COVID-19 Has Made Public University-Community College Partnerships More Important Than Ever

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Online First Publication

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The challenges facing educators and administrators alike have arguably never been greater. COVID-19 created a period of change and adaptation for most university faculty, students, and administrators. As universities develop long-term responses to the economic and social problems exacerbated by the pandemic, strengthening partnerships between public universities and community colleges is one remedy available to leaders. This piece draws on lessons learned through the New Hampshire Humanities Collaborative, which works to build and deepen relationships between faculty at the College of Liberal Arts at the University of New Hampshire and the seven colleges of the Community College System of New Hampshire. It provides several specific recommendations, including formal course articulation agreements, bi-annual training workshops, and student mentorship programs. Overall, these partnerships offer an accessible model for higher education to protect institutional longevity, enrich student experiences, and build more inclusive and diverse communities of learning.

For most university faculty, the past year has been a prolonged period of change and adaptation. We learned how to support students learning from their childhood bedrooms, to encourage our students to engage different or controversial viewpoints – even if voiced behind a mask or webcam – and to adjust to the realities of social distancing in the classroom. As we move beyond the challenges of reopening during a pandemic, university leaders nationwide have begun to develop a longer-term response to the emerging economic and social problems exacerbated by COVID-19.

Amidst discussions about how to maximize expensive technological investments and reallocate physical space, we urge leaders across the country to avoid one-size-fits-all disciplinary solutions, and focus on strengthening the partnerships between public universities and community colleges vital to the future of higher education. We represent a group of faculty working on an initiative called the New Hampshire Humanities Collaborative, which works to build and strengthen relationships between faculty at the College of Liberal Arts at the University of New Hampshire (COLA-UNH) and the seven colleges of the Community College System of New Hampshire (CCSNH). Supported by a grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, this initiative funded a series of partnerships between public institutions in our state, including transfer pathways for students from CCSNH to COLA-UNH, shared curricular development between faculty, student exchanges and internships, and student transfer mentors. Our partnership provides a model for public institutions across the country to adapt and grow – promoting public institutions' longevity, enriching our students' experiences while in school, and strengthening the skills and insights they take with them after graduation. Specifically, we:

- Adopted formal course articulation agreements between community colleges and specific departments at UNH-COLA, which improves course rigor across the state, guarantees that community college credits will transfer, and fosters regular enrollment in humanities majors.
- Organized bi-annual training workshops to provide an opportunity for CCSNH and UNH-COLA faculty and administrators across institutions and the state to identify problems in the transfer process and share pedagogical approaches.
- Implemented a small grant program to incentivize collaboration between faculty across CCSNH and UNH-COLA.

- Developed a student mentorship program that matches newly transferred students with peer leaders at UNH, ideally former transfer students themselves.
- Organized a regular newsletter, email listserv, and website, for faculty and administrators to share resources, information, programming, and progress toward shared goals.
- Hosted an annual contest across CCSNH and UNH-COLA, where students across institutions submit their humanities work in categories such as "Change the World," including prizes and an awards night to honor students together.

The challenges facing educators and administrators alike have arguably never been greater. The social isolation of COVID-19 threatens real dialogue, comradery, and understanding between students and faculty. At the same time, the pandemic's economic consequences threaten the already-perilous future of the humanities (Kramnick, 2020) at a critical historical juncture. As a discipline, the humanities is arguably best equipped to promote an appreciation for different perspectives, democratic institutions, and norms – necessary for the country to move beyond the contentious 2020 presidential election and its fallout.

Our partnership fostered socially distant relationships between students and faculty across our state long before the pandemic disrupted higher education, building a more inclusive and academically-diverse community of learning. Students across our institutions interacted and collaborated on coursework, which fostered relationships and broke down barriers to transfer. Institutions across the state jointly updated curriculum, promoting a more robust education that better-prepared students to transition to post-transfer courses. And we promoted and publicized student work in public and online formats, which not only gave students a forum to share work that was important to them, but also helped develop their expertise in areas like storytelling, research, creative design, and project management – all core humanities skills applicable in a host of post-graduation careers. Our partnership strengthened individual community colleges by providing a viable and cost-effective route to a four-year degree. And it strengthened the university system by fostering a pipeline of community college students to liberal arts majors, integrating a greater variety of student backgrounds and experiences into higher education through enhanced transfers, and enhancing the rigor of our curriculum through an attention to a wider range of student needs.

Pandemic aside, a four-year degree has long been out of reach for too many. State funding for public higher education has declined significantly since the 2008-09 recession, fostering increasingly prohibitive tuition costs. And while

enrollment numbers are mixed, universities and community colleges nationwide have experienced steep enrollment declines since 2011 (American Association of Community Colleges, 2019; National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2020). Meanwhile, recurring recessions significantly harmed employment numbers and long-term earnings potential. In this environment, we have a responsibility to expand student access to higher education and meet the needs of an increasingly remote, knowledge economy.

