

Experiences and perspectives of online community college faculty

by

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B.A., University of Houston, 2010

M.S., University of Houston-Clear Lake, 2012

AN ABSTRACT OF A DISSERTATION

submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Department of Educational Leadership  
College of Education

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY  
Manhattan, Kansas

2026

## **Abstract**

Online courses and programs have become prevalent in higher education, and since the COVID-19 pandemic, community colleges have seen a spike in online learning interest. Using a basic qualitative design, this study explored the experiences of nine full-time community college faculty who taught solely online through semi-structured interviews. Findings uncovered that participants described their experience as challenging yet fulfilling, navigating the complexities of fully online instruction while finding deep fulfillment in serving non-traditional learners. Participants affirmed and expanded on essential competencies for effective online teaching and expressed their desires for greater institutional support. Interpreted through Tamim's (2020) systems model, Moore's (1997) theory of transactional distance, and the Community of Inquiry framework (Garrison et al., 1999), the findings reveal that the quality of online community college teaching is shaped by how well institutions support faculty in sustaining presence, developing their practice, and leaning into the human capacities that no technology can replace. The findings contribute to the understanding of online faculty workload and institutional support in the community college context, with particular implications for institutional leadership, instructional design and educational technology support, and faculty professional development.

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Approved by:

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Online courses and programs have become prevalent in higher education, and since the COVID-19 pandemic, community colleges have seen a spike in online learning interest. Using a basic qualitative design, this study explored the experiences of nine full-time community college faculty who taught solely online through semi-structured interviews. Findings uncovered that participants described their experience as challenging yet fulfilling, navigating the complexities of fully online instruction while finding deep fulfillment in serving non-traditional learners. Participants affirmed and expanded on essential competencies for effective online teaching and expressed their desires for greater institutional support. Interpreted through Tamim's (2020) systems model, Moore's (1997) theory of transactional distance, and the Community of Inquiry framework (Garrison et al., 1999), the findings reveal that the quality of online community college teaching is shaped by how well institutions support faculty in sustaining presence, developing their practice, and leaning into the human capacities that no technology can replace. The findings contribute to the understanding of online faculty workload and institutional support in the community college context, with particular implications for institutional leadership, instructional design and educational technology support, and faculty professional development.

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## **Dedication**

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## **Chapter 1 - Introduction**

Since 2012, higher education enrollments have been declining, while distance education enrollments have continued to increase (Seaman et al., 2018). Despite the increase in distance education enrollments, success and completion rates in online courses at community colleges have shown to be statistically lower than in traditional face-to-face courses (Gregory & Lampley, 2016; Jaggars & Xu, 2010).

In March 2020, in-person instruction halted and moved online as part of instructional contingency efforts due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Floyd, 2021; Spinks et al., 2021). Described as “panicgogy” (Spinks et al., 2021), the sudden shift to online caught face-to-face instructors and students off-guard, with both groups underprepared to engage in solely online instruction, lacking adequate technology and preparation (Bosley & Custer, 2021; Floyd, 2021; McCarthy & Ferreira, 2022; Singh et al., 2021; Spinks et al., 2021). Instructors struggled with their loss of ability to teach their subject effectively, while students were struggling to complete their required coursework. For most faculty and students, the forced shift to online during the COVID-19 pandemic was their first experience with online teaching and learning (Seaman & Johnson, 2021).

In May 2023, the public health emergency status for COVID-19 ended (Assistant Secretary for Public Affairs, 2023), with many higher education institutions having already transitioned back to on-campus operations (Weissman, 2023a). Despite the return to fully in-person operations and face-to-face classes, students have shown a strong desire to continue learning online, especially at community colleges (Weissman, 2023a).

Several community college systems in states such as California, Indiana, Virginia, and Texas have experienced online enrollment growth since the COVID-19 pandemic and have been

challenged to meet this growing online learning demand (Weissman, 2023a; 2023b). One community college in Texas opened an online campus to address the growing interest in online learning (Weissman, 2023b). Furthermore, data from the Changing Landscape of Online Education (CHLOE) 9 report shows that community colleges are prioritizing creating online versions of on-campus courses and programs and expanding their section offerings of existing online courses to meet learner demand (Simunich et al., 2024).

### **Statement of the Problem**

Growing interest in online learning at community colleges post-COVID has led to a need for faculty to teach online. However, prior to and post-pandemic, community college faculty have been resistant to adopt online instruction over concerns about the workload to develop and teach online courses and missing out on the live interaction that occurs in the traditional, face-to-face classroom (Cohen et al., 2014; Kisker et al., 2023; Mansbach & Austin, 2018). Research further indicates that asynchronous online teaching requires the use of specific technologies, design, and facilitation strategies to instruct learners at a distance and considerably more time to develop and teach an online course (Garrett et al., 2022; Grode-Hanks, 2016; Hulett, 2018). Additionally, studies reveal that online community college instructors receive varying levels of institutional support for developing and teaching online courses (Andrews & Hu, 2021; Jaggars, 2019). More research is needed to understand better how community colleges support faculty with online teaching and learning (Andrews & Hu, 2021; Li et al., 2021; Xu & Jaggars, 2013).

While significant research exists on online instruction at community colleges, missing from the literature is the perspective of full-time community college faculty who teach their course load solely online. The forced shift to online instruction during the COVID-19 pandemic provided a worldwide example that fully online teaching is possible (Falk et al., 2022; Floyd,

2021), yet the perspective from the community college context remains largely absent from the literature. With the growing need for faculty to teach online, and the history of resistance and mixed institutional support for online instruction, it is imperative to explore and examine the experiences of community college faculty who persist and thrive in the online modality. This study aimed to fill the gap in the literature by exploring the experiences of faculty who teach their course load entirely online.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the experiences of full-time community college faculty who teach solely online. This study aimed to uncover the challenges and triumphs of teaching fully online with the goal of identifying essential competencies needed for teaching online and faculty desires for institutional support.

### **Research Question**

This study is guided by the research question: How do full-time community college faculty describe their experiences of teaching solely online?

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study employs a framework derived from Tamim's (2020) model of online education as a complex system, which examines the interactions between three levels: theoretical foundations, institutional management and infrastructure, and online instruction. According to Tamim (2020), the foundational theories guide and are implemented in the practice of online teaching and learning through institutional management and infrastructure. In the model, the theories of transactional distance (Moore, 1997) and Community of Inquiry (Garrison et al., 1999) drive the practice of online education and showcase the instructor as a pivotal role in the online student learning experience. Per Tamim's (2020) model, the level of institutional

management and infrastructure impacts the online instruction level. This framework focuses on the faculty perspective and the interplay of the underlying theories of online education and institutional management of online teaching and learning.

## **Research Design**

To address the purpose and research questions, this study utilized a basic qualitative research design. Basic qualitative methods are employed to better understand how people experience a phenomenon and make sense of their experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015; Tisdell et al., 2025). Since this study focused on exploring the experiences of community college faculty who teach solely online, it was fitting to adopt a qualitative study design.

## **Participants**

Basic qualitative research uses purposive sampling to identify and select potential participants and sites that align with the phenomenon under exploration (Creswell & Guetterman, 2020). To explore and better understand the experiences and perspectives of community college faculty who teach solely online, participants who fit this description were invited via email and LinkedIn posting to participate in the study.

For this study, the following two criteria were used to recruit research participants: 1) Research participants must be full-time faculty at a community college or public two-year higher education institution, and 2) they must teach their course load exclusively in an online modality. Full-time faculty who taught any courses with a face-to-face component were excluded from participating in the study.

## **Data Collection and Analysis**

Interviews were the primary data source in this study, supplemented by researcher notes. Due to the geographic separation of the participants, interviews were conducted online via Zoom

using a semi-structured interview protocol (Appendix A). Interviews were transcribed, coded, and analyzed using NVivo qualitative software. Transcripts underwent multiple rounds of coding to analyze participant experiences with solely online teaching and determine salient findings. Throughout the data collection and analysis process thoughts, questions, reflections, and interpretations were documented to support the study findings.

### **Assumptions, Delimitations, and Limitations**

Every research study is shaped by the assumptions that guide it, the delimitations that define its boundaries, and the limitations that affect its scope and quality. This study was guided by three core assumptions: that participants would respond honestly and that their responses would accurately reflect their experiences teaching online; that a perceivable difference exists between online and face-to-face teaching and learning; and that participant experiences are shaped by both personal beliefs and philosophies and the institutional factors unique to the community college setting.

The study was delimited in several important ways. A basic qualitative research design was selected for its flexibility in data collection and analysis, though as the primary instrument of qualitative inquiry, the researcher's own interpretations may have influenced the findings. Data was collected through online interviews, which offered flexibility and accessibility but may have affected the comfort level of participants and the richness of responses that in-person interviews can provide. Participation was limited to full-time community college faculty from different institutions who taught solely online, meaning that participants represented varied institutional infrastructures and cultures that shaped their experiences and perspectives.

This study was also subject to several limitations, including the researcher's knowledge, time, and access to the study population. Additionally, while participants were drawn from

multiple institutions, the study's findings are not intended to be generalized, and the transferability of the results is ultimately left to the reader.

### **Significance of the Study**

With online learning projected to grow, community colleges and other higher education institutions need to have faculty that teach online. This basic qualitative study holds significant value in understanding the lived experiences of community college faculty who teach solely online. By exploring their unique challenges, perspectives, and practices, this research provides insights into an understudied yet growing segment of higher education. The findings contribute to addressing critical gaps in the literature, particularly in understanding the implications of online teaching for faculty workload, institutional support, and the community college context.

Community college faculty often serve a diverse, non-traditional student population that benefits from the flexibility of online education. This study sheds light on how faculty navigate the complexities of supporting these students, including their strategies to overcome technical, pedagogical, and other challenges in the online environment. The findings from this study can inform institutional policies and practices aimed at enhancing faculty preparedness, professional development, and access to resources, ultimately leading to improved student success in the online modality.

Furthermore, the insights derived from this study can guide community colleges in fostering supportive structures, such as professional learning communities, instructional design assistance, and technology support, tailored to the needs of faculty teaching exclusively online. By focusing on the experiences of online faculty, this study provides valuable recommendations for higher education stakeholders, including administrators, policymakers, and faculty support staff, to enhance the quality of online education at community colleges.

## **Operational Definitions**

The terms relevant to this study and aim to provide context are defined as follows:

### **Asynchronous**

Occurring outside the bounds of scheduled time (Scheiderer, 2021).

### **Distance Education**

The NCES (n.d.) defines distance education as Education that uses one or more technologies to deliver instruction to students separated from the instructor and to support regular and substantive interaction between them synchronously or asynchronously. Technologies used for instruction may include the following: Internet; one-way and two-way transmissions through open broadcasts, closed circuit, cable, microwave, broadband lines, fiber optics, and satellite or wireless communication devices; audio conferencing; and DVDs and CD-ROMs if used in a course in conjunction with the technologies listed above. THECB (2017) further defines distance education as the formal educational process that occurs when students and instructors are not in the same physical setting for the majority (more than 50%) of instruction.

### **Distance Education Course**

A course in which a majority (more than 50%) of the instruction occurs when the student(s) and instructor(s) are not in the same physical setting. A distance education course can be delivered synchronously or asynchronously to any single or multiple location(s) through electronic, correspondence, or other means. The course may be formula-funded or offered through extension, and it may be delivered to on-campus students and those who do not take courses on the main campus. A fully distance education course is a course which may have mandatory face-to-face sessions totaling no more than 15% of the instructional time. Examples of

face-to-face sessions include orientation, laboratory, exam review, or an in-person test. (THECB, 2017)

### **Face-to-Face**

In-person or face-to-face courses are courses where the instructor and students are in the same room, typically located on campus, and instruction occurs synchronously during the scheduled time. (THECB, 2012)

### **LMS**

Abbreviated term for Learning Management System. The LMS is a virtual platform that houses learning materials, activities, and assessments. (Mohd Kasim & Khalid, 2016)

### **Modality**

Modality indicates the instructional delivery method; for this study, face-to-face and online are the only modalities referenced. (THECB, 2017)

### **Online**

Virtual delivery via the Internet, either synchronously or asynchronously. (NCES, n.d.)

### **Synchronous**

Occurring in real-time. (Scheiderer, 2021)

## **Chapter Summary and Organization of Dissertation**

Community colleges, which serve diverse and nontraditional students, have seen notable growth in online learning, especially after the COVID-19 pandemic necessitated a rapid transition to remote instruction. With the growing interest in online learning post-COVID, there is a need for community college faculty to teach online. This growing demand necessitates exploring the perspectives of online instructors who have persisted in the online modality to

understand what enables them to be effective instructors. This study seeks to address an important gap in the literature: the experiences of full-time community college faculty who teach solely online. Understanding their unique challenges and successes is critical for developing effective institutional support systems, enhancing online teaching practices, and improving student success in the online modality.

This chapter provided an overview of this dissertation study and introduced the study's background, research problem and questions, key details of the design, and its significance. The literature review in chapter two provides further background, context, and relevant literature related to online instruction in community colleges. Chapter three describes in detail the methodology and design for this study. Chapter four explains the findings from the analysis of the data, and the dissertation concludes with a discussion of the findings in chapter five.

## **Chapter 2 - Review of the Literature**

While substantial research exists on online faculty, little is known about community college faculty who teach their course load solely online. This chapter first presents an overview of community colleges and then explores topics related to online teaching, with each topic shedding light on online instruction in the community college setting. The chapter closes with the conceptual framework that guides this study and a summary of the chapter's contents.

### **Overview of Community Colleges**

As a public, 2-year institution, community colleges serve a unique role in the higher education landscape. Community colleges developed from desires for universities to relinquish lower-level first-year and second-year instruction to focus on upper-level scholarship and to provide additional years of public education beyond high school grade 12 (Cohen et al., 2014). Originally designated as junior colleges in the early 1900s, these colleges provided lower-division coursework and evolved to provide vocational education to support their surrounding community (Cohen et al., 2014). In 1947, The Truman Commission Report introduced the term “community college” and bolstered its role in the education landscape as an educational institution able to provide access to equitable, affordable, and local public education (Cohen et al., 2014; Gilbert & Heller 2013). Community colleges have since served their surrounding communities by operating under an open-access mission and open-door admissions policies to provide higher education to students regardless of their financial status, ethnic background, or academic preparedness (Cohen et al., 2014; Dalziel, 2003, Jaggars, 2019).

## **Online Enrollments in Community Colleges**

Data prior to and since the initial COVID pandemic shows an upward trend for distance education enrollments at community colleges. In the fall of 2019, 36.4% of students enrolled at public, 2-year institutions were enrolled in distance education courses (NCES, 2024). The following year, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the overall and public 2-year institution distance education enrollments skyrocketed to almost 70% for fall 2020.

Since the initial declaration of the pandemic and national recommendation allowed safe return to on-campus operations, distance education enrollments have decreased; however, they have still maintained a higher percentage than pre-COVID. In the latest available data from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), 53.2% of higher education students were enrolled in distance education courses in fall 2023, with distance education enrollments at public, 2-year institutions registering at 56.7% (NCES, 2024). According to the Community College Research Center (2024), in the fall of 2022, about 60% of students enrolled in public two-year colleges took at least one remote learning course. Approximately 32% of students at public two-year colleges were enrolled only in online learning courses or designated as full-time online learners (Community College Research Center, 2024).

## **Community College Students**

Due to their unrestricted access, community colleges have a reputation for serving nontraditional students (Cohen et al., 2014; Jaggars, 2019; Kisker et al., 2023; Travers, 2016). Typically classified as a student who is older than 24 years of age, the National Center for Education Statistics (n.d.) expands characteristics of nontraditional students to include those who 1) attend part-time, 2) are financially independent, 3) are working part-or full-time while enrolled, 4) are single parents or have dependents, or 5) lack a high school diploma or GED

(Kisker et al. 2023; NCES, n.d.). Many community college students rely on financial aid to pay for their courses. Per Kisker et al. (2023), 81% of full-time and 54% of part-time community college students receive financial aid assistance. Based on data correlated by the Community College Research Center (2024) from the 2019–20 academic year, around 37% of students enrolled in public two-year colleges were awarded Federal Pell Grants on average, amounting to \$3,600.

Distance and online education at community colleges provide the opportunity to address the needs of these nontraditional learners, who often are juggling their education with family and work responsibilities (Dalziel, 2003; Jaggars, 2019; Travers, 2016). Online courses provide flexibility in students' schedules and are a primary reason students enroll in online courses and programs (Bawa, 2016; Capra, 2014; Dalziel, 2003; Jaggars, 2019).

### ***Community College Online Student Success***

Despite the growth in online enrollment and the flexibility online courses offer nontraditional students, student success and retention has been measurably lower than students enrolled in traditional, face-to-face courses (Gregory & Lampley, 2016; Jaggars & Xu, 2010; Travers, 2016; Xu & Jaggars, 2011; Xu & Jaggars, 2013). Gregory and Lampley's (2016) study of success rates at a Tennessee community college found that students enrolled in an online course were more likely to receive a grade of 'F' or withdraw than students taking the same course face-to-face with the same instructor. Further findings from the study indicated that first-year students were more likely to receive a failing grade, and males were more likely to withdraw from the online course (Gregory & Lampley, 2016). Jaggars and Xu (2010) found in their study of Virginia community college enrollments that students enrolled in online gatekeeper English and math courses had lower grades and were more likely to withdraw than students

enrolled face-to-face. Xu and Jaggars' (2013) study comparing data from 34 community colleges in Washington revealed results comparable to those of the Virginia study, finding that students online had lower grades and persistence rates than in face-to-face courses. Working students and those who identified as low-income or as an ethnic minority demonstrated lower academic performance (Xu & Jaggars, 2013).

Research during the COVID-19 pandemic shows similar student outcomes at community colleges. Data from the Virginia Community College System (VCCS) indicated a significant increase in withdrawals in courses during the spring 2020 semester while also experiencing a shift in student grades (Bird et al., 2022). During the spring 2020 semester, more students earned A's, while fewer students completed the course with an F as compared to the spring 2019 semester (Bird et al., 2022). Bird et al. (2022) attributed this trend to the college's altered grading policies. The following semester, fall 2020, Northwestern Connecticut Community College (NCCC) saw a decrease in success rates of 4%, with some courses experiencing a decrease of 15% or more (McCarthy & Ferreira, 2022). As indicated by the research, community colleges experienced more withdrawals and lowered success during the COVID-19 pandemic.

