

Transcription for



INSIDE HIGHER ED: THE KEY

**Episode 80: The Evolving Conversation About Quality in Online Learning**

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(UPBEAT MUSIC PLAYS)

DOUG LEDERMAN:

Has higher education forced experimentation with remote learning changed how students, professors, colleges, and the public view online education? Will it make them more or less likely to participate in it? Hello and welcome to this week's episode of The Key, Inside Higher Ed's news and analysis Podcast. I'm Doug Lederman, editor and co-founder of Inside Higher Ed and The Keys host. Thanks for listening today. The global pandemic is slowly and not linearly easing its grip on our world, so it's natural for us to try to take stock of how it has changed us and our lives professionally and personally. We, at Inside Higher Ed, get asked all the time to assess how the last two years have altered this or that aspect of higher education. And we give the best answer we can, with the humility that this is all just one big work in progress. In today's episode of The Key we'll discuss one such effort, Inside Higher Ed's recent report, The Evolving Conversation About Quality in Online Learning. In it, our writer Kristi DePaul dug into a wide range of issues around the current and future state of technology enabled learning to try to help administrators and faculty members prepare to deliver high quality virtual instruction however it fits into their institutional missions.

Joining me today to talk about the report is Laurie Williams, president and CEO of the National Council for State Authorization Reciprocity Agreements. NC-SARA, as the group is known, brings states and colleges together to establish national standards for interstate distance education and its financial support made this Inside Higher Ed report possible. In our conversation, Williams discusses how the pandemic has changed perceptions and practices around online education and how to judge quality in virtual learning, among other topics. Before we go to that discussion, here's a word from NC-SARA.

SPEAKER:

This episode of The Key is sponsored by the National Council for State Authorization Reciprocity Agreements, NC-SARA, Quality Interstate Distance Education Within Reach. Learn more at [nc-sara.org](http://nc-sara.org). That's [nc-sara.org](http://nc-sara.org).

DOUG LEDERMAN:

Laurie, welcome to The Key and thanks for being here.

LAURIE WILLIAMS:

Well, thank you for having me, Doug. I appreciate it.

DOUG LEDERMAN:

As I've just said, we're grateful to NC-SARA for making this report possible. Why was the issue of quality in online education so important to you and your organization at this moment? And what were you seeing or hearing in the wake of the pandemic that made you think this topic needed some deeper exploration right now?

LAURIE WILLIAMS:

For most of my career, I've worked in online learning, so quality in online learning has always been enormously important to me. But right now, I would say the 18 to 22 year olds were not those who have for a couple of decades engaged in online learning until recently. Now virtually everyone has experienced online learning because they need to protect our health with the pandemic. So, this is why it's even more important now than ever because of the increase in online learning. We also saw complaints in the press from those 18 to 22 year olds and their parents who are understandably concerned about online learning. In some cases, professors with little to no real experience in teaching online. It made the students feel like they were teaching themselves. But later, as people got vaccinated and face to face classes resumed, we also heard most students say that they wanted to continue at least some online learning. They wanted the flexibility. They wanted to be able to work to pay for college, to play sports, care for family members.

So, we're not going back to the pre-pandemic days with respect to online learning. I would also say that the pandemic has shifted workforce development needs with the great resignation, particularly in health care and K-12 education, which means online learning to replace those workers who've left will be even more important in the future, and it'll play a big part there.

DOUG LEDERMAN:

There was a lot of discussion early on in the pandemic about whether the forced experimentation with, a lot of us called, emergency remote learning to try and differentiate it from the online learning that had been done for a couple of decades beforehand, whether that forced experimentation would be "good" or "bad" for people's perceptions and the reality of online education more broadly. What's your sense about how the pandemic and that forced experimentation has affected both the perception and the reality of online education broadly? I have to draw that distinction again between the 18 to 22 year olds and the working adult learners. I think most 18 to 22 year olds are still gonna want a face to face experience. I sure wanted it for my own sons. I wanted them to practice becoming more responsible adults in a structured environment. The working adults older than 22, though, just have different needs. Overall I do think that people think more highly of online learning now because they've been able to experience it as faculty, students, parents, and they know that it can be successful if it's structured well.

