Working Together Apart: Collaborative Accomplishments During Covid

Improvement in practice is complicated. The challenges of health, distance, technology, and establishing new professional norms for "normal" day-to-day maintenance complicated universities' work during the pandemic in remarkable ways. However, by working together and apart, one college managed to earn some important achievements. Notably, the authorization to continue offering certification preparation for a variety of certification classes from the state as well as program-specific accomplishments (e.g., national recognition). The lessons learned from this past year are instructive when thinking about building teams that accomplish complex work in the physical or virtual environment.

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Collaboration is the act of constructing relevant meanings that can be shared by all parties involved in the work. Collaboration is purposive; the purpose is to solve a problem, create, or discover something new (Nayar, 2014). In the last 18 months, the shift to remote working has demanded a more agile approach to the collaborative processes we use in our work. Teamwork and communication have always been critical aspects of the collaborative workplace, but the fallout from the COVID19 pandemic has forced successful organizations to become more effective, flexible, and dynamic (Kniffen et al., 2020).

Having acknowledged the importance of collaboration, it is also complicated in the academy. Higher education is a complex organization with its own cultures and rituals. Changes within the system often happen slowly over time. The talents of each faculty member and the effective use of those talents drive the institution's strength. Individuals are prized and hired for their individual expertise instead of their team expertise, and the tenure system encourages and rewards the highest levels of individual achievement. Faculty have been known to exhibit traits such as tribalism, the ivory tower syndrome, and a silo mentality that, at the very least, limits teamwork and collaboration and conflicts with institutional goals (Burgess,1994; Paige et al., 2021). Since the 1990s institutions have gradually begun to appreciate the potential within teams and realized that an organization's performance and productivity are enhanced with the collective effort of work teams.

Teamwork is "a cooperative process that allows ordinary people to achieve extraordinary results" (Scarnati, 2005, p. 5). One of the essential components of a team is its focus on a common goal or solution (Tarricone & Luca, 2002). When a group's goals are reinforced, team members believe that their work fulfills a higher purpose; they are more motivated to act and think collaboratively (Quinn & Thackor, 2018). Although team members share overall goals, they have differing histories, priorities, roles, and expectations. In the past, these differences may have limited opportunities for collaboration. Still, the literature suggests that there are characteristics and practices of successful teams that can minimize differences and provide pathways to successful collaborations. Though the pandemic may have forced abrupt changes in the way organizations operated, it highlighted the importance of teamwork and collaboration and the use of technology.

Some practices of successful teams are summarized below:

• Open, strong communication provides clear expectations about the assigned tasks
and unifies groups around the shared goal(s). During a high-stakes team project,
effective communication enables feedback and discussion, and even debate. This
process is critical as it can help the organization improve overall, and avoid
redundant problems (Bandow, 2001; Bowen, 2021; Paige et al.,2021).

• A focus on goals and results is an essential component of teamwork. Team
members who are committed to the group's success are engaged in their work and
have a clear plan of action, both individually and for the group (Quinn & Thacker,
2018).
• Commitment to team processes, leadership, and accountability by all team
members. Including guidelines and policies on items such as a framework for
problem-solving (processes, specific steps, expectations of each team member, etc.)
that are documented before the work commences will help alleviate team members'
anxiety and general ambiguity (Tarricone & Luca, 2002).
• Good working relationships are built on a foundation of trust (Bandow, 2001).
People who have effective working relationships are more likely to have free
exchanges of information, more consistent performance, less defensive and more
transparent, and are more willing to share information than members of a
dysfunctional group. The behaviors of dependable and trustworthy team members
are predictable and allow the team to focus on their work instead of office politics,
assumptions, or innuendos (Bandow, 2001; Paige et al., 2021).
• Team composition and skillset diversity are paramount to success. Teams that are
made up of people with different backgrounds and skills have the capacity to
collectively see potential solutions that may not be apparent to individual experts.
This process also alleviates the development of a silo mentality and a rigid
adherence to practices that may hinder team function and performance (Paige et al.,
2021).
• A positive attitude, trust, and team orientation are cornerstones in being a high-
quality teammate. Members must be respectful, appreciative, and receptive to input
and suggestions from other teammates (Bowen, 2021; Paige et al., 2021; Tarricone
& Luca, 2002).

