

CURRICULUM AND ASSESSMENT Amid COVID-19 and Beyond



Introduction

During the coronavirus pandemic, colleges changed their methods of instruction -- quickly. Many didn't have plans in place, so instructors did the best they could in a matter of days. Now, they are preparing for the resumption of classes in the fall. Whether they are planning to teach in person, on-line or some combination, they have more time.

But with more time comes questions. Expectations are higher for the fall. What are students learning? How should they be assessed? Colleges are starting to consider these issues. The articles in this compilation reflect the questions that colleges are asking -- and the answers of some institutions.

Inside Higher Ed will continue to cover the way colleges deal with the curriculum and assessment in the post-pandemic era. We welcome your thoughts on this compilation and your ideas for future coverage.

--The Editors
editor@insidehighered.com



Resiliency and Continuous Improvement Through Assessment



As I reflect upon the challenges that we've faced these past few months, two things resonate — human resiliency and the perpetual need for improvement. I admire those who step up to lead, make sacrifices and get creative during trying times, proving that through agility and dedication there is so much we can do even amid a crisis.

The effects of COVID-19 on institutions of higher education, students, faculty and entire communities are unlike anything we've witnessed in our lifetimes. New learning formats and experiences emerged, and the status quo of curriculum and assessment have been challenged. Assessment has long played an essential role in continuous program improvement, and the value of a solid assessment process is arguably more crucial during times of change.

Some of the articles and opinions included in this collection from *Inside Higher Ed* shine a spotlight on the idea that *how* students learn affects *what* students learn. The value of analyzing the “how” to understand the “what” cannot be overstated. Regardless of format, ensuring that students are truly gaining the critical knowledge and skills they need to succeed is, after all, the foundation of higher education.

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ETS is here for you — and with you — as we all keep learning and growing.

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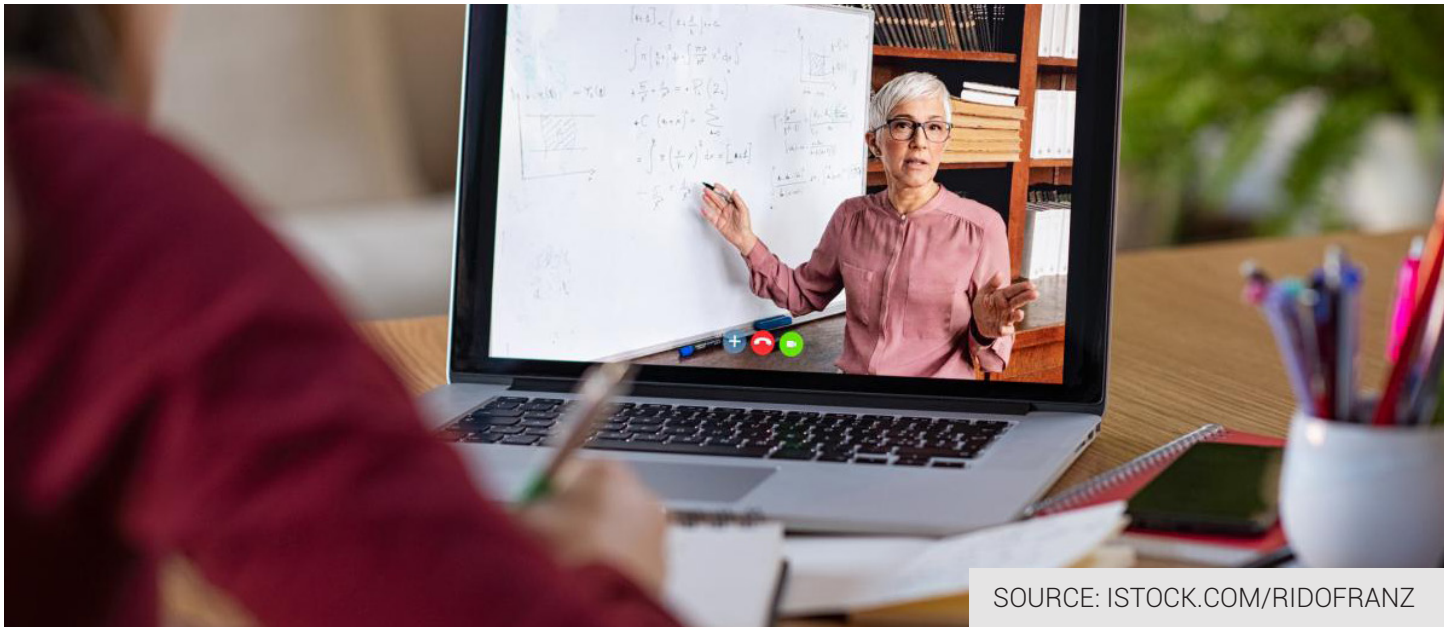
A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "David G. Payne". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first letters of the first and last names being capitalized and prominent.

David G. Payne is Vice President and COO of Global Higher Education at ETS.

What Do We Know About This Spring's Remote Learning?

What should we try to find out? And how might what we learn influence how colleges educate their students this fall and beyond?

By **Doug Lederman** // June 10, 2020



SOURCE: ISTOCK.COM/RIDOFRANZ

This spring COVID-19 forced hundreds of thousands of college instructors and millions of students to take their teaching and learning into a virtual realm most of them had not chosen and with which many of them were unfamiliar.

So how'd it go?

First, it's important to say, it *went*. In other words, most faculty members made the switch adequately enough that most students were able to continue their educations rather than wash out. Given how consistently people love to say that higher education is stuck in its ways and can't adapt, that alone might be considered a minor miracle. Professors adapted; colleges adapted. Most educations were not derailed.

Second, students and parents, as

well as [college leaders](#) and [professors](#), overwhelmingly believe that the learning experience was subpar. That would hardly be surprising, given the aforementioned lack of faculty and student experience and the fact that the pivot of in-person to remote teaching occurred with instructors having as little as a weekend and at most a week or 10 days to make the move.

It also recognizes that all parties involved have struggled through the last three months with varying degrees of personal and professional precariousness. Some have had trauma from coronavirus-related physical or mental health concerns or recession-driven economic woes.

But what do we really *know* about

how it went?

Did less learning happen than it would have if students had remained in the physical classroom, as is widely asserted? Were students less engaged in their learning, and if so, was that because of more distractions in their lives or because the experience was less, well, engaging? Does the spring's experience give us meaningful insight into whether virtual forms of education can be effective?

And perhaps more importantly: What should we *seek to learn* about how it went, through surveys, data analysis or other means? And how should what we glean inform how colleges and universities educate their students this fall and beyond, given the likelihood that technol-

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ogy-enabled learning will remain central to the higher ed landscape in the COVID-19 era, and probably beyond?

Many critiques of the education colleges provided this spring (including [one published elsewhere](#) on this site today) [referred to the instruction students received](#) as on-line learning, rather than as emergency remote instruction, which is more accurate. The distinction may seem like hairsplitting to some, but [I agree with others](#) who say it's not.

While "online learning" can mean many different things, it has been practiced for more than two decades by many thousands of educators who have built up a large body of expertise and evidence that, done right, it can be effective.

By and large, what happened this spring wasn't that: it was legions of dedicated instructors doing their best to figure out how to deliver courses they had built for a physical classroom to a group of now-dispersed students, using whatever technology and often rudimentary pedagogical practices they (with help from their colleges' instructional designers and faculty development staff members) could master in a matter of days.

Faculty members and students alike were not well suited to thrive in that environment. A majority of faculty members had never taught an online course before this spring, and many had not had any training or preparation beyond what institutions were able to give them over spring break.

In normal times, students who've chosen to study online "know what they're signing up for," says Natasha Jankowski, executive director of the National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment. "If it's a synchronous class, you've committed to showing up at the same time

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There was no guarantee they'd be available at the same time. Whether it was watching their kids, or picking up some extra work hours to pay bills, or caring for a loved one, education just may not have been the priority on their survival scale.

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each week and built time into your schedule so you can dedicate your attention and time to it.”

That wasn't the case for most students thrust into remote learning this spring. "There was no guarantee they'd be available at the same time," Jankowski says. "Whether it was watching their kids, or picking up some extra work hours to pay bills, or caring for a loved one, education just may not have been the priority on their survival scale.”

Even a course designed to be asynchronous may not have worked as intended for some students, says Jankowski, who is also a research associate professor in the department of education policy, organization and leadership at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. "Requiring people to create really cool videos of an oral presentation depends on people having good Wi-Fi access or technology," when some students' best Wi-Fi access was in a nearby parking lot. And many instructors put time limits on proctored exams, when there was "no guarantee I have three undisturbed hours in my house ... We went into protection mode, security mode, instead of thinking about how we enable learning in a global

pandemic.”

For that reason, says Jillian Kinzie, associate director of Indiana University's Center for Postsecondary Research, "now is not a time to be judging anything about our effectiveness with online learning" based on this spring's crisis transition. It's also not a time to judge individual professors' efficacy in teaching, which is why many colleges have decided [not to consider this spring's student evaluations of teaching](#) in future decisions about tenure and promotion.

