



eLearning.

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Students speak up about eLearning amid COVID-19

by Professor Randelle Sasa

Among the indirect effects of COVID-19 are school closures to decrease the risk of viral transmission of the disease. However, such closures meant a shift to online learning that affected poor, working students, especially those who have children who need to be home schooled (Perelman, 2020). The National Student Clearinghouse Research Center reported an eight percent decrease in enrollment in community colleges, translating to half a million fewer community college students nationwide this fall (Levin, 2020). *Inside Higher Ed* reported a drop in enrollment rates anywhere from five to 30 percent (Jaschik, 2020). These alarming statistics beckon educators to be cognizant of their students' circumstances so that appropriate student success interventions can be instituted.

The eLearning Committee interviewed four students from different disciplines to ask about their experiences on eLearning amid the COVID pandemic. Nardia Mohsin was amid a clinical nursing course, Jenny Ok was taking Chemistry lab, Marcos Velez was busy with his coursework in music, while Rachel was attending Biology courses when COVID-19 hit back in March. They all agreed to share their experiences with us.

1. Tell me about your experience on eLearning during COVID times.

NARDIA: The beginning of the pandemic was very hard for me. Being a mother of three and a student myself, I had to put my own schoolwork on hold to navigate my kids' remote learning platform. I was sleeping less, very disorganized, and overwhelmed. I felt as if I did not know where to start. I had a mountain of work to do and too exhausted. It was *very* hard. I had to go back to the drawing board to figure out what resources were available to me. Fortunately, my professor was very supportive and helped us to get acquainted with remote learning— always available to answer our questions and explaining every task. Eventually I signed up for tutoring because I needed the extra help. Tutoring turned out to be the best thing that ever happened to

me. I found myself blocking out appropriate time slots to study just for my tutoring session, which helped me tremendously.

JENNY: Before this, I have always attended in-person classes, so this is definitely a transition that took me time to adjust. I still prefer in person classes. I have had technical issues on a few occasions.

MARCOS: The experience has been really good overall. Having lots of time to complete my homework and attending school from home really streamlined the process for me. There were times when I feel that technical difficulties have taken up time or slowed the pace of the class, but these are minor in the grand scheme of things. I think the real difficulty is trying to stay focused over long periods of time, with the internet constantly teasing you to drift away into distractions. But even then, I have enough time for that and my schoolwork as well. Besides, I think it's important to balance work with play, especially in these times. Trying to be too productive during a pandemic can you make you feel even more isolated.

RACHEL: Although it took me some time to become accustomed to eLearning, I have grown to enjoy the online format. I cannot convey the full extent of my appreciation towards my professors, who have been incredibly receptive, considerate, and supportive in these challenging times. Thanks to them, I have been able to transition smoothly to online learning and learn the required material.

2. What challenges did the COVID school closure and rapid transition to online learning pose to your studies?

NARDIA: I always believed that I would never be able to survive in online school, because I needed a physical reminder of all the work I had to do. I felt that online school was out of sight and out of mind. I would set reminders to check all websites used by the school for assignment, or I would fall behind. Being at home made my family believe that I could not possibly have that much to do if I am just sitting in front of a computer. I felt it would have been easier if I would just drive to campus; then my family would know that I had a lot of work to do. I would have my children come to me during lectures because they have no one else to ask for help, and simply because "mom was home". I would literally only have 1 hour and 15 minutes each day to get ready for class, because my class started at 5pm and my children would be done at 3:45pm. I had a laptop that was 8 years old and it started to malfunction with extended use. I was literally in tears because it was right before a major exam. I knew I needed a new laptop. I was very grateful that my husband was able to get me a new laptop in short time.

JENNY: Being a single mother of a first grader, I feel the added pressure especially now that her school was shut down again due to COVID. In addition to the classes I'm currently taking and working, I now have to set aside a few hours each day to do schoolwork with her. It is overwhelming, challenging and I am exhausted most days. Just last week, I had 3 exams for my classes, a report and I had to take the PAX entrance exam. Needless to say, it was a rough week but I got through it. It comes down to time management and priorities. If that means setting five

different alarms, waking up at 3AM to get my assignments done, or sleeping at 4AM only to wake up 3 hours later to get to work— then that's what I have to do.

MARCOS: One of the main reasons I decided to go back to school is because of COVID. Quarantine gave me lots of time to think about what I really wanted for my life, and what would make the most sense given the difficulties that will remain in the foreseeable future. I thought, what better way to come out of this pandemic than with a degree in hand?

