

Reflecting on the Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Higher Education

Salome C. Nnoromele*
Ohio University

Introduction

Analyses of the literature on higher education within the last decade would paint an image of a struggling institution: fiscal concerns leading to financial insolvency of several colleges; increasing tuition costs and mounting debts for students; impact of changing demography on enrollment; debates on access, equity, and student success (Tandberg and Martin 2019). Opinions suggest that higher education has lost its mission, abrogated its role within the community, and is playing with potential extinction. A survey by Inside Higher Ed (Jaschik 2018) found that only 48 percent of Americans expressed confidence in higher education. This represents a 9-percentage point decline from 2015. Questions abound regarding the quality of the educational experience and the value of academic credentials. According to Tandberg and Martin, “higher education is facing a host of challenges, including external questions regarding its value and purpose” (2019).

Then arrived the COVID-19 pandemic. Even though colleges and universities are constantly engaged in conversations about strategic and continuity plans, no one ever imagined the havoc an unprecedented global pandemic could wreak on the fabric of higher education institutions. Working closely with faculty, staff, and administrators over the last few months and staying attuned to the narratives and ethos emerging from colleagues across various colleges and universities, I have come to appreciate the complexity as well as the resilience of the higher education enterprise. The crisis brought by COVID-19 is disruptive, unsettling, and devastating in numerous ways. But, in forcing the academe to rethink the business of teaching and learning, the pandemic is providing opportunities for higher education to regain its vision and appropriate new avenues to make itself relevant to society. The following are reflections, highlighting important lessons COVID-19 continues to teach us about the transformative power of higher education.

Technology Can Be an Effective Pedagogical Tool

As of January 2020, the average age of professors in the United States was 49 years, with 37 percent aged 55 and older (Flaherty 2020). This means that most professors grew up before the explosion of technology and the pervasive presence of the internet. As such, although traditional age students in 2020 fall within the iGen generation, defined as children who have largely grown up with technology, most of their professors understandably were not comfortable with

* **Corresponding Author:** Salome C. Nnoromele, Ohio University, 1804 Liberty Avenue, Ironton, OH, 45638. Email: nnoromel@ohio.edu.

Recommended Citation: Nnoromele, Salome C. 2021. “Reflecting on the Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Higher Education.” *Susan Bulkeley Butler Center for Leadership Excellence and ADVANCE Working Paper Series* 4(1) Special Issue: 24-32.

Acknowledgements: My gratitude to the manuscript reviewers whose positive feedback and suggestions gave me a much needed encouragement, and to my son, Patrick O. Nnoromele, who persuaded me to put my experiences into writing.

technology. Prior to the COVID-19 crisis, it was not unusual for faculty to solicit help from students with basic technology in the classroom, such as setting up a video or streaming device. Few instructors had seriously sought after and learned some aspects of the numerous digital resources that can be used to leverage learning outcomes. In fact, a 2019 study of Faculty Attitudes on Technology found that less than half of professors had taught an online course, and on some campuses that figure is even much less (Jaschik and Lederman 2019). Terms like Zoom, Teams, Whiteboard and Google Hangouts sounded like foreign languages. “Blackboard” and “Canvas” had meanings different from the Learning Management Systems they represent.

The argument for the brick and mortar classroom experience rested on the notion of quality and integrity of higher education learning. In an opinion piece aptly titled, “Why I Won’t Teach Online,” Christopher Schaberg (2018) argued that while he sees some value in online learning for some students, he would never teach online. He reasons:

I can’t get to know my students in person. I can’t meet with them in my office for regular advising sessions or crisis situations and help them through the sometimes clumsy or just confusing experiences of college. Sure, there’s Adobe Connect and Skype, but honestly, it’s just not the same. So much of what happens in real office hours involves nonverbal cues, the intangible qualities of human presence. Part of what we’re training students to do in college, after all, is to work with actual other people.