But just because it's unwise to judge the quality or potential of online learning by the rushed version of it most students encountered this spring doesn't mean we can't learn from the just-completed term, says Kinzie, whose Indiana center is home to the National Survey of Student Engagement, which gauges the perceptions of four-year-college students.

Early results from administrations of NSSE this spring show that next fall's incoming freshmen -- having had more experience with virtual learning than they otherwise would have had -- "realize how self-directed they need to be" to thrive in that setting, she says. "That's not a bad

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outcome from a slapdash approach to online instruction in K-12."

Those students "also have been tasked with inventorying their own capacity -- everything from software and hardware to their attention and personal capacities," Kinzie says. "How long can I sit and do this -- what's my attention span? Do I know how to access resources if I'm in a solely online experience? They've had to ask themselves all these questions."

Colleges should tap in to that as they consider how their own students fared this spring, Kinzie says. "Institutions could ask students to really inventory their skills, what they learned about themselves as learners, try to capture some of that," she says. "They could identify if a student had trouble paying attention because her house was noisy, because little brothers and sisters were bugging them so they couldn't get things done. Whether a student was able to find relevant resources when they couldn't walk to talk to a librarian or nudge a classmate in the next row. That is all valuable information for institutions and for individual learners."

To the widespread assertion that students "learned less" this spring, Kinzie asks a metaphorical "how would we know?"

"The professor's answer shouldn't be, because students scored lower on the final exam I produced for them that was the same exam I've been delivering for 30 years," she says. "There are just too many factors that could affect that -- taking on more hours at the local grocery store [to make up for a lost on-campus work-study job], caring for dependents."

"This semester has asterisks all the way down the list," Jankowski agrees. "Add the words 'in a global pandemic' to any question you



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might ask."

Kinzie hopes institutions will try to build off some of the creative new approaches to assessing student learning that emerged as professors had to experiment. "I know faculty who were really surprised, pleasantly surprised, by what students were able to produce in difficult circumstances because they still wanted to get something out of it," she says. "Let's look at what we did to allow students to demonstrate their learning in new ways, or more crafted by the connections they made with the content than the ones we were forcing them to demonstrate."

"Let's surface examples from faculty who had to resort to different forms of having students demonstrate a particular learning outcome, to show that students can be responsive when they're given a little freedom," she adds. "In the end, this could really help shift and reorient assessment practice to be much more about what the student is owning in the experience, rather than responding to the standard ways of expressing their learning."

Elsewhere on the Indiana University campus, Ben Motz, a research

scientist in its department of psychological and brain sciences, is also on a quest to learn about this spring's learning.

As director of the university's e-learning research and practice lab, Motz is principal investigator on a new "[Mega-Study of COVID-19 Impact in Higher Education](#)." In conjunction with researchers at Ohio State University, Motz and his peers are surveying faculty members and students and analyzing learning analytics data from institutions in the Unizin Consortium of research universities with a goal described this way:

"As our full nation's instructional faculty are suddenly forced to explore the contemporary online learning toolkit, and students are assigned to learn from whatever faculty cobble together, we have the obligation to understand the gaps that they discover, and how this impact is felt."

"There's a great deal of hunger for evidence of what the problems were so we can at least do due diligence of how we can fix them for the fall," Motz says. While many students and parents may have bemoaned the quality of the learning experience this spring, most

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also understand the crisis conditions under which it occurred. The expectations for virtual learning this fall will be higher, Motz says.

"It's as if faculty got a 'You pass Go and collect \$200' card," he says, a Monopoly reference that might be lost on many of today's students. "The likelihood we'll get another favorable draw out of the community chest is low."

The study's goal is not to "evaluate online learning," Motz says, because "a large majority of faculty members and students didn't know what they were doing."

But the existence of a "field test" in which "100 percent of the target population" of students and faculty members "give it all a shot" created what Motz calls a "massive user study" both of the technology instructors and students used and the educational practices they employed.

On the technology side, it will be instructive to see how professors used various tools and how quickly they were able to adapt *how* they used them. "It almost doesn't matter whether a professor gets it right on the first try," Motz says of an instructor's interaction with a learning management system or videoconferencing platform or other technology. "Technology development is more of a sociological problem than a good use problem. If it takes you two years to become a power user [of a piece of technology], your product is broken."

Much more important is what researchers can glean about professors' interactions with students, and students' with course material and each other, Motz says.

While data from the faculty and student surveys are still being processed, very preliminary results reveal that students spent much of their time this spring reading

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textbooks and watching videos of instructors "giving the lecture he would otherwise have given," says Motz.

"It was spectacularly isolating," he adds. "The thing that was totally forgotten in this is any kind of contact among students or between students and faculty members. The faculty member seemed to feel the need to be a firehose of knowledge. The street was one way."

It isn't surprising that in the rush to transform courses in a hurry for a different mode of delivery that "the common response was to ignore those more interactive aspects of what online learning could be -- they just needed to survive," says Motz.

The good news about that is that's a fixable problem; for courses that remain virtual this fall (or that build virtual components into a hybrid model, as many institutions are considering), faculty members have more time to build in community-building elements that will make for a more engaging learning experience.

One other preliminary finding from the Unizin study suggests that instructors are game to try to improve their virtual teaching. Stu-

dents who've responded to the survey say they are less likely to take online courses in the future, based on their experience this spring. But faculty members? "They're much more willing to teach online courses after the spring," Motz reports.

Jankowski of NILOA sees several key takeaways from the spring that she hopes will influence the faculty's approach to learning going forward.

First, early results of the association's [own survey](#) of assessment-related changes this spring shows that many instructors did not put student needs or issues of equity into account in their rush to transform their face-to-face courses for remote instruction. "A lot of people made quick decisions, then later asked, 'Did that work for you?'"

Very quickly, though, the diversity in students' needs and situations became "starkly raised" for instructors, Jankowski says. In normal times on a campus, students turn to various student affairs offices to deal with problems or difficult situations.

But in the pivot to remote learning, "the main touch point that students had with the institution was with faculty, and they were getting

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bombarded with questions about mental health, medical things." On campus, a professor might have referred a student to student affairs, says Jankowski, but with urgent requests, many instructors "ended up having to get support from student affairs professionals for what they do holistically for students."

"I'd like to think professors came away from this spring with a better understanding of the whole student -- not just for the time they show up in my class, but the fact that they have layers of things that are going on. They're not just a student, but a caregiver, or a foster youth ... I would like to see us not be surprised about our students."

Jankowski also, unsurprisingly, sees opportunity for instructors to emerge from their experience this spring with a heightened sense of the importance of how they assess students' learning.

She says her anecdotal sense is that faculty members who had built their in-person courses very specifically around a set of learning

outcomes "understood the value of that when they made the pivot" to remote learning, when many of them reconsidered their expectations for the amount of work students could do given everything else they were juggling.

"It gave them an ability to home in on the most important learning for the end of that term," Jankowski says. As professors considered what assignments to keep and which to ditch, those with a clear sense of the course's goals had an easier time deciding "what do I need to have my students focus on, what are the most important parts of what students need to learn."

"One question for future is whether the importance of learning outcomes and assessment as a design tool carries over and permeates how we build courses," she adds.

Jankowski says she saw professors adapt in another way that heartens her -- by shaping their assignments in response to what students were encountering day to day.

A math professor who asked

students to graph their internet speed over time, to gauge how it might affect their learning. A history instructor who incorporated the 1918 flu into the course plan. Psychology faculty members who asked students to watch a movie with the family members they were holed up with to understand the differing prisms through which they viewed it.

To the widespread assumption that students learned less during this time, Jankowski acknowledges that that's a possibility. But maybe it was just a different kind of learning, she says -- "maybe it became more poignant because it was relevant to how I was living."

She cites another example of music students who used video platforms like YouTube or Flipgrid for group recitals. "That wasn't the faculty that figured it out -- it was the students. It could benefit us to keep in mind that they can be co-creators, and they might have really good ideas if we make clear the outcomes we're trying to get to." ■

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Crisis and Opportunity for Faculty Development

A professor put in charge of her campus's tiny teaching center in the midst of the pandemic discusses the problems and potential of tapping in to fellow faculty members' newfound thirst to get better.

By **Doug Lederman** // June 3, 2020

Maybe it's just the long-in-the-tooth journalist in me, on the lookout for signs of conflict, but on first read Jessamyn Neuhaus's Listserv post last month sounded like a cry for help from someone possibly in over her head at a vulnerable time.

Neuhaus, a professor of U.S. history and pop culture at the State University of New York College at Plattsburgh, [told her colleagues on the POD Network discussion group](#) that she had just the previous week become interim director of her campus's one-person [Center for Teaching Excellence](#).

