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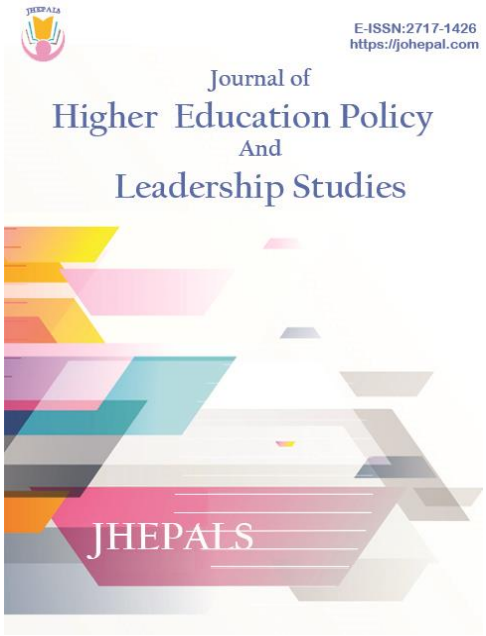


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# "The struggle bus is full.": How College Faculty Interpreted and Navigated Institutional Policy Shifts Amid COVID-19

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## Abstract

Perhaps no other time in United States higher education's history did institutional policies change as quickly as they did during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, no studies have emerged from the pandemic era that address how faculty members navigated these changing policies, many of which were meant to increase safety and student success. This study examines weekly meetings of eight faculty teaching a course for students on academic or financial aid warning during spring 2021. In meetings, faculty reflected on institutional policies as it impacted safety and student success, and findings suggest policy intent was good, but the impact of the policies was not conducive to faculty mental health or student success. Additionally, many COVID-era policies conflicted with existing policies, especially financial aid, placing faculty in difficult situations as policy interpreters. Finally, many new policies had no precedent, therefore, faculty had no guidance on policy interpretation or implementation. Implications for research, policy, and practice are addressed.

**Keywords:** Higher Education Policy; Faculty Development; Student Success; Persistence; Teaching & Learning; COVID-19



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## Introduction

According to Lederer et al. (2021), the COVID-19 pandemic quickly spread across the globe, and by March 2020, almost all teaching and learning had shifted to virtual and online formats. The pandemic created a range of challenges (Chan, 2022; Rainey & Taylor, 2023a, 2023b), which persisted into the fall 2020 and spring 2021 semesters for many institutions. Some institutions maintained virtual operations, while others functioned in hybrid modes with limited in-person offerings (Lederer et al., 2021). The pandemic also affected students' social engagement and their future outlook (Lederer et al., 2021), while institutions had to drastically implement remote learning policies, campus safety policies, and technology policies to facilitate learning.

Of these policy shifts, to support students and faculty during this difficult period, many institutions relaxed academic progression policies and changed grading scales to pass/fail (Chan, 2022). However, many institutions of higher education reversed the pandemic policies that were implemented to provide flexibility to students during the later stages of the pandemic, between early 2021 and the end of 2022 (Chan, 2022). These policy changes, including the re-institution of letter grades and the tightening of academic policies, had an impact on students and faculty, as grades and coursework completion are crucial factors for students' continuous enrollment in college (Rainey & Taylor, 2022). Moreover, similar policy changes related to emergency online learning were reversed, with institutions toggling back and forth between in-person, online, and hybrid course options, many of which were difficult for students and faculty to navigate (Rainey & Taylor, 2022). In short, higher education experienced a wide range of policy shifts in a very short period of time. However, to date, no studies have engaged with faculty—especially those teaching courses for students in financial aid warning or academic probation statuses—to explore how faculty navigated and helped students navigate changing, volatile policies related to campus safety, technology, and student success.

As a result, this study explored the lived experiences of eight faculty and a course coordinator who met weekly throughout the spring 2021 semester as they taught a success course for students on academic probation or financial aid warning (or both). Filling this gap in the literature, this study answers the following questions:

- RQ1: How did faculty experience changing policies meant to support student success?
- RQ2: Were faculty able to navigate these policies to support student success? If so, how? If not, why not?

Answering these questions can inform both emergency and non-emergency online teaching and learning policies while also preparing instructors for future policy changes related to campus safety, technology, and other aspects of participation in higher education.

## Literature Review

Although no studies have addressed how faculty interpreted, implemented, and communicated policies to peers or students during the COVID-19 pandemic, many studies have focused on how faculty navigate various policies in higher education contexts. Here, researchers have demonstrated that faculty often navigate many types of policies related to



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their core duty of teaching (Colbeck, 2002; Gabbard & Mupinga, 2013; Keith et al., 2005) but also must understand and adhere to policies related to technology (Haber & Mills, 2008; Maguire, 2009), campus safety and support (Kyle et al., 2017; McCabe et al., 2012; Wray et al., 2021), and human resources (Miller & Caplow, 2006; Mallon, 2001). In these areas, this literature review informs the current study by providing short reviews of faculty navigation of policy in these areas and related challenges, supporting this work, and identifying specifically where this study fills a critical gap in the literature.

