

How Can Educational Leaders Promote Greater Student Engagement Remotely During Covid-19

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ABSTRACT

This study has been presented in order to share information as to how educational leaders can promote a greater opportunity for student engagement remotely during the COVID-19 crisis. Adjusting in more ways than one during COVID-19 has been challenging for many students and faculty members at universities globally. The leader sets the tone while working and sharing with faculty members ways to engage students at an adequate level to continue student learning experiences remotely. Adaptability and adjustments that most students and faculty members are making during this crisis have been notable by families and community leaders. With educational leaders taking the lead, the major emphasis for this study was to focus on best practices for engaging students in the most productive ways during the COVID-19 crisis.

Keywords: Educational Leaders, Student Engagement, Remote Learning.

INTRODUCTION

Educational leaders had to take the lead with the collaboration of faculty and staff as how to best support students remotely during this crisis. Supporting students remotely may be new for many individuals in the educational environment, though some educators have been teaching remotely online for a number of years. However, many face-to-face teaching universities have not had the minority of faculty teaching online, but more and more university faculty members are now by not having a choice are attempting to adjust to teaching online using various digital tools. For many faculty members, the questions are how can I have quality instructional content and engage all students to participate in the online process in a productive manner, especially when faculty members are not at their highest comfort zone with online teaching and learning? Nevertheless, now is the time for each faculty member at the university to be active in the online student engagement by connecting students to various resources and digital tools and most importantly to ensure students that they are cared about in this new remote experience. Remote student support requires more than being attentive to one's email inbox, it will require being proactive and being responsible faculty members to make every effort to locate and engage with students frequently (Jang, 2008).

Educational Leaders and Faculty

In order to engage students remotely, educational leaders and faculty members can use various platforms digitally. Some common platforms for instruction to engage students are Blackboard, Canvas, Zoom, Facebook, Duo, GroupMe, Twitter and other digital tools. Since faculty members know their students, and would probably know which forums that students may use the most (how do they normally engage with your office?). Students could be asked to go to those platforms (whether on Facebook, GroupMe, Twitter, etc.) and make themselves available. During this health crisis, it is important to reach out to students and ask them to engage with you, to ask questions, express concerns, and share meaningful and needed support (Junco, Heiberger & Loken, 2011).

The chances are that most students are not going to come to faculty members initially. So faculty members and educational leaders need to reach out to students during this crisis. You can do this macro by saying hello students, I would like to make connect with you to see how you are coming along with your classes and your research and how can I help you to be more engaged in your work (Ahlfeldt, Mehta & Sellnow, 2005)? Do you have questions or concerns that you think that you would like to share with me? We are all making adjustments to the COVID-19 crisis, but I want you to know that I am here for you. When is the best time for us to connect to talk about your classes? What is your favorite platform for instruction and activities for your course work in your opinion? Also, try to interact with students weekly when it is convenient for students in a timely manner. Reaching out to students is essential to let students know that they are valued and you respect their time and wish to continue to work with them meaningfully. However, it may be difficult to reach out to some students virtually based on their location residentially (Truong, 2020).

Statement of the Problem

A qualitative approach was used to lead this study. The major problem was: How can educational leader promote more student engagement in learning remotely during Covid-19.

Purpose of this Study

The purpose of this study was to share information on how educational leaders can collaborative with faculty to ensure that all students have access to needed digital support or otherwise to keep students engaging in productive learning experiences in an illustrative manner while students are residing at home during the COVID-19 crisis.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

During this COVID-19 crisis, educational leaders have been put into a position to rethink about the total university environment. Current events have caused colleges and universities to increase their capacity to provide student services online. While faculty move expeditiously to transition their course content online, student affairs professionals must think of creative ways to support, engage, and nurture students through their virtual college experience at all levels currently by: 1). Ensuring Continuity of Programs and Services; 2). Hosting Virtual Career Services; 3). Offering Virtual Registration Services; 4). Providing Mental Health and Well-Being Services from a Distance; 5). Using Social Media to Stay Connected with Students and Engagement in Teaching and Learning (Bryson & Hand, 2007).

