

Teaching and Learning as *CANVAS* Ambassadors During the COVID-19 Pandemic: Faculty Experiences at One Historically Black College and University

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ABSTRACT

In this article, we explore the experiences and self-reflections of faculty as CANVAS Ambassadors at Morgan State University, a Historically Black University in Baltimore, Maryland, during the COVID-19 global pandemic. The university transitioned to remote/online instruction using the CANVAS™ learning management system in March of 2020. The findings include several themes and lessons: the positive impact on collegiality when faculty train faculty, the ability to close technology gaps, and the opportunity to broaden overall faculty teaching and learning development at the university. The paper suggests an example of transferable learning experience to other universities and suggests future research plans in preparation for unpredictable teaching and learning in education.

Keywords: CANVAS Ambassador, Learning Management System, COVID-19, Historically Black College and University, Faculty Experience

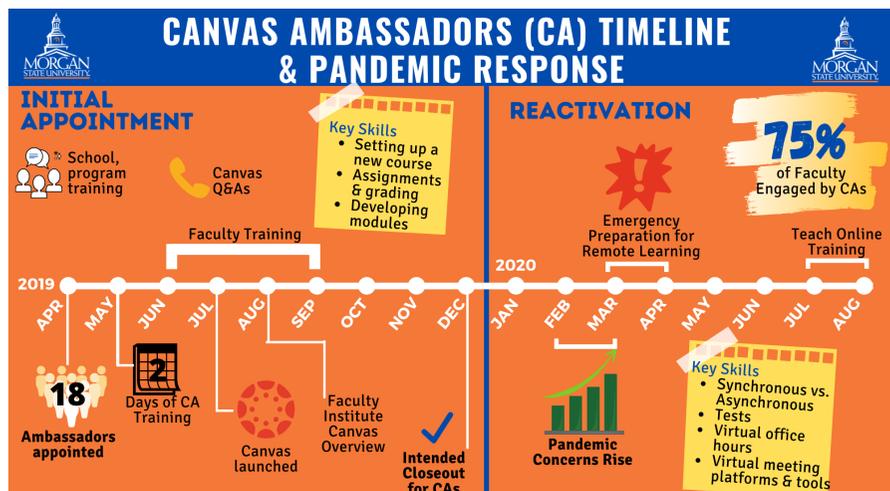
INTRODUCTION

In the early spring of 2020, university and college faculty around the world were in the midst of familiar and eventful semesters. At the time, midterms were in progress, commencements were in planning, campuses were abuzz with the usual activities, and news about a mysterious and deadly illness occurring in eastern parts of the world were starting to be heard. Many felt the illness was far away and not an immediate concern. The terms COVID-19, quarantine, and social distancing were not commonplace in the lexicons of a majority of faculty, students, administrators, and staff, nor was the idea of emergency remote teaching and distance learning. This changed in an instant. By the middle of March, nearly all colleges and universities around the world, including the nearly 5,300 in the United States, were quickly transitioning into a completely new state of operation with remote learning and work becoming the norm. Morgan State University, a Historically Black College and University (HBCU) located in Baltimore, Maryland, was among them.

Morgan State University (MSU) has a valued historic reputation for excellence in teaching, intensive research, effective public service, and community engagement. Its administrators, staff, and faculty dedicate themselves daily to preparing diverse and competitive graduate and undergraduate students for success in a competitive global and interdependent society. MSU is a medium-sized campus that enrolls approximately 8,000 students, many of whom are first-generation college students, in its ten colleges and schools. It offers degrees at the undergraduate, masters, and doctorate levels. Recently, MSU celebrated its 152nd anniversary, and is legislatively designated as the State of Maryland's Pre-eminent Public Urban Research University. The Mission of MSU is to serve the local community and the larger society as an intellectual and creative resource (McLane-Davison et al., 2019).

Excellence in teaching lies at the forefront of the MSU vision statement. The university uses the CANVAS Learning Management System (LMS) to offer academic courses. This platform was approved by both faculty and students because of its ease of use and its ability to facilitate a high-quality active learning and monitoring environment for both face-to-face and online classes. Simultaneously with the adoption of CANVAS LMS, the university administration established a cutting-edge *CANVAS Ambassadors (CA)* program based on the train-the-trainer model, an incredibly useful tool for professional development and training. This involved the nomination and extensive training of faculty representatives in the functionality and applications of CANVAS LMS. These *Ambassadors* would then similarly train the faculty, staff and in some cases administrators in their College or School in exchange for a small stipend. This multi-staged training process

began in June of 2019. By the spring of 2020, most employees, in particular, the faculty, had received substantial CANVAS training and were uniquely prepared for the dramatic shift to emergency remote teaching and learning. The below figure outlines the journey of MSU *CANVAS Ambassadors* from the beginning of the program to MSU preparation for the uncertainty of the 2020-2021 academic year, given the persistence of the COVID-19 pandemic.