## Teaching, Learning, and Technology Policies

As most faculty in many sectors of higher education (ex: community colleges, four-year institutions, trade schools, etc.) teach as their primary job duty, many studies have articulated the many policies that faculty need to navigate to teach effectively. In this regard, faculty need to adhere to state, regional, and institutional workload, attendance, and assessment policies that are often aligned to accreditation standards or degree requirements (Colbeck, 2002; Gabbard & Mupinga, 2013). Specific to this area, studies have asserted that faculty often understand that students must be held to certain standards or levels of rigor depending on the course or institution type, yet faculty have expressed challenges related to academic freedom and rigor if these concepts are not aligned with institutional expectations (Colbeck, 2002; Gabbard & Mupinga, 2013). Moreover, faculty have expressed challenges related to institutional attendance policies, stating that students often do not view attendance policies in the same way that faculty do, leading to disconnect and forcing institutional leadership to respond to students who do not adhere to attendance policies or faculty who implement attendance policies that are too strict or lenient (Keith et al., 2005). To stem these issues, Kezar and Maxey (2012) strongly asserted that faculty should be provided ample professional development, especially during times of policy change, to ensure that faculty are providing students with the best possible experience.

Specifically, pertinent to this study, faculty have faced challenges for decades when navigating online learning policies and policies related to technology (Haber & Mills, 2008; Maguire, 2009). Of these challenges, faculty most often expressed dissatisfaction with their role in helping their institution craft both online learning and technology use policies, claiming that institutions did not gather or utilize faculty feedback when making policy decisions (Maguire, 2009). Additionally, faculty have long bemoaned the fact that institutions adopt new technology policies or require use of new technology that they do not provide training for or explain adequately to students (Haber & Mills, 2008; Kezar & Maxey, 2012). These gaps have forced faculty to navigate new technology policies on their own or through assistance from peers, compromising student experiences and providing substandard instruction (Haber & Mills, 2008; Maguire, 2009). In these studies, researchers have unanimously asserted that institutions should consult faculty members when developing and implementing new technology-related policies that affect teaching and learning, especially as it relates to online learning (Haber & Mills, 2008; Maguire, 2009), in addition to providing timely and relevant professional development (Kezar & Maxey, 2012).



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## Student Support and Campus Safety

Faculty are also held to many policies related to safety and support for many stakeholders, including students and faculty themselves. Many institutions have implemented policies to meet the needs of students from minoritized backgrounds, including queer students (Sausa, 2002), students with disabilities (Cook et al., 2009), and students who are parents (Gerten, 2011) to name a few. As a result, faculty often need to understand and adhere to unique policies that pertain to certain individuals. Yet, many campus safety policies are ones that pertain to entire campuses, such as policies related to drug use (Wray et al., 2021), weapons (Kyle et al., 2017), and academic integrity (McCabe et al., 2012) that increases faculty's responsibility to students and other campus stakeholders beyond teaching, research, and service. The latter has been especially challenging for faculty, as a rapid shift to online learning during the pandemic and increased use of computer technology has focused institutions to create new or adapt academic integrity policies for these new learning modalities (Gamage et al., 2020). This rapid shift in academic integrity policy caused many faculty challenges, as faculty asserted that they were not consulted when these policy changes occurred, nor were they provided training by their institution (Gamage et al., 2020).

## Human Resources

Perhaps the most well-known policies pertinent to college faculty, specifically tenure-track and tenured faculty, as policies related to promotion and tenure (Mallon, 2001) and faculty governance (Miller & Caplow, 2006). These policies largely affect a faculty member's ability to earn a promotion and tenure (Mallon, 2001) and have a voice regarding institutional decision making, usually administered by a faculty senate meant to represent faculty interests (Miller & Caplow, 2006). However, in recent years, the U.S. higher education system has shifted away from hiring permanent, tenure-track faculty and instead have hired many more part-time, adjunct, or visiting faculty members who do not have the policy protections of tenured or tenure-track faculty (Kezar, 2013). These protections were emphasized during the pandemic by the American Association of University Professors (AAUP), as many full-time faculty left the profession during the pandemic and were replaced by adjunct faculty who faced substantial challenges, including a lack of support from and training by their institution (Dali et al., 2021). In these cases, the AAUP suggested that institutions provide emergency training and support services for adjunct faculty, in addition to full-time faculty, to ensure these stakeholders' mental health was supported in addition to their academic needs to educate students (Dali et al., 2021).

## Policy Navigation by Faculty in the COVID-Era

In the immediate aftermath of the declaration of COVID-19 as a pandemic in March 2020, institutions around the world announced a shift to online learning and many campus safety policies for those remaining on physical campuses (El Masri & Sabzalieva, 2020). This shift led faculty to quickly adapt to new online learning policies (Daumiller et al., 2021), course enrollment and learning modality policies (Holtzman et al., 2023), and safety policies (El Masri & Sabzalieva, 2020). However, several studies found that institutional policy responses related to stakeholder safety, especially masking and social distancing policies, did not uniformly mirror federal guidance in multiple countries, placing faculty in precarious



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positions and having to attempt to enforce federal policies that institutions did not mandate (Daumiller et al., 2021; Holtzman et al., 2023).

Moreover, many faculty suffered from mental health issues during and as a result of the pandemic, and faculty often asserted that institutional policies were not in place to address faculty mental health, in addition to any physical mitigation of COVID-19 (Daumiller et al., 2021; Weyandt et al., 2020). In these instances, institutions not only lacked policies to support faculty mental health but often did not consult faculty when making policy decisions related to COVID-19 mitigation efforts (Daumiller et al., 2021; Weyandt et al., 2020). However, to date, no studies have engaged with faculty who taught during the pandemic to understand how these faculty navigated changing policies related to teaching and learning, campus safety and student support, and technology. As a result, this study fills a critical gap in the literature, informative for institutional leaders and faculty members who may encounter another watershed moment in higher education and are forced to develop and implement policies rapidly.