One way to meet this need already exists: students enroll at area community colleges to fulfill general requirements, then transfer to a nearby four-year institution to complete their B.A. or B.S. Such academic tracks can expand higher education to more students and reduce costs for both students and institutions – but only if it is effectively implemented by strong partnerships between community colleges and four-year institutions. Nationally, community college credit hours are approximately 38 percent lower than four-year institutions (Belfield, Fink, & Jenkins, 2017). But research shows that many community college credits fail to transfer because four-year institutions do not accept them, costing transfer students excess tuition dollars and time-to-degree to catch up to their peers (Hu, Ortagus, & Kramer, 2018). And while it is often difficult to estimate exact numbers, many students who want to transfer ultimately fail to do so altogether. This "diversionary effect" is driven by a lack of information, motivation, and socialization to higher education (Belfield, et al., 2017).

The NH Humanities Collaborative directly addressed these issues by bringing together faculty, staff, and former and prospective transfer students across the state. We constructed "majors pathways" for transfer credit between CCSNH and COLA-UNH majors, and universal course articulation agreements between institutions. We invested in student mentorships to smooth the transfer process, created internship programs for transfer students, and collaborated on curriculum to keep higher education learning rigorous and consistent. Importantly, none of these actions required significant financial investment from public institutions; rather, we invested in opportunities for improved communication between faculty and administrators, including bi-annual workshops, networking opportunities, and even simple email listservs to exchange information. We also incorporated student outreach into all our programs, educating parents, community college students, and high schoolers across the state about this effective, desirable transfer route. The pandemic incentivized some students to stay closer to home at two-year institutions, while others sought out the much-missed social comradery of four-year institutions. As the economic fallout of the pandemic further limits affordability for all

students, institutions across the country have an obligation to meet students where they are, provide multiple pathways to pursue higher education, and help develop needed skills and career training.

Our partnership also worked to expand students' academic communities and perspectives, the hallmark of a humanities education and vitally important amidst renewed attention to systemic racism, partisan polarization, and student isolation. As faculty, our courses seek to engage students on a journey that introduces them to experiences, viewpoints, and ideas different from their own – but much work remains to be done to broaden representation in the classroom. Indeed, the pandemic fostered an emerging enrollment crisis among Black students, whose enrollment at universities and community colleges declined by 8.3% and 10.5%, respectively (Fain, 2020). As faculty struggle to find ways to encourage learning behind a mask or a webcam, we cannot ignore opportunities to increase inclusiveness and build learning communities that reflect the rich, dynamic diversity of the country.

In fall 2020, the NH Humanities Collaborative piloted a project involving six courses on three campuses (UNH, Great Bay Community College, and Nashua Community College) to explore the social, political, and historic challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic. The faculty met several times over summer 2020 to design parallel and complementary assignments, which culminated in an online symposium with the students of all six courses. Faculty customized assignments to the subject matter of individual courses while collaborating with colleagues to provide an examination of the pandemic from different disciplinary vantage points. Students in the Great Bay Community College history class researched the history of global pandemics, and a US government class at Nashua Community College examined state and local responses and federal policies. Finally, a world politics course at UNH provided a comparative examination of the COVID-19 mitigation policies in other countries (Germany, Japan, and the United Kingdom). Two months into the semester, students came together via Zoom to present their findings and engage in discussion and analysis. For over two hours, multiple classes from three campuses constituted one learning community, all striving to understand a complex, diverse, and critical challenge. The project provided a venue to leverage each institution's strengths to foster empathy, tolerance, and awareness between university and community college students, both of whom can learn from each other. In a small, largely rural state like ours, larger university classes oftentimes bring together a wider array of student experiences and viewpoints, while smaller community college classes provide a more substantive opportunity to listen and learn from each other. Nationwide, community colleges serve a different student population, including more adult and first-

generation students, while universities tend to offer a wider range of academic disciplines and perspectives.

Partnerships like ours encourage students across institutions to dialogue, share experiences, and challenge stereotypes about each other. Students in the NH Humanities Collaborative's partnership courses and programs learn from the same set of course materials; discuss class theories and concepts in-person and remotely; work together to complete assignments and experiential education simulations; engage on current issues via shared online platforms (e.g., Flipgrid) as course supplements; and observe their faculty treating each other, and the students, as equals. Participating community college students report feeling a greater sense of confidence in their ability to "fit in," contribute to, and visualize succeeding at a four-year institution. This simple yet vital socialization experience encourages students to think about transferring, opening up possibilities, and potentially completing their bachelor's degree, thereby ameliorating the "diversionary effect" (Belfield, et al., 2017). Likewise, surveys of participating UNH undergraduates show that students appreciate expanding their relatively homogeneous classroom environment and learning with and from their community college peers.

