How Different Types of Learners Cope with the Sudden Transition to Distant Learning During COVID-19?

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Abstract

Almost every higher education institution is affected by COVID-19 due to the prompt shift to online learning. Countless students bear the brunt of those measures, while not everyone is impacted equally by the sudden transition to online learning because of their background and personal characteristics. This study explores the different responses of diverse students in online courses. More specifically, this paper focuses on how marginalized students deal with the course transition during the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, this paper seeks to understand what the challenges faced by those students are, and the factors contributing to these challenges. Guided by those questions, this literature seeks to enrich understanding of students' responses to the sudden transition to online learning during the crisis. It also offers some suggestions for higher education institutions to help students cope with the sudden transition and prepare them for further transition in the next semester.

Keywords: online learning, students' transition, COVID-19

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Introduction

The outbreak of coronavirus has forced American universities and colleges to lock down their campuses and transition to an online setting, including delivering instruction and providing services. Such measures have had a direct impact on students, both physically and emotionally. Marginalized students, especially, may suffer more and encounter more challenges due to the transition. For instance, they may have limited internet access in their houses or apartments, limited personal and quiet environment, lack of laptop, and financial constraints. Those challenges would exacerbate educational inequity.

There are already discussions about educational inequity and how to mitigate it. The 2020 historical trend report from the Pell Institute (Cahalan et al., 2020) showed that generally, a more selective higher education institution has fewer low-income undergraduate students. From 2000 to 2018, the gap in the average percentage of undergraduate students awarded federal grants between non-competitive institutions and the most competitive institutions increased from 45% to 53%. Massive open online courses (MOOCs) were viewed as a potential tool to provide more equal access to educational opportunities and to mitigate educational inequities. While MOOCs cannot provide the typical "college experience" by "the physical campus", they can be helpful options for higher education (Literat, 2015, p.10). Moreover, providing a hybrid of face-to-face and online courses would be a promising future direction.

However, now American universities are forced to transform into online courses overnight, and students are forced to leave campuses and complete their coursework online in their homes or apartments. Under such conditions, students are more vulnerable, especially marginalized students. Marginalized students are those experiencing “extreme and persistent disadvantage in education” (UNESCO, 2010, p.138). Their disadvantages could be caused by their socioeconomic level, race, cultural background, sexual orientation, and/or abilities (Ssemanda, 2016). They may struggle financially, physically, or academically. Slow and unstable internet connections, distracting home environments, and discrimination could all be challenges for marginalized students. Some might navigate the pandemic successfully, but generally, they are more likely to face more challenges than their peers. Hoover (2020) described the Internet problems faced by students from Thurgood Marshall Academy. After the school shutdown, low-income students had to bear a poor internet connection but also “competing priorities”, such as doing housework, babysitting, and being interrupted by their families when they have to stay at home (para.49). Meanwhile, racial injustice still hurts racial and ethnic minority groups. African and Asian Americans have reported to more racial slurs during COVID-19 (Ruiz, Horowitz, & Tamir, 2020). This racial stress may exacerbate mental-health concerns for minoritized students. Whereas, those students are culturally resistant to receive counseling, and higher education institutions lack “culturally competent mental-health providers” (Brown, 2020, para.15). Thus, students of color in this time face more challenges in their mental health while they cannot get help, which could further influence the learning outcomes. In terms of the current situation, this study addresses different types of learners’ reactions with a sudden transition to online learning in higher education during coronavirus, especially

marginalized students. By exploring this question, this paper aims to offer some suggestions to colleges and universities to better help students cope with the challenges of current and future online learning and the pandemic.

The following content first discusses university crises and college students' responses to those crises. Then, considering one major influence of COVID-19 is to force universities operating remotely, this paper addresses how the online environment increases inequality among students by inducing different strategies of action. To deal with those problems, the paper shifts to a successful case—Western Governor University to discuss how to build high-quality online courses. Unlike well-prepared online courses, the transition happened suddenly in the spring semester. Then the final part explores special challenges and suggestions of emergence remote teaching.

