ADDRESSING NEW SOCIETAL EXPECTATIONS FOR HIGHER EDUCATION AND ONLINE LEARNING IN THE POST-COVID-19 ERA

Leah Sciabarrasi

Excelsior University, 7 Columbia Cir., Albany, NY 12203, USA,
E-mail: lsciabarrasi@excelsior.edu, leahmsciabarrasi@gmail.com

This article examines how people's lives and work environments have been altered as a result of technology, how these advancements have altered societal expectations for higher education, and three solutions for higher education institutions to address these new expectations. Firstly, to survive the new normal, higher education institutions must shift their student solutions and orientations to accommodate online learners. Secondly, faculty development must concentrate on training faculty to utilize online tools to teach. Thirdly, institutions must better prepare students to be savvy virtual collaborators through online learning and to translate these new skills to the workforce. Finally, this paper uses the lens of the COVID-19 pandemic to present three strategies for achieving these solutions.

KEY WORDS: COVID-19, technological advancements, new expectations for higher education, online learning

1. INTRODUCTION

The first 200 years of American history challenged the established higher education system with social, political, and cultural revolutions; civil and world wars; and economic collapses. Twentieth-century technological advances presented challenges unlike those seen in higher education's history. Higher education was severely impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, causing campuses to move to online instruction rapidly or end semesters early in 2020.

As historical events affected the societies of their time, technology also affected present-day society in 2023. Additionally, as American higher education reacted to the events of its past, it is also trying to determine its purpose in an era when information is highly accessible and pandemics have created a new way of life. Arguably, the most significant technological advancement over the past two decades has been that of the Internet. The Internet, an electronic global computer network, connects people and information in ways that have completely altered how humanity lives, interacts, and works (Firth et al., 2019). The success of the Internet and this person-to-person communication is only possible because the accessibility of the Internet has grown to include so many people. Internet usage now includes over 3.4 billion people around the world (Roser et al., 2015).

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The Internet has become a connective tissue that is, in a sense, reorganizing society (Jarvis, 2009). This new connected lifestyle involves people interacting on the Internet with people around the world through various mediums (audio, video, and gaming) and components—people (meetings and messaging), objects (smart products), and places (wayfinding and smart cities) (Verhoef et al., 2017). Access has been encouraged by the fast adoption of mobile devices (such as smartphones, tablets, and laptops) and the Internet of Things, including transactions, social information sharing, and wearable technology (Gikas & Grant, 2013; Verhoef et al., 2017). Digital natives have never known a world without the Internet, and most people on the planet spend more time online than offline in a space that is free from moderators, filters, or a centralized publisher, and does not require a degree to publish (Davidson, 2017). Suddenly, everyone's voice can be heard and everyone has a platform.

The Internet has also altered the ways most of the developed world works. The tools needed to perform most positions can be found on the Internet, and we can access these tools from anywhere and at any time using any mobile device. There are no barriers to group action. Even the very need for a workplace and the traditional workday are being challenged (Davidson, 2012). Whether good or bad, most employees routinely bring work home with them or work partly from home with very little separation between work and home life (Gadeyne et al., 2018). The Internet and mobile devices have set people free from being tied to a specific place and time to meet and collaborate with coworkers, who may not always resemble those from their own communities (Shirky, 2008). Employees must know how to communicate in this uncharted space with some understanding of racial, ethnic, gender, sexual orientation, and religious backgrounds (Nussbaum, 1997).

2. NEW EXPECTATIONS FOR HIGHER EDUCATION

In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic brought the world to its knees. Lockdowns, death tolls, and personal protective equipment became common terms. Throughout the year, city centers and arenas were deserted, global markets shuddered, and planes flew empty. Life was put on pause and web conferencing became the backbone of our lives. People celebrated events and communities mourned loved ones, virtually. College campuses needed to adapt fast. Classes and commencement ceremonies were held online, and employees worked from home collaborating only in web-based environments for months. In this regard, technology allowed communities, businesses, and higher education to continue operating. The future was uncertain with COVID-19 wreaking havoc across the world and higher education had to continue to adapt and fight for its relevancy in this uncertain time.

