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Crisis Communication during COVID-19

Jonathan C. Cruz

Governors State University, jcruz3@student.govst.edu

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Crisis Communication: Kankakee Area Career Center

Jonathan Cruz

College of Education, Governors State University

Dr. Matthew A. Cooney

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The COVID-19 pandemic has hit Kankakee County and surrounding schools since March 2020. This crisis has had an educational impact for the Kankakee Area Career Center. Primarily focused on hands on learning in various trades, the transition towards remote learning lasted throughout the 2019-2020 school year, and has continued periodically in the Fall 2020 semester. The purpose of this paper is to analyze the actions and outcomes on the Kankakee Area Career Center's COVID-19 response when it comes to remote learning, communications for its stakeholders, and potential recommendations to streamline this process during times of crisis.

Background

The Kankakee Area Career Center (KACC) is located in Bourbonnais, Illinois that serves approximately 950 high school juniors and seniors across 16 different partnership high schools. The goal of KACC is to provide Career and Technical Education (CTE) ranging from nursing, childcare, welding, etc. KACC offers 12 different CTE programs. CTE primarily focuses in on hands-on training, and primarily requires physical face-to-face instruction.

With the ongoing pandemic, KACC has faced some obstacles when it came to providing hands-on instruction. This put a halt for hands-on curriculum and transitioned towards remote learning. Obstacles have included communication not only to parents and stakeholders, but also to students on how to complete their assignments. When face-to-face instruction was doable, safety precautions and other mitigations have been set to ensure the health and safety of students. Additionally, instructors and students had set obligations to fulfill in order to ensure a student's academic success in the class.

Communication

The communication team within KACC consisted of a three-person administrative committee: principal, student dean, and director. Despite this small committee, they are also governed by a board of directors with whom they consult with in regards to the COVID-19 response. These consultations include decisions on creating a safety plan, transitioning towards remote learning, and how to communicate with its staff members, parents, and other stakeholders.

Safety Issues

KACC remains committed to ensure the health and safety of its teachers and students. Precautions are taken such as utilizing sanitation spray periodically throughout the school day, taking student temperatures prior to entering the classroom, and keeping a stocked inventory of personal protective equipment (PPE) such as gloves, face shields, masks, and hand sanitizer.

Procedures have also been established when a student comes in with potential signs and symptoms of COVID-19. Policies set forth by the Illinois Department of Public Health (IDPH) dictate what KACC must do should a teacher encounter a student exhibiting any symptoms. These procedures include sending the student to the principal's office, calling home, and quarantining for 14 days.

Responsibility & Remote Learning

During periods of remote learning, faculty and staff are expected to conduct remote sessions synchronous to a student's schedule. For example, if a student is scheduled to be at KACC from 8:15 a.m. – 10:00 a.m., remote learning conducted via Zoom occurs at this same timeframe. Appendix A lists the instructor and student responsibilities during periods of remote learning. Expectations include students checking in with their instructors on a daily basis for

attendance purposes. Instructors should be providing CTE curriculum to meet Illinois State Board of Education Student Learning Outcomes (SLO's). Additionally, faculty and staff are expected to report to the career center on a daily basis to conduct their classes. A work-from-home option was omitted in this remote learning schedule.

Analysis

The Kankakee Area Career Center carried out a COVID-19 response that aligns with ISBE objectives while practicing standard safety precautions guided by IDPH. This section will analyze KACC's processes and response on this pandemic. This includes specific communication methods that were utilized in contacting faculty, parents, and other stakeholders about potential positive cases at KACC and precautions that were utilized to ensure the safety of individuals.

Crisis Communication Process

With the first outbreak of COVID-19, this was a new concept that KACC had to remain proactive and responsive with. Traditionally, the first announcement would be through social media such as Facebook and Instagram (Brynielsson et al., 2018). Without any internal communications in place, this left many instructors in shock and parents commenting on KACC social media sites: Does my son or daughter need to go to school? What are your future plans as far as remote learning? How can I stay up to date on my son or daughter's academics? These types of questions fueled many instructors without a response from KACC administrators (Cheng, 2018). Overall, this was an ineffective communication strategy, due to the fact that faculty and staff members were not notified beforehand. The sole form of communication was knowing firsthand through social media without any official correspondence or press release from the principal, dean, or director (Cheng, 2018).

Additionally, this gave many faculty members a false sense of security when to be notified if they were a close contact with someone who may have tested positive for COVID-19. This left faculty questioning whether they were exposed or not to a potential harmful virus. It was only after the social media notification that the KACC director put out an official statement for its employees. A sample of this notification for employees can be found in Appendix D. In contrast, as cases within KACC have increased and student attendance was gradually dropping, communications have improved with first notifying faculty members through an internal email system and notifying employees through a mass phone call voicemail about potential remote learning plans (Regan, 2014). Despite these minor improvements, this has inflicted reputational damage to how KACC communicates with its employees (Regan, 2014).

