TAMIU Back Together: Divergent Faculty and Staff Experiences with FlexLive Course

Administration during the Fall 2020 Semester

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Executive Summary

Context: While the pandemic raged on, in the Fall 2020 semester, TAMIU implemented a FlexLive course administration modality as a mechanism for "returning to normal" after the abrupt transition to a purely virtual learning environment in the Spring 2020 semester. The decision to be 'on campus', 'online', or some combination thereof was highly contested across the nation, with many pathways arising. Some institutions moved fully remote. Others provided faculty with the option to choose if they wanted to remain online or to return to campus. As a seeming compromise, TAMIU implemented the FlexLive modality which provided students with the option; however, faculty on-campus presence was mandated.

Methodology: Following TAMIU Institutional Review Board approval, surveys were administered to all faculty and students to assess campus experiences with FlexLive courses during the Fall 2020 semester and related perceptions of campus safety. Between March 10th and May 24th, a total of 381 valid responses were collected: 52 from faculty and 259 from students. The surveys administered included quantitative and open-ended qualitative questions with items, such as demographic data, questions regarding reliable access to technology, perceptions regarding access to recordings, attitudes towards the FlexLive environment, campus safety, and course administration.

Findings: We first present findings from quantitative measures, followed by a thematic analysis of the qualitative data. In general, we found that TAMIU professors were largely seen as accessible during FlexLive courses. However, faculty agreement that TAMIU provided timely updates decreased between the Spring 2020 and Fall 2020 semesters (see Dmello et al., 2020), with approximately one-third of faculty respondents being more critical of the lack of updates. Conversely, student agreement largely increased during this period. The FlexLive decision was incredibly popular with students and received somewhat popular reception from the faculty. There was a mixed response with regards to perception of course quality in FlexLive; however, the vast majority of both faculty and students were in strong support of access to recordings after a live lecture. Finally, despite the multitude of measures adopted by TAMIU to ensure on-campus safety, there were a substantial number of students and faculty that did not feel safe on campus. This safety concern was largely reinforced by their family and friends.

Context

In March 2020, the onset of the global pandemic presented unprecedented challenges to the entire Texas A&M International University (TAMIU) community. While the pandemic continued in the Fall 2020 semester, TAMIU implemented a FlexLive course administration modality as a mechanism for "returning to normal" after the abrupt transition to a purely virtual learning environment in the Spring 2020 semester. The decision to be 'on campus', 'online', or some combination thereof was highly contested across the nation, with many pathways arising. Some institutions moved fully remote. Others provided faculty with the option to choose if they wanted to remain online or to return to campus. As a seeming compromise, TAMIU implemented the FlexLive modality which provided students with the option; however, faculty on-campus presence was mandated.

In subsequent sections, please find information about the methodology applied for this study, findings, and subsequent recommendations. This project was conducted as a part of the TAMIU Louis Stokes Alliance for Minority Participation (LSAMP) initiative. This report is available for open release and can be downloaded from the TAMIU LSAMP website; individuals may also request a copy of this report directly from either the study's lead investigator, Dr. Jared R. Dmello (jrd094@shsu.edu) or from the TAMIU LSAMP PI, Dr. Mahmoud Khasawneh (mahmoud.khasawneh@tamiu.edu). Additionally, for a more detailed insight into the data and findings, please contact the TAMIU LSAMP team.

Methodology

To assess campus experiences with FlexLive courses during the Fall 2020 semester and related perceptions of campus safety, surveys were administered to all active faculty and students. Responses were collected between March 10th and May 24th, 2021. In total, there were 52 faculty and 259 valid student responses. Both the faculty and student survey collection instruments were approved by the TAMIU Institutional Review Board prior to release. Surveys included both quantitative and open-ended qualitative questions. Items included demographic data, questions regarding reliable access to technology, perceptions regarding access to recordings, attitudes towards the FlexLive environment, campus safety, and course administration. Percentages reported are the proportion of respondents who responded to the individual item, unless otherwise noted. To be considered a valid entry, the respondent must have been either enrolled or teaching at least one course in a FlexLive format during the Fall 2020 semester.

Findings

In general, we found that TAMIU professors were largely seen as accessible during FlexLive courses. However, faculty agreement that TAMIU provided timely updates decreased between the Spring 2020 and Fall 2020 semesters (see Dmello et al., 2020, for Spring data), with approximately one-third of faculty respondents being more critical of the lack of updates. Conversely, student agreement largely increased during this period. The FlexLive decision was incredibly popular with students and received somewhat popular reception from the faculty. There was a mixed response with regards to perception of course quality in FlexLive; however, the vast majority of both faculty and students were in strong support of access to recordings after a live

lecture. Finally, despite the multitude of measures adopted by TAMIU to ensure on-campus safety, there were a substantial number of students and faculty that did not feel safe on campus. This safety concern was largely reinforced by their family and friends.

Demographics

Responses came from primarily full-time faculty (90.91%) and students (94.96%), which implies an increased investment in transitioning to a virtual environment. Respondents were distributed across classification for both faculty (e.g., tenure-track, tenured, professional track, adjunct, etc.) and students (e.g., freshman, sophomore, junior, senior, etc.). Based on institutional records, faculty in professional or adjunct tracks are under-represented.[1] The majority of student responses came from juniors (38.24%) and seniors (35.71%); graduate students were under-represented in the response sample (3.37%).
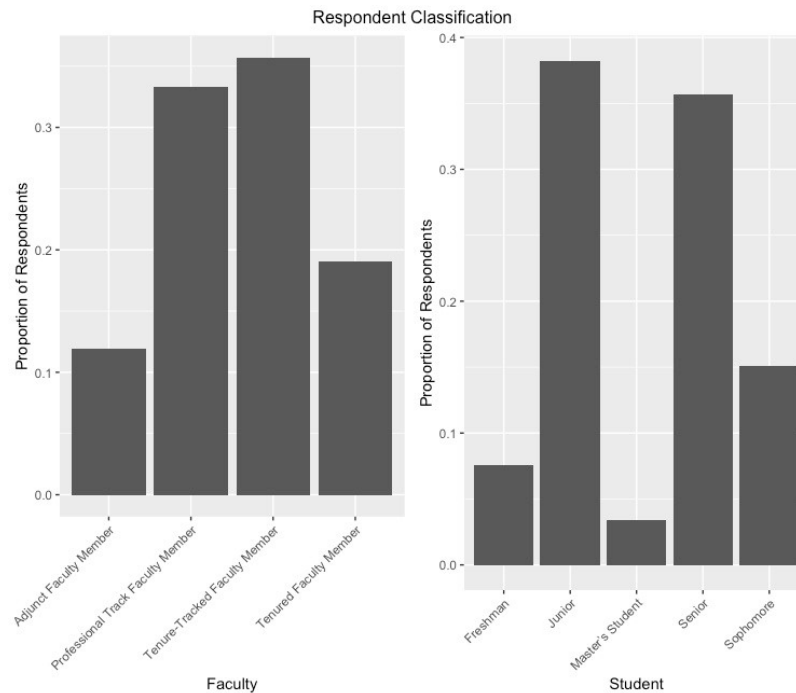

Respondents identifying as females were relatively more prevalent in both samples. For faculty, the sample consisted of 50% male and 50% female. For students, 60.92% identified as females, 38.24% as males, and 0.84% identified as other than male/female binary. This distribution is representative of the TAMIU student body, based on institutional records and is consistent with past research which has found that women have increased rates of participation in higher education than their male counterparts (Ntiri, 2001).

