Chapter 13

Analyzing IT Opportunities for Inclusive Digital Learning:
The Largest Academic Project Ever Implemented During the COVID–19 Era

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ABSTRACT

COVID-19 caused a drastic closure of universities with traditional campus instruction. The university discussed in this chapter is a large institution out of which two campuses were examined for remote faculty training and student impact. The results from two short surveys for students and faculty are presented. Faculty responses focused on the perspective of facilitating remote courses and what direct impact remote teaching has had on their personal lives. The students' responses were mixed. Some participants stated that remote courses positively impacted their self-engagement and performance, and the remaining said that they had noticed a downward trend in performance. Five lessons learned are derived from observations and participants' provided information regarding the lack of communication and faculty engagement in training. By identifying the lessons learned, recommendations for each are provided for future-readiness and insights on how to influence engagement and approach communications and faculty attitude factors.

INTRODUCTION

In response to COVID-19, higher education pushed faculty to quickly identify digital learning solutions to transform classrooms into remote learning. Critically to faculty was if there were significant differences using online tools to emulate traditional classrooms. Combined with this concern was the lack of professional faculty development, learning engagement, and facilitation requirements. The pandemic caused many universities to jump on the concept of repurposing teaching, adopting video-conference

solutions for business meetings. While technology was available, academic institutions' negative impact was the lack of adequate faculty training and ample time to prepare for teaching continuity.

Although crises can lead to inclusive turning points, these opportunities could be costly if the institution does not consider prior situational knowledge and lessons learned. The University to be discussed in this chapter is a large public university residing in the United States, which required shifting to remote learning in one week. The only exceptions were lab-intensive courses which required face-to-face instruction to about 10% of the students. This chapter discusses the steps and sudden development to convert face-to-face courses to a remote environment in one of the largest public university systems. Two campuses are introduced to sample the faculty preparation before teaching remote and the students' reaction to distant learning.

The first section examines the challenges for tech-enabled inclusive education worldwide. The faculty learning frameworks to empower students to remote learning are discussed. The next sections review the faculty training plans and teaching models to enhance faculty course design, pedagogy, and technology use. The chapter describes two local surveys administered to faculty and students to gain their perspectives and beliefs on remote courses. Lastly, it glances over the areas for improvement during the transition to remote classes through a series of lessons learned and recommendations.

BACKGROUND

According to Moe and Rajendran (2020), the online learning pool has changed from 30% pre-coronavirus to almost 90% on a global scale. Densely populated schools have the option to teach online during a health crisis; however, there could be many obstacles to implementing online courses not only from individualized teaching but also from students' expectations and available technology. Heldt et al. (2021) conducted faculty perception studies to measure attitudes towards remote learning while taking a three-months online training course during the pandemic. They found that 68% of the trainees and 61% of the faculty preferred in-person training. Both groups felt that after returning to in-person, some lectures could be delivered effectively online. Professional development has always been a concern to faculty for training effectiveness, sponsorships, and practical application.

Baldiris Navarro et al. (2016) propose that inclusive learning is challenging, but recipients can be productive if faculty access Open Educational Resources for curriculum development. A great deal has been written about inclusive learning, but technology becomes a mediator to learning when it is considered. Therefore, inclusive digital technologies can enhance learning opportunities for all and overcome geographical challenges in a wide spectrum and conceptual way. Many of the universities worldwide have scrambled to put courses online in a matter of days. A similar scenario has played among American universities. For many institutions after the transition, the challenges have resulted in budget cuts, decreased enrollments, and student lawsuits asking for tuition reimbursement. Witze (2020) believes that in the long term, remote learning options will still be available even after in-person classes resume for some universities.

Digital Learning and Competence around the World

Academic leadership is critical to ensure remote teaching, and procedures and policies to support efficacy and continuity must be in place. According to Mazey and Richardson (2020), the United States

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