Chapter 5

Learning Assistance Support in a Global Pandemic:
Rethinking, Reimagining, and Restructuring for Student Success

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ABSTRACT

The spring of 2020 brought with it an entirely new experience for learning assistance professionals, who now had revise services for the online college experience and prepare their student staff for implementation immediately. This chapter provides a "how to" guide for these professionals in considering their services with the COVID-19 pandemic in mind and preparing for future crises. The author provides tools, platforms, and techniques that their center utilized in successfully transitioning to an online environment. While it is important to reflect on and consider the technology and facility needs for one's center, this chapter also argues for the need to support the student staff in the learning assistance center, who are navigating the experience as an employee and a student. The author not only gives tips, but also reflects on their own experience during a global pandemic. The chapter concludes with a look at learning assistance work after COVID-19.

INTRODUCTION

There is no doubt that working in higher education requires a degree of nimbleness and flexibility that is not necessarily found in other professions. Full-time staff at tutoring centers, Supplemental Instruction (SI) program coordinators, and peer tutors make up the larger category of learning assistance staff, both professionals and students. Learning-assistance professionals and student employees experience this uniquely diverse working environment every day, whether that be regarding the content tutored, the funding needs for each semester, or even innovations in reaching students through social media. However, the COVID-19 pandemic pushed those in the student support field to new levels of flexibility. The work

of the learning-assistance professional cannot be understated. Social connectedness, faculty and staff approachability, and student support services are three factors found to contribute to the persistence of the college student (Roberts & Styron, 2010). Recognizing the importance of campus integration and availability of resources, such as tutoring, how do these aforementioned aspects of the college experience change when a global pandemic occurs? Educational professionals had to consider engagement in the online environment after the global pandemic pushed all services online. The author's learning center, based out of a small liberal arts university in the South, pivoted and successfully navigated new methods of engagement. Regardless of the scenario out of which the move online occurred, educational professionals across the globe must ensure that "online programs are at least comparable to and even outperform campus-based programs and provide high-quality educational opportunities" (Kuh, 2009, p. 695). Performance-based funding and institutional goals do not dissipate with the existence of a pandemic; in fact, these two elements of reality may become critical following global crises and the economic and educational impacts thereafter.

By the end of March 2020, higher education across the nation looked entirely different, not only for students, but also for the faculty and staff at these institutions. Students returned to their homes, faculty had to experiment with remote-teaching platforms, and educational professionals in the learning-assistance field were forced to reimagine their services in an online environment. Tutoring, facilitating SI sessions, and providing peer study sessions are all fairly intimate services, not easily translated into an online environment. Outside of the four programs this center already managed, the added After Hours (AH) STEM Tutoring program funded through a university system grant required that professionals understand effective ways to deliver services to the students targeted in the grant. The AH program is a prime example of the ways in which this learning center aimed to bring tutoring directly to the students, through evening and weekend hours in residence halls and common campus locations. This grant-funded tutoring program focuses on increasing services to underrepresented populations on campus, such as minoritized groups and the LGBTQA+ community. When navigating COVID-19, the center had to not only revisit the AH locations due to safety measures, but also approach supporting these populations in additional ways because of their unique needs. Toven-Lindsey et al. (2015) explored how additional support programs increased the persistence of undergraduate STEM majors from underrepresented populations. The study examined how systems like collaborative learning workshops and academic seminars had a positive effect on the persistence of the participants. The AH program at the author's institution followed similar programmatic structures, offering online academic-success workshops to the campus's Bridge students (often from underrepresented groups) and providing targeted services to these same students. Toven-Lindsey et al. (2015) concluded that "a diversity of interventions that foster supportive peer networks, create a more welcoming academic culture, and allow students to begin to see themselves as scientists" was critical in closing the persistence gap for these students (p. 10). Moving the AH tutoring from the residence halls to larger, open spaces and online platforms allowed for continued services during the global crisis.

The same staff of this learning center also had to consider implementation of trainings that still needed to be conducted, management of, at times, over 100 student staff, and balancing it all while remaining hopeful in interactions with the students they encountered (even virtually) every day. While not easy, the work that came with the global pandemic allowed learning-center professionals to stretch their creativity and connect with students in innovative ways. What follows is both an outline and a reflection on the aspects of learning-assistance center work that, like all campus areas, requires innovative solutions to reach institutional goals. This chapter details specific strategies used to successfully maneuver learning-

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