Participant ages significantly varied. The average faculty respondent was 44.56 years old (*min* = 22, *max* = 73) and the average student was 23.43 (*min* = 19, *max* = 56). For both samples, the median was below the mean. This represents a slightly younger average than the sample from our

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[1] The most recent institutional records available are for Fall 2019.

previous emergency transition study. As we previously reported, the relatively younger samples could impact campus attitudes toward the transition to a virtual learning environment, as past research has found an increased use of technology in millennials (McMillan & Morrison, 2006; Stasio, 2013).
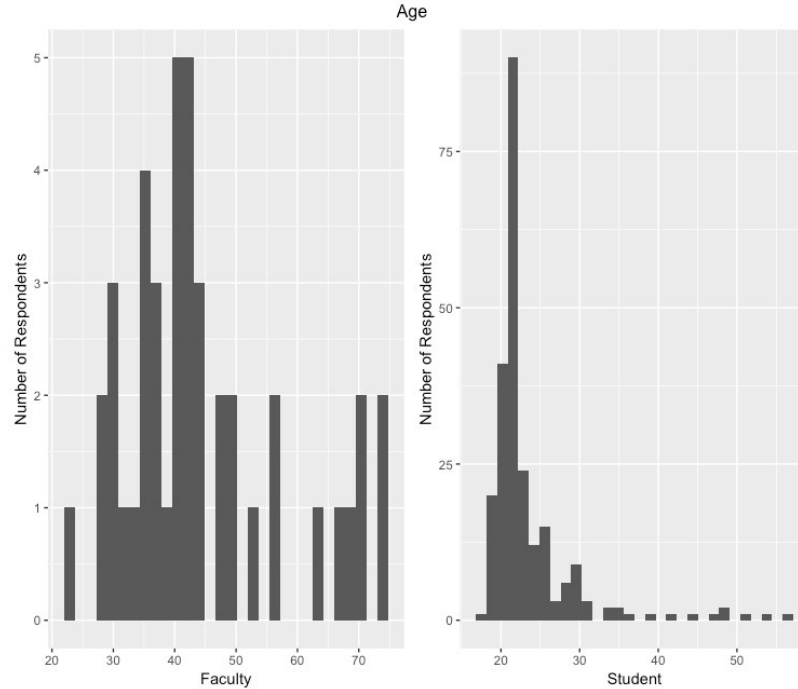

Most faculty respondents (53.49%) identified as "Not Hispanic", whereas the majority of student respondents identified as "Hispanic" (94.54%). This is in line with TAMIU's demography as a Hispanic-Serving Institution and past trends. Per institutional records, in Fall 2019, 93.8% of students and 46.2% of faculty at TAMIU self-identified as Hispanic. In both samples, we received an increased percentage of responses from individuals identifying as Hispanic (ΔFaculty = 11.32%, ΔStudent = 3.75%). Thus, other racial groups could be under-represented in the dataset. Further investigation is needed to evaluate the role of race and ethnicity on attitudes toward FlexLive course administration and to ensure educational programming is reflective of TAMIU's commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Self-Identifying as Hispanic
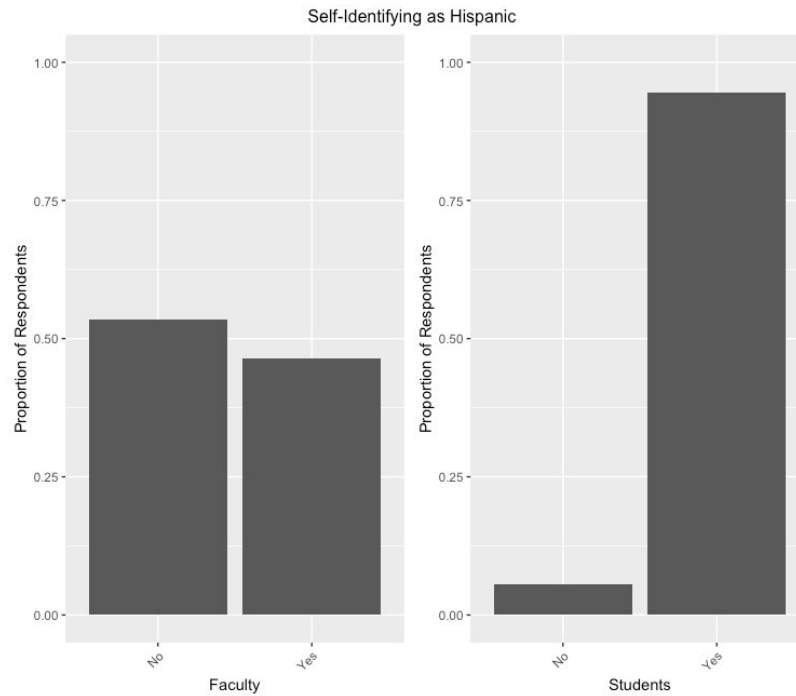
Minorities were largely underrepresented in the samples.[2] African Americans (faculty = 2.32%, students = 1.69%), Asians (faculty = 6.98%, students = 1.69%), or other racial categories (faculty = 6.98%, students = 0.42%). Given the disparity between majority and minority categories, the University should consider developing and implementing a robust plan for increasing diversity on campus. Given its commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion (*see:* TAMIU Annual Report, 2020), TAMIU should consider the impact on these populations and identify specific needs for the purpose of promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion of all demographics within the broader campus community.

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[2] Minorities are operationalized as individuals identifying as non-White and non-Hispanic. Given the demographics of Laredo, Hispanics are categorized within the majority for the purpose of this report, despite being a national minority.

