Crisis as Catalyst for Change and Innovation

"Navigating That Changing and Uneven Landscape"—*How Technical College Educators Grapple With Pandemic-Impacted Teaching, Learning, and Student Support*

This report is grounded in the experiences and insights shared by educators in various roles across Wisconsin's technical colleges as they engage in adaptations, changes, and innovations since Spring 2020. Collectively, interviews with these educators reveal the following key recommendations for maintaining the innovations that cultivate a humanizing and equitable technical education.

- Create spaces for conversation and connection; Offer affirmation of the challenges of the last few years and the stress of constantly resetting. In particular, faculty need to be seen, heard, and understood.

- Transparent and open communications; Hold listening sessions with faculty and staff with the focus on the kinds of support they need as well as trusting them to do their job. Invite colleagues from varied areas of student support to the table toward equity and inclusion.

- Keep flexibilities in place for students, faculty, and staff (e.g., course modes, support staff availability, remote work options, release time for faculty involved in DEI initiatives and other innovations, etc.). Offering rest and reflection is key right now.

- Dismantle barriers to student learning and progress (e.g., equity-based assessments—what do you want students to be able to do, and what is a fair way to determine if they know how to demonstrate that). Give credit to students for prior coursework and work experiences.

- Collect and analyze data to inform decision-making. "It is not about what we prefer or what we think that the student needs." It's what the students are showing and saying they need.

The findings reported in this brief are based on research conducted by the Crisis as Catalyst for Change and Innovation (CCCI) team. Supported by the National Science Foundation (DUE-2100029), CCCI is a longitudinal study of change and innovation in technical education and their lasting impacts. The project is led by Principal Investigator Dr. Xueli Wang (UW-Madison), Co-Principal Investigators Dr. Turina Bakken and Dr. Mary Ellen Kraus (Madison College), and with support from the Wisconsin Technical College System (WTCS). Our first research brief presented a global picture of the adaptations and new initiatives that emerged across WTCS institutions, based on an analysis of WTCS news briefs and various media sources. We uncovered themes of access and flexibility, holistic support for students, community focus, and agility to innovate underlying these adaptations. We found colleges demonstrate their overall commitment to supporting students holistically, but we also cautioned that there is a critical need to address faculty and staff development and supports, as well as the imperative for sustained diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) efforts.

We recognized that challenges persist as the pandemic continues to loom. To seek credible, promising solutions, we delved deeper into the experiences of institutional leaders, administrators, faculty, and staff as they engage in adaptations and innovations. From January to July 2022, we conducted interviews with 79 of these key stakeholders. In the following pages, we present the common themes across participants, which lend richness and depth to the patterns reported in our 2021 report. Before finalizing this research brief, we sought feedback from interview participants who expressed interest in seeing the results and our advisory panel consisting of instructors across WTCS institutions, and received feedback from 30 individuals. We are grateful for their generosity and thoughtfulness that helped strengthen this report.

TEACHING, LEARNING, AND FACULTY DEVELOPMENT

Our interviews uncovered both promising ideas and persistent challenges in the learning experiences and outcomes among students as a result of various instructional adaptations. Those that we interviewed (faculty, academic leadership, administrators, and faculty development specialists) all shared highly promising, innovative approaches that can be broadly captured in three themes: a). creative use of technology, b). human-centered approaches to instruction, and c). re-envisioning core competencies to prepare students for technical education in the post-pandemic landscape. Below are some of the most compelling approaches under each theme.

A. Creative Use of Technology

Remote learning poses particular challenges for technical education programs that traditionally rely on an in-person mode for hands-on learning, such as occupations in the trades (e.g., electronics technicians, clinical technicians, and automotive technologies) and laboratory and agricultural sciences. This is also where we see some of the most compelling innovations in terms of both investment in and engagement with technology. One notable finding is about the transformative role simulation has played. As an instructional leader shared, "Some of our healthcare classes have learned how to use virtual reality to do simulation in areas that we never did before. We embraced virtual reality and created some modules that they could do in a virtual world." What once would have taken years to implement was by necessity put into place much more rapidly. Though this put pressure on faculty and support staff to learn technologies and develop new content quickly, the quality of the experience for students and resulting learning outcomes were better than expected. Students were able to learn skills and knowledge in remote environments, which, as one instructor told us, allows for "immersive and tangible learning experiences." This significantly broadens the scope of traditional hands-on technical education, both in terms of how the courses can be offered (i.e., in-person, hybrid, fully virtual) and what content can be included. Programs that once were considered mandatory face-to-face only, suddenly have much greater flexibility through virtual components.

