PROMISING PRACTICE

Supporting Student Success in the New Normal

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The n*ew normal* in higher education can mean different things on varied campuses. The new normal, which occurred because of the COVID-19 pandemic, is the current atmosphere across the higher education landscape. This has meant more technology at many institutions of higher education (IHE) in numerous areas on campus. Other post-pandemic changes include a new financial reality, finding new ways to support student learning and campus community, and a new reality for many campus programs. This version of higher education looks hauntingly similar yet vastly different than the old vision of the higher education landscape. The COVID-19 pandemic caused many institutions of higher education to hit the fast forward button on implementing innovations and change. This change not only meant a move toward distance education using current methods in new ways but also activating plans for other innovation, such as streamlining paperwork, advocating for remote work, and offering traditional coursework in a new format. Campus leaders may need to redeploy human, financial, and physical capital in alignment with their new operating models (Teachers Insurance and Annuity Association of America [TIAA], 2020).

As institutions prepare for the 2021–22 academic year, higher education has entered its new normal. While these changes may be unsettling for many in the professorate, it gives administrators and educators a chance to change campus policy for the betterment of students. Quality technology has been embraced, not only in the classroom, but also in the integration of student support services. Distance learning promising practices have been supported as a method to help all instructors, both full-time and adjunct, adjust to the post-pandemic campus climate. The lessons from the pandemic have allowed institutions to offer students the best possible educational experience. Higher education has changed in many ways due to COVID-19 and those changes continue daily. Educators should use this push as a positive motivation for transformational campus and curricular change. As colleges integrated a mobile-first approach with their resources, the app became the campus. This is not going to change (Newton, 2020).

Colleges and universities across the globe were disrupted like never before during the pandemic. Over a weekend, faculty and staff moved instruction and support services entirely online. In many cases, institutions were well positioned to conduct remote instruction and work, while other institutions had no choice but to rapidly ramp up new digital

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services to support instructional and administrative functions. In both cases, higher education institutions learned that colleges and universities are far more agile and resilient than may have previously been believed (Ayersman et al., 2020). Remote learning may be challenging for students who are underprepared. During the pandemic, all face-to-face lessons were cancelled, causing many institutions to immediately transition from face-to-face, in-person learning to completely online lessons. The abrupt switch to fully online learning has been particularly stressful for instructors and students who prefer in-person instruction. Online learning is often stigmatized as a weaker option that provides a lower quality of education than in-person face-to-face learning (Hodges et al., 2020). Many student service professionals have adapted current methods to add an extra layer of support for students enrolled in distance education. Diverse student populations require different kinds of learning support. Some students just learn better in a traditional classroom setting.

Embracing the New Normal

In the new normal, the ways in which IHEs conduct business has changed to adapt to the needs of today's campus community. Tomorrow may be different; college and university leaders will need to identify new methods to adapt to the student populations in order to implement changes to their programs to reflect their refined focus (TIAA, 2020). COVID-19 changed life's milestones for many students. A survey of college-bound high school seniors conducted in March 2020 by the Art & Science Group, a consulting company, found that 17% of respondents were rethinking their plans to attend a four-year college full time. If that sort of student uncertainty translated into drops in enrollment, and thus tuition-revenue losses across the board, the consequences could be devastating (Gardner, 2020). This is type of deficit is a factor that many campuses are still recovering from today.

Classrooms became increasingly virtual due to the pandemic, and instructors made efforts to incorporate more technology. Now in the post-pandemic institution, this technical phenomenon has blossomed. It is important that this change in paradigm does not undermine a holistic approach to students. Social presence in classes, especially virtual classrooms, matters, and this definition needs to evolve as the increasing use of technology or the transition to more hybrid and online models of education occur. With today's changes in available technology, videoconferencing must be considered as a part of this idea. Social presence is associated with the degree of participation and social interaction amongst the collaborative group members and, as such, is therefore considered a critical variable for learning (Kreijns, 2014, p. 5); essentially, this idea involves everything a student infers about appropriate engagement from the learning experience. This concept takes numerous forms in varied educational formats. Instructors are required to move from a model of being salient, there, and present, to a model that includes projecting oneself and fostering connection, community, and belonging (Lowenthall & Snelson, 2017). Self-efficacy influences how a person addresses goals, tasks, and challenges. A strong sense of self-efficacy promotes goal attainment while a weak sense undermines it. People with high self-efficacy will engage more readily in a task, expend more effort on it, and persist longer in its completion even when they encounter difficulties (Chemers et al., 2001). Technology use can support this type of self-efficacy. Utilizing gamification, discussion boards, welcome letters, quick, timely, and personalized feedback, and frequent updates are all vital tools to help ensure that students understand that on the other side of a technology there is a faculty member who cares for them.

