"I Gave it All, Who Gave it to Me?" A Qualitative Study of Challenges Experienced by Faculty During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic catalysed unprecedented shifts in higher education worldwide, prompting a reevaluation of teaching and learning practices amidst the backdrop of sustainability imperatives. This editorial synthesizes diverse scholarly contributions exploring the intersectionality of COVID-19, sustainability, and higher education. Amidst ongoing global grappling for a "new normal," this special issue poses a central question: How has higher education responded to sustainability amid the pandemic? Reflecting on institutional responses, the collection illuminates both challenges and opportunities in fostering sustainable futures. Themes of technological integration, social sustainability, and policy implications emerge, underlining the need for adaptive pedagogies and community-centered approaches. As higher education navigates this transformative era, the editorial calls for sustained innovation and a commitment to nurturing resilient, inclusive, and environmentally conscious learning environments.

Citation

Introduction

More than three years have elapsed since the World Health Organization (WHO) announced COVID-19 as a pandemic on March 11, 2020 (WHO, 2020). In the past several years, the pandemic was rampant globally, relentlessly leaving nothing unchanged. As reported, the educational routine of 1.6 billion students in 166 countries worldwide was disrupted by the closure of schools (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, n.d.; United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund, 2020) and millions of teachers were impacted on parallel (IESALC-UNESCO, 2020).

In early 2022, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and Dr. Fauci, President Biden's chief medical adviser, declared that the U.S. was slowly transitioning from a full-blown pandemic to an endemic state (Public Broadcasting Service, 2022). According to the estimate of the College Crisis Initiative at Davidson College, 90% of colleges resumed in-person classes in the spring of 2022 (InsideHigherEd, 2022). Despite no concrete statistics, it is postulated that in 2023, universities and institutions worldwide have returned to a "normal" state. It may be a legitimate claim that the worst of the pandemic appears to be a part of history. Yet the impacts of the pandemic would not vanish within a short term (Karakose, 2021). The aftereffects of this historical crisis are projected to linger for years (Taylor & Frechette, 2022). In this sense, it undoubtedly merits unraveling those effects and making sense of their workings in terms of how they might unfold and impose influences on teaching and learning in higher education in the post-pandemic era.

Defending on the frontline, higher education faculty have been going through a lengthy, grinding time during the pandemic. Research extensively documents that faculty wrestled with numerous pedagogical, professional, personal, and mental challenges and hardships (e.g., Neuwirth et al., 2021; Watermeyer et al., 2021). However, most of the relevant studies focused on presenting what those difficulties were and offering solutions. Scarce are the scholarly efforts to unmask the underpinning causes of faculty's challenging experiences and extend the vision beyond the pandemic to elucidate how the lessons 'taught' by the pandemic could be applied post-pandemic.

The stake of failure to make such endeavors likely perpetuates the undesirable aftereffects of the pandemic and allows them to persist and cause ongoing damage to the higher education community in the post-pandemic era. In light of the literature gap, the present research seeks to reveal the consequential difficulties faced by the faculty during the pandemic and understand whether and how those pertinent experiences were tied to specific deeply ingrained issues.

Literature

Obstacles in Transition and Online-Teaching

Confronted with what was perceived as the largest disruption of the education systems in the history (United Nations, 2020a), institutions around the globe underwent what was termed as rapid online migration (Watermeyer et al., 2021) in the wake of the outbreak of the pandemic (Basilaia & Kvavadze, 2020). Transferring the courses to online settings within a short span posed a tough task for educational organizations (Wu, 2020). Those faculty unfamiliar with technology had to first learn technological basics and then familiarize themselves with the technological infrastructure governing the instructional design, course management, pedagogical tools, and other educational features (Neuwirth et al., 2021). Upon developing requisite skills for setting up the system, instructors then needed to move to adjust their course designs and teaching curriculum, align the learning objectives with the unpredictable contexts, and support and accommodate students' learning (Beaunoyer et al., 2020; Neuwirth et al., 2021), all of which demand time, skills, and knowledge specific to online education (Keengwe & Kidd, 2010). Academics reported spending twice as much time designing online courses as they did with traditional teaching due to limited digital literacy and scant time for self-education (Almazova et al., 2020). Besides, faculty noted difficulties in modifying their pedagogy to respond to circumstances where students' internet access was unstable, personal needs were fluctuating, and directives from institution and/or government were unclear (Eisenbach et al., 2020). Even after having altered major components of a course such as assessment and learning outcomes, which was burdensome in and of itself, many faculty came to frustratingly find themselves stuck in the negotiations with already overwhelmed students who resisted the changes to assignments and class activities (Neuwirth et al., 2021). That university instructors in general are short of pedagogical content knowledge (Shulman, 1987) geared toward online-teaching has long been a problem (Ching et al., 2018; Kali et al., 2011), and the COVID-19 pandemic came to unmask and compound this situation.

