



# Reaction to Crisis: Adult Higher Education's Lessons Learned

*Key Findings and 13 Actionable Steps  
to Improve Experiences for Adult Learners*

2020-2021  
Practice Report



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# Reaction to Crisis: Adult Higher Education's Lessons Learned

Postsecondary institutions responded to COVID-19 in ways that reflect their values, capacity, culture, and leadership. While no one could fully predict the implications and impact of this worldwide pandemic, some institutions demonstrated great creativity, authenticity, and decisiveness as they sought to support their adult learners toward their academic goals. COVID-19 brought out resiliency in faculty, staff, and adult learners. They developed new expertise in remote working and learning. Staff, faculty, and adult learners learned how to video conference using Zoom or MS Teams. Offices converted paper forms to electronic or editable PDFs. Electronic scheduling tools were incorporated into daily activities to connect staff and adult learners. Podcasts and videos were developed in place of written information. Social media tools were integrated into communication and recruitment of adult learners. In many ways, COVID-19 reshaped higher education and moved daily processes into the technological age.

For this research, we conducted 18 focus groups with institutional leaders, faculty, and adult learners. Staff and faculty highlighted the skills they developed and honed, which they will continue to incorporate post-pandemic. Adult learners discussed how they juggled more responsibilities with asynchronous online and synchronous video conferencing for themselves and their children while often working from home. This report includes recommendations with guidelines for implementation that will help institutional leaders improve current and future practices.

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## Key Recommendations in this Practice Report

- ✓ Establish faculty development and technological training for faculty, staff, and adult learners.
- ✓ Make timely and consistent decisions about course delivery and fees.
- ✓ Establish clear communication paths and ensure that communication targets the audience.
- ✓ Be mindful of mental health and stress levels of faculty, staff, and adult learners.

## Study Purpose

The COVID-19 pandemic upended higher education in many ways, affecting adult learners and those institutions in a variety of ways. This study was conducted to address two research questions:

- 1) How has COVID-19 specifically affected adult learners?
- 2) How can higher education institutions address the needs of adult learners during this unique time?

## Methods

Between August and October 2020, we conducted 18 virtual focus groups with administrators, staff, faculty, and adult learners at 16 of the 17 institutions in the Kansas City Scholars Postsecondary Network.

## Participants

Focus groups included 82 faculty, staff, and administrators, as well as 61 adult learners.

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# Key Recommendations

## Recommendation 1: Enhance faculty development and establish technological support for faculty, staff, and students

Except for institutions that were already well versed in online learning, the pandemic forced many institutions into an emergency distance instruction mode (asynchronous online and the synchronous virtual classroom), which was poorly executed and left many with a bad learning experience. Prior to COVID-19, many faculty members were against online learning and vowed never to use it. While not all became converts, most faculty members grew to embrace the benefits and opportunities that online learning offered for their courses and students. Faculty, both experienced and novices to distanced learning, stepped up to help others by sharing what they knew. During March and April, several of the 16 institutions held a one- or two-week crash course in online teaching and tried to engage with all their faculty and as quickly as possible. Institutional Technology (IT) and teaching and learning centers operated practically 24 hours a day to create websites, courses on teaching online, and webinars for the numerous faculty members at the institutions unskilled with online technologies. Each focus group with institutions painted another picture of the stressful environment and the high priority of online learning. The sentiment voiced by several in the focus groups was: Why did we wait so long to force this issue?

*"Everyone started finding instructions on how to do stuff and we created a central Canvas page where we added all the faculty, and everybody started putting on stuff they had found so we were able to amass a lot of information in probably less than two weeks."*

– instructor

### How to carry out this recommendation

#### Fund and support faculty development

Most college faculty are hired for their content expertise, not for their teaching skills. However, anywhere from 20% to 100% of their job responsibilities are generally focused on teaching. The faculty discussed that they had never made teaching online a priority because they were evaluated mostly on their research productivity and not their instruction. Educating was a secondary priority, and since faculty could get *"by every year, why change?"*. One faculty member stated, *"Every campus has one person who is violently opposed to online learning. I am that person. ...it's been me for nine years...and so you need to fire that person."* However, this faculty member became a believer in online

*"In the past, you know we would have the Canvas trainings at the beginning of semesters and occasionally faculty would volunteer to help each other. There was so much involvement from faculty in helping each other learn Canvas."*

learning. She learned many strategies that she stated she would continue to implement in the future. She became a voice for championing online education and training and requiring all faculty to use the learning management system noting, *"You never know when you may lose access to the main campus."* Another instructor commented, *"Don't wait for the global pandemic to encourage you"* to learn new skills.

