The evoLLLution®

A Modern Campus Illumination

Delivering a Seamless Digitial Experience

eBook

From the Editor

Whether or not you're a regular reader of The EvoLLLution, if you're involved in the higher education industry in any way, you know that students are changing.

But the change isn't just a question of demographic shifts. Of course, learners are getting older. But they're also getting more specific about what they're looking for from higher education providers.

Today's student is a seasoned consumer—whether they're a 17-year-old looking for a full-time residential education experience or a 47-year-old looking to advance or change their career. With daily access to Amazon, Netflix, GrubHub and other seamless eCommerce engines, modern students expect more from the customer experience offered by their colleges and universities.
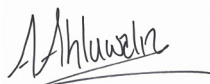
For the student, it doesn't matter what's going on in the back end. Even if their institution has five or six different systems all running simultaneously and managing different aspects of their engagement. LMS, SIS, CRM, ERP...these acronyms don't lead students to empathize with the challenges of offering a modern customer experience.

Learners want a seamless, intuitive experience. They want to log in once and navigate the institutional infrastructure with ease. They want to see personalized pathways to specific outcomes, and recommendations for what to take next. They want the administrative experience to be simple, so they can focus their time and energy on the challenging and rigorous course material they've paid to tackle.

This puts the digital experience in the limelight, and higher education providers can leverage great digital engagement to onboard students of any age and retain them across their lifetime. A modern college or university will be able to meet the lofty expectations of seasoned consumers by leveraging the systems and technology platforms that underpin their operational environments.

To help illustrate the value of this focus, we've compiled this eBook of articles by EvoLLLution contributors exploring different facets of delivering a modern digital customer experience. Hopefully it provides some inspiration to help your institution find its new normal.

Sincerely,

Amrit Ahluwalia

Managing Editor, The EvoLLLution

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About The EvoLLLution

The EvoLLLution is an online newspaper exclusively for and by those who understand higher education best.

We publish articles and interviews by individuals across the postsecondary space sharing their insights into the state of the higher education industry and their opinions on what the future holds for the industry, all through a uniquely non-traditional lens. From the college dean to the state system president to the working adult, individuals everywhere are retooling, reorganizing and rethinking their way into the 21st century. However, for years, the true innovators in the postsecondary space have been working independently; siloed and unable to communicate with one another.

The EvoLLLution, brainchild of Modern Campus, is a grassroots community that aims to bring together these innovators — at every level of every institution — to share their ideas, identify their common challenges and help move higher education into the 21st century.

The evoLLLution®

CUSTOMER SERVICE

The Modern Learner's Seamless Digital Experience

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Digital learning has presented the next significant growth opportunity for higher education, yet it is a growing challenge for a college or university to realize this moment's potential. The education marketplace is increasingly crowded with competitors and offerings—from degrees to non-credit credentials. And while online learning has made it feasible for the growing market of lifelong learners to pursue more education, academic programs contend with a variety of other priorities for potential students' time and finances.

Universities can mitigate these obstacles by designing a seamless experience for learners. Seamlessness requires reimagining educational branding and marketing, admissions, curriculum, and credentials as a singular pathway. A seamless experience begins with the learner's personal needs or goals, continues into guided and flexible learning experiences, and culminates in meaningful outcomes for the learner.

In this post, we will look at three ways in which universities can begin to build a seamless experience for modern learners, including:

• Helping learners recognize the right learning opportunities for them

• Designing courses or programs to be flexible and user-friendly

• Providing learners with meaningful and easily shareable credentials

Empowering learners to discover the right learning opportunities

There are so many educational opportunities learners can discover. With just a bit of typing and a few clicks, a learner is introduced to dozens if not hundreds of degrees, certificates, executive education, open online courses, micro-credentials, modules, and more. The wealth of options, however, can be overwhelming, making it difficult for the learner to determine which option is right for them, given their background, goals and budget.

Universities can streamline this discovery process for learners by focusing branding and marketing on answering the following questions:

• By taking this course or program, what will you learn to do?

• How will this educational experience benefit you?

• What prerequisite knowledge or skills will you need?

• What resources will this course or program give you access to?

By using these questions to form a transparent value proposition, the university empowers learners to better identify which learning opportunity most closely fits their individual educational needs and interests.
Beyond marketing existing programs, universities also can use market research to design new curricula around the learners' needs. At its core, market research is comprised of universities engaging in conversations with employers,

alumni, and prospective students in order to learn how their institution can better meet today's learners' needs for scholarly expertise, critical thinking, conceptual knowledge, and skills.

Designing flexible and user-friendly learning experiences

One factor contributing to the growth of the adult learner market is the collective need for education that either advances individuals' careers or allows adult learners to reskill for new areas of the workforce. For many adult learners, this presents the challenge of pursuing a rigorous education while also having a full-time job and limited availability, as well as facing record high tuition prices.

Credential stackability

Universities can help learners address these challenges through credential stacking: redesigning a larger credential (e.g., a degree) as multiple smaller credentials. Stack-ability decreases the upfront time and financial costs learners face, enabling some to advance their education when they would otherwise be unable to do so. In addition, as universities design each credential to provide specific knowledge and skills that pair with learners' needs, learners can begin to realize the value of their education even while working towards earning a larger credential.
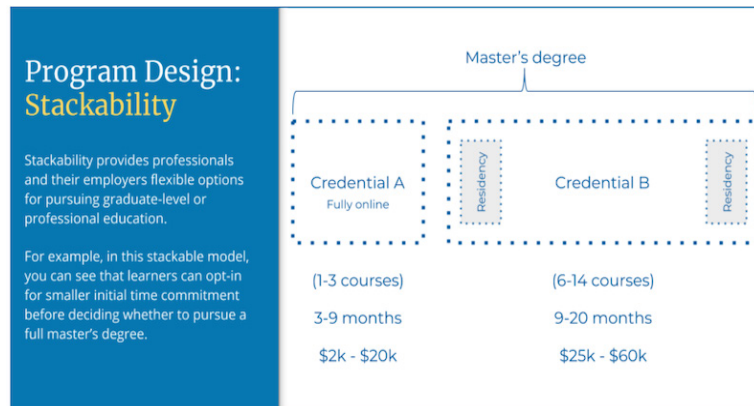
User-friendly course site design

Within programs, universities can help today's learners by leveraging digital course platforms or learning management systems (LMSs) to redesign courses as guided learning experiences. Coupling course design best practices (e.g., the Online Learning Consortium or Quality Matters) with user experience design, universities can create a standardized course site design that consistently answers the following questions for the learner:

- Where are you in the course, and what work do you need to complete this week?

- How can you communicate with your instructors or seek help?

- What are the major program milestones you have completed, and which milestones are still ahead of you?

Redesigning course sites as similarly as scaffolded learning experiences allows learners to focus their limited time on real learning instead of re-learning course sites' customized layouts or developing their own tools to keep track of course assignments or progress through the program.

Providing credentials that matter and are easily shareable

As universities aim to design educational offerings with a compelling value proposition based on learners' needs, learners will be in a stronger position to communicate the value of those credentials to employers. In addition, universities can continually improve their educational offerings through market research with alumni. For example, at Duke, we have begun to survey alumni two to five years after they have completed a degree program, asking:

- What skills or actionable knowledge did you gain from your education that has benefited you most in your careers?

- How can we improve this program's curriculum to better prepare future students for the workforce?

With this information, we can understand how well our programs meet our students' needs as well as potential gaps between the curriculum and professional education needs in the job market.

There are also opportunities for universities to design credentials to be more easily shared. For example, requesting a university transcript can currently be a multi-step process that must be repeated whenever a learner wants to reshare their credential with someone. Educational platforms like Coursera, however, have begun to demonstrate how digital platforms can simplify credential sharing. Coursera provides a shareable URL for each learner's credential; and the digital credential can include verification of a learner's identity.