Additional Emotional Labor

Apart from the extra workload involved in transition to online education and then undertaking regular duties (e.g., grading students' assignment, providing timely feedback, encouraging students to practice self-discipline and plan strategically; Almazova et al., 2020), faculty carried out additional labor that tends to be invisible but crucial—emotional labor. In the context of the pandemic, emotional labor represents listening to and caring about students' various concerns, be them lowered motivation toward learning, health risks of family members, food insecurity, financial strain, as well as disturbed mental state such as anxiety, trepidation, helplessness (Augar & Formentin, 2021). Watermeyer et al. (2021) identified a marked increase in cases where students came to the faculty to seek mental health assistance during the pandemic. Prior to the pandemic, emotional labor constitutes a substantial segment of teaching (Bellas, 1999) as it is an emotion-laden occupation heavily involving interaction with students featuring repetitiveness and intensity over a long time (Wrobel, 2013). At the times of uncertainty, the emotional dimension of

faculty's work stood out. While students had faculty as a source of mental reinvigoration, faculty may have had nobody to recharge themselves during the pandemic (Neuwirth et al., 2021).

McClenahan et al. (2007) argued that the largest single contributor of faculty burnout is the overall workload. Faculty indicated being less productive across all areas of their job due to the mounting work demands emerged during the pandemic (Taylor & Frechette, 2022). Challenges inclusive of low motivation and energy, agitation, depression, sadness, and impaired sleep patterns were what faculty commonly reported experiencing during the pandemic, particularly at the onset of the transition to onlineteaching (Fawaz & Samaha, 2021). Moreover, the pandemic made working from home prevalent. For academics, a profession having the proclivity of compulsive working (Gornall & Sa, 2012), the blurry boundary between work and life may contribute to excessive working, which may rattle the work-life balance and put faculty's wellbeing at stake (Watermeyer et al., 2021).

Disparity in Effects of the Pandemic: Inequalities

The CDC (2020) discovered that health-related indices such as exposure to the virus, illness, hospitalization, and death resulting from COVID-19 were higher among racial and ethnic minority groups. It was primarily the women who borne the brunt of unpaid childcare after the shutdown of schools and community childcare service (United Nations, 2020b). Disparities also existed among faculty in terms of the extent of being affected by the pandemic. Before the pandemic, women faculty tend to shoulder more burdens of helping students deal with stress and insecurities than men colleagues (El-Alayli et al., 2018). The differences in this nurturance demand were assumed to grow even larger during the pandemic due to women, particularly those who are black, indigenous, (or) people of color, having to perform more emotional labor (Berheide et al., 2022). Besides, faculty with a lower rank and less years of experience is more likely to be subject to burnout (Li et al., 2013). It is presupposed that faculty who are female, people of color, untenured, or having fewer years of employment had more challenging experiences.

Throughout the pandemic, faculty navigated numerous adversities, ranging from transitioning from in-person to online education, maintaining standards of pedagogy, performing extra emotional labor, coping with predicaments in personal life. Higher education faculty just "survived" an exacting time. It appears that the pandemic is over, yet those issues unmasked or amplified by the pandemic are far from being addressed. The aftereffects of faculty's experiences will inevitably persist (Karakose, 2021) and continue to bear on higher education in the post-pandemic era. It points out the need to conduct research that dives into faculty's distressing experiences and explores what undergirded the encountered challenges. Hence, by taking advantage of the 'opportunities' created by the COVID-19 pandemic that foregrounded certain fundamental problems not that visible in normal times, the study intended to bring to light the crucial narratives of the faculty, elucidating specifics and root causes of their difficult experiences during the pandemic and envision what to do to leverage those experiences in the post-pandemic era for the best interest of higher education faculty.

Method

The current study adopted a phenomenological approach to probe the experiences of higher education faculty during the COVID-19 pandemic. At the core of phenomenology is to portray and make sense of phenomena of humans (Wojnar & Swanson, 2007) and arrive at its essence (Sadala & Adorno, 2002). It is a methodological tool specialized in fine-grained examination of human experience. This feature facilitates our unraveling and making sense of the hardships faculty encountered in an in-depth fashion.

Sampling and Recruitment

The present study was part of a larger design-based research (DBR, Cobb et al., 2003) project that aimed to explore the role of positionality of pre-service teachers and instructors in the college of education. Originally, the study was not designed within the larger project. However, the COVID-19 occurred unexpectedly at the onset of the project (Spring 2020) and the DBR research team noticed that instructors made constant reflections on the impact of the move to remote learning. That led the present authorship team to conceive of the current study in an effort to make sense of their relevant experiences. Despite the faculty's positionality being the foci of the project, the present study did little to explore positionality; instead, it was largely concerned with faculty's experiences during the pandemic. The project was approved by the institutional review board at the university the first author was affiliated with at the time of writing this manuscript. This university is both a Hispanic-Serving Institution (HIS) and a Majority-Minority Serving Institution (MSI), and is in a metropolitan in the Southwest region of the U.S.

Data were collected in two phases. The first phase took place in June 2021. The first author conducted semi-structured interviews with four faculty respectively. In addition to offering preliminary data, the four interviews served to supply feedback on the interview protocol and the professionality of interview skills of the first author. The second phase spanned from September to December 2021. The recruitment was implemented through two avenues. The department administrator emailed out the flyer to all faculty of college of education including tenure, non-tenure, lecturer, adjunct, and teaching fellow, and the research team posted the flyers in the building of college of education. The eligibility for participation primarily rested upon two criteria—having taught at least one course, regardless of modality, between Spring 2020 and Summer 2021, and being willing to share how the pandemic shaped the teaching experience and perceptions of teacher role, practices, course design, etc. In this phase, ten faculty reached out and all of them met the inclusion criteria. The final sample ended up with 14 faculty in total. Once they signed and returned the informed consent, an interview was scheduled.