### Adopt and use a standard learning management system (LMS) for all courses

Some institutions did not have a standard or did not require the use of a standard LMS (i.e., Canvas, Blackboard, or Moodle). Many faculty members said they were allowed to choose how to set up their online learning experiences. As a result, adult learners were confused by the numerous ways faculty were conducting distance learning via email, podcasts, using the LMS, or requesting PDF copies of assignments to be mailed to the instructor. Challenges ranged from scanning handwritten assignments to PDFs to creating video responses to discussion threads. Many adult learners were frustrated with the variety of different ways instructors asked them to fulfill course requirements.

*"I didn't realize that the courses don't have books and it's basically just a collection of websites that we're supposed to read. And so it feels really disconnected and I'm not really sure how I put all these pieces together to make like a solid education out of it. So that's really frustrating."*

– adult learner

Standardizing the LMS and the course map would allow adult learners to locate information regarding all courses and provide consistent way to upload assignments.

### Train and support faculty and staff on how to manage the technology

The COVID-19 switch to remote working shined a light on the technological expertise staff and faculty needed. An IT administrator explained, *"We discovered that we needed to provide training on some fairly simple features the faculty and staff never used before. We explained, this button does this. This is how to upload videos and podcasts."* An instructor noted, *"Making sure that people understood how to handle the hardware, how to use VPN. There were so many different tools that people had never used."* For example, some instructors had the in-class adult learners connect to the Zoom sessions on their laptops while the instructor connected the audio system in the classroom to Zoom, which caused feedback on the system. Other challenges involved navigating classroom cameras, recording a live class session, and wearing a lapel microphone appropriately while engaging the learners. Besides the hardware issues, there were also connectivity challenges with multiple people within a single household working from home: faculty and staff were often limited by their internet systems and speeds.

*"Hold practice Zoom sessions. Hold practice sessions on VPN."*

– financial aid administrator

*"Embrace technology early...what we've heard from people is these are things I wanted to use, but they didn't do it, and now they were forced to do it. Learn it first."*

– instructor

Institutions need to make technology training available to staff and faculty from beginning to advanced levels on the software and hardware incorporated into their positions.

### Teach faculty online pedagogy

Online teaching is not taking what an instructor did in the classroom and putting it online. There are different pedagogical approaches to online and virtual learning. An instructor commented, *"Don't try to take that time system and throw it into online virtual learning... think about things differently."* There are learning accommodations, such as how to include captioning on videos. Instructors need assistance with the many tasks to ensure they accommodate the learning styles of all adult learners.

Adult learners were frustrated by many of their teachers' lack of online teaching strategies. Some learners shared that some instructors put their presentations online and told them to read them and complete the assignment. Adult learners discussed having minimal contact with instructors at times, such as: *"The instructor was basically emailing us PDFs."* *"Getting it into a schedule and trying to deliver a class that you can tell was meant for in-person, online seems to be a really difficult transition for a lot of teachers."* Many adult learners were frustrated with the number of different ways instructors asked them to fulfill the learning requirements. Several stated they felt like they were teaching themselves.

*"And it seems like some of the faculty thought that because we were online that we needed more work or more assignments... most of these classes have been formulated to be in person and then you go to online and it's like they're coming up with more things to keep us engaged, but it's just a little bit frustrating."*

– adult learner

Not all instructors missed the mark. Other adult learners commented on how well their instructors managed the online learning environment. A limited number of instructors posted videos and lectures and held Zoom sessions to address adult learners' questions. A few adult learners mentioned that instructors reached out to them via email or text to check on them. Other adult learners shared instructors scheduled individual meetings with them to address learning issues.

