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THE KEY: INSIDE HIGHER ED

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DOUG LEDERMAN:

It's been more than two years since just about every instructor and student was suddenly forced to teach or learn remotely via some kind of technology. What have we learned about what works and what doesn't and the role technology should play in instruction going forward? Hello, and welcome to The Key with Inside Higher Ed News and Analysis Podcast. I'm Doug Lederman, Editor and Co-founder of Inside Higher Ed and host of The Key. Thanks for listening today. The academic year that's just wrapping up featured a return to the physical classroom for the significant majority of students who choose not to study fully online and for the many instructors who prefer in-person teaching. But it's unlikely that colleges, professors or students are going back to the way things were before. In this week's episode of The Key, the first of a three part series sponsored by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, we'll discuss whether and how the landscape of digital teaching and learning has been changed by the last two years of global pandemic, recession, upheaval over racial justice, and more.

Joining me for the conversation are Shanna Smith Jaggars, assistant vice president of research and program assessment in Ohio State University's Office of Student Academic Success. And Jessica Rowland Williams, director of Every Learner Everywhere, which pursues equitable outcomes in higher education through advances in digital learning. Jessica Williams and her organization are clear advocates for online and virtual forms of education. As a researcher, Shanna Smith Jaggars has posed hard questions about whether online learning is effective for starkly underrepresented learners. In our discussion, they explore such topics as whether student expectations have changed about when, where and how they learn. If most faculty members are likelier to incorporate technology into their pedagogy than they were before, and what institutional leaders need to do to ensure that whatever role digital learning plays in

their future strategies, they do it well. Before we begin our conversation, here's a word from the Gates Foundation.

SPEAKER:

This episode of The Key is brought to you by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, working to ensure that race, ethnicity and socioeconomic status are no longer predictors of educational success. Learn more about the Foundation's work to improve digital teaching and learning, advance institutional transformation and more at usprogram.gatesfoundation.org. Now, on to my discussion with Jessica Rowland Williams and Shanna Smith Jaggars. Shanna and Jessica, welcome to the Key. Really appreciate both of your being here.

SHANNA:

Happy to be here.

JESSICA:

And I'm happy to be here.

SPEAKER:

Both of you have spent a good bit of time thinking and talking and researching in certain cases, what we learned about digital teaching and learning during these two years in which we saw a lot more institutions, professors, students engaging in it than had been true before. Can you share a couple of observations of things you learned or observe that that most altered your pre-pandemic view of the digital learning landscape?

SHANNA:

I think there's two things that really surprised me. The first was related to digital equity and the other was related to learning sports. In terms of digital equity, for many years I've been what you might call a critical friend of online education in higher education or in colleges. So, I saw a lot of benefits. I also had a lot of concerns. And one of my key concerns has always been the potential lack of digital infrastructure and supports for students who are less privileged. So, for example, before COVID hit in 2019, I knew that 27% of American adults didn't have broadband and that those rates were higher among low income households or in rural populations or for people of color. And a lot of people knew this and were concerned about it, but I don't think they really thought of college students as much in terms of digital equity, because almost all colleges, including community colleges, they have strong Internet access on campus. And if you don't have a good desktop or laptop, you can just use the computer lab.

And college students or younger, people think of them as digital natives. I did worry before COVID about community college students because a lot of them are low income, are the first in their families to go to college and a lot of them commute, so they may not have great access to those on campus, you know, labs and wireless. I didn't really worry about students at universities like mine, but when COVID hit and everyone went home and all the classes went online, we immediately began to hear from students who didn't have what they needed to learn online. So, one student in a rural area told us that every time they had to turn in an assignment, they had to borrow a car and drive half an hour to the parking lot of a place, the free wireless, to upload their assignment. So, we really wanted to understand how widespread of an issue this is. And so we teamed up with a colleague at Indiana University who was hearing some of the same stories. And we did a study, and I was shocked to find that across our two

universities, 19% of our undergraduates didn't have the technology that they needed to fully participate in their online classes.