I do think that institutions and students are getting better at both delivering and consuming it. COVID relief funds helped institutions invest in the structures and supports that make online learning successful. Appropriate technology, support services like the writing center and the library, instructional design, faculty training. But I still think more needs to be done. Issues of engagement and belonging persist. Students also need those wraparound services like childcare, wellness and coaching. Those issues have emerged in the wake of the pandemic. An interesting thing that I see happening in online learning is that more are engaging in synchronous activities online. You know, it used to be the

asynchronous was sort of the holy grail of online learning. And the idea was that this was greater flexibility for working adults. Now, as work too becomes more flexible, at least for those that are able to work from home, synchronous online becomes more possible. And many years ago, I remember my own students in a class that I was teaching at an education master's program some where in Poland, some where in Korea, some where in Japan.

And they asked me for some synchronous sessions, and I was surprised that they'd be willing to get up in the middle of the night or, you know, move things around in order to do that. But they really were looking for it. I'd also say that one of the important things about successful online learning that makes people feel that they can believe that it's a good thing has to do with active learning techniques. And this is something that's not just, of course, online, but in the face to face environment as well. When students can apply their knowledge, skills and competencies to a real life situation, this promotes and in a way that more traditional teaching and learning activities don't. And I think that that holds promise for the future of successful online learning as well. You talked about both the sort of perception and the reality. Maybe let's deal with those a little bit separately. How much could better at delivering high quality experiences do you think the typical institution got over this period of time?

LAURIE WILLIAMS:

I do think that there have been a great deal of improvements. The areas that I touched upon that I just shared earlier about faculty development, faculty training, instructional design, etcetera. But the overarching policies and structures to really support large numbers of online learning really need to change. And on the perception issue, I want to share a little story. Last year, I met a new neighbor, a woman in her forties, four kids at home. She's a graphic designer and an artist. And we were just getting to know each other a little bit, you know, what do you do for a living? And then I shared what I do. And she said, well, you know, I got a master's in design this past year in COVID, and I feel like everybody's got an online degree now because everybody had to move to online. So, the stigma is gone. And that really struck me and I thought about that. And I wonder how many other people feel that way now after having had that experience.

DOUG LEDERMAN:

Maybe a useful moment to ask a question that we kind of grappled with in this report and that, frankly, I grapple with all the time, which is how do we even define quality in pretty much anything that we do in higher education? Because we've never been that great at measuring learning. And again, thinking about sort of quality online instruction. There's obviously varying degrees of quality in how things are built and how they're delivered. But I think to the extent we're talking about sort of the quality of the education, you start to get into the kinds of discussions about, well, how much did students learn and how do we know? And so, I'm just curious sort of how you define quality and where you think we are on the path toward really being able to sort of gauge it?

LAURIE WILLIAMS:

Well, on the one hand, I think that quality education, whether online or face to face, you know, regardless of the modality, is about being able to determine whether students have gained the skills, knowledge and competencies to be able to be good citizens in a democracy, to be able to be effective in the workforce, to be able to develop those critical thinking skills, problem solving skills, creativity, to be able to be flexible in a fast paced and changing world. In order for students online to be successful in

achieving those goals, they have to have the right support systems in place to persist. So, that would be the way that I would define quality.

DOUG LEDERMAN:

How effective do you think we can be now in sensing that? We don't have a competency based system of learning and, you know, some of the things that might drive in that direction remain kind of in the minority. How good are we at that right now?