The current research drew upon the interview protocol refinement (IPR) framework (Castillo-Montoya, 2016) to formulate the interview protocol. This framework outlines specific steps for crafting an interview protocol, which encompasses aligning the devised interview questions with the research questions, constructing an inquiry-based conversation, and collecting feedback. Predicated on the pertinent literature and research goal, we asked participants such questions as

"What were the specific challenges, difficulties, and barriers you encountered as a faculty member during the COVID-19", "What did you think cause these challenges?", "What aspects of your teaching were influenced by the pandemic?". We revised the protocol several times based on the feedback of the research team to ensure that interview questions were as less ambiguous and biased as possible.

Data Collection and Analysis

All interviews were one-on-one, semi-structured, and audio-recorded. The first author conducted all interviews. Each interview lasted approximately 60 minutes. Two faculty chose to meet face-to-face, and the rest opted to meet online over the Zoom teleconferencing platform. At the beginning of each interview, the interviewer briefed the respondents on the procedure of the interview and their rights (e.g., stop the interview and withdraw the research) as well as highlighted the measures to ensure confidentiality. The interviewer started audio-recording the meeting once the respondent consented verbally again. At the conclusion of the interview, the respondent completed a short survey collecting information regarding their demographics and the courses they taught from Spring 2020 to Summer 2021. Within two days after the interview, participants were rewarded with a $25 e-gift card for participating in the research.

Interviews were transcribed verbatim by the first and second authors. Subsequently thematic analysis was performed for coding the data. Thematic analysis is a tool to systematically identify, organize, and analyze the commonalities and patterns across data (Braun & Clarke, 2012; Braun & Clark, 2006). Despite the variations in faculty's experienced difficulties throughout the pandemic, we presupposed that hardships faculty faced overlapped in critical ways, which rendered the thematic analysis workable. Via conducting thematic analysis in a consistently reflexive and thoughtful manner, the goal is to work out a meaningful and complete story about the research topic (Braun & Clarke, 2021). The six analytical phases spelled out by Braun and Clark (2006) were implemented. First, the transcripts were read several times to have a "taste" of the data. Then, every data item perceived as having relevance, irrespective of low or high, to the researched phenomenon was coded. Items that were connected or shared meanings or features were grouped together to form codes. Next, the codes that reflected similar and/or coherent patterns were recognized and clustered ~~them~~ to develop temporary themes. Afterwards, the quality of each provisional theme was evaluated by scrutinizing how much data backed up a given theme and whether a theme was robust in reflecting vital aspects of faculty's plights during the pandemic. The final two steps were naming finalized themes and reporting findings.

Participants

Most of the sample were female and White. The years of teaching in higher education ranged from 1 to 34. The numbers of courses they taught from spring 2020 until summer 2021 were divergent, ranging from 1 to 17. When it comes to teaching format, Zoom or other digital platforms were predominant, followed by internet asynchronous. All but one participant taught either all required or a mix of required and elective courses. Out of the sample, eight are either tenure-track or tenured professors, four lecturers of varying ranks, and two adjunct faculty (see Table 1 for details).

Table 1.

Sample Demographics and Courses Information

	Pseudonym	Gender	Race/Ethnicity	Years of Teaching at Higher Ed	Course load During Covid*	Format of the Courses**	Nature of the Courses	Academic Status
1	Chinh	Female	Asian	8	11	A, B, C, D	All Required	Assistant Tenure-Track Professor
2	Pele	Female	Asian	14	1	B, D	All Required	Assistant Tenure-Track Professor
3	Rose	--	White	19	8	B, D	All Required	Senior lecturer
4	Tyler	Female	White	1	1	C	All Required	Adjunct Faculty
5	Ann	Female	White	32	3	B	All Required	Tenured Professor
6	Robertson	Male	White	20	17	A, D	All Elective	Lecturer
7	Matthew	Male	White	34	8	B, D	A Combination of Required and Elective	Tenured Professor
8	Contadina	Male	White	9	6	B, D	A Combination of Required and Elective	Associate Tenure-Track Professor
9	Sarah	Female	White	1	6	B	All Required	Adjunct Faculty
10	Rebecca	Female	White	5	5	B, C, D	All Required	Assistant Tenure-Track Professor
11	Teo (author 3)	Non-Binary Femme	White	4	5	B	A Combination of Required and Elective	Assistant Tenure-Track Professor
12	Duck	Female	Black	More than 10	4	B	A Combination of Required and Elective	Tenured Lecturer
13	Rosa	Female	Latina	4	6	B, D	All Required	Assistant Tenure-Track Professor