### ***Factors Impacting Online Student Success***

Jaggars (2011) suggests "at least three reasons why students may struggle in online courses: technical difficulties, increased 'social distance,' and relative lack of structure inherent in online courses" (p.1). Iloh's (2019) study confirms the struggles of online students. Iloh (2019) interviewed 34 nontraditional community college students about their experiences and perceptions about online courses. Students in the study shared that they were challenged with figuring out how to use the learning management system (LMS) and satisfactorily participate in

the course (Iloh, 2019). Additionally, students in Iloh's (2019) study felt isolated in the online environment.

The struggles and effects of isolation may be exacerbated for first-time online students. In a similar study, Capra (2014) explored the experiences of 15 community college students taking online courses. The study revealed all participants felt isolated in their learning experience due to lack of instructor interaction and connection with peers. Other findings in Capra's (2014) study revealed the online course structure and activities to be tedious, disengaging, and lacking application, resulting in learners' feelings of disorientation and disappointment with online learning.

Student experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic echo these previous studies. Forced to 'social distance' due to the COVID-19 virus, some community college students found themselves learning online for the first time. In the study by Bowne et al. (2022), survey responses suggest that students were moderately satisfied with the transition to online learning, yet open-ended responses indicated student frustrations with the lack of instructor communication, course assignment and technology expectations, and instructor preparedness. Student responses in the study by Singh et al., 2021 revealed effective course design, instructor adaptability, and presence, as well as prompt feedback, would have eased students during the sudden shift to online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **Community College Faculty**

Community college faculty's primary responsibility is facilitating student learning. (Cohen et al., 2014). Determined by the institution, full-time faculty's workload consists of their class hours and student enrollment along with institutional service (Cohen et al., 2014; Kisker et al., 2023). The typical class hours for a faculty range from 13 to 17 hours a week, which equates

to about four to five classes, and depending on the subject and available resources, class sizes can range from 25-35 students (Cohen et al., 2014; Kisker et al., 2023). Beyond their scheduled class hours, faculty spend their time advising and consulting with their students, participating in institutional programs and initiatives, and developing curricula aimed at improving student success (Kisker et al., 2023; Twombly & Townsend, 2008).

Over the past 70 years, community colleges have employed less full-time faculty in favor of part-time or adjunct faculty as a strategic plan to increase cost-effective measures (Kisker et al., 2023). Dating back to 1953, full-time faculty accounted for 52% of community college faculty (Kisker et al., 2023). The percentage has fluctuated over the decades, hitting a peak in 1968 with 66%, decreasing to 37% in 2003, and further decreasing to 33% in 2020 (Kisker et al., 2023). Though the percentage of full-time faculty has decreased over the years, these faculty play a vital role in community college success measures. Beyond course success, research indicates that full-time faculty yield higher retention rates (Smith, 2010) and graduation rates (Carrier et al., 2023; Jacoby, 2006).

With community colleges focused on meeting student demands, faculty have had to adjust their practices to teach in the online modality (Kisker et al., 2023). As mentioned in the previous chapter, community college faculty have resisted the shift to online instruction, favoring the traditional in-person classroom. According to Kisker et al. (2023), "Faculty members continue to believe that close personal contact with students is the most valuable and flexible instructional form that can be developed" (p. 224). Despite the general resistance to online instruction, community college faculty have embraced the online modality as a way to increase flexibility in their schedule, reach more students, learn new technologies, and expand their teaching practices (Windes & Lesht, 2014).

## **Need for Online Community College Faculty**

Justified in the previous sections, there is a need for full-time online faculty at community colleges. Higher education institutions, primarily universities, have started establishing full-time faculty positions solely for the purpose of teaching online (Bates & LaBrecque, 2019; Falk et al., 2022; Mandernach et al., 2013). In the study by Mandernach et al. (2013), one university required their online faculty to teach online full-time, Monday through Friday, 12:00 p.m. to 8:00 p.m., at a designated teaching center located on campus. These faculty taught four undergraduate classes per eight-week term with a cap of 20 students per course. Due to being hired for the sole purpose of teaching online courses, these faculty had no required research or service responsibilities, making these faculty more akin to their community college counterparts.

Full-time online teaching opens the opportunity for faculty to teach remotely, though most non-profit institutions prefer their faculty to be in residence to meet institutional requirements (Bates & LaBrecque, 2019). However, teaching an asynchronous online course load allows faculty to work from an off-campus location, providing instructors more flexibility in managing their time between their professional and personal lives (Grode-Hanks, 2016; Hadsell, 2012). Since students are drawn to online for its flexibility of being time and space independent (Capra, 2014), online community college instructors can reach more students from varying backgrounds (Brewer, 2018; Capra, 2014).

### **Online Teaching Roles & Competencies**

With the growing need for online faculty, it is important to understand what is required and expected of online instructors (Falk et al., 2022; Singh et al., 2022; Sithole et al., 2019). Evidence prior to and during the COVID-19 pandemic highlights the need to establish “policies

for minimal faculty competence” (Singh et al., 2022, p. 313). Without establishing competency expectations for online faculty, the quality of the online student learning experience can suffer (Brewer, 2018; Sithole et al., 2019; Smith, 2010).

As defined in Abdous’s (2011) framework for online teaching, “competency is perceived as the knowledge, skills, ability, and attitudes required to effectively perform roles within an organization” (p.64). Research examining online competencies has found that online instructors must possess knowledge and skills in subject area, technology, pedagogical practices, time management, and communication (Abdous, 2011; Albrahim, 2020; Brewer, 2018; Hulett, 2018; Tamim, 2020) in order to fulfill their primary roles as course designer, facilitator of learning and student engagement (Abdous, 2011, Martin, Budhrani et al., 2019; Martin, Ritzhaupt et al. 2019; Muljana & Luo, 2019; Smith, 2010).

According to research on online instructors, the facilitator role is the most important and prominent role for the instructor in the online student learning experience (Capra, 2014; Martin, Budhrani et al., 2019). It is in this role that online teaching takes place (Abdous, 2011; Martin, Budhrani et al., 2019). Instructors must implement the design of their course to foster student learning and promote a sense of belonging and community among learners (Abdous, 2011; Martin, Budhrani et al., 2019). To foster learning and community in the course, instructors post text and video announcements, respond to discussion posts, grade assessments, provide timely feedback, and communicate with learners using asynchronous and synchronous methods such as email and video conferencing (Martin, Budhrani et al., 2019; Martin, Ritzhaupt et al., 2019). If students are experiencing disruptions to their online learning experience, such as technology issues (Baily & Card, 2009; Bosley & Custer, 2021) or personal difficulties (Bosley & Custer,

2021; Hulett, 2018), instructors will often adjust assignment expectations or due dates to ensure students are successful.

Online community college instructors stress the importance of open and ongoing communication to support students in the online environment (Hulett, 2018; James et al., 2022; Li et al., 2021). This includes establishing expectations for course assignments, activities, and interaction, posting regular announcements and reminders, and providing progress reports and opportunities for mid-course feedback (James et al., 2022; Li et al., 2021). By providing quality feedback on assignments and course progress reports, the instructor is able to highlight areas students are doing well while encouraging and guiding those who may be struggling (James et al., 2022; Li et al., 2021). Furthermore, by providing opportunities for mid-course feedback, instructors can find out what students find helpful or what they are struggling with and adjust their teaching based on the responses (James et al., 2022).

As the other primary role in the online instructor experience, the course designer role enhances the facilitator role by planning, preparing, and designing the course to address learning outcomes and engage students in the course (Martin, Budhrani et al., 2019). It is in this role that instructors structure the course within the learning management system (LMS), select course content and technology, develop assignments and assessments, and determine student expectations for engagement and interaction (Martin, Ritzhaupt, Kumar, 2019). Research suggests that effective course design can alleviate common challenges experienced by online instructors and students (Cross & Polk, 2018).

Experienced online community college faculty recommend designing and developing courses using the backward design strategy and the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) framework (James et al., 2022). Backward design of courses considers ‘the end in mind,’ with

the structure of the course focusing on students' achievement of the course objectives and goals (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005). After identifying the course objectives and goals, the course assessments are selected and developed to measure the achievement of the course objectives and goals. The course materials and learning activities are then chosen, and the course is structured to enable students to complete the course assessments successfully (James et al., 2022; Wiggins & McTighe, 2005).

To further support student learning and achievement of course objectives, the UDL framework should be considered when designing courses. The goal of the Universal Design for Learning framework is to promote learner agency by incorporating human learning principles and providing guidance for how to design courses that are ADA compliant and meet the needs of diverse learners (CAST, 2024; James et al., 2022). This includes creating captions and transcripts for instructional videos, providing alternate text for all visuals, ensuring text materials can be read by a screen reader, and providing opportunities for learners to use multiple forms of media to express themselves in the course (CAST, 2024).

### **Workload & Time Online**

As mentioned previously, the community college instructor's workload is based on their required course load and their institutional responsibilities. For online instructors, the workload looks a bit different than a traditional, face-to-face instructor. Cross and Polk (2018) contend:

While the problems of managing workload are related to how many students an instructor is teaching, workload is also related to the nature of the digital classroom where repetitive tasks must be completed in order to grade assignments, communicate with students, and correct learning errors (Managing Workload section).

Various studies depict the workload of the community college online instructor. In the study by Hulett (2018), 11 community college faculty were interviewed about their experiences teaching in the online environment. Faculty in the study shared that the time involved in teaching online courses was greater than teaching face-to-face due to the time involved to prepare and facilitate learning and engagement in the online environment. Participants in the study were required to have their online courses developed and approved prior to the start of the term, making it a labor-intensive experience for instructors to prepare an engaging course with accessible learning materials compliant with the American Disabilities Act (ADA). Once instructors were actively teaching online, they struggled with managing their availability and time by emailing students, grading, and responding to course discussions, often working all hours of the day and sometimes sacrificing time with their loved ones. Despite the increased workload of preparing a course and teaching online, faculty expressed that they were “more than willing to devote as much time as necessary to ensure their students were able to be successful in their courses” (Hulett, 2018, p. 69).

Other studies have shown that instructors perceive the online workload to be greater than teaching face-to-face to the extent that the time commitment to online teaching may be detrimental to instructors’ personal lives (Hadsell, 2012; Hulett, 2018). Hadsell’s study (2012) with online community college instructors suggests that different subjects, such as math and English, may have their own challenges with teaching in the online environment, requiring instructors to interact more with students to teach difficult or pertinent concepts. Further findings from Hadsell’s (2012) study found that participants used words like frustrating, hard, time-consuming, and challenging to describe their experiences with teaching online.

On top of their online course workload, community college faculty engage in heavy emotional labor to ensure their students are successful (Cohen et al., 2014; Kisker et al., 2023). Serving learners from varying backgrounds and academic preparedness, community college faculty engage with their students to identify situations such as basic need insecurities, mental health struggles, learning disabilities, and other situations or challenges that may hinder learning and work to direct students to appropriate college and community resources and supports (Kisker et al., 2023). Kisker et al. (2023) caution that full-time community college faculty's workload combined with the emotional labor, institutional service, and commitments beyond teaching, may result in faculty workloads reaching unsustainable levels. Further exploration of community college faculty teaching fully online can provide much-needed insight into faculty workloads and support from their institutions.

### **Institutional Support**

Community colleges are responsible for ensuring that faculty are prepared to teach online. Abdous (2011) asserts that “faculty preparedness has a significant impact on the way in which online teaching unfolds. Thus, providing both development opportunities and ongoing technical support is critical for an effective [online teaching and learning] experience” (p. 74). Furthermore, prepared and supported instructors can lead to improved online student success (Andrews & Hu, 2021; Jaggars, 2019). According to Kang (2012), training is critical for the success of online instruction and the professional development of online faculty. Findings from Kang's (2012) study stress the need for technology and pedagogy training for online faculty.

Literature from community colleges has shown mixed levels of training for their online instructors. Studies have indicated that some instructors teach online without receiving prior training (Lichoro, 2015), while others are required to complete some type of training related to

online teaching (Andrews & Hu, 2021; Garrett et al., 2023; Jaggars, 2019). Furthermore, there is a wide variance in what training is required and its relevancy for online instructors (Andrews & Hu, 2021; Garrett et al., 2023; Kang, 2012).

Teaching and Learning Centers (TLC) are often a central source at universities and community colleges for training and instructional support for online faculty; however, the CHLOE 8 report indicates that community colleges, reported as public, 2-year institutions, are less likely to have a TLC than their 4-year counterparts (Garrett et al., 2023). Additionally, TLCs at community colleges are less likely to assist faculty with online course design than those at universities, though online course design and development support may be available through other institutional resources, such as instructional support staff (Garrett et al., 2023).

Online teaching and learning literature suggests that instructional support staff such as instructional designers and educational technologists can enhance course design and the student learning experience and ultimately improve student success (Abdous, 2011; Martin, Ritzhaupt et al., 2019; Smith, 2010). Instructional designers and educational technologists are knowledgeable of technology integration and course design in the online environment and can meet faculty at their individual knowledge and skill level to advise faculty and provide suggestions for course enhancements (Jaggars, 2019; Martin, Ritzhaupt et al., 2019; Scoppio & Luyt, 2017). Jaggars (2019) advocates for these roles to be involved with the design and development of online courses at community colleges. Data from the CHLOE 7 report shows that community colleges employ fewer instructional designers than universities, but the report fails to delineate the educational technologist numbers at community colleges (Garrett et al., 2022). With the anticipated growth in online education, Garrett et al. (2022) contend that “insufficient instructional design staffing may be one of online learning’s most serious long-term

vulnerabilities” (p. 20). As evidenced in the literature, access to these support roles can have a tremendous impact on faculty’s online teaching and student learning and success in the online modality, therefore more research is needed from online community college faculty about their access and use of these support roles and resources.

In addition to involving instructional designers and educational technologists in online course design and development, Jaggars (2019) suggests online faculty at community colleges have the opportunity to meet and engage with one another. New and experienced online faculty can benefit from the advice and mentoring from fellow online faculty, especially those who teach the same subject (Jaggars, 2019). Other research has shown that lack of access and connection to faculty peers can be detrimental to solely online faculty teaching off campus (Grobe-Hanks, 2016; Stewart et al., 2010). Online off-campus faculty lose the opportunity to connect informally with peers and exchange ideas (Stewart et al., 2010). Grode-Hanks (2016) recommends more research from faculty teaching solely online and the off-campus perspective from different types of institutions to better understand how these faculty connect and engage with their online faculty peers.

## **Theoretical Framework**

After a review of the online teaching and student success literature, it is evident that more research is needed to explore the perspectives of community college faculty who teach solely online. To bridge the gap in the literature, this study uses an integrated framework that is derived from Tamim’s (2020) model for online education.

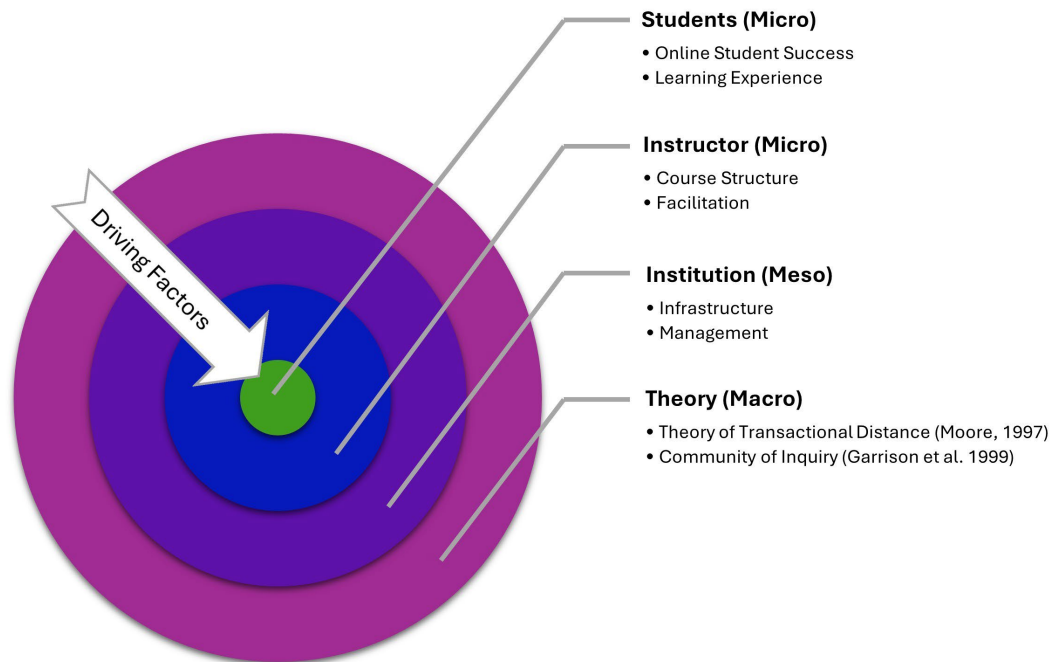
### **Online Education as a Complex System**

In Tamim's (2020) model, online education is depicted as a “complex system” comprised of various parts that interact and affect one another (p.741). Conceptualizing online education as

a complex system allows for the examination of the parts within the whole and provides greater context for how the various parts interact and affect one another. Tamim's (2020) model organizes online education into three levels: macro (theory), meso (management), and micro (instruction). In the model, foundational theories at the macro level guide and are implemented in the practice of teaching and learning online at the micro level through the support of the management and infrastructure at the meso level. The concept of online education as a complex system provides a framework in which to examine the intricacies of online teaching and learning from perspectives at the instructional (micro) and management (meso) levels as well as through the lens of its contributing theories (macro).

While Tamim's (2020) model combines both faculty and student perspectives at the micro level of instruction, the faculty and students are separated into their own levels in this study. Integrating the online teaching and student success literature with Tamim's (2020) model, this study is conceptualized and graphically depicted as a target in Figure 2.1, whereby the rings and center circle represent the different levels in the online education system.

**Figure 2.1 Framework for the Online Education System**



*Note.* Adapted from Tamim, S. R. (2020). Analyzing the complexities of online education systems: A systems thinking perspective. *TechTrends*, 64(5), 740-750. Reproduced with permission from Springer Nature.

In this study, students are situated as the center circle, with their success and learning as the core and focus of online instruction. Working outwards, the innermost, smallest ring represents the faculty, who are responsible for instruction in the online course, and therefore, a pivotal role in online student success and the student learning experience. The middle ring represents the institution, whereby management decisions and infrastructure drive online teaching and learning policies and practices. Lastly, the outermost ring represents theories of transactional distance (Moore, 1997) and Community of Inquiry (Garrison et al., 1999) that underly distance and online education. As indicated by the arrow, each outer ring drives and impacts the inner rings and center circle.