And this was higher among rural students and students of color. Among our black and African-American students, the rate of inadequate technology was 28%. And as you'd expect, those without adequate technology experienced a lot more academic stress and a lot more difficulty in their coursework that spring compared to similar students who had adequate technology. So, all of this suggests to me that the digital inequity problem is everywhere much more pervasive than I thought, or I think most people really realized pre-COVID. And so it makes us realize that we can't take for granted that populations, even populations that we think might be fully prepared to learn online really have that infrastructure that they need to do that effectively.

SPEAKER:

Jessica, we quoted you widely in our report, we published sometime middle of last year about the digital divide. So, I know that's an issue that you're tracking and that you're concerned about as well. Love to hear your answer to the original question, but also curious whether you think institutions made progress. Shanna talked about the greater recognition of the digital divide problems. Did you see evidence of greater inclination to attack that problem by colleges and universities as a result of that increased awareness, Jessica?

JESSICA:

I think there were certainly some bright spots, right? I think we've all heard stories of institutions who have implemented new policies, new practices to support students. I think as a as an overall trend, so I have a lot of work to do. And I want to just double click on something that Shanna said she was talking about, you know, that digital and equity among students. And I wanted to just add to that that we I was surprised to find how that also extends into the faculty, particularly when it comes to adjuncts. We take for granted that the faculty have what they need, including access and technology, to teach these courses. And what we're finding is that sometimes they don't, sometimes they don't have the broadband. They're the ones that don't have the laptops. They're the ones that are having to, you know, go to the parking lots and they don't have the childcare.

SPEAKER:

Jessica, what else did you see that altered or reinforced your pre-pandemic perspective on digital learning?

JESSICA:

One thing we talked about, we thought collectively about as a field related to going through the pandemic was this ability to be flexible and kind of learn through disruption. We heard that a lot, right? Learning through disruption because we were all in crisis together for the first time and having to navigate that. And so I think the thing that I hope that we carry as we move forward is that while for some that crisis may have ended or changed or shifted, for a lot of folks, they are still going through that crisis. And they and they have for a long time, right? It's almost like we got a window into what it's like to have disruption in life. And we also get a window into how online learning and digital learning can help support, be a support through that with all the difficulties that came along with that. And we can dig into that. I think we also have carried this notion that now that's over, right? And so I just think the kind of the thing that I'm holding on to as we're coming, quote unquote, out of the pandemic into this

next phase, is that for a lot of folks, you know, they're still experiencing the symptoms of what it was like to be in the pandemic.

They're still experiencing, you know, difficulty getting support or having access to technology or finding the childcare or finding the quiet space to work or managing the sickness or managing economic crisis like that. Those those things haven't gone away. And for particularly students who are most vulnerable, the students that we need to focus a lot of attention on serving, some of those things are going to stay long beyond the COVID-19 pandemic.

SPEAKER:

Pre-pandemic, there was certainly a recognition or an acknowledgement that for all the talk about how online education could be a tool for expanding access to students who had historically been underrepresented in higher education, those very same learners tended to struggle more in that modality than their highly academically prepared peers did. Did the way the pandemic unfolded changed for either of you, the view of how to most successfully provide digital learning for underrepresented students, or whether we should be doing that at all? Shanna.

SHANNA:

I think it is a mix of two things. So, one is making sure that there is always a robust in-person options for students. However, I think that we should also be more intentionally building in digital frameworks, infrastructures, and approaches for those students from students, you know from the beginning of their time with us so that they do get more comfortable and more fluent with the academic and professional uses of technology and have that infrastructure there at the college to support them in doing that. One of the things that I've always been leery about with online learning is just throwing students into an online class for the first time and expecting them to be able to figure it out. So, I've always recommended that colleges have some kind of ramping up for their first online course, either built into the first week of their course or some kind of pre-course orientation or training to help them understand how to navigate an online course. That may not be necessary for all students now, in this moment, because they've all just done it, but I think it's going to continue to be an infrastructure that needs to be built in so that the university, is sort of orienting students to online learning and giving them an overview of sort of what their digital and their in-person options are and helping them make sure that they feel comfortable with what those options are, that they have, what they need to engage in those options.