Nearly all U.S. K-12 schools and higher education colleges moved their classes online in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Even though online learning has been around for decades, offering online courses during a regular semester was a new initiative for some institutions (Gardner, 2020). While the transition was not perfect, the experience was valuable for faculty who had long resisted the shift and for students who would soon enter the hybrid workforce. Many of the tools that students were asked to use to complete their

learning online (such as virtual meeting, document collaboration, and online work-sharing space) are virtual tools common to many workplaces.

Higher education has a crucial role to play in American society now that most jobs require use of the Internet and virtual tools. Though these virtual tools became part of our everyday lives, the practice of teaching and learning in higher education experienced little disruption. Even in response to COVID-19, many institutions simply put virtual band aids in place waiting for a return to normalcy. However, COVID-19 presented an opportunity for higher education institutions to respond to something much greater—innovating the entire way it does business. Institutions had an opportunity to innovate by adopting a customer service mindset in assisting students to be successful in all aspects of their life and education.

Offering student services online and responding immediately are no longer the exception; they are the expectation (Kretovics, 2015). Technology allows institutors to create new models of higher education where the goals are competency and skill based, with a curriculum that is individualized and with unlimited choice, and it is based on student discovery, flexible, student-centered, and highly interactive (Rhodes, 2001). This is a new approach for higher education; and ongoing assessments and adjustments of hardware, policies, professional development, leadership, and communication was needed to usher in these changes (Bailey & Brown, 2016).

Although technology surrounds us, teaching methods (such as lectures, textbooks, and exams) have remained largely the same (Christensen & Eyring, 2011). Passive pedagogies, standardized tests, and narrow academic courses or programs are no longer needed (Davidson, 2017). The intelligent harnessing of technology allows for more faculty collaboration, active learning in the classroom, more timely and individualized feedback, and extending learning throughout one's life (Bowen, 2013). Afterall, students are already learning in these spaces. If they do not understand a lecture, we will probably find them watching another professor explain the problem in an online video platform or asking ChatGPT before they email their own professor.

The Internet has impacted people's lives, the ways they communicate, and the ways they work. Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, these changes influenced society's expectations for higher education. Many of these expectations stemmed from the skills needed to be a citizen in this interconnected world. With much of today's workforce teleworking, the skills needed to be a valuable employee have far surpassed knowing how to simply perform one's duties (Sousa & Rocha, 2019). Many students will be entering careers where they will be asked to utilize databases, gather information from Internet resources, and code anything from web pages to algorithms (Hardin et al., 2015). Digital skills, net smarts, and Internet literacy are all levels of savviness that form the digital divide between those who know how to truly wield the Internet and those who do not (Rainie & Wellman, 2012). In many ways, higher education institutions are doing students a disservice when they choose not to offer student services online, train their faculty to teach well online, or incorporate activities that allow students to virtually collaborate.

3. THREE SOLUTIONS TO ADDRESS NEW EXPECTATIONS FOR HIGHER EDUCATION

Technological advancements and the COVID-19 pandemic have altered societal expectations for higher education. Colleges can begin to address these new expectations through online learning. Three main solutions include offering online-friendly student solutions and orientations, creating faculty development that addresses the new challenges of how to teach well online, and preparing students to be virtual collaborators (Raaper & Brown, 2020; Johnson et al., 2020; O'Keefe et al., 2020).

Firstly, student services are traditionally created for and serve on-ground students. Colleges must invest in online student services to ensure student success and prevent dropout rates (Bailey & Brown, 2016). Traditionally, orientations are solely offered on campus, enrollment and advisement counselors are trained to work in person with traditional undergraduates, and student solutions (financial aid, student accounts, and registrar) also tailor most of their services to take place in person. Much of this is a result of lack of training. There is concern that the student affairs profession has not advanced its expectations for its graduate programs, resulting in graduates who are not prepared to implement virtual modes of working with online students (Stoller, 2019). The profession needs to catch up with the student bodies they serve, and student affairs leaders must push for student services to be translated for the online environment.