14	Patricia	Female	White	6	14	B, D	All Required	Senior Lecturer

Note. *It refers to the total number of courses taught from Spring 2020 to Summer 2021. **A=Face-to-Face, B=Zoom or other digital spaces, C=Hybrid face-to-face and digital spaces, D=Internet asynchronous.
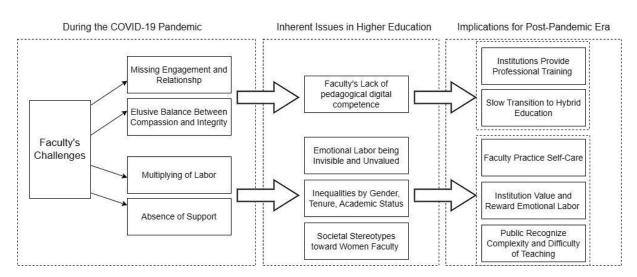
Measures to Improve the Research's Trustworthiness

In a recursive analytical process, authors took multiple measures to enhance the rigor and quality of the research. Reflexivity was practiced extensively by reflecting upon how our own positions and experiences shaped our choices and behaviors during the research and the ensuing findings (Braun & Clark, 2021). Regular meetings were held among three authors to discuss and evaluate critical matters such as the rationality of codes, the coherence of groupings, and the representativeness of the codes and themes for the corresponding data segment. The ongoing findings were periodically shared with the team members of the main research group, inviting them to identify counter-stories, propose alternative ways of sensemaking, and offer feedback on how we conducted ourselves in coding and developing themes. Given that the third author of the present paper served as a participating faculty member who probably has some knowledge of other participants, all data was anonymized with participant-chosen pseudonyms before making it accessible to this author, and the transcript of the interview with the third author was coded only by the first and second authors.

Results

Four themes were constructed—missing engagement and relationships; elusive balance between compassion and integrity; multiplying of labor; and absence of support (Figure 1). We used the term "constructed" to acknowledge that those themes did not emerge by themselves such that the authors played an agentic role in making sense of the data by drawing upon their background knowledge, schemas, and research interest (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Four themes not only capture the hardships the participating faculty dealt with during the pandemic but also illuminate where improvements can be made by the higher education community to gear faculty up to navigate teaching and other professional work more productively in the post-pandemic era.

Figure 1.
The Effect of COVID-19

Missing Engagement and Relationships

The first challenge prevalently experienced by most participants during the pandemic was the struggle of engaging students, particularly when teaching virtually. Ann reported that her students worked a lot of hours at the expense of class. Matthew asserted that "the pandemic was a huge disruption to students' lives.". Students were being forced to be confined at home (Leite et al., 2020), undertaking the responsibilities of attending to children, elders, or siblings (Public Broadcasting Service, 2020), and dealing with loneliness, despair, and loss (Khan, 2021). These strains evoked by COVID-19 compromised students' agency and impetus for learning and shifted students' priorities from learning and schoolwork to matters around livelihood. Consequently, the motivation to attend class decreased.

Even when students came to the class (physically or virtually), faculty noticed the lowered level of students' participation. This problem was more pronounced in virtual settings. A body of research substantiated that an intractable task of online teaching was to arouse student engagement and in-class interaction (Almazova et al., 2020; Bailey & Lee, 2020; Bao, 2020); and supervision and interaction with all students in online setting at the same time was all but impossible (Le et al., 2022). "People really weren't having their cameras turned on; people's energy felt low, and my energy felt low," Rebecca recalled. Sarah could relate to this challenge: "It was difficult to measure student engagement…students were able to keep camera off, and some students reported that they were doing 2-3 other things during class". While there may be valid reasons for turning off the camera, this act eliminates or minimizes numerous interpersonal facets of communication such as postural responses and adjustment, facial expressions, and emotional tones (Neuwirth et al., 2021). The absence of those elements pares down the psychological engagement and interactivity of online learning (Codreanu & Celik, 2013). Duck mentioned a similar concern: "[Online teaching] was not much a challenge once you get used to it, but it just didn't feel authentic when teaching subject matters where we do a lot of reflective work. Environment and atmosphere matter a lot for people to open up.". The accounts of these faculty reflected the difficulty of stimulating consistent student engagement during the pandemic. It was unsurprising that Berheide et al. (2022) found that the burden of speaking 'to the void' in front of a screen was perceived by the faculty as the most distressing psychological aspect of online teaching.

The faculty also spoke about the challenge of forming relationships with students during the COVID-19. Teo (the third author as a participant) indicated that "Zoom can feel more constrained, fewer opportunities for informal relationship building." Glass (2017) contended that faculty's valued social roles are among the determinants of their attitudes toward online education. The sample was the faculty of the college of education who are cognizant of the prominence of forming and sustaining interpersonal relationships. Thus, the participating faculty invested themselves in infusing interactional and relational elements into their pedagogical practices to facilitate students' learning and attend to their relational and emotional needs (Ferri et al., 2020). However, online delivery was a novel adventure for some instructors and the abrupt transition from in-person to online environment left them insufficient time to discover and utilize the affordances of digital platforms. Prior studies have confirmed that teachers' low digital literacy is a major obstacle

impeding interaction (Gillett-Swan, 2017). Self-efficacy and readiness to teach online also affect teachers' success in organizing online-teaching activities (Downing & Dyment, 2013). In this sense, the resultant unfamiliarity with instrumental tools of online environment, in conjunction with other undesirable conditions, (e.g., inconsistent attendance, low engagement and interaction) thwarted the building of relationship. The frustration experienced by faculty members, who highly treasure the relational component of teaching and learning, stems from the fact that they were adept at establishing productive relationship with students at ordinary times before the pandemic but found it tremendously hard to manage to do so during the pandemic.