Bringing it all together: Aligning the design of education with the learner's narrative

Centering education around a superior user experience can help universities attract learners to their programs and provide an education that is conducive to learners' needs and lives. To be able to craft this experience, universities must anticipate what challenges learners will face throughout their pursuit of an education—from discovering the program to earning credentials—as well as consult both prospective students and alumni on the student experience can be improved.
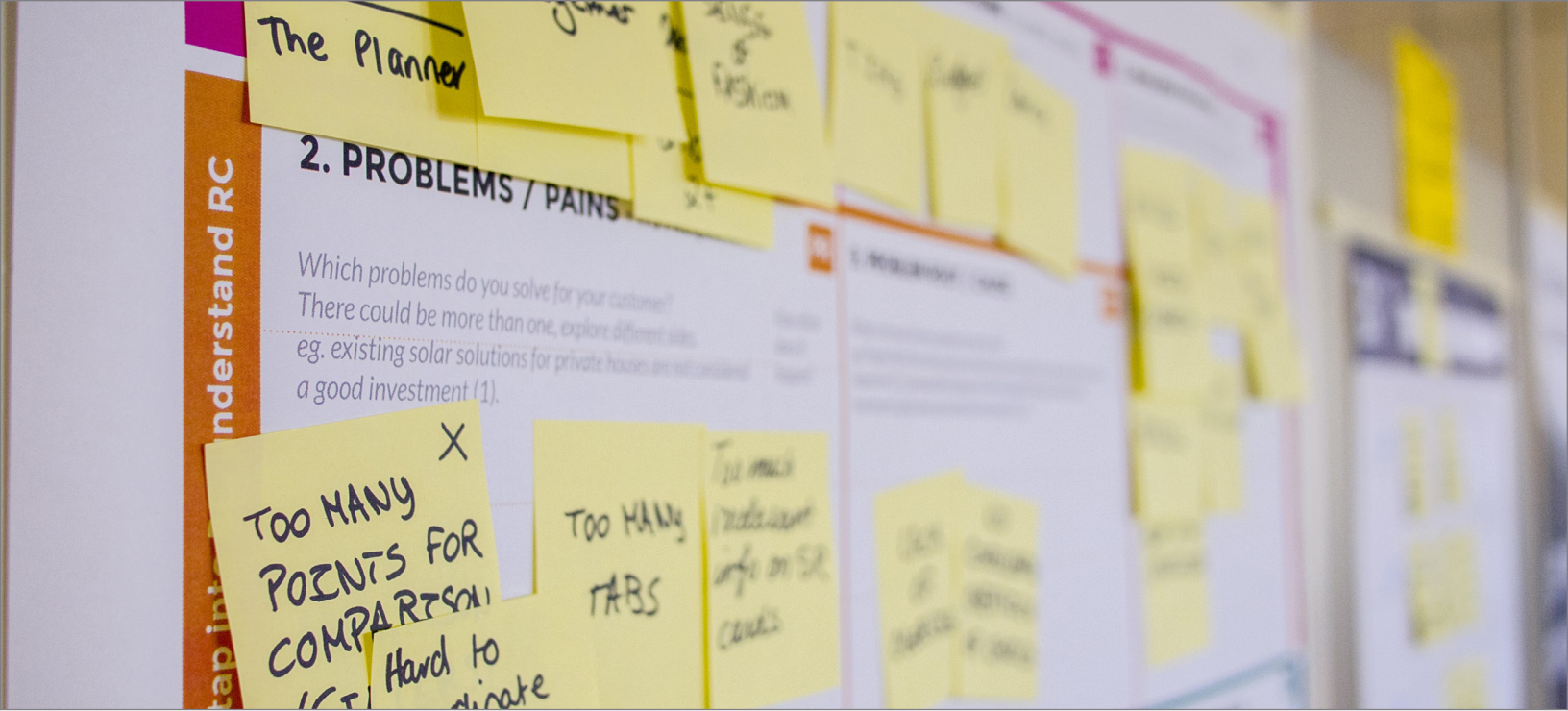
There Are No Shortcuts to a Digital Transformation

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You have spent the last several years advocating for a deliberate and aggressive digital roadmap at your institution. The impacts of COVID-19 and the onslaught of new technical capabilities such as ubiquitous data, unlimited connection, and massive processing have opened a (albeit bumpy) shortcut, bypassing additional years of advocacy and negotiation, to arrive at a turning point where digital dependency is now an institutional necessity. You arrived earlier than expected! However, the unexpected shortcut also left you wondering what to do now that you are here. And you are not quite sure where "here" really is…

Institutions experiencing the new vista of digital dependence are consequently finding that "going remote" means more than simply transitioning traditional courses to online delivery. Indeed, arriving by shortcut has its challenges. A fully digital destination is made up of a deep and coordinated culture and workforce, aligned with deliberate technology shifts that enable new educational opportunities and operating models. Unfortunately, the COVID-19 shortcut can actually shortchange an institution's ability to arrive at a more robust digital destination. The shortcut leaves out the twists and turns that, over time, provide the roadmap and building blocks for an intentional, high-quality digital environment.

If you are finding yourself in this situation, celebrate your accomplishments in the face of daunting challenges. You achieved at least one important objective—proving the value of digital infrastructure and an e-learning ecosystem within your institution. However, going forward will require you to back up a bit and possibly re-route to design for the diverse, digital learner and lead a digital transformation. That means acknowledging that you have much more work to do to ensure that your institution continues to adapt and innovate in a new environment. For example, you should make sure you are aligning technology investments with academic mission, goals, and brand. Higher education technology portfolios focusing on core academic services are complex and require annual investment that increases operational expenses while promoting data integration.

No doubt COVID-19 has shown the value of previously distinct digital platforms: student information systems, learning management systems, assessment and online proctoring systems, digital library access, curriculum and credential management systems, content management systems, enterprise resource systems, third-party educational content systems, video and web conferencing systems, video captioning systems, digital hardware and software, customer relationship management systems, and online tutoring services, to name a few. Road markers associated with these platforms and systems include

annual contract negotiations, implementation processes and project management, operational upgrades, staff training and user adoption, and broader technical integration.

> **A fully digital destination is made up of a deep and coordinated culture and workforce, aligned with deliberate technology shifts that enable new educational opportunities and**

Map strategy

If a digital transformation is your destination, then having a clear digital design map (strategy) is key and requires core foundational practices. Digital innovation needs to come from upper leadership and requires developing a culture wherein ideas are assets, experimentation is valued, and decisions are data-informed.

Innovation support

Institutions that have leveraged executive support for innovation and shifted to a discovery focus found success amidst the pandemic, as have universities that have treated ideas as assets. Ideas fuel growth, and creating a culture that values and respects new ideas creates opportunity mindsets that inspire change. For example, simplifying the admission process and migrating to online advising were ideas that promoted access for Utah State University, helping us to meet our land-grant access mission.

Culture

Complimentary, developing a culture to be able to move first and experiment is vital. An organization open to agility and experimentation will be able to fail fast and make decisions. This creates a nimble organization that can pivot and meet the diverse student population's educational needs.

Be data-driven

The final key is to practice being data-driven. All the technical systems interrelate or complement each other, and how you can leverage the data contributes to enhanced digital maturity. For example, a comprehensive student data analytics strategy depends on access to

multiple systems (student information system, learning management system) that, together, provide statistical insights that lead to actionable data, I—for example, academic innovations like competency-based education (CBE). Integrated and viable CBE programs are built within student information systems, leveraging robust assessment tools, learning and content management systems, and in some cases, third-party educational content solutions.