University Crises and Students' Response

Witte (1992) offered an Extended Parallel Process Model (EPPM) to study people's perceptions and behaviors when facing threats. In this model, Witte (1992) pointed out that after receiving a threat message, people would appraise the level of threat. If the perceived threat is low, they would not take action; if the perceived threat is high, people would further appraise their efficacy. Next, if they have high efficacy, they would adopt danger control processes and take strategies controlling the danger, otherwise, they would use fear control processes to "cope with their fear (defensive motivation) by engaging in maladaptive responses" (Witte, 1992, p.338). That is to say, the message of threat, perceived threat, and perceived efficacy affect people's reactions to threat. This model can be used to analyze students' responses toward the threat of university crises. Facing those crises, students would first

evaluate the level of risks caused by crises, then their efficacy. Based on their evaluation, they would adopt different crisis response mechanisms. Thus, to explore students' responses, it is necessary to define campus crises and examine factors that are related to students' evaluation of threat and their efficacy.

It is not uncommon for higher education to witness crises. Scholars have classified campus crises by different standards. Gigliotti (2017) identified five different crisis taxonomies of scholars. These taxonomies can be separated into two large categories: one is caused by the force majeure factors, such as natural disasters like the pandemic, and environment change, another is man-made disasters, such as active shooter events. Other than defining and classifying campus crises, increasing scholars are exploring students' responses. Students could have different reactions toward different campus crises.

Active shooting is one of the most discussed issues among man-made campus crises. After examining shooting incidents that happened at Virginia Tech and Northern Illinois University, Kaminski et al. (2010) found that the shootings increased students' fear of crime on campus including "fear of being [a] victim of crime" and "walking on campus after dark" at the University of South Carolina (p.95). Furthermore, students' demographic characteristics such as gender, race, and age would impact their fear of crime on campus. Among those students, females report low perceived self-capacity facing crises (Mulvey, 2018).

Similarly, when encountering natural disasters, students' experiences, the confidence in the university, concerns about disasters, and students' actual preparedness would impact their perceived preparedness and their reactions to institutional preparedness (Tkachuck, 2018). Compared to male students and non-

international students, Tkachuck (2018) also found that female students and international students report low preparedness and greater concern about natural disasters. Moreover, a focus group study about undergraduates at a southern university showed that participants expressed little concern, less fear and more confidence on influenza pandemics since they had experiences of those natural disasters, but they express more fear of campus violence since most of them were inexperienced (Davis, 2016).

Institutions and their employees responding appropriately would mitigate the impact of university crises. Better preparedness could ease students' fear and anxiety. Bear et al. (2014) claimed that students tend to rely on faculty and staff to understand what happened and how to react to those events, but students criticized institutions' responses for not understanding the risks that they faced which increased their anxiety. When it comes to specific campus safety policies, demographical factors like race, gender and age, "victimization, perceived self-capacity, fear of crime and perceived risk" would impact students' attitudes of universities' policies (Schafer et al., 2018, p.323). Students with victimization experience, lower self-capacity, higher fear of crime and perceived risk are expected to show more support of institutions' safety policies. Because female students, younger students and non-white students expressed more fearful and higher perceived risk, they would also be more supportive of campus safety policies (Schafer et al., 2018).

Accordingly, types of campus crises arise from different reactions of college students. Students reported fewer concerns and less preparedness for natural disasters, like influenza outbreaks, since they have more experiences, believe it would not likely happen to them, and trust that the university can handle the crises. Different students also have different evaluations of crises and self-efficacy, which further determine

their attitudes and behaviors to crises as well as to institutions' policies. Disadvantaged groups are more vulnerable to facing crises and rely more on institutional supports. Therefore, institutional supports could be valuable to eliminate gaps in students' responses processes.

