# Utilizing High-Impact Teaching Strategies to Teach Politics I Courses with Different Term Lengths During a Pandemic: Fall 2020

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## ▶ Abstract

This narrative documents my experience teaching a hybrid and fully online Politics I course, with different term lengths, during the COVID-19 pandemic at Talladega College in Fall 2020 using online teaching techniques acquired in the High-Impact Online Teaching Practices (HIOTLP) course in Summer 2020.

## Course Information:  Politics I (POL 201)/Politics I (POL 201 FT)

## ▶ Narrative

"It was a pleasure to be a part of your class . . ." "First off let me say it was a pleasure taking your course. You have truly been the best instructor I've had thus far . . ." These are just two sentiments I received in writing at the end of Fall 2020 from a traditional student enrolled in my 16-week hybrid Politics I (POL 201) course and an adult learner enrolled in my asynchronous 5-week Politics I course (POL 201 FT1), respectively. While I am truly honored for the heart-warming compliments I received from my students, the fact is that the High-Impact Online Teaching and Learning Practices (HIOTLP) course for faculty at Historically Black Colleges and Universities, sponsored by The United Negro College Fund (UNCF) and facilitated by the Gardner Institute, deserves a heaping of credit for the trove of online teaching and learning resources that helped prepare me to effectively teach online and hybrid courses. Given such, this narrative will document my individual teaching experience in Fall 2020, during the COVID-19 pandemic and how I utilized fantastic resources from the HIOTLP course. I will focus on the two Politics I courses I taught.

First, let me give some context to what Fall 2020 looked like at Talladega College. Faculty returned to in-person, online, and hybrid (or blended) instruction. Before returning for the fall, the college widely distributed its comprehensive Safe Start: Fall 2020 Semester Re-entry Plan to all stakeholders. The reentry plan outlined the institution's strict adherence to health and safety protocols and procedures to reduce spreading COVID-19 (e.g., social

distancing, required masks, temperature checks, COVID-19 testing, hand washing, etc.). Furthermore, the college invested in ClearScan temperature check devices, standing and tabletop plexiglass barriers in the classrooms and offices, numerous sanitizer pump stations, spray devices to sanitize classrooms, personal protective equipment, etc. The reentry plan also included modifications regarding each administrative area and unit on campus, including academics.

In short, classes began on August 19 and ended before the Thanksgiving holiday. After Thanksgiving, all students completed the remainder of the semester (e.g., final exams) fully online. Face-to-face classes were divided to allow social distancing. For example, students in face-to-face classes held on Tuesday and Thursday were split-up, so that one-half of the class went on Tuesday while the other one-half engaged in virtual instruction. The two groups switched on Thursdays. Monday, Wednesday, and Friday courses were split into three sections. One group attended each day while the others were online.

The Safe Start: Fall 2020 Semester Re-entry Plan made it abundantly clear that plans could change based on recommendations from public health officials. As a result, faculty were required to upload all course content for each course into the college's new Canvas learning management system in case the institution had to switch all of its courses to online formats. Uploading course content into Canvas also accommodated students who did not physically return to campus during Fall 2020 but wanted to continue to take courses; they completed them online.

During Fall 2020, I taught four 16-week hybrid Public Administration courses and one Politics I course to primarily traditional students. In addition, I taught a five-week asynchronous online Politics I course in the college's Fast Track program. Fast Track is tailored to adult learners. (National Football League Hall- of-Famer Deion Sanders recently completed his college degree through our Fast Track program.) Therefore, for five weeks during Fall 2020, I taught six courses. As I mentioned earlier, I will focus on the Politics I courses since I taught the same course in different formats, term lengths, and catered to two different student populations. My 16-week Politics I course had 18 students enrolled; the five-week Politics I course had nine students.

Before I delve into how I specifically catered to each group's particular needs, there were some consistencies in both courses. For instance, after the HIOTLP course, I utilized Bloom's Taxonomy Verb Wheel and Fink's Taxonomy of Significant Learning to review, revise, and redesign my course objectives as needed. Based on Fink (2016), Bloom's taxonomy was developed after discussions with professors; Fink informed that his taxonomy was developed after receiving student input. Incorporating both ensured I had a well-rounded perspective. Also, the HIOTLP class encouraged participants to make sure that our classrooms were inclusive.