Elusive Balance Between Compassion and Integrity

Some participating faculty referenced a quandary in which they offered students compassion and flexibility while being strict with them. Patricia confessed that "this is an area of extreme confusion for me because I don't know where the line is—the line between compassion for students and their circumstances and the integrity of the course and the quality of work.". While committed to the same standard for her teaching during the pandemic, Patricia was rather perplexed by to what extent she ought to maintain or change the standard for her students. Contadina also shared that "I think keeping standards there but also being flexible is kind of a tough balance to have.".

Some faculty in the study reported they were latching onto the standards they set for students. Tyler reported, "I have not lowered my expectations for achievement for the students but lowered what I expect a class to look like or how I expect a class to behave." This corresponds to the study (Panadero et al., 2022) in which university teachers were found to maintain the pre-lockdown instructional goals. The pandemic, however, compelled faculty to rethink related decisions in that students' physical and mental health were at stake (Leite et al., 2020) and the lives of some students were disrupted to the point that accomplishing predetermined learning objectives proved unrealistic. Yet, variabilities existed in students' experiences such that not everyone struggled and some fared well during the pandemic (Beaunoyer et al., 2020). Rebecca recounted that some "students weren't in such a fragile place and they wanted the instructor to stick with the standard.". In the case where students' attitudes, passions, and abilities around learning to meet course objectives diverged during the pandemic, tension arose for faculty to reconcile students' needs at both individual and collective levels.

On the other hand, the respondents were conscious of the necessity of demarcating how far they went in accommodating students, as placing few limits would likely backfire and set the class up for failure for some students. Robertson asserted that "if you set your expectations too low, you're not doing them any favors. On the contrary you're actually doing them a disservice". Faculty realized that, regardless of the situation students were in, some degrees of structuredness had to remain in place. According to McMurtrie (2016), in the case of unprecedented strain, relying on technology to teach begs the question as online assessment is fraught with uncertainty and generates significant ethical and moral dilemmas. Hence, the real conundrum for the faculty lies in pinpointing that 'sweet spot' in the dilemma tangling both compassion and integrity given the complication that the pandemic impacted students differentially and their momentum and commitment to learning varied widely.

Multiplying of Labor

Another common hardship unveiled by the participants was the intensification of their workload during the pandemic. When referencing teaching three courses online in the summer 2020, Chinh delineated, "It was so bad, and it was exhausting.". Pele recalled that, "You're going to grant some people extensions; you're going to checking in with some students one on one anyway. That's very typical but it (the work) was magnified I think probably at least tenfold so yeah.". Pele's workload soared as she noticed and attended to students' growing needs for support. Rosa remarked, "The differences, instead of dealing with one student who maybe has this issue, now I'm dealing with a classroom full of students. Right. And not only a classroom of students, but their contexts are different, right?". In Rosa's class, students' cultural backgrounds and contextual needs were heterogeneous, thus, Rosa had to tailor assistance to accommodate students individually. Toward this end, she reported spending two weeks making numerous phone calls to locate community resources that corresponded to students' particular situations. Rose, a faculty member having extensive online teaching experience, noted she had to spend a considerable amount of time searching for the right material for teaching virtually. These faculty's experiences are in line with what the Chronicle of Higher Education (2020) reported that the faculty felt overwhelmed by the mounting workload during the early-phase of the pandemic. Faculty had to complete, within a limited time frame, the tasks inclusive of transferring courses online, navigating students' educational and emotional needs, and managing personal lives, which represents a typical form of heavy workload (Navarro et al., 2010).

Out of the increased workload, a tangible role added to faculty's traditional roles (i.e., instructor, designer, facilitator; Martin et al., 2018) during the pandemic was the pastoral role that served like a counselor whom students actively approached to discuss life challenges and concerns (Neuwirth et al., 2021) and seek mental health support (Watermeyer et al., 2020). Rosa's experiences attested to such role expansion. "As an educator who does care work right, who does mother work, who does mentor, who does you know, open my door to someone needs to come and cry (Rosa).". She had no issue of willingly providing active listening, empathy, and a shoulder to lean on for students. However, she admitted that the counselor role put an immense amount of labor on her. Her situation would be empathized by the respondents in Watermeyer et al.'s study (2020) who declared that serving as a "proxy counselor" while committing to other regular duties significantly stretched the workload. Teaching per se represents a type of emotional labor. During times like the pandemic, the need for emotional engagement of faculty elevated (Jones, 2023), yet the cost could rise concurrently in that being overloaded by excessive responsibilities and labor lead to overwhelming stress (Hurtado et al., 2012) and burnout (Gardner, 2012). Teo testified that "I've never been as tired as I was throughout 2020 and 2021.".