However, the coronavirus is not like other natural disasters. It is a global pandemic and defined as a Public Health Emergency of International Concern by the World Health Organization (WHO). This virus only took around seven months to spread more than 12 million cases worldwide. Compared to other countries, America has the most case—more than 3.1 million. Worse, there are still no vaccines or effective medicines to prevent or cure COVID-19 (World Health Organization, 2020). As for the higher education institutions, they also did not experience such a global severe pandemic. Many students, faculty members and staff have been tested positive for COVID-19. Moreover, recently, the Trump administration force the university to reopen at the 2020 fall semester (Baker & Green, 2020). Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that in the fall semester, campus safety would be a huge concern for students. Marginalized college students, like females, African American students are more likely to report more fear as well as low level of self-efficacy toward campus crises. They may take fear control processes with maladaptive measures.

Furthermore, students also face the challenges of online learning. Unlike other universities crises, one particular challenge of coronavirus on American universities is that they have to transition to online instruction. Therefore, the next section discusses issues of online courses and how online learning increase inequality due to individual differences.

Students in Online Courses

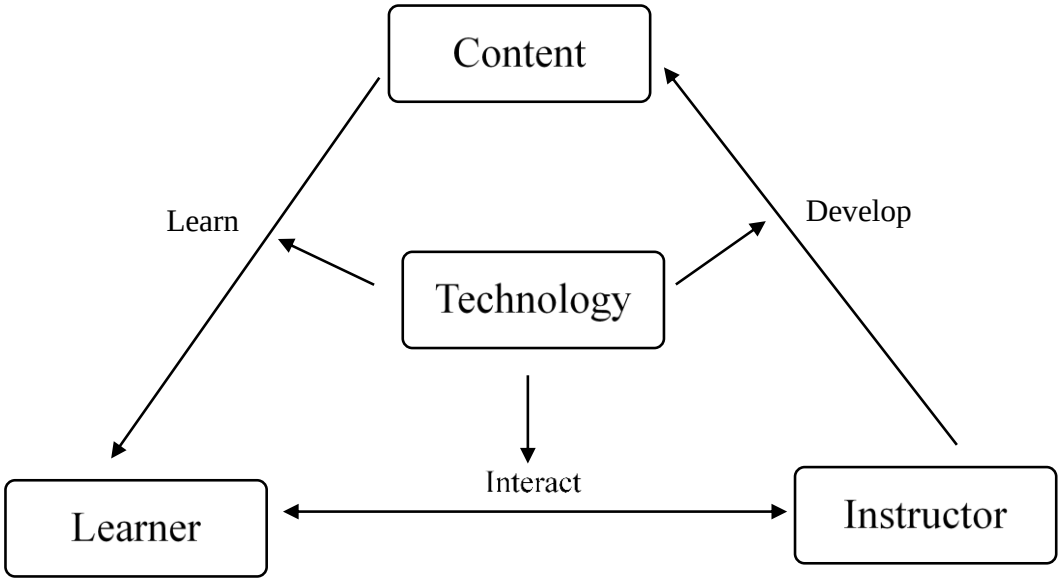
In addition to campus crises, online courses bring more challenges for students. For instance, it is easier to get distracted, students may be more vulnerable to technology problems, they have fewer immediate interactions with professors and classmates, and they may be more likely to be interrupted by their family or environment.

Issues of Online Courses

Learners, instructors, and content are three key issues determining the quality of online courses (Kebritchi et al., 2017). Learners' issues include their expectations before taking classes, readiness, sense of identity, and participation (Kebritchi et al., 2017). Learners' readiness includes "self-directed learning, motivation for learning, computer or internet self-efficacy, learner control, and online communication self-efficacy" (Hung et al., 2010, p.1080). The sense of identity is "a subjective sense of an invigorating sameness and continuity" (Erikson, 1968, p.19). Secondly, content issues are related to instructors' design of content, multimedia used to facilitate understanding and engagement, instructional strategies, and clarity of content development (Kebritchi et al., 2017). The instructors' issues consist of a change of faculty role in online courses, challenges that instructors faced when transferring from face-to-face to online, such as lacking clear guidance and expectations of online teaching, communication barriers, different focuses of online courses and face-to-face courses, lack of interests, more time and energy needed to develop online classes, and personal teaching styles (Kebritchi et al., 2017). Based on the study of a political science class in the University of Arkansans at Little Rock, Glazier (2016) found that an online rapport of faculty makes statistically difference in students' grades and retention rates. Moreover, the rapport of faculty has a greater impact on students' success than their demographic characteristics (Glazier, 2016).

