

Tailoring Professional Development to Educators in Accordance with Doctoral Candidates Responsiveness to COVID-19 Practice and Policy Changes in Mississippi Educational Settings

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Abstract

Ed. D. Doctoral candidates (N = 45) at a regional university in Mississippi were invited to complete a brief questionnaire to share their experiences related to the topic. Responses (N = 19) were analyzed qualitatively using two cycles of coding (Saldana, 2015) and revealed similar findings across a variety of educational settings including P-12, post-secondary, and independent practitioners. Primary themes of change included Scheduling, Interaction, Sanitization, and Technological requirements. Critical aspects of workplace performance included Collaboration, Communication, and Dispositions. Due to Increased Virtual Interactions, participants reported Restructuring and Communication/Interaction as the factors most powerfully impacting their professional best practices. Participant recommendations were overwhelmingly to remain flexible, open-minded, and to be involved/work with shifting priorities during these times of transition and adjustment to societal needs in educational settings.

Keywords: COVID-19, Educational Policy, Educational Practice, Professional Development

1. Introduction/Review of Literature

Without question, in the U.S. and across the globe, 2020 brought about many changes to P-12 school teachers and leaders, post-secondary instructors and administrators, as well as independent educational professionals' practice. When COVID-19 emerged in early spring, it disrupted the normalcy of not only educational practitioners' day-to-day activities, but also those of students and parents alike. Indeed, the pandemic has lived up to the description of an "unprecedented catalyst for social transformation that underscores the need for multilevel and cross-sectoral solutions to address systemic changes to improve health for all" (p.909, Dominguez, Garcia, Martinez, & Hernandez-Arriaga, 2020). Undoubtedly, the world has changed significantly throughout this global threat.

Educational researchers have responded appropriately by conducting and beginning further analyses in P-12 settings on how the pandemic has and is impacting endeavors in teaching and learning. Within this context of uncertainty, studies focusing on teacher well-being have been beneficial for understanding the daily challenges and ways teachers manage stress (Chan, Sharkey, Lawrie, Arch, and Nylund-Gibson, 2021; Herman, Sebastian, Reinke, and Huang, 2021). Parents' stress levels have been shown to be better when support from schools is strong (McGoron, Wargo Aikins, Trentacosta, Gómez, and Beeghly, 2021) with healthy coping mechanisms, even in homeschool settings (Aznar, Sowden, Bayless, Ross, Warhurst, and Pachi, 2021), so keeping schools and teachers operating well certainly impacts students and families.

Research in higher educational settings has also been fruitful for better understanding which approaches are best for pandemic-era issues. Gonzalez, de la Rubia, Hincz, Comas-Lopez, Subirats, Fort and Sacha (2020) found that COVID-19 confinement resulted in a significant positive effect on students' performance. Practices recommended by Schreiber (2021) have been studied and found most effective when course instructors speak at eye-level in recorded content videos (Wong, Marshall, Blank, and Hard, 2021) in the absence of face-to-face options (Ho, Cheong, and Weldon, 2021). In international settings, studies have examined psychological concerns among students and discovered concerns related to fear (Shahbaz, Ashraf, Zakar, Fischer, and Zakar, 2021) intrinsic motivation, persistence, procrastination (Pelikan, Korlat, Reiter, Holzer, Mayerhofer, and Schober, et al. 2021) as well as stress, anxiety (Son, Hegde, Smith, Wang, and Sasangohar, 2020), and shock (Aucejo, French, Araya, and Zafar, 2020). Similarly, Garris and Fleck (2020) revealed that student evaluations of courses transitioning to online were negative and consistently predicted by online self-efficacy, emotional well-being, computer anxiety, online student engagement, and student perceptions of instructor confidence with transitioning online. The role of adaptability was found to be key for students as they transitioned to online learning spontaneously (Besser, Flett, & Hill, 2020).

2. Problem, Purpose, and Research Questions

Attentive responsiveness to the unforeseen policy changes and rapidly-changing educational climate due to COVID-19 have quite possibly been the only constants for the transitioning into new approaches that will continue to persist for the foreseeable future at the very least. Professionals at schools and post-secondary institutions have not only rushed to implement federal and state-level policy changes, but have also designed and implemented changes unique to their own settings; in some instances, they have utilized an action research approach which allows for continuous cycles of improvement. These actions and reactions are critical for successfully adjusting to the ever-changing climate, and by nature they vary among sites to reach students studying content of all sorts. Educators at all levels have been impacted by COVID-19 in myriad ways that deserve investigation and deeper understanding so as to design further professional development for best adapting to new requirements due to COVID-19.