Including but extending beyond technical programs, we see participants experimenting with newer ways to incorporate technology and online resources in their teaching, even after returning to in-person classes. Incorporating instructional technology in meaningful ways allows class time with the students to be more efficient, making it easier for students to attend to other obligations, yet stay on track with their coursework. In many subject areas, instructors mentioned the multitude of online, open-access resources available to incorporate into their curricula to provide context and diversify instructional approaches. Instructors leveraged their ability to bring in remote speakers, unhindered by distance or access. An instructor working with currently and formerly incarcerated individuals described how remote conferencing tools helped support the teaching and learning of this student group, "I'm continuing to use [technology] to bring in outside experts for given topics so that they can talk directly to a jail classroom. That prevents us from going through a labor-intensive background check process getting people into the jail." He noted that other programs rely on outside speakers as well. Engaging with technology to allow presenters access to classrooms remotely has given instructors a "deeper pool of experts that previously didn't have the time to participate." Lastly, another instructor noted that he could take advantage of remote learning to attend professional development opportunities in a more convenient way. These are just some of the many examples of how our interview participants engaged technology in creative ways, both major

and incremental, harnessing a wide range of technologies and content to achieve an enhanced student experience and to gain skills of their own. As a faculty and program director put it, "We realized that we could do a lot more than we initially thought we could with online teaching and learning."

The new possibilities for incorporating technology do not mean all faculty embraced its use. The concerns shared by instructors centered around two areas. The first area is the in-person classroom experience some instructors deem necessary to have assurance that students can perform tasks and skills essential for the workforce. This is particularly true in programs where students and others may be at great risk if skills with using special tools or equipment are not learned properly and demonstrated to instructors, examples being aviation mechanics and diesel mechanics. Another area where this is true is where rapidly changing technological advances occur, such as electronics and electrical engineering. Here, employers need students to have proficiencies with a wide range of equipment, not all of which can be simulated. On a related note, one instructor told us that while he was able to adapt his courses so that students could collaborate and work in teams in virtual environments, the impact of taking these aspects of the program online still leaves a gap in comparison to the live classroom, causing concern for the development of important "soft skills" such as collaboration and teamwork.

The second area of concern is dwindling capacity, time, and resources to develop the knowledge and skills of the instructors to teach effectively using technology. Even though there are countless digital assets available for instructors to reference and sift through, those all have to be vetted before being passed on to students. In addition, resistance to moving courses and programs to virtual or hybrid platforms has led to stress for instructors as well as leaders, as some instructors quit or retired rather than adapting to new modalities. A further complicating issue is digital equity and competency among faculty. As one dean told us, "Some faculty members, just as our students, are not savvy when it comes to technology, so it creates an additional barrier for them." These concerns warrant multi-level institutional structures and support to prepare faculty to do what's best for students. The words of a chief information officer to describe the beginning phase of the pandemic still ring true, "How can we pivot to a digital mobile campus from an equipment, infrastructure, cultural, and support perspective, conveying that we believe it is important for everyone in the institution to adopt that mindset and that we were prepared to support them with the appropriate technology?" For some institutions, this has meant that those who may not be as tech savvy have additional training and development with technology. One instructor told us that her college "created faculty mentors to provide a network of faculty-to-faculty assistance and collaboration in various areas." These and other approaches will remain essential to maintain and grow capabilities with technology within the colleges.

B. A Human-Centered Approach to Instruction

Although student-centeredness was something that resonated with all the instructors that we interviewed, many of the interview participants described what we refer to as "human-centered" approaches to their pandemic-impacted instruction. This means that the holistic contexts of "people who are also students" are being purposefully factored into instructors' course design and approaches. One program director sums up human-centered approaches best as the need "to figure out a way to really, truly meet students where they're at and provide education on a timeline and in a timeframe that makes sense for them, whether that's their learning pace, or their life responsibilities and all the other things that go into training a human being. There's a lot of other elements we need to consider for them to really be ready for the

classroom and ready to learn and be successful." More broadly, given what COVID has unveiled, colleges now have a responsibility to respond. As another program director said, colleges need to make sure students are treated in a holistic way, attending to more than the academic elements of education, and "sometimes instruction means that we have to look at transportation needs, childcare needs," so that students can focus on being students.