The part-time role, which came with limited release from her teaching duties and some modest additional compensation, made her responsible for faculty instructional development at a time of great external tumult on a campus that (like many) had for years been struggling to attract faculty to programs and to utilize the center's services. Her cited reasons for that ineffectiveness may sound familiar to those elsewhere: budget austerity, turf wars, uneven administrative encouragement and "staffing/personality issues.")

Stepping into a situation like that might be challenging at any time, but this isn't an ordinary moment. Like faculty members and administrators elsewhere trying to help their institutions pivot from a spring of emergency remote teaching to prepare for a fall likely involving a mix of in-person and virtual learning, Neuhaus was facing "wildly unrealistic expectations," she wrote. "The lack of a campus culture that

understands and uses [educational development] + high anxiety about the unknowns of the fall = people looking for quick fixes, on a gigantic scale and on a timetable that's simply not possible."

How, she asked her peers, "can I capitalize on the fact that at this moment more people on our campus than ever before are open to the idea of engaging in ED while at the same time managing/redirecting expectations of quick fixes and simple solutions?"

I asked Neuhaus if she'd spare some time to talk about her plight, and expected the conversation to reinforce the general sense of dread and anxiety that so many discussions about higher education leave me with these days.

I was very wrong.

Neuhaus's path to her new role started several years ago. Like many early-career faculty members, she says, she had published a lot (in history) but had little training in teaching. "I'm an introvert, not a natural performer, so I became increasingly interested in questions of teaching and learning," Neuhaus says. When Plattsburgh created its first Center for Teaching Excellence nearly a decade ago, she jumped at the chance for help. She eventually served as a faculty fellow at the teaching center. "It took me a very long time to become an effective teacher," she says.

The center's original director died suddenly last year and, because of budget woes caused by the SUNY campus's declining enrollment, was not replaced. Plattsburgh ad-



Jessamyn Neuhaus

ministrators contemplated various models for keeping the center going, ultimately embracing a plan suggested by Neuhaus to have two faculty co-directors, both part-time. Neuhaus was one; the other logical choice opted out this spring. That's how she ended up in her formal role as a teaching center of one at this pivotal time.

The "grand plans" she had for faculty development this spring went out the window when COVID-19 hit. She and the head of Plattsburgh's technology-enhanced learning unit, John Locke, focused much of their efforts on helping the college's instructors transform their in-person courses so they could educate their dispersed students remotely.

Difficult as the transition was, Neuhaus found it invigorating. At Plattsburgh, as is true at most colleges, there's a "little core group of

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faculty" who have been "all in" on teaching experimentation, and a comparable band of professors who are "actively hostile."

This spring, though, the "big middle group showed up," Neuhaus says. She and Locke held virtual happy hours and lounges that were a combination of "social gathering, moral support, questions about pedagogy and some technical questions for John," she says. "There was an openness, an urge, an impetus to talk about teaching and learning."

"For the first time, here and all across the country, college instructors became novice learners in so many ways," Neuhaus adds. "For the first time, it was acceptable, even desirable, for smarty-pants experts to say, 'I need some assistance; I'm not sure how to teach this right now.' It became culturally acceptable for people to just admit, 'I'm not totally sure how to do this.' That is so huge."

And yet, there were limits on what could be accomplished this spring, Neuhaus says, because of the "crisis conditions ... Nobody learns well while their brains are experiencing trauma and stress," as was true for so many instructors (especially those who are traditionally most vulnerable, "contingent and marginalized and underrepresented faculty") and students.

The challenge for Neuhaus and other faculty development officials now, she says, is to sustain that instructor interest and use it to create sustainable momentum.

That's not the faculty's job alone, she says. Yes, "every college instructor who wants to be an effective teacher has to take responsibility for their own educational development -- they have to maintain that all-essential growth mindset."

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For the first time, it was acceptable, even desirable, for smarty-pants experts to say, 'I need some assistance; I'm not sure how to teach this right now.' It became culturally acceptable for people to just admit, 'I'm not totally sure how to do this.' That is so huge.

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But it takes much more than individual effort, especially when professors are being tasked with learning entirely new ways of designing and delivering their courses -- possibly several at a time if, as might be necessary this fall, they need to ensure that students can participate whether they're in person, online or both.

"Without extensive support, financial and training support, that's not something you can do on an individual basis," Neuhaus says. Campus leaders have to step up to provide those things.

Students have a role to play, too. "Even the most highly skilled online educator is at a disadvantage if the students are coming in resentful and leery of online learning," says Neuhaus. "Students need to get up to speed on the potential of online teaching and learning, and there has to be different messaging to students about what's possible in online learning."

She didn't say it explicitly in our interview, but most college leaders are sending a very different message right now in their clamor for

students to return to campus, with many suggesting that they can't possibly deliver on their missions if students remain virtual. It will be hard to expect students to believe that online or virtual learning can be good -- better than it was this spring -- if their colleges' own leaders don't.

Taking Advantage of the Moment

What does Neuhaus hope that she and Plattsburgh's professors can accomplish together in the months to come? And how does she see the center's role, given that she's a one-person show?

First, she plans to talk up five key pedagogical practices that she laid out in [her 2019 book, *Geeky Pedagogy: A Guide for Intellectuals, Introverts, and Nerds Who Want to Be Effective Teachers* \(West Virginia University Press\)](#): awareness, preparation, practice, support and reflection.

"Last semester, what I saw so many faculty doing was all of those things in a much more aware way," Neuhaus says. "They showed increased awareness of what was

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happening with their students, prepared in new ways; reflected on a scale I've never seen, practicing all these new things, seeking out support. Doing all of those things on a regular basis is the difference between somebody who is constantly working at being an effective educator and not."

She wants faculty members to continue to be open to acknowledging their limitations as teachers. "A lot of us have built up so many walls about our teaching. At this moment, you could say, 'Something's going off the rails with my class' and nobody would question it. As educators, we are always learning new things, and we should be able to ask each oth-

er for help without it being a threat to our expertise."

And Neuhaus hopes instructors will embrace some of the insights they gained and practices they used this spring. "Many saw more than before the importance of connection with their students, and their humanizing presence as instructors in their students' lives," she says.

"Finding more flexible ways for students to demonstrate their learning was a necessity for many faculty for the first time, because it was a crisis," she says. "That's something that should survive this."

The Center's Role

There are limits to what Platts-

burgh's Center for Teaching Excellence, as a one-person band, can do to make all this happen. The advice Neuhaus got from her colleagues at the POD Network was to focus not on generating original programming, but to be a "lifeline ... I am a resource curator, campus connector and college community builder," she says.

"I want to help build a campus community where people talk to each other about what's working with students and find ways to support each other. This crisis has created a moment where that's maybe more possible than it was before.

"I don't want to blow this chance." ■

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<https://www.insidehighered.com/digital-learning/article/2020/06/03/how-new-one-person-teaching-center-navigating-moment-peril-and>

How College Students Viewed This Spring's Remote Learning

A professor's in-depth survey of students before and after courses went virtual offers insights into how colleges can improve. The key elements: a thoughtful mix of flexibility and structure.

By **Doug Lederman** // May 20, 2020



Eric Loepp in a video to his students this spring

As higher education's grand, unplanned experiment with remote learning this spring nears its end, what's the best way to gauge how it went for students and what we can learn from it for the future?

Inside Higher Ed's pages and those of many other publications and blogs have been filled with individual accounts of instructors and students, many of which were critical. The handful of surveys we've seen ([here](#), [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#)) similarly show current college students to be generally dissatisfied with their remote learning experience this spring, but most of the surveys either skimmed the surface or were conducted early on in the pandemic.

Understanding how the spring's learning experience was for stu-

dents is especially important if, as seems likely, COVID-19 will continue to force colleges and universities to educate some if not all of their students virtually in the fall and beyond. Even the significant number of colleges that are confidently announcing plans to resume in-person instruction this fall acknowledge that they might have to revert to remote instruction if the coronavirus rebounds. And like it or not, technology-enabled education, defined broadly, is going to play an increasingly central role in how higher education is delivered going forward.