When I diversified my discussion forums by asking students to introduce themselves and to include their preferred name and pronouns, as Gamrat (2020) suggested, students quickly responded with enthusiasm. Furthermore, I incorporated the 3CQ method Liberman (2019) mentions in his article. My purpose for doing so was to attempt to boost student engagement and to break monotony. The 3CQ method was effective at times, but sometimes some students still did not participate in the discussion forums.

Another critical piece of advice I received during the HIOTLP class was that it was better to allow students to decide if they wanted to use their web camera or not when they participated online. Before the HIOTLP class, I required my students to use their webcams. I adopted a new practice after reading about "Lori" in Darby's (2020) article "5 Ways to Connect with Online Students" in the HIOTLP class. She is the student who was in an abusive relationship and didn't want to upload a video. She lost points on the assignment until she explained her situation to Darby. I always used my webcam, but students did not have to if they did not want to.

In my 16-week Politics I course, there were a lot of moving parts because I had students physically in class, live streaming using Google Hangouts (Live streaming my course was a first for me.), and students enrolled who were taking it fully online. Essentially, it was the equivalent of teaching one class three different ways. I was up for the challenge, though. About five minutes before class started, I would begin playing encouraging songs such as "It's Gonna Be A Lovely Day" by Kirk Franklin, or "We Gon' Be Alright" by Tye Tribette, or "Unstoppable" by Koryn Hawthorne featuring Lecrae, to name a few. If it was available on YouTube, I would show the video. Without my asking, students began putting heart, music, and praise emojis in the chat. Students were engaged before the course even started! When the class began, the class helped me monitor the chat. I was very pleased with students' attendance and participation. I remained on the Google Hangouts calls at the end of class if someone wanted to meet with me. Typically, at least one student remained on the call.

In my five-week asynchronous course, I did something I had not ever done before. In addition to my virtual office hours, I set aside an additional 45-minute window of time (6pm-6:45pm) at the beginning of each week for an optional synchronous Google Hangouts meeting. I got the idea from Darby (2019) and the HIOTLP facilitators, Dr. Flippin-Wynn and Dr. Foote. Darby encourages online instructors to anticipate that students might feel isolated and design the course to "connect" them to the course, the instructor, and their peers.

The HIOTLP group and mentor meetings were instrumental in engaging the participants and building a strong learning community. The meetings were included on the syllabus. The meeting agenda was simple: introductions, a brief overview of the week's assignments, and question and answer. Students showed up 100% of the time! They greeted each other, asked questions, made comments, received clarification, if needed, discussed course materials, mentioned their families and jobs, etc. Students weren't required to remain in the cyber meeting the entire time. For instance, a student logged on just to say hello to everyone.

## Summary/Conclusion

Fall 2020 was unprecedented. I will close with my top four Fall 2020 takeaways. First, empathy goes a long way. Students appreciated it when I asked them how they and their families were doing. I allowed myself and my students to be human. Darby (2020) recommends this also. We had several conversations about how we had been affected by the pandemic. Next, ongoing faculty professional development is critical! The HIOTLP course provided me with incredible resources, confidence, and an amazing network that helped equip me for fall 2020. "Charlene's Group" remains connected. My third takeaway is trial and error is inevitable. I tried different technologies throughout the semester until I found my sweet spot. For some reason, Google Hangouts was a better fit for my students than Canvas Conferences or Zoom during Fall 2020. My fourth takeaway from fall 2020 is a reminder to us all that we

are stronger than we realize. Thankfully, we made it!

Finally, I will continue to build upon what I learned in the HIOTLP course. I look forward to attending other online teaching courses offered by UNCF and Gardner Institute. I have been inspired to do more for online education. I am interested in mentoring faculty who are new to online teaching. This is one way I want to pay it forward to others, the teaching profession, and the field of higher education.