

A Reflection on the State of the College in the Shadow of the Pandemic

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The mission and resilience of Bunker Hill Community College (BHCC) has been tested in many ways over the past 15 years, most notably—until the arrival of COVID-19—by the Great Recession of 2008. The economic collapse triggered a decade of disinvestment in public higher education, even as the College was asked to be the backbone of economic recovery and workforce development. We survived, even thrived, in those years of initial cuts and subsequent flat budgets. We became increasingly more focused and strategic in our investment of time, and in our work.

In January and February of 2020, BHCC was in the enviable position of having completed a 10-year self-study that documents a culture of deep caring about students, a faculty and staff that values innovation and growth, forward-thinking planning about facilities and infrastructure, and a balance sheet that promises stability. The arrival of the COVID pandemic caused a disruption that was unimaginable for BHCC. Our experience with the Great Recession pales in comparison.

Writing this reflection in the middle of May, as the Governor of our Commonwealth just announced that we may slowly and cautiously open our society once again, it is hard to fathom that only some 70 days have passed since we closed the campus to public access, in compliance with the statewide stay-at-home order. So much has changed and yet the important things have stayed true: the attentiveness to quality in teaching and learning, the mindfulness in serving our students, and the care with which we steward the resources of the College. The pandemic might have placed twists and turns on our path, but the North Star of our mission remains true and our journey continues.

Standard One: Mission and Purposes, and Standard Two: Planning and Evaluation

The pandemic magnified and validated the importance of the urban mission of BHCC. The College's mission to provide access and ensure equity in post-secondary education across a full range of options—from non-credit workforce training to credit-bearing certificates and associate degrees—is crucial to post-pandemic economic recovery. Unemployment for FY21 is projected at 14.6%, and revenue shortfall is expected to exceed \$4 billion for the FY21 State Budget (Massachusetts Joint Ways and Means Hearing Expert Testimony, March 2020). Communities of color, low income families, and residents of Gateway Cities served by BHCC are disproportionately affected by this economic collapse. BHCC and community colleges must be on the frontlines of educating and returning the workforce to gainful employment—just as they were in 2008—in the next two years and beyond.

Planning work has begun to identify short-term training programs in allied health, information technology and other high-growth industry sectors to meet this anticipated education need in

the next two years and beyond. The development of fully online programs, which was a planned strategy prior to the pandemic, has taken on new urgency as we try to provide flexibility and access to the adult population, and to meet credentialing and workforce demands. Among the programs in progress are Emergency Medical Technician, Business, and Paralegal Studies.

The conversion of the Spring 2020 semester from on-ground to online, which happened in just two weeks, provided an unexpected push toward remote learning. This was a daunting task, accomplished valiantly. To ensure the Fall 2020 semester is planned and implemented in a more orderly fashion, professional development for faculty will occur on a large scale during Summer 2020. This effort will focus on remote learning and online pedagogy, and be informed by reflections of the faculty as well as student experiences for improvement.

The College Strategic Plan will be entering the third year of its six-year cycle in fall 2020. As noted at the Trustees Meeting in May, we will conduct a mid-term audit and adjust our current Goals, Strategies and Initiatives. Annual unit planning will continue. It will be conducted in tandem with budget planning, though the process will be delayed slightly to allow for everyone to take a breath.

Standard Three: Organization and Governance

The governance of the College, vested in the Board of Trustees, has proceeded without interruption during this outbreak. Board meetings are being conducted remotely via WebEx, and the trustees' annual retreat for review and planning took place remotely at the end of May 2020.

The operations of the College went remote in mid-March. To comply with the stay-at-home order of the Governor, the campuses are off-limits to the general public and to students from mid-March to the end of June; only authorized staff (less than 5%) are permitted on the premises to maintain operations.

Participatory Governance meetings such as Governance Chairs Leadership meetings are being conducted via WebEx. Three Town Halls (Budget/Enrollment, Academic Affairs, and Project Re-Open) have been conducted remotely, with over 400 attendees at the first venue. The new governance model was approved in fall 2019, and elections to new committees are planned for fall 2020 after convocation. The remote participation option has provided an ease of access that is advantageous, and may hold potential for future meetings.

Students quickly adapted to an online mode for their annual Student Government leadership, Student Trustee, and Student Alumni Trustee election.

Standard Four: The Academic Program

The seismic move from on-ground to remote learning has affected every part of academic affairs. What remains constant, however, is the commitment of faculty and staff to maintain

continuity of the learning experience despite the disruption. The mode of instruction has changed; the integrity of the programs and components has not.