The communications process remains complex as KACC serves 16 different high schools from Kankakee and Will Counties. The complexity of each school also dictates which students may show up face-to-face at the Career Center. Appendix B includes a list of schools that attend KACC and their status about remote learning. Appendix B provides a sample of schools that have went remote and is subject to change. The KACC principal remains in close contact with other school principals in regards to their own school district's learning plan and precautions that are taken. If and when a school does go remote, the principal is the first to be notified via phone call or email. This information is then disseminated to the teachers to be informed of which students from which school district to expect for the school day.

Instructor and Student Safety

Occasionally, a specific CTE program has been placed on hold due to a teacher contracting COVID-19 or may have exhibited symptoms. For example, KACC has placed the Construction Technology Program on hold due to an instructor's close contact of COVID-19

from a family member. Appendix C has provided an example of communication that has been posted to social media, teachers, and other stakeholders. Previous programs that have been paused include Cosmetology and Early Childhood Education.

In relation to communication, students and their homeschools were notified late of this decision/action. As a result, students would show up to the school with no instructor in sight for the first couple days after this announcement. The delay of this response has left many parents frustrated due to misunderstandings or lack of communications from KACC (Shulman & Bullock, 2020).

Remote Learning

The Kankakee Area Career Center has had periods of remote learning throughout the Fall 2020 semester. Utilizing Appendix B, KACC deems it necessary to transition to remote learning when face-to-face student attendance reaches 40% or below. This spreadsheet is updated on a daily basis at 3:00 p.m. prior to planning for the next school day. With constant changes being made by the hour, this internal document serves as a reference tool for all KACC teachers.

Remote learning expectations have been set up by the KACC administrators for instructors to follow (see Appendix A). During periods of which face-to-face instruction resume at KACC, instructors are expected to post lessons on their Google Classroom for feeder schools that still remain remote. This ensures accessibility to educational materials for those students who may not be able to come to the career center due to their school's restrictions or for students who may have exhibited signs and symptoms.

Despite providing access to educational materials, KACC has a population of students that may not have access to Wi-Fi. A student's homeschool does provide them with a laptop, but KACC has not been able to help when providing internet access to these students, connectivity

issues, or technical support for troubleshooting problems (Mukhopadhyay et al., 2020). This has lead to missing assignments, failing grades, and phone calls home to parents.

Recommendations

The follow section will discuss potential options or recommendations in regards to the Kankakee Area Career Center's communication plan about COVID-19, remote learning access, and additional precautions that can be taken to ensure the health and safety of students.

Communications

Despite minor improvements with communication about close contacts with COVID-19 internally, other stakeholders such as parents and guardians remain uninformed about these rapid changes when it comes to sending their children to school. Recommendations may include sending automated phone calls or messages to the parents. Social media should not be its primary notification system, only a supplemental tool. A phone call home would also help track data such as message delivery status, returned phone calls, and failed messages (Xu & Wu, 2020). Having this raw data may help pinpoint accessibility or communication concerns when reaching out to a parent or guardian. Further steps can be taken such as notifying a student's homeschool on their unexcused absence or lack of activity when it comes to remote learning. These types of preparations may help troubleshoot students who may be struggling and open an opportunity for KACC teachers and staff to provide the supports needed (Brock et al., 2011).

Traditionally, teachers would also send out communication emails to their students. An additional recommendation would be send out mass communication text messages or utilize mssaging applications such as GroupMe, Skype, or Remind. Using platforms that Generation-Z is accustomed to helps create an extra outlet of communication for important reminders and deadlines (Wood et al., 2020). This should help create a positive trend towards a student's

success when receiving communications from their instructors (Wood et al., 2020). Though in order to make these platforms purposeful, they would also need access to certain technologies.

Remote Learning

While remote learning requires chromebooks, phones, tablets, or electronic devices, some students lack the accessibility in order to succeed in their classes. A student's homeschool is able to provide each student with a laptop, but becomes impractical without access to Wi-Fi (Pretti et al., 2020). KACC should recommend the option of drive-in Wi-Fi networks. Majority of students own a vehicle or have the ability to drive. Drive-in wi-fi networks would allow students to drive up to the school parking lot and be able to do homework or assignments from the comfort of their vehicle (Regehr, 2017).

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to describe and analyze the Kankakee Area Career Center's COVID-19 response as it relates to its communication methods, standard safety precautions, and remote learning processes. KACC's leadership team is a three-person committee, but primarily governed by a board of directors. KACC has its own mitigations in place with guidance from ISBE and IDPH. Communications must improve through automated telephone messaging, enforce safety precautions through frequent handwashing and sanitizing, and ensure equal accessibility of technology to ensure a student's academic success. Overall, COVID-19 rapidly changes a crisis plan. Thus, KACC must be prepared to be proactive and react in a professional and timely manner.