MSU's *CANVAS Ambassadors* consist of full-time faculty of varying ranks. They are excellent teachers in their own classrooms and are also dedicated to learning best practices in online teaching pedagogy including the mastery of learning management systems like CANVAS. They must balance their research agendas and tenure pursuits with their commitments, as selected ambassadors, to the role of a professor teaching fellow professors. This commitment translates into a great deal of training, emails, phone calls, and in-person coaching on various aspects of the teaching and learning CANVAS features (Smith et al, 2020). The *CANVAS Ambassador* role at MSU is thus both demanding and rewarding. Moreover, MSU *CANVAS Ambassadors* became essential when all classes shifted to distance learning. Their peer faculty interaction activity increased exponentially, and they were required to be experts in a new LMS as well as in discipline-specific software and video conferencing platforms. Thus, those faculty who held this role became a primary driving force for continuing teaching excellence at MSU during this global pandemic, and in doing so, the faculty experienced, accomplished, and learned a great deal. This article will examine the unique experiences of MSU *CANVAS Ambassadors* during the shift to emergency remote teaching and offers some valuable lessons learned.

LITERATURE REVIEW

At the time of writing this article, the development of a body of literature specific to the response to the COVID-19 pandemic within higher education had only just begun. Throughout the beginning of the Spring Semester of 2020, colleges and universities were temporarily closed and started, at a rapid pace, exploring options and alternatives to continue teaching and learning. Administrators and faculty members frequently called urgent meetings, assessed online resources, and ran several surveys to ensure a smooth transition to educational delivery and student learning (Baker, 2020). This sudden shift to online learning or remote instruction was one of best possible alternatives --at schools and colleges, whether big or small, whether private or public, whether in the United States or elsewhere. To support faculty during the pandemic, Baker (2020) has recommended opportunities for social and emotional support along with peer to peer learning by a) creating a faculty community on social media as a forum to share tips, concerns, and strategies, b) organizing disciplinary/thematic programs using resources such as Zoom or Google Meet or Microsoft Teams; and c) re-envisioning career development policies and practices to address the needs and experiences/well-being of vulnerable students and faculty (disabled, underprivileged, non-tenured, less technologically skilled). The MSU *CANVAS Ambassadors* exemplified Baker's recommendations.

At the beginning of the pandemic, the major focus of the faculty and university leadership was how to continue curricula and connect with students when everything was shut down. As McMurtrie (2020) pointed out, faculty struggled "with two basic teaching challenges: How to modify their course content when assignments become impossible to do from home, and how to keep their students engaged at a time when everyone is operating under a lot of stress" (para 2). In addition to faculty, administrative staff including the senior leadership team -- presidents, provosts, deans-- explored options and alternatives for remote operations during this pandemic and "highlighted the role of technology as an institutional backbone" (Blumenstyk, 2020, para 4).

Some argue that students endured a higher level of psychological distress during the Spring semester of 2020, as compared with the previous semester, to keep up with course work, assignments, internships, and research experiences while balancing the demands of family and employment. According to the Active Minds Report (2020), 80% of college students reported that the COVID-19 crisis has negatively affected their mental health and 20% of them were "significantly worsened" during this time. In the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, Brown, and Kafka (2020) documented, through several interviews, the intense sadness, isolation, and anxiety of college students during the pandemic.

Many reports (Miller, 2020; Supiano, 2020; Zhu & Liu, 2020) indicated that faculty and administrators were successful in identifying essentials for students and setting up ways to keep moving forward as the pandemic progressed. For example, Miller (2020) indicated that a) faculty members were provided with support to teach fully or partially online or to teach remotely, and their interactions with students were rewarding; b) a transition from spring semester to summer semester or fall semester was aligned with programs and materials (syllabi, readings); and c) institutions sought additional resources and external supports from the government, private, and other federal agencies to ensure continued smooth operations of their institutions.