Schaberg took scathing criticism for his views. However, his questions about the quality, effectiveness, and efficiency of online teaching and learning resonated with many in the profession. Faculty invest significant portions of their lives studying and mastering their fields and designing classes to engage students with course materials in ways that help them experience the joys of learning. The fear has always been that online or virtual learning undermined these cherished aspects of teaching, which Schaberg (2018) fittingly calls “the intangible qualities of human presence.” Yet, in March 2020, within a space of two weeks, almost every faculty across the country not only moved their courses online or remotely in response to the pandemic but were actively engaged in looking for ways to make a traumatic experience meaningful for them and their students.

Despite the reluctance with digital learning, the frenzy brought on by COVID-19 gave faculty no choice but to embrace existing resources and technology in the effort to continue their classes and assist students to complete the semester. It was no ordinary fit, as many instructors across the country affirm. But, if we focus only on the trauma, we will miss the incredible transformation that occurred on how we teach and learn. Being forced to confront the demons and latent fears of using technology as a medium for teaching and learning, we discovered that we are not only capable of adapting but that technology can be an effective tool for engagement and learning in ways we never imagined. We learned that we can take advantage of online learning to provide innovative educational opportunities, and will continue to be a part of the solution (Whitaker 2020). We reaffirmed what we have always known, that neither the online nor face-to-face models, by themselves, guarantee success in teaching. Effective teaching and learning whether in the face-to-face (in-person) or the digital classroom require thoughtful planning, imagination, and creative strategies to engage students, including appropriately designed assessment instruments to gauge and reinforce learning.

Schaberg was not wrong in enumerating the things we value about teaching. But several months of discovering and evaluating the digital teaching platforms reveal that we are indeed capable of achieving the “intangible human experience” in the digital as well as in the face-to-face classroom. With just a bit of creativity, patience and flexibility, the things we value in the brick and mortar classroom can be replicated in the digital classroom and leveraged to motivate and engage students. Video conferencing through tools like Teams and Zoom can be used to maintain presence. Office hours can be kept virtually to allow students to continue to engage with faculty so they do not feel that moving online or virtually means that faculty are no longer available. Spontaneous and collaborative learning can be achieved through the whiteboard feature on Teams and Zoom. Group work can be achieved effectively in a digital classroom with breakout room features, and faculty can encourage students to continue their study groups and outside of class activities using digital tools. In many ways, we are learning that despite its advantages with regards to human physical contact, the brick and mortar classroom can be limiting. Afterall, “part of what we’re training students to do in college is to work with actual other people” (Schaberg 2018) in whatever medium and circumstances they may find themselves. Opportunity to model and provide experience to students on how to successfully engage with varying technology should be an essential part of an effective learning strategy for our time.

This is not to assume that technology is the “be all, cure all” of instructional concerns or to advocate that we transition operations to embrace the philosophical strategies of online mega-universities. Not at all. One of the many things we learned from moving classes to the digital platform is that technology, as a tool created by imperfect humans, has its own limitations. Internet failures, power outages, software malfunctions and security issues, like the recent security breach with Proctortrack, can be very disruptive to learning. Even when digital learning platforms function as designed, there could still be problems with use and protocols. For example, using the “chat” feature in Zoom or Teams can be a meaningful or cumbersome experience, depending on instructor’s and students’ digital knowledge base. And, even at its best, the “chat” feature is not a substitute for the give and take of the brick and mortar classroom discussions. In addition, it is also becoming obvious that our students’ savviness with social media and everyday apps does not equate to competent usage or agility with online learning tools. Often, faculty who are themselves struggling with the technology have to use valuable class time to help students navigate software or connectivity issues.

But rather than ditching technology because it can fail or not work the way we expect or prefer, faculty can take the lead in providing real-time feedback and advocacy that helps leverage product improvements. We can use our experiences (both the good and the bad) to initiate and advance positive changes in campus technological infrastructure, software design and resources to achieve optimal learning opportunities for our students. Software designers are constantly introducing new products and soliciting feedback for existing products from faculty. We should make use of these opportunities to have a voice in influencing what the learning landscape of the future would look like. A recent whitepaper published by Workday (2020) suggests that “trends will continue to demand faster, more effective responses, and outdated planning processes just won’t cut it... higher education institutions need to be practice active, continuous planning.” As

higher education landscape continues to change, faculty must be involved in helping their institutions improve learning in all platforms.