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Instructor and Student Obligations:**Instructors are obligated to:**

- Provide a wide range of meaningful learning opportunities that meet the needs of all types of learners.
- Meet virtually with students at least three times this week using a platform of their choosing (Google Meets, Zoom, Flip, Phone, GoPro). Meetings can be whole class or small groups.
- Provide timely feedback to students. This includes formative and summative assessments.
- Summarize weekly student attendance and contact students and their families with less than 90% weekly attendance. Chronically absent students should be reported to the administration.

Students are obligated to:

- Log in to the remote classroom daily for attendance and engagement.
- Engage in all scheduled activities and meetings.
- Complete all assignments by the instructor's due date.
- Ask clarifying questions when materials are not understood.
- Be respectful to themselves, their instructors, and their peers.

KACC Student Support for IEP's, 504's, and other essential needs

During Remote Learning students will receive the following:

- Appropriate Instructor planning for remote learning that respects the needs of all students and staff.
- Implementing remote learning that attends to the diversity of each community to ensure that all students have access to equitable educational opportunities.
- Meticulously documenting the best efforts possible being made under the current emergency conditions concerning students with Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) and Section 504 Plans.
- Structuring active student engagement with learning in accordance with the age-appropriate thresholds.
- Selecting content for remote learning that is aligned to standards, relevant, and appropriate for each student.
- Practicing consistent communication with students, families, and staff to understand how the health emergency is impacting them socially and emotionally.

Appendix B

School	Student Count	In Session	On Remote Sending to KACC	% of Students Attending	School	% of Students Registered
Beecher	40	0	0	0.0%	Beecher	5.6%
BBCHS	205	0	0	0.0%	BBCHS	28.9%
Central	45	0	0	0.0%	Central	6.3%
Grant	14	14	0	2.0%	Grant	2.0%
Herscher	48	0	0	0.0%	Herscher	6.8%
Kankakee	52	0	0	0.0%	Kankakee	7.3%
Manteno	64	0	0	0.0%	Manteno	9.0%
Momence	37	0	0	0.0%	Momence	5.2%
Peotone	33	0	0	0.0%	Peotone	4.6%
St. Anne	32	0	0	0.0%	St. Anne	4.5%
Bishop Mac	16	0	0	0.0%	Bishop Mac	2.3%
Crete	45	0	0	0.0%	Crete	6.3%
Donovan	6	6	0	0.8%	Donovan	0.8%
Grace	6	0	0	0.0%	Grace	0.8%
I-West	43	0	0	0.0%	I-West	6.1%
Watseka	18	18	0	2.5%	Watseka	2.5%
Homeschooled	6	6	0	0.8%	Homeschooled	0.8%
Total Student Count	710	44	0	89%		
Total % of						
Remote Vs.						
Schools	3					
Schools Remote	15					
Total Schools	16					
% In Session	19%					

Appendix C

12/7/2020

Kankakee Area Career Center - Construction Technology Classes Placed on Temporary Hold

Construction Technology Classes Placed on Temporary Hold

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മേഖലയിലെ ഹൈസ്കൂളുകളിൽ നിന്നും കോളേജുകളിൽ നിന്നും കോർസുകളിലേക്ക് പേര് മാറ്റിയവർക്ക് അറിയിക്കുന്നു.

മിക്കവാറും എല്ലാ കോർസുകളും നിലവിൽ തുറന്നിരിക്കുന്നു. എന്നാൽ, കോർസുകളിലേക്ക് പേര് മാറ്റിയവർക്ക് അറിയിക്കുന്നു. കോർസുകളിലേക്ക് പേര് മാറ്റിയവർക്ക് അറിയിക്കുന്നു.

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Appendix D



Notice of Exposure to a Communicable Disease

November 12, 2020

KACC was notified of additional persons who tested positive to the novel coronavirus, also known as COVID-19. As a result, Kankakee County Health Department and KACC require anyone considered a “close contact” to quarantine at home for 14 days. Those persons have been notified and have not returned to school.

Please know our Principal, Mr. Tim Guerin and I are monitoring and tracing any instances of COVID19 in our building and following all IDPH guidelines. We will remain diligent on being as transparent as possible without identifying any specific person to ensure everyone’s personal health information remains confidential.

We remind you KACC administration, faculty and staff are committed to ensuring our ensuring our school is consistently cleaned and sanitized throughout every school day and have hired additional professionals to deep-clean every classroom where a positive case has been identified.

Administration from our attending schools have been extremely open and a strong partner in mitigating and tracing contacts to ensure we do everything to prevent the spread of this virus.

We are extremely proud of our students and faculty for their diligence in being mask compliant and embracing all mitigations including social distancing.

As always, the health and safety of our students, faculty and staff and their families remain our number one priority.

Mr. Tim Guerin will be available if you have any questions about your specific son/daughter. You can reach him at 815-939-4971 between 7:30 a.m. and 3:30 p.m. or via email, guerint@kacc.org.

Everyone, please stay safe and be well.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'M. Kelley'.

Matthew A. Kelley
Executive Director