### Provide orientation for adult learners to the learning management system

Most adult learners discussed that they had initially chosen in-person classes because they felt they learned better than in online asynchronous courses. These learners believed that in-person instruction provided better access to their instructor and classmates when they were confused. When everyone had to shift to online learning, adult learners struggled with the online learning management system. Only

*"They changed courses from in person to online and I've been looking for my materials, like my books in my courses and I cannot find the information. The instructor says he is sending us messages, but he didn't publish the course in Canvas, so we never received them."*

– adult learner

one department required its students to attend an online course orientation; the others assumed that adult learners would intuitively understand the LMS navigation and how to engage within an online course. While institutional representatives stated there was an orientation available, many adult learners did not know where to find the information or how to navigate the LMS or the online courses' organization. They would reach out to classmates for assistance with the LMS after receiving no response from the instructor.

### Be cognizant that adult learners may not have adequate access to WiFi and computers needed to be academically successful

When surveying or contacting adult learners to determine whether they are prepared to be successful in an online course, institutions should specifically ask if students have access to an available computer to complete their course work. Many institutional leaders found out late in the process that many adult learners did not have easy access to a computer or wireless internet and were trying to complete assignments on their smartphones. In some cases, adult learners did have a computer at home but shared it with all family members to finish schoolwork, conduct remote work, and take college courses. Adult learners commented that they did not have the money to purchase or could not find an adequate laptop. The Cares Act Funding assisted some adult learners in this area, while others stated they were not eligible for Cares Act Funds and needed equipment. In one focus group, an adult learner shared she only had an older laptop that was not compatible with Zoom. Because she could find no means to solve this issue, others in the focus group asked for her email address to help her find an up-to-date laptop.

*"We are still seeing students do their assignments on their phones, you still see students driving up McDonald's to get a WiFi connection."*

*– chief administrator*

Instructors may need to understand how to set up an online course for mobile phone delivery or assistance from the IT/LMS specialists at the institution on the best strategies. Alternative means of course delivery need to be provided to assist instructors in creating learning environments for all adult learners. One institution did have their IT/LMS specialists creating websites to assist instructors with alternative ways of creating and assessing learning experiences.

*"There were faculty who are basically telling me, 'I have no skills in teaching online,' and I needed to accept that and try to help calm them down first."*

*- director of a teaching and learning center*

*"We had such great help with our IT department here that they made life easier. I will say that managing, for example, the class where I have students online as well as face to face and managing five different screens to do that can sometimes just be overwhelming."*

*- instructor*

## Recommendation 2: Make timely and consistent decisions about course delivery and fees

While the pandemic brought many challenges and obstacles to overcome, it also provided ample opportunities for leaders to demonstrate their skills and abilities. Faculty, staff, and adult learners were asked to assess the leadership provided in the wake of the pandemic and subsequent operational adjustments. Perspectives varied widely from institution to institution ranging from high praise to harsh criticism. Staff and adult learners approached situations in a much calmer manner when leaders were transparent in their decision-making, incorporated key personnel, including frontline staff and adult learners, and remained steady in their approach to managing the situation. Faculty and staff appreciated when their executive leaders provided clarity, did not equivocate, and shared decision-making processes. One example included very intentional outreach to adult learners in three phases: (1) wellness calls, (2) inquiry into student's academic needs, and (3) ongoing dialogue.

*"Decisions were constantly changing on fee structures and additional fees were added. We just needed clear and simple fees. Why am I paying for lab fees when I cannot use the lab?"*

*- adult learner*

### How to carry out this recommendation

#### Make timely and consistent decisions

Timely decision-making was expected from the institutional leaders and faculty, especially during times of high stress. Focus group participants particularly appreciated executive leaders who communicated clear expectations and created regular feedback opportunities, especially during the pandemic's early stages. Adult learners were frustrated by changing decisions or lack of information when some institutional leaders decided that all courses would be online. They were coping with an overwhelming combination of changes and transitions that included financial uncertainty, job changes, increased responsibilities related to home-schooling and childcare, and fear of exposure to COVID-19 for themselves and their loved ones. Adult learners appreciated clear and definitive communication about online courses; having that one aspect of their lives settled made it easier for them to cope with the many other uncertainties in their lives.