2.1 Statement of the Problem

With the need for successfully managing the rapid changes and needs due to COVID-19, we as educational leaders must continue pursuing knowledge and understanding of just how our students and colleagues are and have been affected so as to better know how to lead. Moving forward, the outlook of many social and educational endeavors can be tentative and uncertain at best. Due to the unprecedented issues educators face at this time, it is imperative that we examine current conditions to best understand the climate in a variety of settings as new policies and other practical measures are implemented.

2.2 Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this study was to explore how educational professionals in a variety of settings in Mississippi have handled policy changes at their particular sites in order to gain understanding of current best practices. Career-level educators enrolled in a doctoral program have the wealth of experiences and knowledge to provide insight on how the educational landscape has shifted since the pandemic we currently face. As both leaders and students in P-12 and post-secondary institutions, they are uniquely positioned to convey real challenges and needs for supporting educational endeavors at all learning levels. Specifically, issues with which educators face that need additional attention should be identified and addressed to the extent possible. To do this, we must first pursue more information about how workplace requirements and expectations shifted through the experiences of practitioners.

2.3 Research Questions

There was one guiding research question for this study, which served as the foundation of inquiry with seven questions for students to answer. The research questions are as follows.

How has COVID-19 responsiveness to shifting policies at your site impacted your best practices?

1. *What is your professional role in the workplace?*
2. *When did your site begin managing workplace changes due to COVID-19?*
3. *What aspects of your work have changed due to shifting policies as a result of COVID-19?*
4. *Which of these aspects do you consider as critical to your workplace performance?*
5. *How have these critical aspects changed as a result of responsiveness to shifting policies at your workplace?*

- 6. *Among these changes, how have your professional best practices been impacted?*
- 7. *What advice, comments, or questions would you share with practitioners in roles similar to yours regarding adjusting to policy/procedural changes in the workplace as a result of COVID-19?*

3. Research Methods

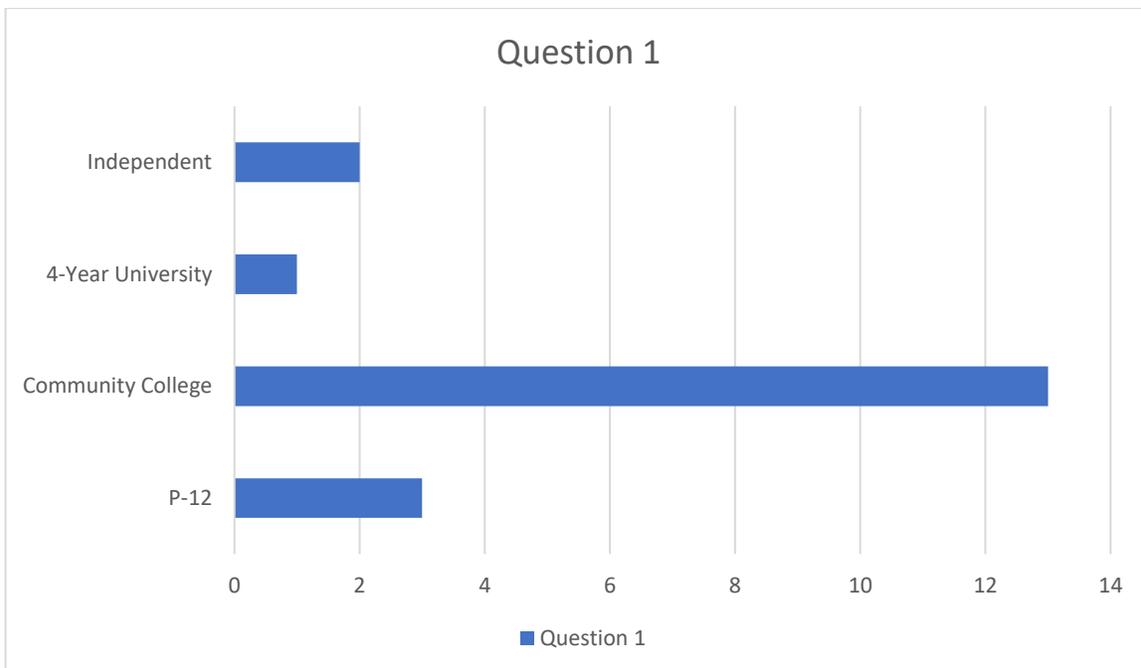
To achieve the purpose of this study, questionnaires were sent electronically via email from the university’s Institutional Research office to yield anonymous responses (N = 19) following IRB approval. The sampling pool included Ed. D. Doctoral candidates (N = 45) at a regional university in Mississippi, who were invited to share their own experiences at their individual sites. Upon completion, results were submitted directly to the Institutional Research and Planning division. The questionnaire did not request demographic information or any details that would allow participants or their site to be made public, and no identifiers provided in responses were included in data analysis or reporting of results. Only the researcher accessed the data collected.