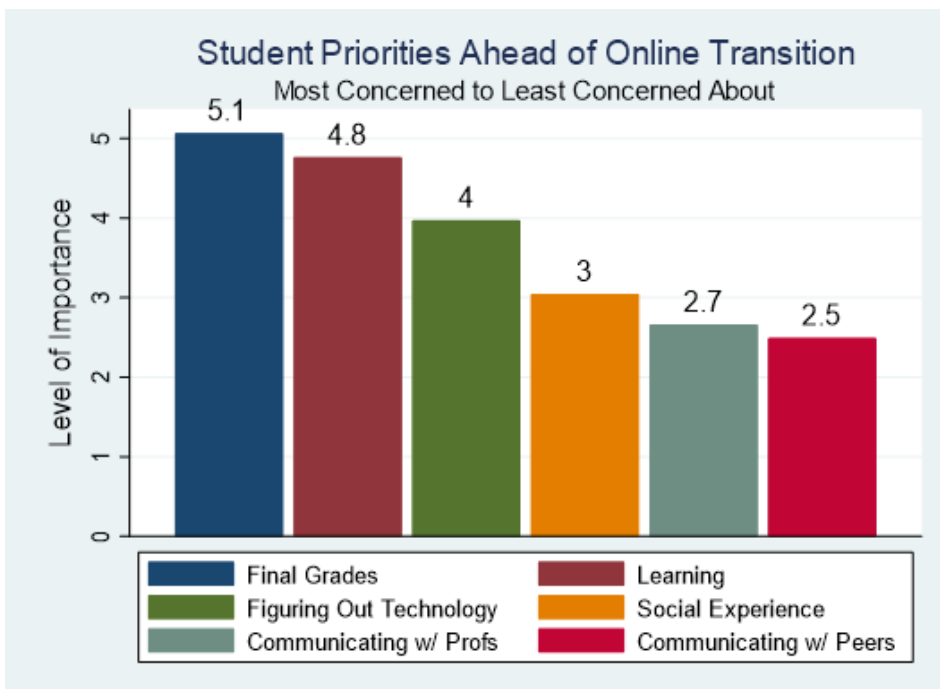
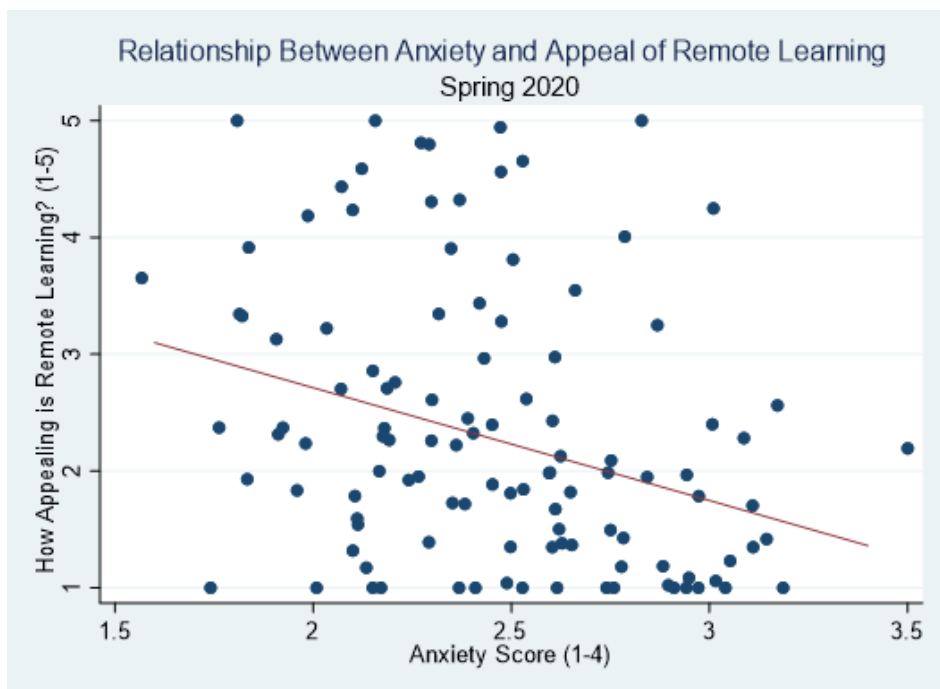
So the more we know about what works and what doesn't, the better.

That thinking was part of what motivated Eric D. Loepp to complicate his own transition this spring.

As the assistant professor of political science used the University of Wisconsin at Whitewater's extended spring break to prepare to shift his four courses for remote delivery, he saw an opportunity to engage in a little research, too. So he sought institutional review board approval to survey his 100-plus students at the start and finish of their virtual learning experience this spring.

His goals were partly selfish: "I did it for my own edification, to see how I did," he says. But as an active participant in Whitewater's faculty developments efforts (he's taught in its Active Learning Academy and its [Institute for Online/Blended Teaching](#)), Loepp hoped to inform the anxious conversations unfolding among his peers about whether "a COVID-online semes-

How College Students Viewed This Spring's Remote Learning



ter is different from a regular online course" and how and how much instructors would have to change their usual practices to succeed in the new format.

He started with an admitted bias: "My general thinking is that a good teaching practice is a good teaching practice, however it's delivered."

His students, who were surveyed in the first days of the shift to remote learning, started with their own biases, and it didn't bode well for the transition.

They overwhelmingly said that being in a physical classroom was very important to them, rating it on average as a four on a five-point

scale. About 80 percent of them had studied online before -- an average of 2.5 courses -- so virtual learning was "not new to them, but wasn't common, either."

Loepp asked a set of questions to produce an "anxiety score" for each student (the average was 2.46 on a scale of one to four), and then compared each student's anxiety level to how much (or how little) the prospect of remote learning appealed to them. The correlation was strong: "The more anxious they were, the less appealing they find online learning," Loepp said.

What were they most anxious about heading into their remote learning experiences?

Collectively, they were much more worried about how they would perform and what they would learn than about any technical or operational difficulties with the transition to a virtual format. Even though Wisconsin at Whitewater officials had decided that students would have more flexibility to take courses on a satisfactory/not basis, "they were concerned they would get lower grades and wouldn't learn as much," Loepp said.

Here's one typical quotation from a student: "My initial thoughts on learning remotely involve frustration, confusion and stress. The idea of learning all class material online when a majority of the class is lecture-based is rather concerning. The atmosphere of the classroom during lecture requires a student to pay more attention to what is being said, but now, since I will be listening to lectures in the comfort of my own home, I feel like I will be less capable of obtaining information. Therefore, I am stressed and on edge about how well I will do the rest of the semester in this class."

Another added, "I personally struggle with learning remotely. My

How College Students Viewed This Spring's Remote Learning

learning style is very visual and I like to connect with other students and my professors. Another concern with learning remotely is the home environment. Just because students have a place to live does not mean that the environment is healthy. All students do not have a healthy environment to learn with all the technology that is needed."

Issues of access played a prominent role in students' pretransition anxiety.

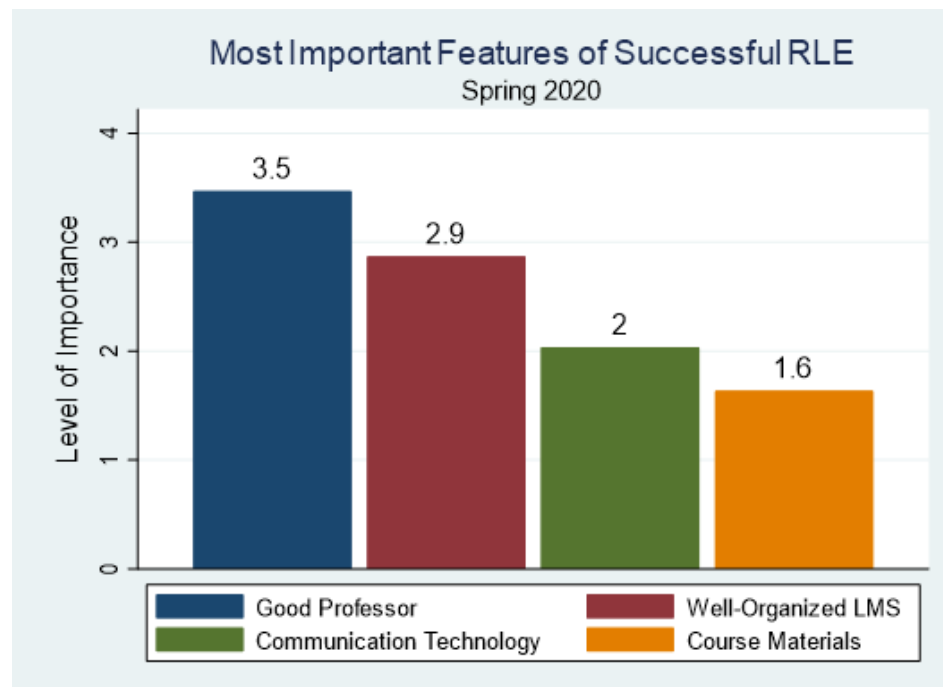
"Learning remotely is a reasonable option for the situation we are faced with," one student wrote. "Yet, problems arise when some students may not have technology, internet, studying resources or the materials they need for remote learning ... I hope that professors understand the difficulty this causes some students and are more lenient in grading in some aspects."

Some students were hopeful amid the anxiety. "It's obviously foreign and new to everyone involved, but there is an element of excitement and optimism in me that knows that everything will pan out just fine as long as we remain organized," one wrote. "Remote learning allows everyone to work at their own pace, but a lack of classroom meetings will probably result in lack of motivation for most people. Including me, sadly."

How It Went

At the end of the term (it ended just last week, so he was gathering the concluding data through this past Sunday), Loepp asked students to respond to a new questionnaire. Among other things he asked them to respond to this statement: "I could learn at least as much as I did in face-to-face meetings."