Like any good GPS, there are clear starting and destination points, and there are always hazards to watch out for along the way. A shortcut may bypass a one or two, but it is usually better to address hazards head-on, to build confidence, and to fail fast to overcome them effectively. For example, supporting robust digital systems that provide access to valuable data can also expose an institution to misuse and data breach. An institution should take the time to develop a comprehensive data governance policy that guides users while protecting the institution and those it serves. Another hazard is ignoring the reality of "implementation fatigue." Designing and sharing a plan creates transparency and can prevent student, faculty and staff from feeling overwhelmed by new digital tools that are meant to assist and support them but that they perceive as burdensome, never-ending, and just more tools to learn and add complexity to their responsibilities.

Your conditional digital destination can be redesigned into an intentional digital transformation plan that creates an environment in which your institution can more effectively adapt to the post-COVID new normal by assessing and benchmarking your current digital state, ensuring executive sponsorship for innovation, building a culture of ideas as assets, valuing experiments, and practicing being data-driven.

Creating a Champagne Experience on a Beer Budget: Delivering on Modern Learners' Customer Service Expectations

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In my experience, students' expectations of what the university should be delivering varies greatly—especially in continuing education, because we serve such a large and diverse audience.

Some adult learners have high expectations for instant gratification, flexible policies when it comes to deadlines and refunds, 24/7 service, and personalization. Others are simply happy to have a space where they can grab dinner between work and class. These expectations can't always be explained away as generational differences. Rather, you need to understand your students' expectations, and you need to want to understand your students' expectations.

As continuing education becomes increasingly commodified, leaders must understand that program offerings are only part of creating a competitive advantage. If you're not able to compete on price, you better be able to compete on service. How are your students interacting with you? Are they walking into your building because they want to, or is it because your enrollment operations are paper-based and they have no other choice? Are you requiring students to fill out the same information repeatedly because their data is sitting in one system that doesn't "talk" to another system? How long is it taking them to get a transcript?

What companies like Amazon and Uber get right is they start with human-centered design. This is where higher education frequently gets it wrong, especially with adult continuing education students who are typically forced to conform to operational workflows built to serve traditional-age, campus-based students: "Sorry, we close at 5:00 p.m." "Oh, you're going to need to come in and sign a form." "The person who takes care of that is at lunch. They should be back in about an hour."

Amazon and Uber start with their desired customer experience. From there, they look at the processes and workflows needed to deliver that experience. Finally, they select the technology (or technologies) that will facilitate the processes required to deliver a seamless service experience. In the majority of cases, however, higher education does the opposite. Institutions pick technology systems, revise their internal processes to fit the limitations of those systems, then require students to follow the processes. The student experience becomes a casualty of the decision, not the driver of the decision.

Four Key Characteristics of the Shopping Experience Provided by eCommerce Leaders:

1. Machine Learning and Predictive Commerce

Can you imagine your Amazon Alexa saying, "Registration opens this morning for next semester. Would you like me to register you for your next classes and order your textbooks?" Imagine Alexa knowing which classes to register you for based on your degree/certificate path and the courses you've previously completed, then paying for them with your credit card on file—all without having to drive to the Registrar's Office or log in to the campus website.

2. High-Quality Online Shopping Experience

Amazon's transactional and shopping cart experiences are also a plus. Their design of the purchase process is clean and intuitive, with multiple visual cues to let you know how many items are in your cart. Items stay in your cart even if you end the shopping session without completing a purchase. There's a "Save for Later" option and a tracker that tells you whether the price of items in your cart (or on your list) has increased or decreased since you added them. Opt-in notifications also can be sent with cart reminders. The whole process is easy—perhaps too easy, as evidenced by my monthly credit card statements!

3. Empowered Staff

On the rare occasions when I have had to contact Amazon about an issue, the service agents I worked with were clearly empowered to make decisions regarding my issues. In some cases that meant not charging me for a digital download; in others, it meant sending me another item at no cost. These decisions did not have to be escalated. I did not have to talk to four people in order to reach a resolution. It was clear that my loyalty as a customer was worth more to them than arguing over a $1.99 MP3 or a $50 insulated tumbler. Additionally, there was someone available to assist me regardless of when I reached out—early morning, evenings, weekends, etc. My interactions took five or ten minutes at most, and I could get on with the rest of my day.

4. Customer Reviews

Reviews are another powerful part of the Amazon shopping experience. Customers are more likely to trust the experiences of other customers over the sales pitch from the company. In my experience, higher education approaches the notion of public-facing reviews with resistance. The fact is, we don't have to like that students use social media and Yelp to air their grievances, but we do have to accept that we live and work in a hive-mind culture. It is critical to have a plan in place for addressing this feedback transparently. About ten years ago, I was working with my former department on developing the first social media strategy for Penn State World Campus. As part of this process, we researched peer and competitor social platforms to see how they were handling negative feedback. It was an eye-opening experience. One of the largest for-profit providers at the time had months-old unanswered complaints sitting publicly on their Facebook page. It was not a good look for the institution, but it was an important lesson for us and set the bar for how we wanted to embrace concerns and complaints and build a CQI feedback loop back into the organization.

Delivering the Amazon Experience in the Postsecondary Environment

I can hear some of my continuing education colleagues saying, "There's no place for customer service in higher education" and/or "If we had Amazon's budget, we could do all of these things, too!"

The notion of students as customers is anathema to many ears, for sure, but I encourage my colleagues to embrace it in the context of continuing education. Adult learners are shopping education providers like never before, especially with the rise of for-profit institutions. The days of an adult learner persisting to graduation at one institution are being replaced with adult learners who swirl from school to school until they're finished. Articulation agreements make it easy for learners to transfer credits and supplement their education. The rising costs of education necessitate "credit shopping" and the ability to complete general education requirements at lower-cost community colleges before moving to another school for degree completion. Adult learners are becoming savvier than ever at what they perceive as "getting their money's worth." Continuing education institutions that don't at least lean in to this changing tide will find themselves on the outside looking in. Even the powerhouse brands in the CE marketplace know they can no longer rest on name alone. The times they are a-changin'.

To be clear, "students as customers" does not mean that the customer is always right. We are still educational institutions, of course, and we have policies and processes in place to protect academic integrity, student privacy, and governing financial regulations. To my mind, "students as customers" means we don't force them through arbitrary processes that are intentionally complex. A now-retired colleague once said to me that he buried a policy on the website so that students couldn't find it because it was a policy written in their favor.

This is where I hope, dear reader, you are saying, "Huh?"

"Students as customers" means having staff available to answer phones and meet with students over the lunch hour. It means improving process inefficiencies. It means asking students what they need. It means showing students that you have a genuine investment in them, just as they have made a (literal) investment in you. Outside of the classroom, students can and should be your partners.

Regarding Amazon's budget, I recognize that it is not feasible for most continuing education institutions to develop an Alexa or enter into a pricey partnership with a third party to overhaul the entire student experience. Many institutions are fighting to stay afloat and/or operating with a staff of five or six people juggling multiple roles and responsibilities.

What is possible is to take the time to identify the things that are in your control:

1. Availability

It is unlikely that Amazon's 24/7/365 support is necessary for most continuing education institutions, but there are basic steps that CE offices of any size can implement. For example, structuring schedules so that the office is staffed over the lunch hour for phone calls and walk-in traffic, and rotating schedules so that each employee takes a turn staying until 6:00 p.m. instead of 5:00 p.m. to accommodate adult learners leaving work.