The Spring 2020 schedule consisted of 1,700 sections. Only a quarter of those sections were online or hybrid at the start. Over Spring Break, which the College extended to two weeks to accommodate the change in instruction mode, all sections were converted to either remote (synchronistic via WebEx or other remote tool) or online (asynchronistic, via Moodle LMS) with the exceptions of some Nursing, Allied Health, and Career Technical Education (CTE) labs. The AIDE (Academic Innovation and Distance Education) Center, which serves as the College's online faculty professional development and online course design hub, provided technical assistance and training during the conversion.

Allied Health and CTE labs that cannot be brought online now will be made up on campus as the College restores limited on-ground access in June and July.

Summer 2020 will be fully remote, consisting of a mixture of online and remote sections. Major professional development activities will be undertaken during this period, to ensure that faculty have the full range of resources and training for online offerings. Fall 2020 will see a mix of online, remote, and on-ground offerings in a schedule crafted in compliance with the Governor's health and safety mandates. The College anticipates the quality of online instruction will continue to improve through professional development and the continuity of using online tools.

Paid internships via the Learn and Earn Program and the Academic Internship office that were expanding in multiple sectors before the pandemic have turned virtual and are going strong. The College continues to secure private philanthropy dollars to match employer funds for paid internship expansion, ensuring that experiential learning is available to students of all financial means. Our commitment to equity remains firm.

The College's goal of broader online learning development as part of an enrollment and access strategy has experienced an unexpected turn, gaining momentum. We are mindful, however, to match speed with deliberate attention to quality. The twin commitment to excellent teaching and learning, and to relevant and vigorous academic programs are firm and abiding.

Standard Five: Students

The pandemic has thrown into deep relief the inequities that our students experience in their daily lives. Even as we embrace the richness of culture and life experiences our students bring to our College, we acknowledge that their lives are complex and often economically fragile, and their struggles involve not only themselves but often the children and family they support. Over 50% of our students are food insecure; 14% are homeless; three out of five are parents, and half of the student parents are single mothers. The College has, over time, developed structures to help alleviate some of these immediate needs: The Single Stop emergency office, the DISH food pantry, the Student Emergency Fund, mental health counseling, academic advisors, peer tutors, computer labs that open from 7 a.m. to 10 p.m. and Wi-Fi on campus. When we

shuttered the campus in mid-March, the pandemic swept away not only a hub of learning but also the social and emotional shelter for many of our students.

To maintain this academic, social, and emotional continuity for our students, we acted quickly. The following is only a sample of what we have done and will continue to do to ensure that the academic journey as well as the sense of belonging for our students remain intact for our learners.

- We purchased 800 Chromebooks and secured dozens of laptops for students who do not have devices at home to do academic work.
- We provided information to access free or reduced price Wi-Fi connections and in some cases purchased disposable phones to serve as Wi-Fi hotspots for students.
- We kept the food pantry open for as long as we could, and after shuttering the campus, mailed gift cards and delivered groceries to students.
- We called and wrote students when they disappeared from online classes and their faculty could reach them.
- We implemented an IP (in-progress) plan to support students with incompletes to complete over the summer.
- We moved the Withdrawal Date to the end of the semester to afford students more time to acclimate to remote learning and to encourage them to complete the semester.
- We implemented a Pass/Fail policy for the semester, to ensure that a student's GPA and overall academic success narrative was not derailed by the pandemic.
- We gave tuition and fee waivers upon request for students wishing to repeat a course due to the disruption of the outbreak.
- We made live chat, online tutoring, and remote assessment available to students.

Just as we have learned that traditionally marginalized communities are at greater health risk when there is a pandemic, we also have also come to understand that the inequities embedded in our public higher education system put our students at greater risk during times of disruption. In this pandemic, we have seen the geographical areas of risk overlap between health and higher education. Chelsea, where our second campus is located, continues to be a hotspot for COVID-19 infection. The Gateway Cities of Revere, Malden, Everett as well as the inner-city neighbors of Dorchester, Mattapan and South Boston where our students live have been visibly stressed and disproportionately affected.

BHCC is slated to receive a total of \$8.2 million from the federal CARES Act. The direct aid portion of \$4.1 million was distributed quickly in April. Two-thirds was distributed according to Pell eligibility and credit load, with one-third reserved for emergency application. The College awaits the distribution of the second \$4.1 million, which will offset COVID-related expenditures including the conversion to remote instruction and emergency operating expenses. What has not been addressed in the CARES funding are international, DACA, and undocumented students in distress and in danger of dropping out. The College Foundation has established a COVID Student Relief Fund and continues to fundraise, but demand overwhelms the available

resources. The College has serious concerns that the academic career of these students will be permanently disrupted.

