results of implementation. Most feedback suggested that Hyflex is fundamentally unworkable and should only be used as a last resort. Students, being generally very perceptive and smart, quickly learned that the availability of recorded lectures, coupled with a permissive stance, provided the basis for habits generally not conducive to success (E.g. disengagement, distraction, failure to complete work, and simply not attending). While lecture recordings and other tools meant to supplement student absences (planned, sanctioned, or

otherwise) are beneficial in legitimate use, these tools often promoted disengagement and absences. To wit, anecdotes suggest that a little as 5% of students remain committed to in-class attendance neared to the close of the semester. Student engagement was also difficult when faculty attention was divided between those in the on-campus classroom and those participating remotely. The overhead of this approach was frequently deemed as too costly whereby learning, and the assessment thereof, suffered.

While near-universal support for the IT's assistance and facilitation was expressed, some noted difficulties of a technical nature, for both students and faculty, while working from home. These appeared to be deficiencies related to equipment and connections on the remote side and not from the on-site side. Also, the overall novelty of technology use was noted as a challenge as these were not a normative part of classroom activities prior to the pandemic.

Regardless of previous modes of delivery, many important perspectives related to the mechanisms of learning surfaced in the feedback. For instance, the conduct of successful in-class discussion was a notable challenge. The efficacy of non-verbal communication was also an example of the limitations of the approach. It was also noted that both the professor's or student's immediate home environment was not always conducive to focused learning.

A lack of connectedness to students and between students was noted throughout the feedback received. Student responsiveness to faculty was noticeably lower, making engagement a challenge. Establishing the importance of academic dishonesty - forestalling it, and identifying it when it did occur - was of greater incidence and concern. These are all reflective of the need for a face-to-face option when the subject matter, the student, or the professor do best in that context.

Lastly, many reported issues related to work/life balance such that some faculty felt as though they were "always working" while at home. Others cited that the creation of mediated content required significant additional time and care due to the additional steps required in the creation of this content. This, in turn, created the need to develop new mechanisms for the assurance of learning. The stated concern is that the additional time required to adapt would not likely be accounted for in assessment of faculty productivity in areas outside of teaching, such as research.

Return from Remote

"Do you sense that as we return to increased face-to-face interaction (and the general assumption is that significantly more face-to-face interaction will exist in the fall semester), there will be hurdles created by a year of remote work? If that is the case, do you have suggestions about to make the transition most effective?"

Beyond the possibility of residual health and safety issues, most faculty feel that face-to-face is a well-understood normal mode of operations. Questions regarding how we will identify and capitalize on the positive aspects of remote work were of greater interest. Many suggested

that a predicate to a return to normal would be the proliferation and efficacy of ameliorations and abatements in response to COVID-19. As such, some intimated that predictions of a return to normal are just that.

However, if the 18-month period leading into Fall 2021 is considered as mostly lost time, several faculty proposed that it would be short-sighted to view time lost to COVID-19 as an aberration to quickly move past. Rather, directly or indirectly, many mentioned the need to take stock of lasting impacts of COVID-19 on faculty, staff, and students. This feedback appears to be consistent with the notion that our COVID-19 experience constitutes a collective “wound” on our community, whose healing pattern is not yet fully understood. There were fewer concrete recommendations beyond an expressed imperative to undertake processes of comprehension, rebuilding, and reflection in Fall 2021 and beyond.

Others have noted that we do not yet comprehend the degree to which COVID-19 may impact a student’s ability to complete subsequent upper-level coursework. Similarly, while some faculty report exceptional research productivity as a result of the circumstances of remote work, others experienced challenges. These all collectively underscore reservations that come faculty have expressed that a return to normal may be an apocryphal characterization of what a return in the Fall 2021 will be. Further, previous well-intentioned leniency may complicate a successful transition back to full campus engagement for both students and faculty. The adjustments may prove to be abrupt for both faculty and student and require a degree of care and support.

Many noted a shift in student expectations such that students have demonstrated increasing expectations of access to recordings of lectures they have missed. The stated concern is the risk that students will substitute real-time participation with these recordings. Even for those students who do participate in a real-time lecture, some faculty expressed concern for a behavior they characterized as “Zooming it in.” These behaviors have negative implications for student engagement and learning.

Notable feedback was a desire to see continued and uniform administrative support. It would appear that this desire is informed by the notion that any resumption of normal would be more of a process and not simply a declaration. The range of these concerns is reflected well in the following input:

“I think, most importantly, we need the support of administration. If faculty want or are forced to teach in-person, then they should be able to set the expectations for attendance, videos, etc., without administration pushing them to create more videos, Zoom, hybridize, etc. In the same vein, faculty need more consideration of the time it takes to constantly transition course content and modalities back-and-forth. We were told by administrators, several times last year, that we should have so much more time to focus on developing new programs and research agendas since we were all just sitting at home. This shows a real lack of support and understanding for the time and stress many of us experienced in trying to thoughtfully support our students and programs. This includes much more than just making videos - e.g., working with students who

need internet access, finding new practicum placements, redesigning contracts and experiences, contacting all students individually, setting up remote access, changing our research designs, etc. - not to mention the changes we were all experiencing at home and with families..."