RACHEL: I had come to enjoy many aspects of taking in-person courses at QCC such as walking to and from the campus, breathing in the crisp air and enjoying the warmth of the sunshine, and listening to the lovely, energetic voices of children as they entered and exited the neighboring elementary school. The abruptness of the school closure and transition to online learning amidst COVID initially left me disoriented and in utter shock. I really struggled with the swift change to online learning. I was accustomed to learning in a classroom environment, surrounded by fellow classmates and communicating with the professor. The new online format felt very distant and removed. I struggled to feel the same level of visceral connection I had felt with my professors during in person classes. My mind also lagged in retaining the information from my science courses, especially since I no longer had the option of studying in the library or in coffee shops.

3. What positive aspects of eLearning did you discover?

NARDIA: There are a few positive aspects of eLearning that I discovered. First is being able to maximize my time studying because I was at home and I had all my resources at my fingertips. I also was able to study with my classmates virtually without worrying about getting a babysitter. Being a stay-at-home mom, it was a relief to know that I was close to my children if they needed me and I was able to be present in class at the same time.

JENNY: Positive aspects of eLearning? I guess I have to say that it forces someone to take control of and be very mindful of how they are managing their time.

MARCOS: I like being able to connect with a wide range of students and professors from the comfort of my home, having everything in one place with no paper needed. Recording of class sessions made it easy to study.

RACHEL: Although this experience has really been challenging, I began to realize that there are many positive aspects of eLearning. I appreciate how I can come to class with a click of a button instead of setting aside an hour to prepare and travel to campus. I can now dedicate that time to activities and hobbies outside of class. I noticed greater participation among my fellow students. I feel that the online format and the chatting option encourages more students to voice their thoughts actively. I really enjoy the livelier sessions. My professors have dedicated their best efforts to facilitate the transition to online learning by frequently reaching out to us students, offering guidance, support, and additional resources to help in academics, even our mental health. As a result, I feel strongly connected to them and well supported in my education despite the

circumstances. The different media available to students to better learn the assigned material have made virtual class sessions stimulating and engaging. For example, several of my professors have incorporated animated videos, online quizzes and games, and virtual labs in lessons to review challenging material. I have found such lessons and activities to be delightful and helpful in understanding difficult subjects.

4. What are the strengths and areas for improvement of QCC's eLearning platform/ program?

NARDIA: The strengths of QCC's eLearning program are availability of information, workshops, and resources. Having a tutor available online was a great help. I felt like I was able to take advantage of opportunities that were not available to me before due to the time these programs were offered. An area for improvement is the amount of assignments. It can get overwhelming when you see many assignments due in a short period time.

JENNY: I think it's great and necessary to have eLearning. Who would have thought the year would turn out the way it has? Schools closing down and going remote is new for both faculty and students. We are all learning and adjusting— though some of us are struggling more than others.

MARCOS: I think Blackboard could have better audio and connectivity strength, as well as tools to share audio files. This is important for a music majors.

RACHEL: QCC's e Learning platform holds many strengths. As a student, I appreciate how easy it is to upload assignments, take quizzes and exams, and attend classes and office hours all through one or two centralized platforms. I love that I receive my grades quickly. Blackboard sends me alerts and reminders for approaching due dates so that I can remember to submit assignments on time. The ability for students to view recorded lectures is undoubtedly another major strength; it helped clarify my understanding of difficult topics by allowing me to review lectures— and in the case of organic chemistry, I was able to solve problems alongside my professor any time of the day. These have greatly helped me in preparing for exams. One possible area of improvement would be the occurrence of bugs during exams. While I was beginning an exam last semester, Blackboard suddenly shut down my page and submitted my answers, leaving me with my jaw agape, a grade of 6 out of 100, and an icy cold sensation washing over my body. Thankfully, my professor understood the situation and reset the exam.