Absence of Support

The final theme, which manifested in only several participating faculty's narratives but took on the primacy for the study, is the lack of adequate support from the institution during COVID-19.

Patricia expressed the bewilderment – ″Sometimes I just thought to myself like how is it that I'm supposed to extend grace to all and it's not being given to me?″. A series of family emergencies occurred in a semester of 2021. Unfortunately, she was not permitted to leave to handle the fallout. She understood why the institution made such decisions. What was truly exasperating was the institution's responses to her situation that the institution did nothing beyond giving verbal consolation; it did not ask whether she needed a break or a teaching assistant. The sharp contrast between her dedication to teaching and her students, and the institution's lack of any substantive support saddened her. One reason that she opted not to verbalize the frustration may have to do with her status of being a non-tenure track faculty member. Per Schrecker (2012), untenured academics, out of the fear of reassessment and cessation of contracts, have more trepidation when confronted with unreasonable or harmful decisions by institutional authorities.

Rosa also experienced undertreatment. She disclosed that she, as an educator, felt overwhelmed by being scrutinized and pulled in multiple directions by people who demanded her attention, time, and energy. As presented in the theme of *multiplying of labor*, Rosa went out of her way to take on a great deal of invisible labor to support students academically and emotionally. However, the institution did nothing to put "pieces" back. Moreover, whenever she brought up her students' plights in the hope of gaining support and resources, colleagues oftentimes downplayed her requests and suggested her to focus on writing papers and publication. The institution's orientation that priorities grant application and publication was at odds with Rosa's envisioned mission of educators who should not be single-mindedly preoccupied with research-related causes but instead have equal commitments to teaching and service (Eagan & Garvey, 2015). What Rosa experienced could be perceived as role conflict and resource inadequacy (Cavanaugh, 2000; LePine et al., 2005), and such stressors threatened to detract faculty's working capacity (Rodell & Judge, 2009), which could further impact the job performance (Eagan & Garvey, 2015).

Discussion

It is not an overstatement that many faculty have borne the brunt of the impacts of the pandemic on higher education as they worked at the frontline. The current research laid bare some challenges faculty encountered throughout the pandemic and yielded four corresponding themes: missing engagement and relationship, elusive balance between compassion and integrity, multiplying of labor, and absence of support. The narratives of the participants shed light on the fact that countless educators, including the faculty in the current study, underwent a bumpy ride fraught with hardships during the COVID-19 pandemic. By zooming in on the themes, we came to realize that the first two themes largely represent predicaments faculty encountered on the dimension of pedagogy and teaching whilst the final two themes are more reflective of faculty's suffering on the occupational level (See figure 1). Accordingly, the ensuing section is divided into two parts. We make an argument that these themes are present beyond the pandemic-phase and represent deeper issues within education in the academy.

Call for Pedagogical Support

The difficulty to engage and connect with students in online setting has been widely documented by studies on the pandemic (e.g., Almazova et al., 2020; Bailey & Lee, 2020; Bao, 2020). The present study provides further evidence in this respect. In contrast, the ambiguity involved in reconciling rigor, integrity, compassion, and flexibility around teaching in an atypical time (e.g., COVID-19) was an understudied topic thus we constructed theme (i.e., *elusive balance between compassion and integrity*) with the intention to spark constructive conversations among higher education community. Factors such as students' undermined learning motivation, loss of energy, faculty's low familiarity with technology, and unstable internet connection obviously contributed to these two plights. On a deeper level, however, the first two themes in concert probably reflect a long-standing issue—the faculty's lack of pedagogical digital competence, a set of skills required in a new digital educational environment (Al-Hattami, 2020; Ching et al., 2018; Starkey, 2020). This competence can be regarded as pedagogical content knowledge (PCK; Shulman, 1986) in the context of online education. PCK renders the subject content teachable, accessible, and comprehensible to learners by representing knowledge in numerous illustrative forms (Shing et al., 2018). Traditional classroom spatially allows instructors to be in a good position for synchronously gauging to what extent students comprehend the presented information with students' output such as visual feedback, and to adjust the pacing and means of instruction accordingly. Many avenues for exchanging feedback became less operative in the virtual classrooms, which renders it challenging to conduct a timely assessment of students' participation, engagement, and performance (Neuwirth et al., 2021) as well as their personal development (Koumpouras & Helfgott, 2020). Per Almazova et al. (2020), traditional teaching competence does not guarantee the success of online teaching. Even with adequate subject knowledge, lacking PCK geared toward teaching online (or hybrid) still likely generates uncertainty towards the teaching effectiveness. The instructors' propensity to replicate in online setting their habitual instructional practices utilized for face-to-face teaching (Bozkurt et al., 2020; Van Heuvelen et al., 2020) could restrict the student-instructor interaction, which further leads to students' unfavorable perception of online learning and lowered learning satisfaction (Alqurshi, 2020).