Although many colleges and universities had to cancel classes for a couple of days or even weeks in March of 2020 when the pandemic appeared, that was deemed to be the best transitional approach to assess the resources and seek alternatives. These institutions posted information and instructions on their websites on how to remain healthy and maintain social distance as well as how to teach and learn in the time of COVID-19. Pinsker (2020, last para) has beautifully summarized the condition during pandemic this way:

The experience of Covid-19 taught me we must learn to live with illness and extreme uncertainty, and we must do so with resilience and grit. Experimentation, learning, intellectual curiosity and engagement, communication, compassion, and honesty — the hallmarks of a liberal education — are essential to pass over to the other side.

METHOD AND RESULTS

We collected data from thirteen *CANVAS Ambassadors* during the final week of course instruction in Spring 2020. The survey was administered online and consisted five open-ended questions focused on activities performed, sources of enjoyment working with faculty, and challenges encountered working with faculty in their role of *CANVAS Ambassador*. Additionally, there was one closed-ended question on the number of faculty members with whom the *CANVAS Ambassador* interacted with during the pandemic. Through general thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) which emphasizes identifying, analyzing and interpreting patterns of meaning (or "themes") within responses, five themes emerged.

CANVAS Ambassadors were essentially called upon to provide a sense of calm during an incredibly high-stress moment for all Morgan State faculty. There was a tremendous amount of work to be accomplished. Faculty transferred thousands of undergraduate and graduate course materials to the remote learning modality in a matter of days. *Ambassadors* approached their

challenge to support the faculty with a consistent “can do” demeanor. Amidst the final transition from face-to-face to remote/online instruction, *CANVAS Ambassadors* did enjoy aspects of the work, as evidenced in two key themes.

Theme 1: New Level of Collegiality

During the pandemic, the transition to remote/online instruction engaged faculty in ways that they had never before experienced. *CANVAS Ambassadors*, as faculty themselves at the same institution, noted what seemed to be a new level of depth to the collegiality with their fellow faculty when asked to partner with them during such a high-demand time. Some of the survey respondents, in addressing this theme, stated that they enjoyed and valued the increased quality of their faculty peer relationships. For example, one faculty ambassador said, “Hearing personal stories of each faculty member and their transition to online learning,” Another faculty ambassador added, “Speaking with them and learning about them and their interests; it provided a great platform for higher level of personal engagements and becoming friends from the workplace, particularly with colleagues from different programs and units.”

Such responses indicated that faculty revealed more about themselves and their need for professional development specific to online instruction. In doing so, they enhanced their professional relationships and did so across ranks and disciplines. With the inevitable vulnerability that the COVID-19 pandemic brought to higher education, new connections, and the true satisfaction arising from *CANVAS Ambassadors’* ability to help their colleagues, emerged.

Theme 2: Multiple Roles of Teacher, Helper, Learner, Problem-Solver

In addition to the new level of collegiality that MSU *CANVAS Ambassadors* reported, the data also revealed that they experienced an intersection of a multitude of roles when engaging with their faculty colleagues. One respondent emphasized the teacher role when stating “I did enjoy the opportunity to talk about teaching beyond the technical nuts-and-bolts of how to use the LMS or university procedures, even though we were constrained by the needs of emergency remote instruction.” Another noted the problem-solver role that the *CANVAS Ambassadors* were called to fulfill by writing that they enjoyed “learning the problems that each colleague faced and being able to assist where possible.” Finally, another respondent noted enjoyment in “...helping fellow colleagues in teaching and learning activities.” What appeared to be true for many ambassadors was that they found themselves moving fluidly across each of the ambassador roles and enjoyed the unpredictability of what would be asked of them from each interaction.

Theme 3: Answering the Call(s)

In March, the Provost's Office at the university called upon *CANVAS Ambassadors* to support the Academic Technology Services and Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning in helping faculty quickly convert face-to-face courses online. The tasks presented to *CANVAS Ambassadors* were to (1) conduct a weekly webinar for faculty and (2) be available during business hours to answer email or consult with colleagues. The results of the ambassador survey showed that the latter task dominated their duties. Faculty respondents shared the following challenges including, "long personnel phone calls," "issues dealing with their family, classes, and other pressures of deaths and illness in families," and "pedagogical advice."