5. Share your tips to fellow students who are currently struggling with eLearning.

NARDIA: I found it very useful to create a schedule and stick to it. I created calendar invites to send out reminders regarding assignment due dates and added my classmates to it. I am the type of person that need alarms going off everywhere to remind me what I needed to do throughout the day. I found making a to-do list everyday kept me on schedule. I would put everything on my to-do list. By sticking to my schedule, I was more organized, and I was able to study more efficiently. Number one thing was to block out my study time and put *all* my devices on “do not

disturb” mode. Tutoring kept me on track with my readings. I asked for help from my professors— extensions even—when I fell behind. I also asked for feedback so that I have a clear idea about how I was doing in class. Also, finding time for self-care and rest is *very important!*

JENNY: My advice to students who are struggling with eLearning would be to *plan ahead*. I write out my day-to-day schedule on an oversized monthly calendar to help me stay organized and juggle everything I have going on. I jot down when I have an exam for each class, what chapters I must study and due dates for assignments. It really helps to see things written out. I have different colored folders and notebooks for each class. I have the QCC academic calendar taped on my wall. Be aware when there will be no classes and conversion days (for example, a Tuesday will follow a Monday's schedule). Be on top of things, do not simply rely on your professors to tell you. Reach out to professors if you have questions. It's important to communicate especially now that classes are online and we do not have the opportunity to talk to our professors in person after class. Write down the office hours of your professors. I have the office hours of my professors written down and taped on the wall. Make it a priority to always submit assignments on time. Do not miss a class. Listen to recordings if you did not understand the lecture the first time. If professors left comments on the assignments I submitted, I make sure to keep them in mind as I work on the next assignment so I can improve. Stay organized; Don't give up. Take it one day at a time.

MARCOS: I have a whiteboard that I keep above my desk with all my classes, homework due for those classes, and other important dates. Having too much your computer can jumble up information so I like to keep my reminders on paper where I can physically see them all the time. I also think cleaning up and organizing your desktop and email really help make space for all your school files. I would also suggest taking full advantage of learning from home by keeping some creature comforts close during class like a nice hot chocolate, pet, or something to fidget with. However make sure to keep unhealthy distractions out of sight or difficult to access to set yourself up for success. Being creative with your space by decorating or changing areas if you have a laptop can break up the routine in a healthy way. Sometimes I'll get up and stretch while I listen to my lectures too.

RACHEL: I have found keeping a big desk calendar to be indispensable; writing out assignment and exam due dates by hand has helped me stay on track. I enjoy how the size of the calendar lets me see all my assignments in an instant. Another tip would be to keep cellphones out of reach during class sessions and perhaps install a browser extension that allows one to choose websites to temporarily block; I have found doing both activities helps me focus and be far less distracted during classes and studying sessions. I would also encourage other students to seek counseling offered by QCC, for we are living in difficult and chaotic times and could all benefit from being able to speak about our pain and experiences.

References

- Jaschik, S. (2020, August 17). A tough year for community colleges. *Inside Higher Ed*.
Levin, D. (2020, October 12) No home, no wi-fi: Pandemic adds to strain on poor college students. *The New York Times*.
Perelman, Deb (2020, July 2) In the Covid-19 economy, you can have a kid or a job. You can't have both. *The New York Times*.

Faculty Spotlight:
An Interview with Dr. Meg Tarafdar

by Dr. Punita Bhansali



Can you tell us how long you've been working at QCC, your department, and a few words about your background/ discipline?

I started working in QCC's Center for Excellence in Teaching and learning (CETL) in 2006 and continued my role as an Associate Director until my transition to the English Department in 2015. My specialization includes Post-Colonial studies, Composition & Rhetoric, and World Literature. I have taught courses such as ENGL 101/102 and upper level literature courses in various modalities.

As faculty coordinator of Global & Diversity Learning (GDL), one of the high impact practices at QCC, I regularly conduct workshops on course design and reflection activities to stimulate a heightened consciousness regarding diverse cultures, global life experiences, and multiple perspectives for preparing our students to become globally competent citizens.

As a core member of the eLearning team since 2008, I have served as facilitator and mentor for eLearning, supported faculty cohorts in developing online and hybrid courses, and reviewed the program's objective of increasing students' success rates in blended and fully asynchronous classes at the College.

Can you describe your new role with CETL?

In my current role as an Interim Director of CETL since Jan 2020, I have been involved in professional development activities to support faculty across the disciplines in their effort to increase student success. By designing and delivering a range of pedagogy-practice programs, I support the college's ongoing commitment to developing and assessing the most effective ways to reach and teach our diverse student body. I work with faculty members to implement pedagogical initiatives and interdisciplinary collaborations within and beyond the college's organizational structure. In addition to working closely with faculty members across the disciplines, the office of Academic Affairs, the Diversity Office, the Office of Educational technology, and other campus units, I also collaborate with Centers for Teaching & Learning throughout CUNY and other institutions for addressing important issues related to community college pedagogy.