I want to sort of layer on to that that one of the big benefits that I saw with COVID was that all support services immediately went online. Prior to that, most colleges that had online programs had pretty inadequate support services for those students that were totally separate from the support services that students on campus had access to and were receiving. And then COVID, suddenly the playing field was leveled. Everybody was getting all their services on Zoom or by chat or however. And it turned out that for many students, they liked those digital support services better than having to sit outside in advisor's office and wait. They could be in their own room, doing their own thing until their their zoom appointment with their advisor. They can hop on. They don't have to get dressed and still have the same face to face, you know, mediated by Zoom, the same interaction with their advisor that they would have in their office. So, students like it better, advisors like it better. Advisors can now work hybrid schedules.

They don't have to always be in their office, library services, tutoring services, writing support services. All of the services that you used to have to go in-person to are now available by Zoom for all students,

the online students and the face to face students. Now, some students aren't going to want that. Some students are going to still want the face to face option. They should have it, but I'm really pleased that we now have this sort of varied set of options that help meet the needs of varied students more appropriately. So, that, you know, your your part time working student can have a Zoom appointment at 6pm instead of having to try to get into campus at 3pm.

SPEAKER:

One of the interesting questions will be whether places try to go back, and that's a broader set of issues that I think maybe we can talk about later in the conversation. But it's one of the big questions I'm asking, which is, and looking forward is the extent to which institutions in their kind of rush to return to campus continue to enable and prioritize that flexibility. I think it's an open question at this point. Jessica, you're clearly been an advocate for the availability of online and digital learning and options for these student groups, has, did the pandemic altered your view at all of sort of when and how and how much to prioritize that kind of delivery for what you're most concerned about?

JESSICA:

Yeah, I think first we like really kind of lay out the benefits of digital learning in general because I think there are some clear cut benefits. One, of course, is lower cost to students because you could replace textbooks with we OER, free and low cost resources that are digital, right? Another is that, you know, you can deliver personalized, targeted instructions to students in ways that you could not, especially in these large gateway courses. You know, we're in a college algebra course, all three of us, and we're studying, you know, polynomial functions and I've got it down, and you guys are really struggling, you know, with an adaptive course where, you know, I could go ahead and go to the next level, right? And continue to be challenged while you guys continue to get that basic foundational information that you need. And that's something that, you know, an instructor could not deliver, right, in a course of a hundred students. And so that's just one of the another benefit of technology.

You know, a lot of times courseware and other tools provide data and insight into how students are doing, which allow perfect professors, faculty instructors to intervene early when students are struggling or when students are just disengaged, right? Students not doing the homework, students not even logging into the system, right? Instructors can can tell that right away. And so all of these things are beneficial to marginalized students specifically, but also to just students in general. And then also there's the flexibility piece that she was just talking about, right? Being able to learn and study and also balance work and other things. I think for those reasons, I think the question needs to stop being returned to online and do away with digital instruction, or we should stop pitting them against each other. I think because, you know, teaching is point flexibility in choices and options is going to be the future for our students. And so the real question should be, you know, how do we deliver quality instruction in both modalities, right?

Not which modality is better, because we can't make that decision for students.

SHANNA:

I would agree with that, and add on to that. I think one of the things that COVID taught us is that we will be better off if rather than having a sort of a siloed model for online education, where like a small group of staff and teachers work exclusively with fully online students, and then a totally separate group of faculty and support staff work with on campus students. If we have a more integrated model where the knowledge and the skills regarding online students and courses and supports are spread across the

entire institution and people are able to work with both types of students interchangeably because often we know that all of our on campus students are taking an online course or two here or there. They're all going to do it. And so acting like our online students are somehow some sort of separate breed that should be dealt with with separate, you know, infrastructures and staffs like it doesn't make sense. We should be taking the learning that we had that Jessica was talking about in terms of how digital learning can help support students and integrating that into our, you know, our physical classroom spaces.