While it is not perhaps entirely within the capability and purview for each of the issues above to be rectified by administration, these concerns are reflective of what faculty wish to have addressed and how they would like to be heard moving forward. The input from another colleague perhaps captures the best recommendation on how to proceed: *"...patience, and understanding that we are all doing our best to catch up..."* Another reflection reminds that the most vital consideration in any resumption of "normal" is our students: *"...students are alienated, struggling, unsupported, and exhausted."*

Community

"Do people in your respective groups miss the typical day-to-day interactions on the campus of West Texas A&M University? I have a bias that suggests people are social, and the limitation or diminishment of in-person interaction may have unintended and unpleasant consequences. Again, if a more standard set of day-to-day interactions are deemed valuable, are there some techniques or ideas that we might implement to facilitate a more productive return to the fall semester."

Whereas many of the previous sections are somewhat lengthy and expository, the simplest answer here is "yes." The feedback received asserts that the inherent and intrinsic value of the institution is social, intellectual, and discursive congress.

Some concern was expressed that predominant "yes" answer to this prompt would negate or pre-empt any attempt to realize the benefits of working from home, when and where it is effective. However, the resounding message evident in the feedback is that our community needs the richest aspects of interpersonal communication when and where context and connection must be created and renewed. Those in the greatest need of this connection are our students.

Since the pandemic has been comprehended and experienced from a variety of perspectives, there are no doubt a variety of beliefs and convictions about what returning to campus means. For instance, since gracious consideration was given to those who felt safer working from home, it is reasonable expect some resentment to have developed among those that were present on campus throughout the pandemic versus those who were not. This is particularly so in cases where on-campus tasks would have disproportionately fallen upon who were on campus versus those who were remote. This division, and any accompanying recrimination, is counterproductive to the achievement of our goal to renew and sustain the strength of the institution.

Continuity

“Thinking back to the ideas of citizenship from each of your respective constituencies, are there things that faculty, staff, students, and administration might do as groups that could be unique to each in support of all?”

The feedback on the matter is arguably divergent. Some suggest that a vigorous resumption of face-to-face activities will hasten our ability to establish/resume normalcy. This perspective suggests that the compromises undertaken during the pandemic will do too much harm if protracted. In counterpoint, others have advocated for a slower pace to take stock of the full extent of the impacts and consequences of the University’s response to the pandemic. These voices feel that a return to normal could become an ordained fiat accomplished as opposed to an emergent process of comprehension. Others have expressed doubt whether a return to pre-COVID-19 campus is feasible.

A greater proportion of feedback favored the “let’s take it slow” approach and some likened the process as being akin to injury recovery. Embedded in this metaphor is the need to adjust expectations, undertake a progressive recalibration of success criteria, and to identify bounded periods for understanding and support. The “bounding” is suggested to separate need for accommodation from any opportunities to abuse these accommodations.

An approach to a successful return may simply be to take advantage of being together; to explore the impacts of what transpired and to simply hear from each other. Much as these prompts can be construed as ethnographic in nature, we have an opportunity to engage in a comprehensive effort to explicitly share our stories and document any wisdom that emerges. This is an opportunity to heal in the aftermath of crisis in equal measures of celebration, mourning, reflection, and adjustment. As there are measurable and immeasurable costs associated with the COVID-19 experience, we would do well to discuss them.

Conclusion

The voices of support, hope, and concern for our collective wellbeing were abundant. While a discernable sense of uncertainty and caution exists throughout the feedback, these sentiments are matched with expressions of renewed commitment to our students and their overall wellbeing. The prompts for reflection on Fall 2021 were both necessary and welcomed. Faculty feedback reveals equal measures of hope and vigilance in the path ahead. Many have expressed full comprehension of why we are here: to provide a community of inquiry, and an opportunity to individuals to flourish in an environment designed to promote growth, innovation, and insight. Feedback suggests that faculty relish a resumption of the richest expressions of our community: the development and success of our students, and the renewal of the community we mutually construct for that purpose. Questions related to working from home, productivity, and community health constitute a complex bundle for which there are few quick answers. As such, a significant aspect of the feedback was the recommendation that we engage in collective and dialogical comprehension, caring, and reconciliation. There is a desire to better understand what we are returning from in order to understand what we are returning to.

We again express our gratitude for the opportunity to provide input and otherwise participate in the necessary process of renewing the strengths of our university and community.

Sincerely,

WTAMU Faculty Senate