Using this framework, this study focuses on online community college faculty who teach solely online to understand more from their perspectives. According to Tamim (2020), “every decision the instructor makes is guided by their theoretical beliefs about transactional distance and community of inquiry” (p. 746) and is made possible because of an infrastructure and management that supports the instructor. To better understand the impact of infrastructure and management on an instructor’s experiences with online instruction, it is imperative to gain a foundational knowledge of the underlying theories of online education. Discussed in further detail in the subsequent sections, the theories of transactional distance (Moore, 1997) and Community of Inquiry (Garrison et al., 1999) both describe core components in facilitating learning in a distance environment and showcase the instructor as a pivotal role in the student learning experience.

### **Theory of Transactional Distance**

Moore’s (1997) theory of transactional distance coins its name from John Dewey’s (Dewey and Bentley, 1949) seminal concept of transaction, whereby:

The transaction that we call distance education occurs between teachers and learners in an environment having the special characteristic of separation of teachers from learners.

This separation leads to special patterns of learner and teacher behaviours. It is the separation of learners and teachers that profoundly affects both teaching and learning.

With separation there is a psychological and communications space to be crossed, a space of potential misunderstanding between the inputs of instructor and those of the learner. It is this psychological and communications space that is the transactional distance. (p. 22)

Establishing the potential for misunderstanding, Moore (1997) builds his theory of transactional distance around three variables of teaching and learning: dialogue, structure, and

learner autonomy. The interplay of these three variables determines the extent of transactional distance for the learner.

According to Moore (1997), it is “very demanding” and “much skill is needed” to appropriately structure a course and foster dialogue that is sufficient for each learner (p. 27). The course structure is considered to consist of the course’s learning objectives, teaching strategies, and assessments, whereas dialogue is positive, purposeful, and constructive interactions between instructor and learner that facilitate student understanding. The extent of structure and dialogue in a course determines the degree of transactional distance for the learner as well as the extent to which learners can autonomously manage their learning (Moore, 1997, 2019). Since learners vary in their ability to be autonomous, it is a challenge for the instructor to structure a course and foster an appropriate level of dialogue that addresses learners’ individual levels of autonomy (Moore, 1997, 2019).

According to the theory of transactional distance, more dialogue and interaction between the instructor and the student reduces the transactional distance, enabling the learner to be more successful in the learning environment. However, the extent and quality of dialogue in a distance education course are influenced by the chosen mediums of communication and the instructors’ and learners’ interactivity with those mediums (Moore, 1997). Dialogue can also be impacted by the physical and emotional environments and the personalities of the instructors and learners involved (Moore, 1997). For learners to be more successful, the instructor must take into consideration these factors of structure, dialogue, and learner autonomy when developing and teaching their course.

### ***Research with the Theory of Transactional Distance***

Since the term ‘transactional distance’ was first introduced in 1980 (Moore, 1980), several researchers have conducted studies using the theory of transactional distance. Initial work by Saba (1988) and Saba and Shearer (1994) focused on validating the theory of transactional distance and demonstrating relationships between the constructs of dialogue, structure, and learner autonomy. Further work by Saba and Shearer (2018) depicts higher education as a complex system whereby Saba and Shearer contend that and explain how the theory of transactional distance is influential in driving instructional and management practices within higher education that ultimately impact each learner.

Studies with online learners using the theory of transactional distance support Saba and Shearer's argument for the theory of transactional distance as a driving factor in higher education practices. Iloh's (2019) study, mentioned previously in the literature review, explored the experiences and perspectives of community college students taking online courses using the theory of transactional distance. Findings from the study showed that students experienced a lack of clear expectations and isolation in their online courses, resulting in a diminished online learning experience for the students. Further findings showed that students were not provided with an orientation to online learning before being enrolled in online courses, which likely contributed to their online learning experience. In another study, Orcutt et al. (2024) examined how an instructor's immediacy behaviors reduced the transactional distance experienced by community college students and contributed to their success in an online interpersonal communication course. Students in the study shared that the instructor's immediacy behaviors helped them build a connection with the instructor, with the course materials, and encouraged them to stay motivated with online learning. According to Orcutt et al. (2024), findings from

their study emphasize the importance of training community college online instructors in effective practices for online instruction.

Similarly, in a basic qualitative study by Kara & Yildirim (2020) based on the theory of transactional distance, distance education stakeholders, which included administrators, faculty, and students, were interviewed about their perspectives on optimal faculty behaviors in the distance education environment. Findings from the study identified crucial behaviors to manage transactional distance and support learner success in distance education environments, further citing that certain behaviors require support from instructional support roles. Kara & Yildirim (2020) suggested that these behaviors can be used to identify performance deficiencies and drive professional development and performance improvement practices.

### **Community of Inquiry (CoI)**

With the implementation and increased use of computers and the internet in higher education, Garrison et al. (1999) proposed a framework of essential elements for a quality and successful higher educational experience known as the Community of Inquiry (CoI) model. The Community of Inquiry model depicts the educational experience as an interrelationship of the three essential elements of cognitive presence, social presence, and teaching presence, (Garrison et al., 1999). The desired outcomes of the educational experience are achieved through relationships of the three presences.

Garrison et al. (1999) describe the most vital presence affecting the educational experience, cognitive presence, as the learner's ability to construct meaning and knowledge and enhance their critical thinking through communication and interaction. Cognitive presence is enacted through the Practical Inquiry model, which is rooted in Dewey's (1933, as cited in Cleveland-Innes et al., 2019) concept of reflective inquiry. In the Practical Inquiry model, a

triggering event sets in motion a four-phase process for critical inquiry and constructing meaning and knowledge. In the triggering event phase, an event or activity associated with a problem or issue generates initial curiosity in the learner. In the next phase, the exploration phase, the learner gains an understanding of the problem or issue and seeks out further information. Following the exploration phase is the integration phase in which the learner engages in discourse about the problem or issue to further shape understanding and begin resolving the problem or issue at hand. In the last phase, the resolution phase, the learner determines a solution and tests the solution if possible (Cleveland-Innes et al., 2019). Depending on the activity or learning environment, not all phases of the Practical Inquiry model may be reached by the learners without development of social presence or the facilitation of the teaching presence (Cleveland-Innes et al., 2019).

The next presence, social presence, is important to support critical inquiry and sense of belonging for the learner. While initially defined as the learners' ability to show their individuality and authentic selves when communicating and interacting with others as part of the learning community Garrison et al. (1999), the definition has been revised as “the ability of participants to identify with the group or course of study, communicate purposefully in a trusting environment, and develop personal and affective relationships progressively by way of projecting their individual personalities” (Cleveland-Innes et al., 2019). As social presence is developed, learners see themselves as part of the community of inquiry, thus enabling and enhancing collaboration and discourse (Cleveland-Innes et al., 2019).

The final presence, teaching presence, is “the key element to integrating the cognitive and social presences” through the design of the course and the facilitation of discourse to support the achievement of educational outcomes Cleveland-Innes et al., 2019, p.71; Garrison et al.,

1999). According to Garrison et al. (1999), the “efficacy of the educational process” is evaluated through the teaching presence and the teacher’s ability to promote reflection of the subject and an environment of “constructive explanatory feedback” (p. 102). Garrison et al. (1999) assert that teaching:

Requires considerable content expertise, not to mention pedagogical expertise, to make the links among contributed ideas, to diagnose misconceptions, and to inject knowledge from diverse sources such as textbooks, published articles, and internet-based resources. (p. 101-102)

Cleveland-Innes et al. (2019) contend that without a content and pedagogical expert in the teaching presence role, the educational experience can be diminished for the learner.

### ***Research with the Community of Inquiry Framework***

Since its publication, several studies have focused on the Community of Inquiry framework. In the study by Arbaugh et al. (2008), Garrison and colleagues developed a survey instrument to measure the social, cognitive, and teaching presences in online learning environments. The instrument has since been used in multiple studies and has been a key tool in providing empirical evidence and validation for the Community of Inquiry framework (Cleveland-Innes et al., 2019; Kim & Gurvitch, 2020).

One example is the study by Rosser-Majors et al. (2022). In their study, Rosser-Majors et al. (2022) used a rubric based on the Community of Inquiry instrument developed in the study by Arbaugh et al. (2008) to determine a connection between Community of Inquiry engagement strategies implemented by the instructor and their impact on student success and retention with university students. Results from the study demonstrated an improvement in course success and dropout rates in online courses after instructors completed the self-paced training modules based

on the social, cognitive, and teaching presences. Findings also showed that the majority of instructors who completed the training modules found the modules valuable and helpful in improving their online teaching practices, which also increased their enjoyment of teaching online.

Similarly, Dello Stritto and Aguiar's (2024) study investigated what skills experienced online instructors find most valuable for demonstrating teaching presence in online courses. Instructors in the study identified communication, organization, time management, technology proficiency, flexibility, and creativity as necessary for demonstrating teaching presence in an online course. Implications from the study suggest that instructor perceptions of necessary skills may differ based on the level of the course, the type of institution, and available support.

Looking at the Community of Inquiry framework and teaching presence from the student perspective, in the study by Thompson et al. (2022), the Community of Inquiry framework was used to determine what value community college students place on efficiency, teaching presence, and social presence in their online courses. Findings from the study revealed that community college students value teaching presence over social presence and that there may be a connection between teaching presence and the perceived efficiency of the course. Student responses identified poor design and lack of instructor interaction as indicators of an inefficient course. Thompson et al. (2022)'s study echoes findings from Capra's (2014) study, which was mentioned previously in the literature review. Capra's (2014) study used the Community of Inquiry framework to explore the experiences of community college students taking online courses. The students in Capra's (2014) study shared experiences that indicated the lack of social and cognitive presence in their courses, resulting in a more isolating learning experience for the

students. The study's findings also showed that teaching presence exhibited by the instructor "can enhance or compromise the learning experience" (Capra, 2014, p.119).

## **Integrated Approach**

This study takes an integrated approach to explore the online teaching experience. Drawing from Tamim's (2020) model, the study conceptualizes online education as a complex system comprised of interacting levels—macro (theory), meso (management), and micro (instruction). This systems-based model demonstrates how faculty instructional practices and online teaching experiences are shaped by the foundational theories and the institutional management of online education, which in turn influence student outcomes.

To further explore the instructional and institutional management levels within this systems model, the study incorporates the two macro-level theories of online education: Moore's (1997) theory of transactional distance and the Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework developed by Garrison, et al. (1999). These theories provide a framework to understand the foundational and crucial components of online pedagogy.

Critical in Moore's (1997) theory is the concept of transactional distance, which is the psychological and communicative space that occurs between instructors and learners when they are separated. The theory posits the constructs of dialogue, course structure, and learner autonomy impact the transactional distance experienced by the learner. Depicted in the theory, instructors play a crucial role in bridging the transactional distance and must be skilled to structure a course and facilitate dialogue with consideration of learners' autonomy.

Similarly, the Community of Inquiry model presents a framework of the interplay between the cognitive presence, social presence, and teaching presence in constructing meaningful learning experiences. The theory stresses that the instructor should be a content and

pedagogical expert since the teaching presence is critical for integrating the social and cognitive presences and fostering a community of learning.

Both Garrison et al. (1999) and Moore's (1997) theories position the instructor as a vital role in the learning experience and describe the need for the instructor to be knowledgeable about facilitating learning in a distance learning environment. As evidenced in previous sections, institutions play a significant role in supporting and training instructors in the skills needed to teach online.

By integrating Moore's (1997) theory of transactional distance and Garrison et al.'s (1999) Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework with Tamim's (2020) systems model, the interplay of the underlying theories of online education and institutional management of online instruction can be explored. Together, these three frameworks—Tamim's (2020) systems model, Moore's (1997) theory of transactional distance, and the CoI framework—form an integrated lens to explore the experiences of community college faculty who teach solely online.

## **Chapter Summary**

Community colleges serve a unique role in offering accessible, affordable higher education, particularly for nontraditional students. There is a growing interest in online learning at community colleges post-COVID-19, necessitating faculty to teach online courses.

Online instruction requires thoughtful design and facilitation to ensure online students are successful. However, research has shown that online community college faculty receive mixed levels of support in the development and teaching of their online courses. It is imperative to explore what enables faculty to thrive in the online modality and how community colleges are supporting online teaching and learning. This study uses a conceptual framework derived from

Tamim's (2020) model of online education as a complex system to explore how community college faculty experience teaching solely online.

## **Chapter 3 - Methodology**

This chapter presents the methodology and research design for this study. The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the experiences of full-time community college faculty who teach solely online. This study seeks to uncover the triumphs and challenges of teaching fully online with the goal of identifying essential competencies and faculty desires for institutional support.

### **Research Question**

This study was guided by the research question: How do full-time community college faculty describe their experiences of teaching solely online?

### **Basic Qualitative Research Design**

Research approaches are selected to best address the research problems and questions. To address the research question, this study employed a basic qualitative research design. Basic qualitative studies aim to explore how individuals interpret and derive meaning from their personal lives and experiences and provide a flexible, yet structured approach to conduct research that does not align with other methodologies (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Basic qualitative research primarily uses textual data as well as other types of data to explore and develop an understanding of a phenomenon, whereas quantitative research examines relationships among variables objectively using statistical analysis of numerical data (Creswell & Guetterman, 2020; Creswell & Poth, 2025).

According to Tisdell et al. (2025), four characteristics define basic qualitative research, and they are: the focus is on understanding the participants' perspective, the researcher is the primary instrument for data collection and analysis, the process is inductive, and the product is richly descriptive (p.19). As the primary instrument for data collection and analysis, basic

qualitative researchers utilize interviews, observations, and documents to understand people's experiences and the meaning they attribute to those experiences. Rather than testing hypotheses as part of a deductive process, data collected from participants in qualitative studies build towards themes and theories through an inductive analysis process. The themes and theories are then richly described in the study's findings, using words and visuals to convey what the researcher has learned and participant quotes and excerpts to support the findings (Tisdell et al., 2025).

In basic qualitative studies, which Tisdell et al. (2025) refer to as descriptive studies, researchers are "interested in describing: (1) how people interpret their experiences, (2) how they construct their worlds, and (3) what meaning they attribute to their experiences" (p.29). Most common in the field of education, the primary goal of a descriptive study is for the researcher to uncover these meanings and describe the participants' understanding. This study focused on how full-time community college faculty experience teaching solely online and describes their interpretations of those experiences, therefore, it was fitting that this research adopted a basic qualitative study approach.

### **Reflexivity & Role of the Researcher**

As the primary instrument in basic qualitative research and as a method to support trustworthiness, it is important that researchers disclose how their previous experiences, biases, and assumptions shaped the study (Creswell & Poth, 2025; Tracy, 2010). This section discloses how I approached this qualitative study.

My experiences as an online learner both prior to and during the COVID-19 pandemic, combined with my primary role as online course support for community college faculty and online teaching as an adjunct, have undoubtedly ignited and fueled this research. As a learner, I

am drawn to online courses for the flexibility, enabling me to choose when and where to learn and complete the required coursework. I've been fortunate to experience online courses and programs as a community college student through my doctoral studies, earning a bachelor's degree in Communications-Media Production and a master's degree in Instructional Design and Technology. My early interest in online learning blossomed into a professional pursuit to support and advocate for online education.

In my current position, I serve in a supervisory role for instructional designers at a community college. Prior to this role, I was in positions that provided instructional design and educational technology support to community college faculty. I come to this research as someone who avidly enjoys online learning and is in an optimal professional role to hear the questions, concerns, struggles, and triumphs of instructors teaching online. It is through my interactions with instructors and my experience as an online adjunct instructor that I am inspired to explore more about how others experience online teaching.

### **Participant Recruitment**

In basic qualitative research, purposeful sampling is used to “intentionally select individuals and sites to learn or understand the central phenomenon” (Creswell & Guetterman, 2020, p. 206). As part of purposeful sampling, criteria must be determined to select appropriate, information-rich cases to be studied (Tisdell et al., 2025). To explore and understand the experiences and perspectives of full-time community college faculty who teach solely online, two criteria were used to recruit research participants for this study: 1) Research participants must be full-time faculty at a community college or public, two-year higher education institution and 2) they must also teach their course load exclusively in an online modality. Full-time faculty who taught any courses with a face-to-face component were excluded from participating in the

study. Excluding full-time faculty who taught face-to-face allowed for a deeper exploration and understanding of full-time community college faculty who teach solely in the online modality and may have different experiences than faculty with face-to-face courses.

Participants were recruited through a LinkedIn posting on my personal LinkedIn page and via email using nominations from my professional network and available faculty directories. Despite multiple reposting's by myself and my professional network, LinkedIn was not fruitful in recruiting participants, however, direct contact via email was. Using available email directories and nominations from professional contacts, participants were invited via email to participate in the study. Six participants responded to email invitations. Eligible and willing participants were scheduled to be interviewed and sent the informed consent document to sign ahead of their interview.

At the conclusion of each interview, participants were thanked for their participation and those who expressed interest were encouraged to share the study with other eligible participants as part of a process referred to as snowball sampling (Creswell & Poth, 2025). Thanks to participant referrals, three additional participants responded to email invitations and were recruited for participation in the study, for a total of nine study participants.

### ***Description of Study Participants***

Nine full-time faculty from three community colleges and public, 2-year institutions participated in this study. Their experience teaching solely online ranged from two and half months to eight years. Seven of the nine participants taught for an institution focused on online education, where the other two participants taught online based on the student enrollment trends for their programs. As a measure to protect their identities, pseudonyms have been assigned to

each participant. Table 3.1 presents the participants by their pseudonym, time spent teaching solely online, subject they teach, and their institution.

**Table 3.1 Study Participants**

| <b>Name</b>     | <b>Time Teaching Fully Online</b> | <b>Subject Taught</b> | <b>Institution</b> |
|-----------------|-----------------------------------|-----------------------|--------------------|
| <b>Pam</b>      | 8 years                           | Math                  | College A          |
| <b>Reginald</b> | 4 years                           | Humanities            | College A          |
| <b>Rosaline</b> | 5 years                           | ESL                   | College A          |
| <b>Jessica</b>  | 2.5 months                        | Media Arts            | College B          |
| <b>Diane</b>    | 2.5 years                         | Media Arts            | College B          |
| <b>Britta</b>   | 4 years                           | History               | College C          |
| <b>Annie</b>    | 2 years                           | Government            | College C          |
| <b>Xavier</b>   | 4 years                           | Cybersecurity         | College C          |
| <b>Jeff</b>     | 6.5 years                         | Computer Science      | College C          |

## **Data Collection**

In basic qualitative research, participant interviews serve as a primary source of data (Creswell & Poth, 2025; Tisdell et al., 2025). “Interviewing is necessary when we cannot observe behavior, feelings, or how people interpret the world around them” (Tisdell et al., 2025, p. 136). For this study, data was collected through semi-structured interviews following the interview protocol in Appendix A. Semi-structured interviews provide the researcher flexibility in the wording and ordering of questions and allow for the researcher to ask any relevant follow-up questions to participant responses (Creswell & Guetterman, 2020; Tisdell et al., 2025).