And that the things that we know working in face to face learning, we should be integrating them as much as possible into online courses instead of just being so siloed try to be more integrated and think about this more as a system that has different facets to it, as opposed to two totally different things.
(MUSIC PLAYING)

SPEAKER 2:

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DOUG LEDERMAN:

Speaking today with Jessica Rowland Williams of Every Learner Everywhere and Shanna Smith Jaggar of Ohio State University. It may be too early to tell or know, to know for sure, but have you seen changes in student expectations and desires regarding the flexibility of when and where and how they take their courses? And if so, in what directions? I ask, because there are certain kinds of expectations that could be very difficult for colleges and universities to satisfy. It would be especially hard if students want to be able to attend the same course in person on a Tuesday, say, but go to class from their dorm room or apartment on Thursday. So, I'm curious if you have a sense of how student expectations are trending and how institutions are thinking about responding to it.

JESSICA:

So, I think one thing we all know is that student enrollment is decreasing and I think that we need to dig into what that means right? And what that information is telling us. I think that the message that students are sending with their feet, right? Is that Higher Ed needs to change and rethink its value proposition to students. And so I do think that student expectations are changing. I think that student needs are changing. However, I don't know if we have a good handle on what that means for our institutions and exactly what needs to be changed to meet that need.

SPEAKER:

I agree with you. We've certainly seen the enrollment declines. There are a lot of reasons for that, and I don't think we have very good insights yet into exactly what has led a million or so students to stop enrolling. We know with some of it's the impact of the pandemic and an improved job market and all sorts of things. So, but I agree with you that I think that question has been put on the table in a more direct way. Shanna, any thoughts on that?

SHANNA:

From some of my previous research, I saw that students tend to have very distinct preferences about what they want to do online and what they don't want to do online. And I don't know that COVID has

necessarily changed the shape of those preferences. I think in general, first, it depended on the kind of person and student that you were, whether you tended to like online or face to face options more in general. So, if you were an older working student, had kids, yes, you were going to be more likely to want to take advantage of those online options. If you were a younger, traditional student, you know, 19, 20 years old, you're more likely to want to do the face to face options. But then within that, there was a lot of nuance of the kinds of courses that you might opt to take online, even if you weren't that into online learning in general, you might want to take online courses for courses that you didn't care all that much about and just sort of needed to get out of the way, and courses that you thought would be relatively easy.

But courses that you saw were challenging or difficult, or where you were really intrinsically interested in the subject and wanted to dive into it, or where you thought that the relationships with the teacher or the other students in the class were going to be really important, those were courses students definitely wanted to take face to face. and I haven't done a study of that post-COVID. So, all I can say is anecdotally what I hear from students that I encounter, but that sort of pre-COVID findings seems to resonate with what I'm still hearing from individual anecdotal students today.

SPEAKER:

That probably makes sense. The only the biggest change then would be just that we went from having roughly a third of students having taken an online course by choice to 99.9%, probably of students having taken online courses and just from a at least from a scale standpoint, even if the, even if you're right, that the pre-pandemic inclinations haven't changed. Certain other things about the scale of change. Jessica, did you have something you wanted to add on that?

JESSICA:

As you know, you talked to me before. I was like to remind people is that, you know, traditional face to face teaching has not served black Latin. It's probably affected first generation students. Well, either. And I know that we kind of hold it up as a gold standard because it's what we know, right? It's what it's what we've been doing. But even pre-pandemic, there were real issues, right? Like we were, there were, we're still talking about issues of equity gaps and discrimination in the classroom with microaggressions and all of these things. One thing that we've got to move away from, of course, is one, just trying to digitize this traditional face to face learning experience. But really, I think we've got to rethink learning in general, rethink our learning spaces in general. And I think that digital gives us an opportunity to do that because it's a little newer, right? It's not brand new, but it's just a little newer. Whereas the traditional classroom, you know, we've got some tried and true practices that folks are just really tied to.