2. Human-Centered Design

How are your students experiencing your frontline service? How do they need to experience it? It isn't always necessary to pour money into hiring third-party consultants to discover this for you. Depending on the size of your staff, pull a few focus groups together, buy some pizza, and listen to what your students are saying. Don't explain, justify, or defend … just listen. What patterns arise in their feedback? Additionally, have your family members and friends mystery shop for you. Ask them to call and pretend to be a prospective student. Ask them to visit the building and see if anyone speaks to them in the hallways. How welcoming is your space to someone who finally gathered enough courage to stop by for program information after 30 years outside of a classroom? Institute service satisfaction surveys. These can be once a quarter/semester, or they can be after every interaction. Be mindful about asking outcomes-based questions—other than whether the staff was friendly, is the student now better able to help themselves moving forward as a result of that interaction? Are they more confident? Utilize the results of this information-gathering process to create a student experience map for your institution. Identify the vulnerabilities and begin developing workflows and processes that make things better, both for your students and your bottom line.

3. Digital Signatures

If your institution continues to require that students submit forms, can the forms be completed, signed, and securely submitted to your offices electronically? How about through mobile devices?

4. Website/Shopping Cart

In my opinion, this is the most important investment your institution can make to improve the enrollment experience—and, again, the user design and experience strategy should be driven by your experience map. Ultimately, you want a site robust enough to interface seamlessly with your Student Information System and curriculum-management system so that students can select and complete their "purchase" intuitively and securely. In 2018, students shouldn't have to manually enter course numbers and prices into an online enrollment form. Technology accelerators are sophisticated enough now to make the back-end system handoffs invisible to students. Follow the lead of Amazon and other online retailers by developing a shopping cart that incorporates visual cues. If students abandon their carts without making a purchase, ensure your design requirements include automated reminders with calls to action.

Additionally, more than 50 percent of today's web traffic comes from mobile devices. To have any credibility as a business or organization in these times of tech dominance and service demand, your website must reflect responsive design and development. Students should be able to do business with you in a way that is technology agnostic—this includes via text message, which is an emerging trend in high-touch student service.

5. Social Media

It does not require a lot of money to develop a solid social media strategy for continuing education. Reviews posted to Yelp, Facebook, etc., require almost immediate responses—with gratitude for the feedback. If staff capacity is limited or staff skills are better invested elsewhere, consider work-study students, interns, etc. Even if you are not able to give the student what they want, a transparent response is not only important for the reviewer but also for the other students watching to see what you do. For responses that dance close to the boundaries of FERPA, a public response stating that you're reaching out privately is beneficial.

Setting the Tone for the Student Experience from Registration

Admittedly I'm biased, but the enrollment experience—the entire service experience—is critical. If the reality of your students' experience isn't matching the promise you made in your recruitment materials, it damages the credibility of your institution and its brand.

The rapid deployment of technologies that allow for immediate consumption of goods has flipped the script for consumers, including adult learners shopping for continuing education. Higher education no longer has the upper hand in the relationship with adult learners. If a student doesn't receive a response to an emailed question, or if they repeatedly click "Enroll Now" on your website and are met with a blank screen, it damages the credibility of your institution and its brand.

Adult learners may shop around, but when they're ready to buy, your institution needs to be ready. If you're not, another institution will be.

Delivering A Seamless Digital Experience Beyond the Pandemic

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Although the online environment is more important than ever in this moment, it will be equally important when we step out of this pandemic. It's critical to make any improvements now and only build upon them as we get better acquainted with the digital environment. Institutions have the opportunity to see the gaps and flaws in their current systems and find solutions before students begin to look to other institutions who are highly skilled in the digital space. In this interview, Andrea Keener discusses how staff can deliver a high-quality experience, the challenges within to doing so and the key ingredients to creating a seamless student experience.

The EvoLLLution (Evo): What are some of the most significant challenges involved with serving students entirely remotely through the college's virtual channels?

Andrea Keener (AK): As far the School of Continuing Education and Professional Development is concerned, I would narrow it down to three major challenges: access, continued engagement and connection.

Access

The COVID-19 environment poses several unique challenges: the severity of impact, the length of time and the sheer scale– all truly unprecedented challenges in our lifetime. Faced with these challenges, higher education's main pillar–the brick-and-mortar mode of delivery-ceased to be possible. Suddenly, we found ourselves catapulted into a fully online or virtual delivery mode. Many familiar concepts had to be reconceptualized, and some turned out to be much more dimensional than we had previously thought; access was one of them.

We had to ensure our continuing education and adult students could log on and stay logged on to the LMS. Strictly speaking, this is a technology issue, but all of a sudden, in this environment of social distancing and within the boundaries of the COVID-19 environment, staying logged on became so much more dimensional and needed to be addressed as such. It needed to be addressed in a student-centric way in an effort to demonstrate a sense of continuity and our commitment to it as an institution.

To that end, we surveyed all students within the School of Continuing Education and Professional Development to gauge their technology needs and capacity. We made a concerted institutional effort to provide laptops and sustained technology support. We sent personalized emails to students. Our Retention and Recruitment Specialists, as well as our

campus staff provided timely updates when classes would resume. Our goal was to send a clear message of uninterrupted accessibility to our students.

Continued engagement

This second challenge could also be called the challenge of maintaining motivation. Our efforts focused on high touch student engagement strategies supported by our entire team. Since the situational demands required such a swift move to a fully remote learning environment to ensure academic continuity, this challenge had instructional implications as well. Deciding on the ratio between synchronous and asynchronous components was a valuable learning experience, and we are now able to implement its lessons during the fall term as we move towards academic sustainability in this global pandemic environment.

Faced with these challenges, higher education's main pillar-the brick-and-mortar mode of delivery-ceased to be possible. Suddenly, we found ourselves catapulted into a fully online or virtual delivery mode.

Connection

Finally, I would call the third challenge a connection to resources. Staying connected was essential for instructors, as they served as invaluable pillars of support during this time. As administrators and staff in the continuing and adult education space, we aimed to stay in supportive connection with our instructors by providing continuous training opportunities regarding remote teaching and learning and institutional updates; administration and staff moved to frequent virtual team meetings to remain connected and informed. We set up a virtual student support center to further bolster our connections with our students. Finally, in collaboration with our Center for Institutional and Organizational Learning, we designed a training program for 'Remote Learning Champions' for staff members. It included providing 'embedded' support to students, instructors, and staff. An additional goal of our Remote Learning Champions is to facilitate the delivery of a high-quality curriculum, foster student engagement, and

ensure exceptional learning experiences in a fully online or blended learning environment.

In spite of its size, the School of Continuing Education and Professional Development has always been known for personalized service and its connection to students and instructors alike. We believe that maintaining this approach is essential to ensuring a relevant and dimensional student experience and wanted to ensure we could continue in this tradition during an exclusively remote learning environment.

Evo: How have staff at every level adapted to ensure the student experience they were delivering was of high-quality and personalized, even though the entire engagement between the learner and the institution is digital?

AK: Under 'normal' circumstances, translating curriculum into digital delivery formats is a time-consuming and iterative process. In previous positions, I have gone through this process at various levels, as a faculty member and administrator. This present experience was different because of the urgency involved, lack of alternative delivery modes, and the need to attend to several parallel processes simultaneously. This global pandemic impacts all of us to varying degrees. Adapting to its challenges takes on personal and interpersonal dimensions. Our institution's empathetic leadership and our strong, internal team afforded us with the ability to provide continuous support to our students as well as to each other.

As far as the student experience is concerned, we continue to make adjustments based on lessons learned. We are mindful of the exhaustion factor both students and instructors are experiencing during this unprecedented time, and this continues to inform how we structure our classes in terms of delivery mode (synchronous/asynchronous). We remain mindful of the challenges our adult students face and tailor our programs and schedules to meet their needs. I believe making these adjustments based on the current situation's demands is necessary to maintain adult student engagement.

Evo: How would you advise faculty and staff to improve upon the work they've done so far to create that seamless experience?