Race
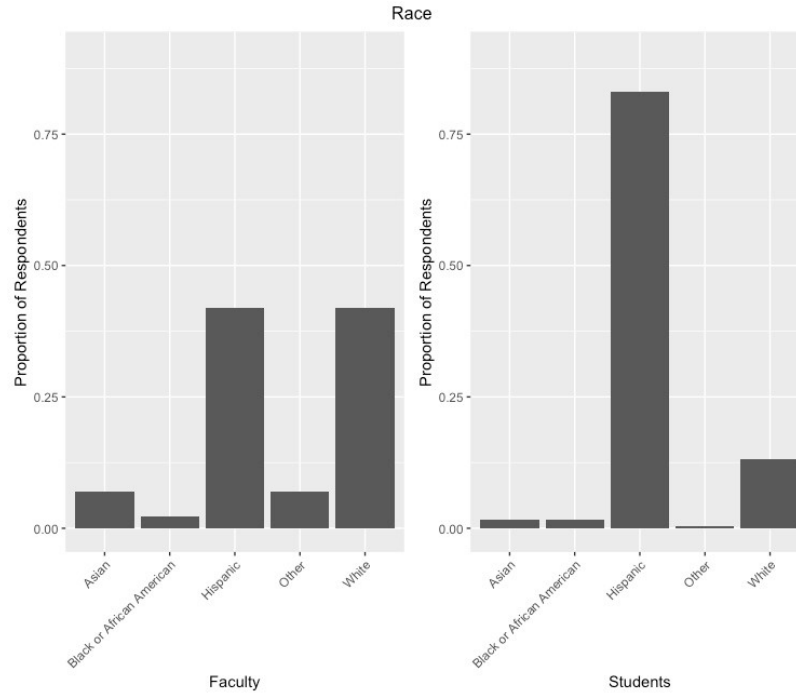
Faculty

Students

For students, the majority were not the sole income provider for their households (87.39%), while 59.09% of faculty respondents reported being the sole provider for their households. However, total household income was far more distributed across categories. While faculty distributions were more spread, just under half of student respondents have households that make less than $30,000 per year (47.78%), over double the next highest bracket of $30,001 to $50,000 (20.48%). The 2020 poverty threshold ranges from $13,465 to $57,597, dependent on size of the family unit and the number of children under the age of 18 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020); approximately 30.1% of Webb County's population lives below the poverty line, far higher than the national average of 13.1% (DataUSA, n.d.). The median household income in the county is $46,862. Almost half (48.30%) of student respondents reported household incomes under $30,000 making them at high-risk of falling below the poverty line.[3]

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[3] For example, if a family with two adults and three children has an annual household income below $30,887, this would fall below the poverty line (see: U.S. Census Bureau, 2020).
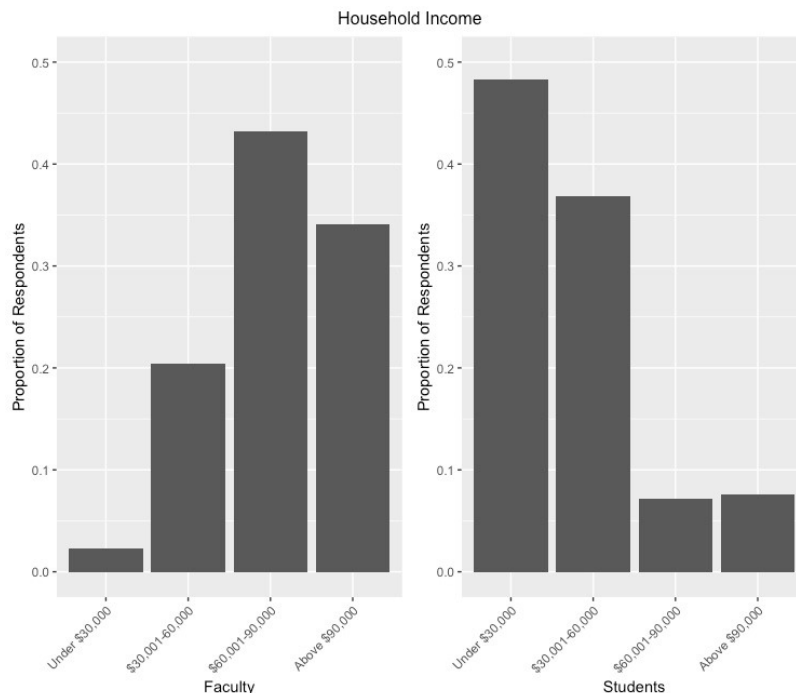
Consistent with the breakdown of classification presented above, 34% of students reported being at TAMIU for 3 years. The plurality of faculty (42.86%) reported being at TAMIU (*min* = 1, *max* = 24). The most common length of service to the University for faculty was 2 years, with prevalence sharply diminishing after 7 years. Most respondents (69.05%) have been at TAMIU for less than one decade.

Overall, students remained satisfied with faculty accessibility after the transition to a FlexLive learning environment; with 80.63% reporting either agreement or strong agreement, an increase from 60.49% found by Dmello et al. (2020) in their analysis of student perceptions of accessibility following the emergency transition to a virtual learning environment in the Spring 2020 semester. Of note, no students (0%) reported that they "Strongly Disagree" that faculty were accessible for FlexLive courses during the Fall 2020 semester. One possible explanation for this increase is the University's investment in technology and commitment to training faculty through professional development opportunities, such as those hosted by E-Learning, the TAMIU Advancing Research and Curriculum Initiative (ARC), and the PROF Center. For example, faculty were encouraged to use the Blackboard Collaborate environment for virtual office hours. In the Spring 2020 term, TAMIU also gave faculty access to Jabber through the VPN allowing faculty to maintain access to their office phones and voicemails remotely. As proposed by Dmello et al. (2020), faculty should consider continuing to incorporate these technologies moving forward to ensure a commitment to student accessibility. For example, if a faculty member were to host office hours in a Blackboard Collaborate session even when in their physical office, this could facilitate student participation and accessibility to faculty members even if the student is unable to physically come to campus during that time. Some faculty members reported that they plan to use both virtual and in-person office hours moving forward to better meet student needs. Another faculty member noted that they plan to have in-person office hours scheduled during the day but

also plan to host virtual office hours in the evening to answer questions from students who may focus on studies during the later hours, such as after their children finish homework or go to sleep.

