

Chapter 4

Creative Solutions for Today's Students: A Case-Based Approach to Optimize Face- to-Face, Hybrid, and Remote Learning

Tyan Thomas

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5816-900X>

Philadelphia College of Pharmacy, University of the Sciences in Philadelphia, USA

Alice Lim Scaletta

Philadelphia College of Pharmacy, University of the Sciences in Philadelphia, USA

Sharon K. Park

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5355-1071>

Notre Dame of Maryland University, USA

ABSTRACT

This chapter will explore the connection between diversifying health profession student demographics, diversifying challenges these students face, and the new obstacles presented by shifting curriculum delivery to remote and hybrid learning during the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic. The chapter will explore challenges that may seem especially difficult to address in a remote learning model: the desire to develop community among fellow learners when in a hybrid or fully remote program and when learners are from varied backgrounds; cultivating in students coping mechanisms to manage anxiety from the economic uncertainty of today's world, balancing commitments between educational pursuits and other responsibilities (e.g., child or parent care, etc.); and facilitating learning for students with physical and/or mental disabilities or chronic medical conditions.

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INTRODUCTION

There are many challenges that students face today. Some of them are out of our control to manage as instructors; however, others can be strategically mitigated or lessened to help students better engage in learning. Some challenges that today's students face are feelings of a lack of belonging due to differences in ethnic and social backgrounds among their peers (Johnson, 2020); barriers stemming from differences in physical and mental health statuses and learning styles (Meeks & Neal-Boylan, 2020); balancing commitments between educational pursuits and other responsibilities (e.g. child or elder care) (Institute for Women's Policy Research, 2021; Horovitz, 2020); and inadequate coping mechanisms to manage anxiety from political and economic uncertainties of today's world (Kunzler et al., 2020; Malau-Abuli, 2011; Savitsky et al., 2020; Schiller et al., 2018). Helping students manage these challenges may seem even more difficult when the curriculum is being delivered in a remote or hybrid format. Addressing these challenges requires creativity and incorporating flexibility in course delivery and advising (Weinberg, 2021).

This chapter will provide the reader with ideas for creative course delivery and advising and is divided in three sections: (1) incorporating flexibility into didactic and experiential course structure; (2) optimizing learning for students of varying levels of physical and mental abilities, family circumstances, and health statuses; and (3) supporting students' non-cognitive and psychosocial needs.

The Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic shed new light on the challenges today's students face. The pandemic forced many colleges and universities to deliver curricula fully remotely or in a hybrid (both on-campus and remote) model. This remote delivery of curricula removed social interaction and a sense of social community that students desired in their college experience. Due to closures of schools and daycare centers and concerns for loved ones' COVID-19 exposure in long-term care facilities, many students had to assume new caregiving responsibilities alongside their responsibilities as students. Moreover, the uncertainty and loss of normalcy caused by the pandemic created new anxieties in some students and heightened pre-pandemic anxieties in other students. Finally, the move to remote and hybrid models of curriculum delivery may have removed an additional layer of support and created unintended learning challenges for students with disabilities (Gibilisco, 2020).

A variety of educational resources and literature address these aforementioned issues. This chapter provides cases that depict each of these challenges and provide practical tips to address them. In addition, it will provide insights about the potentially lasting effects the pandemic may have on instructional models in health professions education in the post-pandemic world. The over-arching goal is to make the case that rigor may be maintained while also providing flexibility in instructional delivery, nurturing students' non-cognitive skills, and supporting their psychosocial needs.

BACKGROUND

Beware of Challenges in Current Educational Climate

The challenge of adapting teaching approaches to each new generation of learners is not new; however, the advent of remote and virtual learning has added another challenge to achieving this task in higher education to tackle the task. Today's learners face unique challenges, including varying levels of physical and mental abilities (Meeks & Neal-Boylan, 2020), changing family dynamics and responsibilities

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