Participants shared many seemingly small yet powerful elements underlying this human-centered approach. Most of these involve recognizing everyone as human beings with complicated lives who also want to be successful students and getting to know and understand where students are coming from. Faculty mentioned being "aware of students' life circumstances." They performed "check-ins with students, unprompted;" they paid attention to details about their students, especially in instances where they could not meet face-to-face at all, things like "knowing students' names, calling out something that they talked about to form a connection." Yet another faculty member shared that his program moved to adjust how students interacted with employers, noting students engaged in "direct involvement with employers in the field" both formally (e.g., internships) and informally (e.g., events, meet-ups, tours, etc.), so that students got to know more about what it is like to work for different employers and industries more intimately. This familiarity made students better prepared to get a job once they graduated. These and many other examples shared by our participants offer concrete ideas about how to attend to the "many variables in students' lives" to make their educational experiences more personal and meaningful.

Within the classroom, instructors and faculty went out of their way to make personal connections and give students a holistic sense of support. "I know I have to make one more phone call, one more text, one more email," said one associate dean. Another participant, a student support staff person, noted the importance of "always letting students feel free to connect if it's something very important." Support offices maintained extended hours and were "open" and operating sometimes until 8:00 at night to serve students. Connection to students was enhanced by engaging teams of faculty and staff for coordinated supports. As one program manager told us, "I've been able to bring more staff in on more meetings. I think it helps our students feel like they're getting this foundational support group here." This human connection was essential for students and anchored them within the colleges and to their programs. As told by an associate dean, "We got to see the students struggle, and we were there to accompany them and try to help them navigate that landscape that was changing and uneven." For many students, this made all the difference. To be sure, not all faculty continued to maintain this human-centeredness. As one instructor noted, some faculty were, by Fall 2021, ready to approach their relationships with students "as though COVID never happened. Some staff forgot about the difficulty our students faced and grew impatient with being flexible. Empathy for student needs has started to wear off." Thus, the challenge remains for maintaining the focus on flexibilities for students.

C. Re-Envisioning Core Competencies/Learning Outcomes

Interview participants also reflected on potential new skillsets to infuse and impart post-pandemic. As one dean put it, "One, we can be innovative very quickly. Two, the students' needs have changed, and we need to respond to their needs." Digital readiness and competency regarding DEI represent two compelling directions, made even more compelling by the urgency imparted around both. "Digital readiness" encompasses more than just abilities surrounding use of technologies, expanding to include helping students understand what supports are available, creating online learning communities where students feel they are a visible part of something,

and making online and hybrid learning more interactive. We spoke with an associate dean who defined digital readiness comprehensively, saying that it ensures "that we're getting students on board for learning, that we're assessing their digital literacy skills when they come in, that we're building community, that we're intentionally creating that engagement and community online so that there's more motivation to complete, there's more of a connection for support."

In the area of DEI, ongoing efforts have been ramped up and new efforts have been initiated in many colleges. As open-enrollment institutions that serve a diverse student body, the colleges increasingly view literacy surrounding DEI as an essential core competency. Colleges are bringing teams together aimed at better understanding student needs and providing the flexibility and responsiveness inherent in equitable approaches to education, which takes a lot of time and resources. One vice president told us, "We all got together and decided we're going to start doing a lot more aggressive planning and assessment and work on this. We have teams in every school." These efforts involved several components designed to better serve students, including coordinating student supports and re-envisioning assessments. In particular, faculty considered how feedback cycles and performance-based evaluations could be used to measure students' knowledge and skills more equitably. One instructor noted that the DEI team at the college works closely with the assessment team to focus on DEI, "especially related to cultural, social, and global awareness." For some instructors, equity efforts are focused less on cultural aspects of interacting and more on planning and implementing curriculum that best meets students' diverse needs; "For me, every single course has a different story. So, I try to take care of every individual course or program." Another instructor noted that "using industry experts from diverse backgrounds and cultures to present topics and skills to the students is a big part of my teaching." In all cases, diversity is an important and ever-present feature of our world, and as one college vice president put it, "Everybody needs to work with diverse suppliers, customers, coworkers, at a baseline level regardless of what those other skills are, so thinking about each of those disciplines having some freedom to think about what are the learning outcomes that are most relevant for their occupation as well, you know rather than assuming it is going to be a cookie-cutter approach to say everybody needs to learn these five things or, across the college wide."