On a scale of one (strongly disagree) to seven (strongly agree), the average response for students



in his courses was 4.89 -- "squarely on the 'agree' side, which is great, particularly given circumstances that severely disrupted both the micro and macro learning environments," Loepp said via email. "But it also suggests there is some room for me to develop and grow as an online leader/facilitator."

More useful than those overall satisfaction numbers, Loepp suggests, are students' impressions about what worked and what didn't, and why. That's especially important as professors and institutions look ahead to a virtual, or blended, fall.

Asked to rate the importance of a set of factors in contributing to a successful remote learning experience, students put their professors' performance at the top of the list.

What traits of professors were most important? Three in particular: communication and flexibility -- but the latter leavened with structure, too.

Communication. It's a two-way street. "The reason this instructor was the best at remote teaching/

instruction is because they were always able to be contacted," said one student. "It was helpful in a time that was very stressful and uncertain to know that if I contacted someone they would not only respond but would also respond fast."

But hearing from professors proactively was also important. "They were constantly reaching out to students to see what they needed help with and how they could assist in making the class easier" to navigate, said another.

Flexibility. Many students expressed appreciation for instructors who understood the strains students were under and built leeway into their approach to the course, to account for students' adjustments to a new way of life and lack of control over their schedules.

"They made students not feel too overwhelmed and they were very understanding that for most students, it is very hard to juggle four or more classes entirely online," said one student.

Another added, "The professor was understanding of how hard

How College Students Viewed This Spring's Remote Learning

online classes are and was willing to work with us. They didn't give us unreasonable assignments or continue on like class was exactly the same online."

Structure. Students didn't want too much flexibility; the best instructors also imposed a sense of rigor and regularity.

"They also made it very clear what needed to be done each week ... They also sent out reminders about when things were due which was very helpful," one student wrote.

Students didn't just lean on professors for structure, Loepp said; they sought to impose it on themselves to avoid the natural human tendency to procrastinate.

When they were asked what advice they gave to their peers, many cited tips on organizing their days effectively. "There were lots of comments like 'Don't sleep in,' 'Create blocks of time each day when you study for a certain class,' 'go into Canvas twice a day to look for updates,'" Loepp said.

Students' "simultaneously expressing a preference for flexibility, but also for structure" is an "important challenge for us to navigate as an institution," Loepp said.

Take due dates, for example. Students wanted to know that if they had a major life event -- a childcare problem, a sick relative -- professors would be understanding about the need for an extension, he said. But they also urged instructors to set clear and consistent deadlines and not to change them. "And if you have to change it, don't change it again," Loepp advised.

The mix of flexibility and structure also emerged in the context

of the thorny issue of **whether and how much to depend on synchronous (live) class meetings**. Like many instructors nationally, Loepp said, "a lot of [Whitewater professors] shied away from synchronous meetings because of accessibility issues," given that many students had a lot less control over their schedules when they were physically dispersed than when they were on campus, as well as spottier internet access.

But in their comments, "students were really high on having some sort of synchronous presence" as a way to interact with their instructors and their fellow students, Loepp said. One big question going forward will be how to meet that need for planned, structured time together while still being "careful about mandating synchronous meetings" out of respect for those who work, care for dependents or otherwise have complicated lives.

Another Kind of Consistency

The other major area that students cited as most important to a good remote learning experience, beyond the faculty, was what Loepp's survey called a "well-structured LMS," or learning management system.

Numerous students said they appreciated when course pages in Canvas clearly indicated how they could find library resources, student services or other key needs; laid out the curriculum in a clear and concise way; and made deadlines and assignments plainly evident. On the flip side, they complained about issues like professors creating assignments without filling in the due date field in the LMS, such that the assignment didn't show up

in the calendar students used to track their work.

This raises a thorny issue. Many of the institutions with deep experience in online learning also tend to be the most prescriptive in encouraging, if not requiring, faculty members to use common templates or structure their courses in the same way. At many colleges, there's no quicker way to get faculty up in arms than to mandate that instructors do something in a specific way -- be it a syllabus, let alone course structure.

In a recent discussion on the Whitewater campus, Loepp recalls, one professor suggested a "universal template" for courses built in Canvas. "I totally understand the degree to which that might make sense, but there's no way that gets through without a huge fight over academic freedom. So I'd hesitate to be particularly hierarchical in having us mandate something like that."

Where colleges and universities might go instead, Loepp said, is "building up a consistent and regular course module on campus, providing best practices and templates, and profiling faculty who've had successes."

"Most professors I talk to," he said, "don't want to do that which is really easy. They want to do what works. If we can collectively identify the best practices, or create a blank Canvas course that can be copied, that might help create best practices but won't necessarily standardize or universalize.

"It's kind of like freedom of speech: the best ideas are the ones that make it to the surface and prevail." ■

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OPINION

In a Pandemic, Everyone Gets an Asterisk

Rethinking how we assess, test and grade our students gives not only them but also instructors needed flexibility during an impossible time, Cathy N. Davidson and Christina Katopodis write.

By **Cathy N. Davidson** and **Christina Katopodis** // March 23, 2020

The National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases announced on March 16 that the U.S. has begun [human testing for a new coronavirus vaccine](#). According to Dr. Anthony Fauci, the director of the institute, while the trial was launched at record speed, a vaccine won't be ready for at least a year. It takes time to develop and test a vaccine that is both safe for humans and effective in fighting this virus.

There is an uncanny parallel between testing a vaccine on humans and testing students in the extraordinary circumstance of a health emergency where all courses must be put online without advance preparation. Under normal circumstances, it would take at least a year to do this well. Since we don't have a year, resources in higher ed need to be [pooled](#) and [shared](#) to help prepare faculty members to meet students where they are. Remarkably, all over America institutions and individuals are responding with amazing creative energy, responsibility and generosity.

Ironically, if there is an area where many still remain mystified, it is in the area of testing itself. We don't have a year to become experts in how to assess students during this emergency period of distance learning. Even at higher ed institutions where residential life is a cornerstone of all they do, it seems somehow easier to close the campus, move every student out of the

dorms and place all courses online than to change policies and practices for how those students will be tested, assessed and graded. Fortunately, though, a number of higher education institutions are recognizing this educational deficiency and are working on ways to see past it. We can learn from them.

The University of Washington, in Seattle, the original epicenter of the COVID-19 virus in the U.S., was one of the first universities to make the decision to move all of its classes to remote instruction. According to an exchange on Facebook with President Ana Mari Cauce, faculty members at the university can decide whether their courses will be graded or whether they use [CR/NC](#) (credit/no credit). Grades have an asterisk beside them to explain the circumstances of such choices so that students in competitive majors won't be penalized, especially in cases where students need a high GPA in order to continue in professional school.

An asterisk may seem small, but it is an important modification of the notion that one letter or number "represents" what one achieved in a course. Don't we all need an asterisk this term? If many of us are feeling too much like experimental subjects in some gigantic educational test, we all could use that asterisk to indicate the extenuating circumstances under which we have been compelled to perform this year.



SOURCE: ISTOCK.COM/AYAX

Smith College in Northampton, Mass., is another college that offers an excellent model for changing how to calculate student success. Seemingly overnight, Smith not only moved to remote learning but also went to a mandatory satisfactory/unsatisfactory grading system in order to "recognize the extraordinary character of current circumstances." Thoughtfully, the [Smith FAQ](#) about academic continuity explains, "As we move instruction into alternative modes, we are necessarily changing our agreements about expectations and assessments. In a new and unfamiliar environment, we cannot hold faculty and students to expectations constructed in and for a different instructional experience." Everything

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about this statement reaffirms the foundational principles of a liberal arts education, even when conducted at a distance: it should prepare you for whatever challenges might lie ahead outside of college, or, as noted on the Smith College homepage, it is an education designed to “empower the whole you.”

At Georgetown University, a team of imaginative educators has spent the last decade exploring a variety of learning innovations. In this crisis, they have turned their attention to alternative forms of grading. According to Vice Provost for Education Randall Bass, Georgetown has not only moved courses online but has worked to come up with ways to “ensure that both students and faculty are supported to do their best work.” That means changing assessment. For spring 2020, Georgetown will give its undergraduate students the option to choose either a letter grade or [pass/fail](#). Students are allowed to make this choice until the last day of classes, in any course (including core, majors, certificates and electives). It’s a pivot, and an extraordinary one, in extraordinary circumstances.

We are pleased to be hearing from colleagues at a number of other institutions that are right now discussing the appropriate way to grade in this pandemic. The admirably helpful University of Oklahoma professor Laura Gibbs (@OnlineCrslady) is even compiling a crowdsourced list, [“Alternate Grading in a Crisis,”](#) to keep track of changes, decisions, discussions and petitions. She notes that community colleges have an additional problem adopting an alternative grading system lest they hinder their students’ transfer to four-year college.