LAURIE WILLIAMS:

I think that those in industry that are looking for graduates to have those skills, knowledge and competencies are telling us that they don't have them in the ways that they need them. And so, I think there is a ways to go in that regard. But I think that as the focus - and, of course, this is controversial as well - on education being more about workforce development, this will change the attitudes of those in higher education toward ensuring that the graduates will meet those workforce development needs. And if you think about it from a, you know, Maslow's hierarchy of needs, you need to pay the bills when they graduate. They need to pay back their student loans. That is sort of a baseline outcome for higher education. Of course, all those other things are important too, but that's got to be first and foremost.

DOUG LEDERMAN:

How much do you sense student expectations for the flexibility in modality have changed because of the pandemic? And depending on the answer to that, how well-positioned do you think most institutions are to meet those expectations?

LAURIE WILLIAMS:

We still wear medieval costumes at graduation in higher education, so our ability to be flexible and change doesn't have a strong track record. Having said that, people did pivot to emergency online instruction fairly quickly when pressed to do it. I would say that even outside the pandemic, there's just so much right now about our culture that caters to individuals and convenience. Ever more specialized television content intended for niche audiences. Amazon packages that arrive at your door in less than a day. Apps on your phone that are tracking your steps, your heart rate, your sleep patterns. Instacart bringing groceries to your door in the pandemic. So, this desire and expectation for flexibility and convenience is embedded in our culture, especially for those that are privileged. And for those that are not so privileged, I would say that flexibility is just a necessity in higher education. Most online students need to care for family members who may be sick or be immune compromised, or maybe they're immune compromised themselves.

Maybe they just don't have the gas money to get to the campus more than a few times a week. They really need that flexibility that online learning provides.

DOUG LEDERMAN:

Like a lot of policy areas, regulation of online education is susceptible to the swings in the balance of power in Washington. This administration is very consumer protection focused, and a lot of the consumer advocacy groups it listens to take a somewhat skeptical view of online education, in part because they often equate it with the for-profit colleges that the groups really don't like. That makes sense in some way because the for-profits dominated online education for many years, but they don't anymore. How do you view that situation?

LAURIE WILLIAMS:

As you said, online learning can be conflated with for-profit education, but that landscape has changed in a big way. At NC-SARA we have the majority of those that offer distance education participating in SARA. Of our 2,350 some odd participating institutions, the vast majority are non-profits. The biggest percentage are publics than private non-profits, and only a small percentage are for-profit. And given that the for-profits are conflated with online, it's important to know that all states that are members of SARA, and that's all at California, must adhere to education consumer protections, they've got those in place. Most states, in fact, have several of those protections, and they include on-site visits, outcomes reporting, closure requirements, tuition refund policy, tuition recovery funds, security bonds. So, this isn't to say that there aren't reasons to be concerned about some for-profit schools. Those with accreditation problems, financial instability, they're just not permitted to participate in SARA.

Corinthian and ITT, for example, were not participants in SARA.

DOUG LEDERMAN:

We just published a few weeks ago our annual survey of college presidents and asked a series of questions related to the role of online education, including a question about their perception of quality. We asked them to assess the quality of the different modes of instruction at their institutions this spring. And almost three quarters of presidents rated their in-person courses as excellent, barely a quarter said the same about their blended or hybrid courses. And fewer than one in five, 19%, said they thought their fully online courses were of high quality. Just curious what you make of that. And we talked a little earlier about the perception and if we're expecting the public perception to have changed, it raises some questions about whether that's likely if the presidents of the institutions themselves don't necessarily rate their online courses that highly. So, I'm just curious what you make of that.

LAURIE WILLIAMS:

Well, it wasn't especially surprising to me. You know, we all prefer what we know. Our brains are just wired that way to be biased. And we have to consciously work to develop the ability to move beyond our confirmation bias. We all tend to favor what confirms our already held beliefs and values. I'd like to believe that this could change over time as more presidents actually experience quality online learning. The kind of learning that leads to the skills, knowledge and competencies that we talked about earlier that will help develop a successful workforce and citizens in a successful democracy, but it's gonna take time on the part of presidents to have had those experience themselves to witness what online learning looks like. One of the things that I think can really help is the fact that online learning records everything. Face to face learning, you know, a dean, a president, can pop in on a scheduled day and it's like a big show, right? You know, today's the day that somebody is coming in and gonna observe my classroom.