## Theoretical Framework

Actor-Network Theory (ANT) appropriately frames this study, as ANT is a social theory that highlights the significance of analyzing the connections between people, objects, and institutions in forming social phenomena (Fenwick & Edwards, 2010). In the context of education, ANT aims to comprehend how these connections influence the generation and spread of knowledge. According to ANT, knowledge is not static but is produced through interaction between actors, which may include students, teachers, educational materials, or technologies, within a network, such as an institution of higher education. ANT also emphasizes the influence of non-human actors, such as educational policies or technologies, in shaping educational practices and results. By scrutinizing the interrelationships between actors and their impacts on each other's actions, ANT seeks to offer a more comprehensive perception of the intricacies of educational systems (Fenwick & Edwards, 2010). Specific to this study, the research team was interested in learning how faculty-as-actors experienced changing policies meant to support overall campus safety and student success from the perspective of their institution. Here, ANT allowed the research team to identify policies, view the policies through the experiences of faculty members translating (interpreting) and enacting these policies, and explore how policies and their interpretation did or did not influence student success.

## Research Methodology

### Site and Participants

Winding Coast University (WCU, a pseudonym), served as the research site for this study. WCU is a private four-year university situated in the Gulf Coast region of the Southern United States. WCU enrolls about 4,500 students per year (~3,200 undergraduates, ~1,300 graduates). There are about 400 faculty, with more than half of the faculty with full-time status. Approximately 20 percent of the faculty come from minority groups and just under one-half of the faculty are women. Participants were conveniently sampled through institutional, professional relationships given their position as instructors of a student



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success course meant to provide small-group, targeted outreach to students in danger of losing their financial aid eligibility or being placed on academic probation. Instructors learned they were eligible to participate in this study in a meeting with the course designer and coordinator, who is a co-author in this study.

Table 1.
Descriptive statistics of faculty participating in this study (n=8)

| Pseudonym | Age in Spring 2021 | Gender | Job Title in Spring 2021 | Years Teaching Experience Prior to Spring 2021 | Years of Experience in Higher Education |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Melissa | 50s | Woman | Director, Student Services | 8 | 15 |
| Sally | 40s | Woman | Director, Financial Services | 1 | 9 |
| Terri | 30s | Woman | Assistant Director, Career Development | 3 | 10 |
| Jane | 30s | Woman | Director, Career Development | 5 | 12 |
| Monica | 60s | Woman | Assistant Director, Writing Support | 30+ | 30+ |
| Harriet* | 30s | Woman | University Minister | 0 | 8 |
| Nadella | 30s | Woman | Success Coach | 0 | 8 |
| Veronica* | 40s | Woman | Executive Director, Student Success | 8 | 20 |

*Note: worked full-time while also attending graduate school.

The eight faculty (instructor) and one course coordinator in this study were all women, six of them were White and two of them identified as bi-racial or Black. Two of the instructors teach as part of their full-time staff responsibilities, while five were adjunct instructors. All of them had full-time positions in campus support units, such as career development, advising, financial services, writing support, and student life. Their teaching experiences ranged from zero to more than 30 years of instruction (Table 1).

## Data Collection

Instructors were notified that their weekly one-hour check-in meetings would be recorded on Zoom as part of a larger study on the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on students and instructors. Meetings were first auto-transcribed by Zoom and, later, updated by the research team to ensure accuracy. Weekly agenda meeting notes were also reviewed as part of the data-gathering process. Instructors were not given incentives to participate. The research team stored data in password-protected files. Faculty were given pseudonyms and had identifying information masked. Guided by De Wever et al.'s (2006) framework for content analysis and qualitative methods of inquiry (Merriam & Grenier, 2019), the research team conducted a content analysis of the Zoom transcripts of the weekly meetings and agenda notes.

## Data Analysis

The primary data analysis consisted of two rounds of coding, informed by Fenwick and Edwards' (2010) theory of ANT for education, prior faculty development literature (ex:



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Centra, 1978; Ouellet, 2010), and Saldaña's (2016) coding process. The research team deployed a mix of deductive and inductive approaches (Saldaña, 2016). Our deductive starting codes came from extant literature, our theoretical framework, and our experiences teaching at-risk college students. Our codebook is in Appendix A. The major categories that emerged from our first round of coding included course modalities, COVID policies, and technology policies. Then, we conducted a second round of coding using Taguette, an open-source tool for qualitative research. Of these broader themes, we engaged with Fenwick and Edwards' (2010) theory of ANT for education to better understand how faculty 1.) understood policy, 2.) navigated policy, and 3.) implemented policy to support student success.

## Findings

After performing an in-depth analysis of 12 recorded faculty meetings—as well as instructors' agendas and notes—between January and April 2021, this study addressed how faculty translated, enacted, and augmented institutional policies meant to support student success and campus safety during the COVID-19 pandemic. In all, three core themes emerged from the data that spoke to the rapid, chaotic nature of COVID-19 era policy changes and conflicts and the downstream effect those changes had on faculty, which trickled down to student experiences and success. These themes were Policy Intent was Good, But Policy Impact was Bad; COVID-Era Policies Conflicted with Existing Policies, Especially Financial Aid; and New Policies Had No Precedent, Therefore Faculty Had No Guidance.