Because participants were from various locations, interviews were conducted online using the virtual meeting software, Zoom. Each participant was interviewed one time following the interview protocol (Appendix A) with each interview lasting approximately 30 to 50 minutes. During each interview, I recorded notes and insights about the participant and their responses, which contributed to the data analysis. All participant interviews were digitally recorded and the recordings were used to generate transcripts for analysis.

## **Data Analysis**

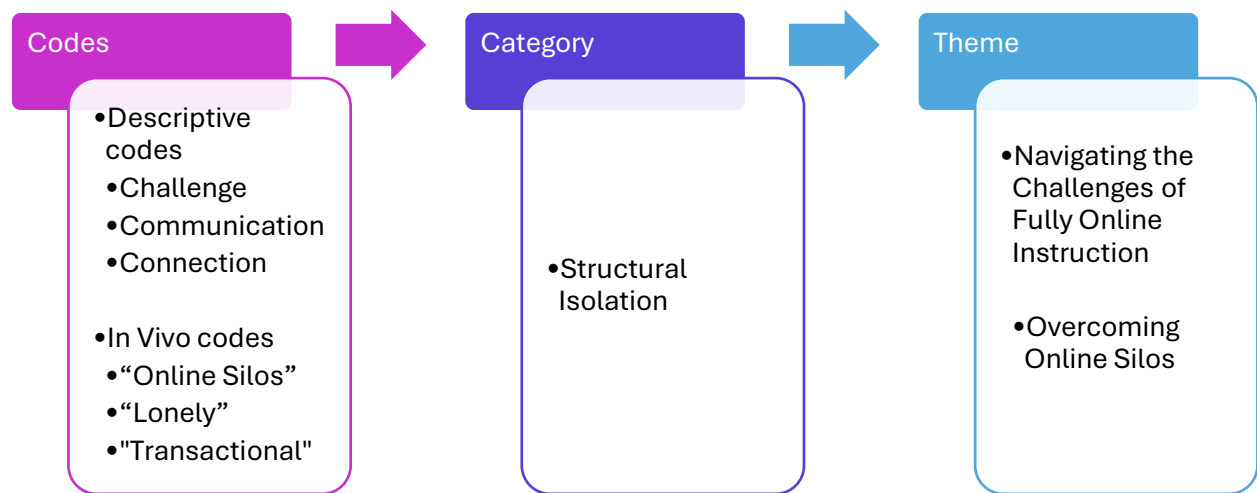
In qualitative research, data collection and analysis are typically done concurrently to ensure focus of study findings and determine when data saturation is reached (Tisdell et al., 2025). As participant interviews were conducted, transcripts underwent analysis through an open and a secondary, coding cycle.

As a method of inductive analysis in qualitative research, coding is used to identify and determine salient categories and themes in the data (Miles et al., 2020). Generated by the researcher, codes capture meaningful study data and facilitate categorization and pattern recognition as part of the analysis process (Miles et al., 2020; Tisdell et al., 2025). During the open coding cycle, I reviewed each transcript line-by-line, noting my interpretations in Microsoft OneNote, and identifying data that yielded descriptive and In Vivo codes. Per Miles et al. (2020), descriptive codes are labels that capture the primary topic in a piece of data whereas In Vivo codes capture words and phrases in the “participant’s own language” (p. 65). To support the capturing of codes and aid with organization and analysis of study data, interview transcripts were loaded into the computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS), NVivo 15 (Richards & Richards, 2003).

Using the codes generated from the open coding cycle, the transcripts underwent a secondary cycle of coding, to group the codes into categories and themes based on patterns in the data (Miles et al., 2020; Tisdell et al., 2025), exemplified in Figure 3.1. During this cycle, I examined the descriptive and In Vivo codes generated for each transcript and applied pattern coding to identify relationships among codes, determine redundancies, and construct overarching thematic categories that reflected the participants’ shared and diverse experiences. Through the

process, I documented my insights, reflections, and interpretations to help construct the study findings.

**Figure 3.1 Example of Coding Process**



Because interviews were analyzed alongside ongoing data collection, saturation was assessed through the continued emergence or repetition of codes. Data saturation was considered reached when no new codes, themes, or insights appeared and further interviews were unlikely to yield new analytical value. Recurrent codes emerged with the seventh participant interview, while interviews eight and nine reaffirmed existing themes, confirming that data saturation had been achieved.

### **Data Management**

Data management in a study supports analysis and ensures that the data collected is protected and fully compliant with Institutional Review Board (IRB) standards. In alignment with IRB guidelines, all interviews were conducted using dedicated, password-protected virtual meeting links under Kansas State University’s institutional Zoom account.

Data was stored on password- and fingerprint-protected personal computers and backed up on the university's two-factor authentication, cloud storage to ensure security and confidentiality throughout the research process. In adherence to IRB guidelines, the electronic data will be retained for three years following the completion of the study, after which all study files will be permanently deleted from my laptop and cloud storage.

### **Trustworthiness**

Researchers utilize various techniques and procedures to establish trustworthiness and support the validation and credibility of findings in basic qualitative research (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Creswell & Poth, 2025; Tisdell et al., 2025; Tracy, 2010). Prominent techniques to support validation of study findings such as adherence to ethical procedures, clarification of researcher bias, developing an audit trail, member reflections, and generation of rich, thick description have been integrated throughout this study's design (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Creswell & Poth, 2025; Tisdell et al., 2025; Tracy, 2010).

First and foremost, this study adhered to ethical procedures. Prior to conducting the study, Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was obtained and participants provided written consent before data was collected. Study data was securely stored on personal, password-protected computers and backed up on the institution's cloud storage as a measure to protect data and ensure participant confidentiality.

To address potential biases, I explicitly outlined my role as the researcher and acknowledged the perspectives I bring to this study in the section titled "Role & Reflexivity of Researcher." This transparency allowed me to bracket my own experiences and focus on understanding the experiences of community college faculty who teach exclusively online (Creswell & Poth, 2025; Tisdell et al., 2025; Tracy, 2010).

Throughout data collection and analysis, I kept an audit trail, documenting my interpretations, reflections, and codes used to categorize study data and determine study findings (Tisdell et al., 2025; Tracy, 2010). Furthermore, member reflections were solicited to support analysis and enhance the credibility of study findings.

Lastly, as a characteristic of qualitative study, the findings are presented in a richly descriptive manner to capture participants' experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2025; Tisdell et al., 2025; Tracy, 2010). Artificial intelligence (AI) writing tools, specifically Claude.ai and ChatGPT, were used to provide suggestions to refine wording and improve clarity and flow in the presentation of the findings and throughout this dissertation (Anthropic, 2026; OpenAI, 2026).

## **Ethics**

Multiple ethical considerations and measures for protecting participants' identity and confidentiality were embedded throughout the design of this study. Prior to conducting the study, IRB approval was sought and received from Kansas State University. Before being interviewed, participants signed the informed consent document that outlined the research study, eligibility, process for participation, potential risks, and benefits. At the end of their interview, participants were debriefed that their interview would be summarized by the researcher, and they would be sent a copy of their interview summary in a follow-up email.

After each interview underwent open coding, participants were sent via email a copy of their interview summary and a debriefing statement about their rights as a participant to withdraw from the study after participation as well as contact information for the Principal Investigator and the IRB Chair to address any questions or concerns about the study.

Furthermore, to protect the participants' identities, participants were assigned pseudonyms in coding of the data and representation in the study findings.

Data from this study is stored on the researcher's password-protected computer and backed up onto cloud storage and will be kept three years beyond dissertation defense in accordance with IRB, after which time the data will be destroyed.

## **Chapter Summary**

This chapter described the methodology for this study. This research employed a basic qualitative research design to explore the experiences of community college faculty who teach their course load solely online. Eligible participants were recruited through a LinkedIn posting and via email to participate in the study. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews conducted via Zoom and supplemented by researcher notes. Interviews were transcribed, coded, and analyzed using NVivo qualitative software across multiple rounds of coding to identify salient findings. Trustworthiness was established through adherence to ethical procedures, clarification of researcher bias, development of an audit trail, member reflections, and richly descriptive presentation of findings.

## **Chapter 4 - Findings**

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of full-time community college faculty who teach solely online. Using a qualitative research design and semi-structured interview protocol, nine full-time community college faculty were interviewed about their experiences teaching exclusively in the online modality. Structured around the research question and purpose, through coding and analysis I identified five themes: The Challenging Yet Fulfilling Experience of Teaching Solely Online, Navigating the Challenges of Fully Online

Instruction, Experiencing Personal and Professional Fulfillment, Building Competencies in a Fully Online Teaching Context, and Perspectives on Institutional Support. These themes and their subthemes illustrate the professional and personal journeys of faculty who teach fully online.

### **The Challenging Yet Fulfilling Experience of Teaching Solely Online**

Aligned with the research question, participants were asked to provide a word or phrase to describe teaching solely online. The participants varied in their responses, some choosing a single word while others opted for a phrase to best describe the experience with fully online instruction. A visual representation of the participants' initial words and phrases used to describe teaching solely online is presented in Table 4.1.

**Table 4.1 Descriptions of Teaching Solely Online**

| <b>Response</b>                               | <b>Classification</b> |
|-----------------------------------------------|-----------------------|
| challenging                                   | Neutral               |
| challenging yet fulfilling                    | Neutral               |
| difficult but rewarding                       | Neutral               |
| hack away at the unessential                  | Neutral               |
| innovation                                    | Positive              |
| lonely                                        | Negative              |
| lovely                                        | Positive              |
| opportunity                                   | Positive              |
| over-communicate instead of under-communicate | Neutral               |

Overall, participants described a positive-leaning experience with solely online instruction. Of the nine responses, five were classified as neutral, three as positive, and one as negative. Positive responses such as "innovation," "lovely," and "opportunity" reflected participants' genuine enthusiasm for what the online modality makes possible for their students and for themselves as educators, echoing the fulfillment they described in meeting students where they are, achieving work-life balance, and pursuing opportunities for innovation and

professional growth. The single negative response, "lonely," captured the structural isolation at the heart of the online silo experience that participants across the study consistently described as one of the most persistent challenges of fully online instruction.

Neutral responses, which made up the majority, revealed the complexity of the experience most directly. Responses like "hack away at the unessential" and "over-communicate instead of under-communicate" reflected the practical, strategic mindset participants brought to navigating the demands of the online environment. The response of "challenging" was described by its participant as both a positive and a hardship, echoing the sentiment of phrases such as "challenging yet fulfilling" and "difficult but rewarding," which captured a duality that resisted simple categorization. Taken together, the neutral responses reveal that for most participants, teaching solely online was an experience they had thought deeply about, one that resisted easy characterization because it was as complex as it was personal.

Drawing from the participants' own verbiage and aligning with the study purpose, the phrase "challenging yet fulfilling" best expresses and captures the shared experiences of teaching solely online, generating the overarching theme for this study's findings. What the participants' words and phrases collectively reveal is that the experience of teaching solely online is neither uniformly difficult nor uniformly satisfying but persistently both. For most participants, challenge and fulfillment were not opposites but two sides of the same experience, a duality that runs throughout their accounts and shapes the themes that follow.

### **Navigating the Challenges of Fully Online Instruction**

Aligned with the overarching theme and purpose for this study, this theme captures the complexities faculty encounter when teaching exclusively in the online modality. Participants discussed difficulties with feeling siloed in the online environment, responding to the growing

influence of artificial intelligence (AI), remaining pedagogically relevant, and maintaining work-life boundaries.

## **Overcoming Online Silos**

A central challenge identified by participants was the experience of what was described as “online silos.” Participants described fully online instruction as structurally isolating, often characterizing the experience as “siloed,” disconnected, and lacking the immediacy of a shared physical space.

Participants, particularly those with prior face-to-face teaching experience, described the loss of informal classroom interactions as particularly challenging. Pam, who has been teaching fully online the longest, described her experiences with fully online instruction as being “lonely” and “transactional.” She explained that she doesn’t connect with her students like she did in the physical classroom:

There's something about being on the same time, in that moment, when you can communicate with them and talk to them. When it's delayed, or there's some kind of a barrier, time delay with email or whatever, you’ve lost that moment to hopefully make that connection that helps them understand, especially in mathematics.

Other participants echoed similar challenges in facilitating student understanding without the classroom setting. Although the online modality was the “only way she's ever taught,” Diane's difficulty “conveying” assignment and course expectations “when you're online and not in person” suggests that the challenge is not rooted in comparison to traditional classroom instruction but in the structural realities of the online format itself.

Participants also described how “online silos” often resulted in repetitive communication for them. As Jeff noted:

In an online environment, you tend to find yourself in a siloed environment where, as an instructor, you may get the same question 20 times, where if you were in the classroom, you would have got that question once, everybody would have heard it, and you don't have to repeat yourself.

Resonating with this sentiment, Jessica explained that without live engagement with the students, fully online teaching “gets reduced down to grading and mundane tasks and email conversations as opposed to more fulfilling dialogue that might happen in person.” Corroborating Jessica’s explanation, Pam attested that “nothing will ever replace” working in real-time with students and “having that light go off, in that moment.” These experiences suggest that the absence of synchronous and communal interaction altered not only the way instructors engage with their students, but also their sense of professional fulfillment.

Despite these struggles, all participants made intentional efforts to mitigate the “silo” of online instruction. They tried to connect with students through messaging, chat, phone, or hosting both in-person and virtual office hours to let students know that, as Jessica said, they were “approachable and available.” For some participants, efforts resulted in meaningful interaction and engagement with their students. Britta described experiencing more frequent interactions with her online students compared to her time in the classroom:

I feel like I have more interactions with students outside of the classroom. These students attend office hours, email more, and have more questions. It’s really cool to get that kind of interaction, and the interest that students develop in politics and civics, it’s definitely cool to see that.

Britta’s experience suggests that engagement transpires differently in the online modality, occurring through mediated channels rather than live group interaction.

However, not all participants received same results as Britta did. Multiple participants indicated that some online students just chose not to engage regardless of what they did. As Diane explained, "you'll get students that won't communicate at all." When communication attempts went unanswered and students continued to fall behind, she explained that "your hands are kind of tied there as far as trying to help them to achieve their goals." For the research participants of this study, the lack of reciprocity from students limited their ability to provide academic support while also reinforcing the disconnect and "siloed" effect of online instruction.

### **Navigating the Emergence of AI and the New Era of Teaching**

Another prominent challenge identified by participants was the rapid emergence of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and its influence on teaching and learning. Several participants shared concerns about academic integrity, ethics regarding student use, and how to effectively incorporate AI into instructional practices.

Maintaining academic integrity was a major pain point identified by the participants. Pam discussed the need for her and her math colleagues to "come up with different ways to ask questions that make it more difficult to use AI" and limit student cheating on non-proctored assessments. However, Pam also acknowledged that students have a different perception regarding AI and their online coursework:

I think they have a goal, and the tool is helping them achieve the goal. They don't see the value of doing that work on their own. So if you ask them if they're cheating, they would say no, probably. They're using a tool to accomplish to do their homework faster, or to move through and get points for an assignment, or whatever. So, yeah, it's become very muddy and very nuanced in that world right now.

Other participants also acknowledged the "muddled" use of AI. Annie expressed particular concern about students' "lack of ethics" using AI to complete assignments in her course. While she supported the use of AI for students to "brainstorm an outline or answer a question," she shared that students try to "skirt around the student code of conduct." To mitigate violations, she implemented a three-strike policy in her syllabus, but still reported students "every week," emphasizing the importance of "shaping and changing behaviors before the consequences are irreversible." Annie's and Pam's accounts showcase the blur between acceptable and dishonest use of AI, suggesting that AI has further complicated maintaining academic integrity in instruction.

In contrast, several other participants described a more integrative approach to AI. Recognizing the importance of maintaining academic rigor, Reginald emphasized the challenge of "incorporating AI into teaching and learning without being heavy on the punitive end." Rosaline viewed incorporating AI as a way to support student learning and engagement rather than a threat to academic integrity:

Once you make it to where it's not a threatening situation, like you are cheating by using it, instead using it as a learning tool, then you begin to see a shift in students' trust, and walking alongside their journey to learn.

Even among those open to integration, uncertainty persisted. Britta described struggling with "how much to incorporate now with AI" and questioned, "where's the line that we draw?" She characterized that boundary as "an ever-moving target," acknowledging AI as both a challenge and an opportunity to "rethink how to teach online." She further elaborated, "maybe this is making us better and more effective online instructors at the same time by doing that."

The intersect of AI as both a cheating and learning tool remains an ongoing challenge as online instructors learn to adapt and incorporate AI into their courses, suggesting that AI is pushing online instructors to rethink online pedagogy itself. Jeff extended this thinking further, offering a broader perspective on where deeper AI integration may ultimately lead:

I would think at the community college level, as AI and other technologies get more integrated, I think faculty will shift more towards that mentorship role — the instructor will be more of a mentor, as opposed to a true instructor or facilitator of knowledge, or whatever term you want to give them.

What Jeff describes is not simply a change in teaching strategy but a fundamental shift in the role of the online instructor. As AI increasingly assumes the functions of information delivery and content generation, what remains irreplaceable are the distinctly human dimensions of teaching: guidance, connection, and professional wisdom. For the participants in this study, that shift was not a distant possibility but an emerging reality they were already navigating.

### **Staying Relevant with an Evolving Student Population**

Building on the challenges posed by AI, participants also described concerns with their ability to stay relevant in the online context. Concerns described by the participants centered on two interconnected issues: outdated course content and teaching practices that have not kept pace with the needs of today's non-traditional online learner.

Participants described uncertainty about how to effectively teach students whose experiences, expectations, and learning habits differ significantly from their own. As Rosaline questioned, “How can you educate those you don’t understand?” Similarly, Annie asked, “How can online classes serve all the types of students?” These rhetorical questions illustrate the

participants' internal conflict of meeting the learning needs of an increasingly diverse student population.