Each of the seven questions offered open-ended narrative opportunities for participants to share freely, as based upon each one’s experiences at their own individual campus without being forced to select a pre-determined response. Participants provided data within a 2-week timeframe as approved by the institution’s IRB, and qualitative data gathered were coded in 2 cycles of analysis following Saldana’s (2015) techniques. Cycle one coding employed In Vivo codes and cycle two coding generated descriptive categories of the codes. All categories generated are displayed in tables. Additionally, data are reported in frequencies to accommodate multiple responses across categories per participant. Finally, a third cycle of coding identified two meta-themes as a result of cross-analysis of all item responses. Codes and themes are reported in tables and/or figures.

4. Results

Question one asked participants to report their professional roles in the workplace. This question is important for understanding the workplace responsibilities as well as the nature of the student population affected by participants’ practice. As doctoral candidates, participants had been practicing as educators for at least a decade each in various capacities. While there were a range of positions reported, which were represented across levels and sites, more than half (68%) of participants indicated having a professional role in community college settings. One other participant reported working in a 4-year university role while three (16%) shared serving in P-12 settings and two (11%) indicated that they work independently. Therefore, participant responses indicate that the student populations impacted include those in P-12 through post-secondary levels. Figure 1 displays responses for question one.

Figure 1



(Figure notes or narrative explanation of each category)

Question two asked participants to share when their worksite began managing changes due to COVID-19. Sixteen participants (84%) indicated that they began addressing changes in March 2020, while two participants reported that their worksite instituted change in April 2020, and one participant reported January 2020 as the beginning of COVID-related change in the workplace. This is important information to consider within the context of the typical semester with regard to activities and scheduling that take place each month (i.e., January through May). With the overwhelming majority of participants reporting serious shifts in March, we have a better understanding of the progress their students likely made before the changes were instituted as well as how much of the semester was spent making adjustments to new requirements and social changes that accompanied the initial stage of COVID-19. Table 1 illustrates results for question two.

Table 1

Question 2: When did your site begin managing workplace changes due to COVID-19? (Please provide month and year)

Month, Year	Response Frequency
January 2020	1
March 2020	16
April 2020	2
Total	19

Question three asked participants to denote which aspects of their work changed as a result of shifting policies from COVID-19. This was an attempt to capture candidate experiences during and after the pandemic emerged. Table 2 illustrates the data from this open-response question and reveals a variety of changes, with a strong increase in virtual meetings through social distancing and working from home as some of the most common responses. Another commonly-reported change was related to interactions with students, which were altered through changed scheduling (i.e., increased number of hybrid/online courses) and protocol for maintaining sanitation. For many, interactions with students were initially and primarily in person, with little virtual interaction. Additionally, sanitization was previously not a concern for candidates, but changed drastically after the emergence of COVID-19.