Our own City University of New York has extended the deadlines



We are pleased to be hearing from colleagues at a number of other institutions that are right now discussing the appropriate way to grade in this pandemic.



by which students decide if they will take a course for a conventional grade or a pass/no credit/fail option. Any adjustment signals an awareness that the current disruption has changed all of our options for pretty much everything and on every level.

Are these makeshift solutions or are they small revolutions in university grading policies that we wish to continue? Susan D. Blum, one of [several prominent advocates](#) for “ungrading,” insists that she began using formative, narrative written feedback instead of grades when she began to see greater variety and diversity among her students. As she notes in an essay in [Inside Higher Ed](#), “Grading requires uniformity. It assumes uniform input, uniform process and uniform output ... Students don’t start out the same. They don’t have the same life experiences -- or even academic experiences -- during our semester together. They don’t go to the same places afterward.”

It is hard to imagine anything that makes those differences sharper than a pandemic. Higher education will never have a silver bullet solu-

tion, like a vaccine, to fix the status quo. Disease, we know, affects us unequally and, with remote learning, the burdens that fall on our students are grossly unequal. The pandemic magnifies differences at a basic, structural level. Do you have Wi-Fi? Have your preschoolers and your teenagers been sent home from school, disrupting your online class? Are you taking care of an elderly relative and suddenly have no one to help you? Have you been laid off from your part-time restaurant job? Are you required to continue to work at a hospital? All of this contributes to your life. An A, B, C, D or F grade does not come close to measuring what you are learning or how.

For more than 100 years, testing and grading have become the tail wagging the dog we call higher education. As we all scramble to make do as best we can in the worst pandemic in a century, with the unfair and unequal pressures it has placed on all of us -- teachers, students, administrators, staff -- it is useful to pause and think about the purpose and mission of what we do. What might we learn from

In a Pandemic, Everyone Gets an Asterisk

this extraordinary time and this radical, unanticipated and mandatory realignment of our usual practices? What is essential? What falls away? Maybe this horrific pandemic can also make us aware of the virtues of flexibility and the importance of the forms of learning that cannot be tested by standardized measures.

When this is over, many of us will gladly return to our former ways. And there's nothing wrong with that: crisis operations are in no way replacements for best practices. Yet in this extraordinary time of innovation and pedagogical sharing, we

are seeing renewed commitment to teaching, to caring and to generosity across fields, ranks and institutions. These are precious. Adjunct and junior faculty and graduate student instructors have, notably, been at the forefront of solicitous sharing, despite the abuses many of them have experienced in our profession. We must remember that.

This crisis has forced us to put our old habits and practices under a spotlight. We've been required to get creative and to do it fast -- too fast. Maybe the other requirement for this time is to recognize that,

although we might not be perfect, we actually might be learning new methods and techniques and embracing values that improve what we were doing before.

We are all being tested in the most profound way by this disease. Rethinking how we assess, test and grade our students not only gives them flexibility at an impossible time. It also gives instructors an opportunity to be flexible. It allows us all -- faculty, students and staff -- to give ourselves an asterisk that says, simply and profoundly, we are human. ■

Bio

*Cathy N. Davidson is cofounder and codirector of HASTAC (Humanities, Arts, Science, and Technology Alliance and Collaboratory). She is Distinguished Professor of English and founding director of the Futures Initiative at the Graduate Center CUNY. Christina Katopodis is a doctoral candidate in English and Futures Initiative fellow at the Graduate Center CUNY and an adjunct instructor at Hunter College. Together, they are writing a book tentatively titled *Transforming Every Classroom: A Practical Guide* (under contract to Harvard University Press, anticipated 2022).*

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<https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2020/03/23/during-covid-19-crisis-higher-ed-should-rethink-how-assess-test-and-grade-students>

Return to Learn

Through a new viral testing program, the University of California, San Diego, hopes to quickly identify COVID-19 infections, reduce the risk of a major outbreak and become a model for others, writes Pradeep Khosla.

By Pradeep Khosla // May 8, 2020

Not so long ago, no one had heard of the 2019 novel coronavirus. Until mid-February, neither the virus nor the disease it causes even had an official name. Now, we are all painfully familiar with SARS-CoV-2 and the respiratory disease, COVID-19.

The virus has upended lives and ended many. To slow its spread, we have had to radically adjust our economy and society, including higher education -- a critical engine that drives both.

Higher education institutions like the University of California, San Diego, adapted our campuses weeks ago to quickly and efficiently implement remote education so the vast majority of students could continue their studies while taking shelter during the pandemic. While we are proud of the success of our remote education programs, we are also committed to continuing to offer our students the experience of being and learning on a college campus.

To do so at our institution, a team of our university clinicians, molecular biologists, technologists, infectious disease experts, bioinformatics specialists, disease modelers, public health experts and others has launched a new program called Return to Learn. The initial phase, which begins May 11, is designed to make COVID-19 testing available for up to 5,000 students who continue to reside on our campus.

Our hope is that this initial phase will provide us with the knowledge and insight to eventually scale up to where we could potentially test

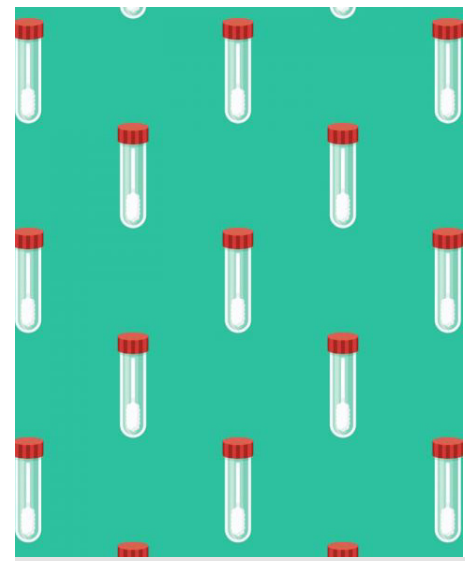
monthly the vast majority of the roughly 65,000 students, faculty and staff members on campus. If all goes well in the initial phase, this effort could be ready for large-scale deployment as early as this fall. By testing large numbers of our students, faculty and staff on a recurring basis, we hope to be able to quickly identify COVID-19 infections on the campus and thereby help to reduce the risk of a significant outbreak.

This proposed program is unprecedented and audacious. If successful, it could serve as a model -- not only for higher education, but also for cities, counties and states working to fight the spread of coronavirus.

The Return to Learn program has five major components:

1. **Risk assessment and mitigation.** Through comprehensive review of the physical and functional aspects of our campus, we are seeking new strategies for stratifying and reducing transmission risk of coronavirus, such as optimal class sizes and density, scope and structure for co-curricular activities, and appropriate personal behaviors, like safe distancing and use of face coverings, to help reduce spread of the virus.

2. **Proactive vigilance.** Among the painful lessons learned thus far is that public response and action to coronavirus cannot be solely reactive. We have created rigorous mathematical models for an enhanced viral monitoring program



SOURCE: ISTOCK.COM/BORTONIA

that should help us to detect the presence of the virus on our campus in its earliest stages, possibly before people even know they're infected. According to our models, if we are able to successfully test 60 to 90 percent of our campus population for viral infection each month on a recurring basis, we could have a greater than 90 percent chance of detecting its spread when fewer than 10 people among tens of thousands are actively, but unknowingly, shedding viral particles. This is possible because, as a research university with a deep reservoir of tools -- from innovative sampling techniques to high-throughput nucleic acid detection platforms to extensive public health expertise -- we have the requisite research and clinical know-how to do so. And what we

Return to Learn

learn, we will share with everyone.

3. **Rapid response.** If a testing sample proves positive for coronavirus, a specially trained, campus-based public health team will attempt to reach out to that person to notify them and provide guidance on health care. The team will also try to identify and notify persons with whom the infected person may have had close contact in previous days -- an effort known as exposure notification.

4. **Technological tools.** The novel coronavirus is highly contagious and capable of extraordinary transmission speeds. We seek to work fast, too, and comprehensively. Recent studies suggest the coronavirus may be most infectious before symptoms appear. Therefore, to further enhance chances of catching the virus early, our program will also look for viral RNA from residen-

tial wastewater and surface collections. If the virus is detected, molecular sequence analyses will be used to create a database to help guide public health measures. By combining information technologies, cutting-edge epidemiology tools, diverse cellular and molecular sciences, and traditional public health interventions, our approach offers the possibility of extraordinary levels of viral control at the population level.

5. **Big picture.** All these efforts will be integrated to promote early analyses of viral activity signals and quicker response times. The Return to Learn program has been designed to identify clusters of individuals shedding virus or those at greater risk in specific locations, whether it's a residence hall or a particular classroom. That will permit faster treatment, ear-

lier mitigation of identified issues and continuing refinement and improvement of the system.

No one knows what the world -- even our small part of it -- will look like a month from now, let alone in September when we begin our fall classes. Everything is subject to constant change and evolution, not unlike coronavirus.