These three issues plus technology have a combined impact on online courses. Figure 1 summarizes the key issues that affect online learning. Content, learners, and instructors are the three key components of online courses. Instructors are the people who design and develop content that is learned by learners. Those issues also interact together to determine the educational quality and outcomes of online courses. Learners interact with instructors in online courses. Apart from those three components, technology is the factor that impacts how instructors design their content, how learners learn from the content, and how learners interact with their instructors.

Figure 1



Inequality in Online Courses

Since online learning is more self-directed, learners' issues like socioeconomic status, individual differences would be more obvious that leads to various responses to online learnings and further causes increasing inequality. The digital divide is usually used in the discussion of digital inequity. The digital divide includes two aspects. One is the accessibility and sustainability of the Internet, requiring a stable

network and usable computer, which further defined as technology maintenance (DiMaggio et al., 2004; Gonzales, 2016). This aspect is related to socioeconomic status. Another aspect is related to cultural capital and cultural tool kits (Calarco, 2018; Petro et al., 2020). According to these two aspects, DiMaggio et al. (2004) pointed out five dimensions in analyzing inequality online— "technical means", "autonomy", "skill", "social support", and "purpose" (p.30-31). When students were on campuses, they have already faced differentiated technology maintenance. Some students own latest and high-quality laptops with plenty of software, while others may rely on library computers to finish their assignments. However, at least they can enjoy a stable network on campuses. Now, campuses are shuttered, students have to study on their home or departments. Some students face the challenges from technical means, both in hardware and connections. A survey in Arizona, California, and Colorado among lower-income Hispanic families showed that many lower-income families have connection problems, like under-connected, the constraint on devices and instability network. Hispanic immigrants suffer more from others in connections (Rideout & Katz, 2016). The accessibility of the Internet further impacts students' attitudes and skills, and then their learning outcomes. For those economically marginalized students with low-quality Internet, access is scared resources which forces them to be goal-oriented, restrict improvements on information-seeking skills and suffer from high emotional costs. Compared to privileged students, they are reported less satisfaction toward the Internet and worse learning outcomes (Robinson, 2009). Technology problems also induce different help-seeking strategies. Due to the lower sense of belonging of low-SES students, they are resistant to seek to help for their technology problems (Petro et al., 2020).

Moreover, the knowledge gap caused by information and culture leads to differences in skills, motivations and purposes of Internet use. Some students know what information they need and how to find the information, while other students are not. For instance, females showed less confidence than males in online skills (Hargittai, 2003, as cited in DiMaggio et al. 2004). A study showed that female students perform worse online in STEM courses than face-to-face courses because the online environment may invoke stereotype threat of female students, while older students would perform better online on STEM since they may be more suitable in self-direction courses (Wladis et al., 2015). African American female students showed that African American female students are more sensitive to fairness than their peers and feel frustrated in online collaboration. Those may affect their online collaboration and academic performances (Du et al., 2016).

Most studies related to online learning focus on how those four components affect students' academic performance and how to improve their performances. They usually use a uniform standard—GPA to evaluate learning outcomes. This assessment criterion is deficiency-oriented and outcome-oriented. The concept of this criterion tries to fulfill the goal that no matter the individual differences in abilities, family background, they would meet the uniform standard at a given time. This standard does not value progress and diversity, which could exacerbate inequity. Online learning relies more on students' self-direction and self-discipline. Therefore, when this standard is used to evaluate students' performance in online courses, the gap among students' abilities, motivations and performances is more obvious. Therefore, to solve the inequity, in addition to instructors' rapport, improved technology, and better content, higher education institutions should also reframe their perspectives on evaluation, on students' performance. Higher education institutions should hold

dynamic views students, focusing on the progress that students make during the courses.

