VIRTUAL LEARNING/EDUCATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Developed by the Higher Education Committee of the 100 Black Men of America

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Introduction

The 2020 COVID-19 pandemic forced higher education institutions to transition into offering their educational services almost exclusively virtual. This disruption created a multitude of challenges and obstacles for colleges and universities in the spring of 2020 and planning for the 2020-2021 entire year, either virtually or hybrid. This white paper will address three significant issues involving virtual learning: 1) Understanding Distance Learning, 2) Barriers and Challenges of Distance Learning, and 3) Faculty Challenges in teaching online. We hope this paper will provide insight and assistance for administrators, faculty, and policymakers on understanding distance education at colleges and universities.

Understanding Distance Learning

The terms "distance learning" and "distance education" are often used interchangeably. They refer to a method of study where teachers and students rely upon internet, email, the postal service mail, etc., to have classes." Traditionally, this usually involved correspondence courses wherein the student corresponded with the school through the postal service via mail. However, given today's technology, this process occurs almost exclusively via the internet. In true distance learning, students and teachers never interact. Students receive their learning expectations, study materials, and assignments via the internet. Students study remotely at home on their own, and the learning is more individual and varies on speed and timeline according to individual students and their availability.

Many distance learning formats include complete distance learning, where students and teachers never engage in 'in-person' interaction. Other formats may incorporate video conference mode utilizing technologies such as Zoom, where students and teachers interact in real-time via the internet. And many times, some combination of those two, plus periodic in-person interaction, are employed.

Because distance education is remote, it can connect students to universities worldwide, making it more accessible for students in different countries. It is also thought to be more affordable, which helps make distance education more accessible to many students worldwide and in different socioeconomic situations. On the other hand, Traditionally, distance learning was the province of proprietary institutions, and it did not enjoy a great reputation within the higher education establishment. However, COVID 19 created the necessity for well-established, residential universities to convert to distance learning. Their initial impression was that they were being stuck with considerable expenses of on-campus housing assets and unused classrooms and laboratories, which had to be maintained but could not be utilized as intended. Accordingly, while the actual cost of delivering educational resources was less expensive, those universities

had to bear the financial burden of maintaining those resources without the revenues they were expected to generate. This was, at worse, a short-term dilemma as it is anticipated that COVID will subside as a major determining factor in the latter part of 2021, and in-person education activities will resume in the fall of 2021. At the same time, universities have realized the efficiencies of distance education, and they will likely elect to continue utilizing it in some forms going forward. Those forms may include Continuing Education and External Degree programs, for example. It is useful to examine the relevant considerations regarding the pros and cons of distance learning in higher education.

The Benefits Of Distance Learning

As mentioned above, students can study from universities worldwide, even if they cannot travel to their preferred program. This allows top universities to be available to students who would not otherwise be able to attend due to distance, finances, or other circumstances. Distance learning is vital for those who cannot participate in programs due to health complications, severe social anxiety, busy work schedules or parenting demands, or other situations necessary to be confined to the home.

Distance learning is not suitable for every student. To be successful, students must possess sufficient emotional maturity and self-motivation to study and learn in the absence of regular social interactions. They must have access to adequate computing capacity and Internet bandwidth. There also must be available, adequate instructional resources which they may consult in the absence of a human instructor.

As suggested above, distance education is attractive to some universities because of the efficiencies that it offers. Universities may admit many more students if they are not required to construct additional classrooms. Also, as this mode of instruction evolves, it can be anticipated that many faculty lectures will be prerecorded for distribution to students, thereby reducing the need to hire additional, world-class faculty members.

There is already there is a burgeoning industry in internet-based college degree programs. Many of these have been offered by for-profit (proprietary) institutions. Because most of these institutions were ahead of the curb offering distance learning, they were industry experts in providing classes virtually. Over time, issues relating to student learning outcomes, assessment, and academic integrity surfaced that caused accreditors and government agencies to require more rigorous standards. Over time, most colleges and universities began to adopt distance learning platforms in their curricula. Covid-19 has forced higher education institutions to immediately invest and expand their distance learning offerings to remain relevant.

Now that it appears the distance learning will become a staple in higher education, faculty will need to adopt the technologies and techniques required for this new teaching mode. Many younger faculty members have grown up with the internet, interactive video games, and technology-assisted devices. Thus, they may be more comfortable using internet technologies to facilitate instruction. Some older faculty may be less conversant with these technologies and somewhat intimidated by them. In addition, many faculty members, younger or older, need the (emotional) feedback that in-person teaching provides. They need to read feedback from their students' body language to confirm that they are getting their points across. These are challenges that universities will have to manage as they expand their distance learning curricula.

Types Of Distance Learning

Three types of distance learning exist currently in higher education: online, hybrid, and conference classes. Online courses are often usually offered as additional classes in traditional degrees. If students have an adequate computer and internet access, they can learn and receive instruction at home. Hybrid courses

combine traditional classroom settings with online learning at home. This can mean that students learn individually at home and meet up for in-person instructions or lectures at certain intervals during the course. The amount of remote at-home learning and in-class learning varies for each hybrid course. Conferencing allows students and teachers to meet up for a class in real-time, whether in a group or one-on-one with an instructor. Using the phone or video chatting, such as Zoom, GOOGLE Meet, Microsoft Teams, or the like, students and teachers can engage in live lessons despite the distance.

Distance Learning: Barriers & Challenges

Some institutional and systemic barriers exist related to distance education. Historically the digital divide began in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The term emerged as more Americans started to purchasing IBM and Apple personal computers. Initially, primarily wealthy and middle-class Americans were purchasing computers for home use, resulting in a divide between those who could afford them and those who could not. As the personal computer has become foundational to the operation of our society, computer literacy sets the foundation as a requisite and essential component of modern learning. Over time, prices eased with demand and necessity, making computer ownership more feasible for those who could previously not afford them. However, a gap in digital literacy across socioeconomic lines exists and persists due to the lack of knowledge that many families have versus those whose families have utilized computers for years.

