


Chapter 15

Exposing Learners to Practice: When Crisis Presents New Opportunities

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ABSTRACT

Clinical education is the center of professional preparation in healthcare fields, linking theoretical knowledge with clinical practice in the minds and behaviors of student clinicians. Clinical education, supervised by educators who are licensed professionals, is essential in the process of creating new professionals. What does a professional training program do about clinical education when the world shuts down? This chapter addresses the context of a private, not for profit university's response to the COVID-19 public healthcare crisis in spring of 2019 and the process by which a graduate training program in speech-language pathology re-organized, and re-visioned, clinical education in that context. The process allowed an upper cohort of students to graduate successfully and on time, engaged a lower cohort of brand-new clinicians in meaningful clinical learning, and taught the program new lessons about what is important in designing clinical education.

INTRODUCTION

The rise of COVID-19 in spring of 2020 put extreme pressure on the already fragile system of higher education in the United States (U.S.). As of mid-March 2021, over 397,000 cases of COVID-19 had been identified at over 1,800 institutions of higher education in the U.S. (New York Times, 2020). With students vacating dorms and campuses for the remainder of the spring 2020 semester, and many not

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returning to campus in the fall as institutions held fall courses online, large numbers of colleges and universities lost a great deal of revenue from refunding or not receiving payments for housing and meal plans. In July 2020, the House Subcommittee on Higher Education and Workforce Investment received testimony from several college, university and educational research association presidents and chancellors. In that testimony it was noted that the higher education industry has been aware of the need for change in several areas, but the COVID-19 crisis accelerated and magnified that need. Common relevant themes that ranged throughout these testimonies were the need for digital access equity for all students, to equip faculty members with strong pedagogy and training for online teaching and learning, and investment in technology (House Subcommittee on Higher Education and Workforce Investment, 2020).

These developments have made it more important than ever for institutions of higher education to use creative problem solving to innovate in order to provide students with the best learning opportunities possible. The College of Education and Human Services (CEHS) at Abilene Christian University (ACU) has committed to developing innovative experiential learning opportunities that are sustainable and scalable. College leadership's response to the challenges of COVID-19 demonstrates the college's continued commitment to do so, even in the midst of the most challenging circumstances.

In this chapter, the authors use the work of the department of Communication Sciences and Disorders (CSD) and their quick pivot from traditional clinical education practices to alternative clinical education programming as a case study for exposing learners to practice using innovative strategies in providing clinical skills training.

BACKGROUND

ACU has a strong commitment to innovation, having launched a well-known mobile learning initiative in 2008 which put smartphones and mobile devices in the hands of every student, and provided training opportunities for faculty in using these technologies (Young, 2011). In the face of the COVID-19 crisis, the university's senior leadership remained committed to using innovative strategies in prioritizing continued student learning. A main goal of the administration was to insure that, as far as possible, students were able to remain on their current trajectory for graduation. For the CEHS, being able to maintain progress for students meant that it was critical to continue clinical training experiences within the health professions programs housed within the college.

In order to support student progress, both university and college leadership committed to providing technical support for all faculty to conduct their courses online and to maintain personal communication with one another and with students. College leadership communicated with faculty in mid-March, asking them to explore what additional technologies might be helpful in supporting their continued work with students when face-to-face meetings were suspended. Additional technological supports such as headsets and professional video conferencing accounts were purchased for all faculty members.

As the center of clinical training for allied health programs at the university, the CEHS faced additional challenges. The CEHS is one of four academic colleges within the university, each of which houses multiple departments, centers, and/or institutes. The departments contained in the CEHS are Communication Sciences and Disorders, Kinesiology and Nutrition, Occupational Therapy, Social Work and Teacher Education. The Center for Speech, Language and Learning (CSLL) is housed within the Department of Communication Sciences and Disorders and provides speech and language treatment

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