But what we do know is that higher education possesses the skills, knowledge and abilities to make significant contributions to getting our economy and society back on track as soon as possible. The University of California, San Diego, Return to Learn program represents higher education at its finest, and if successful, it can help this university and similar institutions to do what we do best: teach, conduct leading-edge research and provide service to our communities. ■

Bio

Pradeep Khosla is chancellor of University of California, San Diego.

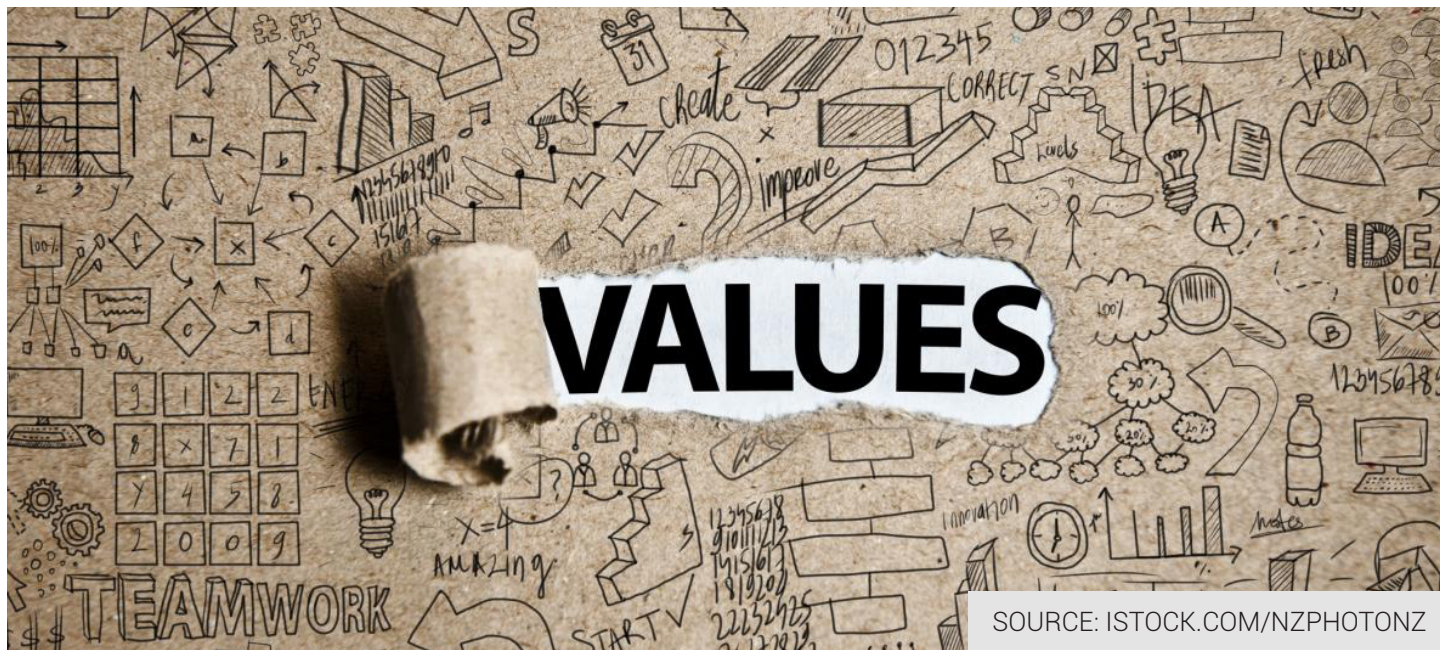
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Values-Centered Instructional Planning

As colleges move from coping to planning for the fall and beyond, they should be guided by a consistent, mission-aligned framework, writes Robin DeRosa.

By [Robin DeRosa](#) // May 13, 2020



SOURCE: ISTOCK.COM/NZPHOTONZ

As most colleges and universities in the United States begin to tackle contingency planning for this coming fall and spring given the uncertainty around COVID-19, campus leaders are looking for solutions that can quickly steady the ship.

Ed-tech companies are generously offering free trials and promises of frictionless conversion tools to help faculty members who are new to online teaching make a rapid leap to an unfamiliar modality. But these tech-based solutions often ignore the pedagogies that many of our colleges and universities center in our mission statements and admissions pitches.

As we scramble to outfit more classrooms with Zoom capabilities, teach more faculty how to upload video lectures to the learning man-

agement system, and adopt anti-cheating browser lockdown software for faculty to use as they deliver their traditional assessments, we are choosing stopgap measures that are unlikely to align with the kinds of language we use when we advertise our academic programs to prospective students: "our institution offers real-world experiences," "we offer hands-on approaches," "applied and project-based curriculum," "student-centered learning at its best."

As we wind down a semester of remote teaching during a time of crisis, institutions are now looking ahead to determine how we might better align the online experience we may need to offer with the kinds of engaged teaching and learning approaches and experiences that

particularly our residential and face-to-face colleges and universities are known for.

What is missing from most of the remote teaching contingency planning is a framework for helping the people inside institutions understand and make decisions about pedagogy from inside the pandemic's evolving reality. Pedagogy is not an ancillary or optional part of conversations about remote teaching. Pedagogy is the category that describes how we teach. For that reason, whether we foreground it or not, pedagogy is a key part of how our learners understand and assess their experience at our institutions during this crisis.

At the [Open Learning & Teaching Collaborative](#) at [Plymouth State University](#), we have developed the

Values-Centered Instructional Planning

ACE

	ADAPTABILITY	CONNECTION	EQUITY	
assignment-level	Flexible Deadlines Student Design & Choice	Reduced Disposability Portal-Based Use of Internet	UDL Baselines Varied Engagement Channels	ACE-Informed Practices
course-level	Hy-Flex Design Module-Based Schedule	Curriculum Linked to Context Open Tools	OER Adoption Basic Needs Syllabus Integration	
institution-level	Technology Adoption Driven by Pedagogy University Policies (transfer, P/NP, etc)	Supporting Instructional Design Portals for Community Partnerships	Digital Divide Amelioration Integration with Basic Needs Services	

colab.plymouthcreate.net/ace/

ACE framework -- adaptability, connection and equity -- to guide our decision making and professional development planning.

The idea behind ACE is that we elevate three characteristics that are clear, context sensitive, values driven and mission aligned, and we use them to plan assignment-, course- and institution-level responses to COVID-19 in the areas of our university that are connected to teaching and learning. ACE is a framework that fits Plymouth State; as a public, residentially oriented university, our pedagogical approach promises engaged and project-based experiences for students that connect them to real-world issues and problems and nurture their connections to each other and to their communities as they learn.

This pedagogical approach is popular with our comparator institutions, but other institutions that serve markedly different demographics or who take different approaches to teaching and learning may need to revise ACE or start fresh with a framework of their own. But contingency planning without a guiding framework is likely to bring most colleges and universities further from their core missions by the time this pandemic is over.

To understand ACE in action, we

need to think about the practices that can be encouraged and integrated by such a framework.

The practices that populate this chart can be swapped for other examples, but the idea is that at all levels of the university (and this can be extended to other levels such as program level or system level), we can use the framework to guide our priorities as we navigate challenges to our communities. We can walk through these sets of practices to get a sense of how they work.

Adaptability: At the assignment level, instructors can create more flexible deadlines for all learners as we expect them to face trauma or uncertainty, and we can involve learners in assignment design or allow them to choose from multiple assignment options to make sure the parameters fit their schedules and circumstances. At the course level, we can create courses that allow learners to trade off more often between online and face-to-face participation as it suits their circumstances, and chunk curriculum into smaller noncumulative modules that can be deployed in different modalities depending on regional scenarios with social distancing.

And at the institutional level, we can adopt technologies and build

infrastructure based on the needs of our teachers and learners and look toward university policies (such as optional pass/no pass grading or generous transfer policies) that help learners persist despite difficult circumstances.

Connection: At the assignment level, instructors can design non-disposable assignments, giving students the opportunity to contribute their work to communities where it would be helpful or appreciated, and conceive of the internet not just as a channel for submission between student and teacher, but as a portal that connects learners with the world.

At the course level, we can link appropriate content to the reality of living during a crisis, asking students to consider connections between their fields and the challenges that crisis presents to culture and livelihood, and we can use open platforms that allow the public to benefit from the course's work. At the institution level, we can invest in instructional designers to support faculty as they integrate connected learning approaches into their courses and create channels and dedicate staff to building partnerships with community partners who would like to engage with the college during a time of common community need.

Equity: At the assignment level, instructors can learn basic principles and tools from universal design for learning in order to maximize the accessibility of the approaches they take, and they can offer multiple engagement channels so that students can participate regardless of how they interface with technology, and how often. At the course level, we can transition rapidly to open educational resources to assure availability of course texts and to lower the cost of learning mate-

Values-Centered Instructional Planning

rials, and we can build basic needs resource information and attention into our syllabi, helping students see that we consider basic needs an academic issue.