Developing courses with material that meets the learning objectives and serves different learners was described as an ongoing challenge for the participants. As Reginald explained:

Students are getting old material, and it's not current, and in most cases, it's not relevant to what they're trying to do moving forward as an online student. So the challenge is twofold: make sure that material that they're learning is relevant and connected to not only the course objectives but connected to something that they can use moving forward. Reginald's comments showcases that course relevancy extends beyond instructional content and needs to be applicable to students' diverse lives.

Participants that were from institutions focused on online education discussed the use of what some called "peer-developed courses" as a way to consistently meet learning objectives in online courses. Britta described the peer-developed courses as a "cake mix" that has a pre-set module structure and curriculum that instructors need to "add [their] own oil and eggs and whatever else into that mix...to infuse their own personality in it." These courses are shared with other instructors, particularly new adjuncts, with the understanding that "this is what you need to do, but you can modify it," noted Britta. "I think that that can be very helpful for someone, especially who is just starting to teach online," she elaborated, indicating that the added benefit of peer-developed courses for new instructors. While the peer-developed courses offer consistency and efficiency, they also introduce a layer of complexity around ownership and adaptability.

Coming from the same college as Britta, Annie had a first-hand role in revising a peer-developed course. Annie discussed using AI to support development of the peer-developed

course and described her overall experience as “advancing her perspective” on “what makes a good online course and the kinds of things that need to be included” for the students they serve.

Annie described the need to serve learners from different stages of life:

You're gonna have students who are in high school, so they have their own challenges of when they can meet, or what they're doing, or what else is going on in their lives, and then you're gonna have students that are my dad's age, and they're gonna have technology challenges.

Similarly, Rosaline expressed concern about the widening generational gap between how participants were taught and how students now learn:

The way that I was taught is not the way my children are learning, or being taught at the very moment. So there is a huge space to understand this generational learning. We're trying to teach them in a space where that's not how they learn. That's not even the world they live in, nor are they interested. And I'm trying to learn all of the ways that they communicate, and the different ways they communicate, and how they say things differently, and all this stuff. So I think if it's a gap for me, it's even more of a gap for my colleagues that may be a little bit older than I am.

Participants perceive that students are evolving and, therefore, should their online teaching practices. These accounts highlight that participants have an ongoing struggle with not just creating courses with current and meaningful content but also serving multiple generations of learners.

### **Managing the Always-On Mentality**

A consistent struggle for the participants was navigating the “always-on” mentality of online instruction. Participants described feeling a continuous sense of responsibility to respond

to student communications and be available beyond traditional working hours, while maintaining professional and personal boundaries.

Participants described how the “always-on” mentality of online instruction created a discrepancy between instructor availability and student communication expectations. Jeff described the difficulty with students expecting immediate responses:

The benefit for online students is they can log in whenever they want to. The bad thing is they can log in whenever they want to, so typically you find yourselves getting a lot of questions. I've found myself in a position where you have to remind folks that despite the always-on mentality, we are still contractually obligated to work a 35-hour or 40-hour work week, and that's typical Monday through Friday. So you do find yourself getting a lot of students who say, hey, I emailed you 3 times over the weekend. Sorry, it's Monday. Jeff's account highlights a structural reality of online instruction: that the very flexibility that makes online education accessible to students can simultaneously create unrealistic expectations about instructor availability.

While Jeff responded with contractual boundaries, other participants internalized this expectation and felt burdened to be constantly accessible in order to support student success. “I’m basically on call all day long,” shared Diane. Similarly, Britta expressed that because she has “the privilege of being online and being at home,” she feels compelled to be available “24-7.” She elaborated:

If students need to meet, I will make time for them, even if it's evenings and weekends. I have met with people at 9 p.m. on a Sunday and I tell them my 4-year-old could burst into the room right now, I'm not going to apologize, but I do want to have that connection and let them know that they are a priority for me.

Britta's willingness to meet students outside traditional working hours reflects online instructors' compassion-driven commitment to their students, yet also illustrates how the absence of physical separation between home and workplace can make it difficult for online instructors to draw and maintain clear professional boundaries.

Those who taught remotely like Britta, especially struggled with establishing professional boundaries and maintaining a work-life balance. Participants described difficulty creating clear stopping points in their day. Xavier reflected, "You're at home... you have to have a cutoff hour," yet acknowledged that those cutoff times often coincide with when students are most active. Likewise, Annie noted the temptation to continue working after her children were asleep in an effort to "get ahead" and avoid waking to "a million emails."

These accounts suggest that the "always-on" mentality is rooted in the flexibility of online instruction. What emerges across these accounts is a picture of online instructors caught between their professional commitment to be responsive to students and their efforts to establish boundaries to guard their personal time.

### **Experiencing Personal and Professional Fulfillment**

Despite the challenges discussed previously, participants consistently described teaching fully online as both professionally demanding and deeply fulfilling. When asked what they found most satisfying about fully online instruction, participants emphasized the flexibility the online modality offers both students and instructors as well as how online teaching provided the opportunity to expand their instructional practices.

For participants, fulfillment was closely tied to the ability to "meet students where they are", balance between professional and personal life, and their growth as educators. Subthemes for this theme depict the various factors that make solely online teaching a fulfilling experience.

## Meeting Students Where They Are

A central source of fulfillment emerged from participants' ability to "meet students where they are." Participants described online instruction as uniquely positioned to serve students whose lives do not align with traditional campus instruction.

Participants described the reach of online education as one of the most satisfying aspects of teaching fully online. Reginald explained:

The most satisfying thing for me is knowing that it could reach not only students coming out of high school, but then you could also reach the adult learner as well in a post-COVID world. The online format really works well with people that are strictly at home or have switched careers.

Building on this sentiment, Rosaline described online teaching as "lovely" because it "challenges us [instructors] to meet people where they are." She further elaborated:

It gives students another opportunity or another way to express and share their learning, and it really works well for those who have families, multiple jobs, and are balancing a lot of life. They're still able to show up, show what they've learned, and it gives them a space to do that individually.

For example, Jessica described how online instruction provides "freedom" for students to set their own schedule to manage coursework:

That freedom that both myself and my students are benefiting from. The user is in control of their time, and how they spend it, whether they want to sit down at the computer and work on their projects for 3 hours, or if they want to listen to the 20-minute lecture and then walk away for a little bit, absorb it, come back the next day. So there's a lot of room

for taking in the information. I think that helps with information retention, which I appreciate.

For these participants, fulfillment was rooted in not just who online education serves, but how it serves the learners.

Participants also found it particularly fulfilling to observe student transformation in their courses. Annie, a mom herself, found it “rewarding” and “cool” when a “mom with 4 kids at home” or a student “really struggling with technology” persisted in her online courses despite hindrances. Diane also found it “rewarding” to view her students’ final projects at end of her 11-week course, “knowing that this was all done without a classroom setting.” For both participants, what made their experience rewarding was not simply that students completed the coursework, but that they did so in the absence of a physical classroom and while navigating competing demands.

Together, these accounts illustrate that participants found professional fulfillment not just in teaching online, but in what online instruction made possible: meeting students where they are.

### **Flexibility and the Work/Life Balance of Teaching Online**

Countering the ‘Always-On Mentality’ participants enjoyed teaching completely online because of the flexibility it provides between their professional and personal lives. Participants expressed satisfaction with the ability to work remotely, enabling them to balance their time more effectively between professional responsibilities and their own families and personal interests.

Participants described how fully online instruction was more flexible than face-to-face teaching. Pam described how her transition to fully online instruction “greatly relieved” the pressure that came with teaching face-to-face weekly:

I can respond to student questions at times during the day when I'm available. I can create lessons on my breaks, or whenever. The schedule is quite different than if I'm teaching a face-to-face class. There's always a lot of pressure with a face-to-face class to be ready to walk in every week, however many times per week, and deliver content and interact with students in that moment. And that pressure is greatly relieved with online.

For Pam, the satisfaction of teaching solely online was rooted in her professional responsibilities, but for others, the flexibility of online instruction carried equally significant personal implications, particularly around the demands of commuting and personal life.

Participants described the lack of commute as a particular benefit of fully online instruction. Britta, a new mother at the time of her transition to fully online instruction, described the shift as a "really lovely thing," explaining the toll that commuting between campuses had previously taken:

I was commuting, I was doing dual credit, and so I was commuting about an hour almost each way with traffic, going to several different high schools. It was just really stressful balancing going between my campus to the high schools to here and there, commuting, and so when there was an [opportunity to teach fully online], I was just in a place in my life where that made a lot of sense for me with a small child. I really liked the idea of the flexibility of time that I would have with teaching online.

Xavier echoed the practical value of teaching remotely and not having to commute:

Whenever you leave the house, you tend to spend a lot of money nowadays, so staying at home is so more convenient. You're willing to spend a little bit more time helping individuals out and you don't have the burden of having to get dressed, or having to travel, having to worry about gas in your car.

For these participants, the lack of commute provided more opportunity to be available for their students with the added convenience to their personal lives.

With the added convenience to their personal lives, participants also described how solely online instruction provides flexibility in managing family responsibilities and personal interests. Jeff shared:

It works best for me personally, outside of work, I've got a few passion projects. It allows me to continue to pursue those while still having an income and a job and being able to make an impact on those sorts of things. We have four kids under 10, so being able to work around their schedules and their activities is advantageous.

For some of the participants, personal projects were focused on staying active in their field. "I own my own game studio," noted Diane. Xavier also described working remotely as an engineer, which enabled him to "impact multiple individuals across the world without physically having to be there."

For Britta, she invested the time from her lack of commute into her research and family: I had that extra just time from not doing that, that I was able to put back into myself. I was able to do more with my own research as well, and I published an article, I published my book since I moved online so I feel like I was able to maintain balance in a really lovely way by moving online. With that flexibility of time, I've also been able to drop my

daughter off at Mother's Day Out so I feel slightly more present than I might have been with in-person teaching.

Britta's use of the word "present" illustrates an underlying theme across the participants:

flexibility was more than managing time; it was about being more fully available, to students, to family, and to themselves. Furthermore, these accounts suggest that the flexibility of fully online instruction was experienced not as a professional perk but as a meaningful condition of a more balanced life.

### **Online Teaching as a Catalyst for Innovation & Professional Growth**

Lastly, participants expressed satisfaction in the ability to grow as educators through fully online instruction. In addition to the flexibility it afforded their personal lives, the online space presented opportunities to engage with students in unique ways and explore technologies that expanded what instruction could look like.

Participants described being drawn to fully online instruction as an opportunity to build on and share the knowledge and experiences they had accumulated outside the classroom. Jeff explained how his own educational journey motivated him to teach online:

I was in the military, so going online as much as possible was definitely advantageous during that time. I definitely had a preference for it, compared to an in-class or a typical, in-person requirement. As with most things, there were good things about it, there were bad things about it, and I thought that I could bring my experiences as a student to the next generation, if you will.

Xavier shared a similar sense of purpose, framing online teaching as an extension of his professional life and an opportunity for meaningful contribution. He explained, "You get to share the information that you've experienced in the corporate world to multiple individuals. But more

so, your social impact — impacting the up-and-coming young professionals, and a sense of giving back. I enjoy it.” For both participants, online instruction represented a way of reaching more people and contributing to the development of the next generation of professionals.

Rosaline extended this thinking further, describing her embrace of the online space as both strategic and philosophical:

COVID was my main catapult, but I always had this interest in, the online space, not because I'm particularly in alignment with teaching and learning [online], however, that is the world in which these students live in. Therefore, there is a shift in perspective in which education has to make — exploring what those best practices are going to look like in the online space.

For Rosaline, the move to online instruction was not simply a response to circumstance but a deliberate alignment between her teaching practice and the realities of students' lives. This orientation toward students' lived realities extended into how Rosaline and other participants approached technology, not only as a requirement of the online format, but as a tool for reimagining what instruction could be.

Participants described fulfillment from utilizing technology to create learning experiences that extended beyond what a physical classroom could offer. Jessica described translating face-to-face experiences using technology as a “fun challenge to take on.” She further explained:

What new technology and apps you can bring in to help student engagement and do some of those things that I mentioned like how can you build community in an online environment?....It's the fun challenge of how can I do what I would have done in class, online? What technology can I use? How can I make my presence known when I'm not physically there?

For Jessica, the structure of the online format was not an obstacle but an opportunity to innovate, motivating her to find new ways to replicate and even enhance what she had previously done in person.

Resonating with Jessica, Rosaline described how online instruction is an avenue to be innovative with technology and bring experiences to the learners that do not currently exist in the college setting. She explained:

Rosaline I think whoever thought about teaching online Was very forward-thinking because they understood that You don't just have to sit in a desk, traditionally. Even now, when you go into the colleges, and you're teaching in a space. We still have Desks and chairs, like we did in the 1950s instead of learning spaces. If I wanted to learn biology in person, Where is my... Biology building that is like a zoo Where real stuff happening? I think still, we're in this isolated space, and I think that at least online offers ways to visit different spaces. If you use Nearpod you can take a virtual Field trip. So, I have students go to the Louvre who may never make it to the Louvre.

In addition to using Nearpod, an interactive lesson platform, Rosaline discussed using VoiceThread, an online collaboration platform, as alternate to written assignments and to address plagiarism concerns:

So, oftentimes, if something comes up in a written piece in my courses that says, this is plagiarism, 99% or 80% or whatever. Then we often do a VoiceThread. And we begin to then sit down with the student and have a conversation. Tell me what that's about. Tell me what that means. Talk to me about how that connects to your life. Talk to me about an experience you had. So then I'm pushing their brain to connect it to the things that they know, and I'm also listening for the gaps that I need to help them to understand.

Rosaline's use of Nearpod and VoiceThread captures what professional growth and innovation looked like in practice: finding and using tools that did not merely replicate the classroom, but reimagined what learning could be.

These experiences of growth, whether through technology, shared experience, or pedagogical reimagination, reflect a deeper source of fulfillment that runs throughout this theme. For these participants, teaching fully online was not simply a modality they adapted to, but a space that actively challenged and expanded who they were as educators.

### **Building Competencies in a Fully Online Teaching Context**

This theme depicts the competencies and personal attributes the participants identified as essential for teaching effectively in a fully online environment. Participants discussed needing subject matter expertise, online pedagogical knowledge, digital literacy, communication skills, compassion, adaptability, and a willingness to learn, self-discipline, as crucial for thriving as online instructor.

#### **The Role of Subject Matter Expertise in the Online Classroom**

A recurring and essential competency among participants was a strong command of subject matter expertise. Being knowledgeable and experienced in their discipline was described as foundational to addressing student questions, providing meaningful feedback, and scaffolding learning in an environment where the instructor cannot rely on spontaneous, in-person exchange to fill gaps in understanding.

Participants described subject matter expertise as foundational to their ability to address student questions, provide meaningful guidance, and scaffold learning effectively. A recurring observation was that students frequently pose complex or unexpected questions that require instructors to draw upon far more than the course content alone. Diane illustrated this directly,

noting that students "will come up with some questions," adding, "I've been stumped a few times. It just makes me grow when I have to go figure those answers out for them." Diane's account suggests that subject matter expertise in the online environment is more than a credential, but a practice of deepening knowledge in response to student questions.

Even in courses with pre-set curriculum, participants maintained that strong discipline knowledge is essential. Reginald elaborated, explaining that a pre-built course structure does not reduce the demand for disciplinary knowledge: "Even though the course is pre-created, you still have to have solid content knowledge, because students will have a lot of questions and the feedback has to be on point, where you have to be the expert." For Reginald, course structure and instructor expertise were distinct and irreplaceable. The curriculum could provide the framework, but only the instructor's expertise could bring it to life.

Beyond mastery of course content, participants described real-world experience within their discipline as what ultimately brings online instruction to life. Xavier articulated this most directly, arguing that neither the textbook nor technology could substitute for personal experience:

You need to cover the tangible, which is the course information. But also, you need to cover the intangibles — the mindset of what an ideal candidate would look like that's executing these lessons that are being taught in real life. And that's something that the book and technology doesn't teach.

He elaborated on this further, drawing a distinction between knowledge that is looked up and knowledge that is lived:

If you haven't been through it... actually went through what you're teaching, then how can you make other points outside of what the textbooks say? Yes, you can ask the internet, but that doesn't have your authenticity.

Xavier's account captures what runs throughout this subtheme, that subject matter expertise in the online environment is ultimately about authenticity. The capacity to bring personal experience and professional credibility into the online classroom in ways that no textbook or search engine can replicate is what distinguishes an effective online instructor from one who is merely delivering content.

### **Online Pedagogy as a Foundation for Effective Instruction**

Beyond subject expertise, participants emphasized that effective online teaching requires a strong understanding of online pedagogy. Participants stressed the importance of knowing how students learn online and the need to intentionally design courses for online delivery.

For participants, understanding online pedagogy meant recognizing that the online environment requires different instructional strategies than the face-to-face classroom. In the absence of real-time adjustments possible in a physical classroom, intentional design becomes the primary means through which online instructors meet their students where they are. Jessica stressed the importance of designing activities appropriate for online delivery, explaining:

“You can be an expert at the topic, but that doesn't necessarily mean you're a good teacher... You have to be aware of frameworks, pedagogy, and methods that work in the online environment. If you can't translate the hands-on, group activity to online, you can very easily miss that learning objective.”

Jessica's reflection underscores that subject expertise alone is insufficient and that effective online instruction requires deliberate attention to how learning is structured to and facilitated within the online environment.

With this in mind, participants described multiple frameworks for designing and delivering effective online courses. Backwards Design was a prominent method used by the participants. Jeff succinctly explained the course design approach:

I apply a work-backwards approach, and reverse engineer the course to meet the established learning objectives. What you do have control over is kind of the week-by-week or module-by-module objectives, and basically, those are your targets, right? So you can work backwards from there, you can reverse engineer it to ultimately say, by the end of the 16 weeks, have we accomplished these things that we set out to accomplish?

Another supporter of Backwards Design, Jessica described the approach as “hugely effective” and also identified Transparency in Learning and Teaching (TILT) as a “really helpful” framework in developing online activities for her students. (Jessica) explained how she implemented TILT in her courses: “I am really intentional in making sure that the major projects I do include a purpose statement. This is why we're doing this and this is how it's going to benefit you as a professional.”

Adding to this, Rosaline also described Universal Design for Learning (UDL) as an effective design approach in her online courses, explaining, “I love Universal Design Learning. it captures and meets everyone where they are with their unique learning styles.... With UDL, Students have different Ways in which they can demonstrate that they understand material.” Participants' use of multiple frameworks suggests that effective online pedagogy is not a single

method but a combination of intentional approaches for structuring and aligning student learning to course outcomes.

