

AN ABRUPT CHANGE: HOW COVID-19 IMPACTED ACADEMIA

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ABSTRACT

Change is difficult for many people. However, the Greek philosopher Heraclitus is known for saying “The only constant in life is change”. COVID-19 arguably changed the planet and how we operate as a society. Universities across the world were challenged with balancing governmental and world health recommendations that permeated the landscape and enrollment of students while perpetuating academic learning through physical face-to-face classes. For many, because of the policies put in place, face-to-face instruction was not allowed and universities across the world were forced to change and adapt to the volatile recommendations (i.e., masks, vaccines, cleaning practices and social distancing). The COVID-19 pandemic led to abrupt changes for academia. Gradual changes have occurred over the course of academia through technology changes; however, the abrupt change caused by the COVID-19 pandemic has led to a rearrangement of assessment, professor landscape, student life, class instruction, and expectations. This essay offers a perspective on the implementation of these changes and a view of what may be to come for academia.

Keywords: COVID-19, Students Learning, Vaccines, Academia.

INTRODUCTION

The literature, in a qualitative study shows that assessment has been challenging for professors. How to best assess students learning may never be agreed upon by professors. However, one item that can be agreed upon by most, if not all, is that cheating should not be allowed. Bilen & Matros (2020) provide evidence of the cheating that occurred during the pandemic by some students and call for uniform online exam policy to curb cheating. While cheating has always been an issue (and will continue to be), the transition of classes from physical to online created an opportunity for students willing to cheat to do so and take advantage of professors that were new to proctoring exams online. While there are tools to attempt to dissuade students from cheating while taking a test from home that records the students' screen and face, hard proof of cheating is difficult to obtain. For example, a camera recording may not be a catchall as some students may like to look up while thinking about a question and maintaining eye contact with a screen is challenging. However, other students may have written notes on the ceiling or placed just above the camera. To the observer of the camera, it looks the same like the student was looking somewhere other than the screen. Catching cheaters has been a game of cat and mouse for decades. Those students that desired to cheat during the pandemic may have had the upper hand at the start of the abrupt change to online learning, but universities now can catch up and design and put in place test proctoring that deters cheating (Rupnow et al., 2020).

Professor Landscape

While new opportunities to cheat were available to students, this was only one of the new challenges impacting professors. Specifically, some of the other challenges were masks, absenteeism, and vaccine hesitancy. Some universities and colleges started to require masks to be worn by all students and professors. While masks have their advantages, it could be argued that they had their disadvantages in a class setting, such as being a barrier to communication. For example, some students and professors have low voices potentially making it impossible to communicate effectively while wearing a mask. Secondly, absenteeism was a new issue for professors as students tested positive for COVID-19, were required to quarantine being exposed, or felt uncomfortable in attending class because of a local outbreak. Extra work was needed by professors to accommodate students in retakes of exams, assignments, and quizzes. Lastly, vaccine requirements changed the landscape for professors. Some universities have required vaccines of their employees while others have not. While the requirement to be up to date on vaccines to be employed is not a new concept, it may have impacted some professors that had vaccine hesitancy. As another example, new PhD graduates with vaccine hesitancy may have been affected in their job search and whether to get vaccinated. Further, those professors employed at universities may not have agreed with a vaccine mandate enforced by the university and left to either retire or look for schools with more lenient vaccine requirements.

Student Life

Before the pandemic, student life concerning attending classes and being physically present was filled with travel, choosing clothes, doing makeup, buying a car, finding the class, and participating in class. Because classes were offered online, many of the above have disappeared. While some students may have been required to have a camera turned on during a lecture during an online class, other professors may have allowed the students to leave the camera off. Regardless, online class attendance from home changed the learning atmosphere. Distractions abounded, such as dogs barking, babies crying, and spouses or children walking in the background. Easy access to the refrigerator led to snacking or eating all while listening to the lecture. While some students may have adapted to these changes easily and maintained high grades, online virtual learning may have not been beneficial to others. For example, Breaux et al. (2020) found that for highschoolers, male students and those with ADHD were especially adversely affected on their GPA. The ritual and routine of waking up, driving to school and focusing while physically present in a class was disrupted.