Figure 2

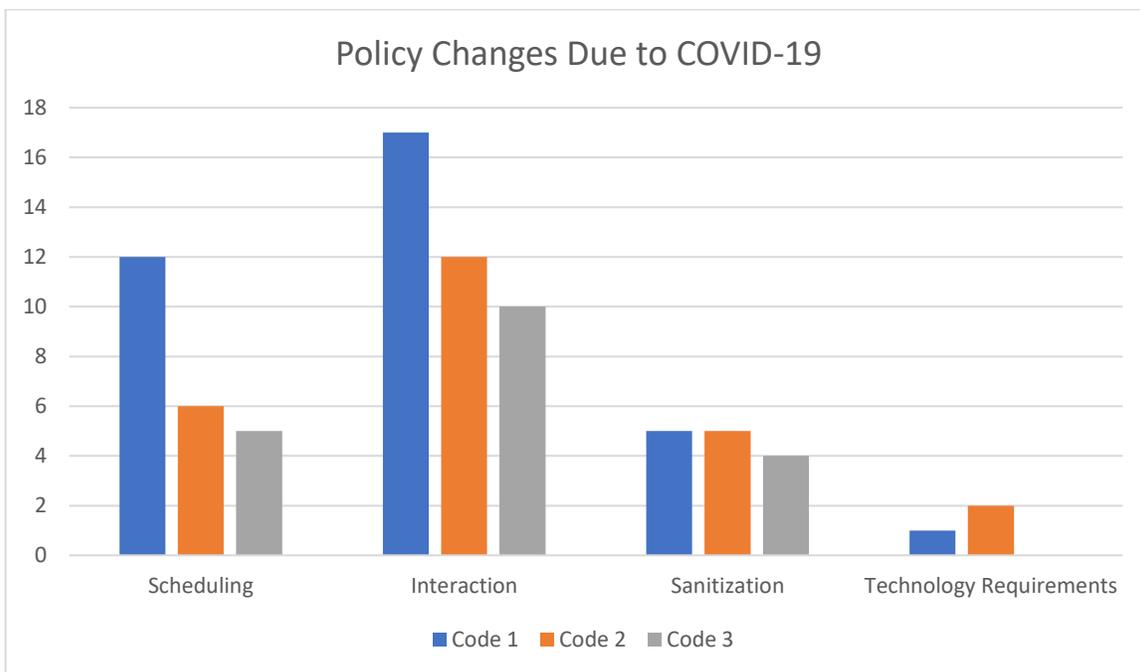


Table 2

Question 3: What aspects of your work have changed due to shifting policies as a result of COVID-19?

Categories of Change	Specific Types	Number Responding
Scheduling	Class Meetings (to hybrid & online)	10
	Semester dates & Length	2
	Increased Professional Development	6
	Altered Evaluation Practices (Classroom & Accreditation)	5
Interaction	Working from Home	5
	Social Distancing	12
	Increased Virtual Meetings	12
	Altered Professional Meetings	9
	Less Collaboration	1
Sanitization	Masks required	5
	Increased sanitization practices	5
	Daily Health Screeners	4
Technology Requirements	CARES funds for IT Infrastructure	1
	Increased Capacity for New Demands	2
Unclassified	<i>“Each day seems to bring a new set of policies and procedures for the workplace. I, and the students I teach, feel as if we are trying to hit a moving target.”</i>	1
	<i>“Nailing down any sort of plan has been especially difficult”.</i>	1

Note: N = 19

Question four asked which of the aspects listed in question three are critical to workplace performance. Naturally, in-person interactions were hindered greatly; likewise, a similar amount of participants' personal dispositions were also reported as critical. Categories generated include *Collaboration*, *Communication*, *Dispositions*, and *All of the Above* as shown in Figure 3 and Table 3, respectively.