Faculty had two weeks including Spring break to prepare their courses. The initial shift in the instructional delivery was met with some resistance and uncertainty by faculty and students alike. Various forms of communication took place between the *CANVAS Ambassadors* and faculty members. In the beginning, many ambassadors conducted live and pre-recorded webinars for faculty. However, due to time limitations and unique needs, one-on-one sessions between faculty and *CANVAS Ambassadors* were preferred. Some questions were answered via email, but the majority of questions were best served via phone or web. Several ambassadors noted that they had long one-on-one phone conversations providing guidance on how to set up various aspects of courses or to offer pedagogical advice. Web Conferencing with screen sharing was preferred during these sessions to enable quick problem-solving. Ambassadors noted that flexibility was necessary as their colleagues were balancing classes and personal issues, such as homeschooling children and the pressures of death and illness due to the pandemic.

Theme 4: Identifying Key Elements of Emergency Remote Learning Pedagogies

The quick transition to online delivery required ambassadors to identify the most pertinent elements for immediate success. Initial discussions centered on the pros and cons of asynchronous and synchronous learning, syllabus modifications, and student engagement. Since *CANVAS* was new to many faculty, there was disparate use of the learning management system. Ambassadors assisted with the course's organization; some instructors chose weekly modules and others preferred topic-based modules. Some programs faced special challenges. Laboratory, project-centric, art and design, and practicum courses were presented with unique challenges due to the need for specialized equipment or software, person to person interaction, and workplace restrictions. *CANVAS Ambassadors* stated the following challenges: "Rushing to put incoherent pieces together to create a course from scratch for those who never used *CANVAS* before," "The setting of exams

and assignments (within CANVAS),” and “Being stuck” in the old styles of teaching and delivery of materials.”

Effectively engaging and assessing students required pedagogical innovation, adaptability, and technology. Some faculty were behind with use of technology and resources pertaining to their subject matter. Delivery was also hindered by not having the appropriate tools at home. For example, computational courses were more effective when tablets or touchscreen computers were used to work out problems in real-time. Students were also limited in their infrastructure as many did not have personal computers or Wi-Fi. However, faculty were very creative in helping students in these situations. Office hours were a bit of a challenge and various approaches were used, such as online appointments, email to schedule an appointment, or logging into a web conferencing platform at an appointed time. Students and faculty had to navigate a variety of platforms. At the onset of remote learning, the University had access to Google Meets and a limited number of seats of Big Blue Button through CANVAS. Though Morgan acquired a site license for Zoom in early April of 2020, faculty had adopted a variety of web conferencing platforms and not all transitioned to Zoom.

Theme 5: Closing Digital Literacy Gaps

CANVAS Ambassadors navigated a wide spectrum of technology literacy with faculty and at times some ambassadors worried about appearing *all-knowing* when this was far from the reality. The shift to online learning was received with some resistance by some instructors who faced unfamiliar territory. Not all faculty took advantage of the available resources and training during the initial adoption of CANVAS in the summer and fall of 2019 and the emergency resources developed in the spring of 2020. Some Schools provided Ambassadors the ability to view all courses in their School or College. Using CANVAS LMS reports such as course storage, last user access, unpublished courses, and unused courses, the Ambassadors targeted faculty who were not well versed in the CANVAS LMS platform.

There was an overwhelming sense among Ambassadors that the transition to a new LMS followed by the pandemic provided a unique opportunity to improve pedagogy and close digital literacy gaps. By investing in the CANVAS Ambassador Program, Morgan State positioned its faculty to make large gains in course delivery. One *CANVAS Ambassador* wrote “*This pandemic was a great opportunity to close the technology gap of faculty. There is proof that there is a gap now - this was a grand experiment where [the ambassadors] were able to reach most of the faculty.*”

Lessons Learned for Consideration

After careful analysis of the data and emergent themes, five lessons are offered below. They range from technological considerations to leveraging the benefit for all organizational members in university context when some (in this case faculty) are given the opportunity to help others. Although these lessons reflect the experience of Morgan State University *CANVAS Ambassadors* specifically, they may have applicable value for other education contexts and put forth with this in mind.

The Pandemic was, Ironically, a Great Opportunity to Lessen the Technology Gap among Faculty

The *CANVAS Ambassador* experience put the need for pedagogical innovation into perspective and brought forth new thinking on developing meaningful and technology-based instructional skills for the current (and future) generation(s) of students. This paradigm shift was received with some resistance as many instructors faced unfamiliar territory and needed a quick fix to an unanticipated big problem. MSU *CANVAS Ambassadors* started by convincing the faculty that they needed a quick design strategy for CANVAS starting with a syllabus, followed by modules to be implemented. Some instructors chose weekly modules, and others preferred topic modules. The course content included in modules was not an issue; however, students' engagement and assessment presented great challenges which further illuminated the need for pedagogical innovation and adaptability. Once the quick course design was drawn in the faculty mind, training in the navigation of the CANVAS tools proceeded through group webinar, videos, screencasts, Google Meets, and one-to-one guidance calls and screen sharing.

