

Hard-to-convert courses remain a challenge for the fall



BY MATTHEW DEMBICKI JULY 26, 2020

Prior to March, Angela Echeverri, a faculty member at [Los Angeles Mission College](#) (LAMC), had not taught online or remotely.

“Because my classes have labs, I never thought I would teach fully online,” said Echeverri, who teaches microbiology, biology and chemistry and is president of the District Academic Senate for the [Los Angeles Community College District](#) (LACCD).

But that all changed this spring when the district had two weeks to transition some 8,000 course sections from in-person to remote classes, as nearly all U.S. colleges had to do due to the health pandemic.

For most courses, the move was intense but overall it went smoothly, Echeverri said. For some courses, such as those related to healthcare which require a hands-on component, it was harder. However, because students were able to complete most of their hands-on learning earlier in semester before the transition, it went OK.

“We did a lot of virtual labs, but they had the foundation from the first five weeks,” Echeverri said Thursday at the Education Writers Association National Seminar, which was held virtually. She and other college representatives highlighted to reporters how their colleges transitioned in the spring and how they plan to hold classes this fall.

Microscope kits and more

Like a growing number of colleges, LACCD is again going remote this fall — and possibly beyond that, too. But instructors are struggling with courses that require hands-on learning, Echeverri said. For example, her general microbiology class requires students to work with microscopes. One potential solution is to provide students with kits that would be mailed to most students. The kits would include equipment and supplies to allow them to do experiments at home.

The college is considering creating a loaner program or having students buy a relatively inexpensive microscope (about \$100 to \$150) for home use, Echeverri said. The faculty decided to nix the required textbook for the course and instead use open education resources to offset the cost of the microscope. They are still working on what else to

include in the kit, such as the number of Petri plates, cotton swabs and more. But much of it is still guesswork as it is the first time instructors are making such kits.

“It’s not something we feel comfortable doing without having some hands-on experience and practice,” Echeverri said.

Teaching students to use microscopes typically includes a lot of hands-on instruction, with an instructor standing next to students, looking at their microscope and showing them how to focus it.

“We’re not sure how we are going to be able to do that, except that we might be able to demo things through Zoom, but it’s clearly not the same,” Echeverri said. “And that’s true of many other courses, like say dental hygiene or welding. It’s just not the same.”

Training frontline healthcare workers is especially crucial now, as shortages of healthcare workers are worsening across the country as covid-19 cases spike, Echeverri said.

“These are going to be difficult to train given the circumstances, but we have to find a way,” she said.

Atypical approaches

Faculty are also considering holding some classes outside for some courses, using tents or other facilities, Echeverri said.

“We’re really thinking outside the box here in trying to find solutions,” she said.

Although it is complicated, at least faculty members have more time to prepare than in the spring, Echeverri noted. And if they can’t find a way to transition certain courses to a remote format, then they won’t be offered.

“That is going to probably happen for some of our programs,” she said.

Critical professional development

Of the 10,000 class sections offered this spring in LACCD, about 18 percent were already online, Echeverri said. Instructors converted all of the remaining 8,000 sections to a remote format except for 150, which were hard or almost impossible to convert, she said. They included courses that require a hands-on learning component, such as welding, nursing, dental hygiene, aviation mechanics and more.

About one-third of the district’s 5,000 faculty already were distance-education certified, Echeverri said. Many already used programs such as Canvas to enhance their courses. But the district still had to train about 3,000 faculty, which it is doing currently. Echeverri herself is taking a second course for distance-education certification.

“But it’s very clear that we need ever more professional development, especially for faculty who are in those lab courses or some of the technical courses,” she said.

Professional development and sharing promising practice among programs and colleges will be key because of the short amount of time instructors have to prepare, Echeverri said, noting that many faculty members themselves continue to have a hard time with the transition.

The technology hurdle

Instructors and district officials also are aware that not all students have the same access to technology, such as computers and internet service. About 25 percent of district students rely on their cell phones to take their classes, Echeverri said. Only about 60 percent have access to a computer on a regular basis.

“We have to keep that in consideration when delivering content,” she said.

LACCD has purchased 14,500 Chromebooks to distribute to students who need them and another 4,000 for LA College Promise students. They will be shipped to students to minimize the number of students coming on campus.

Providing internet access is trickier. Some local internet providers this spring offered students access at little or no cost, though it is uncertain how long they will provide that, Echeverri said, emphasizing that access is critical.

“Otherwise, the digital divide will leave a lot of students out of an education,” she said.

Concerns about developmental education

Echeverri is also worried about developmental education in college. She doesn’t think most current K-12 students have the skills or maturity to excel in an online environment. Many of these students likely won’t be ready for college-level work, which is a concern as many states and higher education institutions are curtailing developmental education.

“We’re going to have a big group of students who are going to have some major challenges when they move on to college,” especially in math, she said.