Meeting Our Students Where They Are

Not only are we gaining new tools to engage students and leverage learning outcomes, the trauma and disruption of COVID-19 is leading us to rethink and ask questions about curriculum and classroom practices, including content coverage, assessment, and engagement. Do students have to read those 500-page books or novels to gain needed information or knowledge? Might shorter texts be most effective in teaching content, critical thinking, and analytical skills? Is it necessary to cram content into a single semester course or might there be ways of breaking up learning materials into manageable units for student consumption? Will the nature of assessment and exams remain the same? What about policies and course requirements? In sum, how can we meet the challenges of these confusing times, while enabling our students to learn and be successful?

There is widespread acknowledgment that things are now different. There is no crystal ball to predict the future and show the academe how to continue to meet its mission, despite current and impending disruptions. But, as some faculty have echoed, the questions provide the opportunity to “reconsider what we value,” and “why we gather together in places like universities” (Goldrick-Rab and Stommel 2018). What would we want our students to remember about this year, this historic event and how the profession handled it? What impact would these changes and reflections have for the future of teaching and learning? Faculty are suggesting that the COVID-19 experience offers a chance to consider the whole student and err on the side of generosity. “In such a sad and terrifying time as this, the best way I can think to teach my brilliant, brave young students right now is...suffused with love and generosity, patience and understanding” (Johnson 2020:13). “Love,” “generosity,” “patience,” and “understanding” may not have been higher education primary vocabularies pre-COVID-19. But they are not incompatible with rigor. They also have practical pedagogical implications for the classroom.

In “Teaching the Student We Have, Not the Students We Wish We Had,” Goldrick-Rab and Stommel (2018) argued that “Today’s college students are radically different from the students occupying college classrooms even a decade ago... Today’s college students are the most overburdened and under-supported in American history.” They urged faculty to think about the realities of their students’ experiences rather than their own when designing their courses. Shifting paradigms is not easy. However, recognizing the complex and diverse needs and lives of our students provides an opportunity to rethink what we teach and how we teach it. COVID-19 has forced us to reimagine almost every aspect of the university experience, from new student orientation to convocation to rushing for sororities and fraternities. Teaching and learning, the most important aspect of the higher education enterprise cannot be left behind. Rather than relying on old tools that catered to specific students (mostly traditional students with little or no responsibilities outside of college), we are being asked to recognize that our courses and curriculum need to serve the entire populations of our students. Our students are diverse in multiple ways. Appreciating the diversity of our student population, who they are and where they come from, their strengths and struggles, we can redesign our courses to build in different options and pathways for their success. Course design needs to “include a critical examination of our tools, what they afford, who they (include and) exclude... and how humans learn”

(Goldrick-Rab and Stommel 2018). As Johnson (2020:13) reflects, “the responsibility we have to protect and preserve one another isn’t new, but this disaster made it newly implicit, and perhaps whatever it was about the past that allowed us to ignore that responsibility for so long isn’t something we should want to return to.”

In practice, this might mean rethinking course content in ways that examine the inclusivity of our models, readings, and assignments. Understanding that some of our students have jobs and other competing demands, we might consider one that helps them to do the work and learn, even if it is not on our preferred timeline. Instead of the traditional in-person office hours, we could also include virtual office hours so that all students can have access to faculty time. If students do not show up for office hours, how about inviting them to conversations with the instructor and making it part of the course requirement? Weimer (2020) writes about the difference a word switch like “student hours” as opposed to “office hours” can have on students’ perception of faculty approachability. We can indeed weave into our course design a welcoming tone, and policies that indicate that the classroom does belong to the students.