My professors were accessible to me for my FlexLive courses.
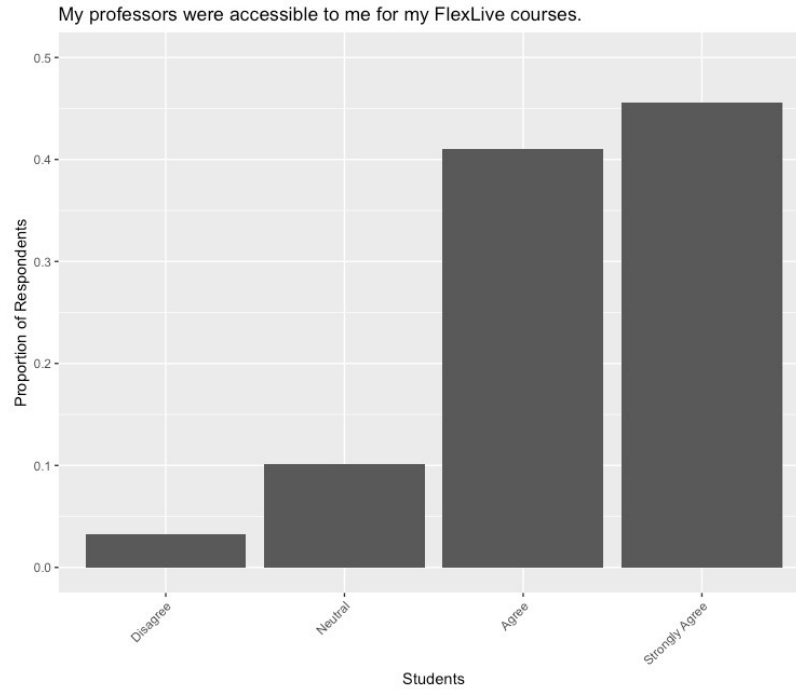
Overall, faculty noted high levels of student attendance in FlexLive courses. Although 94.87% of faculty reported 0-25% of their courses attended in-person sessions for their FlexLive courses, 84.62% reported at least half the class attending synchronously in real-time. While this figure may seem low, it is consistent with pre-COVID rates of class attendance. However, it should be noted that high levels of attendance *do not* mean high levels of participation. Anecdotally, in conversations with members of the research team, several faculty members commented about how students would log in to their courses while at work or tending to other matters, without participating in the course sessions.

What percentage of students attended live FlexLive sessions synchronously online?
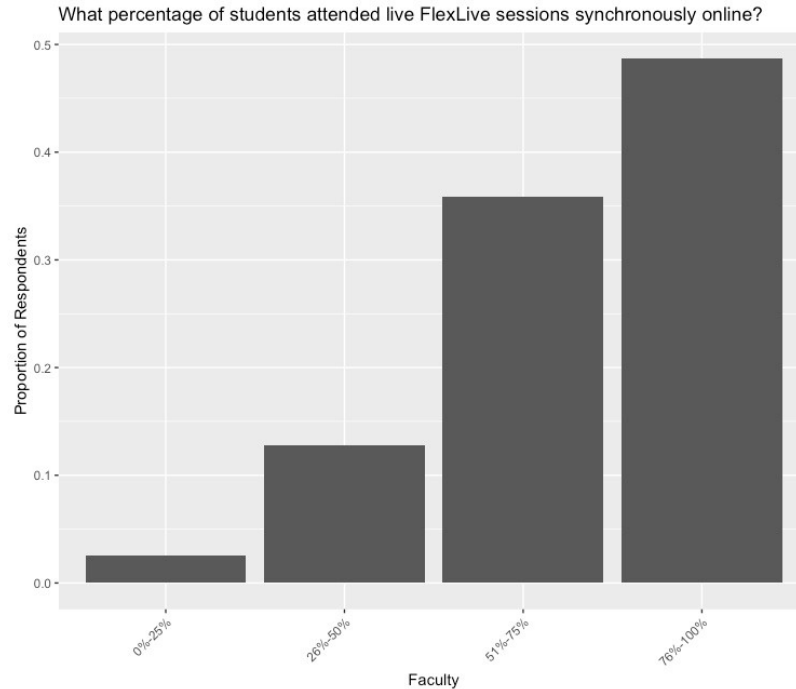
Overall Attitudes

Both faculty (69.05%) and students (80.61%) largely agreed that TAMIU provided timely updates to the campus community related to the administration of FlexLive courses and the University's plan for operations in the Fall 2020 semester. Of note, faculty agreement that the University provided timely updates in the fall dropped by 15.85% compared to spring updates, while student agreement increased by 18.06%. This decline in faculty support could explain the TAMIU Faculty Senate survey asking faculty members about their sentiments regarding "hopes and concerns" shortly before the Fall 2020 semester.

TAMIU Provided Timely Updates
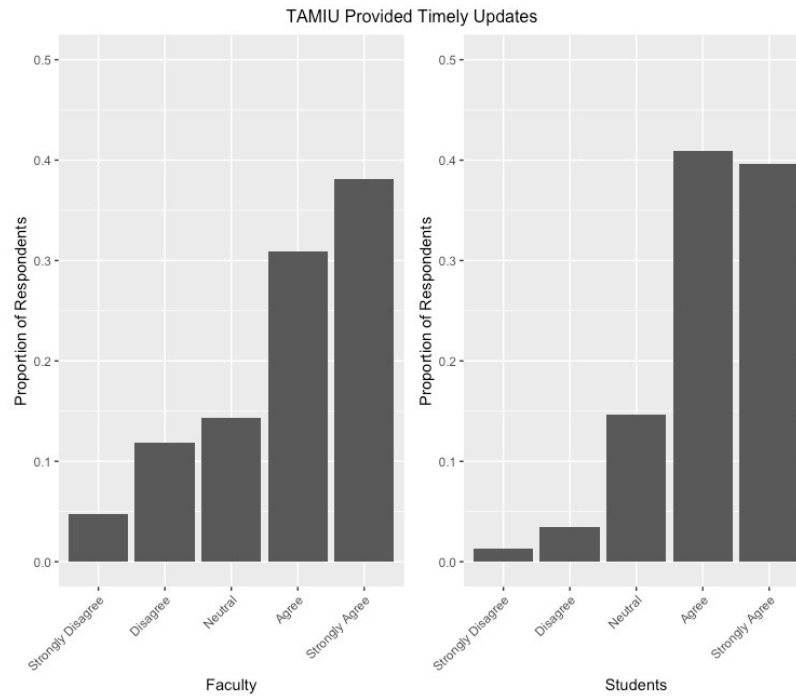
Faculty (64.1%) and student (96.36%) respondents largely believed that TAMIU made the right decision in implementing a FlexLive framework for the Fall 2020 semester. This marks a strong deviation from campus agreement with university decisions for an emergency migration to a virtual learning environment during the Spring 2020 semester at the start of the COVID-19 global pandemic (ΔFaculty = -35.9%, ΔStudent = 3.75%). One factor that could impact this finding is the uncertainty of the 'other'. For examples, agreement could be vis-à-vis online only or returning to fully in-person instruction. From campus conversations during the Fall 2020 semester, it is possible that lower faculty agreement may be due to a belief that TAMIU should have transitioned entirely online for the fall 2020 semester, consistent with practices taken at other universities/systems, whereas students may have largely agreed with the decision for FlexLive because they preferred that option over face-to-face instruction. Regardless, both categories of respondents selected "Strongly Agree" as the plurality option for this question.