Technological innovation is ushering in an era where online learning is in vogue in higher education around the world (Baber, 2020). Distance education will continuously be an integral part of education in the post-pandemic period (Banihashem et al., 2023) and hybrid (blended) education combining traditional face-to-face and online education is the trend (Fernandez-Batanero et al., 2022). Provided that most teachers including higher education faculty are short of adequate skills and experiences for designing and teaching courses in a blended format (Sharma & Shree, 2023), it is essential for institutions to step up and provide faculty professional development opportunities that equip them with a set of knowledge and skills for effectively conducting online teaching (Kebritchi et al., 2017). As Abdulrahim and Mabrouk (2020) contended that distance education has long been excluded from teacher training programs; the pandemic served as a reminder of how crucial it was to possess pedagogical competence geared toward teaching virtually for achieving positive learning outcomes (Houlden & Veletsianos, 2020). Plus, institutions need to ensure the system that runs online education has technological features (McGill & Klobas, 2009; Waheed et al., 2016) that can render online teaching easy to manage (Su & Guo, 2021).

Caution must be exercised while transitioning to the hybrid modality in the post-pandemic era. Despite the advantages of blended education (e.g., increased flexibility and autonomy), adapting to the different modalities and finding a balance could engender more workload and stress to faculty and put their well-being at stake (Banihashem et al., 2023). As Tesar (2020) suggests, the meaning we attached to the COVID-19 pandemic should be akin to an accelerator facilitating gradual changes toward a more organic integration of multiple teaching modalities for better outcomes of learning rather than viewing the pandemic as a radical modifier aiming for rapid transformation. It follows that policymakers of institutions slow down the process of integrating multiple modalities and implement strategic planning such that they consider faculty's teaching preference and competence, academic discipline, technological literacy, etc. (Saha et al., 2022) for constructing individualized, differentiated, yet equitable workload instead of designating faculty the identical responsibilities of online education (Glass, 2016).

Call for Occupational Support

In the context that faculty made more emotional investment in their work during the pandemic, the present research lends supportive evidence to the issue that emotional labor in higher education has been long rendered invisible and unimportant in the performance assessment and tenure evaluation (ElAlayli et al., 2018; Hanasono et al., 2019). Moreover, faculty differed by gender and academic status likely experience differential effects of extra emotional labor (Augar & Formentin, 2021).

In the current study, several untenured female faculty members reported performing extra emotional labor but receiving no credit. Gender inequalities reflected by slower career advancement, unequal workloads, and systemic gender biases are what women faculty have been long grappling with (Gruber et al., 2020). Gardner (2012) asserted that the absence of encouragement and appreciation from administrators was a leading factor for the decision of women faculty to depart the employed institutions. Per role congruity theory (Eagly & Karau, 2002), women are anticipated to perform normative socially constructed gender roles such that they promote warmth, facilitate harmony, and meet nurturance demands (Prentice & Carranza, 2002). Whereas men's generally higher status keeps them from having to assume equal "emotional work" across a wide range of occupations (Cottingham et al., 2015; Erickson & Ritter, 2001). In academia, those prescriptive notions, either externally imposed on or internalized by women faculty, could push them to undertake extra labor in helping alleviate students' stress and insecurities and offering more uncritical feedback so as to not be considered "harsh" (El-Alayli et al., 2018). During the pandemic, in which the need for emotional support became greater, women may feel more pressure to adhere to related social norms. Martinez (2022) found that many academic mothers felt high expectations of fulfilling job-related tasks by doing and thinking too much for others and too little for themselves; otherwise, they regarded themselves as failing. Nonetheless, for women faculty, those gendered stereotypes and biases likely result in workload inequalities (Moss-Racusin et al., 2012), cruel academic climate (Devine et al., 2017), and high sensitivity to burnout (Li et al., 2013). In addition to gender, being untenured may also cause faculty to take on extra workload. Tunguz (2016) found that untenured faculty engaged in more emotional labor than tenured colleagues, and tenured men faculty reported expending less emotional labor compared to untenured counterparts.

Connections to broader issues

By conducting in-depth interviews with faculty, the present study makes a case that the pandemic aggravated pre-existing inequalities that are deeply entrenched within the higher education system (De Welde & Stepnick, 2023; Griffin, 2019; Olsen et al., 2020; Sawyer & Waite, 2021). As such, faculty who are women, young, in lower academic status, have fewer years of professional experience are more likely to perform undervalued and unappreciated (i.e., invisible) emotional labor despite such labor mattered immensely for struggling students. Given that the aftereffects of the pandemic on higher education will be persisting in the next five years (Watermeyer et al., 2020), the continuity of students' need for emotional support and extra workload falling on the faculty's shoulders is conceivable. This signifies that, while being the educational guide, faculty will be expected to remain as a substantial source of mental reinvigoration for students in the years to come. Nevertheless, the disproportionate allocation of emotional (invisible) labor and other forms of inequalities would find ways to replicate themselves and bear on faculty, by varying degrees, in the post-pandemic era unless actions are taken simultaneously on multiple levels, be them individual, institutional, or societal. Thus, we propose the following implications for stakeholders who play a role in either sustaining or restraining faculty.