AK: As an educator and administrator of a school that serves adult students and those seeking non-credit learning opportunities, the message I am

sending to instructors is to listen authentically to students' feedback. During the initial transition, we experienced an almost parallel transposition from face-to-face to synchronous learning. It became clear almost immediately, however, that this was not going to be effective. After integrating students' feedback, we are noticing how autonomously and creatively students engage with the class material. We are noticing an intentionality to their engagement that is very reassuring and affirming. Students seize the opportunity to document their learning across multiples contexts. They are able to delve into the material more fully and, as they do so, learning becomes more relevant to them.

Evo: As you think about it from your perspective as an administrator, what are the key ingredients to delivering that truly seamless digital learner experience?

AK: You have to be able to think outside the box and understand that time is often an empty variable. Student learning should be about removing restrictions and not about adding them. As the facilitator, technology removes barriers and allows for learning to become seamless. This further allows for creative and authentic expression. Providing seamless learning opportunities lets students demonstrate learning that is relevant and personally meaningful.

Students learn to navigate these tools, develop digital skills, and they also learn how to express themselves creatively. Moreover, this approach fosters institutional embeddedness.

Furthermore, it is important for staff and instructors to be digitally fluent and have access to resources and tools, as well. This is especially important since instructors teach on a part-time basis in the continuing education space. Training and professional development are main goals of ours, and we believe them to be key factors when it comes to efficiency.

Evo: Is there anything you'd like to add about the importance of delivering a seamless digital student experience in 2020 and beyond?

AK: Seamless experiences are learner-driven and technology-facilitated. Providing them within the context of an institutional support structure can increase student engagement. In terms of the adult or continuing education learner, this institutional connection can prove to be especially impactful, as it may lead to the continued exploration of educational opportunities, lay the foundation for their academic path or further their career advancement.

This interview was edited for length and clarity.

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Evo: In terms of staff efficiency, how can introducing tools that support a seamless digital experience help take the burden off staff while delivering a student experience that they expect from the college?

AK: Connecting students early on with the available institutional resources and tools available at a school such as ours is very important. This circles back to the connection piece we discussed earlier.

Recognize, Revise and Reimagine: How CE Drives Higher Education's Evolution

LESLEY NICHOLS
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF PROFESSIONAL STUDIES, EMERSON COLLEGE

There's a saying you may know: The first step in recovery is admitting you have a problem.

The ground has been shifting under our feet in higher education for the past two decades. In the United States, we're seeing a lot of debate at the national level about the value of a degree as more non-traditional students look for ways to pursue education on terms that better fit their needs. A four-year degree is still the perfect choice for some, but it isn't the right choice for everyone.

First, we need to accept that funneling everyone into the same box isn't the only path. The notion of shorter-term, lower cost, stackable credentials has really taken off in popularity. The looming student loan debt crisis is opening eyes to different perspectives for educational attainment that can be both affordable and flexible for busy lifestyles. And it's not just Millennials and Generation Z students looking for alternatives—mid-career professionals looking to change careers, obtain a promotion or start their own business are recognizing the need for lifelong learning beyond the bachelor's or master's degree.

Providing alternative academic pathways, like taking individual courses, certificates, or boot camps either for credit or non-credit, is the perfect way for higher education to open their doors and fulfill this need.

Unfortunately, tradition can be our own worst enemy. Colleges and universities have a rich history that lends our industry credibility and trust, but most of our institutions of higher learning were created to grant degrees. Consequently, the infrastructure was built to serve degree-seeking students in an era before online courses even existed.

Everything from the software systems we use, financial aid rules, transcripts, faculty hiring models, career services, health services, payment systems, marketing language, and even the definition of credit hours all cater to serving the traditional full-time student. Even the hours of business for most institutions adhere to the historical daytime model when all students lived on campus and attended classes full-time during the day.

Online, evening and weekend courses have been the great hope as a bridge to open opportunities for new audiences. But we still encounter stumbling blocks. For example, is a student taking a non-credit course eligible to access the same campus services as a degree-seeking student? What if the student is taking a weekend class and service offices are closed? We've made significant progress creating programming bridges, but the infrastructure supporting these bridges hasn't caught up yet.

It may take a critical mass of enrollment volume and public demand for alternatives to start shifting that paradigm. But at least the conversations are now happening to build momentum around the changes needed to attract and retain new audiences.

How CE Divisions Can Help Higher Ed Bridge the Gap from Traditional to the New Normal

For continuing education divisions, offering flexible, high-quality programming to non-traditional students across a diverse range of formats and program types is not new—or even particularly innovative! These divisions can play a huge role in making this peripheral approach to delivering postsecondary programming the norm.

Of course, the first step lies in bringing CE into conversations around access, infrastructure, academic planning, and support. Having that voice at the table helps to ensure that the needs of non-traditional students are considered alongside the needs of traditional degree-seeking students.

At Emerson, we've spent the past three years since I arrived trying to build exactly these sorts of bridges. Key steps we've taken include bringing graduate and professional studies under the same leadership umbrella and working more closely with academic departments to plan courses and programming. In partnership with the academic units, we've launched graduate certificate programs, taught primarily online, that can serve as stand-alone entry points for students to take individual courses, earn a certificate credential or pipeline directly into a master's degree. We've worked with academic departments to increase the number of online courses offered during the summer so that both degree- and non-degree-seeking students have access to courses that allow for flexible schedules that can balance work or internships.

We also integrated our pre-college summer program applications with the college's admissions CRM so high school students who apply for pre-college use the same system as prospective undergraduate students. This also allows us to track the progress of those who start with pre-college and matriculate into an undergraduate program at Emerson.

Most recently, we moved our physical office from an isolated space into the academic building alongside our peers in central college leadership and academic departments. The goal is to create opportunities for face-to-face interactions with our colleagues and students in order to incorporate professional education into strategic conversations. Even symbolic changes can be very powerful.

Obstacles Standing in the Way of Reimagining Higher Education

One potential obstacle standing in the way of this new reality lies in changing perspectives about what it means to open up degree courses to non-degree seeking students. Non-traditional learners might be a different age or bring different perspectives based on their work and life experience. Financial aid can be limited or non-existent for non-degree students, so self-paying students often have an expectation of receiving immediate proof of their return on investment. "How can I take what I'm learning and apply it towards my current job or facilitate a career change?" Non-traditional students aren't afraid to question their professor and challenge information presented in class, based on their own experience.

These factors can be daunting for an instructor, but CE has a role to play in dispelling the perceived negatives and highlighting the benefits of welcoming diversity, so that students of all ages and levels of experience can benefit from interacting with each other. From an infrastructure perspective, the challenge lies in working within systems and business processes that don't always fit non-traditional learning.

One issue I'm currently tackling is how to create a more seamless experience for non-degree students to register for credit-bearing courses. Our systems and policies don't allow non-degree students to self-register, so we've been working through numerous scenarios to make this process as Amazon-like as possible students while keeping the back-end mechanics manageable for our staff.

A Roadmap for Non-Traditional Leaders

Achieving a tighter relationship between CE and the main campus is absolutely achievable. It's all about building positive relationships with your peers across campus and growing your operation to a point where you can demonstrate results.

Much of my work has focused on gaining an understanding of how existing infrastructure works and how we can propose adaptations to open doors for new audiences, new types of programming, and new ways of thinking. I find that if I take the time to understand how other areas on campus work and the challenges they face, I'm a better advocate for fitting needs of our students into the framework. This knowledge gives me the credibility to speak the same language and work with others to find creative solutions that work for all parties.

It's natural to encounter skepticism, and it can be disheartening when you propose new ideas but don't get the immediate buy-in you were hoping to receive. CE units often have to prove that what they're doing is worthwhile, and it takes time to build the infrastructure and programming needed to achieve demonstrable results. If I walk into a meeting to advocate for offering more online courses, there's no incentive for anyone to listen unless I can prove there is demand for these offerings. But if I can walk into that same meeting three years later and show that we've increased online enrollment by 277 percent, those results speak for themselves.