In order to engage a student, it may take on a different meaning or focus depending on the context of one's goals, course preparation, or the delivery process. For some, the goal may be to understand

early on in the course preparation phase what fundamentally motivates students, whether intrinsically or extrinsically, to acquire new knowledge and skills? For others, the focus may be relative to a specific lesson or activity during which capturing and retaining a student's attention "in the moment" is the most immediate concern. Despite these foci being at two different points in a course design and delivery process, whether in the context of developing an understanding of the individual's frame of reference and learning preferences or within the context of the actual teaching and learning activities, themselves, these are some key factors to successfully engage students as follows: 1). offer a mix of content and activity to present information; 2). seek activities that help students to have higher order thinking skills by analyzing, evaluating and creating relevant information; 3). making the process relevant to the students own life experiences; 4). help students to build on existing knowledge and being creative; 5). offer time for students to reflect on what has been learned; 6). help to create an environment for sharing ideas; 6). encourage students to take on a leadership position in executing an activity (Cearley, Burke, Smith, Jones and Chandrasekaran, 2020).

Student engagement in higher education has been an area highlighted consistently as having significant influence on student outcomes, including the successful completion of studies (Troisi, 2014). Chen, Lambert, and Guidry (2010) suggested that student engagement in learning has a more significant impact on learning outcomes than who students are or where student enroll to study. As universities have increased their online presence and provided more opportunities for fully-online studies especially since Covid-19, student engagement in this mode requires further investigation and consideration according to (Coates, 2009).

An online engagement framework for research in the past has "devoted relatively little attention to online learning" (p. 66), a view supported by others (e.g., Robinson & Hullinger, 2008), and Hampton and Pearce (2016) noted that being focused and engaged in course work as an online student is critical for success in courses today. In addition, research has indicated that the majority of online learners are now non-traditional students who are balancing the competing demands of family, work, life, and study commitments and elect to study online for the convenience it offers (Chen, Lambert, & Guidry, 2010; Thompson, Miller, & Pomykal Franz, 2013). These external commitments and pressures have resulted in higher rates of student attrition (Meyer, 2018) and, as such, online student engagement continues to be a pressing area for further exploration. Pittaway and Moss (2011) also communicated the important of faculty and staff engagement, which "is essential before students can engage" (p. 141).

LITERATURE

According to a survey data conducted by Inside Higher Ed (2020), maintaining student engagement right now is a top priority and is recognized as a leading challenge in most educational environments. A new way of being and thinking is a key observation virtually. But keeping current students engaged in a COVID-19 world does not require a tectonic shift in thinking or approach nor does it have to be expensive for the university or the student. It is more about being creative and innovative in the delivery of instruction and activities for students. The key here is to follow a few common-sense suggestions and to leverage various digital technology tools to make things happen by having students more engaged in their own learning experiences (Cavanagh, 2020).

Connect with students

Colleges and universities' leaders and faculty members have long known that a "personal touch" when communicating with students (both current and prospective) is an effective technique for engaging in enrichment learning experiences early at the university (Zeeman & Lotriet, 2013). This has been known by most colleges and universities for years, through techniques such as personalized messaging and orientation and advising groups led by peers with common interests plus by creating a learning-center environment virtually (Doyle, 2008).

But now, institutions need to make that personal connection a priority. Before students connect with a course they need to connect with a human being. That is why one University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, the professor adjusted his syllabus to include personal and very human messages to give to students. Rather than having students to read a list or an outline of upcoming case studies, tests and quizzes, this professor's syllabus begins with messages such as you know that nobody signed up for this not for the sickness, not for the social distancing, and not for the sudden end of our collective lives on campus. The humane option is the best option, because we are going to prioritize supporting each other as humans and work on your behalf and convenience during this COVID-19 crisis so that faculty members and students do not suffer a burnout (Zhang, Shi, Yun, Li, He & Miao, 2014).