Our Story, Our Process

Our college was not immune to the challenges brought about by the pandemic. Not only did we
have to keep pivoting (e.g., class meetings, shifting mandates that impacted gatherings in a
shared physical space), but at our university, the COE was also undergoing both a 7-year
accreditation review from the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP) and
a 5-year program review conducted by the Texas Education Agency (TEA). Both laborious
processes were necessary to maintain accreditation and state authorization.
   Consistent with experiences at other universities, the pandemic also created barriers to our
ability to engage in ad-hoc conversation – to walk over to a colleague's office to ask a question.
Thus, we implemented the extensive use of Microsoft Teams (MS Teams). MS Teams is a file

and data collaboration tool with features such as instant messaging, audio and video calling, mobile meeting, and web conferencing spaces.

Despite the very real challenges presented by COVID-19, failure was not an option we would accept. We had to find the most effective ways to move forward. We learned the importance of being purposeful in our communication strategies; specificity about tasks, deadlines, and the why behind requests can remove the ambiguity of communication within virtual team collaborations (Bowen, 2021).

Given the collegial nature of the interaction between members of our college, it was more a question of how and who than it was of whether our work would be accomplished. That culture of shared effort and shared interest offered a solid foundation on which to begin the work. The use of virtual meeting spaces allowed for routine meetings and coordination of task management.

During our virtual meetings, we were able to clear up any misunderstandings, agree to delegated tasks (e.g., who would develop templates for data entry and reporting and who would populate various documents), and offer insight and support. Misunderstandings often arose while preparing our reaccreditation reports. However, real-time conversations fostered a shared understanding of the work to be done. This was extremely important because everyone was assigned separate tasks that were later piecemealed together. The final product was a coherent document that was submitted to the accrediting body. Colleagues with more experience were also able to provide guidance and clarification as novice colleagues navigated through this journey.

Having a virtual meeting space in MS Teams allowed for more than just real-time conversations. Because documents could be shared in real-time, team members could actively collaborate during conversations for the purpose of updating, editing, and improving our work. This allowed us to make meaningful progress toward the creation of products that would support our ability to demonstrate compliance and efforts related to continuous improvement.

Regular meetings using MS Teams and document-sharing supported goal accomplishment by helping us develop a common approach to identifying resources and assigning responsibilities. We found it natural to fall into patterns of delayed response and follow-through. We also discovered it was natural to want to avoid that pattern if we knew we were going to meet. This process embedded accountability and, therefore, lessened the space for lack of follow-through or task avoidance.

Preservation of our work became another important consideration. While the ability to meet and edit together in real-time was vital to our success, not everyone on our team shared the same work habits or wished to work at the same time. Cloud-based drives (e.g., Google Drive and OneDrive) supported our ability to work both synchronously and asynchronously with consideration for our habits and the realities faced by each member of the team during the pandemic.

There were a number of practical actions and products related to the work that led to our success and to the anticipation of additional good news in the coming months. One method we used to separate tasks was forming groups centered around accreditation standards. Each group set up regular meetings on MS Teams and leveraged group members' strengths to accomplish specific tasks (e.g., creating tables, wordsmithing).

The work was also purposefully organized. For example, one faculty member took the lead by setting up and organizing digital folders, thus making it convenient for others to locate and add pertinent files. Another member spent time formatting the teams' contributions so that presentation and readability styles were standardized – something appreciated by reviewers. In

the end, by coordinating our time and talents, our workflow became focused and efficient. A benefit of our process was a lower burden on college leadership to manage each element of each process. Our organized team efforts allowed the administration to focus on other aspects of the review process including aspects more closely related to leadership.

Moments of uncertainty, confusion, and stress certainly occurred. As a team, we were transparent about any concerns. We acknowledged the overwhelming nature of the accreditation process, especially for those who were novices. We recognized the anxiety of the unknown and new; many of us faced the fear of failure during this lengthy process. Thankfully, our team established clear communication and collaboration efforts. We persevered through the challenges and successfully met TEA requirements and we anticipate full accreditation after a favorable formative review!