Figure 3

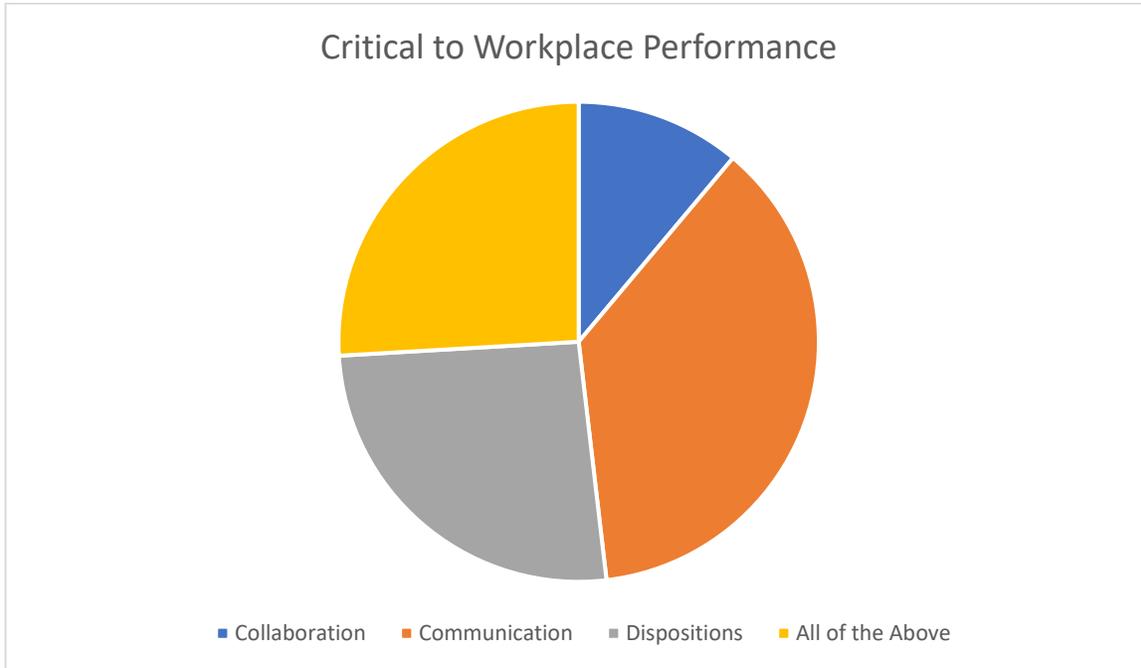


Table 3

Question 4: Which of these aspects do you consider as critical to your workplace performance?

Critical to Workplace Performance	Specific Types	Number Responding
Collaboration	Meetings	3
	Phone calls	2
Communication	Virtual platforms	5
	In person	3
	Patience	1
Dispositions	Flexibility	1
	Safety	2
	Consistency/Structure	1
	IT infrastructure support	2
	All of the Above	<i>Scheduling, interaction (collaboration & communication), sanitization, IT capacity</i>

Note: N = 19

Question five asked participants how these critical aspects have changed as a result of responsiveness to shifting policies at their workplace. Two primary categories of change emerged from participant responses, including *Increased Virtual Interactions* and *Policies and Procedures*. The first category consisted of interpersonal-related communication while the latter included the specific components of change, including remaining flexible, social distancing, sanitary practices, scheduling, and student-centered approaches. See Table 4 for the codes and categories generated from question 5 analysis.

Table 4

Question 5: How have these critical aspects changed as a result of responsiveness to shifting policies at your workplace?

Categories of Change	Specific Types	Number Responding
Increased Interactions	Virtual Class Meetings	4
	Parent Conferences	1
	Professional Meetings	4
	Collaboration	2
	24-7 access	4
Policies & Procedures	Fluid/embracing change	6
	Social Distancing	3
	Masks/sanitization	2
	Altered Scheduling	9
	Student-paced	1

Note: N = 19

Question six asked participants how their professional best practices were impacted amidst the changes denoted in question five. Emergent categories reflected *Restructuring* and *Interaction* practices as dominant. Participants reported that a variety of effects altered educational best practices, such as those suggested by Cahapay (2020) and as shown in Table 5. In the *Restructuring* category, six of the 19 participants reported that “everything” in different areas changed as a result of COVID-19. Regarding *Interaction* practices, participants reported that virtual capabilities were enhanced while building working relationships with students was also notably impacted.

Table 5

Question 6: Among these changes, how have your professional best practices been impacted?

Categories of Change	Specific Types	Number Responding
Restructuring	Everything revised/built from the ground up	2
	Everything went virtual	4
	<i>Altered Scheduling</i>	
	(Classes & Professional Meetings)	3
	(Working from Home)	3
Interaction	Enhanced Virtual Capabilities	6
	Altered rapport-building with students	7

Note: N = 19

Question seven asked what advice, comments, or questions participants would share with practitioners in roles similar to theirs regarding adjusting to policy/procedural changes in the workplace as a result of COVID-19. Similar to results discovered by Valverde-Berrococo, Fernández-Sánchez, Revuelta Dominguez, and Sosa-Díaz (2021), themes pertaining to remaining flexible were largely represented, with suggestions for helping others and reaching out for help as other prominent themes. While more participants in this study reported the importance of being “flexible and open-minded” as well as “working with shifting priorities,” sub-categories emerged that recommend maintaining current knowledge/information by “reach(ing) out for help” as well as “taking advantage of training opportunities” and “maintain(ing) good health practices.” Table 6 illustrates the totality of participant responses to question seven.