Above all, technology maintenance as well as the knowledge leads to different behaviors in online courses, which further produce different academic performances. Thus, designing a high-quality online course is not enough to mitigate inequality. It is also important to identify individual differences. However, developing a high-quality online course is already harder than having a face-to-face course. As Xu and Jaggers (2013) said an online course requires more preparations for designing, developing and evaluating the courses and understanding students' requirements, which need more than six months. As an online university that stresses the competency-based model and facilitates plenty of marginalized students to graduate, Western Governor University (WGU) provides an example to study.

Western Governor University

Unlike traditional universities, Western Governor University is an online university with all programs online. Founded in 1997, Western Governors University offers "bachelor's and master's degrees in business, information technology, K-12 teacher education, and health professions" (Western Governors University, n.d., Four colleges, one purpose). A distinguished innovation of this university is to establish a competency-based education (CBE) model in an online setting. Competencies, rather than credit hours are the cores of curriculums; performance, rather than grades are the criteria of assessment (Kinser, 2007). Moreover, the Western Governor University model is an advanced competency-based education with "end-of-program competencies" (Nodine, 2016, p.7). This is a student-centered model that allows students to study at their own pace and direct their own learning process. Such a

model is especially suitable for online learning which relies more on students themselves to explore and understand the content.

Two key issues are important in supporting this competency-based education model. The first is the faculty. Faculties' professional knowledge as well as their curriculum design, rapport, and evaluation guide students' learning and integrating what they learn in classes. WGU disaggregates those faculty roles into three different faculty members. WGU does not classify faculty members by their ranks; instead, it classifies them by their functions. There are three types of faculty members in WGU: program mentors, course instructors and evaluators (Jones-Schenk, 2014). Course instructors are responsible for designing courses with their professional knowledge and helping students master the skills and content of special courses. Each student also has a program mentor. Focusing on the big picture rather than one course, mentors guide students from their enrollment to graduation by weekly communication. They help to identify students' strengths and needs and develop personalized plans for students. Meanwhile, evaluators assess students' performances and provide feedback to help students make progress. Besides, the assessment of students' performance is also a critical part of the competency-based education model. WGU provides a comprehensive assessment system, combing formative assessments and summative assessments. The formative assessments are the timely feedback on students' progress by identifying what students already know and what they still need to learn; while the summative assessments are the confirmation and summary of students' competencies on the certain level so that they can move to next competency or graduate (Pace, 2013; Gervais, 2016). Before entering into programs and each course, students in WGU have an assessment to measure their competencies. Then, at

the end of courses or programs, they have a summative assessment to demonstrate their mastery of the content and skills (DeMark, 2016).

Free from the burden of spending on facilities and buildings, the WGU's model stresses investment on human resources. Compared to the traditional model, this model is low cost. Facing tight finance, and challenges from the pandemic and online instruction, higher education institutions can learn from this competency-based model to provide better online courses while reducing the cost. Since this model is a low cost, marginalized students can also benefit from it with lower tuition fees. Moreover, the competency-based model is student-centered, so that faculty play a more proactive and careful role in learning students' needs and helping students make progress. Therefore, marginalized students' needs could also be valued even though they may be reluctant to express their requirements actively. It is hard for traditional universities to copy this model immediately since this model needs plenty of pre-prior investments in training faculty members and designing courses. However, universities and colleges can learn from such a model to reflect the essence of education and the faculty's responsibilities. On the other hand, this model is more suitable for those market-oriented and applied disciplines. As for basic science, universities should be cautious about the assessment criteria. In conclusion, a high-quality and equality online course requires better preparation of instruction, assessment standards, and relevant support systems to meet various needs.