But when it comes to specifically racially marginalized students, you know, in these settings, you know, I think it's just always important to come back to the fact that whether we're talking about face to face or online or hybrid, we've got a lot of work to do and thinking about how we best serve those.

SPEAKER:

Let's keep going down that path for a bit. We've been talking about the demand side, what students want and may demand from digital learning. Let's talk about the supply side and the extent to which the experiences of the faculty and staff in delivering 100% virtual by choice or not change them. Do you think we saw that greater exposure and practice made professors go better at, and potentially more interested in incorporating digital approaches into their instruction? And B, has it created enough interest in and willingness to experiment that it could result in the kind of rethinking of pedagogy that

you were talking about before, Jessica? Recognizing that we're still early on, do you sense some movement in that direction?

JESSICA:

I think that when we first go into the pandemic and everyone had to flip their courses online in 48 hours, it was crazy. I think that was really difficult for both faculty and students had really challenging experiences that semester. I think certainly there were some positive stories that came out of that, but we also heard that there was a lot of challenge on both ends. And I think that the following semester when faculty had a little bit more time to really think about how they wanted to implement technology or how they wanted to teach online, there was a bit of a positive trend. In general, I think we saw. Certainly there are the skeptics, the desire to try to do skeptics, who are still skeptical in some cases even have been repulsed. I think one thing that we've seen and heard is that faculty and student experiences with online learning and their positive experiences was often correlated with the amount of support that they received from their from their institutions, with designing that online course and also the professional development that they received around implementing and teaching online, particularly the folks that didn't have, that they were doing it for the first time.

And so, I think that one thing that we we have to talk about when it comes to faculty teaching and student experience is the support for faculty, right? The professional development and that support specifically when it comes to serving marginalized students, that is not something that faculty are just going to wake up and know how to do. That takes training and practice and thoughtfulness and learning new skills and maybe even a new way of thinking about things. Again, I think folks have had mixed experiences, but I think in general the trends have been that when faculty are more supported, then students have better experiences.

SPEAKER 3:

Somebody used, I think, used the phrase silver lining, or maybe it's just been in my head. But that's, to me the recognition by institutions of the importance of faculty support and development. That's another thing that I'm hoping we don't go back from going forward. Shanna, thoughts from you on the sort of faculty side of things?

SHANNA:

I think a lot of people thought that the switch to online learning in the spring of 2020 and the semesters that followed would prompt a sort of widescale reexamination among college academic administrators about the primacy of online learning. And so that would include very robust training for faculty in how to teach online for all faculty, for example. I haven't seen that. So, I edited the special issue of online learning in spring of 2021 that was about the transition. And there was a study in there that looked at two universities and how they were preparing their doctoral students for future teaching. And they talked to those academic administrators sort of then several months after the onset of COVID, when everybody was teaching online and trying to gauge their sense of how this would change their preparation for doctoral students. And the answer is basically, it will it won't change. You know, most of the doctoral students believe that learning about online teaching was important and that they benefit from training on it.

But deans and department chairs really downplayed the importance of it and didn't see a clear necessity to provide doctoral students with training in terms of online learning. However, I would say that I've seen a lot more of movement around the importance of teaching both doctoral students and current

faculty having more robust long-term training around inclusivity and improving classroom climate for underserved students. So, there is that, but that's sort of separate from training on digital learning or online learning. And it may be that when department chairs and deans are thinking about the most important and highest priority things that they want their doctoral students and their instructors to get better at. It may be diversity and inclusion topics rather than digital learning topics, but I don't know. That probably varies from college to college and from department to department.