Whereas with online learning, everything is recorded. You can see exactly what's happening for the entirety of the course with all of the students. And for me, that helps to raise the stakes for people being able to understand what went well.

DOUG LEDERMAN:

What would you want a president or anybody who has doubts about the quality of online learning on a campus to do to try to find that out?

LAURIE WILLIAMS:

Well, I think two things, to actually experience it either by looking over the shoulder virtually of faculty members that are teaching online, talking with those that are highly rated among students in online learning about what made for a successful course and successful teaching, to hear more from the students that have graduated from online programs or had a substantial number of online courses as part of their program, to learn more about what they thought meant for a good course, a good program, successful learning outcomes. But then I would also say to focus on those outcomes, are the students persisting? Are they graduating? Are they paying down their debt? Are they able to get good jobs? That's a sign of success as well. And that should help presidents understand better the value of online learning.

DOUG LEDERMAN:

I'm curious where you see the most legitimate questioning being done about online learning, and where do you think advocates and practitioners of online learning need to be focusing to really deliver on the promise you clearly believe it holds?

LAURIE WILLIAMS:

Well, in the same way that those that have been historically underrepresented in higher education face to face can pose challenges for persistence and success in the face to face environment, it's exacerbated online if there aren't the support services that are needed for students that have been underrepresented, first generation, etcetera. And so, those wraparound services are really important for helping those students to be more successful in online learning. Things like childcare, wellness, do they have food? Do they have housing? Those kinds of things. Do students have the right bandwidth? Do they have updated technology, hardware, software? And institutions need to ask their students those kinds of questions to be able to determine who has those needs so that they can help support them and ensure that they'll be successful.

DOUG LEDERMAN:

How do you sum up the moment we're in? It sounds like you think the last couple of years have potentially been good in terms of exposing people to the modality and what it can do for students. Do you come out of this period fairly optimistic about how much and how successfully institutions are gonna be able to inject accessible forms of education through technology into how they serve students?

LAURIE WILLIAMS:

I do think that there are some positive outcomes, absolutely. And I think if you think about technology enabled education more broadly than just online education, faculty members, administrators, staff are seeing the benefits in making better use of technology in a number of areas. Being able to provide those support services like a writing center or a library electronically, using electronic scheduling, for example. In much the same way that we have telehealth kinds of scheduled appointments, you can schedule appointments online without having to come face-to-face. Better uses of technology to enhance faculty member's ability to conduct research. So, there are other broad areas that I think that technology can assist in higher education, even beyond online education. I also think that institutions need to decide who they are, re-examine their missions. Do they want to just jump into online learning because it's another revenue stream and they're fighting against demographic changes and shifts in who's having babies, where and where they're moving to in the United States?

Or is this really, truly part of their mission to serve adults that are working with online learning? And in what way does that fit into the mission of the institution? Institutions can't be everything to everybody, there are limited resources. And so, I think that will be an important part of whether this grand experiment that happened by accident will be successful moving forward.

DOUG LEDERMAN:

That was Lori Williams, president and CEO of NC-SARA, thanks to her for those insights into her organization for helping us raise these issues with our audience through its sponsorship of our recent report. Technology is likely to play a greater role in how post-secondary instruction is delivered going forward, but exactly how institutions use online and other digital instruction will vary enormously based on how each institution defines its mission and which students it chooses to serve. No matter what, though, student expectations are gonna rise and colleges and individual instructors are gonna have to ensure that they're delivering the best possible experience, just as you'd expect them to do in their physical classrooms. That's all for this week's episode. We'll be back in coming weeks with more discussion of digital teaching and learning, federal regulation of higher education and a more unusual topic dealing with grief. I'm Doug Lederman and until next week, stay well and stay safe.