As faculty implement new approaches, they also wrestle with the widening gaps and disparities that they notice in their students' experiences and the kinds of resources and supports they might need. Not all students were as successful as others in the new environments created by the pandemic. Based on the interviews, this was particularly salient in regard to income, age, ability, and geography. This represents the most notable area of continued challenges. For these learners, oftentimes virtual options are not preferred due to complications related to comfort with technology, access to technology, and lack of space and time away from other responsibilities to complete coursework. As one instructor told us, there is an "obvious challenge of older and senior students with new technologies. Students who return to school after a while to complete or start a program have several problems with new methods and technologies applied in teaching which have been adopted since the pandemic started." Providing all students access to various materials and methods or tutorials to help them adapt has been both a challenge and opportunity. While student supports have increased considerably and are more widely available, one barrier to students taking advantage of the supports is that, as one student success coach noted, engaging with resources is student-driven, with the impetus for using support services being placed on the student. So, the challenge remains in connecting students with the available resources and letting them know what's

out there that might help contribute to their success, whatever that success looks like. In response to the challenge that students often need to seek out support on their own, an exemplary new practice shared by our faculty interview participants is building a technology training module into their courses right at the beginning, thus offering a smooth transition to the technology used in the classes. Beyond these supports for learning, students can potentially benefit greatly from receiving credit and being recognized for competencies achieved from prior education and work experience. One program manager told us, "We started to look holistically at all the work that students had been doing leading up to the point of enrollment...in total, at what students had accomplished for example, in high school, at work." This represents a more equitable and inclusive approach to get more students into and through college programs while still focusing on core competencies.

STUDENT SUPPORT BEYOND THE CLASSROOM

The student support professionals we spoke with pointed us to a number of innovative practices, all centered around holistically addressing the many intersecting challenges that disproportionately impact the most vulnerable populations. Some examples to highlight: Staff were available at almost all hours. They used high- and low-tech methods to reach out to students and address their needs. In addition to the technology (e.g., computers, hotspots, webcams, etc.) and learning materials (e.g., lab kits, simulation software, virtual reality, and training on how to use these) that were distributed (sometimes by hand to students' homes), staff went above and beyond to reach out to students and make important connections.

Given the major role student support professionals played in connecting students and staff with resources, it is important to highlight the fact that they were also part of teams dedicated to helping instructors better understand and meet the needs of students in multiple arenas using technological tools. With so many changes, college centers dedicated to excellence in teaching and learning were pivotal hubs for streamlining efforts, developing data-driven training, and coordinating implementation of various tools for staff and students alike. One associate dean told us, "We look at data to help inform where do we need to make changes? How are things going?" This is true even for programs that may not otherwise have been targeted for innovation in the past. "We've got data by division: Here's the dashboard for Business, here's the dashboard for Health and Public Safety, here's how much time we've spent with your learners and in what manner, what type of intervention, and what area of instruction. This is incredibly innovative for the adult basic education integration and education of training world."

Cutting across these interviews is a commitment to removing barriers for a more seamless student experience. A compelling example is the "student-ready" ethos facilitated by the recent Guided Pathways reform. As a participant described this shift in mindset, "[in our past practices], we always ask if the students are college ready. Are you ready? We tested them, you're not ready, go back. We can't accept you, we can't admit you, and so on so forth. We reversed that question, and we asked: Are we 'student-ready'? Meaning to say any individual student that came to our college deserved education, are we ready for our students? And if they're not ready because of a test, what can we do to get them ready?" Participants shared many examples where they changed their own practices at the individual level to fully meet student needs. More important though, being student-ready involves removing and

dismantling some of the long-standing institutional policies and structures that do not actually serve students. For instance, some colleges removed admissions fees or placement tests to improve access to programs that students would otherwise be shut out of. Adjusting traditional approaches to determining whether or not students can enter programs due to placement testing or other assessments are essential for making it possible that a more diverse student population can realize their educational and occupational goals.