### Policy Intent was Good, But Policy Impact was Bad

Throughout meetings, faculty frequently discussed many policies put into place by the institution to both improve the educational experience for multiple stakeholders and adhere to national- and state-level COVID safety protocols. These policies included adjusted semester and course schedules, modified attendance and grading policies, and several others that were not discussed by faculty at length. Although faculty viewed these policies as having best intentions, the impact of many policies was problematic at best and catastrophic at worst.

#### *Problematic Course Schedules, Modalities, and Learning Environments*

To adapt to the pandemic, the institution implemented new course modality policies that allowed for more flexible student scheduling and learning. For instance, Harriet shared several student stories about new class formats, including a "hy-flex" model that allowed students to attend online and in-person:

> I've been talking to some students about formats, and I think the issue, especially first semester, was that some classes were in-person and they rotated. And then other classes were hy-flex, and then other classes were 100% online. But no one took that into account. The time it would take to rotate yourself was not enough because you have 10 minutes to get to the next class. But there's no place on campus to go where you can sit on Zoom and participate in class without hearing other people in the background. There's no private place you can go.



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This sentiment was shared by many other faculty, as students had often struggled to attend class on time—or at all—because of how the institution had scheduled courses held across different modalities. The institution allowed students to schedule courses closely together during the day, but when students could not travel from a course held in one modality to another modality, students often struggled to attend class or locate a quiet learning space conducive to attending an online or hy-flex course. Here, course modality policies rendered it challenging for students to attend courses, and the institution seemingly did not provide students with adequate academic advising for students to recognize the challenges of certain course schedules or provide on-campus students with quiet learning spaces to attend online or hy-flex courses.

### *New Calendar Policies Were "Not Sustainable"*

Another policy that faculty frequently discussed was the new semester calendar policy, which eliminated both spring break for all stakeholders and leave days for faculty in order to finish the semester earlier and avoid any possible COVID breakouts due to spring break travel and socialization. However, by mid-semester, faculty were reporting serious exhaustion on their own behalf and on behalf of their students due to the non-stop nature of the new semester calendar. Moreover, many faculty previously relied on spring break and scheduled leave days to perform self-care or catch up on work, and the institution did not address faculty concerns in these areas. For instance, Nadella, Terri, Jane, Monica, and Veronica discussed the newly adopted schedule, of which they were not asked to contribute by administration, and felt that they lacked the leave days to perform their work adequately and care for themselves:

> Nadella: We don't have spring break. And you know, we don't really have those extended holidays either.
> Terri: I know, yeah.
> Veronica: I think we have a weird Thursday off in March. I remember I put it on my calendar.
> Monica: But the issue is that's a weird day. It's smack in the middle of a work week. So, you're still going to work. It won't be a day off.
> Jane: Yeah, that doesn't help at all. I will just continue to work.
> Nadella: The Friday probably would have been nicer, like a three-day weekend. No one asked us, though.
> Jane: Yeah, and they're not gonna do it now.

Throughout the semester, there were many conversations such as these, lamenting the removal of spring break and leave days with the goal of finishing the semester early. Harriet described it best when she said, "This whole no giving us no break thing is just, it's not sustainable. I just feel like I'm drowning." Veronica remarked that other faculty members felt like "it's burnout." Moreover, Veronica shared that her students reported that they "are hanging on for dear life," and that the new semester calendar transgressed "a certain rhythm in higher education" that requires all stakeholders to have a break.



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### *College Faculty & COVID-Era Policy*

#### *Mental Health Days Misaligned with Institutional Operations*

To assuage some calendar concerns, the institution implemented allowable mental health days for faculty and staff to take at their discretion, but these days were not conducive to rest and stress relief, as Monica, Nadella, and Harriet reasoned:

> Monica: The problem is the whole university is still going. We need a collective shutdown so we can all take a collective breath. But no, you gotta worry about coming back to 50 emails.
>
> Nadella: I really need a break before I burn out for the summer. I just wish we could shut down for a couple of mental health days and everybody could just take a break. But I don't sense that that's coming.
>
> Harriet: Yeah, it's never ending. It's a lot. Like, I've never had to deal with this before.

This conversation was one of many that faculty shared on a weekly basis, as the topic of mental health days and their inconvenient nature was frequently discussed. Although a brief snapshot into the attitudes of faculty toward mental health days, it was apparent that the institution's implementation of mental health days—although well intentioned—were not conducive to faculty rest and recovery, as institutional operations continued and would produce stressful workloads upon their return.

#### *Flexible Learning Policies Did Not Encompass Technology Needs*

Because the institution adapted online and hy-flex learning policies, many faculty and students needed two fundamental tools to do school-related work: an Internet-enabled device, preferably a computer, and high-speed Internet access to allow for video conferencing. However, institutions did not provide faculty with technology resources to share with students, nor did the institution communicate technology resources with students directly. This was especially problematic for students enrolled in the success course, which was serving at-promise students, many of whom were first generation college students, Pell Grant recipients, and students from low-income backgrounds. Jane shared that she felt if the institution was going to mandate course modalities that included online learning, the institution needed to "ensure that everyone has a computer that has the functionality that you need it to have and a headset." Heather echoed this sentiment and added, "There are schools that include technology in their tuition, so if we know that every semester somebody's going to be participating in something online, we need to do better in terms of getting them the resources." Heather continued by sharing that one of her students needed to relocate to Chicago to be closer to family during the pandemic, and that she "doesn't even have a laptop and this is her second semester."