TAMIU Made the Right Decision Implementing FlexLive
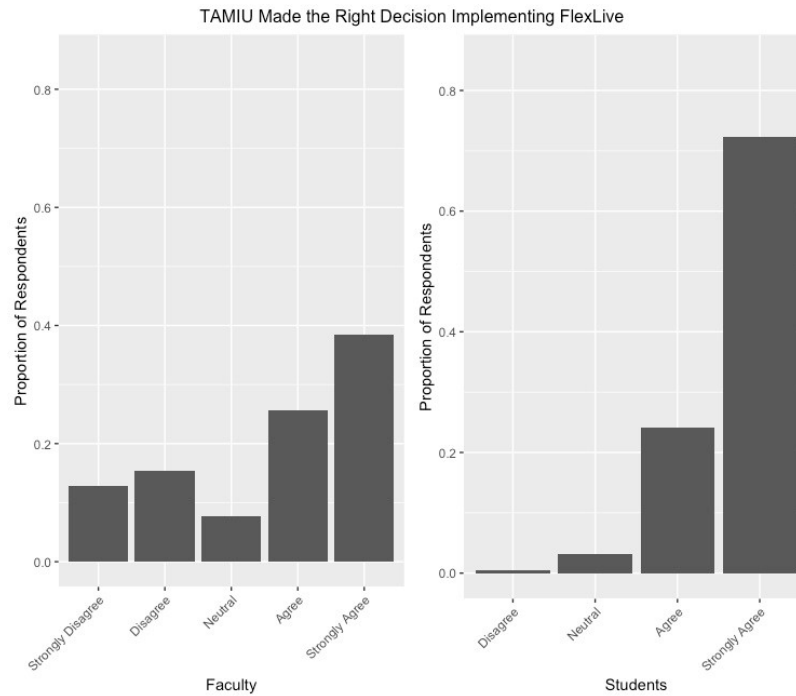
Overall, respondents were happy with the decision to move to FlexLive (66.67% of faculty and 85.91% of students). This could be interpreted based on a few motivations. Lower in-person densities could enhance sense of safety. For example, one participant commented that "[l]ess students physically present in the classroom made me feel safer while teaching," while another respondent noted that "students felt more safe." The FlexLive option provided students with a choice of attending in-person if they wanted those connections or to attend virtually if that better suited their risk tolerance thresholds. The greater variability in faculty responses could be attributed to the on-campus requirement or additional workloads, such as managing technical difficulties.

Happy Moved to FlexLive
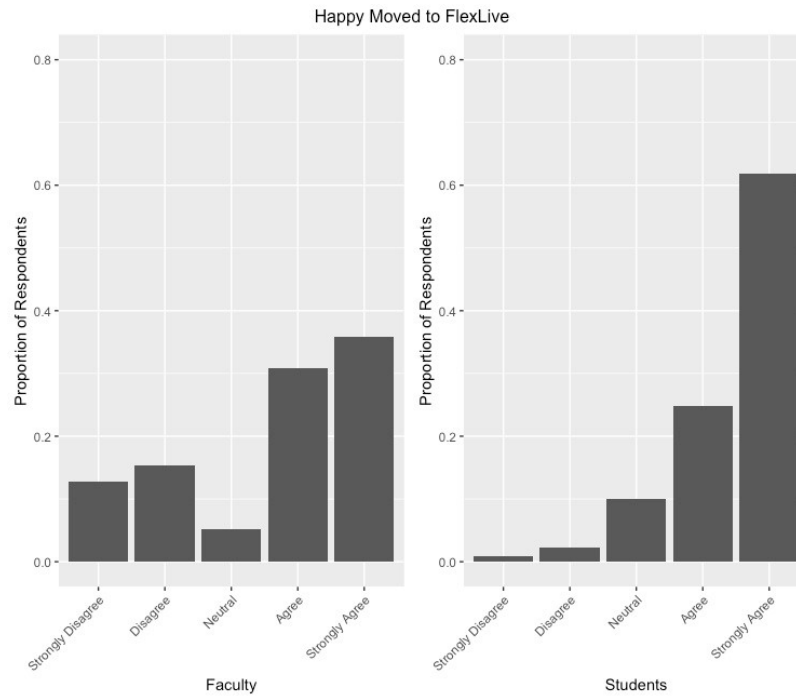
Related to the satisfaction of the transition is the belief that course quality was lowered by implementing a FlexLive framework. While 33.33% of faculty commented that they believed the courses they taught were of lower quality because they were offered via FlexLive, only 25.91% of all student respondents felt the quality had diminished. One possibility for this relatively low rate of dissatisfaction is that faculty had a longer period to develop the courses in a hybridized fashion.

Given the relatively new nature of FlexLive course administration, a perception of quality decline is not fully unexpected. However, to avoid confusion of expectations and to streamline technology and instructor capabilities, TAMIU could consider offering hybrid courses instead of FlexLive modalities. Courses offered via a hybrid approach could also help address broader institutional concerns regarding limitations on room availability for course scheduling, which could help the University continue to serve an ever-growing student population.

Course Quality Lowered by Moving to FlexLive
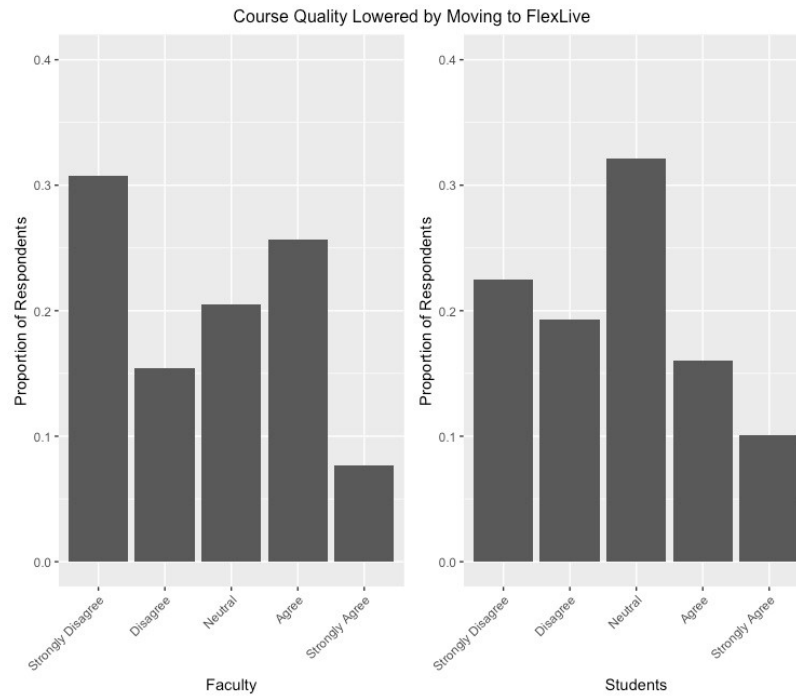
Overall Attitudes

Only 11.63% of faculty respondents reported teaching courses that were designated as 'face to face' or 'in person only'. Of our sample, 90.20% reported being required to teach on campus. While some faculty respondents commented that they enjoyed being back in the classroom, many were expressed discontent that they were required to teach in largely empty rooms, as most students opted to learn via virtual learning. Regarding safety, 57.77% of faculty respondents and 36.70% of student respondents agreed that they felt being safe on campus. This is consistent with comments from faculty about teaching to largely empty classrooms. Several faculty respondents commented teaching in large lecture halls while being the only individual physically present in the classroom. The high percentage of student respondents not feeling safe in the classroom could relate to a variety of items, including daily exposure to media COVID-19 coverage or fear of exposing loved ones to risk.