Building on this, participants in the study also emphasized the importance of keeping course content streamlined and focused. Pam described using “vertical design” to present a consistent weekly module structure, as well as “prerequisite scaffolding” to ensure the students complete lessons before moving onto subsequent material. Jeff offered a similar philosophy, describing the need to “hack away at the unessential” in online courses:

Basically, what that means is get to the point, right? Eliminate any fluff that you can eliminate, because a lot of times when you're dealing with the online student, you typically have adult learners, non-traditional learners, folks who basically say, what do I need to do, and when do I need to do it? So, I think that forces you to make your modules more succinct, to kind of say, here's what's expected of you, here are the key takeaways. That makes you very effective as an online instructor.

These strategies suggest that clarity and intentional design are not merely organizational preferences but fundamental to meeting the needs of the adult learner population that online courses most often serve.

### **Digital Literacy as an Instructional Necessity**

As a complement to online pedagogy, participants identified digital literacy as another critical competency for teaching fully online. Where online pedagogy addressed how instructors design and deliver instruction, digital literacy addressed whether they had the technical foundation to do so effectively.

For participants, digital literacy was grounded in what Jessica described as a combination of “technology skills and knowledge.” Rosaline elaborated on this, believing that before you can

teach a student, you have to know your own tools," identifying proficiency in working a computer, communicating via email, navigating a learning management system, and operating video conferencing platforms such as Zoom, as "basic," yet essential for online instruction.

Participants stressed that this proficiency needed to be developed before entering the online classroom rather than learned on the job. Rosaline described this as a professional obligation: "I think that instructors need to do their due diligence in practicing the online learning platform on their own up front before they join an online space." She further elaborated that instructors should know "all the features" of the LMS from "how to add somebody to how to collaborate."

This level of preparation, Rosaline suggested, is what separates instructors who can facilitate a smooth online experience from those who inadvertently create barriers for their students. Rosaline described witnessing this firsthand, recounting an experience observing an underprepared online instructor:

They must have just threw this instructor online. She couldn't figure out the chat.

Students had to tell her how to share her screen and do all the things. But if you're gonna teach online, you probably should know those things ahead of time. Just knowing how to navigate the platform can, depending on who your students are, either help or hurt.

Rosaline's account illustrates the consequences of insufficient digital literacy in practice. When instructors are underprepared, students lose confidence in the learning experience and the instructor's credibility is questioned.

By contrast, participants described how digital literacy enables instructors to better support their students both academically and technically. Pam described the value of having the "skills to make or find a video" to assist students with their course questions or life

circumstances as a supplement to the typical email communication that occurs in the online environment. Annie extended this further, describing the value of familiarity with common platform issues:

Annie while you may not be information technology support, and I am not, it helps to even just, like, know the basic problems that might arise with using, the LMS and other software.....so you yourself have encountered issues, and you can say, oh, when that happened, when I had that same issue as you, here's what I did.

For both participants, digital literacy extended beyond personal proficiency, equipping the instructors to anticipate student challenges and respond to them in ways that keep the learning experience on track.

Collectively, these accounts illustrate that in the fully online environment, digital literacy is inseparable from teaching effectiveness, shaping not just what instructors can do, but how students experience and engage with the course from the very first interaction.

### **Building Presence through Intentional Communication**

Another recurring and crucial competency among participants was the ability to communicate effectively in the fully online environment. Unlike face-to-face instruction, where tone, body language, and immediate response naturally support understanding, online communication requires deliberate effort and intentionality.

Participants described effective online communication as beginning with an effort to understand their students. Pam stressed that "figuring out how to communicate well with students to understand what their questions really are is important," while Jeff added that effective communication requires an awareness of students' diverse contexts, noting that "you have to recognize where these students are coming from and how they're accessing things." Pam

elaborated on this, describing how online students tend to be more forthcoming about their personal circumstances than students in face-to-face settings:

I do find out in an online class way more about what's going on in their life, personally, that's impacting their ability to be successful than I probably would in a face-to-face class. Only because a lot of times that's front and center when they send me a message and they tell me all the things that are happening, and you just begin to realize how many things they're juggling, especially in community college environment, to try to put their education at some level of priority in their lives. It's not just about the math. It's much bigger than that.

For these participants, effective communication was not simply about knowing what to say, but about understanding the student well enough to know how to say it in a way that would actually reach them.

Participants further described effective communication as going beyond the written format to engage with students. Jessica described incorporating video feedback alongside written communication to establish presence and build rapport with students:

You have to be able to communicate so much in written format, or doing video feedback. I provide video feedback for my students so they can hear my voice — I show my screen and talk to them. That's another way that I build up that affinity between us and show my online presence.

What Jessica described is a form of intentional presence. Rather than using video for solely conveying information, she used it as a way to bridge the perceived distance of online instruction that written communication alone cannot do.

Yet participants stressed that establishing presence was not enough on its own to support students in the online environment, it also required proactive and persistent outreach. As part of weekly course announcements, participant Xavier advised online instructors to "over-communicate instead of under-communicate," describing how clear, upfront information allows students to manage their time more effectively to meet assignment expectations and deadlines:

When you get all the information you need in the first communication reach out, you can get what you want instantly back. And that's important to online classes, because things have a due date, and usually, sometimes, if students have time against them, they're usually in the backside of the week where the assignment is due.

Building on the need for proactive and clear communication emphasized by Xavier, Annie highlighted the critical role of persistence in overcoming “communication breakdowns” to ensure student success and reinforce instructor presence:

Annie Somebody who's persistent, making sure that there's a shared understanding between you and the student of whatever the issue is. You have to be a willing to show the students, I am a real person teaching this class, this is not AI –let's jump on a Teams call and talk face-to-face.

Annie articulates what participants across this subtheme consistently pointed toward, that effective online communication is ultimately about more than how often or through what channels instructors reach their students. It is about showing up as a full and accessible human being in a space that can otherwise feel impersonal and transactional.

In this way, communication emerged as the primary means through which online instructors establish presence, build trust, and support student success in the absence of face-to-

face interaction, making it not just a useful skill, but an essential competency for fully online teaching.

### **Meeting Diverse Learners with Compassion and Adaptability**

Recognizing that students come from diverse backgrounds, participants emphasized the importance of both compassion and adaptability as essential competencies for supporting learner success in the fully online environment.

Participants framed compassion as an intentional stance toward students. Britta, a department chair responsible for hiring adjuncts, stated outright, “I want people who are compassionate. That's a skill that I need. I want people who care about their students. I want them to see their online students as just as valid as those in the brick-and-mortar campuses.” Reginald echoed this sentiment, describing that compassion and flexibility as inseparable in the online context:

So you have to be very flexible in this space....Students will, because you're online, try to contact you at all types of hours — to see if their work has been graded, or have a question, or whatever. So you have to have a lot of compassion for where students are coming from. Our students are coming from all around the world, so you have to have that understanding.

For both participants, compassion was rooted in an awareness and understanding of the varied circumstances and backgrounds that online students bring to their coursework.

Participants described adaptability as the instructional counterpart to compassion. While compassion informed how participants related to students, adaptability was how they translated their awareness of student need into meaningful instructional action. Jeff was deliberate in distinguishing adaptability from flexibility:

Flexible is not the right term. You need to be adaptable — recognizing those students who need a little bit more help than others. You do have to have the ability to pivot during a semester to focus on one particular topic over another.

Xavier elaborated on adaptability in the context of course delivery, explaining that even with a syllabus in place, effective online instructors must be willing to adjust when gaps in student understanding emerge:

At some point, yes, you have your syllabus and your coursework laid out, but there are times that you may have to make adjustments and throw in other lessons just to get to the next lesson, because you may have discovered a gap in what you're providing or what the students haven't grasped in other classes.

Building on this, Annie argued that because students inevitably face circumstances that no policy can fully anticipate, building flexibility into course structures from the outset is itself an act of adaptability:

People are going to have stuff that comes up that's not documentable, so I think you have to build things like drops and extra credit into your course. You can't just be like, you missed the assignment, oh well — now you've missed a 50-point assignment. You have to be a person who's flexible.

Taken together, participants portrayed compassion and adaptability as deeply intertwined competencies. Compassion shaped how participants understood and related to their students; adaptability shaped how they responded to them. Together, these qualities enable online instructors to meet students where they are and support not just students' academic progress, but their ability to persist in the online environment.

## **Embracing Growth and Innovation in the Online Environment**

Understanding the rapid changes that can affect education, participants also emphasized a willingness to learn and be innovative as crucial competencies for online instructors.

Participants characterized the “willingness to learn” by the one’s ability to adapt with change and feedback. Speaking as a department chair responsible for hiring and overseeing adjuncts, Britta observed “some of our really best online instructors are ones that are willing to adopt and change and willing to continually improve their courses.” Central to that improvement, she noted, is the “ability to take feedback,” finding value in peer-reviewing courses:

I think it's important for us to look at each other's courses, and have people give you feedback, and sometimes it's tough to hear, this isn't really that great. I think it's good for us to be willing to change, willing to incorporate new things, and not be too set in our ways, because it's always changing.

Echoing this sentiment, Rosaline described that online instructors should not just be facilitators of learning but also willing to learn from their students, commenting “It's not just a linear, I'm giving you knowledge, right? You're willing to receive from the students.” For these participants, willingness to receive and implement feedback from peers and students enhances online teaching effectiveness.

Beyond feedback, “willingness to learn” was also characterized by the ability to adapt to new experiences. Rosaline described embracing online instruction as a testament to having a willingness to learn. She explained, “I feel like if you have a willingness to learn. What it is like to navigate the online space as you would navigating an in-person space, or navigating whatever it is that you're teaching. then I think you'll be fine.”

Participants' accounts of navigating artificial intelligence (AI) in their online courses illustrated this willingness in practice. Annie noted that while instructors "can't hate AI," they should develop at least a "basic understanding of it." Britta similarly acknowledged the challenge AI presents, while framing it as an opportunity to be innovative: "It's a challenge, but it's one that I think we're at least confronting and trying to be flexible and think about innovative ways in which to alter our assignments." For participants, AI reflected a natural intersection of willingness to learn and innovation—two competencies that were difficult to separate in practice.

Participants also highlighted “innovation” as a distinct and essential competency for online instructor effectiveness. Reginald asserted, “innovation is the key when it comes to online.” He elaborated and emphasized, “if you're not innovative, you don't belong in the online space. It's just that you're doing you're doing a disservice to students.” Participants characterized “innovation” as utilizing various technologies to enhance the online teaching and learning experience. For example, Jeff described the use of chatbots programmed to respond to student questions:

We deploy chatbots within our courses that basically ingest the syllabus and answer those questions so that you don't have to say, it's in the syllabus 50 times. It'll say, hey, according to the syllabus, this is what the requirement is.

His use of chatbots illustrates an innovative resolution to a common instructor problem --- repeatedly redirecting students to the syllabus. This innovative use of technology not only serves the students but reduces the need for instructor intervention, making better use of their time.

This willingness to seek out and implement technology solutions was a sentiment shared across participants. Annie described this as an openness to trying new technologies regardless of institutional approval:

Willingness to try new technologies even outside of what the university might approve of, like, things that you can bring in that aren't necessarily, like, a part of what you're instructing, but maybe part of your reviews or your supplemental stuff.

Diane exemplified this approach directly, incorporating Discord, a gaming communication platform, into her online courses. She described the impact it had on student engagement:

Discord has become vital, because I honestly don't know if I would know how to effectively keep students engaged if we were just strictly using Canvas and Zoom, I think that would be very hard.....One of the biggest teaching practices that I have that's effective is getting on Discord and hanging out in the chat. Discord opens up my availability to the students, and it makes the students feel like they're not bothering me, I guess is one way to look at it, or it makes the shier students not feel like they're being singled out if they go into a required meeting, where everybody's there, they see me sitting in a channel by myself, they're more likely to jump in and say, hey, I'm having problems with this, can you show me how to do this? It seems to it really opens up a lot of success for the students in that way.

Diane further shared that after presenting at her faculty institute, faculty members were not familiar with Discord and were “amazed” at “how much communication was going on between students.” Her willingness and innovativeness to incorporate technology more common in her field resulted in an increase in student engagement, showcasing how these competencies are crucial for online instructors.

## **Self-Discipline as a Professional Necessity**

Lastly, participants highlighted the importance of self-discipline in managing the demands of teaching solely online.

Challenged with maintaining professional and personal life balance, participants described the need to be self-disciplined with their time and personal wellness. “One thing with online is, is that you have to be dedicated, you have to have that will to do it, you have to have that time management skill,” noted Diane. Despite subject matter expertise, Reginald noted that there are “faculty that are not cut out to teach online,” due to their time management. Speaking from a department chair role, Reginald described how some online adjuncts did not meet the expectations to grade and provide substantive feedback to students within 48 hours of submission:

They have another job so sometimes they fall way behind on the grading and it disrupts the student learning outcome. Students become discouraged as a result of not getting adequate feedback. Or not getting feedback at all, and they become discouraged within the course.

He further elaborated that student discouragement can “affect persistence and retention rates” at the institution. His account underscores that lack of self-discipline can result in a diminished learning experience for the students.

Building on their comments, Britta further described the need for self-regulation not just to manage online teaching responsibilities, but also maintain personal wellness:

Discipline is what you would need, discipline of your time, discipline of your own, making sure that you're getting up and moving each hour, that you're not just sitting all day, because that's not healthy for us either.

As an act of self-discipline, Xavier described having a “cutoff hour,” as previously mentioned, or else he found himself “working all day” as a remote online instructor. Their comments suggest that without self-discipline, online instructors find themselves “working all day,” at possibly a detriment to their personal lives. Overall, participants’ accounts attest that self-discipline is needed to be an engaged instructor and maintain personal well-being.

### **Desires for Institutional Support**

This theme captures the participants’ perspectives on current institutional practices and desired support for full-time faculty who teach solely online. Participants described wanting access to training and professional development, changes to workload expectations, technology improvements, and resources for online students.

#### **Investing in Training and Professional Development**

Recognizing online instruction requires different methods to engage students, participants expressed desires for dedicated training and support for teaching online. Additionally, some participants yearned for access to local and international professional development events to better address their student population and build professional connections.

With the understanding that online education is expected to stay and grow, participants described a need for dedicated training and support for online instructors. Britta emphasized that colleges should “hone in on making sure that online instructors have the skills and support what they need.” Diane concurred, “I think there's some skills that instructors need to learn in order to teach online”; however, she felt her institution “failed” her in preparing her to teach solely online. While Diane received information about instructional design and student support services as a new faculty, the onboarding process did not include “training on how to effectively teach online.” She elaborated:

They have a new faculty institute, which goes over all the different areas like the instructional design [services], the student support services, all of those things. But they really don't have a course that goes into how you set your online class up, what works in communication, what works and what doesn't work, what resources out there that other instructors are using in order to run these classes.

Despite lack of training before teaching online, Diane described her college's instructional design services as "huge" in helping her navigating the LMS, resolve issues, and ensure content accessibility.

To prevent experiences like Diane's, Rosaline suggested that colleges require certification to teach online either from an internal training or organizations like Quality Matters or Online Learning Consortium before "they throw an instructor online." Rosaline acknowledged "it doesn't always happen that way, because sometimes you have more students online than you have instructors," resulting in instructors teaching online before being able to take and complete training. Participants from College C described a contrasting experience, noting that their institution had already implemented a certification requirement for online instructors as part of onboarding and every two years thereafter. Annie spoke to the value of the required training:

There is that barrier that cannot teach online until you go through this training. And it's a pretty cool training. I learned how to do video quizzes. I did not know how to do that before when I moved to online.

Beyond dedicated training and support for online instruction, participants also expressed a desire for broader professional development opportunities. Participants described limited funding for conference attendance and professional travel as a barrier to growth. For example, Annie characterized her institution as "stingy" with funding for both online-focused and local

conferences, despite viewing such events as “a great learning experience” and opportunities to connect with “textbook authors.” Similarly, Reginald was adamant about having “access to internationalize the curriculum by traveling abroad” since his college serves students from “all over the world.”

For the participants, access to training, conferences, and international opportunities indicated whether the institution was invested in their growth and effectiveness as online instructors.

### **Managing Workload and Time Demands of the Online Instructor**

In addition to training and support access, participants want dedicated time for activities that support online instruction.

Participants described how role expectations take away time to focus on instruction. As Jeff lamented, “There's a lot of non-teaching activities that we find ourselves doing on a daily basis, almost to the point where it's like, oh yeah, we do have to do that teaching thing, too.” In addition to their role as faculty, multiple participants expressed serving in department chair roles, which primary responsibilities included hiring and overseeing adjunct instructors. Some participants also described serving on committees as part of their institutional service requirement as a faculty member. Annie felt serving on a committee was an ineffective use of time, especially when during service “nobody asks for your input.” Based on her committee experience, Annie wants her institution’s faculty contract revised to be “training focused rather than on service to the college,” because “sometimes the service hours can take away from being able to serve students.” Participants’ accounts illustrate that faculty are not solely responsible for online instruction, but must fulfill multiple roles, which results in less time for instructional activities.

Participants also described the need to have adequate time to prepare for their online courses. As a new full-time faculty, Jessica wanted more “lead time to redo the courses” she inherited since she only had “a week off to actually do it.” She elaborated:

More lead time to get into that class would be really helpful, so that you can ensure things, like the technology's there, or that the rubrics are available for students to see, or that there's purpose statements and accessibility, of course. We could do it as we're overlapping and teaching other courses, but there's the teaching load, right? It's like, how much time in a day do you have?

Jessica's account underscores that online course preparation requires significant time, even when content is already developed and also highlights that preparation may occur concurrently while actively teaching.

Beyond course preparation, instructors need time to learn the course material for themselves. Pam described needing “six months to prepare and be ready” to teach a new or unfamiliar course online. She elaborated, “If I went into it cold, I'm gonna be not as competent an instructor as if took the time needed to bring that back into my working memory.” Pam's comments suggest teaching a new or unfamiliar course requires more lead time to prepare. Overall, these accounts suggest lack of adequate time to prepare the course as an instructor, diminishing the course quality and ultimately, the student experience.

### **Improving Institutional Technology Infrastructure**

Participants also expressed a strong interest in improving current technologies and practices at their institutions.