Second, online learning requires faculty to meet students where they are with their coursework. Textbooks have long posed the problem of being uneditable without an easy means to update them for audiences that own them (Jarvis, 2009). They cannot be linked to related content, conversations, and additional sources like web resources can. Thanks to the Internet, higher education is no longer restricted to disseminating information in a physical location. These limitations are compounded by the rising costs of textbooks and the proliferation of digital content. Students can now benefit from hearing from a variety of perspectives about the topics they are studying at little to no cost and, as studies have shown, with no impact on their performance (Jhangiani et al., 2018). In addition, implementing digital resources and teaching online also means pivoting faculty development to address online teaching (McQuiggan, 2012). While institutions had an idea of what engaging online teaching looked like before, the COVID-19 pandemic forced them to respond with online classes. The online courses offered in response to the pandemic were very different from well-planned online learning experiences that took months to meaningfully prepare, however (Hodges et al., 2020). Researchers are fearful that the rush to move classes online so quickly sealed the unproven stereotype that online is of lower quality. Going forward, institutions must invest in faculty development that simultaneously targets in-person and online teaching strategies to influence good teaching in and out of the classroom.

Finally, there are new expectations for graduates to be savvy, virtual collaborators. Institutions must examine closely where in the online curriculum students are being

prepared to work, communicate, and collaborate over the Internet. This goal is one part cultural competence and one part technological. This multicultural education must acquaint students with the histories and cultures of many groups so that students may know how to communicate with, and not offend, those different from them (Nussbaum, 1997). Ideally, every student should be practicing how to communicate online with those of other cultures using a variety of web-based tools (such as cloud-based software for word processing, document creation, and web conferencing) to collaborate on projects in their online courses. Students should also be developing the kind of statistical thinking needed to weed through the volume and complexity that has vastly increased over the years (Hardin et al., 2015). Many faculty do not take full advantage of the collaborative online tools, software, and programs that employees use on a daily basis. Online faculty can ask students to web conference with each other, co-develop presentations, co-create graphics, and co-manage projects. These collaboration tools are all about creating, which is a skill that will always be needed for most jobs.

4. FRAMEWORK FOR IMPLEMENTING NEW SOLUTIONS

Many institutions of higher education are pivoting to stay relevant and respond to the shifts in the ways one works and lives. Building, affiliating, and innovating are three strategies that form a maneuvering framework. Firstly, besides building new online programs, institutions should also consider new collaborative spaces, centers, and community engagement that help them to remain relevant and develop new forms of revenue, such as online professional development, virtual and physical wellness centers, and performance art spaces that stream performances. Secondly, some institutions (especially small institutions) will struggle to keep their doors open unless they affiliate to provide the manpower for projects and programs that they alone cannot supply. One such model is partnering with a supportive company or fellow institution to support online learners and faculty, as well as to offer collaborative programs. Finally, it is most important for institutions to innovate—a highly used word that means to think beyond what is currently possible. Points to consider include the skills needed to support careers coming down the pipeline, different mediums and timeframes for offering curriculum, and harnessing the power of technology to support learning. Artificial intelligence, virtual reality, and simulation have already changed the way we work and play. Why can't they change the way we learn?

5. CONCLUSION

This paper has suggested that higher education institutions need to shift traditional, in-person services in order to meet the expectations for higher education and respond to the new normal influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic. This shift includes creating online-friendly student solutions, offering faculty development to reach in an online environment, and preparing students to be virtual collaborators. These strategies will benefit all students.

A basic framework of building, affiliating, and innovating will help institutions to support students virtually, promote faculty development for teaching, and introduce digital literacy and virtual collaboration into the curriculum.

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