DEPARTMENT AND PROGRAM INNOVATIONS

Various technical education programs and departments as key institutional units are also navigating an influx of both challenges and opportunities. As our in-depth case studies are still underway, here we share preliminary findings from one particular case study, the full findings of which will be reported in a subsequent research brief by our team. Initial findings reveal three broader approaches or themes: a). a catalyst to accelerate innovation, b). reimagining the (online) classroom, and c). innovation as a core disciplinary feature. Selected quotes from participants illustrating these approaches are provided under each of the three themes below.

A. Catalyst to Accelerate Innovation

While the pandemic could put a damper on efforts to innovate, several programs and departments found that the pandemic compelled them to fast-track changes and innovations they were already working on. For example, a diesel technology department was using grant funding the year before the pandemic to revamp their programs, including streamlining courses and developing learning objects. The streamlining and creating learning objects were incredibly timely in the switch to remote instruction, as noted by one instructor, "I was finishing learning objects and handing them off to instructors that were teaching as fast as I could finish them…And they were happy with them, but we were so far ahead of that curve just by chance, and that saved us."

Another approach that gained traction due to the pandemic was co-op programs, which blends classroom instruction and hands-on training in the workplace. In the case of co-op programs, instructors set and monitor skills and competencies in agreement with and signed off by partnering employers. That way, students can apply the knowledge they learn from the classroom in the workplace, all the while getting credit for performing a predetermined set of tasks. This was an approach that originated in pockets of departments but spread quickly to others as they grappled with students needing to work, not being able to be at the college as they had been before the pandemic, along with labor shortages and retirements. The automotive technology department had learned about co-op programs from other departments and piloted their own, "We've been able to try to get our students back into industry a lot more. We created a co-op program that we're running. We're able to have a student here less in lab and have them at work a). making money and b). helping that industry out, helping them make money too, and get the vehicles faster out the door."

B. Reimagining the (Online) Classroom

Participants from various departments and programs often noted enduring transformations to their classrooms due to the pandemic, both online and in person. Some of these changes included reimagining hands-on experiences and developing efficiencies in learning for students. A key challenge among the programs and departments was maintaining hands-on labs, workshops, and other relevant experiences that are an inherent part of these

programs. This challenge prompted departments to develop interactive programs, described by an instructor in the electromechanical department, "So like for building circuits, there was software…where they would physically be putting resistors into circuits and applying voltage through a virtual environment, see what would happen…I built trainers for just about every lab we had across the five classes to imitate a physical thing, so that they had feedback, like if they would create a program and push the button, they would see if their logic worked to control what we're asking them to do." While these innovations were helpful and continue to be used, participants also noted that, "there is no replacing a certain amount of hands-on. We have to do it, and it's part of our world."

Programs and departments were also confronted with the challenge and opportunity to create efficiencies in learning that would benefit their students moving forward. Several participants described approaches such as honing in on the most essential content for students; allowing students to choose topics and experiences they want to participate in based on their learning, career, and life goals; providing students with materials and content ahead of in-person instruction or labs for better preparation and more efficient learning in class; and shortening lecture for more hands-on learning. For example, instructors from the agriculture department created brief, 15-minute videos featuring experts for students to watch "on their own time if the topic related to them." Another instructor from the same department described a similar process, "I've really reduced even a full-on video lecture…if I have slides I want you to see, I'm writing some notes in the speaker notes, and here's the slides, read through the slide deck. If I do videos, they're quick short videos and most of the time, I'm doing a lot of activities where they're working through either exploring a website or exploring some research or completing an activity to be able to meet our goal of what I want them to learn." Even though many programs are fully back to in-person instruction, these and other similar approaches will remain in place to provide additional content and to improve student engagement.