However, a sudden transition to online learning during the pandemic does not provide the university with much time to prepare. Thus, some scholars turn to use emergency remote teaching (ERT) to discuss the current challenges that universities face.

Emergency Remote Teaching

According to Hodges et al. (2020), remote emergency learning "is a temporary shift of instructional delivery to an alternate delivery model due to crisis circumstances" (p.6). They argued that the difference between face-to-face and online courses is that face-to-face instruction has an ecosystem to support students' learning, such as the library, reliable internet connection on campus, student services. This ecosystem needs plenty of time and energy to build. A well-prepared online course needs more than six months to prepare. However, suddenly transition to online teaching, which is ERT, does not provide time for universities, instructors and students to prepare. They further stated that the CIPP model is more suitable to evaluate ERT. CIPP model includes evaluations on context, input, process and product of ERT (Hodges et al., 2020). Bozkurt and Sharma (2020) further indicated that instead of content, emotions and feelings are the most impressive that students will remember after the ERT. Thus, building communities to show care, support of students is more important. However, a survey of 325 K-12 educators of Massachusetts showed that instructors are struggling with ERT. They reported a lack of preparation and overwhelmed, and need more training on ERT (Trust & Whalen, 2020). On the other side, other than challenges, ERT also provides opportunities to universities. For instance, instructors have more freedom of teaching and adopting innovative methods to connect students. Also, it requires closer connections among universities around the world to support each other, which encourages cooperation and experience sharing (Toquero, 2020).

In ERT, universities cannot build the ecosystem to support instruction immediately. It is already hard for instructors to transition successfully during ERT, let alone notice various needs of students. Thus, marginalized students who already

have more challenges may find that their instructors are too overwhelmed to connect them. One important lesson of ERT is the significance of a support system. This support system does not only include students but also teachers and relevant staff and services. When students face problems, they can turn to faculty for help. Meanwhile, the faculty and staff can have sufficient capability and knowledge to identify and meet students' needs.

Research Gap

Traditional campus crises research provides a research lens on understanding students' perceptions and behaviors toward crises, while research about online learning focuses on how to navigate students to online learning successfully. Recently discussions on ERT do not pay much attention to various challenges of students. However, COVID-19 happens and transmits quickly which puts forward the challenges combining the normal campus crises, online learning and ERT.

Marginalized college students, like first-generation students, low-SES students, minority students, and female students have already faced more challenges in higher education than their peers. Due to family inequalities, lack of social and cultural capital accumulation, and low-SES, first-generation students are viewed as underrepresented in educational opportunities as well as outcomes. Students' early experiences form cultural tool kits which include "strategies of action and logics of action" (Calarco, 2014, p.189). These cultural tool kits impact how students understand and respond to situations. For instance, middle-class students are more willing to ask for help for teachers, while working-class students keep silent when they meet problems and afraid to interact with professors (Calarco, 2014; Jack, 2016).

Hence, online learning could bring more challenges from marginalized students and increase inequality, let alone burdens from emergency remote learning.

As the impact of coronavirus continuing, online learning or a hybrid of online and in-person courses would be the future direction. Higher education institutions may take different measures to make through this pandemic, but they all need to deal with the same challenge—educational inequity. However, there is lacking relevant literature on how to navigate marginalized students in dealing with the influence of both coronavirus and online learning.

Discussion and Conclusion

Campus safety is one of the most important considerations of higher education institutions. Because of that consideration, American universities and colleges chose to shift to online after the outbreak of COVID-19. However, other than campus safety, academic performances, and educational equality are also significant parts of higher education. While it is important to keep students safe, the university cannot ignore the educational quality and equality.