What has CETL done to support faculty in the switch to remote learning?

Because of the sudden switch to remote learning in March 2020, CETL has expanded the opportunities of virtual professional development and individual consultations regarding pedagogical practices, scholarship, and the use of educational technology. CETL has worked closely with the Office of Educational Technology (OET) in order to support the College's transition to online instruction.

CETL has hosted professional development sessions on timely, contextual issues and distance learning pedagogy in order to address a range of challenges faced by faculty, staff, and students. In collaboration with various departments and campus-wide committees, CETL has offered workshops on Engaging Students Online, Mental Health Series: How to help your Students, Fostering Inclusiveness in the Virtual Classroom, Creating Digital Presence, Online Communication Styles, Scholarly Publications, and related topics in response to the emerging needs of this unprecedented time.

Are there any other eLearning activities that have been initiated by CETL?

CETL's eLearning activities involved workshops, consultations, and support sessions on pedagogical practices in the online environment; review of instructional design based on Quality Matters standards; faculty training on ACUE's modules (Creating an Inclusive and Supportive Environment), and Q&A sessions on online pedagogy.

What have been the biggest challenges to you in your role as Interim CETL director?

The biggest challenge as Interim Director was the sudden switch to remote operation and the lack of resources to handle this crisis. Since I was new to my role in CETL, I had limited time to adapt to my administrative responsibilities before handling the urgent transition to virtual programming.

As the Interim Director of CETL, have you noticed any changes with regard to online teaching and learning strategies with the advent of COVID?

Because of COVID, instructors have integrated several newly emerging pedagogies and have changed their approach to online teaching and learning. The new online modality requires a scaling up in the level of effort and training for utilizing the tools of student interaction, engagement, and collaboration. There has been a substantial growth in technology skills, greater awareness about instructional design, and a strong interest in assessment practices in the virtual environment.

In your transition from faculty to CETL director, have you learned anything new about the strengths of QCC and its faculty and staff?

I have observed the amazing resilience of QCC faculty in stepping up to face the challenges of teaching online and adapting innovative practices for ensuring student success. Most faculty have embraced the goal of inclusivity and compassion in their approach in responding to the emerging needs of our diverse student population, especially those whose lives have been impacted due to the pandemic.

What are some of the goals of CETL in the future?

- Mentoring of faculty– sharing pedagogical strategies, providing resources;
- Collaboration –events, programs, communities of practice, and CUNY-Wide initiatives;

- Leadership – lead general education learning outcome alignment across the curriculum;
- Service – conference announcements, hosting discussions, webinar & videos on teaching.

Is there anything else you would like to share about your experience as the Interim CETL director as it relates to eLearning?

As an Interim Director, I am looking forward to providing leadership, knowledge, and vision for the design and implementation of eLearning at QCC. I hope to explore important aspects about student learning and effective online pedagogy by stimulating a greater interest in pedagogical research.

eLearning Brown Bag series: *Pear Deck*™ for Slide Presentations

by Professor Randelle Sasa

Professor Susan Lago led this semester's eLearning Brown Bag session, featuring *Pear Deck*™, a slide presentation manager that allows for interactive online classes. The session was conducted last October 28, 2020 via Zoom teleconferencing.

The eLearning committee conducts faculty Brown Bag sessions every semester to share educational technologies to QCC faculty members.



PHOTO: A snapshot of Professor Lago's Zoom class as she demonstrated how to use Pear Deck.

eLearning Updates

Upcoming Events sponsored by the Office of Educational Technology

1. Best Practices for Ending the Semester with Blackboard - [click here to register](#)

Tuesday, December 8th, 2020 3:00pm
Friday, December 11th, 2020 11:00am

Monday, December 14th, 2020 3:00pm
Thursday, December 17th, 2020 11:00am

2. Upcoming PlayPosit Partner Webinars - [click here to register](#)

Note: PlayPosit's upcoming webinar series is hosted by the PlayPosit Instructional Design Team.

- Flipping Your Syllabus with PlayPosit - Tuesday, December 15, 2020 1:00 PM
- PlayPosit's Live Class Response System Broadcast for Synchronous Instruction - January 13, 2021 12:00 PM

3. eLearning Institute – Winter session (January 5, 12, 19 and 26, 2021) – registration ongoing.