Implications and Lessons Learned

Despite the myriad and complex challenges of working together while apart during the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic, our college made real progress. At times, it felt as if we were trudging through mud, and growth came in fits and starts, but we learned a few things. A key takeaway was that an ethic of care, paired with a commitment to realizing our goals, leads to accomplishments over time. Notable achievements were realized at both the college level and for specific programs. At the college level, we were reauthorized by the state to continue to offer certification preparation for a wide variety of programs for the next five years. We also received a favorable report and anticipate formal reaffirmation of our College CAEP accreditation later this year. Program-specific accomplishments were also highlighted. An example of a program-specific accomplishment is an affirmation of national recognition. National recognition is earned when a program is evaluated against published standards from a specialized professional association or SPA (e.g., International Literacy Association – ILA or the Educational Leadership Constituent Council – ELCC).

At a more granular level, we have identified four major lessons or implications. Those four lessons are related to compliance, improving educator preparation, implications for work in the PK-12 setting, and future research.

Implications for Compliance, improving educator preparation, and implications for work in the PK-12 setting.

The COVID-19 pandemic required us to use existing systems and tools effectively or to invent new ones. A tool that was helpful to our group was virtual meeting spaces (e.g. Zoom and MS Teams). These spaces allow working groups to meet synchronously while not having to share the same breathing space. The benefits of this tool extended beyond creating space for face-to-face meetings. Our conversations were enhanced by document sharing in ways that are more difficult in a face-to-face setting. Sharing documents that can be seen and edited by multiple people simultaneously and in different physical places strengthened collaborative conversations while fostering an environment of support and shared accountability. The documents were stored on a cloud-based shared drive (e.g., OneDrive). These virtual documents could be accessed and edited by all. This was a great resource that supported our collaborative efforts. We also made better use of electronic calendars to block out work time and invite colleagues into discussions and meetings which offered our working team a way to structure time together even though we were

apart. Our conversations and work together also highlight the idea we are more than the sum of our parts. Though we were physically separated during the pandemic, we worked together and learned new things about improving our approach to preparation. Where requirements were similar across programs (compliance), application and procedures were frequently different. The new kind of deliberative collaboration required by the conditions caused by the pandemic taught us about how others in our college work to meet requirements as well as advance candidates' learning and the quality of their work. This led to changes in our approach to the work and, as a result, improvement in our practice. Though not exhaustive, some of those improvements include:

● Multiple programs created processes and systems in isolation, we are beginning to coordinate efforts. This means we can better address content needs while supporting each other with process construction and execution.
● Our experiences and deliberations led to the creation of a workgroup we expect will offer sustainable "space" to continue and reinforce our shared work.
● As a consequence of a better shared approach to the work, we can each give more time and attention to the content standards for our respective preparation programs and increase the quality of student learning experiences.

There are a number of helpful practices we discovered as we worked toward our overall goal of improving teacher preparation programs. One of those is Team Planning. Our pre-pandemic approach relied heavily on in-person attendance at meetings. The rise of use in virtual meeting technologies improved our ability to get together for many goals, including improving instruction. Another practice of note concerns resource storage. Teachers can use cloud-based storage for collaboration with each other, for their own professional learning, and in support of their students' learning.

Additionally, the professional development frontier using virtual meeting spaces is wide open. It is not so much that this option was not previously available; it is more that the learning curve is not as steep as it was pre-pandemic. Professionals in the PK-12 setting should also consider cost implications. Virtual meeting spaces, cloud-based drives, and other technology tools present major cost-saving opportunities. Training, consultation, and support for PK-12 educators can be offered at a lower cost with more flexibility and far more efficiently than in the past.

Concerning Implications for Future Research

The final implication for this exploration of our experiences during COVID is how lessons learned can be applied to future research. For those in academia, research is a top priority. Our experience brought about possibilities for future research. Some ideas include a longitudinal study that considers the degree to which changes in practice during COVID persisted, a case study exploring the implementation of new practices across varied institutions of higher education (e.g., different tiers and locations), and a look at the role diversity could play in how collaborative workgroups move forward together.

Conclusion

This season has most certainly been challenging. However, our mandate to advance programming effectiveness and meet state and accreditation requirements could not relax. We brought grit and fortitude in order to maintain our pace and to move forward to something more.

While communication and collaboration were more challenging during the early stages of the pandemic, they were no less important now. The realities of the pandemic compelled us to find new ways to work. The work we accomplished during the pandemic was therefore a byproduct of our commitment to finding a way.

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