Table 6

Question 7: What advice, comments, or questions would you share with practitioners in roles similar to yours regarding adjusting to policy & procedural changes in the workplace as a result of COVID-19?

Categories	Specific Types	Number Responding
Dispositions	Be patient	4
	Be kind	1
	Be flexible & open-minded	12
	Be involved/work with shifting priorities	8
	Maintain consistency	1
	Be available to assist	2
	Reach out for help	2
	Take advantage of training opportunities	2
	Maintain good health practices	2

Note: N = 19

4.1 Cycle Three Coding

In the third and final cycle of coding, questions three through six were analyzed further to determine meta-themes from cross analysis of the codes generated from cycle two coding. Two meta-themes emerged, including *Communication* (i.e., *Increased Virtual Interactions*) and *Policies & Procedures*. These metadata indicate that among all of the changes reported by participants, these two areas denoted were the primary differences in best practices due to the adjustments necessary for the COVID-19 pandemic. Table 7 illustrates the questions included in analysis for cycle 3 of qualitative coding.

Table 7

Questions Included in Cycle Three Coding (#3-6)

Question Number	Question
3	What aspects of your work have changed due to shifting policies as a result of COVID-19?
4	Which of these aspects do you consider as critical to your workplace performance?
5	How have these critical aspects changed as a result of responsiveness to shifting policies at your workplace?
6	Among these changes, how have your professional best practices been impacted?

5. Summary

The guiding research question for this study was *How has COVID-19 responsiveness to shifting policies at your site impacted your best practices?* Of the 19 respondents, results indicated 14 participants in higher ed. Settings, three in P-12, and two independent educational practitioners. Sixteen (16) of those participants indicated shifts in the workplace beginning in March 2020. Among all 19 participants, work aspects that changed include interpersonal interactions, scheduling, and sanitization. Participants also reported that critical aspects of workplace performance included one or more of the following: collaboration, communication, and dispositions. Critical aspects changed most through increased virtual interactions as well as shifting policies and procedures. Professional practices were most impacted by restructuring and personal interactions. A culmination of the advice offered by participants for moving forward revealed the belief that human agency can overcome obstacles.

6. Conclusions and Implications

Findings from this project may have benefits by providing information to improve and enhance responsiveness in P-12, post-secondary, as well as independent educator leadership in the state of Mississippi. Additionally, other organizations may benefit from this research by examining the impacts and influences of educational practices within the state of Mississippi. Amidst the rapidly changing and unknown conditions faced by contemporary society, practitioners in other areas and states may garner insight into local populations of individuals by soliciting their input through research studies like this one. Thus, results from this study can have valuable implications for educational professionals in both P-12 and secondary institutions situated in rural areas.

As data for this study revealed, the increased technological and virtual demands reported by participants were noteworthy, which warrant more professional development to achieve equivalency in virtual spaces. The increase in need for virtual meetings has established a new normal that may remain, regardless of how COVID-related issues evolve. At minimum, virtual platforms and face-to-face interpersonal communication methods are to be treated as equally important and should be equally interchangeable in educational settings to promote consistency of communication in all modes of interaction. Personal dispositions are instrumental in successfully managing the shift from personal to virtual communication, so ensuring that we maintain a requisite flexibility may enhance educators' ability to adapt to change.

Interestingly, yet quite important is setting boundaries for virtual availability as we continue to transition more fully into virtual spaces. Additionally, rapport-building with students will likely look differently than in years' past. With the confluence of diverse generations in educational settings, educators must understand that individuals possess various levels of comfort and fluency within virtual spaces; those who need assistance with adapting should be supported and accepted, as virtual comprehension and competencies must grow if educational entities are to remain present and prosper. Indeed, the cognitive dissonance experienced by some should be explored and addressed to provide requisite knowledge and skills for successful interaction in virtual landscapes. Supporting individuals at every level is our shared charge to continue working for a better tomorrow. Given these findings, educational leaders who are implementing and improving virtual spaces should take heed to the advice of participants (N = 19) that educators must maintain dispositions that are "flexible and open-minded."

