

More Than an English Education: Community Colleges and English Language Learners during Covid-19

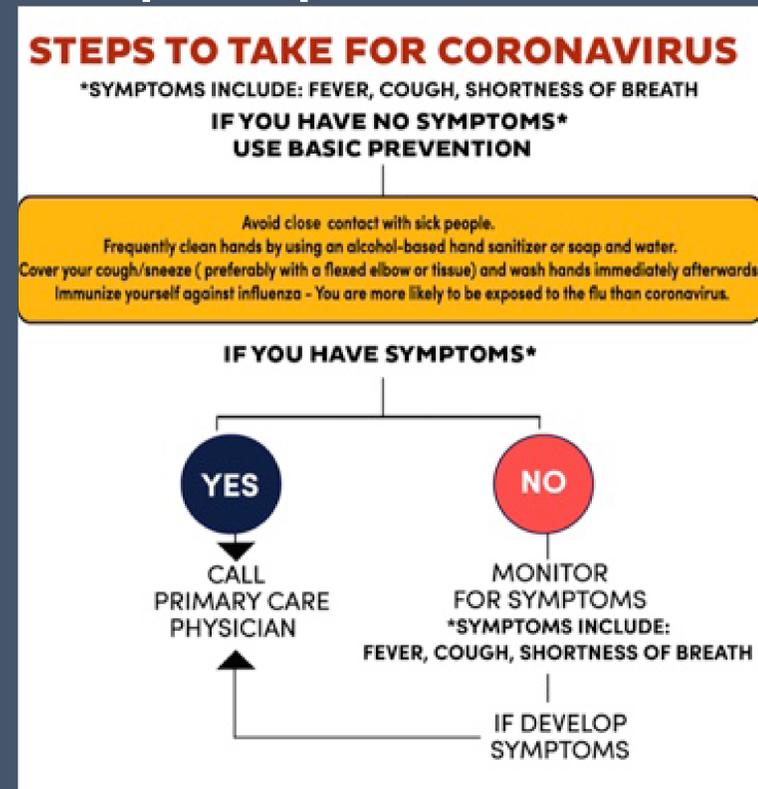
Liz Crouse (Faculty Mentor: Dr. Jennifer Eidum, Elon University Department of English)

Introduction

How do community colleges communicate with their adult English Language Learners (ELLs) during emergencies? In light of the Covid-19 pandemic, community colleges were forced to respond to the emergent public health crisis by communicating with stakeholders about health protocols, new rules, and volatile conditions. The immediate and dramatic demand for crisis response put organizational communicators and the channels through which they distributed information under extreme stress, resulting in an information gap between community members and organizations.

This case study of Alamance Community College's crisis response to the Covid-19 pandemic identifies gaps between how community colleges currently function and how such institutions can use their position within their respective communities to distribute necessary resources, communicate relevant information, and educate ELL students about health literacy-related topics.

Example Graphic

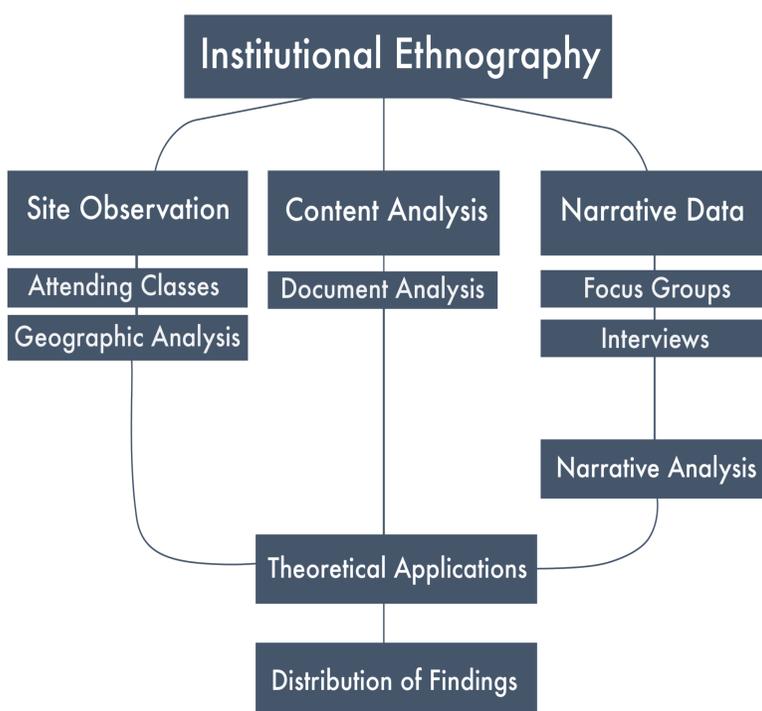


ACC Flow Chart of Steps to follow during COVID-19

Recommendations

1. Prioritize stakeholder wellbeing over organizational benefit.
2. Consider which information stakeholders may need as a result of the crisis.
3. Use visuals to illustrate important points. Charts, graphs, and numerical values can be ready across many languages without needing too much interpretation.
4. Frontload crucial information to ensure readers see it. The further down in the message, the less chance it will be interpreted and understood.
4. Use text message channels when possible. Non-native English speakers often feel unprepared for phone calls and struggle to access email accounts.
5. Use clear, culturally sensitive language.

Methods



Findings

By analyzing the narrative data collected as well as the communication practices of ACC during the pandemic, the study concluded that there are a number of factors that influence audience understanding of crisis communication from community colleges. First, there is a pervasive challenge with digital illiteracy and connectivity among ELLs. One administrator said that students are “scared” to engage with technology, which may relate to their citizenship status or an overall distrust of technology that they had not had access to previously.

This fear also arose in response to the Covid-19 vaccine. Two students said they would not receive the vaccine because they “did not trust it.” This created a health and safety obstacle for ACC because instructors expressed worries about being in classrooms with unvaccinated students. Finally, student and faculty mental health concerns increased significantly during the pandemic. The stress and fear of Covid-19 combined with educational responsibilities took a toll on the health of the individuals involved with the ESL program at ACC, which resulted in a health gap.

Results