Assessment of learning continues to pose challenges for faculty as they transitioned in-person designed courses online or virtually. Some agonize on how to remain flexible and accommodating while being fair to all students and maintaining the integrity of their timed exams. But, instead of worrying about students cheating or putting students through the trauma of having proctored online tests, how about redesigning class assignments and exams that allow students to actually show what they have learned as opposed to how quickly they can respond to timed questions? Such a paradigm shift, however, would require faculty to change their “focus from prosecution to prevention.” Integrating problem-based, case-based, and project-based design models into assessment can help create a learning environment that simultaneously reduces motivation to cheat while making cheating more difficult. Every discipline has problems that it aims to solve. How about designing assessments around those issues and engaging students in a process that allows them to use their creativity to approach the solution? Faculty can choose an aspect of course material that students historically find challenging and ask students to produce a video that teaches that topic to the instructor. Instead of creating questions and asking students to respond to them, how about flipping the model to asking students to create the questions and provide answers to those questions? (Bart 2017).

In a recent article, Supiano (2020) reports the surprise a faculty member had when he overhauled the quick recall and define-terms type of exam he used for in-person classes, and opted for open-book take-home essay-based exams for the on-line version of his class. He concluded:

Sometimes when you give an essay exam, you get a sense of what students are doing, they come into the exam and their heads are filled with lots of information, and they’re sort of ticking off the key points that you might be expecting to see. With more time, students instead synthesize ideas and weave together cohesive responses, demonstrating a deeper understanding of the material. They move from trying to give the answer they thought [the professor] wanted to producing their own pieces of writing (Supiano 2020).

Problem-based, case-based, and project-based assessment models can also work for science laboratory courses. It is a real challenge reducing science experiments that involve the sense of

touch and smell into a digital format. However, Emily Fisher, director of undergraduate studies for the biology department at John Hopkin’s University, encourages lab instructors to shift their focus to other forms of instruction. “If you’re trying to introduce students to an authentic research environment, then the chaos of real research is part of that,” (McMurtrie 2020). Instead of crunching data from a lab experiment, students could research and write up a proposal for one. That, too, she notes, is part of the life of a scientist. “Researchers don’t just pipette all day. They do a lot of thinking” (McMurtrie 2020). There will always be debate among faculty in terms of what teaching and learning strategies are most useful in achieving classroom success. No doubt, “the digital revolution gives faculty far more tools for assessment than the traditional paper or worksheet. Now students can better exercise their creativity in presenting their learning through a combination of text, images, videos, and other media” (Velez-Torres 2020). We can also return to those time tested and proven strategies that we may have abandoned, like open-text exams. However, our willingness to embrace change and seek different ways to innovate our teaching and cater to diverse student populations will send a message of compassion and care to our students.

Cultivating a Culture of Care

For an entity that historically is slow to act or change, the speed with which colleges and universities responded to the pandemic and the scale and depth of the response are quite remarkable. The point is that the pandemic unmasked the economic issues that colleges and universities have always known were there, but which they had chronically ignored. For years, we had numerous conversations and collected data about the inequity in higher education. We knew that students from low-income families, first generation students, and minority students often struggle with access and opportunities. During the COVID-19 crisis, however, it was no longer a matter of data and storytelling. We all became witnesses to the breadth and depth of the issues, and the evidence could not be ignored. The burden the pandemic placed on many students exposed the staggering class divides that always existed in higher education (Patel 2020). Schools with predominantly first generation and economically challenged students had to confront obstacles rooted in systemic and social inequalities. We noted that some of our students had cell phones but not computers or laptops. Some had no Wi-Fi, and those that did had such weak connections it rendered them practically useless. We saw that several of our students were also parents who suddenly found themselves caring for their children at home while trying to take classes at the same time. Most struggled with sharing Wi-Fi connections with their school-age children who also had to get schoolwork completed. A few students had housing challenges and insecurities. Some did not have a safe environment at home; and some had no home to which to return. Others, who may have had a safe home to return to, did not have their own private rooms or a space conducive to learning. Faculty lament the discomfort students face in having to discuss sensitive topics in spaces shared by siblings and, sometimes, the whole family.