According to EPPM, the same crisis can cause different response mechanisms based on personal evaluations of the crisis and self-efficacy. Marginalized students are more likely to have higher concerns about campus crises and lower self-efficacy than their peers. Thus, the same crisis may bring more challenges to marginalized students. Due to COVID-19, some shops, companies, and campuses closed. Therefore, some parents or students may lose their jobs, which increases the financial burden on them, especially for low SES students. Worse, because of schools' lockdown, students were forced to leave campuses and took remote learning. However, not every student has access to a stable internet or even a laptop. Generally,

institutions and instructors are important to support that students can rely on. But due to emergency transition and lack of experience, institutions and instructors may be overwhelmed. Students who are hesitant to reach out before might be more unwilling to express their needs and ask for help. Hence, when it comes to evaluating the impact of COVID-19 and abilities to deal with those impacts, marginalized students could have higher levels of perceived threat and lower levels of self-efficacy. Instead of facing the challenges, they are more likely to adopt defensive avoidance or negative behaviors to control their fear or anxiety. For instance, they may drink more, spend more time on games or videos, or choose to do housework rather than their assignments.

To shift from fear control processes to danger control processes, it requires either to decrease the perceived threat or increase self-efficacy. For college students, institutions are strong supporters. Especially for those disadvantaged students, they rely more on institutional support even they may not express. To help students make through this crisis and mitigate inequity, institutions' policies could be of great importance. Better preparedness and timely response of institutions mean a lot for students. First, the university should identify students' various concerns and needs through surveys or investigations. Since marginalized students might be reluctant to reach out, institutions should be more proactive in learning students' needs and offer well-focused help. As for decreasing the level of perceived threat, information and communication are the priorities. Students express fear of crises mainly due to their inexperience and vulnerability. Universities could inform students of the basic knowledge and follow-up information about COVID-19 and how to avoid it. Thus, inexperienced students may not feel so scared or anxious about the pandemic. Also, institutions can prepare more for the fall semester like offering masks, hand sanitizers,

or virus tests and inform students about their preparations. Those would lower students' perceived threat when they have to come back to campuses. More information would also be helpful to improve self-efficacy. Moreover, marginalized students may lack resources or capabilities to deal with challenges caused by the pandemic. It is the university that can help them to improve their abilities. For those students who are vulnerable financially, universities can help them to meet the basic needs, such as provide laptops to attend online courses, foods for those who need it, a safe place with stable internet. Moreover, universities can keep connections with students and provide various and accessible ways for different students to reach out, such as services for LGBT students, first-generation students.

One special challenge that students faced academically during COVID-19 is online learning. Unlike in-person classes, online courses are more self-directed. That is to say, students' personal characteristics play more important roles in deciding their behaviors in classes, thus further determining their learning outcomes. To deal with educational inequality, the first is to guarantee equal opportunity. Other than technical assistance by providing essential equipment like laptops, universities also need to identify the emotional needs of students. Refer to equality of outcome which is academic performance, the current deficiency-oriented education system would encourage more achievement gaps among students because it would reproduce the inequity caused by their family background (Zhao, 2016). The competency-based education model provides an idea to better realize the equality of outcome. Faculty and assessments are the two critical parts of the competence-based education model. Faculty members are the key factors to improve students' engagement. Besides the responsibility to spread the knowledge, faculty members need to build connections with students, provide support, increase interaction in classes, learn more about

students' requirements, motivations. Personal relationships and connections outside of classrooms would be helpful for students to have more sense of belonging in classrooms. A study examining two online teaching models of a middle school in China during Covid-19 shows that more interactions between teachers and students, better learning outcomes students have (Yao et al., 2020).

However, no matter whether high-quality online courses can replace face-to-face courses, emergency remote teaching lacks time to build a complete ecosystem to support. In this sudden transition, compared to course content, support would be more important.

Now the world is in mid of COVID-19, there is still a long way to go. Higher education institutions may lack preparation in the last spring semester, but they can learn from that and pay more attention to the issues that they need to improve. It also is a chance for institutions to review the core of higher education and make changes. It is a hard time for all members of the university community, while some of them are facing more challenges. Without proper measures and reasonable care, higher education might witness widening inequality during COVID-19, but if the community can be together and care about each other, higher education would make through this crisis successfully.

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