The Digital Experience and the Analog Institution

ADRIAN HAUGABROOK
EXECUTIVE VICE PRESIDENT AND MANAGING DIRECTOR OF THE HORIZON GROUP, SOUTHERN NEW HAMPSHIRE UNIVERSITY

For decades, higher education had to follow a more rigid structure built for the traditional student—now the minority of the higher ed learner population. Institutions need to rethink their infrastructures to fit non-traditional students, who look for a more flexible and customized digital experience. In this interview, Adrian Haugabrook discusses key elements to redesigning the student experience, higher ed's responsibility to their consumer and how to create this high-quality experience as we head into a recession.

The EvoLLLution (Evo): How does the institutional responsibility to deliver high-quality learning experiences change or advance or grow during a recession?

Adrian Haugabrook (AH): My immediate thought is that it doesn't change. There are people who are doing high-quality work and have been in this space for a number of years—organizations that have built the infrastructure, capacity and capabilities to actually do this. One might say, if we're doing high-quality work, then there's nothing that needs to be amped up to service that question in terms of delivering high-quality learning experiences. However, this is the moment in time that really creates opportunity for acceleration, since many of us have seen signals in the environment for a number of years.

What this does now is help accelerate the work that's already being done. In some cases, there is innovation occurring, but more for those who are in that space of innovation, it is accelerating this work. There are a number of large aspirational goals that we have set our sights on at Southern New Hampshire University (SNHU) for 2023 and 2030. But because of the environment that we're in, we're accelerating those now to 2020 or 2021.

During these times of recession, it's forcing us to be as agile and frictionless as possible. There are so many impediments out there—clunky things that don't serve well in environments in which people are highly anxious. In this time of mass uncertainty, you need to think about what it is that you can make known to people. What can you make easier and more accessible?

The other component to this is capacity and capabilities. Ensure that you have an acceleration plan that puts you in tune with what your resources are and how to add to and flow with those resources. An agile environment or organization will have the capacity and capabilities to expand when and where it's needed to really extend that quality of service.

SNHU is well known for growth and scale both internally and externally. However, if there's a time when we feel there's slippage in the quality of service, support and content we provide to our learners for the sake of scale, we will stop scaling in order to make sure we're always putting the student first.

Evo: As you look at the online experience for adult learners—in terms of the virtual environment and their holistic engagement with the institution—what are some of the key elements to designing that experience properly?

AH: It transcends this notion of quality experience. If you have a relentless focus on the student, then you build around the student as the apparatus rather than around the institution and then trying to fit it for the student. One of the key elements in that design is flexibility. That flexibility could be the length of time required to complete tasks—flexibility in the amount of content you're absorbing, creating and curating.

The second element would be options and choices. We typically think of the educational process as linear—from point A to point B to point C. But what if it was a cyclical process, one where students are coming in and out of your learning ecosystem in different ways. This is especially true for adult learners. Their demands are very different than those we heard from traditional students. So, how do you provide the right options that allow for positive decision-making and progression?

You need to relentlessly focus on supports particularly for adult learners. They're not a monolithic group; there is disaggregation in this demographic, but institutions need to build a support system and structure that allow for easier access. This doesn't just apply to academic content but also the resources needed. When you think about a learning environment, what are all the things students need for learning? We needed to be accessible, so we built the resources right into the student portal to create a frictionless environment.

When creating this well-designed online experience, the other component is how can you create low barriers to entry? How can you mitigate or eliminate the hoops that most students go through to get things done? It's about finding solutions to create these low barriers, so they don't become anxiety-ridden activities that put stress on the students' success and progress.

Evo: As we think about the responsibility of a postsecondary institution to its digital customer, how comfortable do we need to get with that idea that we're serving customers who are shopping in a marketplace—not for a credential, but for access to an educational experience?

AH: It's interesting that we've placed higher education over here, but then everything else about the consumer is built around them. For example, why did Uber and Lyft become

so popular? It's because they were listening to consumer signals and saw the barriers that many consumers faced. When we think of the consumer, we think of a brick-and-mortar store or online shopping—that doesn't necessarily translate well to the postsecondary experience.

For a number of years, people didn't want to call students customers because it was too business-like. But we need to see them as consumers because they send us the same signals. A lot of the work that we see in these frictionless environments, the agility of ensuring a platform meets learner demand—those signals have been there for a number of years. As you build and scale up the experience, it's no longer about filling seats, it's about building an actual experience. We should be talking about product roadmaps, the learner journey, personas, profiles, SEOs etc. It's a different language, but there are appropriate places and spaces in which to use it.

Not all institutions serve the same students, but we all face the savviness of the consumer or prospective student and in the same current environment. Many institutions and organizations are really fractured right now. For SNHU, we did scenario planning in advance of the pandemic that has allowed us the time to build out a learning structure while thinking about the learner to ensure both the experience and content fit learner demands.

Evo: What are some of the main challenges or obstacles that a leader might face when trying to create this seamless student centric, digital or virtual experience?

AH: The first obstacle is that the institution is built for the itself first and the learner second. You need to flip the script, which is hard. You're going against a historical precedent, against structures and systems that were built in that way. It goes back to the capacity and capability aspect of things. SNHU had its first fully online program—not class or course but program—in 1995. So, there has been great opportunity for us to learn along the way. Even in our high growth period in 2012, the numbers looked great, but we were about to shatter systems on the inside because the systems weren't built for that kind of scale. Some of those obstacles are resetting the infrastructure and systems.

The second obstacle is the thought of solving the revenue problem by building an online infrastructure. In the COVID-19 environment, there have to be different mechanisms, but they won't solve the revenue problem. There's a deep investment required and a long tail to actually doing it. The question is, can institutions and organizations make those investments, not just from a monetary perspective, but in a way that reinvents a portion of themselves to facilitate monetary gain?

The last obstacle would be the leadership paradigm. We're trying to have a go at digital challenges with analog institutions or practices, and they don't reconcile unless you actually build an approach that allows you to be able to do that. But you have to take a bite that is enough for you– something that is chewable for the institution and for the organization. There are some pretty creative online approaches for students' return in the fall. It's less about the decisions that people are making and more about their planning and approach to their decisions, and there are some pretty neat things coming out of that.

Evo: As we shift to a broader, flexible postsecondary ecosystem–how can colleges and universities start to ensure that the non-academic aspects of the digital experience are designed to support engagement and retention?

AH: There will always be a place for a residential experience, but the signals we're seeing for the traditional coming-of-age student don't prioritize face-to-face. I have a daughter who recently graduated from college and a son who's an incoming junior in college. As early as their middle-school years, they used different platforms and technologies in their learning experiences. When they got to college, they essentially had to reset because they were given more didactic experiences.

Although there will always be a place for the residential experience, we have to look at what consumer signals are telling us. Students want a degree of flexibility so they can curate their own content. So how does that build into their learning experience, and how can they adapt and adopt that into a larger context?

Again, you can't use the online environment to solve deficits around dollars, but also around mentality. Just because you're now online doesn't mean you'll see those revenue numbers. This transition into the online environment advances and accelerates higher education. In order to work, it needs be designed for the learner first and not the institution—understanding the learner experience almost as if it's a roadmap.

Once you understand the learner experience, even in a traditional place-based residential format, how do you now begin to understand that experience in a digital context? Remember to always be truthful about your capacity and your capabilities. You're not going to be able to convert your whole institution into an online format in an instant or plan to have 500 or 10,000 online students by the end of next year. You first need to be realistic about your capacity and capabilities and plan around that. Talk about what

you buy versus what you build. Can you build the right experience or infrastructure? All of these elements need to be carefully thought out and planned.