Broadband access is still another issue impacting the digital divide where again the price and now, geographic proximately to reliable broadband technology determined the ability to have full access to the internet. Beyond the broadband, the issue is the functional computer literacy that has been the main component of those learning those whose families previously owned computers. Today the digital divide persists on the level of computer literacy, as families who have not owned many personal computers are still acquiring specific basic proficiencies of computing. Valadez and Duran (2007) studied the difference in computers in schools across the socioeconomic spectrum. They concluded that the high-resourced schools used their computers in more creative ways to teach. Among the applications cited were better programs of study to gather information and increased student communication and collaboration. At the time of this publication, the COVID-19 pandemic has forced academic institutions to rethink their digital learning infrastructures. An estimated 50 million students were thrust into full-time distance learning programs. Training for the use of technology has been highlighted as an essential need for educators on all levels who are working to keep pace with the changes to learning.

Black students and those of low socioeconomic status statuses were adversely affected by the digital divide decades ago and continue to be challenged. Beyond the acquisition of computers, the ability to access broadband technology continues to present barriers to learning. The "homework gap," as explained by Chandra refers to the inability of some students to complete assignments due to a lack of a stable internet connection at home. It is estimated that nearly 16 million families live in homes with insufficient technology to support distance learning. While the Covid-19 pandemic exacerbated problems with distance education, the longstanding inequality of broadband access, particularly for under-resourced students, continues to cause concern for educators.

Likewise, the COVID-19 pandemic ushered in an increased virtual learning demand and challenges for Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), as the challenges for these institutions were exacerbated by infrastructure needs and limited budgets. Consequently, some HBCU's have struggled to keep pace with other institutions in delivering virtual learning opportunities. Specifically, these schools were forced to make large-scale changes to curriculum, technology upgrades while dealing with student

access to computers and broadband. These concerns impacted African American students in particular, who largely attended these institutions during the pandemic.

Policymakers should remain informed that a digital divide persists, and continuous efforts should be made to increase computer literacy, particularly for youth and teenagers. Educational leaders could raise awareness and focus on closing the digital divide to inform policymakers.

Future studies on this topic might seek to examine the impact of computer literacy and success in online degree programs. There could be a connection between computational thinking (digital literacy) and success at distance learning. While there is little evidence that learning styles impact academic achievement requisite knowledge in using computers to solve problems may. It is recommended that educators and policymakers continue to bolster efforts to increase digital literacy and broadband access to overcome these obstacles to equality in the digital learning environment.

Distance Learning: Faculty Challenges

Teaching online presents some barriers for faculty to engage students. However, some approaches can make students feel as if they are learning and developing a connection with faculty and their peers. Faculty members must be intentionally engaging their students, setting the tone and tenure in classes. As a practice, faculty members should lecture and ask students to participate in class by asking them questions or presenting lessons. Additionally, faculty should be mindful of the various learning styles that students may have and provide different pedological practices, including PowerPoint presentations, in-class debates, videos/YouTube videos, interactive games, and music. Moreover, faculty must be consistent and responsive to student emails and provide student queries to keep students engaged. Finally, faculty members who hold virtual hours should invite students who are not showing for class or perform below average to a one-on-one session to help students succeed in the course.

Establishing ground rules for online teaching is a necessity to have a successful teaching experience. Several platforms can hold classes such as zoom, google meets, and Microsoft teams. On or before the first day of class, faculty should provide expectations for participating in a virtual class. These rules can include: muting microphone while faculty is lecturing; times to log on; video camera on during course, being in a quiet place with no distraction; using the chat or raised hand function to ask questions; and providing name and pronouns in each student's name box. Setting ground rules for teaching online helps provide a virtual ambiance to ensure that teaching and learning can be most effective.

Another aspect of online learning is understanding the difference between offering asynchronous and synchronous courses. The latter approach offers courses in real-time, meaning that there is a set schedule that students and faculty show up online to engage one another. The former method is not schedule-based but relatively self-directed learning. Faculty provide students prerecorded lectures, reading materials and periodically give exams to take time learning as long as they meet the expected deadlines. The advantages of synchronous learning are that it offers classroom engagement, real-time feedback, and instructional depth, and the disadvantages are rigid schedules and possible technical difficulties. The benefits of asynchronous learning are flexibility, pacing, affordability, and disadvantages are isolation and risk of apathy.

The last issue faculty may have in teaching online is understanding their learning management systems to assess student learning effectively. At least a dozen learning systems support online learning, including Blackboard, Jenzabar, Bannerweb, Canvas, and Moodle. Most of these systems allow faculty to

take attendance, building assignments, contract grade books and allow students to keep up with their progress in the class the entire semester. Furthermore, in many disciplines, some e-books can be uploaded to the system where text banks, PowerPoint presentations, and lecture notes are provided to faculty to pass on to students. It is imperative that faculty work with either their IT department and learning management system helpdesk to get the necessary professional development to navigate and troubleshoot issues involving the systems.

Conclusion

In the final analysis, online teaching and learning have their benefits and pitfalls for all involved. For students, there must be an unwavering commitment towards maintaining the discipline of showing up online for classes, submitting assignments on time, and keeping their professors informed of any academic or technological issues that may arise. Faculty must take the time to understand the learning management system to provide a superior teaching experience virtually. Also, faculty should take time to engage and teach their students to serve them better appropriately. However, we are aware that even if faculty and students have the will and desire to teach and learn virtually, some systemic obstacles ultimately may stunt this progress

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