Other faculty shared the same concerns, as all faculty were teaching a section of the student success course that was either online or hy-flex, meaning all students needed to join class online at some point. However, each faculty member reported at least one instance where a student did not have adequate access to technology and could not join class. In discussions, faculty explored methods of providing students this technology and turned to institutional policy, but faculty were unable to find a policy lever that would force the institution to provide either mobile Internet hotspots for students unable to live on-campus or adequate hardware to complete academic work and attend online classes. Here,



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institutional policies meant to increase safety by holding classes online did not integrate provision of technology to students, negatively impacting the educational experiences of these students.

### COVID-Era Policies Conflicted with Existing Policies, Especially Financial Aid

As faculty were teaching a student success class, faculty often counseled students on their academics and financial aid statuses, ensuring that students had the information necessary to persist. However, over the course of the semester, faculty slowly learned that many existing institutional and federal policies conflicted with newly adopted COVID-era policies, leaving both faculty and students in precarious positions.

#### *New Pass/Fail Grading Policies*

First, the institution adopted a flexible grading policy that allowed students to take courses as pass/fail and also drop more classes than they would normally be allowed while maintaining federal student aid eligibility. Important to note is that a student earning a "fail" grade did not have that grade count against their overall grade-point average. However, students still needed to make satisfactory academic progress toward their degree by passing at least 67% of their courses. Here, the institutional policy allowed for students to take pass/fail courses and drop classes, which conflicted with institutional and federal financial aid eligibility policies. Nadella recalled a conversation with a student who was confused by this new institutional policy:

> Look, I'm already having those conversations with one of my first-year students. Because they're like, "Oh, I have a 3.5. My GPA looks great." And I'm like, "That's because you withdrew from everything but two classes. Let me break it down for you and explain to you mathematically how this works and how to remain eligible for aid." And they're like, "Well, shoot. This is harder than I thought."

Jane also shared a very similar story, as she had learned that "A lot of students are realizing when they took a 'P' that it didn't get GPA or credit, and withdrawing would substantially put them behind." Veronica responded to Jane's remarks by sharing insight into institutional policy directions to attempt to adhere to federal financial aid policies, particularly satisfactory academic progress (SAP):

> Everyone needs to start managing expectations for your students, so they aren't banking on pass/fail policies in the fall. We need to give students language around this to say, "You had a 0.2 in the fall and you're only on track to get a 1.7 this spring. Let's just mentally prepare that you're going to be academically suspended. Now, let's work on your financial aid appeal." You know, that may lower their stress because you can kind of predict if they don't raise their cumulative GPA over 2.0, which can be mathematically impossible. Then, they're at risk of being suspended.

Here, because new institutional pass/fail policies allowed students to freely adjust courses to pass/fail and withdraw from courses they struggled with, faculty scrambled to both help students understand how the new institutional policy conflicted with federal financial aid policy. Moreover, faculty collaborated to generate ideas for crisis mitigation,



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including helping students "manage expectations" for future policy changes, preemptively understand their academic suspension, and submit a financial aid appeal to attempt to remain eligible for financial aid. Ultimately, Veronica summarized this situation best when she said, "The struggle bus is full."

### *Registration and Withdrawal Policies*

To allow for more student flexibility in terms of registration and withdrawal, the institution implemented new registration and withdrawal policies that allowed students to register several weeks after they would normally be allowed to do so and register for both full and part-time course loads across two separate eight-week sessions within a single semester. Moreover, a new policy allowed students to withdraw from courses without penalty if a hardship waiver was completed. However, both of these new policies conflicted with enrollment management and financial aid policies, rendering operations much more difficult for professional staff.

To illustrate this difficulty, Harriet shared that her students "are having a really hard time, their parents lost income, their parents have died, they have gotten sick, and now they have to take on extra jobs," requiring students to withdraw at various times, as well as imbalance their course loads. For Sally, who worked closely with the institutional billing and financial aid departments, this flux "screws up our billing like you would not believe and financial aid, too." For instance, Sally explained that if a student withdrew late from the first eight-week session for an emergency and then re-registered for another course in the second eight-week session, financial aid staff would need to reverse their financial aid award. However, there was a lag in the course registration system that did not allow courses to immediately appear as enrolled on the financial aid side. Sally explained:

> So technically, according to federal financial aid rules, they have to reverse the aid. We're charging them full time tuition, but they reversed the aid. I call in and ask, "Well, a lot of these kids that you reversed are under loaded. They're going to register in second session classes. They're going to end up being full time, so their aid's going to have to be put back on. Do you have a policy to go back and check?" No, they can't do that. They said there's no way they have capacity for it.

Beyond stressing the billing and financial aid units of the institution, flexible registration and withdrawal policies were also problematic for academic advisers and the institutional registrar, who were "constantly trying," according to Melissa, to understand student enrollment patterns and ensure that courses were appropriately enrolled and balanced. Sally echoed Melissa's concern, stating that institutional policies allowing students to register and withdraw at highly variable times and rates was "a constant problem" because "before the pandemic, we would schedule courses and award aid based on full-time enrollment. Now, during the pandemic, students actually want or need to be part time. That's a constant problem."