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Figure 1

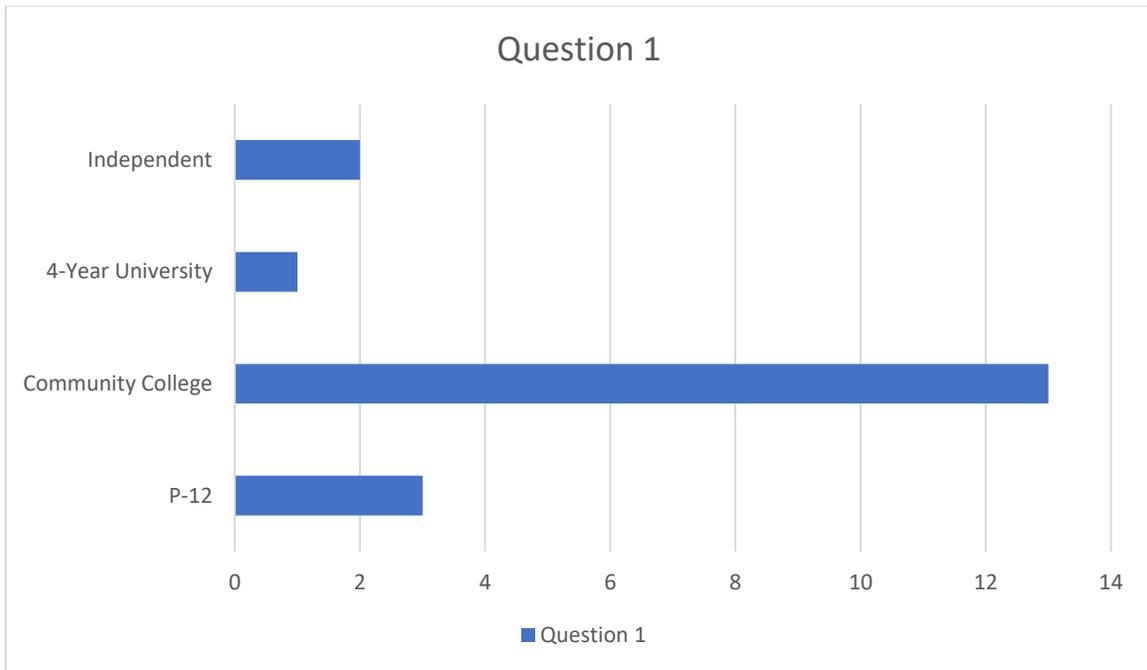


Figure 2

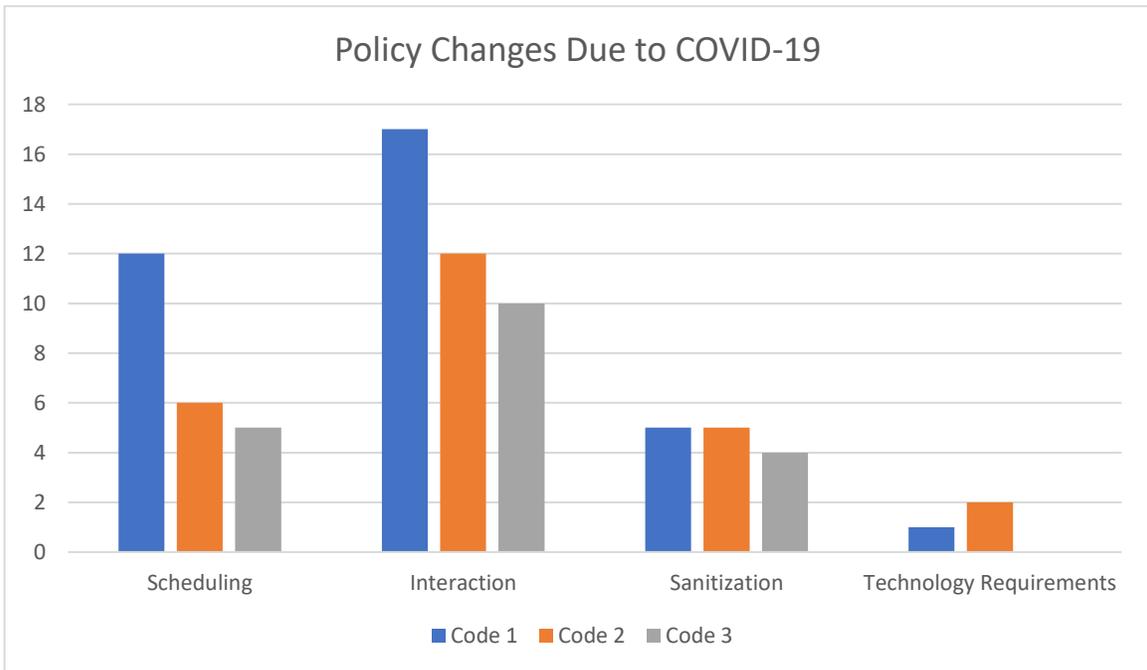


Figure 3

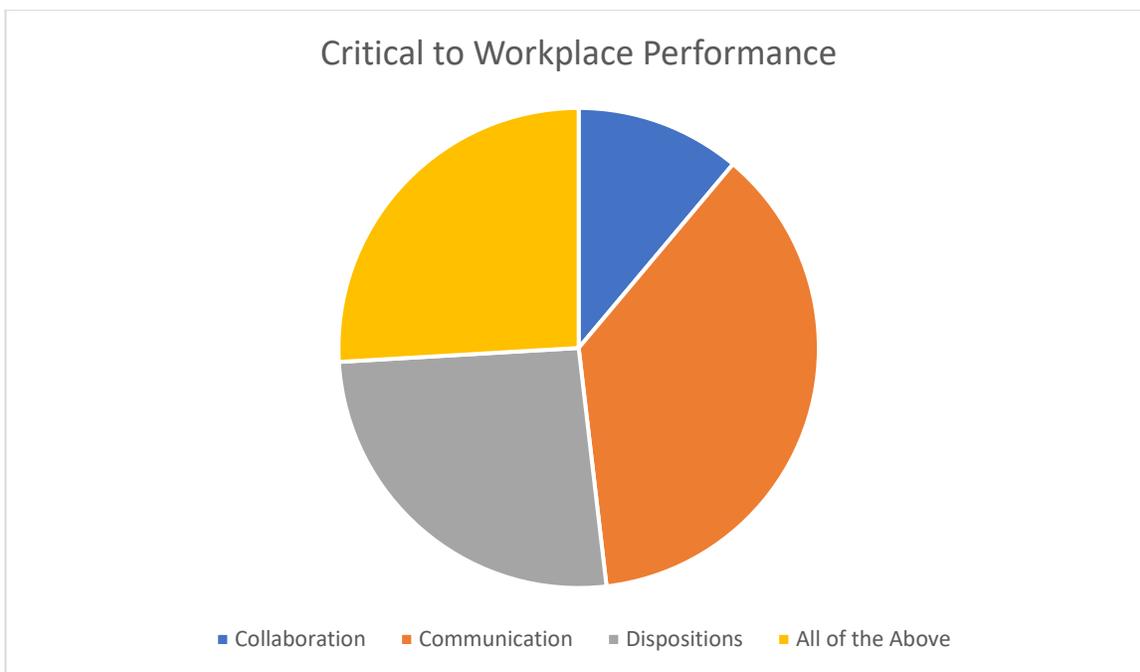


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Interaction	Working from Home	5
	Social Distancing	12
	Increased Virtual Meetings	12
	Altered Professional Meetings	9
	Less Collaboration	1
Sanitization	Masks required	5
	Increased sanitization practices	5
	Daily Health Screeners	4
Technology Requirements	CARES funds for IT Infrastructure	1
	Increased Capacity for New Demands	2
Unclassified	<i>“Each day seems to bring a new set of policies and procedures for the workplace. I, and the students I teach, feel as if we are trying to hit a moving target.”</i>	1
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Note: N = 19

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Dispositions	Patience	1
	Flexibility	1
	Safety	2
	Consistency/Structure	1
	IT infrastructure support	2
All of the Above	<i>Scheduling, interaction (collaboration & communication), sanitization, IT capacity</i>	7

Note: N = 19

Table 4

Question 5: How have these critical aspects changed as a result of responsiveness to shifting policies at your workplace?

Categories of Change	Specific Types	Number Responding
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	Reach out for help	2
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Maintain good health practices	2	

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