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Cover Page Footnote

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Policy Point-Counterpoint: Can Colleges and Universities Maintain High Quality Connections with Students through Virtual Platforms?

For centuries, educational institutions have integrated technological advances into their traditional teaching methods to circumvent geographic constraints for learners and to enhance academic and co-curricular experiences. Correspondence education emerged during the Industrial Era, and became firmly rooted in many Canadian, American, and European universities.[1] The postal system facilitated this early form of distance education as the method of information exchange between teachers and students. With the advent of digital technologies in the early twentieth century, college courses could be delivered through radio and television.[2] These educational delivery tools further supported education beyond geographic boundaries, however using these tools involved tremendous amounts of preparation work for instructors and required their dedication to maintaining communication with students. In the 1980s, educators began to integrate computer-based technologies into classrooms. Combined with the widespread introduction of the Internet to college campuses in the late 1990s,[3] this enabled email to bring faster forms of asynchronous communication bridging spatial divides between teacher and student. Technologies have allowed for the expansion of educational experiences, yet have primarily understood as tools to augment face-to-face classroom practices.

A shift towards online education emerged in the late 1980s, with Phoenix University introducing the first fully online program offering bachelor's and master's degrees in 1989.[4] Online program offerings have expanded; University of Phoenix now supports 134 majors and American Public University offers more than 200 degree and certificate programs, in addition to no-cost textbooks and e-books for eligible students.[5] Even with a shift in modality, focus on

educational standards has extended to online programs; Jones International University became the first accredited web-based university in 1996.[6]

While the field of online education has grown, colleges and universities now utilize a variety of program models. Alongside the fully online institutions already noted, universities with physical campuses support individual online program offerings, such as the Harvard Extension School. The fully online programs enable students in any location to access the entirety of the coursework. Institutions of higher education are also adopting blended learning models in which students take some coursework through distance education and complete other components on site. This model allows for flexibility while maintaining some in person educational elements. Finally, many institutions still embrace the more traditional face-to-face program model. In 2018, approximately one third of U.S. students, undergraduate and graduate combined, reported taking all of their coursework exclusively through online format. While this percentage is notable, nearly 60 percent of the college and university student population completed no coursework through distance education.[7]

Within institutions that use some form of distance education, there are a variety of modalities for individual courses; including hybrid, online synchronous, and online asynchronous. In classes using online asynchronous, coursework is conducted remotely and, although there are deadlines, there are no expectations for real-time interaction. In the online synchronous format, students have the location flexibility within time constraints maintained through real-time interaction requirements; this may include live course lectures or discussions. With the hybrid format, students again participate in some form of online course activities while also completing a portion of the coursework within the face-to-face classroom setting; balancing flexibility of time and location with in person classroom connection. Furthermore, higher

education is also embracing social networking sites, such as Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook, for marketing and amplification of the curricular and co-curricular student experience.[8]

For many of the approximately 60 percent, or 1.8 million, postsecondary students, who did not have prior distance education experience, the unanticipated pivot to remote learning in spring of 2020 was a challenging alteration to their usual educational activities. Students shifting away from their familiar classrooms, delivery methods, sources of campus support, and in-person interaction with professors, compounded existing challenges at some institutions including student retention, completion and financial stability. Covid-19's power to alter academic institutions has refocused attention across higher education; compelling inquiry into deeper questions not just about technologies, but also regarding pedagogies and engagement with students. Educators are finding renewed need to build and maintain connections between educators and students; as with the critical pedagogies of Paulo Freire and Parker Palmer, who advocate for building communion with students, and Pedro Noguera et al., who refocus attention on the power of connections within education.[9] In a historical moment, when administrators, faculty, and students must be prepared to adapt to online course modalities and social networking sites, in full or in part, can colleges and universities maintain high quality connections with students through virtual platforms?