Ultimately, in many instances, faculty expressed those new institutional policies conflicted with existing policies, especially in financial aid. This led to students (and faculty) being confused by new policies meant to increase student success, when in some cases, students acted in ways that did not support their best interests and jeopardized their standing at the institution because policy allowed it.



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### New Policies Had No Precedent, Therefore Faculty Had No Guidance

As the institution needed to rapidly implement policies meant to increase safety or student success, these policies often had no precedent, so faculty operated with little guidance, including how to explain policies to students.

#### *Work-From-Home Policies*

One new policy that pertained to faculty and staff was a flexible work-from-home policy, providing department directors with unprecedented power to dictate work arrangements. During the Spring 2021 semester, department directors were allowed to set their own work from home policies, as long as instructional faculty adhered to the approved learning modality set forth by the institution. Regarding staff, directors also had freedom to allow subordinates to work from home, as long as student-facing units were staffed on-campus.

Faculty members repeatedly referred to this policy as unprecedented, which made explaining the policy to stakeholders difficult and confusing. Regarding students, faculty needed to explain institutional attitudes toward attending in-person classes, even though many faculty and staff leveraged the new work-from-home policy. There was also a serious incongruence between departments on campus, as Sally asserted that, “My boss likes working from home, and I think if he could, he would just empty out the hall altogether and send everybody home forever.” Melissa, working in a different unit, replied, “Well, maybe he doesn’t need to connect to students, which is fine. But then there’s people like us who need to. It’s not going to work for everyone, including students, who need to be here and may have a question.” Here, some departments required faculty and students to be on campus while others did not, placing certain faculty in precarious situations regarding their own health and having to explain and negotiate policies for peers and students who did not understand this incongruence.

Moreover, institutional messaging obscured the institution’s policy. Faculty members Sally and Harriet consistently reported that the institution was telling students that in-person classes were valuable, and students were encouraged to live on-campus and use on-campus resources. Yet, faculty also reported students commenting on how vacant campus was and how some buildings were empty. As a result, students hesitated to use on-campus resources, as students witnessed faculty and other administrators working from home and felt that was their norm. Illustrating this discrepancy was a discussion held by Melissa and Nadella:

> Melissa: I'm in my office most days and I'll say, “Do you want to meet in person?” and I know they live in the dorms. And they say, “No, I’ll Zoom.” I ask, “Why don’t you want to come to my office?” And they’re like, “I don’t know, didn’t even consider it.”
>
> Nadella: Melissa, I have students on campus that have opted to be fully virtual, but they're in the dorms, right?
>
> Melissa: Oh, I know. That blew me away.

Here, the institution attempted to provide flexibility through work-from-home policies, yet faculty and staff implementation of such policies produced a visual of an empty campus, which conflicted with institutional messaging, confusing students. As a result,



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faculty reported that many students did not consider using on-campus resources, such as faculty student office hours, possibly impacting a student's ability to persist.

### *COVID Policies of Quarantine and Contact Tracing*

Adhering to federal guidance, the institution implemented a mandatory ten-day quarantine for individuals testing positive for COVID, as well as requiring contact tracing through an institutional portal. Yet, within the policies, there was a student amnesty clause that did not punish students for failure to quarantine properly or reporting contact tracing in a timely, accurate fashion. As a result, this policy and its amnesty clause was unprecedented and had many downstream effects on students, including how to manage reporting contact tracing, which faculty struggled to advise upon. Jane, Sally, Terri, and Veronica discussed one student's situation in particular related to both quarantine and contact tracing protocols:

> Veronica: We think students are underreporting their contacts, which is not good, but it's expected. Students are stressing over this, and they do forget or they're just like, "Whatever I gave you what you need, so go away." We just need to get the word out on amnesty and say, "You're not going to get in trouble, but if you don't tell us or lie about who you were in touch with, all of a sudden, we may have to quarantine 20 people who were close contacts. And by that point, someone may have gotten sick."
> Jane: There's a problem though.
> Sally: Exactly, that's not the problem. There's a bigger problem.
> Jane: The students just don't want to.
> Terri: The students don't want to report their contacts. The student doesn't want their roommate to ostracize them. Even though they are trying to be responsible.
> Jane: Is there an anonymous way to do it?
> Terri: I don't know. But it's such an awful situation to be in.

This situation was very common, as quarantine and contact tracing policies allowed for students to forget, lie, or fail to report illness or close contacts through amnesty, but faculty learned that many students felt compelled to circumvent the policy out of fear of identifying roommates or friends, many of whom may have felt ostracized or isolated because they contracted COVID or were a close contact of someone who did. As a result, faculty often discussed how to leverage the amnesty clause within the policy to encourage students to follow the policy, yet other social factors influenced student behavior, rendering the policy relatively ineffective in faculty's view.