C. Innovation as a Core Disciplinary Feature

Although the pandemic posed significant disruptions at all levels, participants consistently referred to the innovative nature of their programs and disciplines as a driving force to adapt and change to the circumstances before, during, and well after the pandemic. For instance, in the automotive technology department, several participants highlighted how problem-solving, being forward-thinking, and constant improvement and adaptation are core features of their programs and industry more broadly. They used an example of a virtual reality program they initially pursued as a potential innovation that eventually was not a fit for them, "we're not afraid to try things, and they don't always work out…It was kind of like a virtual reality thing…We thought it would work…Things change, and it didn't work out well…Maybe a different area can use it and I think nursing is going to take them."

Collaboration, both intra- and cross-departmental, was also part of being innovative programs and disciplines, which helped in navigating pandemic-related challenges and the remote transition. Departments were quick to share materials, support online instruction for one another (including tools and approaches), and work through problems and challenges together. An instructor in the manufacturing technology department found that in "the different departments everyone's done a great job of being responsive through Teams, Teams meetings, and being virtually available to login and help each other that way." In the electromechanical department, "Because we are very hands-on, it took a lot of work by all people in our group to kind of put that [program online] together…we split it up kind of based on what classes were kind of our forte."

INSTITUTIONAL LEADERSHIP

At the end of the interviews, we asked our participants, including the many institutional leaders themselves, to offer recommendations or concerns, as times are continuously trying. The responses we heard overwhelmingly concentrate on the challenge of burnout and the "Great Resignation"—heightened rates of resignation in higher education. Faculty, staff, and leaders all had full plates. They had multiple responsibilities in addition to the constant pull of work, leading to burnout. Further, finding qualified individuals to fill the vacancies has been very difficult. Below is a sample of participants' insights and advice for institutional leaders.

Concerns surrounding burnout were ubiquitous. One student support staff person told us, "I think my biggest concern was really burnout during COVID, for our faculty members. Well, for many, many folks in higher education. Just because you can only do so much outreach, you can do so many calls before you start carrying the potential stress and frustration of the students." We described the extent to which faculty, administrators, leaders, and staff went to provide for students. This took its toll in the form of transferred stress and anxiety. This was echoed in the words of an education director, "Many of us in education during the pandemic really internalized a lot of what we heard. We were sounding boards for the struggles that many people are facing. Many people in education, particularly 2-year institutions, really wanted to go above and beyond, because you feel that sense of mission that you're in this work because you really love these institutions. All of that just really, for everyone was super stressful. The work is just so circular, and it's always ongoing. And now we have all of these different campuses that do trimesters. So, you know, there's no summer semester off, or everyone's kind of staggered, and the work still has to get done. So, for me that really led to my sense of burnout."

This nonstop effort and extra burden did not go unrecognized by leaders both within the colleges and at the system level. As one institutional leader described it, "Quite frankly, during the height of the pandemic, they were 24/7. They were very productive, ultra, high performers. And I'm like—okay, you folks, can't keep going at that rate without tiring. So, you need to stop out, you need to do self-care so that you can continue to be brilliant. Otherwise, your brilliance will burn out, and I don't want that. You don't want that. No one wants that. That's some of human response to this challenge because not only are we all thinking about being educators or administrators, but we are also all mothers, wives, aunts, children. We are a total sum of our parts, not one part, and I think we have to really start to honor that." This echoes the theme noted earlier related to human-centered approaches—this has to be college and systemwide for students and staff alike. Faculty and staff are people in addition to the roles they play within their jobs. This is reinforced in what one dean told us, "Part of this response to the crisis, and having it be a catalyst for healthy change again comes back to being flexible with our people. You know I talked about how resilient they were. I also had to really listen and watch people because we were constantly asking them to step up to the starting line again, you know? Do another marathon, and then soon as they're done with that one, step up to the starting line again. And sometimes they were just not ready, you know they just needed a break."

Complicating this burnout is the critical need for centering DEI work. As a faculty participant said, "You only have so many people who are doing the work. This is all being looked at as volunteer work. Some people get some course release for some of the work that they do. I feel like I'm fortunate in the fact that [my dean] is supportive, so he's like, 'You find people to teach your classes, and I don't care how many you teach…you're running our team, you're running the committee, you're helping to implement the plan throughout the school.'" As

students, faculty, and staff return to campuses, it may be easy to lose track of the meaning, purpose, and essential nature of DEI efforts. The efforts of those who are engaging in this work should be recognized so as to allow DEI work to remain front and center and not fall by the wayside.