Class Instruction

Students

Class instruction changed during the pandemic. For many of the traditional students the change was an easy transition, as those in their early 20's grew up with advanced technology such as a smart phone and its capabilities such as face-time live calls. Speaking with others over an online medium was old hat. However, while the technology may have been familiar, personality differences may have impacted the atmosphere for students. For example, the shy students may have been happy to hide behind a screen, but the outgoing students that feed off of the physical in class interaction may have struggled.

Professors

Many professors may have struggled with the class instruction during the pandemic, but many have thrived through adaptation. The abrupt change to teaching online forced non-technology savvy professors that may have been reluctant to use technology to dive in and embrace the new tools. New tools such as virtual calls, chat, game-based learning platforms, and online test proctoring may have been uncomfortable or scary to use at first, but many have adapted. At a minimum many have been brought up to speed to the current levels of technology. Some have even called for a new faculty rank of “*Online Professor*” (Falk & Lemanski, 2020) to establish the new setting of teaching online. Teaching online comes with many advantages such as no commute, flexibility in location, and lower costs.

Expectations

Once a product or service offering is given to a customer it is difficult to retract the offering. For example, in a grocery store or retail setting firms have continued to adapt their offerings to compete against competitors and attract new customers or maintain loyal ones. Now that universities have offered online instruction, the expectations of students have changed, and it will be difficult to go back to only offering physical face-to-face class instruction. It would take a consolidated effort by all the colleges and universities to return to a pre-COVID-19 state to convince students to return to solely physical face-to-face instruction. However, as colleges and universities compete with one another (and have other competitors such as online only schools) this agreement seems unfeasible. Therefore, it may be argued that the expectations of students to have options to take classes online is permanent and may come with its challenges. For example, some students may want to attend a university while they live out of state. In-state versus out-of-state tuition rates differ drastically. In the past, some students move to a state temporarily to establish residency but move thereafter creating a mess of definitions of what is required to maintain and establish in-state residency status. The expectations of students have been altered and these new expectations arguably are here to stay.

The future

Gradual change seems to be easier to accept than an abrupt, unexpected change. Think for example, when a professor moved from using a chalkboard to a whiteboard, an overhead projector with transparent slides to PowerPoint slides, or from pushing around a TV cart to having an installed projector with a pull-down screen installed in each classroom. These gradual changes seem to offer many benefits, but little sacrifices or cost to learn. However, abrupt changes at first glance may seem to offer less benefits and too much to learn all at once and lead to disgruntled professors resisting the changes. Technology will continue to change and may be scary to some, but exciting to others. For example, virtual reality headsets have started to gain popularity with some and may be used to attend class virtually in the future and may offer many of the benefits of being physically present.

From a business perspective, universities and colleges may have been fearful of moving classes to an online platform. The fear is warranted as millions of dollars in infrastructure have been invested in physical spaces (e.g., libraries, computer labs, and recreational facilities). Students' habits were broken that were generations in the making (i.e., students' parents, grandparents, and great grandparents may have attended college before the student). Universities

and colleges that have adapted to suit the regulations of COVID-19 may be hard pressed to return to a historically standard in-class only offering. The bar has changed. Expectations have been changed and new habits have been solidified. For example, a single parent that had difficulty getting to physical class has enjoyed the flexibility of attending an online version of the class with their children in the next room. However, because of the established infrastructure, universities have been challenged to get students physically on campus but also to do so safely while serving the new needs and new expectations of students. A new type of student has emerged, one that expects flexibility, online offerings (synchronous and asynchronous), and historically typical face-to-face classes. It is also now expected that face-to-face classes be video recorded to either be watched later or live when the student is ill and cannot attend. While some professors have taken these changes in stride others have struggled to make the change (Haleem et al., 2020).

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it well may be that the future will hold many different options of learning through the university setting. There will not be a perfect answer for everyone. The university will have to continue to adapt to the changing landscape as students' expectations have changed and competition increases. Hybrid classes offer many of the benefits discovered through the pandemic and allow the university to use its buildings. Universities worldwide will have to stay nimble to manage the competitive forces they are experiencing from all sides.

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