Standard Six: Teaching, Learning and Scholarship

It is the commitment and resilience of our faculty and professional staff, buoyed by the support of technical staff, that enabled us to switch from on-ground to remote instruction in a few short weeks. The activities involved in that dramatic change is described under Standard Two. We are looking forward to a vibrant set of professional development activities surrounding online pedagogy in the summer so we can better anticipate the possible paths of this outbreak and pivot to remote again in the Fall Semester if necessary.

It is a point of pride for us to note that, in spite of the disruptive forces this spring, we have seen powerful signs that the teaching and learning community is alive and well. One-Book Speaker Event, poetry and prose readings from the TELL magazine, student concerts, Compelling Conversations speakers, and celebrations like the International Program graduation and Allied Health Pinnings are blossoming on WebEx, with full audience participation. The third annual Center for Equity and Cultural Wealth Summer Institute will be conducted—virtually—without missing a beat!

Standard Seven: Institutional Resources

Like most public higher education institutions, BHCC has incurred extraordinary expenses to weather the pandemic and lost anticipated revenue through decline in enrollment and other rental and enterprise income during Spring 2020. Enrollment decline is expected in Summer and Fall 2020, and if the 2008 Great Recession and its aftermath is any indication, a double-digit cut in state funding may occur.

While CARES Act funding (the institutional portion of \$4.1 million) offsets some revenue losses, an increase in student fees as well as reductions in operational and personnel spending will have to occur to deliver a balanced budget for FY21. The College has presented to the trustees and the College a three-scenario projection, and will be following the course of the state budget closely to determine the next steps in budget decisions. This situation is ubiquitous across the Massachusetts community college system, and likely CC systems across the United States.

The facilities projects previously planned, involving mainly the E and M buildings, have protected state funding and an approved financing commitment. While the scale of the building project might be slightly diminished due to increased cost, this critical project will enable the elimination of the H-Building lease. The relief from long-term lease obligations as well as greater control over the use of our physical spaces will place the College in a better financial and planning position in the future. This project also provides the modernization of the College Library and Learning Commons, which no longer serve students adequately in their current physical and technological state.

Our human resource goal during a severe economic downturn is to protect the core functions of the College. Over the past five years, the administration has built a lean but effective

organizational structure that provides for adequate service to students, and support to faculty and staff. With the growing need for holistic support to ensure student success, the expansion in LifeMap and other student services has been welcomed. The need to strengthen an increasingly critical student information system has also been acknowledged and supported. The aim during these difficult budget times is to preserve the core structure as much as possible to ensure stability and prepare for future growth. If the counter-cyclical nature of community college enrollment holds in the post-pandemic period, we will need a strong workforce to anchor the growth.

Standard Eight: Institutional Effectiveness

Although it seems much longer, we have only been in the grips of the pandemic for about 70 days. It is too early to assess the effectiveness of the strategies we put in place for academic and business continuity. We will watch student retention and persistence as well as completion rates, mindful of disaggregating our data to track equity issues. But even in these early days, we have surprised much of the higher education world with our nimbleness, our resilience, and our persistence. There is a great deal to do as our students enter the summer and fall: they will be facing a host of challenges from the online environment, to health, employment, family, and childcare. Our program outcome measures and institutional measures remain in place and we are continuing to perform unit planning, albeit slightly abridged due to the current crisis. We will be watchful.

Standard Nine: Integrity, Transparency, and Public Disclosure

This pandemic has tested our ability to communicate in the midst of uncertainty. It is not only the content of the messages sent that is critical, but the stability and effectiveness of our established communication venues that help promote integrity and transparency.

The structures we have intentionally strengthened in the past few years have served us well over the past few months. They include:

- The Incident Command Structure (IC)
- The Emergency Management Team (expanded IC)
- VP Council, Deans Council, A&F Council
- Department Chairs
- The Forum and Forum Committee Leadership
- Town Halls (Budget, Enrollment, Academic, Project Re-Open)
- Board of Trustee Meetings
- Student Government
- Emergency Notification System
- College Website/COVID-19 Resource Site

Each of these groups/venues has functioned well in the crisis. At this writing, a series of summer chats with the president is being launched to encourage connections over the summer break.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 crisis will cast a long shadow over BHCC and the world of higher education for quite some time. The disruptions it unleashes will force us to adapt in minor ways in some areas and completely reimagine our thinking and practices in others. In facing this uncertain future, we would do well to take a lesson from our students: their aspirations and resilience to succeed against common expectations should inspire us to innovate and transcend these challenges, whatever the odds.