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Even though the strategic integration of student support services has been a hot topic in higher education over the previous decade, in the post-pandemic landscape of higher education, this is more important than ever before. While it manifests uniquely at each campus, there are proven methods to migrate to integrated services. Stakeholder input can be gathered and used to inform any change that effects multiple campus units. College administrators and department heads can be assembled to work together to find the campus champions who are willing to help make these connections. With the pandemic recovery occurring, new methods of completing campus procedures are necessary. The advent of technology, such as Formstack, Wufoo, and other programs, will help to build a bridge of communication between instructors, both full-time and adjunct, financial aid professionals, student advisors, student success center personnel, tutors, TRIO office staff, and other stakeholders. Individual campus needs will vary because of the community and population served. Stakeholders on all levels must work together.

Technology and Teaching in the New Normal

Technology is the great equalizer in helping students to strengthen the skills that they need to be adequately prepared for the rigor of college-level work. Even pre-COVID-19, technology use on campus had expanded greatly. In higher education, technology has gone from being a global phenomenon (Hadadian et al., 2014) in the virtual classrooms of the pandemic to a necessity for today's digital natives. For those underprepared for college, supplemental software programs can be useful to grow their skills for completing college level work. However, this technology can only help to close the skills gap for those who have access to it. The CARES Act provided vital funding to maintain the financial health of higher education institutions. However, the CARES Act did not offer an opportunity for students to receive direct tuition or fee payment resources similar to the federal stimulus payments given to qualified citizens; instead, it focused on student loan borrowers and existing payments. The CARES Act and the financial relief for institutions to support students proved vital to student success during the rapid transition to online learning. Thirty-four percent of students received technology or technical services from their institutions (Cameron et. al., 2021, A2).

As the pandemic progressed it became clear that the way IHEs were teaching needed to shift to online, immediately. Based on federal data from over 4,700 colleges and universities, more than 6.3 million students or 56.1% of students in the U.S., most of whom were undergraduates, took at least one online course in fall 2016, a 5.6% increase from just a year before (Friedman, 2018, p. 1). While the number of students taking online courses was increasing, even pre-pandemic, this number has continued to skyrocket as different campuses have returned to teaching in various classroom and online formats. One lesson which college administrators learned from pandemic education was that distance education could work in a variety of subjects. While online courses have the societal benefit of providing greater access for all students to higher education, during the pandemic they provided the only access. This advent of more distance education had been on the horizon for years, but the pandemic forced many campuses to activate distance education plans sooner than planned.

As courses were moved into their new online versions, instructors had to focus on the needs of all their students. Addressing these needs required a multifaceted approach that had to take in to account the software updates and the rising presence of the software as a service model within the institution. Funding at the federal level was required to support the infrastructure of such changes. Within the CARES Act, eight funds were established with different competitive priorities, application procedures, and eligibility requirements. Of the eight funds, the Institutional Resilience and Expanded Postsecondary Opportunity (IREPO) grant program competition most closely supported the institutional need to upgrade technology infrastructure by providing priority funding for institutions that "are committed to developing a more resilient instructional delivery model, such as learning, that make learning possible even when students cannot be physically present on campus for any reason" (U.S. Department of Education, 2021, para.1). Continued financial support will be required to create and maintain the technology infrastructure schools require to support post-COVID-19 instructional and learning shifts. The applications for IREPO funding closed in October 2020, prior to the widespread reopening of public institutions and with much of CARES funding already spent. Anthony and Navarro (2021) pointed out that of "$13 billion that institutions applied for and received, almost $10 billion, or 75 percent, has been spent" (para. 6.). Subtle changes have remained in other areas, like the campus cafeteria and Student Success Center as students and faculty have returned to campus. The move to technologies like Zoom and Microsoft Teams has changed the way classes are managed to enhance student support. These efforts are necessary to maintain compliance with both accessibility standards as well as implementing Universal Design for Learning and other updated teaching practices in service to students. Post-pandemic initiatives require both an administrative and faculty commitment to be successful. Administrators need to support financing for these technical projects, and faculty need to embrace the innovations for them to be successful in their execution as part of the campus curriculum. Stakeholder buy-in is vital for student success.