SPEAKER:

And if we're looking for doctoral education to be on the cutting edge of anything, we're probably missing the boat. Because, listen, we're still struggling to get doctoral programs to teach future professors how to teach, period, let alone teach online. Jessica, did you want to jump back in?

JESSICA:

The common misconception that faculty built all the time, which is that you've got DEI work here and then you've got digital learning work here, and that there is no intersection between the two. They're two separate things. And I think part of the reason why we think that way is because we often think, oh, technology is technology. It's not race neutral, it's not everything. And even when we think about online learning, it's like, wow, you can't even see the students, right? So, how can you? You can't discriminate or anything like that. There's no, because you don't even know what you're talking to. You're talking to black boxes on a zoom screen. You know, of course, what we know in the work that we do in our network is all related to how, you know, issues of race are very much embedded in digital learning and how we teach online. And there are actually ways that you can discriminate against students, even when you can't see them in their studies that have been done that show that, you know, we get clues about who people are based on their names and their writing styles, and we make assumptions about students that we don't even recognize.

And there are ways for biases creep in. And so I think if we take this idea and kind of unchecked, take this idea unchecked, that digital learning is independent of the DEI work that we're doing, then we're really missing an opportunity to center marginalized students needs in digital learning.

SPEAKER:

Probably want to close with trying to look ahead and gauge on some of the things we've talked about. How much sort of lasting impact we're likely to see. I mean, we saw a lot of experimentation. We saw a lot of adaptation by institutions and by individual instructors. But it was a crisis and it was a it was really kind of no choice. And when most of us changed the most, is when we have some pressing need, some compulsion to respond and to do something differently. As that eases, it is, it will probably, I guess I'm curious kind of which things you think it would be, we're sort of likeliest to hold on to? And which things you'd most like to see as hold on to in this area of digital teaching and learning? Shanna, your thoughts on that, first?

SHANNA:

One thing that I'm really hoping that we hold on to is that faculty will more universally keep using their college's learning management system for their face to face courses, because it's not helpful for students if they're taking, say, five courses and two of them use the learning management system and have like their schedules and their grades and everything in it And the other three don't exist in the learning management system. At my university, and I would assume at many universities, since all faculty were teaching online using the learning management system for a semester or two. Hopefully

they saw the benefits of having your syllabus online, your schedule on, you know, your schedule built into the system, your grades built into the system, and will continue to do that even after, you know, they may be teaching the majority or all of their classes to face to face in the future, because that just really, really helps students. That might seem like a modest hope, but it's it has a true and earnest hope that I have.

(LAUGHS)

SPEAKER:

Jessica.

JESSICA:

I, as you know, really see technology enhance learning as the future of learning. I don't think we're going backwards. I think we're going forward full speed ahead. And I think as we continue to move forward, we're going to have opportunities to embed technology and enhanced learning through technology. And I think that can be a good thing if we can figure out how to do it right. And I think that needs to be our focus is really understanding how do we serve students leveraging technology in the best ways possible. And I think the one thing that I've seen that's given me so much hope in the pandemic is shifting to a model of thinking about classroom learning, that student centered and really centers on student need and in some cases even incorporate students voices and perspectives. And I hope that as we continue to move forward, that we just see that shift in understanding that the students are really the most important piece of the puzzle in the work that we do. And their needs really are the center of the work that we're trying to accomplish together.

I hope that doesn't go away.

DOUG LEDERMAN:

That was Shanna Smith Jaggars of Ohio State University and Jessica Rowland Williams of Every Learner Everywhere. They brought a research focused perspective to the first of three conversations about the current landscape for digital teaching and learning. And coming episodes will discuss what institutions, faculty and staff and students need and want from the many technology vendors that make up this digital learning infrastructure and some of the challenges and opportunities that await campuses as they assess or in some cases reassess what role digital teaching and learning should play as they pursue their educational missions in the years ahead. That's all for this week's episode of The Key. I'm Doug Lederman. And until next week, stay well and stay safe. (MUSIC PLAYING)