One participant notably desired an improved LMS experience. While Pam was satisfied with her institution's faculty support, she was candid about the institution's technological shortcomings:

There isn't really anything I think I would change around individual faculty support. I mean, there's a lot of things I would change around our learning management system, but that's a whole other issue, and we're trying to design a new one, but that's just a challenge, for sure.

She further described the absence of interactive communication tools as a gap that directly affected her ability to engage students, describing a desire for "some interactive chat tool or something, which we don't have." Her account illustrates how technology limitations can affect online instruction in ways that instructors have little power to address on their own.

Echoing this sentiment, Rosaline situated the problem within a broader institutional reality, pointing to the gap between available technology and institutional investment:

There is software out there that can bring the experiences to the students, which is great. It's just figuring out the technologies to do that, and having the money, because the technology might be there, but then the college can't afford it — which is why the buildings are still the same, and why everything's still the same.

Rosaline's account suggests that while technology is available to enhance the online instructional experience, institutions are not financially prioritizing improvements.

For another participant, the technology issue was rooted not in what institutions lacked but what they already possessed and were underutilizing. Jeff argued that institutions should "exploit the technology that they spend a lot of money on, because they definitely don't use it to

its fullest extent." Drawing on his previous experiences at other higher education institutions, Jeff described what full utilization could look like:

There are some institutions out there where attendance is automated, grades are a one-click submit and at my college, we have none of that. Canvas, Blackboard, whatever LMS you have, there are a lot of features that make the job a lot easier. The reporting systems that are out there, there's a lot of automation in there that would make the job a lot easier.

Jeff and the other participants' accounts illustrate that there are institutional gaps in both financial and functional investment in technology, resulting in participants' desires for improvements.

### **Addressing Online Students' Technology Needs**

Lastly, participants want more resources for online students. Participants described concerns about student readiness for online learning particularly with technology access and functionality.

Participants described unreliable technology and access as barrier to online learning. Britta explained that a significant issue students face is "devices that don't work," inhibiting their ability to participate in online classes. Similarly, Rosaline reflected that some students "may not have the tools to be successful," underscoring how technological limitations can directly affect academic performance. Jessica framed technology access as an institutional responsibility, expressing both a desire and a belief that institutions could do more:

I want to make sure that they're connected with those things as well, so that they can be very successful. And I think that these things are possible. I think we can do even a better job in ensuring that our students are set up for success in this modality.

However, Rosaline also described that expanding access to technology resources is not a simple undertaking. She explained, “There's going to be protocols and procedures and processes and regulations and all of these things that you kind of have to navigate, and that takes time. It takes groups of people coming together, it takes lots of conversation, so it's not something that happens overnight.” At the same time, Rosaline also questioned whether institutions are fully aware of the scope of student needs, asking, “Because you also don't always know the resources that students may need, can we get them?” Jessica and Rosaline’s accounts illustrate a gap not only in available resources, but in institutional awareness and assessment of student readiness for online learning.

## **Chapter Summary**

This chapter presented the findings of a qualitative study examining the experiences of nine full-time community college faculty who teach solely online, organized around five themes that emerged through coding and analysis. Participants described the experience of fully online instruction as both challenging and fulfilling, captured in the overarching theme of "The Challenging Yet Fulfilling Experience of Teaching Solely Online." The challenges of navigating online silos, managing the always-on expectation, staying pedagogically relevant, and responding to the rapid emergence of AI were counterbalanced by the fulfillment participants found in meeting non-traditional students where they are, achieving greater work-life balance, and growing as educators through innovation and technology. Across the remaining themes, participants identified the competencies essential for effective fully online teaching and described the institutional support they desired to sustain that work. Together, these themes illustrate the professional and personal journeys of faculty who teach fully online, capturing both the demands of the role and the deeper sense of purpose that keeps them engaged in it.

## **Chapter 5 - Discussion of the Findings**

### **Introduction**

Chapter Five presents an interpretation of the findings from this qualitative study examining the experiences of community college faculty who teach solely online. Drawing on participants' accounts, this chapter situates the findings within existing literature and offers an interpretive analysis organized around four themes: the duality of flexibility in online teaching, evolving online teaching practice, technology as a tool and barrier, and the evolving online community college faculty. Following the interpretation of findings, implications for institutional leaders, instructional designers and educational technologists, and faculty themselves are discussed, alongside recommendations for further research. The chapter concludes with a reflection on what this study contributes to the broader understanding of online teaching and learning at community colleges.

The community college faculty whose experiences are interpreted in this chapter represent a population that is both distinct and difficult to access. While online instruction has become increasingly common across higher education, faculty who teach their entire course load in the online modality, without face-to-face or hybrid sections, represent a particular and unique subset of the broader online teaching population. Recruiting participants who fit this specific profile proved to be one of the more demanding aspects of this study, as the criteria requiring participants to be full-time, teach solely online, and be employed at a community college significantly narrowed the eligible pool. The nine participants who ultimately took part in this study reflect the rarity of this population and the value of the perspectives they offer: full-time educators who have committed entirely to the online modality and whose experiences provide a window into a professional context that has been underexplored in the literature.

## **Interpretation of the Findings**

### **Online Instruction within a Complex System**

The findings of this study were interpreted through the integrated conceptual framework derived from Tamim's (2020) model of online education as a complex system, which examines the interactions across three levels: theoretical foundations at the macro level, institutional management and infrastructure at the meso level, and online instruction at the micro level. The five themes and their subthemes presented in the previous chapter, *The Challenging Yet Fulfilling Experience of Teaching Solely Online*, *Navigating the Challenges of Fully Online Instruction*, *Experiencing Personal and Professional Fulfillment*, *Building Competencies in a Fully Online Teaching Context*, and *Desires for Institutional Support* reflect this interconnected system in practice rather than as isolated experiences. The findings shared in this study showcase the dynamic interplay of theory, infrastructure, and online instructional practices.

At the macro level, the theories of transactional distance (Moore, 1997) and Community of Inquiry (Garrison et al., 1999) establish that the instructor is central to the quality of the online learning experience and that effective facilitation requires deliberate pedagogical skill, intentional communication, and a sustained effort to bridge the transactional distance inherent to the online environment. The participants' accounts affirmed this. The challenges they navigated, isolation in the online silo, managing the always-on mentality, remaining pedagogically relevant, and responding to the rise of AI, reflect the structural realities that both theories identify as characteristic of distance education, and the competencies participants identified as essential, subject matter expertise, online pedagogy, digital literacy, intentional communication, compassion and adaptability, a commitment to growth and innovation, and self-discipline, are the skills through which participants' worked to address and overcome these challenges.

Through intentional course design, proactive communication, and extended availability, participants enacted the dialogue, structure, and presence that Moore (1997) and Garrison et al. (1999) position as foundational to reducing transactional distance and supporting student learning, illustrating that the challenges and competencies participants described are not isolated experiences but a lived application of the theoretical principles that underpin effective online education.

Expanding on this, the meso level of Tamim's (2020) system makes clear that the theoretical demands Moore (1997) and Garrison et al. (1999) place on the online instructor do not exist in isolation but they are enabled or constrained by the institutional management and infrastructure that surrounds them. Participants' experiences illustrated this dynamic directly. Where institutions invested in training, technology, and support, participants were better positioned to develop and enact the competencies that transactional distance theory (Moore, 1997) and the Community of Inquiry framework (Garrison et al., 1999) identify as essential; where that investment was absent, the burden of closing those gaps fell on the participants.

The flexibility that participants found most fulfilling, remote teaching, self-directed scheduling, and the ability to serve learners who could not otherwise access higher education, reflected institutional decisions that created the conditions for that fulfillment. At the same time, participants' desires for more rigorous onboarding, professional development, functional technology, and student-facing resources reveal that the meso-level support Tamim (2020) identifies as essential to effective online instruction remained inconsistent across their institutions, shaping not only their professional experience but the quality of the instruction they were able to provide. Taken together, the findings illustrate that the online teaching experience at the community college is not shaped by individual faculty effort alone but by the interconnected

theoretical, institutional, and instructional dimensions that define the system in which that teaching takes place.

### **Duality of the Flexibility of Online Teaching**

Despite documented faculty resistance to online instruction at community colleges (Cohen et al., 2014; Kisker et al., 2023), participants in this study expressed the opposite and were drawn to fully online teaching in part because of the population it serves, consistent with research by Windes and Lesht (2014). Participants described professional fulfillment rooted not simply in who online education reaches, but in how it reaches them: by removing the physical and scheduling barriers that would otherwise prevent working adults, caregivers, and students navigating complex life demands from accessing higher education at all.

Yet the same time and space independence that makes online education accessible to non-traditional learners creates a structural consequence that participants described consistently: a siloed effect that isolates instructors and students from one another and from the spontaneous exchanges that characterize face-to-face teaching. Participants described online instruction as transactional, driven by one-way communication and routine tasks that stood in contrast to the reciprocal, relational exchanges they valued most about teaching, and exemplifying the psychological and communication gap that Moore (1997) identifies as inherent to the online environment.

This finding is consistent with Grode-Hanks (2016) and Stewart et al. (2010), who documented the professional isolation of off-campus faculty, and with student-facing studies by Capra (2014) and Iloh (2019), which identified isolation as a factor in student disengagement with online learning. What the findings of this study add is that the isolation is mutual, experienced by instructors just as much as by students.

Through availability, proactive outreach, and persistent follow-up, participants made deliberate and consistent efforts to reduce transactional distance (Moore, 1997), efforts that Orcutt et al. (2024) found can foster student engagement and strengthen the instructor-student relationship in online environments, as demonstrated by Annie and Diane. Their accounts illustrate an important distinction: effective online communication is necessary but not sufficient for closing the transactional distance that Moore (1997) identifies as inherent to online instruction. Faculty can create the conditions for dialogue, but they cannot compel it. Therefore, silos are not defined by a lack of effort on the part of faculty, but as a structural reality rooted in the time and space independence of the online modality, which individual effort can mitigate but never eliminate.

Despite the siloed effect, participants described the flexibility of fully online instruction as one of its most fulfilling aspects. Unlike campus-based online faculty who maintained traditional on-campus hours even while teaching online (Mandernach et al., 2013), several participants in this study worked entirely remotely, enabling them to more effectively balance professional obligations with their personal lives.

Yet the same flexibility that allowed participants to be more present in their personal lives made it harder to be anything less than fully present to their students. Consistent with Hulett (2018) and Hadsell (2012), participants described a compassion-driven, always-on mentality to prioritize and be available to their students, finding themselves working all day and blurring the boundaries between their professional obligations and personal lives.

The duality of flexibility, then, is not incidental to the online teaching experience but inherent in it. The same flexibility that enables faculty to serve learners who could not otherwise access higher education, and to be more fully present in their own lives, generates structural

isolation, sustains the always-on expectation, and blurs the boundaries between professional and personal life in ways that individual discipline alone cannot resolve. How faculty navigate that duality — and what institutions do to support them — shapes the very quality of the teaching practice that follows, a dynamic that Tamim's (2020) systems model situates within the interaction of institutional decisions, foundational theory, and the inherent properties of the online modality.

### **Evolving Online Teaching Practice**

Consistent with Cohen et al. (2014), Jaggars (2019), and Kisker et al. (2023), participants described serving a diverse, non-traditional student population whose competing demands and differing life experiences shape not only when and how they engage with coursework but what they need from their instructors to persist. As Rosaline noted, “we’re trying to teach them in a space where that’s not how they learn. That’s not even the world they live in, nor are they interested,” inviting online instructors to be responsive in their course design, content, and ongoing teaching practices.

As established in Chapter 2 and confirmed by participants, subject matter expertise alone is insufficient for teaching online; effective online instruction requires a combination of online pedagogy, digital literacy, communication, compassion, adaptability, and a willingness to learn and innovate (Abdous, 2011; Albrahim, 2020; Brewer, 2018; Dello Stritto & Aguiar, 2024; Hulett, 2018). This finding is further grounded in Moore’s (1997) theory of transactional distance and the Community of Inquiry framework (Garrison et al., 1999; Cleveland-Innes et al., 2019), both of which establish that effective online instruction requires deliberate pedagogical skill in addition to content knowledge. Participants, particularly Rosaline, depicted that when

instructors lack the necessary competencies, especially digital literacy or online pedagogical preparation, the student learning experience is diminished (Cleveland-Innes et al., 2019).

Colleges bear responsibility for preparing instructors to teach online, but the practice remains inconsistent (Andrews & Hu, 2021; Garrett et al., 2023; Kang, 2012; Lichoro, 2015; Tamim, 2020). Several participants described requiring certification before instructors can teach online, demonstrating that online pedagogy training is foundational for effective course design and facilitation (Andrews & Hu, 2021; Garrett et al., 2023; Jaggars, 2019; Kang, 2012; Tamim, 2020).

Critical to overcoming transactional distance (Moore, 1997) and demonstrating teaching presence (Garrison et al., 1999) is how instructors structure and design the online course (James et al., 2022; Martin, Ritzhaupt et al., 2019). Participants identified frameworks including Backwards Design, Universal Design for Learning (UDL), TILT, and scaffolded module structures as approaches for designing effective online courses, consistent with Cross and Polk (2018) and James et al. (2022).

Effective course design extended beyond participants' individual courses into peer-developed course models at some institutions. While shared course structures offer efficiency and consistency, they can limit what instructors are able to adjust, constraining their ability to adapt course content and design to serve a diverse and evolving student population (James et al., 2022; Martin, Ritzhaupt & Kumar, 2019; Tamim, 2020).

The emergence of AI introduced another significant layer of complexity in course design and facilitation. Seen as both a cheating and learning tool, AI has forced faculty to rethink assessment design, academic integrity policies, and the very purpose of assignments in real time.

Not addressed in the reviewed literature, the “ever-moving target” of AI is a new factor shaping online teaching and the instructor’s role as course designer and facilitator (Martin, Budhrani et al., 2019) in the learning process, positioning participants' accounts as a timely contribution to the emerging area of literature on AI in online teaching.

As instructors navigate the challenge of AI and continue to serve a diverse student population, institutions once again bear responsibility for providing access to ongoing training and support for online instruction (Tamim, 2020). Confirmed by Diane, instructional design services are “huge” in supporting online instructors with the design and facilitation of their courses, with indirect but meaningful impact on student success (Abdous, 2011; Martin, Ritzhaupt et al., 2019; Smith, 2010). Where institutions invest in this support, faculty are better positioned to serve an evolving student population; where they do not, the quality of online teaching and learning is compromised in ways that individual instructors cannot remedy alone. As technology evolves and AI continues to reshape the online teaching and learning landscape, that need for institutional investment will only grow. Central to that investment is ensuring faculty have the tools and infrastructure to put those competencies into practice (Tamim, 2020).

### **Technology as a Learning Tool and Barrier**

For the participants in this study, technology occupied a fundamentally dual role. It was the primary means through which effective and innovative online teaching became possible, yet it was also one of the most persistent sources of challenge and constraint in their daily work. Their experiences echo prior research that describes technology in community college online learning as both a learning tool and a barrier (Bailey & Card, 2009; Jaggars, 2011) and suggest that the online environment is shaped as much by institutional technology limits as by instructional intent (Tamim, 2020).

AI sat at the intersection of technology as both tool and barrier in ways that participants were still actively working to interpret. Several participants framed AI first as a threat to academic integrity and the submission of authentic student work, resulting in redesign of student assessments and reporting for breaking student code of conduct. At the same time, participants also described the enabling potential of AI. Annie, for example, discussed using AI to assist with peer-developed courses, while Jeff described using chatbots to respond to syllabus questions, thereby reducing repetitive communication and freeing time for more complex instructional interactions. These accounts resonate with emerging scholarship that positions AI as both a risk and a resource, and they highlight Jeff's concern that as AI and other technologies advance, they may alter not only how online instructors work, but what their role is fundamentally for (Martin, Budhrani et al., 2019; Tamim, 2020).

Beyond AI, participants' experiences underscored that the learning management system alone was not sufficient to support the depth of presence and interaction they sought to create. They emphasized the need for accessible, ADA-compliant tools that would allow them to design rich content, foster interaction, and make their presence more visible in the course (CAST, 2024; Cleveland-Innes et al., 2019; Garrison et al., 1999; James et al., 2022; Tamim, 2020). One specific area they identified was the absence of adequate real-time communication tools within the LMS. Pam described wanting an integrated chat feature that would allow for more immediate and informal student interaction. In contrast, Diane turned to Discord as an external platform to support more dynamic student interaction. This adoption of Discord illustrates both the faculty-level innovation that institutional gaps can prompt and the additional burden those gaps place on individual instructors to identify, vet, and implement tools that institutions should be providing (Tamim, 2020).

The findings also align with research that distinguishes between the availability of technology and its meaningful use. Across institutions, participants described a pattern of out-of-date LMS platforms, a lack of integrated tools, and underutilized automation capabilities, suggesting that the technology problem was as much about neglect as it was about resources. This distinction matters because it suggests that the technology challenge facing community college online instruction is not only a funding problem. Institutions that already possess underutilized tools could improve the online teaching and learning environment without additional investment — if they directed sufficient attention and staff capacity toward making existing resources fully functional and accessible (Tamim, 2020). Instructional designers and educational technologists are often the bridge between the tools institutions possess and the faculty who need support using them effectively, making their roles central to closing the gap between institutional investment and instructional impact (Tamim, 2020).

The same institutional gaps that constrain faculty also ripple outward to students, as participants underscored that technology access must extend beyond the classroom if online learning is to be genuinely effective. Consistent with Jaggar (2011), Bailey and Card (2009), and Bosley and Custer (2021), participants described unreliable devices and technology issues as direct barriers to student learning and called on their institutions to provide the hardware and support necessary for participation in online courses. At the same time, they recognized that colleges already struggling to invest in essential instructional technologies for faculty may find it difficult to also provide device access for students, revealing yet another layer of tension in the technological landscape of community college education (Tamim, 2020).

Taken together, these findings portray technology as both necessary and insufficient. Tools, platforms, and AI systems can support design, communication, and efficiency, but they

cannot account for the most defining feature of effective online instruction and what prior work on instructor presence (Cleveland-Innes et al., 2019; Garrison et al., 1999) and transactional distance (Moore, 1997) also emphasizes: the deliberate, persistent, and deeply human work of showing up as a full and accessible presence in a space that does not make that easy.

### **The Evolving Online Community College Faculty**

The literature highlights a growing need for qualified online faculty at community colleges (Cohen et al., 2014; Kisker et al., 2023). Participants in this study exemplify how that need can be effectively met through compassion-driven teaching, intentional communication, and adaptive instructional practice.