Keys to Student Success Today

Student success, retention, and persistence are measured using different metrics and by tracking certain analytics at various colleges and universities. One key to student success and retention for students who are underprepared for the rigor of college are targeted interventions. While it is vital to intervene when students are falling behind in their course work for one reason or another, the methods for assisting students varies by campus. Today, especially in higher education's post-pandemic new normal, this is being done through the advent of different technological programs as well as through traditional methods. Semester-long courses are being offered side-by-side with hybrid and online options.

Among the challenges of incorporating educational technology into classrooms are the cost, cognitive load strain for both the instructor and the student, and learning management system (LMS) compatibility. Alongside this is the ability of students to learn to operate various supplemental course software. Resources which offer instructional design support, such

as Open Educational Resource Commons textbooks, instructional activities, or presentation materials, will be referenced as universal design content that can be utilized to support multiple means of assessment, acquisition, and engagement.

Changes in Higher Education Funding

The pandemic had a significant financial impact on IHEs. A deficit in funding measures, which ranged from loss of tuition to fewer government funds for certain programs, caused this change. One result was larger class sizes. This was done in order to cut back on instructional costs. The hybrid model became more of the norm for many colleges. As the pandemic resurges across the country, the coronavirus has forced universities large and small to make deep and possibly lasting cuts to close widening budget shortfalls. By one estimate, the pandemic has cost colleges at least $120 billion, with even Harvard University, despite its $41.9 billion endowment, reporting a $10 million deficit that has prompted belt tightening (Hubler, 2020). The pandemic event occurred at a time when student debt was already a major stakeholder concern. The third component is the growth of student indebtedness as a result of increased costs. More than six in ten (62%) college seniors who graduated from public and private nonprofit colleges in 2019 had student loan debt and owed an average of $28,950 (Institute for College Access and Success, 2020). This problem concerns public policy makers at the local and national level as well as parents and students. These issues, along with a misunderstanding of what developmental education is, have coalesced into legislation at all levels that has serious implications for developmental education in many states (Boylan et al., 2017). Coupled with the economic issues due to COVID-19, a new financial reality of less sustainable revenue became apparent as legislators and administrators saw the need for fewer adjunct faculty due to a decrease in tuition profits from fewer on-campus students. In order to maintain quality instruction, institutions need to consider the overall financial implications with student retention, engagement, and instructor burnout. Though many colleges imposed stopgap measures such as hiring freezes and early retirements to save money in the spring, the persistence of the economic downturn is taking a devastating financial toll, pushing many to lay off or furlough employees, delay graduate admissions, and even cut or consolidate core programs like liberal arts departments (Hubler, 2020).

Where Do We Go from Here?

With the possibility of the pandemic ending, there may be a light at the end of the tunnel. Some changes implemented during COVID-19 will remain in effect, whereas others will not. One lesson learned in higher education from this event was the need to be flexible. It is evident that communities across the globe have had to find as many ways as possible to connect in meaningful ways; this will continue, but things will be different than they were before the pandemic. Because teaching remained a one-size-fits-all model, rather than personalized and adapted to various students' learning needs, this is the time to personalize learning in varied formats (Mintz, 2018). Students desire social connection, digital connection, and a sense of community and belonging. Numerous higher education systems have accepted this call to action by encouraging educators to do things differently, with greater intention and purposeful inclusion, in the construction of their virtual classrooms; these changes will span the years following the recovery from COVID-19. In the post-pandemic world, higher education will have the opportunity to reinvent itself. Universities have used technology in new ways and will continue to expand this growth. Some institutions of higher education emphasized promising innovations, such as co-requisite course designs, mastery and accelerated learning, along with the advent of new campus technologies. The ones that were successful will continue; others will not. The lessons learned at various IHEs in the spring of 2020 helped many college administrators and instructional designers to plan better for future academic years. Higher education will never be exactly like it was before the pandemic.

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Distance education was here to stay prior to the pandemic, and the lessons and promising practices implemented from this time will help mold future campus policies. Financially, technologically, and culturally, the policies of President Biden's Department of Education will be tied directly to the future of higher education. Like President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal policies helped to rebuild America following the Great Depression, President Biden's Department of Education's higher education policy will be directly tied to the ability of colleges and universities to survive the economic shortfalls. To better accommodate a changing college community, new educational technology measures should be funded at the federal, state, and local levels.

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