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Navigating the pandemic with faculty development: unification while working remotely

Le perfectionnement du corps professoral pour faire face à la pandémie : unifier tout en travaillant à distance

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The COVID-19 pandemic propelled universities to rapidly convert to emergency, remote teaching. Kansas City University (KCU) was no exception and physically closed its two campuses in March 2020 and began remotely delivering its medical curriculum.¹ To quickly introduce this change, KCU leadership co-opted an existing faculty development structure as the vehicle for sharing information with and providing direction for faculty and staff.

Prior to the pandemic, faculty development at KCU occurred during a protected 2-hour weekly session at KCU's Institute for Learning Advancement (ILA). With the onset of the pandemic in March 2020, ILA began meeting daily, requiring attendance for all faculty and key staff. Leadership (e.g., executive deans and campus deans) attended ILA frequently to communicate real-time information, direction, and decisions as we navigated emergent and urgent needs in response to COVID-19. Using a remote meeting platform previously used for simultaneous teaching at our two campus locations, faculty from both campuses attended ILA meetings from the safety of their homes. The ILA framework was key to KCU's successful pivot in curricular delivery but served more importantly as a much-needed gyroscope, stabilizing, and unifying the faculty.

Fisher's Process of Transition theory postulates a progression of emotions as individuals within an organization undergo organizational change.² His

descriptive curve shows the cyclic, sequential emotions of Anxiety, Happiness, Fear, Threat, Guilt, then Depression.² As change progresses, individuals either move on to Gradual Acceptance and Moving Forward, or else they shift into Hostility. Fisher's theory explains KCU's pandemic experience and is reflected by organic changes we made in the frequency and duration of ILA sessions as the pandemic progressed (decreasing in both frequency and duration). Comparing our frequency of ILA sessions with Fisher's Process of Transition reveals an interesting parallel.² Similar to Fisher's change curve, our anxiety during the early days of the pandemic (March–May 2020) corresponded with greater number of hours in ILA sessions.

ILA sessions continued meeting diligently through Summer 2020 to improve our remote teaching and practice using new educational technology platforms. By the start of the next academic year (July 2020), we had improved both our competency and comfort with online, remote teaching, allowing us to return to a pre-pandemic level of ILA sessions. We thus shifted from daily to two, one-hour sessions of faculty development per week. This period maps to Fisher's transition stage of Happiness.² By Spring 2021 we had grown more exhausted from coping with the pandemic. Our number of hours in ILA decreased, which is mirrored by a dip in Fisher's curve.² If our experience continues to mirror Fisher's curve, we may expect to see an increase in ILA session hours as we eventually grow to Fisher's final stages of Gradual Acceptance and Moving Forward.²

Background of ILA

From the beginning of ILA, some faculty had expressed their perception that the faculty development experience was better for those who received instruction in-person. Further, our technology and meeting framework did not provide a mechanism for cross-campus small group learning. These barriers challenged our ability to develop a common culture and cohesive community.

In the early weeks of the pandemic, strong collaboration across the entirety of faculty occurred, in part, because everyone was working from home. We were not defined by our home campus and became a homogenous faculty body. Additionally, technology provided faculty an opportunity to collaborate in new ways as they reimagined their curricular courses for the online setting. Over the span of weeks, the perspective of 'better experience based on campus location' shifted as faculty became more familiar with one another. Faculty engagement strengthened as creativity blossomed from both campuses to the extent that KCU faculty recognized themselves as one campus serving students with innovation and excellence. For KCU, the pandemic brought a unifying force, rather than a divisive one.

The second story arising from the pandemic involves the unintentional, yet important role ILA played in the well-being of faculty. In this new world of social distancing, teleworking from home placed a significant amount of stress on faculty.³ ILA became a vital community where faculty members would often arrive early to ILA meetings to support and check-in on each other.

Although ILA began as a vehicle for cultivating teaching and curricular excellence, its role in the pandemic expanded to communicate, direct, and upskill faculty. ILA has provided the forum to navigate our organizational needs and

changes, resulting in a closer, more unified multi-campus faculty.

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