As students continue to have less contact with the physical institution for a while, it becomes paramount for faculty to reach out to their students and talk to them on a human level. In this new era, faculty will also show their leadership abilities and practice humanly how to help advance the messaging of the institution and it is vital that faculty communicate that the institution cares and will continue to value students as people and as individuals, while also providing a high-quality instructional-driven educational program opportunities virtually (Delialio, 2012).

Health and Safety

Utilizing tools for connecting with students their families is through a video or online, information can be found on the webpage from most institution's president or provost which is essential to the student body and public relations of the university during this COVID-19 crisis. Many universities already do these things, but now it is vitally important for the message to express concerns for the health and safety of current students, faculty and staff. The video or information given by the university community should provide rationale and truth based on the views of health professionals and CDC. There must be transparency in the action of university leaders, faculty and staff regarding health concerns. All information given by video or other media should be updated regularly and address how the institution is being flexible and adapting to maintain academic excellence and social well-being for all. Videos are also an opportunity to remind students and their families that some important things are *not* changing, such as the institution's mission, vision, purpose and values. However, health and safety are the priorities for the university campus during this crisis (Zang, Shi, Yun, Li, Wang, H & Miao).

Support from Alumni

Are universities utilizing its alumni enough? Alumni can also play a key role in connecting with students as well at this time. Institutions can recruit alumni to call or text current students to check in from time to time to let them know that others care. Matching alumni from the college of education, for example, to reach out to current students enrolled can forge an impactful and

meaningful connection. Even recruiting outstanding or well-known alumni to send a message to students will make a difference of concern and support to current students enrolled at the university.

Based on a grounded body of research, online-only education may psychologically impact students differently. Some students frequently crave for a physical connection with their institution and friends and there is no replacement for attending classes in person or strolling across the campus. For those students, some visual connection to their college or university will be beneficial. It is a good idea to occasionally send an appealing photograph of campus, self, special occasions shared, or to create virtual campus backgrounds for students and faculty members to use during teleconferencing and online classes. Those students missing the campus environment may find comfort in these images of friends, faculty and staff (Barkley, 2010).

Promote Summer Enrollment

Many universities offer a slim schedule of summer courses, as students are often taking advantage of co-curricular opportunities internships and graduate research, or working a summer job to save money for the next academic year. For summer 2020, many students are homebound and may consider the summer as an opportunity to earn academic credits. Colleges and universities can step in to provide new and expanded course offerings. As students become more comfortable with remote learning processes, they may be more inclined to enroll in summer courses and upcoming fall courses. An online summer courses may allow the university an unparalleled opportunity to fine-tune the systems and processes around online learning before the anticipated enrollment of students the fall semester. Could some universities afford to offer a reduction in tuition for online summer courses to make the experience affordable and convenient for students? Too many students and their family members have had a reduction in their income earning as a family and could the universities be more sensitive and creative of how students could best meet their financial needs for the summer and fall semester (Hicks, 2020)?

Recruitment for the fall semester could be a priority focus for universities. That being said, this is a prime time to focus on fall advisement, recruitment and registration as well for colleges and universities to promote new and improved programs. A critical metric for fall enrollment is the early registration of continuing students. This presents an opportunity for one-on-one engagement between students, recruiters, academic advisors, course work and faculty members as measure through the collection of data (Handelsman, Briggs, Sullivan & Towler, 2005). It is important to note too, that generation Z learners have a preference for advising and coaching in person, so enabling advisors and faculty members to set up phone or web-based conference sessions to discuss fall 2020 registration and courses of study which can also allow for a personal check-in concern for continuing students. By making these connections with a trusted member of the university can help to influence students' decision to return to the university this fall. Again, the personal touch is always important to recruit, retain students and graduate students timely and this is a plus for any university in expanding its public relations to the community (Smith, 2020).