This Experience Highlighted the Need to Invest in Faculty Course Design Training

CANVAS Ambassadors were central to maintaining the continuity of teaching excellence even in the midst of the global pandemic. And although success was achieved in the training and development of over 400 faculty in the CANVAS Learning Management System, the experience also revealed that faculty needed professional development in foundational course design as well. Best pedagogy at any education level underscores the need for faculty to understand the role that course learning outcomes, goals, and assessment strategies play in overall course design. Moreover, learning management systems such as CANVAS are tools to support these foundational course delivery considerations and cannot be used to create them. MSU *CANVAS Ambassadors* found themselves coaching their faculty peers on the difference between the two aspects of good pedagogy and the importance of training and development for both.

Faculty Need Remote/Online Instruction Tools

The technology needs of MSU students were accurately anticipated as the move to remote/online instruction began. What was not anticipated were similar needs among the faculty once campus offices were deemed inaccessible due to the global pandemic. Some faculty needed laptops and desktop computers with greater memory and speed to handle the demands of remote/online instruction. Others needed to upgrade their home internet speed to support the uptick in traffic while working and living their lives from home. While this came as a surprise for *CANVAS Ambassadors*, it afforded the opportunity for many faculty to address these needs and to attain greater preparedness for an uncertain future.

Faculty-to-Faculty Training Benefits Both Parties

The CANVAS Ambassador program, which is modeled after the “train the trainer model,” demonstrated the benefit of using faculty from each school/college who were already familiar with the school/college culture to train and assist their peers’ transition to remote instruction. This experience was deemed beneficial to both the *Ambassador* and the faculty. The *Ambassadors* were able to see exactly what their colleagues’ needs were and were able to assist and share ideas on pedagogy. This went beyond the narrow scope of teaching their peers how to utilize the learning management system. The unique situation also increased readiness for learning because there was immediate relevance, which made the experience mutually beneficial. The *Ambassadors* experienced personal satisfaction, and the faculty were reassured they could continue to deliver content, engage their students, and achieve the objectives of their courses during this time of remote instruction.

Faculty are Willing to Answer the Call to Serve

Despite the challenges and heavy workload, *Ambassadors* answered the call to serve willingly. In the midst of working on transitioning their own courses, they were willing to assist their colleagues and were innovative in doing this in an efficient way. In some instances, they sacrificed their own productivity in order to assist their colleagues to ensure successful course completion.

CONCLUSIONS

In this paper, we focused on the experiences of a special task force of faculty known as *CANVAS Ambassadors* at MSU. *CANVAS Ambassadors* have indeed answered this call to serve the needs of students, faculty across our schools, and departments at the university. Ambassadors were faced with training faculty to adjust remote learning and the new CANVAS LMS as the

university transitioned from Blackboard the same year. Due to the brevity of time, the input of other faculty and students was not included in this paper. However, upcoming manuscripts will document responses by Morgan's faculty and students to a survey and interviews to provide a more in-depth analysis of their experiences during this transition to CANVAS LMS and online/remote instruction. A closer analysis of lessons learned by the Ambassadors proves to be worth investigating and sharing with other institutions and colleagues.

At the writing of this paper, the *CANVAS Ambassadors* were asked to continue training faculty for the 2020-2021 academic year. We see great value in self-study of the efficacy of the program as it is delivered and intend to continue this research so that it may benefit MSU and other institutions. We will explore whether this training made a difference in the instruction and learning at MSU and discover which specific strategies made the most impact. We believe that MSU faculty now embrace the use of technology to facilitate learning in their classes because of the focused faculty-to-faculty training that has directly impacted our students. Moving forward, additional research will demonstrate this scientifically. There is still more work to be done related to teaching and learning professional training at the university, and the *CANVAS Ambassadors* are ready. At the time of finishing this article, the university has implemented several initiatives, including mandatory training for online teaching, and Quality Matters (™) training. The university has also created a blue-ribbon teaching and learning committee to develop best practices for the university. The university also designated graduate technology teaching assistants to assist nearly 400 faculty members with Learning Management System integration as part of best pedagogical practices.

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