### *COVID Policies and ADA*

Perhaps no other policy conflict was as anxiety-inducing for faculty as navigating how COVID policies interacted with and impacted ADA policies, especially learning accommodations. Jane, unsure of the policy for students testing positive for COVID but who also have ADA accommodations retroactively, asked the group, "I have a student with accommodations, but now she's coming out of the woodwork, saying she's been sick with COVID for four weeks. What is the process?" Veronica responded:



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> It's uncharted territory. But generally speaking, retroactive accommodations is a huge no-no. If you've always had ADD or ADHD, but you only decided to tell us in January and you want something fixed in September, that's like a hard no. But COVID long haulers? That's a gray area. I would get in touch with disability services and ask. The trickier place is for the students who are sent to quarantine but are not positive. They technically do not qualify for accommodations. But I would ask.

After listening to Veronica's explanation and emphasis on norming all student-focused policy guidance with the disability services office, Harriet explained that exam accommodations would still pose a problem. Harriet said, "You know, at the beginning of the semester they need accommodations, you can do it. But there are other classes with a final exam. Is there an example we can follow?" Here, synthesizing discussions about mandatory quarantine and final exam accommodations, Harriet, along with other faculty, were unclear about how to provide accommodations for students who could not attend final exams for both quarantine and/or disability-related reasons. Because the quarantine policy did not address ADA accommodations or final exam requirements, faculty were left to constantly norm advice they were providing to students with the disability services office, hoping they were not violating ADA guidelines or institutional policy.

### *Lack of Food Insecurity Policies*

Prior to the pandemic, the institution administered a food pantry for student use, but the pandemic accelerated student demand and there was no policy in place to ensure food was distributed equitably. Sally, who oversaw food pantry operations, explained that there was no precedent to help sustain food pantry resources. Sally explained, "The first week of school, they almost cleaned us out. We usually restock once a month, but now it was twice within three weeks." Sally also comments on how students engaged with the food pantry, with the staff having to adopt new policies related to food volume. Sally remembered, "Some students are taking way more than what they should be. They're taking multiple bags and things, so we're trying to start reinforcing things. Like, you know, there need to be rules." Here, Sally and the staff actively replenished supplies and adjusted ordering frequencies to meet student demand, but the emergency services department did not have policies in place to ensure that food was distributed equitably. Moreover, because emergency services did not have policies in place, faculty could not provide students with guidance on how to use the services, placing the burden of "reinforcement" on a select few staff.

### *Emergency Aid Policies*

As the pandemic progressed, the federal government provided institutions with several rounds of emergency funding, and Winding Coast University needed to administer emergency aid efficiently and effectively. This was especially true of the geographic region of the institution, as students not only navigated the pandemic, but the region also experienced several severe storms and a hurricane, placing many students in dire financial circumstances. However, similar to many institutions, WCU did not have emergency aid distribution policies in place. Because the funds arrived quickly, WCU decided to automatically award $800 to students with the highest financial need, only after the student



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completed an eligibility form emailed to eligible students. Yet, this form was written into policy without an explanation to faculty about how students should navigate the process. Monica, Harriet, Nadella, Veronica, and Melissa held a discussion encapsulating the confusion that the emergency aid policy and its eligibility form created:

> Harriet: Students who were eligible were supposed to automatically receive the form. But now I'm looking at the application, and it says, "after completing the eligibility form," but where's the form?
> Nadella: No, students who file the FAFSA and are eligible for a Pell Grant automatically get it after completing the form.
> Melissa: Yeah, but what about other students? I feel like it's different.
> Veronica: Okay, I just want to point out that it feels confusing to us.
> Harriet: No, this is the form that was supposed to be in the email.
> Melissa: Yeah, right, because that's the form. If you don't get the automatic 800, I thought.
> Harriet: Right? Yeah, that's the only form that was in the email. It tells you.
> Melissa: Right. Wait, is it?
> Veronica: I think so.
> Harriet: Yeah, it says you have to fill out an eligibility form, but there's no form. There's not a form in there, right? I don't understand.

Ultimately, there was another form that students who were not deemed automatically eligible for aid could fill out. In these cases, faculty understood that students who were eligible would get a form through email, but faculty did not understand that there were two aid sources, and both required completion of an eligibility form. Overall, as WCU did not have an emergency aid policy in place, faculty felt the emergency aid distribution model was confusing, as the institution did not explain protocols to faculty, making it difficult for faculty to pass this knowledge along to students.

## Discussion and Implications

After reviewing this study's data and considering both prior literature and Actor-Network Theory (Fenwick & Edwards, 2010), many emergent themes in this work emphasized faculty confusion surrounding COVID-era policies. This confusion arose from either incongruous policy intent and impact, conflicting policies, or unclear or unprecedented policies. From here, many implications emerge from this work to guide future research, policy, and practice.

First, faculty in this study strongly asserted that institutional policy intent was incongruous with impact, including how students struggled to navigate learning modalities and access to technology. Here, there was a clear disconnect between actors within the institutional network, primarily that institutional leaders as actors did not--and perhaps could not--foresee the impact of new policies. Perhaps impact was not visible as both faculty and students, as actors, were not involved with the policy development process, even though prior research has repeatedly encouraged institutions to involve faculty in policy development (Haber & Mills, 2008; Maguire, 2009). As a result, faculty *acted* as policy interpreters, and students *acted* according to what the policies and institutional *network*



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allowed. In short, new institutional policies allowed actors to act independently of each other, with faculty often needing to explicate policy for students and mitigate difficult student situations allowable by policy.

