

How Institutions Can Optimize - Learning Delivery Methods

The COVID-19 pandemic has altered higher education indefinitely, and university leaders have had to adapt to changing environment without any guidebook. Although it has been challenging, it has also allowed institutions to re-think how they support learners. Here are some of the ways that institutions can use different learning methods to support students and faculty.

Re-imagine the Learning Model

The COVID-19 pandemic globally made the colleges and universities to close in March 2020. As an immediate impact, many institutions sought short-term distance learning solutions. Most colleges were already able to deliver some level of online learning but only in a small scale, perhaps a few fully online programs or online course options. But they were not prepared to immediately scale these online offerings to support their entire course catalog. In addition to that, their faculty and students had little to no experience with online courses and had not made the choice to teach or learn virtually. There was mix up of reviews with both success and disappointment in terms of distance learning. University leaders need a virtual structure that can be delivered effectively and consistently as they adapt to new needs and concerns. When changes do occur, higher educational pursuits should not have to end or suffer. As we look ahead to the post-pandemic period, leaders and faculty will take advantage of the opportunity to re-think the learning experience they deliver long-term. We now have the opportunity to thoughtfully combine the advantages of face-to-face and online learning into new delivery models through blended learning.

Deliver Quality and Equitable Education through Effective Practices

While online education is new to many, we have gone through decades of development and experimentation in online learning, and we know quite a bit about what works. When it comes to the course experience, many factors are important to support success, including technology affordances, student readiness, and teaching techniques specific to online learning. Though a focus on technology is undoubtedly important when planning online education, it strikes some meaningful questions not about the modality. Instead, they are about whether curriculum is developed and delivered in a student-centered way. Is curriculum aligned with the skills students need to be successful? Are students supported with authentic application and feedback opportunities? Are they able to connect productively with peers and faculty? These concerns transcend modality and provide good guidance to improve overall quality and support better outcomes for faculty and students.

Curriculum and Employment Alignment

All students need skills relevant to the world of work they are preparing to enter, and it is well known that employers feel these are lacking in graduates. Universities should improve collaboration with employers now and align curriculum and course designs to in-demand job skills of today and the future. Through close collaboration, they can also facilitate quality educational opportunities in the field, including internships and short project opportunities.

These high-impact experiences can be easier to achieve in a more virtual world and while students find it highly necessary, it is often hard to find.

Content Delivery

Content delivery in a live setting can be compelling, lecture is not usually the best use of synchronous time, whether the class is in-person, online, or blended. Most presentations should be converted to online delivery via interactives, text or video, and self-assessments. This frees up in-person or videoconferencing time for case-method learning, application of concepts to personal experiences, group work, or discussion and synthesis activities. Through this approach many faculty will breathe new life into their courses.

Field Activities

Application activities in online and blended courses can leverage new possibilities with students in the field generating artifacts including video, audio, images, and more to support their learning and enrich class discussion. The integration of field experience with the concepts and discourse of the class has massive resonance and can be done at a much broader scale. Online instructors generally rave about the impact of this in comparison to traditional site-based courses.

Mentorship

Mentorship should be incorporated formally into classes and programs. With more intentionality concerning how an instructor engages with groups and individuals, we can ensure the right amount of true relationship building happens. The mentorship aspect of the university experience has too often been left up to students to navigate, especially at the undergraduate level, and many never find or harness this opportunity. This can be especially effective with non-traditional and at-risk populations and as a way to proactively address obstacles any student can face that may or may not be academic.

These deeply engaging features can be implemented in blended and online courses to drive meaning and impact for students in exciting ways.

Now it is time to work together to reconsider the future of education with student needs and outcomes top of mind. Of course, faculty and administrators are always considering how to best connect with and inspire students inside and outside of the classroom, but recent disruption has resulted in a new level of urgency and openness to innovation as the benefits of online and blended learning will continue to exist long even after a coronavirus vaccine is distributed.