For faculty

Emotional labor can be classified into self-directed and other-directed (Pugliesi, 1999). While necessary to continue to perform other-directed emotional labor (e.g., providing emotional nurturance to students), equally important, if not more important, is to practice self-care regularly. We concur with Jone's (2023) advice of setting healthy boundaries with students, forsaking the idea of being a counselor, and referring students to mental health resources on campus when they call for mental assistance. Per Augar and Formentin (2021), some means to reduce "unpaid emotional labor" are volunteering less, attending fewer non-mandatory workshops, cutting down extra office hours and student supervision. But those approaches appear to not only blame instructors for attending to the needs of their students but also ignore the systemic issue that women and feminine-identified individuals are assumed to be 'natural' ones to undertake this much-needed work, yet such work does not merit formal means of validation by the academic system. We suggest faculty find a balance between self-directed and other-directed emotional labor to experience less burnout and more replenishment.

For institution

The end of the pandemic does not denote the cessation of emotional labor performed by faculty. Instead of continuing to downplay this type of labor, institutions need to validate the significance of this type of labor and take pragmatic measures to support and reward such invisible labor. First, it is vital that institutions recognize the impacts of gender, race, and other demographic characteristics on the disparities of emotional labor performed by faculty and understand how such disparities translate to various forms of inequalities in assessing faculty performance. With those pieces of knowledge, administrators are recommended to ask faculty to document the emotional labor they perform for students on their annual reports as well as in tenure and promotion portfolios (Gonzales & Griffin, 2020). The incorporation of emotional labor in rewarding and assessing faculty renders the overall evaluation more holistic (Berheide et al., 2023).

Teacher's work engages care, kindness, and emotionality. It is a personal choice regarding how emotionally available faculty are to students. This choice is tied to faculty's professional identity (Jones & Kessler, 2020). In this sense, once such labor is assimilated into one's professional identity, faculty, regardless of gender, tenure status, or rank, will feel more motivated and autonomous in undertaking emotional labor. It follows that institutions endeavor to create a supportive climate to normalize emotional work and call upon all faculty, especially those who are men, tenured, and/or white, to be involved and instill a caring spirit in their professional identity. Meanwhile, institutions need to relieve some faculty's emotional labor by making resources (e.g., mental health services) widely and transparently available to students (Berheide et al., 2022).

For public

Jones and Kessler (2020) argued that the need to realize teaching is such a complex and tough profession has never been more pronounced than it was during the COVID-19 era. Per Wrobel (2013), the public maintains that teachers, compared to other occupations, are supposed to be more kind, thoughtful, helpful, and experience less tiredness and irritation. In the post-pandemic era, such high expectations will presumably stand. Yet unless the general people discontinue to underestimate the sheer complexity of teaching and the workload involved, teachers, including higher education faculty, are still in a vulnerable position in terms of falling victim to the stereotypical ideology at a macro-level. Hence, it is central that the government and mass media provide public education advocating for teachers and illustrate their accomplishments and hardships during the pandemic as well as what their experiences meant for teaching and learning post-pandemic. This could help dispel misconceptions and prejudices the public holds toward teachers, promote their empathetic understanding, and ultimately create a macro environment hospitable for teachers.

Conclusions

Limitations

This research has several limitations worth noting. First, the study employed convenience sampling. All 14 participants were from the same college of education (three participants were employed in different institutions some time from Spring 2020 to Fall 2021). The sample size is relatively small; the low participation might be due to many faculty being overburdened by academic and personal responsibilities during the fall of 2021. There is a preponderance of females and Whites in the sample. It is suggested that future research recruits a larger sample having a balanced male-female ratio and a more diverse body of faculty from multiple colleges and institutions. Besides, the study may be subject to the social desirability effect. For various reasons, participants may opt to not thoroughly report the adversities they encountered during the pandemic. Other than taking measures to assure confidentiality and build a rapport with participants to derive the high-level of disclosure, reaching a comprehensive understanding of faculty's experiences also calls for conducting research of different types (i.e., quantitative, mixed method) and collecting data of multiple sources (e.g., students, colleagues). In analyzing the data, the authors did not differentiate faculty's challenges by course level (i.e., undergraduate and

graduate) and teaching modality (i.e., physically in-person, synchronous online, asynchronous online). Graduate students are found to be more self-motivated, such that learning online did not weaken their in-class interactivity and learning outcomes as much as it did with undergraduates (Gray & DiLoreto, 2016). Hence, whether and to what extent each challenge was relevant to a particular course level and/or modality was not explored. Finally, the study originally intended to understand how the COVID-19 pandemic and concurrent events (e.g., the 2020 presidential election, the Black Lives Matter Movement, and anti-Asian hate crime) impacted teaching. However, only a few interviews touched on those events. The insufficiency of applicable data did not allow for examining how those events other than the pandemic influenced academics' teaching practice.

Conclusion

Although the pandemic comes to an end (hopefully), what higher education faculty have experienced throughout the pandemic constitutes an unerasable part of history that merits narration, dissemination, and appreciation. The present study showcases that the hardships faculty encountered during the pandemic reflect crucial issues and deficits ingrained in higher education. Those conundrums imply that a great deal of work needs to be implemented on an ongoing basis to enhance faculty's competence to conduct hybrid education, rewarding and validating faculty's invisible, yet meaningful labor, advancing overall equality among all faculty. Only through turning faculty's challenging experiences during the pandemic into assets can bring the higher education community to a better place in the post-pandemic era.

Conflict of Interest

Acknowledgment

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