In addition, new scheduling and calendar policies seemingly did not consider faculty or student mental health. Faculty in this study strongly advocated for breaks and leave days to allow for all stakeholders to recover, but new institutional policies with the goal of a quicker semester finish superseded stakeholders' mental health. Prior studies have strongly urged institutions to support stakeholders' mental health through policy (Daumiller et al., 2021; Weyandt et al., 2020), but WCU's policies negatively impacted both faculty and student mental health. Here, it is possible that because important actors were not included in the policy development process, the impact of these policies negatively impacted many actors' ability to do work and support student success.

Policy discordance was also apparent throughout the many faculty discussions. Faculty repeatedly articulated how many COVID-era policies conflicted with institutional and federal financial aid policies, placing faculty-as-actors in a difficult situation within the network. Here, faculty needed to provide students with policy guidance without violating policy, which at times, was impossible. Prior research hinted at the difficulty that faculty face navigating many institutional policies and avoiding policy violation (Cook et al., 2009; Gerten, 2011; Sausa, 2002). Here, many faculty were forced to provide students with guidance on new institutional policy regarding registration, withdrawal, and grading policies that faculty knew either contradicted federal policy or forced financial aid staff to take on new tasks that were either impossible or produced heavy workloads. In this regard, faculty-as-actors needed to operate in two policy networks—institutional and federal—and the results of this network navigation produced stress and anxiety for faculty and precarious situations for students.

However, many COVID-era developments, both new institutional policies and federal emergency grant programs, were unprecedented and were not facilitative of faculty knowledge of the developments and subsequent policies (Chan, 2022; Rainey & Taylor, 2022, 2023a). Consistently, faculty discussions about policy amounted to sessions of policy interpretation, as faculty explored and explained policies to each other and connected each other to campus resources. Here, no prior literature has explored the phenomenon of faculty collaboration around new policy interpretation and implementation, especially as these policies impact at-promise students during crisis periods. Subsequently, more research is needed in the areas of faculty development and collaboration related to policy interpretation and implementation.

It is also critical to mention that several director-level executive leaders were faculty in this study, and therefore, may not have felt able or willing to overly criticize policies or leadership who developed and enacted the policies. However, especially as these faculty were serving at-promise students in a student success course, it was troubling to learn that policies were so obtuse or complex that many faculty members needed to hold hour-long meetings to understand policies, many of which were meant for student audiences. Here, as institutional actors developed many new policies without faculty-actor or student-actor input, both faculty and students struggled to understand how policies worked. Given this disconnect, future research could focus on how faculty and students collectively come to understand a given policy and how these discussions are facilitated, especially focused on



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at-promise students and policies that address basic needs, emergency services, or student safety initiatives.

Related research has also explored how case management models may assuage policies meant to provide students with emergency services, as these models facilitate frequent communication between students and support staff, with staff being trained on policies so students can focus on their physical and mental health, rather than policy interpretation (Black & Taylor, 2021). Perhaps institutional leaders could consider case management models that place the burden of policy interpretation on the policymakers so faculty can better focus on teaching and students can better focus on learning. Moreover, future policymakers-as-*actors* could explore involving faculty and students-as-*actors* in the policy development *network*, facilitating broader understanding of how policies are developed and implemented.

Ultimately, this study and application of Actor-Network Theory (ANT) reveals that WCU implemented many policies that ended up producing problematic outcomes for some actors (students) and positive outcomes for other actors (faculty and staff), the reverse of the intention of the policies. This included policies that did not consider actors' (students) lived realities, policies that were explained to some actors (faculty) and not others (students), and policies that some actors (students) witnessed other actors (faculty) performing, which changed student behavior, possibly producing a negative outcome, such as avoiding in-person office hours. Ultimately, these institutional policies likely meant well but had inverse impacts, bringing into question many pandemic-era policy changes and how these policies were enacted.

## Conclusion

Although the COVID-19 pandemic has abated in many educational contexts (Rainey & Taylor, 2022, 2023b), it is still critical for researchers to investigate how faculty and students navigated new policies during this period. These investigations can inform how future policymaking can be made clearer and more supportive of stakeholders, especially at-promise students who are in most need of institutional resources and support. Unprecedented as they may have been, many of the problematic policies discussed in this could have been clarified through better policy development collaboration and increased policy communication from institutions leaders to faculty and students. If more collaboration and communication occur in the future, the "struggle bus" may not be as full and students may experience greater levels of success than ever before.

## Limitations and Delimitations

There are several limitations and delimitations of this work. This study gathered and analyzed data from a single postsecondary institution during a unique time in teaching and learning. One of the co-authors of this study was the original course designer for the class this study examines. It was first introduced as a zero-credit class at WCU in 2014 and was revised to carry a credit hour in spring 2020 as part of a broader strategy to improve retention rates for students on academic probation and/or financial aid warning. The co-author previously taught this class but was not an instructor in spring 2021. The co-author



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was, at times, present for the weekly instructor meetings as the course coordinator and the person who trains new instructors. The co-author embraced her position as a research practitioner, using her experience to build relationships, structure ways to ensure fidelity, and be present with the dual role (Hays & Singh, 2012).

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## Human Participants

The authors obtained full institutional review board approval for this study. This information can be provided upon request from the authors. Further ethical guidelines are also observed in terms of participants both in alignment with the journal's guidelines as well as the university policies.

## Originality Note

The authors take full responsibility for this study, including its conceptualization, data collection and analysis, and writing of the results. The authors did not use artificial intelligence or generative technologies for any part of the research or writing process.

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