I felt safe being on campus.
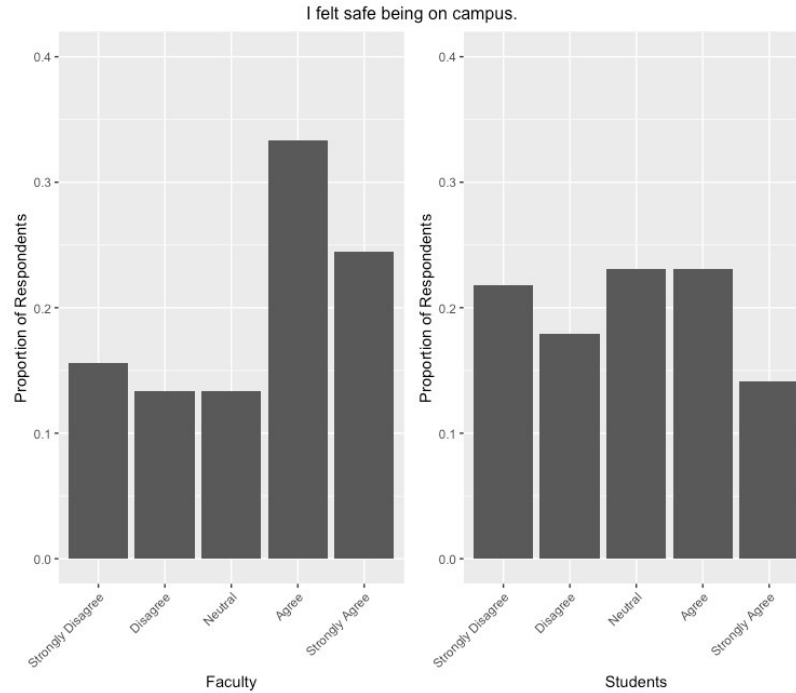
An overwhelming majority of respondents (71.11% of faculty and 83.54% of students) reported friends and/or family members being concerned about their safety on campus; however, the majority of respondents commented that their friends and/or family were concerned about their safety on campus (71.11% of faculty and 83.54% of students). This contrast highlights the personal dilemma for the campus community, because while faculty and students reported feeling safe, there were concerns that their broader networks had inverse feelings. This could have contributed to heightened anxiety, with individuals feeling concerned about the risk of exposing loved ones to COVID-19.

My friends and/or family were concerned about my safety being on campus.
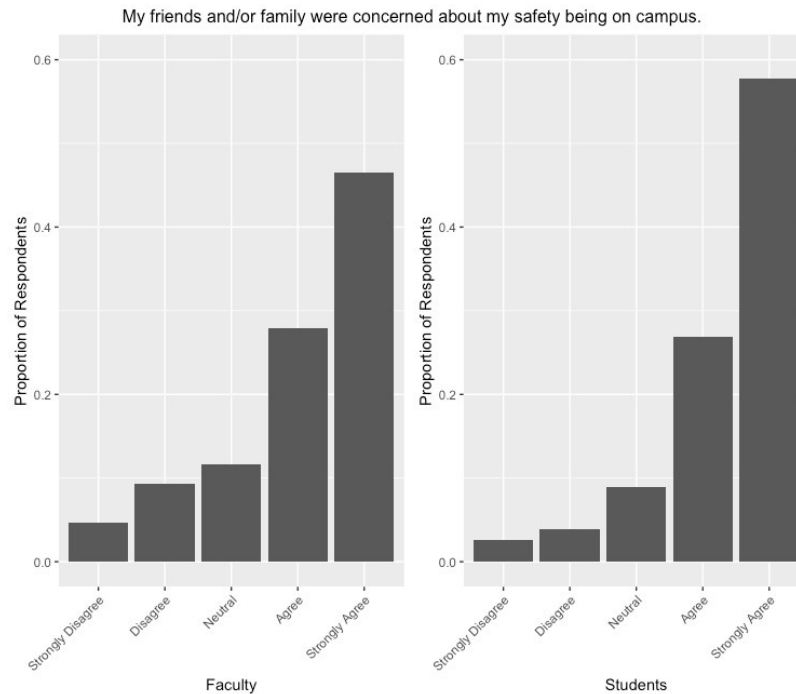
Access to Recordings

In addition to considerations pertaining to FlexLive course administration, during the Fall 2020 semester, guidance was issued by the administration regarding the need to not make the recordings available to students unless there are mitigating circumstances. The Faculty Senate passed a resolution highlighting the pedagogical reasons for making recordings available to students after the synchronous session has ended. The Provost and Deans discussed the resolution and issued additional guidance clarifying the discretion the faculty have in making the recordings available to students under certain circumstances. We acknowledge that there are two sides to this debate. From a scholarly perspective, there is literature on both sides of the recordings debate; however, the majority of this literature was conducted in pre-pandemic times. Clearly, the pandemic is a titanic event and pre-pandemic literature is not necessarily applicable anymore. There have been few studies since the pandemic started (Abelskamp & Santamarinam, 2020; Al-Azzam et al., 2020; Armstrong-Mensah et al., 2020; McGaughey et al., 2021), but this literature is not yet mature enough to draw sound generalizable conclusions. Despite this ongoing debate, faculty respondents overwhelmingly agreed that students should be allowed to have access to recordings of live lectures after class (91.84%). This provides an opportunity for students to ensure they understand the course material in addition to reviewing for exams, while providing an avenue for addressing connectivity challenges like those reported by respondents.