Evo: As we've shifted to remote learning, do you think there will be a wider acceptance and adoption of online programming post pandemic, or will this experience of poorly instructed remote online courses will pertain the reputation of true online learning in the future?

AH: I think it'll add to the choice equation for many people. From the perspective of a student learner, or parent or family, it becomes a choice option. For example, in this COVID-19 environment, students and families are having to make fast decisions because campuses are re-opening. But if they don't feel safe returning to campus, they may choose to transfer to a school that will have quality online education and academic experiences, while keeping their students safe.

From a consumer perspective, they're going to let you know what they value and what they don't. So, I think we'll see, at minimum, a bifurcation of what is acceptable in high-quality online education versus what isn't. Or you might see a stratification—we don't know yet. Some of the regulations, compliance and accreditation issues are going to force some new and different perspectives, both at the federal and regional levels.

Another aspect of this new normal that we won't see is a reconciliation of K-12 to higher ed, although that would be great. But what I do see is as a result of this digital environment are organizations in places that have hybrid colleges—they'll provide all the wraparound supports and services for their students. There will be blurring between primarily high school and higher ed. Since the traditional thinking thinks of postsecondary as sitting between K-12 learning and career, part of reshaping the ecosystem will provide a connection between the two instead. It's about seeing it as a learning journey or learning roadmap versus a butt-in-seat in college.

When we talk about the learning continuum, we're not just talking about it from an academic content perspective. It IS the learning experience. The student experience is the uber category, and under that is content, support and other things. We need to envision the student experience in that way to clarify the postsecondary infrastructure.

This interview was edited for length and clarity.

The Digital Transformation in Higher Education and Its Aftereffects

LISA R. BRAVERMAN
VICE PROVOST, EXCELSIOR COLLEGE

Much has been written over the past six months about the sudden pivot this past spring by colleges and universities to digital educational delivery in response to the coronavirus pandemic. We know now from reports and conversations with colleagues that certain institutions fared better than others. Those that already delivered significant program content online were better prepared to make the shift when the pandemic struck. The many challenges that emerged from this abrupt and unexpected virtual migration have significantly tested our industry and continue to impact every aspect of our academic lives.

The total number of course conversions triggered by the swift digital transformation was staggering. According to the July 2020 survey conducted for the CHLOE (Changing Landscape of Higher Education) report, the average higher education institution migrated no less than 500 courses online and as many as 900 to 2000 courses at regional public and research universities. Individual faculty members had to convert their own face-to-face courses to online midway through the spring semester hastily and without much instructional design support. Faculty struggled as they defaulted to overused Zoom-room classes and opted away from asynchronous online instructional approaches, due mostly to a lack of preparation, time and experience.

Still, other institutions, such as Excelsior College where I currently work, already were delivering their programs online and did not need to make the same pivot. Instead, these colleges were forced to compete in an increasingly crowded virtual market where they had to focus on safeguarding enrollments, given that students were undergoing serious disruptions to their health, finances and family situations that directly impacted their study goals.

Students unaccustomed to online learning had to acclimate to all-virtual classes with unanticipated speed. To mitigate the abrupt transition, many institutions provided pass/fail grading options for the semester while others, like Stanford, made final exams optional. Still others reduced or froze their summer and fall tuition rates, while academic advising, student support services and career counseling all shifted to online delivery.

Intensive professional development for faculty, students and staff took place almost overnight and continued at most institutions throughout the summer, when campuses had to evaluate the efficacy of their approaches to prepare for this fall.

As we know, college finances were deeply affected by the swing. Already strained resources that had been earmarked for other purposes suddenly had to be reallocated by more than 69% of institutions, according to CHLOE. Upgrades in information technology, software and hardware had to occur rapidly and further strained campus resources. The

financial vulnerabilities exposed by the unpredicted move online were summed up recently in the NY Times:

"The pandemic...hurt colleges' finances in multiple ways, adding pressure on many schools to bring students back to campus. It...caused enrollment declines as students... opted for gap years or chose to stay closer to home, added substantial costs for safety measures, reduced revenue from student room and board and canceled money-generating athletic events."

In his article, Re-calculating Tuition During the COVID Crisis, former Adelphi University President Dr. Robert A. Scott describes families' criticism of college tuition rates and the stress on campuses from the digital transformation:

"The move to remote teaching and learning this spring, with no reduction in tuition, brought renewed public scrutiny of college costs. Parents, politicians, and pundits have criticized tuition increases that exceeded the rate of inflation. After the shutdown of campuses due to COVID protocols, colleges incurred these and other costs. They also experienced reduced revenue from summer programs, rentals, investments, and students deciding to take a "gap" year. To compensate, colleges have resorted to furloughs and layoffs, exacerbating divisions on campus between faculty and staff on the one hand and trustees and presidents on the other."

Scott relays that reopening this fall, has involved increasing safety approaches such as testing and tracing; reducing residence hall occupancy; and reconfiguring classrooms, dining facilities, entire dorms and other areas for student quarantines. The result, he concludes, has been problematic and generally has brought increased costs and decreased enrollments and revenue to many colleges and universities. With campuses currently becoming the new hotspot for viral outbreaks, costs have increased even more due to quarantines, testing and tracing, and returning to online formats for the second time in six months, making daily life on campus even more expensive and difficult. As she moved everyone except one hundred students off campus and terminated all remaining face-to-face classes this week, California State University Chico President Gayle Hutchinson stated, "We gave it our best shot. Maybe everything will have to remain virtual until we have a vaccine."

Another especially disturbing outcome of the pandemic was the ongoing weakness it exposed regarding diversity, equity and inclusion, specifically with respect to healthcare and technology access. We witnessed people of color being impacted disproportionately by the virus, with a reported 30% of the total infection rate occurring in Latinx communities in this country. Harvard scholar Anthony Jack spoke this spring in lectures and webinars about how COVID-19 affected such students. While many students left their campuses to return to the safety of their homes, Jack asked whether the homes that some underserved students were returning to could be considered truly safe. Further, for these students, he stated, having to leave campus was akin to receiving both a pink slip and an eviction notice, with both their lodging and income abruptly halted. Finally, some of these students lacked computers and access to reliable Wi-Fi and internet services, in some cases derailing their studies entirely.

Undoubtedly the coronavirus pandemic has left very few aspects of our college and university faculty, staff, students and operations untouched. Nonetheless, despite the stressful and challenging conditions owing to the shift we were forced to make, what have been the positive aspects and lessons learned from our experience? Aside from the severe instructional and financial challenges that institutions without warning had to navigate, what are the improvements that we've managed to accomplish in the face of, despite and even due to the global pandemic?

• Our attention and focus on our students have increased.

• Our understanding of the student learning experience has sharpened.

• Faculty have become much better at online instruction and pedagogy than before the pandemic.

• Institutions have had to deeply reflect, rapidly assess their own strengths and weaknesses and make tough calls that have included closing programs and implementing unprecedented cost-cutting approaches—some of which are predicted to persist beyond the pandemic's resolution. Nonetheless the streamlining and belt-tightening have taken place that have advanced institutional capacity for distinguishing between what is truly important and what is less so.

• Campuses and their everyday operations have had to become more focused on safety and virus- proofing, though many are experiencing surges in coronavirus cases as they reopen. Serious care is being taken not only to safeguard students' health, but also that of staff and administrators. Many approaches such as holding outdoor classrooms, testing students prior to their arrival and other similar measures have demonstrated significant innovation, adaptability and resiliency on the part of colleges and universities.

• We have developed an even greater appreciation for the social, economic, and political contexts our students currently are bringing with them into the classroom.