In response to the pain and suffering the pandemic placed on students, colleges and universities worked to put together support, with varying degrees of generosity. Many launched fund-raising campaigns for emergency money that could be used on a case-by-case basis for things like airfare back home, a rental deposit, storage, food, rent and utility bills. Some carved out exceptions for students with no other housing options to remain on campus. Some colleges committed to paying their student workers through the end of the semester, and many devised different ways to keep students employed virtually over the summer and Fall semesters (Patel

2020). From providing laptops to students to continue their education, to boosting connectivity on campus so that students can connect to Wi-Fi from their cars, to offering pass/fail options, institutions have risen up to stand in the gap, providing assistance to minimize the disruption and trauma of the COVID-19 experience. It is unfortunate that colleges and universities needed a tragic, universal event to cue them to the needs and sufferings of their students. But now that we are aware of both the needs and the solutions, we cannot afford to go back to the way things used to be. We can cultivate a culture of care within the academe. Higher education must consciously and strategically commit to investing in programs and initiatives that support our varying student populations.

Conclusion

When the crises began in March 2020, few of us could have predicted how long it would last. Most administrators, faculty and staff thought that the crisis would surely be over by the end of the Spring semester, giving us the opportunity to use the summer months to heal and prepare for the Fall semester. Few anticipated the tumult and confusion we are still engaged in and the questions surrounding the best approach to teaching and learning for Fall 2020, Spring 2021, and thereafter. There are many things we do not know about the future. What we do know, however, is that higher education will never be the same. Jacques Berlinerblau (2020) describes his new classroom reality:

Through the medium of Zoom, my students are geometrically arrayed across my computer screen in little Brady Bunch boxes. One is a passenger in dad's car, her seatbelt draped around her like an ambassador's sash. Unbeknown to another participant, his brother is fixing a sandwich off in the background: ham, cheese, tartare mayonnaise, Kaiser roll, all that. Most of the others are reclining on their beds in the rooms where they grew up, played Pokémon, and never once imagined that their college dreams would be waylaid by COVID-19. I never once imagined anything like this either. The only doomsday scenarios that I ever entertained centered on the unhealthy, compromised organism that is the American professoriate.

None of us ever imagined anything like the current time, with its heartaches and blubbing hope. As I write, there are 9,278,400 confirmed COVID-19 cases in the United States. 230,879 have died. If the trend continues, 317,312 people are projected to succumb to this virus by December 1, 2020. Worldwide, there are 46.4 million confirmed cases and 1.2 million+ deaths. This is not only mind-boggling but mentally debilitating. Recently, the Center for Disease Control issued data indicating that twenty-five percent of Americans ages 18-24 have seriously considered suicide in the past couple of months. These are our students. It is true that suicide among college students were already on the rise pre-COVID-19. There is no question, however that the pandemic exacerbated the feelings of isolation, loneliness, anxiety, and defeat suffered by students. The digital platform, by itself, can increase the feeling of anxiety, confusion, and isolation. But it can also be used to bridge the gap and effectively engage our students. We cannot unlearn what we learned about the divergent and varying needs of our students. We can no longer return to the false security of years past. It is up to us to decide how to use our resources and creativity to extend care and support to our students physically and emotionally within and outside the classroom.