Point: Online Platforms Provide a Subpar Quality of Connection Compared to In-Person Instruction

The urgency of the current pandemic-related educational shift clashes with the technological reality of the average student body. In fact, the prevailing role of technology in everyday activities induces the assumption that we are all unanimously connected, and there should not exist any physical limitations to engagement with virtual environments. However, the possession of adequate technological tools highly depends on the existing relationship between

the student and the family household, as well as the economic availability of not only the tools in question, but of goods and services that allow for acceptable standards of connection with the selected virtual platforms (i.e. old versus new computers, slow versus fast connections).[10] Apart from the quality and maintenance of computer systems, a lack of prior experience hinders the proper execution of online activities, some of which require programs that the student either has not yet mastered or has only access to through the physical institution. Further complicating the issue is the socially segregating reality of the U.S.; racial minorities and non-citizens are more likely to face challenges caused by lower quality equipment and inadequate personal, or work-related, knowledge of technology use compared to their peers.[11]

As a result, the connection between the student and the teacher becomes dependent on the technological savviness of both parties, even occasionally rendering the student reliant on the services of the faculty and institution.[12] However, the shift from mutually inclusive to asymmetrical reciprocal communication inevitably puts higher responsibilities on the direct representative of the institution: the faculty. The training preceding the use of technological tools requires time to take proper effect, and it achieves acceptable results only when accompanied by the tool's degree of public accessibility.[13]

Similarly, the Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology (UTAUT) posits intention and facilitating conditions, most likely provided by the faculty, as well as performance expectancy, effort expectancy and social influence, most likely provided by the institution, as determinants of a person's proper engagement with the available technological tools, all steps leading to the establishment of a quality connection between student and professor.[14] Following this idea, the absence of the social factor, and the unreliability of the faculty-owned determinants, establishes the importance of the first two, which could logically be achieved

through an improvement of the institution's means of connection.[15] Nonetheless, it posits the basis of an infiltration of third-party contractors, employed to substitute the role of the institution within the student's household. Unlike the academic institution, their actions do not need to prioritize the individual educational quality of the connection. Instead, by proceeding with an automation of the academic curriculum, they sacrifice the flexibility and personalization of the classroom interaction with the structure and universality of the virtual interaction.[16]

While it could be possible for employed contractors to provide the same type of academic quality, the issue stands on the loss of the individual faculty's ability to compensate for the lack of institutional funding.[17] With online learning, the quality of the connection will inevitably be tied to the latter, and the professors, who could negate this disadvantage the most through on-site adaptation, are now unable to ease or avoid the costs of distance learning. Ironically, the cited funding usually rests on the students' pockets, and the benefit of extending streamlined education to all might be null with the ever-increasing cost of education. As an example, textbooks rose by 82 percent in price between 2002 and 2014 and between 2006 and 2016, tuition and other general expenses rose by 31 percent for public institutions and 24 percent for private nonprofit organizations; adjusted for inflation.[18]

Furthermore, relocation of the learning environment, although favored by some students, produces a slight decline in performance, possibly due to the difference in engagement between physical and online connection.[19] In fact, the functionality of online tools, especially with assessment, aids both students, with a focus on low/medium-end achievers, and faculty, in rendering their activities and lectures more automated. The easing of tasks causes both to lower their guards, and incur, respectively, in less committed learning and a weakened awareness of the

student work;[20] this does not imply that online learning increases academic dishonesty, yet the slight 1 percent loss in performance could be decisive for weaker students.

In addition, colleges and universities have widely recognized that students' interaction with peers and faculty, along with campus involvement, enhance levels of student success. This is noted by the implementation of widely utilized engagement measurement tools, such as the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), which encourage institutions to regularly assess, and to enhance, students' opportunities for social involvement, campus activities with fine arts or athletics and campus events addressing social, economic, or political topics.[21] Defining high-quality interaction through simple "availability" of connection, something easily achievable with online formats, does not account for the reproduction of a campus' network of learning experiences; though identifiable online, they lack the informal effects of their coexistence in a physical communal environment.

Ultimately, online platforms do not preclude the enactment of a high-quality, academic connection, but they do not render it easier either. In reality, they introduce a different set of problems that stem from the physical distance and tool availability of the student, the loss of the academic freedom and leisure to micromanage of the faculty.[22] Additionally, the psychological distance from the classroom puts those that were already at the lower end of classroom work at a greater disadvantage, given that course personalization is harder to achieve without ongoing interaction with the professors.[23] Only training and continued presence of the professor can highlight the benefits of expanded online interaction and streamlined education;[24] still, there is no guarantee that institutions can deliver the former in an expedient and effective manner.

Counterpoint: Virtual Platforms Can Offer Students Enriching Academic

and Co-Curricular Experiences

In 2020, given current technology, colleges and universities can maintain high-quality connections with students, despite distance. While there are experiential differences between traditional college and remote learning, each present benefits to students. In the face of a global pandemic, the experience may look different than students and faculty are used to, yet students are able to receive a high-quality education digitally.