Finally, with classes going partially or all online across the nation, this transformation has brought a series of changes to the delivery of college courses including the following:

• Better faculty development programs and campus efforts to support online instruction

• Reconsideration of prior grading policies and implementation of more flexible assessment practices

• More vital student engagement in and out of class

• Stronger leadership by those who have had to make tough calls and position their institutions for survival while being challenged by the unprecedented difficulties the virus triggered

Finally, I was inspired recently by an article entitled, "The Gift of Goodbye: Saying Goodbye to Normal and Hello to Extraordinary" by Dr. Shai L. Butler who advances the notion that the coronavirus crisis has provided a special opportunity for intrinsic growth and innovation in higher education:

"This crossroads provides us a unique opportunity to consider what old ideas, pedagogies, instructional techniques, etc. have overstayed their welcome in our industry and what can be part of our goodbye. If only a fraction of the approximately 28,000 colleges and universities in the world took it upon themselves to engage in the study, generation and dissemination of educational innovation….as they face the challenges of education during the pandemic and those that persist after it, and if we engaged our students in…work in…domains affected by the pandemic — public health, local government, business, arts and culture — we would be preparing our students for the increasingly volatile and uncertain world they will have to lead. We'd also be steering the course of events unleashed by this pandemic toward a renaissance and not the alternative."

We are currently living through one of the most challenging chapters both in higher education and global history, one that is exposing fault lines of every kind and testing our resolve and leadership. However, these very circumstances are moving us toward a future in which we will be better equipped to more effectively educate all students, become more cognizant of ensuring equitable access for all students to technology and the internet, address the vulnerabilities and inequities impacting students of color and collaborate as a community of educators to a greater degree than we have previously. In a common spirit of collective solution-finding and social advancement, we have achieved a digital transformation that has taught us far more about our strengths and weaknesses than anything else could have. Far more sensitive to both the student and faculty experience and better able to pivot in the face of misfortune, we can now advance a more innovative educational paradigm that will continue to leverage digital approaches in both our instructional and administrative practice. Virtual work also has given rise to improvements such as a better balance between our jobs and personal priorities, more focus on our families, more industriousness and time on task, greater attention to our health and wellness, improved capacity to manage competing priorities, and others.

We can only hope that the enormous adaptation that we have achieved during this once-in-a-century crisis has demonstrated our resolve, determination and capacity for prevailing over adversity as we fought hard to sustain uninterrupted student learning and campus safety. The rapid and unexpected digital transformation that has been accomplished by higher education this year has forever changed our industry and been nothing less than heroic. It is important that we pause to recognize this fact.

CUSTOMER SERVICE

Power to the People: The Wide Impact of Administrative Self-Service in Higher Education

CHRISTINE BLAKNEY
MANAGING DIRECTOR OF STUDENT BUSINESS SERVICES, TEXAS TECH UNIVERSITY

Technology is fundamentally changing the way people conduct business, and higher education is not immune to its influence. Students aren't standing in line to pay for courses anymore—it now happens with the click of a button. Yet progress is not always linear. Innovations meant to help students manage their own financial accounts can actually make the process more complicated. In this interview Christine Blakney discusses some of the common roadblocks students face when registering and paying for courses online, and offers her insights on how business services offices can help to overcome them.

The EvoLLLution (Evo): What are the benefits of letting students manage their own account balances and payments online?

Christine Blakney (CB): This generation of students has only known immediate access to information via the internet—with around-the-clock access to virtually. It just makes sense that our universities—which should be on the leading edge of technology and education—would offer that ease of access as well.

Meeting this expectation can also greatly improve the efficiency of our business operations due to the decrease in hands-on processing. Since many business offices are being challenged to do more with fewer staff, providing resources that allow the student to manage their account directly helps us to meet that goal.

A growing number of students are also considered non-traditional, which means they are no longer coming directly to college from high school. Many are attending college while working and raising a family and may not be able to address issues with their student account during typical office hours. By making access to student accounts available around the clock, students can make payments, enroll in payment plans, consult FAQs and send inquiries at times that fit their lifestyle.

By providing virtually unlimited access for students to manage their student accounts, universities are not only providing quality customer service, they are improving the efficiency of their operations and meeting the expectations of our students.

Evo: What are the most common obstacles students face when it comes to account and payment management?

CB: In many cases, a student is not the person that is actually managing the financial aspects of their college enrollment. While the prevailing standard at universities has been to allow the student to assign an authorized user access to their student financial account, there are regulatory issues that both the student and the institution must navigate.

The Family Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) provides guidelines and restrictions on access to student information. When a parent wishes to manage the financial aspect, we often encounter a very unhappy customer if we explain that we cannot release any student information when there is no FERPA authorization on file.

The Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) (20 U.S.C. § 1232g; 34 CFR Part 99) is a Federal law that protects the privacy of student education records. The law applies to all schools that receive funds under an applicable program of the U.S. Department of Education.

FERPA gives parents certain rights with respect to their children's education records. These rights transfer to the student when he or she reaches the age of 18 or attends a school beyond the high school level. Students to whom the rights have transferred are "eligible students."

Assigning authorized user access does not necessarily provide business offices the ability to answer any question that the user may ask. Financial transactions on a student account are inherently tied to their academic record. While we can generally discuss anything that the user can view on the student financial account, without a FERPA authorization on file we are prevented from providing detailed information that could inadvertently reflect the student's academic status or activities.

It can also be difficult to ensure students and their authorized users are aware of all available tools and resources. Every fall we encounter a new cohort of students, and some returning students, who insist on visiting the office to manage their student financial account. During these peak periods, wait times can be in the two- or three-hour range. While we offer a text-from-home solution, we may have over a hundred students and family members waiting in our lobby for their number to be called. Many times, once we are able to assist them, we advise them of the online resources available and they are understandably frustrated that they made the effort to visit the office. We always see a drastic reduction to our in-office visits during the spring term since the users are now aware of those online resources.

Another common obstacle revolves around simply providing access. There are so many browsers, apps and computer settings, it becomes challenging for business offices to ensure access to their online tools is not adversely impacted by various user settings.

Evo: How can business service offices work to help students overcome these obstacles?

CB: While the business office is generally not the office responsible for collection of FERPA authorizations, our staff should understand the requirements of that form and also have the form available to assist student who wish to defer their financial account management to another person. At Texas Tech, we also have a notary in our business office to facilitate getting a properly executed form from the student.

Business offices should make every effort to educate new students on the resources available to them, whether it be the text-in feature to lessen their wait time or the online payment portal. Making sure the users are aware of these options results in much higher customer satisfaction. Providing information during orientation is critical but honestly, students and parents are inundated with so much information during those days, even a simple concept about how to login and pay the bill can get forgotten.

Providing computer support presents a more unique challenge to business office staff. That is definitely not a job function that we would be experts at. But there is an ever-increasing need for our staff to be able to provide basic computer assistance when a student or authorized user is having trouble accessing their account. If the problem is difficult, we do have an IT help line. But if business office staff can answer the basic questions, it just improves our level of service and efficiency.

Evo: Where's the line between a human touch and technology when it comes to supporting students?

CB: Anytime you can put student account management directly in the hands of your students you will gain efficiency in your operations and make your staff resources available for other tasks. If you are fortunate enough to be able to automate and still retain your current staffing levels, you can increase staff training level so they can perform more complex tasks than simply taking payments or answering student questions.

The difficulty in making student account management completely self-sufficient lies in the fact that we still serve several generations and not everyone trusts, or is willing to utilize technology to manage their finances. While many offices have gone cashless in an effort to move all payment transactions to an online function, you increase the hassle for students who are determined to pay in cash.

Also, while systems strive to be user-friendly, we will always encounter users who either have technology related issues or may fail to follow instructions in using those resources. Creating effective training materials — and keeping them up to date — takes time and money. These requirements will negatively impact the gains you receive from having fewer staff involved with in-person transactions.

As with all advancements, there becomes a trade-off between what you gain and what it truly costs an organization to implement and maintain those resources.

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

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