References

- Bart, Mary. 2017. "Five Classroom Assessment Techniques for the Online Classroom." *The Teaching Professor* (Online). Retrieved August 16, 2020 (<http://qa.teachingprofessor.com/topics/online-learning/grading-feedback-online-learning/five-classroom-assessment-techniques-online-classroom/>).
- Berlinerblau, Jacques. 2020. "After Coronavirus, the Deluge." *Chronicle of Higher Education* (Online). Retrieved June 27, 2020 (<https://www.chronicle.com/article/after-coronavirus-the-deluge/>).
- Flaherty, Colleen. 2020. "The Aging Faculty." *Inside Higher Ed* (Online). Retrieved August 2, 2020 (<https://www.insidehighered.com/quicktakes/2020/01/27/aging-faculty>).
- Goldrick-Rab, Sara and Jesse Stommel. 2018. "Teaching the Students We Have, Not the Students We Wish We Had." *Chronicle of Higher Education* (Online). Retrieved June 30, 2020 (<https://www.chronicle.com/article/teaching-the-students-we-have-not-the-students-we-wish-we-had/>).
- Jaschik, Scott. 2018. "Falling Confidence in Higher Ed." *Inside Higher Ed* (Online). Retrieved July 15, 2020 (<https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2018/10/09/gallup-survey-finds-falling-confidence-higher-education>).
- Jaschik, Scott and Doug Lederman. 2019. "2019 Survey of Faculty Attitudes on Technology: A Study by Inside Higher Ed and Gallup." (Online). Retrieved June 30, 2020 (https://www.insidehighered.com/system/files/media/IHE_2019_Faculty_Tech_Survey_20191030.pdf).
- Johnson, Lacy. 2020. "Survival Pedagogy." *Rice Magazine, Special Issue: Life in the Pandemic, Summer 2020*: 11-13.
- McMurtrie, Beth. 2020. "The Coronavirus Has Pushed Courses Online. Professors Are Trying Hard to Keep Up." *Chronicle of Higher Education* (Online). Retrieved June 30, 2020 (<https://www.chronicle.com/article/the-coronavirus-has-pushed-courses-online-professors-are-trying-hard-to-keep-up/>).
- Patel, Vimal. (2020). "Covid-19 Is a Pivotal Moment for Struggling Students. Can Colleges Step Up?" *Chronicle of Higher Education*(Online). Retrieved August 2, 2020 (<https://www.chronicle.com/article/covid-19-is-a-pivotal-moment-for-struggling-students-can-colleges-step-up/>).
- Schaberg, Christopher. 2018. "Why I Won't Teach Online." *Inside Higher Ed* (Online). Retrieved August 4, 2020 (<https://www.insidehighered.com/digital-learning/views/2018/03/07/professor-explains-why-he-wont-teach-online-opinion>).
- Supiano, Beckie. 2020. "How the Pandemic Is Pushing Professors to Improve their Pedagogy." *Chronicle of Higher Education*(Online). Retrieved August 29, 2020 (<https://www.chronicle.com/article/how-the-pandemic-is-pushing-professors-to-improve-their-pedagogy>).
- Tandberg, David and Rebecca Martin. 2019. "Quality Assurance and Improvement in Higher Education: The Role of States." State Higher Education Executive Officers Association (SHEEO) (Online). Retrieved July 26, 2020 (https://sheeo.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/SHEEO_QualityAssurance.pdf).
- Weimer, Maryellen. 2020. "Revisiting the Syllabus." *The Teaching Professor* (Online). Retrieved August 16, 2020 (<https://www.teachingprofessor.com/category/topics/special-series/revisiting-the-syllabus>).

- Whitaker, Manya. 2020. "What an Ed-Tech Skeptic Learned About Her Own Teaching in the Covid-19 Crises." *Chronicle of Higher Education* (Online). Retrieved July 27, 2020 (https://www.chronicle.com/article/what-an-ed-tech-skeptic-learned-about-her-own-teaching-in-the-covid-19-crisis?cid=gen_sign_in).
- Workday. 2020. "How Can Higher Education Institutions Achieve Long-Term Success?" (Online). Retrieved November 5, 2020 (<https://forms.workday.com/en-us/whitepapers/organizational-agility-education/form.open.html/dl/4>).
- Velez-Torres, Wendolyn. 2020. "Flipping the Classroom and Project-Based Assessments with Book Creator." *The Teaching Professor* (Online). Retrieved August 16, 2020 (<https://www.teachingprofessor.com/topics/teaching-strategies/teaching-with-technology/flipping-the-classroom-and-project-based-assessments-with-book-creator/?cac=6360>).