Recognizing and honoring the Herculean effort put forth by the colleges (and particularly the leaders, faculty, and staff running them) throughout the pandemic is so important. The work does continue to get done, even given all the challenges faced and met, as well as those that are ongoing. With that recognition, individual college and system leaders should be ever more cognizant that faculty and staff need and deserve the supports and care of a human-centered approach to work, just as students need a human-centered approach to education. Flexibilities, course releases, and holistic approaches to supporting faculty and staff are essential parts of making lasting change and enabling long-term wellness and continued commitment to the work being done, invigorating those with "boots on the ground" who are at the very heart of these institutions.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

To quote one system leader, "What is the good that's going to come from this?" Campuses quickly adapted, and we now know more about some of adaptations that were made and the outcomes that resulted. We are at an inflection point. Right now, we have an opportunity to identify the positive changes, and make these more permanent. Some key recommendations that we believe will help colleges maintain the innovations that are working well include:

- Create spaces for conversation and connection; Offer affirmation of the challenges of the last few years and the stress of constantly resetting. In particular, faculty need to be seen, heard, and understood.

- Transparent and open communications; Hold listening sessions with faculty and staff with the focus on the kinds of support they need as well as trusting them to do their job. Invite colleagues from varied areas of student support to the table toward equity and inclusion.

- Keep flexibilities in place for students, faculty, and staff (e.g., course modes, support staff availability, remote work options, release time for faculty involved in DEI initiatives and other innovations, etc.). Offering rest and reflection is key right now.

- Dismantle barriers to student learning and progress (e.g., equity-based assessments— what do you want students to be able to do, and what is a fair way to determine if they know how to demonstrate that). Give credit to students for prior coursework and work experiences.

- Collect and analyze data to inform decision-making. "It is not about what we prefer or what we think that the student needs." It's what the students are showing and saying they need.

Ultimately, as we rebuild community, it is of utmost importance to create space for all—faculty, students, staff, and leaders—to be, to connect, to be in conversation.

MORE ON CCCI

As a longitudinal mixed methods research project running from June 2021 to May 2024, Crisis as Catalyst for Change and Innovation continues to evolve following the lead of the voices and insights from our research participants. We are currently engaged in several in-depth case studies and the development of a data dashboard that showcases the range of change and innovation that continue to emerge. Critical to our entire research process, we continue to rely on our panel of 18 technical college faculty across the WTCS who has and will continue to provide vital input on our research. Finally, we are still recruiting interview participants to offer new directions or nuance the findings that have emerged. If you are interested in participating, please contact Principal Investigator Xueli Wang at xwang273@wisc.edu.

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The following CCCI team members contributed to this brief: Xueli Wang conducted the 65 individual interviews, led data analysis, and collaborated with Amy Prevost and Kelly Wickersham in developing the main structure and content of this research brief. Kelly Wickersham conducted 14 interviews for the case study and led its analysis, supported by Ayse Okur. Amy Prevost, Peiwen Zheng, and Xiwei Zhu assisted with all phases of data processing and analysis of the individual interviews in preparation of the brief. Turina Bakken and Mary Ellen Kraus contributed to the development of key recommendations. Nicole Contreras-Garcia and Maria Widmer reviewed and offered input on earlier drafts. For more information on this research brief or the CCCI project in general, contact Xueli Wang, Principal Investigator at xwang273@wisc.edu.

BRIEF NOTE ON ANALYSIS

For the findings reported in this research brief, we analyzed interview data collected from a range of WTCS institution and system stakeholders, including faculty, staff, and administrators. Interview participants were selected two ways: 1) based on text mining results from the first phase of the study and 2) a snowball approach, meaning study participants suggested additional individuals who might be willing to share their experiences related to change and innovation in response to COVID-19. Interviews were about 60 minutes in duration with the vast majority conducted in a virtual format. To analyze the interviews, we read over the transcripts multiple times to familiarize ourselves with the key experiences and ideas shared by the participants. Next, we generated deeper meaning by organizing these key elements into common categories and larger themes across participants. We then pulled compelling or significant statements from the transcripts that support these larger themes and categories to amplify participant voices in illuminating the process of change and innovation.