Chapter 12
Keep Me Connected:
No Cost Solutions for Access to Remote Instruction

Alexander James Reid
California State University, Bakersfield, USA

Elaine Correa
California State University, Bakersfield, USA

ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic has created unprecedented changes to the way college faculty and students are expected to teach and learn. For vulnerable populations, remaining virtually connected is an additional burden that students must navigate, along with financial instability, food insecurity, and familial responsibilities. College students who do not have access to computers or reliable internet access at home and depend on university onsite resources must seek alternative venues to continue their studies. Guided by Bourdieu's social and cultural capital theories, digital quality, and no-cost resources in mitigating a growing divide are examined. College students' learning needs in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and the impact of open educational and technology-based resources on students' learning experiences and academic outcomes are discussed. Survey results highlight students' concerns regarding the transition to a virtual university. Affordable and accessible solutions are presented to address these concerns to keep college students connected.

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic and resulting closures of in-person interactions required schools and universities on a worldwide scale to rapidly establish alternative modalities of instructional delivery to ensure continued learning for students ranging from engagement at the elementary school level to the university. The experiences of students at the university level highlighted a number of intersecting issues related to learning in a virtual modality. Several vulnerable populations were disproportionately affected by this sudden switch to a virtual learning environment. The outcome of this decision had several impacts

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-7998-6533-9.ch012

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as not every student had homes equipped with immediate access to electronic devices (e.g., computers, iPads, Chromebooks), broadband connectivity (i.e., strong remote connection and speed), and the technical skills needed to successfully navigate online learning. The successful transition from face-to-face to distance learning is highly contingent upon students' living situations. Students living in low-income households, many of whom are first-generation college students, were disconnected from their campuses that provided quiet and accessible places to study and complete required course assignments and weekly assigned homework with ease of access to technology (e.g., dorm rooms, on-campus library; McCarthy, 2020). The ensuing closures of the COVID-19 pandemic have confined students, and their family members' daily activities and routines to their homes, potentially resulting in additional distractions. College students raising school-aged children must further balance their own classes while helping their children navigate their own distance learning platforms. Not only are these college students sharing a physical space with family members who are remotely working or distance learning, but they are also sharing a network connection. As the frequency of network users increases, the network speed may become significantly slower, thus hindering stable connectivity. One study found that students with higher Internet speeds were more likely to email teachers, peers, and participate in online activities compared to students with slower Internet speeds (Hampton et al., 2020). The delays with access and continued connectivity may negatively contribute to student productivity and ultimately impact their academic progress. The COVID-19 crisis, has further accentuated and exacerbated students' lack of access to devices, connectivity, and IT support. The goals of the current chapter are to:

1. Highlight social inequities surfaced by the resulting closures of the COVID-19 pandemic
2. Address college students' concerns regarding the distance learning platforms, technology, and connectivity
3. Propose no-cost alternative solutions to institutions of higher education to help alleviate the digital and financial obstacles of distance learning

BACKGROUND

Theories of social and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1977; 1990) assist in conceptualizing the connections between the context, access, skills, use, and outcomes. Students with greater cultural capital (e.g., equipment, access, connectivity) are situated in ways that support learning in a virtual modality, thus reinforcing a digital hierarchy and subsequent digital divide in comparison to students navigating learning without these basic essential affordances. Haight et al. (2014) argue that digital access is connected to social and cultural capital, and one's level and type of online activity leverages connectivity, which in turn facilitates the production and critique of online information and knowledge. For students without updated equipment, or compatible programs, heightened with limited access and unstable connectivity, the lack of resources compounds the limitations that are imposed on learning and additionally reduces the opportunities to develop and acquire technical proficiencies and skills. Social and cultural capital is both required for digital fluency, but also flow out of digital fluency (Miller & Bartlett, 2012). The impact of digital fluency particularly for low income, and/or underrepresented minority students, who do not possess the technological suite of tools (enhanced by steady uninterrupted connectivity) to learn, means the reliance on developing and increasing their digital knowledge and skills becomes increasingly more challenging. Digital quality and no-cost resources are needed to further mitigate a growing digital

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