Participants' stories reflected a compassion-driven mindset grounded in an understanding of the non-traditional learner experience. They often viewed disengagement not as a sign of disinterest but as a response to life challenges or systemic barriers that complicated students' ability to participate fully. This perspective translated into adaptability, as participants adjusted deadlines, responded quickly to communication, and provided individualized instruction when needed. These approaches extended the findings of Kisker et al. (2023), Bosley and Custer (2021), and Hulett (2018), affirming that empathy and flexibility are central to supporting student success in online community college contexts.

These competencies were demonstrated through how participants fostered presence and humanized themselves through intentional communication in their courses. Participants used strategies such as virtual office hours, video feedback, proactive outreach, and extended availability to build authentic relationships and bridge the isolation gap felt in online instruction. Several participants, especially those who worked remotely, described responding to students during evenings and weekends to support learner success. Remote teaching and extended

availability also required participants to balance their professional dedication with their own personal lives, extending the time management competency to that of self-discipline (Abdous, 2011; Albrahim, 2020; Brewer, 2018; Hulett, 2018; Tamim, 2020). These collective accounts further affirm that communication skills are essential for teaching online, varied mediums demonstrate presence, and remote flexibility enables greater availability to students, yet at a cost to personal time (Albrahim, 2020; Garrison et al., 1999; Hadsell, 2012; Hulett, 2018; James et al., 2022; Li et al., 2021; Budhrani & Kumar, 2019; Moore, 1997; Tamim, 2020).

Yet participants' ability to devote sustained time to this kind of thoughtful design and presence was frequently constrained by broader institutional policies and responsibilities (Cohen et al., 2014; Kisker et al., 2023; Tamim, 2020). The level of institutional support and resources available for online instruction further limited what was possible. Jessica was allotted only a single dedicated week to revise the courses she inherited, restricting her ability to integrate technology and implement effective course design, work that ultimately had to overlap with her active teaching responsibilities. Similarly, Annie described serving time on unproductive committee work, while Reginald and Britta held department chair roles responsible for hiring and managing part-time and adjunct instructors, responsibilities that further drew time away from dedicated teaching. Taken together, these accounts illustrate how institutional demands on faculty time extend beyond the instructor, ultimately shaping the quality of the online learning experience students receive (Capra, 2014; Cohen et al., 2014; Kisker et al., 2023; Orcutt, 2024; Tamim, 2020).

Alongside these competing demands, participants were further constrained by the technology their colleges provided. They discussed how institutional technology limitations sometimes restricted their ability to engage fully with students and diminished their effectiveness

as online instructors. Pam navigated an outdated LMS that lacked a chat tool; Rosaline described a lack of college investment in instructional technologies; and Jeff called for greater automation and more strategic use of underutilized technology. Such improvements would enhance the online instruction experience for both instructors and students (Tamim, 2020). Even with essential tools like an updated LMS and a virtual meeting platform, participants exhibited innovation to enhance student engagement in their courses. For example, Rosaline used an interactive lesson platform to create virtual field trips for her students, and Diane meaningfully increased engagement by utilizing Discord to communicate with students. Together, these accounts illustrate that student engagement goes beyond LMS features and virtual meeting platforms, revealing a gap between institutional resources and faculty capability, and requiring faculty to think innovatively to deliver effective online instruction (Abdous, 2011; Albrahim, 2020; Cleveland-Innes et al., 2019; Garrison et al., 1999; Moore, 1997; Tamim, 2020).

As online faculty navigate these technology challenges, they are also confronting their role alongside AI. While Martin, Budhrani, and Kumar (2019) describe course designer and facilitator as the instructor's primary roles in the online environment, participants in this study, and one in particular, anticipate something more significant: a shift in what their role is fundamentally for. As AI increasingly takes on functions related to information delivery and content generation, the distinctly human dimensions of teaching, such as professional expertise, compassion, and adaptability, may become not supplementary features of the instructor's role but its defining ones (Cleveland-Innes et al., 2019; Garrison et al., 1999; Moore, 1997; Tamim, 2020). What AI cannot replicate, ultimately, is the authentic presence of the instructor.

These findings portray the evolving online community college faculty member as someone whose role is being reshaped at the intersection of care, design, technology, and

institutional context. As institutional infrastructures lag and AI capabilities grow, participants' challenging yet fulfilling experiences suggest that the future of online community college teaching will depend on how well faculty are supported in sustaining presence, balancing their time, and leaning into the human capacities that no technology can replace. Viewed through Tamim's (2020) systems model, that evolution will be guided by the foundational theories of transactional distance (Moore, 1997) and community of inquiry (Garrison et al., 1999) and determined, in no small part, by the institutional management that surrounds it.

### **Implications for Practice**

The findings of this study suggest several implications for community college online education practices: for institutional leaders who set the conditions under which online teaching occurs, for the instructional designers and educational technologists who support online faculty, and for the faculty themselves who navigate the demands of teaching solely online at community colleges.

### **Implications for Institutional Leadership**

The findings of this study carry significant implications for community college leaders responsible for the policies, resources, and structures that shape the online teaching and learning environment (Tamim, 2020).

First, institutions should consider establishing dedicated faculty positions for fully online teaching, including the option to work remotely. As evidenced in this study and supported by Bates and LaBrecque (2019), Falk et al. (2022), and Mandernach et al. (2013), faculty whose sole responsibility is online instruction are better positioned to sustain the presence, course quality, and responsiveness that online students need to succeed. Where institutions extend these positions to include remote work, faculty are better positioned to meet students where they are,

responding during the non-traditional hours when online learners are most active and most in need of support.

Second, institutions should establish and enforce clear standards for faculty preparation to teach online. Singh et al. (2022) identified the need for policies ensuring minimal faculty competence in the face of emerging challenges to online teaching, and the findings of this study confirm that urgency. Required training in digital literacy and online pedagogy before faculty teach online is not an optional institutional investment but a foundational condition for student success. As artificial intelligence continues to reshape the online teaching and learning landscape, institutional AI policy is an extension of this responsibility: faculty should not be left to navigate questions of academic integrity, assessment redesign, and appropriate AI use without clear institutional guidance and support (Tamim, 2020).

Third, institutions should examine faculty contracts and service expectations in relation to the specific demands of fully online teaching (Tamim, 2020). Participants described committee service, curriculum development, and administrative responsibilities as competing directly with the time needed to develop, maintain, and continuously improve online courses. Workload policies that do not account for the preparation and ongoing maintenance demands of online instruction place faculty in a position that ultimately affects the quality and consistency of the student learning experience. Providing continual access to professional development, including conference funding and discipline-specific opportunities, signals that institutions view online faculty as professionals whose ongoing growth is a shared responsibility.

Fourth, institutions should examine how existing technology resources are being used before assuming that improvement requires additional investment. Participants described a dual institutional failure involving not only a lack of resources but also a failure to fully deploy and

maintain the tools already available. Institutions that direct sufficient staff capacity toward making existing technologies and learning management system features functional, accessible, and integrated into instructional practice could meaningfully improve the online teaching and learning environment at reduced cost.

Finally, supporting faculty time and preparation also requires the right staff infrastructure. Institutions should invest in dedicated instructional design and educational technology staffing to support online instruction. Affirmed by Diane and consistent with Abdous (2011), Jaggars (2019), and Garrett et al. (2022), instructional design and learning management support are vital for delivering quality online instruction. Critically, these staff must themselves receive ongoing professional development to keep pace with the evolving demands of online teaching; an instructional designer who is not current in emerging pedagogical practices and technologies is limited in the support they can offer faculty.

### **Implications for Instructional Designers and Educational Technologists**

The findings of this study have direct implications for the instructional designers and educational technologists who support online faculty at community colleges. As evidenced in this study and consistent with Abdous (2011), Martin, Ritzhaupt and Kumar (2019), and Smith (2010), the quality of that support will depend on how these roles approach their work with faculty and whether they are positioned to grow alongside the demands of online teaching.

First, instructional designers should approach their work with faculty as faculty-centered design partnerships rather than transactional service interactions (Garrett et al., 2022; Tamim, 2020). This means engaging with faculty not only during initial course development but on an ongoing basis, as course content evolves, as student populations shift, and as new pedagogical challenges emerge.

Second, the emergence of AI as a pedagogical challenge without institutional guidance is an area where instructional designers are uniquely positioned to lead. Instructional designers who develop AI-specific resources, facilitate faculty conversations about AI in online teaching, and build AI literacy into existing training and professional development offerings would meaningfully help online instructors navigate the emerging technology landscape.

Third, instructional designers and educational technologists should prioritize maintaining currency in their field, including emerging developments in online pedagogy, instructional technology, and artificial intelligence. As the demands of online teaching continue to evolve, their ability to support faculty effectively is only as strong as their own professional knowledge.

Finally, educational technologists are particularly positioned to address the infrastructure gaps participants described. By auditing available tools, identifying underutilized LMS features, and advocating for infrastructure investments that reflect the needs of fully online instruction, educational technologists can close the gap between what institutions possess and what faculty and students actually experience.

Together, instructional designers and educational technologists form a critical support layer between institutional decisions and faculty practice — and it is within that layer that the conditions for effective online teaching are built, one course and one collaboration at a time.

### **Implications for Community College Faculty Teaching Online**

As the primary focus of this study, the findings carry concrete implications for faculty themselves. Participants' accounts reveal that effective online teaching is not simply a matter of content expertise but of deliberate, sustained practice grounded in online pedagogy, spanning course design, presence, boundaries, and innovation, each of which shapes the quality of the learning experience students receive.

First, a grounding in online pedagogy is an essential and independent competency for faculty teaching online. Frameworks such as Backwards Design, Universal Design for Learning, and scaffolded module structures provide a pedagogical foundation for designing courses that are organized, accessible, and responsive to the needs of a diverse, non-traditional student population (James et al., 2022; Martin, Ritzhaupt et al., 2019). This foundation is essential regardless of the level of institutional support available — it is the basis from which effective course design, student engagement, and instructional decision-making flow.

Second, aligned with the theory of transactional distance (Moore, 1997) and the Community of Inquiry framework (Cleveland-Innes et al., 2019; Garrison et al., 1999), participants' accounts of effective online teaching point consistently toward one foundational practice: deliberate, continual presence in the online course. Faculty who invest in presence from the outset of a course and maintain that investment consistently across the term are better positioned to reduce transactional distance, support student persistence, and sustain their own professional fulfillment in a modality that can otherwise feel isolating.

Third, presence in the online environment is closely tied to non-traditional hours (Hadsell, 2012; Hulett, 2018). Participants' experiences highlight the tension between being available when students are most likely to engage and the risk of drifting into constant availability. Faculty who explicitly define and communicate their availability windows, and who practice self-discipline in honoring those boundaries, protect their own sustainability while still signaling reliability and care to students.

Fourth, where partnerships with instructional designers and educational technologists are available, faculty are encouraged to leverage those relationships to enhance and extend their course design work. Treating these partnerships as ongoing collaborative opportunities rather

than one-time service interactions positions faculty to continuously refine their courses, integrate emerging tools effectively, and respond to the evolving needs of their students (Abdous, 2011; Martin, Ritzhaupt et al., 2019; Smith, 2010).

Fifth, AI literacy is an emerging and essential competency for online faculty, one that goes beyond academic integrity concerns to include the thoughtful integration of AI as a pedagogical tool and transparent communication with students about appropriate use. Participants' accounts suggest that AI can support aspects of course design, routine communication, and student learning but also introduces new questions about authorship, assessment, and the purpose of assignments. Collaboration with instructional designers can strengthen this integration, helping faculty reimagine assessments that emphasize higher-order thinking and develop approaches to AI that are pedagogically intentional rather than reactive. Faculty who engage proactively with AI in this way will be better positioned to shape its impact on learning and to maintain the distinctly human dimensions of their role.

Finally, participants' experiences highlight the value of faculty innovation and exploration of instructional technologies beyond the LMS. Participants' use of tools like Discord and Nearpod shows that faculty innovation is already occurring at the margins of institutional systems. Such innovation does not require mastering every new tool; rather, it involves a willingness to explore, evaluate, and selectively integrate technologies that align with pedagogical goals and the needs of a diverse student population — meeting students where they are, in the spaces and tools that reflect how they actually learn.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

The findings of this study illuminate several areas where further research could extend understanding of online teaching at community colleges. As artificial intelligence introduces new

questions about the instructor's role, institutional structures continue to shape what is possible for faculty, and technology access remains a persistent challenge, future studies can address gaps in AI's evolving impact, preparation standards, technology satisfaction, and instructional design support.

First, the influence of artificial intelligence merits dedicated and urgent study. Jeff's concerns about AI reshaping the instructor role, alongside other participants' real-time navigation of assessment redesign without institutional guidance, point to an area of rapid change that existing literature has not yet fully addressed. Research tracking how AI integration evolves alongside instructor presence (Cleveland-Innes et al., 2019; Garrison et al., 1999) and student learning would extend this study's finding of AI's dual role as tool and disruptor in community college online teaching. As AI capabilities continue to advance, the questions raised by participants in this study will only become more pressing, underscoring the urgency of sustained scholarly attention to this dimension of online faculty practice.

Second, future research should examine how institutional requirements and expectations for teaching online are defined and enacted at community colleges (Tamim, 2020). Participants described inconsistent preparation standards across institutions, with some requiring certification while others left faculty to learn on their own, alongside competing service demands that constrained course improvement time. Future research in this area would clarify which institutional structures best support the sustained presence and course quality that participants demonstrated as essential for effective online teaching.

Third, further research should examine faculty satisfaction with institutional technologies, including learning management systems and engagement tools. Participants such as Pam sought basic features such as real-time chat that were absent from their LMS, while Diane

adopted external platforms like Discord to compensate. Jeff highlighted underutilized institutional tools, suggesting further attention to how specific technology frustrations connect to instructional practices and student engagement (Tamim, 2020).

Fourth, further insights can be gleaned from studying this population more in depth. Deeper exploration of full-time faculty who teach solely online would reveal more about the online teaching experience within the community college context.

Finally, deeper exploration of course development and training practices is warranted, particularly the roles and utilization of instructional designers and educational technologists (Abdous, 2011; Martin, Ritzhaupt et al., 2019; Smith, 2010). Diane affirmed instructional design support as "huge" for course quality, yet participants across the study frequently worked around technological limitations and underutilized tools independently. Research into how these supports function in practice would reveal gaps between available resources and actual use.

## **Study Conclusion**

This study sought to describe the experiences of community college faculty who teach solely online, and in doing so, it surfaced a portrait of a profession that is as challenging as it is fulfilling. Participants were drawn to online teaching because of the population it serves, and they brought to that work a level of compassion, adaptability, and pedagogical intentionality that the literature has called for but rarely documented in full. Across the four interpretive themes, a consistent tension emerged between what faculty are capable of and what institutional conditions make possible, as faculty navigated isolation, always-on expectations, technology limitations, and the emerging implications of artificial intelligence, doing so with creativity, resolve, and a deep commitment to the learners they serve.

What this study makes clear is that the quality of online community college teaching will not be decided by technology alone. It will be decided by how well institutions support the faculty who show up, day after day, to do the distinctly human work that no platform, system, or algorithm can replace. Viewed through the integrated lens of Tamim's (2020) systems model, Moore's (1997) theory of transactional distance, and the Community of Inquiry framework (Garrison et al., 1999), the findings confirm that the instructor remains the irreplaceable center of the online learning experience and that the institutions, policies, and supports surrounding them will determine how fully that potential is realized.

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## Appendix A - Interview Protocol with Framework Alignment Matrix

| Question                                                                                                                 | Framework                                                                                                                      |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1. Please share your first name, the subject you teach, and how long you have been teaching fully online.                | Participant demographics question                                                                                              |
| 2. What prompted you to teach exclusively online?                                                                        | Participant background question                                                                                                |
| 3. From a personal and professional basis, what do you find most satisfying about teaching solely online?                | Tamim (2020) – micro & meso level (How do faculty experience teaching online & institutional management of online instruction) |
| 4. From a personal and professional basis, what do you find least satisfying about teaching solely online?               | Tamim (2020) – micro & meso level (How do faculty experience teaching online & institutional management of online instruction) |
| 5. Do you find teaching only online different from what you expected it to be?                                           | Tamim (2020) – micro level (How do faculty experience teaching online)                                                         |
| 6. What are some of the biggest challenges you've faced teaching solely online, and how have you tried to overcome them? | Tamim (2020) – micro level (How do faculty experience teaching online)                                                         |
| 7. In what ways has teaching fully online affected how you see yourself as an educator?                                  | Tamim (2020) – micro & meso level (How do faculty experience teaching online & institutional management of online instruction) |

| Question                                                                                                                                                                                                    | Framework                                                                                                                                             |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 8. What design and teaching practices do you consider to be effective to support learner success in your online courses?                                                                                    | Tamim (2020) – micro & macro level (How do faculty experience teaching online; TDT/COI – Instructors must be skilled to deliver distance instruction) |
| 9. How do you build relationships with students in an online environment? How does that compared to in-person teaching, if you’ve done that?                                                                | Tamim (2020) – micro & macro level (How do faculty experience teaching online; TDT/COI – Instructors must be skilled to deliver distance instruction) |
| 10. Based on your experiences, please share a word or phrase to describe teaching solely online. What other words or phrases describe online teaching?<br><br>a. Why did you choose those words or phrases? | Tamim (2020) – micro level (How do faculty experience teaching online)                                                                                |
| 11. From your experience and in your opinion, what knowledge, skills, and/or personal attributes do online instructors need to effectively teach online?                                                    | Tamim (2020) macro level (TDT/COI – Instructors must be skilled to deliver distance instruction)                                                      |
| 12. Do you believe that an instructor’s level of competency teaching online affects online student learning experience and academic outcomes? If so, how?                                                   | Tamim (2020) macro level (TDT/COI – Instructors must be skilled to deliver distance instruction)                                                      |
| 13. What is something that your college does well in supporting the development of necessary competencies to teach online?                                                                                  | Tamim (2020) – meso level (How do faculty experience institutional management of online instruction)                                                  |
| 14. If you could redesign how online faculty are supported, what changes would you make? What types of training or resources would be most useful?                                                          | Tamim (2020) – meso level (How do faculty experience institutional management of online instruction)                                                  |

| Question                                                                            | Framework                                                                                            |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 15. What does the future of online teaching in community colleges look like?        | Tamim (2020) – meso level (How do faculty experience institutional management of online instruction) |
| 16. Is there anything else that hasn't been discussed but feels important to share? | Open ended                                                                                           |