Chapter 106

Inequities Revealed:
Pre–Pandemic Online Students and Faculty During the Global Health Crisis

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ABSTRACT

With the onset of the pandemic associated with COVID-19 taking hold in North America in spring of 2020, higher education institutions responded swiftly to reduce virus transmission by shifting in-seat courses to virtual-only instruction. Many faculty and students had already been engaged in online teaching and learning from the semester's onset. Still, these students were not exempt from facing challenges and inequities directly related to, or coinciding with, the change in instructional delivery. This chapter serves to share the stories of a diverse group of four faculty and four students who were already engaged in online learning at the time of this mid-semester shift and identify key barriers experienced. The most common themes include parenting and childcare responsibilities, supporting colleagues and other learners, difficulty maintaining work and study routines, and the direct impact of illness.

INTRODUCTION

While much attention is being given to the inequities faced by students and faculty who were abruptly required to move instruction online during the global health crisis of COVID-19, less attention has been given to acknowledging that students and faculty who were involved in online programs prior to the onset of the pandemic were not immune to the exposure of inequities during this tumultuous time.

This chapter aims to defend the fact that students in online programs (and the faculty who teach for them) faced parallel inequities to in-seat students during institution-wide and academia-wide shifts to online instruction. Personal experiences of online students and online faculty will be shared in this chapter to provide context in describing these inequities. As a faculty member who primarily teaches online at a university that offers both online and in-seat instruction, the author has been approached by colleagues who repeatedly pointed out that "at least nothing had to change for your course," or "at least

your students were not impacted," or "at least this is business as usual for you." This dismissal of the instructional and learning experiences of online students and faculty during the pandemic is not only unwarranted, it is presumptuous and patronizing.

The upheaval of day-to-day life for students and faculty during the global health crisis is not limited to their experiences within academia and studentship; to act as though online students and faculty experienced business as usual is inaccurate and perhaps naïve. While the specifics of impact and exposed inequities of a post-adolescent, traditional, in-seat student may be different than those of an older career-switcher in an undergraduate or graduate online program, it would be neglectful not to shed light on the fact that online students and faculty experienced significant shifts in the teaching and learning experience during the pandemic. Specific areas in which new inequities were exposed include (but are not limited to) those related to parenting and childcare responsibilities, supporting colleagues and other learners, difficulty maintaining work and study routines, and direct impact of COVID-19 illness.

This chapter will share anecdotes of students and faculty, across eight North American institutions of varying size and geographical context, who were already involved in online coursework at the start of the Spring 2020 semester. However, when the term for in-seat students shifted online in March of 2020, they experienced new challenges in terms of resources and time. Examples of inequities among these students and faculty participating in online coursework will be described.

Background

The impact of COVID-19 on institutions of higher education is still developing, and as such, new publications are emerging regularly that speak to the impact of the pandemic on educational experiences and related transitions. However, the global health crisis is recent enough that the scope of literature is somewhat limited on the role that shifting education to an all-virtual experience played on highlighting inequities that surfaced during this change.

Faculty already teaching online, or new to the shift to virtual instruction, found themselves needing to be more mindful of student needs associated with the pandemic. Whether showing compassion for students who experienced illness or being empathetic toward those who had to care for others who contracted the virus, faculty have found themselves needing to offer increased flexibility for students (Corbera et al., 2020; Sahu, 2020). Even for those who have not personally contracted COVID-19 or who have not had loved ones who have, students reported that a fear of the virus directly impacted their focus and motivation (Pan, 2020).

Sitzman and Leners (2006) note that university students in online courses greatly value caring attitudes and behavior on the part of instructors, and this pandemic has certainly been an opportunity for faculty to demonstrate these characteristics at a critical time. Online instructors need to be particularly vigilant to notice the students who are not engaging or who seem to need support or assistance, and to actively reach out to provide necessary guidance and advisement (Gillett-Swan, 2017, Tanis, 2020). Institutions ought to determine a centralized way to share information about campus and community resources in order to demonstrate these caring attitudes and provide information for accessing mental health support for students and employees (Corbera et al., 2020, Sahu, 2020).

Those teaching coursework during the pandemic would benefit from awareness of the impact of the health crisis not only on mental health functioning (Cellini et al., 2020; Prime et al., 2020; Sahu, 2020), but also associated sleep disruption (Cellini et al., 2020; Lee, 2020), loss of appetite (Lee, 2020), economic and financial stability (Prime et al., 2020), and intersecting factors of socio-economic differences,

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