Perhaps no aspect of our partnership has more relevance in the current era of remote work and declining state education funding than our emphasis on expanding digital resource access. This was particularly evident during the Mock Democratic and Republican Nominating Convention involving 22 courses and 5 community colleges. As part of the simulation, students conducted research on state political dynamics and policymaking, a task our community college colleagues reminded us was undoubtedly more difficult for their students who did not have numerous librarians available to help, or university-wide subscriptions to scholarly journals and databases, as we did.

Our partnership taught us that our students need research skills that can be used regardless of whether they can surmount a paywall. We can do far more to prepare our students for a 21st century digital world where open-access, open-source materials are increasingly the norm, and digital literacy is a pre-requisite for most employment opportunities (Hecker & Loprest, 2019). As the pandemic isolates students away from library stacks – and the economic crisis hastens the need for marketable remote work skills – we must invest in digital learning strategies like this. Indeed, many of the same scholarly databases and journals that our students benefit from now are becoming increasingly out of reach, even for large, public universities like ours. As the pandemic threatens further

budget cuts, leveraging academic librarians' expertise and library infrastructure to reach the needs of students at diverse institutions across the state is a smart economic decision for state legislatures (Peet, 2020). At the same time, technology is also an important equalizer, particularly in terms of reducing travel costs and time in large and/or rural states. Faculty and staff from more rural areas who normally would need to make a substantive time commitment and drive several hours to a workshop at UNH were able to attend our biannual workshops virtually via Zoom.

Partnerships like ours begin with simply creating the space for collaboration across campuses and then develop programming iteratively. To do this, institutions might consider several approaches. First, create a working group of interested, key faculty across institutions. Second, host events across the year to present key challenges, run workshops around shared goals, and (most importantly) build relationships through shared goals. And finally, focus on initiatives that bring students together – in curriculum, in events and programming, and throughout their academic careers through transfer.

If other public institutions want to adopt our model of collaboration, we recommend starting small. The first step only requires identifying interested faculty and staff who are willing to engage with each other across different campuses. Then, we recommend organizing workshops – what we label "Summer" and "Winter" academies" – that include faculty, staff, admissions counselors, and most importantly, a few Deans and other key leaders at the different institutions who are willing to issue a call for action and engagement. These 'calls to action' provide motivation, justification, and inspiration, and are tailored to fit each institution's goals, including social justice, enrollment needs, or other strategic interests. During these academies, we employed several mechanisms to foster relationships including workshops, strategy sessions, and general efforts at community building. Each academy is centered around a theme (i.e., Community, Democracy, or Racial Diversity) and included work to raise awareness of both the challenges and need for more inclusive education. One very effective approach involved task-oriented workshops. At these workshops, faculty from across campuses met together in breakout rooms to discuss essential elements and curriculum that would be necessary to create pathways from, for example, history courses at the community colleges to the History Department at UNH. This work takes time, communication, and community building, and initial meetings were occasionally met with skepticism and even bias. But our partnership's emphasis on institutionalizing these meetings

several times each year ultimately fostered individual relationships, building trust and enthusiasm across colleges. After these initial meetings, participation grew as organizers began a "match-making" of sorts connecting key faculty and administrators on different campuses and recruiting them into a range of projects, including internship programs; course collaborations; the 300+ person Mock Nominating Political Convention; a HUGEmanities project giving tools and assignment templates from the digital humanities to faculty, a statewide contest where students at both CCSNH and UNH submitted work; and shared faculty research around racial and social justice.

While small pilot grants are ideal to incentivize this work and build momentum, the most essential piece is leadership: a few like-minded and committed individuals on a few different campuses, and a meeting space with a few tables for breakout sessions and workshops (and perhaps a coffee pot and tray of cookies to encourage informal conversations). We cannot stress enough that relationship-building across institutions is by far the most essential aspect of all of these programs, and can be achieved without any external funding. Indeed, as humanists, we must always remember the key role of human-to-human connection, and the last several years have highlighted the importance of relationships – faculty, administrator, and student – in achieving our goals.

The pandemic and the raw divisions revealed and amplified by the election, have made humanities partnerships between universities and community colleges like ours more urgent than ever. As academic leaders strategize about how to move beyond the immediate crisis of the fall semester, we all have a responsibility to reach out to our neighboring institutions to start a conversation about strengthening ties. Faculty, students, and institutions of higher education will be better off for it.

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