Allow Access to Recordings of Live Lectures After Class
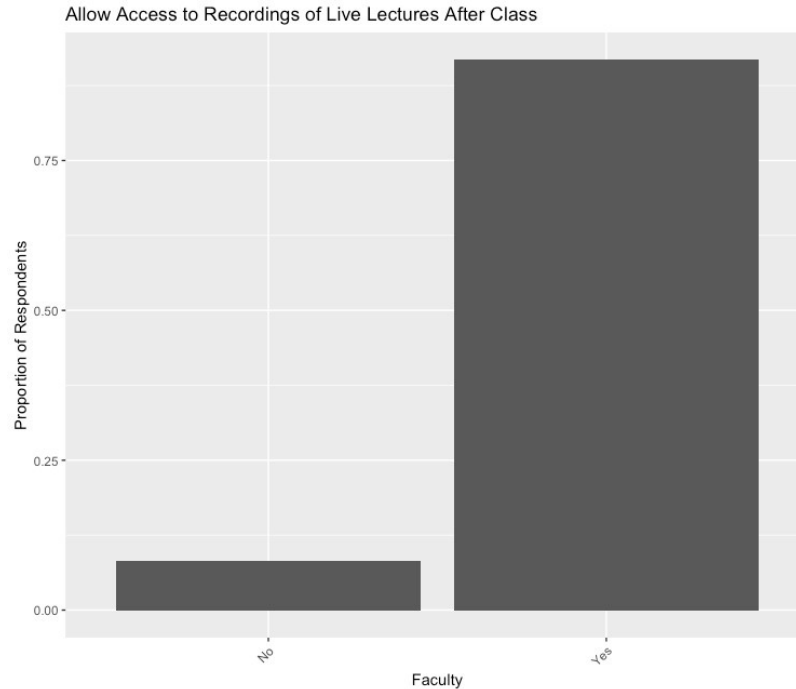
94.14% of students reported accessing recordings after class. When asked to estimate the percentage of students utilizing recordings, faculty reported a wide array, with over 50% estimating that less than half their classes accessed the recordings. However, everyone learns differently. Thus, while only a handful of students could have accessed recordings, this could still be a meaningful and important tool for those students necessary for achieving academic success.

When asked if students should have access to recordings after class, students overwhelmingly agreed (96.65% of respondents), and 97.07% of student respondents reported preferring to have access to recordings after the class. While the majority of faculty respondents (77.27%) agreed, there was more variation amongst faculty members, with some arguing against the students having this ability. One participant stated that "some students saw the recordings as a way to easily skip live class, which hurt their performance," while another stated that recordings were "more passive and made students more lazy." Conversely, reflecting on their own course, one faculty member stated: "Live recordings are known to help reinforce those threshold concepts that students struggle with and I'm confident recorded library sessions aided students in their research projects." Another faculty respondent commented about how recordings "allowed students who faced unexpected emergencies or employment issues to still get the material and not fall behind," sentiments shared by several respondents.

Students Should Have Access to Recordings After Class
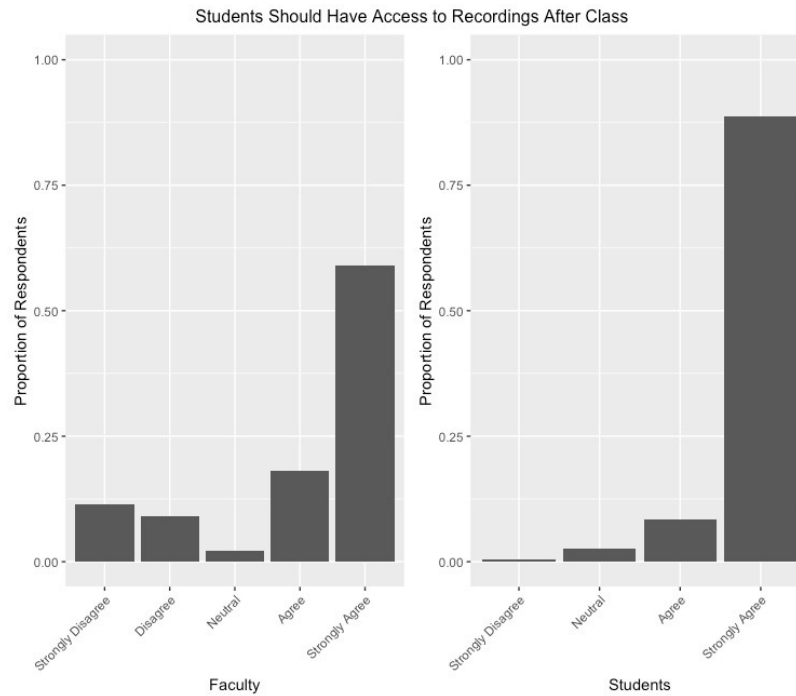
Overall, there was widespread agreement that having access to recordings of lectures after class helps students master course concepts. No student respondents disagreed with this statement, while only 18.19% of faculty respondents disagreed. Thus, the majority of faculty and students agree in the utility of being able to access lecture material on demand. This is not surprising, as the Spring 2020 shift to a virtual learning environment identified a variety of ways that technology can be leveraged to empower student learning – access to recordings is another tool faculty can use to ensure their courses are built for a diverse group of learners.

Access to Recordings of Live Lectures after Class Helps Master Course Concepts
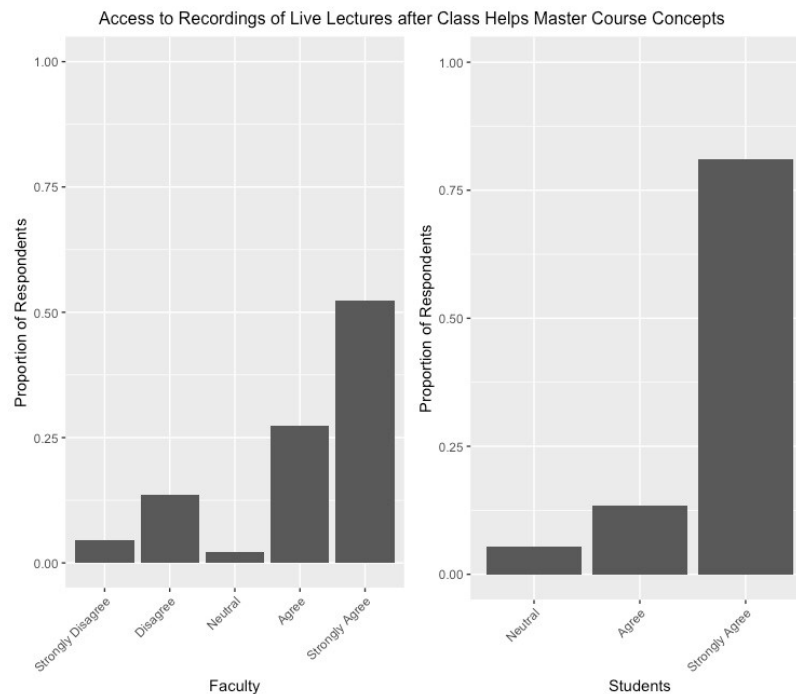
Faculty Comments

In the open-ended sections, faculty members expressed concerns with the University's decision to implement a FlexLive administration and the execution of this planned modality. Several respondents alluded to how this decision made them concerned for their personal safety, as well as that of their loved ones. One participant commented that "personally, I didn't feel safe. Friends and family were equally worried." In a similar strain, another participant mentioned that "[i]t would have been simpler, more straightforward, and safer had the courses just been totally online from the start." This comment is reflective of broader themes associated with disagreement with the administration for mandating faculty on-campus presence.