*"Let's get together, let's talk about how we're going to serve students. How can we align so we are all consistent for the student? Let's make sure the message is the same from admissions to the faculty members. Let's work together."*

*- career services administrator*

## Keep fees consistent and stable

Adult learners were also unsettled by the variety of fee structures at some institutions. While institutional leaders were trying to be fair with students and consistent across varied course deliveries, they sometimes missed the mark. For example, some adult learners were charged lab fees, although they could not go to the lab. Some fine arts adult learners were refunded fees for studio usage, yet others had fees waived one semester but reinstated the next when they still could not use the studio.

## Provide consistency in course delivery

Either entirely online courses or in-class sessions were easier for adult learners to maneuver than having some courses online, some hybrid and others face-to-face. Adult learners who had both hybrid and online courses expressed more anxiety and higher stress from switching than those whose classes were all conducted online or in-person. The learners may have preferred face-to-face instruction to online, but they had confidence in how their courses would be delivered. While adult learners did not want to move online, they navigated the semester with lower stress levels than those facing multiple course delivery options.

*"I am frustrated with the fact one class is socially distanced and the very next course is completely online. Where do I go? Buildings are closed on campus."*  
– adult learner

## Recommendation 3: Establish clear communication paths and ensure that communication targets the audience

Institutions communicated decisions and information in a variety of ways, from websites to emails. Conscientious communication is noticed and appreciated, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. Faculty and adult learners were often bombarded with communications about the pandemic as institutions grappled with policy and operational implications for scheduling and implementing safety measures. Several institutions set up a centralized information site so adult learners could get the latest information from institutional leaders. Others seemed to, as one adult learner stated, *"flood our emails with messages that didn't apply. And you know, I think I actually missed an email that did pertain to me because after a while. I'm just like, going, okay. That doesn't matter. That doesn't matter. That doesn't matter."* Many adult learners were frustrated with the volume of communication that did not relate to them. For example, they were not living in the dorm and were not attending classes on campus, so much of the communication about campus events did not pertain to them.

*"Communication is so important to faculty and staff, but also to the students, you know, just letting them know what's happening, day-to-day because this is changing on a daily basis."*

– chief administrator



## How to carry out this recommendation

### Target messages to the appropriate audience

Many institutions sent daily messages as information and decisions changed. When institutions emailed all students whether the decisions applied to that audience or not, it often caused adult learners to ignore or not thoroughly read them. For instance, adult learners commented on getting messages which discussed moving into the dorm rooms, information about the cafeteria, or campus restrictions. *"You almost got overwhelmed with all of the different emails that came through with just differing information...to where I think it just kind of became a jumbled mess."* Institutions with multiple campuses sent messages to all students when some did not apply to adult learners. A few institutional representatives discussed customizing the institutional messages for their specific adult learner audience or advisees. The adult learners in the focus groups who received these types of messages appreciated them and were more prepared for the semester.

### Encourage advisors and faculty to engage with their adult learners

The most powerful and compelling communications shared during the focus groups came from adult learners who felt authentically cared for and felt emotionally moved by the faculty, staff members, or both who made little gestures that were not necessarily part of their jobs. *"My success coach who meets with all the adult KC Scholars recipients. She also reached out to me. We talked a lot and we talked specifically at the time that I was having a really stressful time and she has little kids at home. So she was kind of relating to that with me."* Several institutions proactively reached out to adult learners to do wellness checks. These were most effective when someone with a prior relationship with the adult learner (advisor, faculty chair, admissions representative, or previous faculty) did the outreach. Adult learners appreciated being noticed and missed. Adult learners who did not have a person at their institution reach out either said they *"navigated it on my own"* or made comments such as, *"I don't have an advisor. I didn't hear from anyone."*

*"My mentor is easy to get a hold of. She's very responsive and we kept in contact at least once a week and sometimes daily if I needed to."*

*– adult learner*

Simply touching base for as little as ten minutes with someone at the institution who knew them made a difference to many adult learners. Adult learners often felt communication was less effective or meaningful when there was no established relationship. Additionally, several adult learners implored institutional leaders not to *"wait to reach out to your students."* A growing sense of isolation could occur when adult learners did not feel a sense of community in their program. Many adult learners felt they were left to cope with the pandemic themselves and would have appreciated some support or encouragement.