Students' academic success must remain of utmost importance when colleges and universities consider the feasibility of distance learning. At the University of Minnesota, St. Paul, students enrolled in Horticulture 1003 online performed as well as students who took the course traditionally. Both groups rated high satisfaction levels with their respective methods of learning, but online students lauded their ability to access further information at any time while they were progressing through the material.[25] This 2002 study demonstrated the educational equivalence of remote and traditional learning, even before the invention of present day technologies that allow for a more enriched online educational experience; including capabilities to conduct synchronous lectures and facilitate group discussions via mediums such as Zoom, Microsoft Teams, and educational platforms used directly by universities. In present times the online educational experience is not so different whether students are sitting in a classroom, or anywhere they have internet access.

A 2020 study showed that students in online and hybrid classes in STEM fields performed equivalently to students taking courses in a traditional format, while also providing the students with the additional benefit of incurring a lower cost for their education. These students completed courses such as Engineering Mechanics and Construction Materials

Technology with similar academic results and satisfaction levels, at a fraction of the cost. Compared to the costs incurred for students enrolled in-person learning, blended learning was 19.2 percent less expensive and online was 80.9 percent less than the traditional tuition.[26] Alleviation of financial burden can increase accessibility of education for students who would otherwise be unable to afford traditional tuition and housing costs; potentially benefiting students with dependents, full-time jobs, medical debt, or other financially restrictive circumstances.

While barriers to technology access are another main concern, institutions are taking measures to help students bridge the technology divide. Some schools, such as the University of Washington-Bothell and Delaware State University, are providing students with laptops, tablets, WiFi hotspots, and equipment loans so they can continue their education.[27] Programs outside of the academic community are also aiding the transition. Hundreds of Internet Service Providers have taken part in the Federal Communications Commission's Keep Americans Connected Pledge to support distance learning through offering free internet hotspots and not implementing data caps for those affected by the pandemic.[28]

Outside of coursework, colleges offer other academic, wellness, and co-curricular services to students that must be considered in assessing the merits of online education. A number of services have transitioned to remotely serve students during their inability to operate on-campus. Career resources, academic and financial advising can be conducted through scheduling meetings in chats, video, or phone calls. Tutoring and academic support can be provided to students at any time through third party tutoring services that operate twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. Students can be paired with mentor alumni through their universities, or through platforms such as LinkedIn. Virtual job fairs have become popular. To continue engagement with local communities, and social justice efforts, student clubs or service-

learning classes can virtually volunteer or complete service activities remotely. Mental health counseling has even successfully transitioned online for colleges that previously offered free counseling for students.[29] Social aspects of college life can also be maintained remotely. Members of Greek life, student organizations, and other university sponsored student involvement programs can hold virtual events and maintain connections via social media platforms such as Instagram and Twitter. The University of Florida has addressed student social life by creating "The UF Online Plaza," where students can synthesize university news, join student groups based on interests, majors, and locations, and network with other students.[30] Universities can create social-media-like websites to facilitate student interactions that resemble the college experience they are used to, bridging the physical distance.

One must also consider that colleges and universities have been providing meaningful educational opportunities via virtual modalities for years. The transition to some form of online course delivery was more or less an inevitability of academia's evolution; 96 percent of traditional universities already offered at least one online class before they were forced to transition.[31] Beyond offering entire courses online, prior to spring 2020, many universities used online tools, such as course management systems and apps, to provide students with grades, feedback on academic performance, assignment instructions, and online assignments, papers, and quizzes, even using lockdown browsers such as Respondus to effectively administer remote exams.

Conclusion

The need to more deeply and creatively assess educational modalities has been amplified with the unexpected emergence of a global pandemic. In spring 2020, institutions of higher education quickly shifted to online formats with little time for pause to consider the pedagogies

that were implemented as they more or less survival strategies. Entering into the 2020-21

academic year, institutions now must take responsibility for considering and implementing

mechanisms for maintaining educational quality and students' connections to their professors

and campus communities; in addition to deeply assessing health of the campus community.

Using our own institution, Jacksonville University, as an example, some colleges and

universities may opt for blended models that provide most students with some face-to-face

instruction, allowing for maintenance of in person connection between instructor-student and

student-student. Preparation for distance education course delivery has likely been enhanced as

many college students now have experience with utilizing online platforms, and faculty have

developed a wider range of skills to deliver and facilitate high quality courses through

technologically rich, remote formats. As we move forward, somewhat more prepared for virtual

course offerings, college and university leadership must still consider possible economic, social,

and personal barriers so that no student is disconnected.

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