Additionally, faculty reported concerns over technical issues and connectivity problems faced while trying to teach in a FlexLive modality. Several commented that class time was wasted due to the technical difficulties and that OIT's limited availability during evening and/or weekend courses posed additional challenges. In a similar vein, one faculty member commented that "the '3-in-1' approach distracts from [the] real job of teaching [at] the college level."[4] Several faculty members also commented that preparing for and teaching in FlexLive courses was more time intensive. Considerations should be given by the University of this unique period in teaching when considering items such as tenure and promotion for faculty who were at TAMIU during this time.

Faculty participants also reported many positives that emerged from the FlexLive environment. For example, several commented that this administration method is more inclusive of TAMIU's online students. One participant wrote: "I sincerely hope that all future academic and extra-curricular activities retain their in-person and online hybrid natures, because only then can this University reach out to and embrace their previously invisible and unsupported online students." Similarly, another participant commented on how increasing the University's online course offerings provides new opportunities for future growth, stating that "[t]here is a whole demographic of online students that had been left behind, not only in their learning because of the limited number of online classes offered, but in student engagement activities." Multiple respondents also commented about how they ultimately felt that they were more available to students while operating in a FlexLive environment, implementing virtual options for office hours across a broader time availability. Continuing to offer virtual office hours may be a beneficial option to capture a broader student audience.

Student Comments

Students reported many similar themes as faculty members. For examples, concerns about technical issues were pervasive, including internet access and not being able to clearly hear the audio from the classroom, despite TAMIU installing upgraded microphones in classrooms prior to the start of the Fall 2020 semester.

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[4] A common reference to FlexLive on campus was the '3-in-1 approach' because faculty felt that they were teaching three concurrent courses: 1) a 'traditional' face-to-face course, 2) a synchronous remote course, and 3) an asynchronous online course, each requiring different pedagogical approaches for success.

Student respondents discussed inequal treatment by faculty for students participating online. For example, one respondent wrote that "[s]ometimes class for the students online were "cancelled" for online people only because the professor(s) would not know how to fix the problem they were having, so they would choose to neglect online students over in person students." This is particularly note-worthy given TAMIU's strong commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion. Additionally, as other programs engage in similar types of teaching modalities, there should be greater attention paid to prevent the reoccurrence of these issues.

Students also reported a mismatch of perceptions, with several commenting that they did not understand at first that FlexLive courses had designated times for meeting, like a traditional face-to-face course. This is indicative of the fact that messaging between relevant campus community stakeholders around FlexLive could have been better. Additionally, students reported financial concerns and issues associated with diminished mental health during the Fall 2020 semester. Student respondents also commented strongly in favor of having access to course recordings, suggesting that constraints on recordings availability, while rightfully seeking to deter the minority that abuse the system, result in missing an opportunity to promote learning in the greater majority. One respondent commented that "[t]he online format was the best alternative to be sure and TAMIU's decision to make recorded lectures unavailable to students who did not attend a live online lecture is counterintuitive and frankly anti student." Similarly, another participant described how "[t]here were also connectivity issues so students could go back and watch the recordings in case they lost their connection." Referring to the need for student access to recordings of lectures, one participant commented that "it was critical as many students had connectivity issues and [access to recordings] allowed them to go and fill in the blanks."

Discussion

Overall, there were divergent perspectives on FlexLive course administration. While some approved, others presented arguments to explain how it could have been better-implemented, and some were against it entirely. Several respondents, both faculty and students, who expressed approval for the FlexLive administration also commented that they were just grateful to be back "in person", which limits the ability to comment on the true effectiveness of FlexLive as a viable course modality. However, this provided a framework for the University to welcome back some students while enabling those who did not feel safe coming to campus to continue working towards their degrees. Additionally, offering true hybrid courses could be a medium for future implementation of technology-enabled courses at TAMIU.

Limitations

It should be noted that the overall sample sizes were relatively low given the campus census of faculty members and students. However, despite the relatively low participation rates, our findings are consistent with demographics attributed to the University based on institutional records; thus, enhancing the reliability and validity of the findings.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this research, we provide four broad recommendations for TAMIU:

First, faculty should be encouraged to continue providing virtual options for students to attend office hours. This could be facilitated by either opening a Blackboard Collaborate room from a faculty member's office during scheduled office hours or providing students with an option to schedule a virtual meeting during that time. Virtual options could help ensure that more students with conflicting schedules have an opportunity to obtain the support they need for success.

Second, the University could consider offering more hybrid course options. This modality would enable faculty and students to capitalize on the parts of the FlexLive program that they liked, such as freedom in scheduling. Additionally, hybrid courses provide higher-level benefits to the University. Given TAMIU's limited class space, hybrid courses could free up classroom space to serve a broader student population. For example, a WIN course that traditionally meets Tuesdays and Thursdays in-person could be replaced with two sections, one meeting in-person Tuesdays and virtually on Thursday, with the other section on the opposite schedule; this would allow double the occupancy in a given classroom, better facilitating TAMIU's need for additional courses due to its trajectory of student growth.

Third, we recommend providing additional support for OIT and E-Learning. The University should strongly consider hiring additional support technicians to ensure coverage during all TAMIU course offerings, particularly for classes meeting in the evenings and on weekends. Additionally, the University should continue supporting efforts by E-Learning to train faculty on new programs and initiatives to offer more effective and accessible courses. Relatedly, the University must continue supporting online students to ensure an equitable and inclusive space.

Finally, there are concerns across the University about the long-term stability of enhanced student resources. For example, the University should conduct a cost-benefit analysis to evaluate the long-term impact of CARES Act funding on programs and initiatives, such as one-year instructors or increased Supplemental Instructor positions for the 2021-2022 Academic Year. More specifically, TAMIU should consider institutionalizing these positions for long-term stability and sustainability once the temporary funding lines expire, if these lines are found to be effective. The Office of Institutional Assessment could consider initiating a systematic review of the processes on campus and developing a comprehensive plan for coordination and strategic projections.

Conclusions

This report offers a snapshot of the general sentiments related to faculty and student experiences in teaching and learning. Further research is needed to understand the degree of student engagement, retention, and the quality of student learning outcomes. Throughout the pandemic, uncertainty has existed for all members of the TAMIU community. TAMIU Faculty and students were resilient in the face of unprecedented circumstances, with faculty modifying courses and students adapting to new learning styles, despite barriers such as connection issues and lack of clear communication. We believe that these recommendations merit review in light of the changes that all higher education institutions face in a post-COVID society. Even though TAMIU has

returned to an on-campus environment, continued support for E-Learning and other related programs initiated during these times is essential for the TAMIU's ability to serve our students and the broader Laredo community.

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