A few programs already had student success coaches and mentors assigned to each adult learner. These coaches and mentors already had established relationships with their adult learners due to standard practice at their institutions. Adult learners at other institutions voiced the feeling they had to navigate the system independently and try to find information on the

website or ask a classmate. The adult learners in these focus groups floundered and dropped courses.

## Recommendation 4: Be mindful of mental health and stress of faculty, staff, and adult learners

Faculty, staff, and adult learners all discussed the anxiety and stress of the pandemic circumstances. Working remotely brought challenges. Some had no dedicated space to work, which meant they worked at the kitchen table or in their bedrooms with little quiet space. Faculty, staff, and adult learners shared concerns about contracting COVID-19. Several individuals in the focus groups had lost family members to COVID-19, with one adult learner mentioning losing four family members and worrying about contracting COVID-19 herself. Other stressors included fears of layoffs or job loss for themselves or a family member. Adult learners also experienced stress about not having access to tutoring services either because the building was closed, services were only offered in-person and a long distance away, or they could not navigate the online structure. In early September, when asked to rate their stress level between 1 (lowest) and 10 (highest), one learner said, *"My stress level is a 20 but I guess we'll stick with the 10, so I'm maxed out right now."* As the fall semester started and they started to get into a rhythm, stress levels seemed to decrease. Nevertheless, isolation from a routine and lack of geographical transitions between home, work, and school increased some faculty, staff, and adult learners' stress.

### How to carry out this recommendation

#### Engage with faculty and staff on an ongoing basis

Leaders of departments and centers discussed checking on each faculty and staff person daily through a phone call or a videoconference session. Some leaders scheduled 15-minute daily Zoom coffee breaks to chat with staff members. Those individuals commented on appreciating these events as a way to keep them connected and feel supported. These events helped relieve the anxiety and the feelings of being alone in this journey.

#### Provide a means for adult learners to engage remotely with professional counselors

Most institutional counseling staff were full and stretched to the maximum during the semester. Some adult learners commented on their institution providing additional counselors. In offering advice to others the focus group, one adult learner stated, *"just make sure you're reaching out and you're talking to someone...virtual counseling makes sure that you're not just constantly letting your mind be idle*

*"A bigger issue across the board for most people is mental health."*

*– student services administrator*

*in a negative way. Always make sure that you let off some of your frustrations, because they can be overwhelming, and that can consume you.”*

When counselors were not available, adult learners talked with others at the institution. An academic advisor stated, *“I’m not a trained counselor. But still a lot of students think an advisor is a person who is a counselor. And they’re just looking for a person to listen, who’s not in the four walls of their apartment or house because they’ve talked to those folks enough, they want to talk to somebody outside of it, even if it’s on a screen.”*

## The Key Lesson Learned

Higher education consistently evolves as new needs in the workforce and economy surface. These recommendations were drawn during a pandemic, but they will improve institutional practices and service to adult learners in any environment. When faculty and staff were asked what they had learned from the pandemic and what they thought might be continued post-pandemic, many comments focused on the fact that COVID-19 made them create good practices, policies, and procedures that they had delayed for too long. Let us no longer put off until tomorrow what we know needs to be done today.

### About Our Study Sample

This study gathered insights from staff, faculty, administrators, and adult learners from 16 of the 17 institutions within the KC Scholars Postsecondary Network, including eight public and eight private. Four of these were two-year institutions, and twelve were four-year institutions. Fourteen operated primarily in-person before the COVID-19 pandemic, while the remaining two already delivered most courses online.

Faculty, staff, and administrators were from various functional areas, including top-level administration (Deans and Chief Academic Officers), Advising, Admissions, Career Services, Financial Aid, Recruitment, Student Success, and a wide variety of academic departments. Adult learners were pursuing various degrees in a broad range of fields, were of widely varied ages (from the mid-20s to mid-70s), and the majority were working full-time, supporting dependents, or both.