Chapter 12
Curriculum Design for Digital Delivery and Readiness for Emergency Pivot

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ABSTRACT

In March of 2020, the world came to a screeching halt due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Without any warning, businesses big and small were closed, elementary schools and high schools ordered to shut down, and colleges and universities urged to move all in-person classes to online. This chapter explores the curriculum design for digital delivery and readiness for an emergency pivot.

INTRODUCTION

The landscape of higher education saw a dramatic shift due to COVID-19. Perhaps no other incident during the lifetimes of the current professoriate has had as great of an impact across the higher education sector as the 2020 pandemic. But unlike other crisis, the availability of online learning became the de facto strategy adopted by colleges and universities in handling the crisis. Yet this strategy was reported to be both a blessing and a curse.

Higher education saw 650,000 jobs (Bauman, 2021) disappear throughout the pandemic but more importantly, college / university enrollments in the United States dropped significantly. Higher ed lost ~200,000 enrollments in Spring (2020) and 400,000 enrollments in Fall (2020) across the entire (American) sector (St. Amour, 2020b), with Spring (2021) to be determined. News reports were largely negative about the perceptions of online learning approaches for almost every stakeholder set. From the New York Times to the Chronicle of Higher Education to Fox News to NPR, reporters sought the opinions of staff, faculty, students, and parents who were often negatively predisposed to digital learning options from the start. While outcomes and practitioner research do not back up these perceptions, they have been reported for years. As described by the Babson Survey of more than 4,500 instructors nearly a decade ago, "Professors, overall, cast a skeptical eye on the learning outcomes for online educa-

tion. Nearly two-thirds say they believe that the learning outcomes for an online course are inferior or somewhat inferior to those for a comparable face-to-face course" (Seaman, 2012, p. 3). This perceptual predisposition seemed to set up a negative cycle of effectiveness throughout the pandemic.

THE PANDEMIC

Prior to 2020, the National Center for Education Statistics' Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) data showed that in the fall of 2018, more than 6.9 million students, or 35.3 percent of students in the nation, were enrolled in some manner of distance education courses at degree-granting postsecondary institutions (Wallis, 2020). Depending on the definition of an online course (which can be reported as more than X% of the course taken via the web versus a course containing any asynchronous communication versus a course taken completely online with no face-to-face experiences), approximately 15-30% of all learners in higher education took courses exclusively online (Educational Data [EdData. org], 2021) through 2020. However, as of March 2020, 99% of students across higher education were taking courses fully online (Diep, 2021), forcing faculty to pivot faster and committedly like never before

Instead of focusing solely on a method of keeping students on track to course completion and graduation, online learning became a method of keeping students and faculty safe while continuing with their respective responsibilities within the higher educational system. Components of online learning, while traditionally not designed nor structured for the entire higher educational system, is proving adaptive to massive groups (Bickle & Rucker, 2020).

While online learning has been the only consistent segment of the United States higher education population to see yearly growth for the past decade (Allen & Seaman, 2017; Seaman et al., 2012), the sector has seen enrollment losses each year since 2009. But in 2020, Fall's approximate national enrollment in Title IV degree-granting institutions of approximately 17.7 million students saw a decline of -2.5%. This is almost twice the rate of decline in Fall 2019, which was 1.3% (EdData.org, 2021).

It seems fair to suggest that many educators saw the pandemic as more than a health crisis but as an education crisis too. How could institutions teach *all* students at a distance with faculty who had never taught online before?

INSTITUTIONAL CASE STUDY DEMOGRAPHICS

One institution, Felician University; a mirror of the statistical impacts and issues described here, was able to make the transition to fully online without a loss of business continuity and, importantly without a loss of enrollments, largely because infrastructure and preparatory measures were taken well before the pandemic arrived. This private, faith-based university, Felician University, situated at two distinct locations, has a long tradition of values-based teaching and learning. Location-based instruction and assessment began to shift in the late 1990's as this institution determined it was important to extend its reach and provide more opportunities to students through distance learning.

The University's Mission is "to provide a full complement of learning experiences, reinforced with strong academic and student development programs designed to bring students to their highest potential

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