Technology Team and Support Services

Educational leaders at the university should ensure that the OIT team in up-to-par. Now is the time to leverage the campus technology system to its fullest. It is not impressive, when students pay tuition and the technology is not working properly on campus. A robust OIT team support system

is the backbone for any top-notch university online educational programs. Strengthening student engagement depends on access to more than just using the learning management system for course delivery, but having access to working technology. Universities can strengthen engagement through trainings, career and academic success workshops, and asynchronous leadership conferences for students and faculty members (Belini, 2019).

Additionally, educational leaders should make sure to maintain online access to other areas of student support, including disability services, counseling services, and academic support resources. Universities must also move their counseling services online resource promoting mental health and well-being particularly valuable for at-risk students who may be feeling deeply isolated during this time (Coates, 2006). Universities may also utilize video or audio conferencing for advising appointments, synchronous office hours for faculty, counseling appointments, and clubs or organizational meetings. By leveraging video and remote meeting tools for these support services will help to solidify the crucial link between student and the university, which is now more important than ever during COVID-19. Some universities have taken important steps by establishing services to support students in new learning environments remotely (Belini, 2019).

LIMITATION

This study was limited to actions of educational leaders and how these leaders have been leading in promoting student engagement during this serious crisis related to COVID-19. This research study was limited to the virtual university environment.

METHODOLOGY

This is a qualitative study that examined educational leaders at the university who continue to collaboratively work with faculty to engage students remotely in their learning experiences. Data for this study were qualitative phenomenological, because the two researchers looked at some readable documents, articles and resources pertaining to how to promote student engagement remotely during the COVID-19 crisis. The two researchers in this study looked for the most reliable sources concerning student engagement using digital tools and how educational leaders could support student engagement remotely in a structured manner.

FINDINGS AND SUGGESTIONS

The overall recommendations and finding were as follows for educational leaders to practice within the university environment remotely. Based on the research findings, educational leaders can promote student engagement activities as follows by: 1). providing a completely free customized hub for class teamwork with Teams that includes video meetings, online versions of Google Classroom, as well as compliance tools, and information protection; 2). encouraging students to create their own class in Teams, add selected students, and share lessons; 3). create assignments, collaborate virtually in real-time, and do grading and provide personalized feedback all in one hub; 4). participating in interactive discussions with classes and by sharing one's screen to present relevant lesson and encourage students to ask questions using the chat; 5). moderating the class discussion by muting students, making them presenters and self-evaluators of their own work; 6). planning, organizing and presenting a dissertation research mini-conference; 7). participating in webinars and other digital activities remotely.

For a future study, researchers could use an engagement survey in collecting data for a quantitative or mixed methods study. Second, starting 2020, researchers could conduct a longitudinal study for the next four years in measuring student learning outcomes when using digital tools exclusively for student engagement in graduate programs virtually in educational leadership in a comprehensive university.

CONCLUSION

Educational leaders must provide adequate digital tools for all students and to monitor how well instructional services are being rendered to students in an engaging manner. What if students do not have or can access any form of digital tools? Therefore, educational leaders and faculty members must find other ways to communicate with students without technology access, believe it or not, by telephone or U.S. mail educational packets. Whatever it may take, it is important that students are engaging in learning. It is essential for educational leaders and teaching faculty to find different means to monitor and evaluate students' work fairly based on all the adjustments being made during this current crisis. Working collaboratively, perhaps educational leaders and faculty could review meaningful data that can be available for assessment based on the needs of students more frequently by using various types of digital tools to execute a number of tasks for the-day-to-day operation of the university virtually (Coates, 2007). Lastly, educational leaders and faculty members could work collaboratively by setting reasonable goals weekly that will directly engage individual students and as a group plus encourage students to be resourceful through the use of digital tools remotely (Ahlfeldt, Mehta, & Sellnow, 2005).

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