At the institutional level, we can assume that all increases in technology use need to be accompanied by direct action to prevent widening of the digital divide. And we can partner with community agencies and other public service providers to strengthen an integrated safety net so that our students will know that their college or university understands the full breadth of challenges -- from food and housing insecurity to childcare pressure to the need for transpor-

tation -- that they face as they try to persist in college.

What we've been doing for the last eight weeks is coping. What we are starting to do now feels more like planning. In 2019, global ed-tech investments reached a staggering \$18.66 billion, and as the novel coronavirus spread across the United States, ed-tech companies were right behind offering ideas, deals, gifts and promises. While many of these technologies are likely to be healthy parts of a balanced response plan, we need to be guided by a framework that is free from undue industry influence, and instead stems from what we claim is most important to our

learning communities.

The ACE framework is openly licensed and easily adaptable; you can swap out the priority practices you focus on or even swap out the core values in the rubric. What matters most is that we focus teaching and learning on, well, teaching and learning, and that during a time of crisis, instead of abandoning our missions to a superficial set of patchwork technologies, we dig deeper to stay true to our commitment to our core values in higher education. ■

I am grateful to the CoLab's learning developer, Martha Burtis, for her partnership in designing the ACE framework.

Bio

Robin DeRosa is director of the Open Learning & Teaching Collaborative at Plymouth State University, in New Hampshire. She can be found on Twitter @actualham.

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<https://www.insidehighered.com/digital-learning/views/2020/05/13/consistent-mission-aligned-instructional-framework-fall-and-beyond>

Quantity Is Not Rigor

While we are all working at home, let's use the occasion to examine the status quo, urges Cathy N. Davidson, including rethinking homework.

By **Cathy N. Davidson** // May 13, 2020

Several commentators have argued recently that one problem with remote teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic is lowered standards. Apparently, we should be worried about professors decreasing their usual homework assignments and therefore abandoning rigor.

Really? Is quantity the same as rigor? Is maintaining the status quo the best educational goal during a crisis? Since we have all been turned upside down by this catastrophe, I suggest we turn the question of rigor on its head, too. Why not use this occasion to examine those standards and ask where they came from, whether they continue to serve us and, if not, what we can do to change them? While we are all working at home, let's rethink homework.

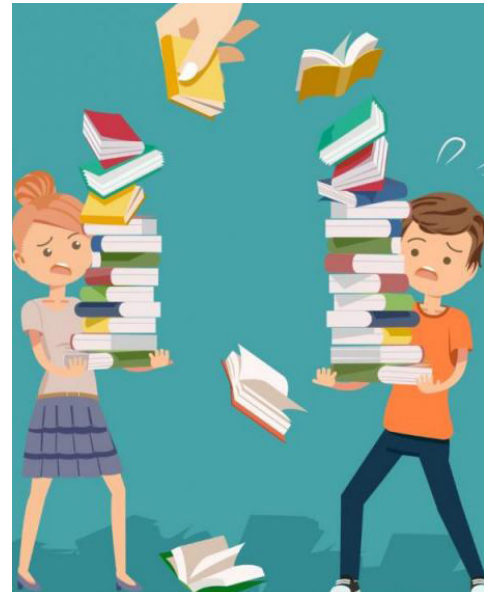
The old rule of thumb for homework is that a college student should spend two hours studying outside of class for each Carnegie credit hour. A student taking a 16-hour course load should devote roughly 32 hours a week to homework, spending a total of 48 hours each week dedicated to academics. Perhaps that would have been reasonable in 1906, the year that the Carnegie hour was invented, when only a small sector of the population went to college and more than 80 percent of college students attended elite, private, residential institutions.

Now, however, over 80 percent of students attend public institutions. Forty percent of all students work [30 hours a week](#), and a quarter hold

down full-time jobs while attending college full-time. Some 22 percent of today's students are also parents. At commuter campuses, including community colleges that enroll nearly half of the nation's students, they also have to spend travel time getting to and from classes. Forty-eight hours of schoolwork simply does not fit into the calculus of our students' busy lives.

In Introduction to Transformative Teaching and Learning in the Humanities and Social Sciences, a graduate class that I co-teach with LaGuardia Community College professor Eduardo Vianna (an M.D. who also holds a Ph.D. in developmental psychology), our students are rethinking every possible aspect of graduate, professional and undergraduate training. In this class, we ask what counts -- and who gets to count. We ask what we teach, why and how and to whom. We ask what it means to introduce students to a field. In our student-led, participatory course, we do not just talk about requirements, but we also ask the far deeper question of what students require for mastery of a field. What kinds of mastery serve students beyond college? Is the goal of higher education to learn from an expert? Or to gain the tools and skills that will allow students to become experts themselves in whatever they hope to accomplish? How does one do that?

As a final project, several of our graduate students are creating syllabi for undergraduate courses they will soon be teaching. One question they start with is "How long should



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a syllabus actually be?" This is a good question because, if one looks at the many syllabi available online, they often seem created with the unrealistic Carnegie prescriptions for homework in mind. Many are so unrealistic (one could say "padded") that one has to wonder if they were written only for the eyes of their students or also for scrutiny by supervisors -- chairs and deans. Meanwhile, those supervisors are thinking ahead to the five-year scrutiny by their formal educational accreditation bodies.

How much homework *should* we assign? There is no one right answer, but it is crucial to spend time thoughtfully focusing on the question. We can begin by asking what we wish students to accomplish outside of class and why. We also need to ask about the level of

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the class, the amount of preparation students bring to it and the material constraints on their time outside of class. Finally, we need to be honest with ourselves about the actual amount of work we are assigning, and we need to make the hard choices before the class begins. As an undergraduate English major, I was assigned *Moby Dick* to read in a week; in graduate school, we had a week to devour *Being and Time*. I am positive no one finished either tome.

A handy tool created at Rice University's Center for Teaching Excellence helps anyone, students or professors, come up with a more realistic assessment of how much time students spend on their assignments. [The Course Workload Estimator](#) allows anyone to enter in data for the reading, writing, exams and other homework assignments for a course. One specifies not only length of an assigned reading, for example, but also the text's difficulty and the purpose of the assignment (to survey, understand or engage). The tool provides an instructor or a student with an estimate of how much out-of-class time is required to accomplish this work. Extensive supplementary materials, including surveys and other data, explain the

assumptions behind this convenient tool. Although hardly definitive, the Course Workload Estimator provides a useful reality check.

What are we actually communicating when we create an unrealistic syllabus? No, a student will not be able to read Thomas Piketty's 817-page *Capital* in a week. They might, however, manage the Instaread Summary that clocks in at a lean 34 pages or the 4,900-word Wikipedia entry or a 500-word exam crib sheet prepared by another student and available online. Given the realities of our students' lives, it is time to admit that when we over-assign, we are really rewarding the skim, the summary and the cheat. Is that rigor?

Homework seems like a simple and perhaps even superficial place to begin an analysis of our inherited practices, but it is actually a subtle dog whistle that signals assumptions about the values of our profession. How much is the "rigorous" syllabus telling students who do not have the previous training, insider vocabulary and cultural capital to know how to fake it that they will never, ever catch up -- so why bother? What is the relationship between a daunting syllabus and a student's willingness to take a course -- or

ability to finish one?

I am suggesting that "rigor" can be deployed as a code word that leads to far deeper assumptions about our profession, including its function as an echo chamber that rewards those few students whose values, background, demographics and family educational background match those of their professors. "Rigor" can too easily translate as professorial self-replication.

Someday, this heinous COVID-19 crisis will be over, and then it will be time to pick up the pieces and rebuild. Given the abandon with which programs are being cut right now, one must worry that there will still be enough pieces left to start that process. I fervently hope that, in the current crisis, higher education is not jettisoned, that the future of students isn't sacrificed to other economic considerations.

At the same time, as we rebuild, I hope that we can also reimagine higher education. Let's reconsider the meaning, scope and purpose of the work we do as well as the work we assign. Let's think about how we measure excellence and success. Let's decouple quantity and quality. Perhaps from this pandemic we might all learn some lessons that we should have learned before. ■

Bio

Cathy N. Davidson is a Distinguished Professor and founder of the Futures Initiative at the Graduate Center CUNY. She is the author, most recently, of [The New Education: How to Revolutionize the University for a World in Flux](#) (Basic Books, 2017).

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Equitable Exams During COVID-19

Pamela Chui Kadakia and Allan A. Bradshaw offer some approaches to consider in light of the sudden changes this spring as instructors begin to design, administer and score final assessments.

By **Pamela Chui Kadakia** and **Allan A. Bradshaw** // May 6, 2020

In March, shelter-in-place mandates changed the face of education. Spring breaks were extended as instructors worked to move courses online. Higher education publications like *Inside Higher Ed* have released countless articles analyzing, predicting and commenting on how the unprecedented move would impact students, instructors and educational institutions.

Now the dust has settled, and we are in May. Most of us have adjusted to the new normal of online instruction. We are adapting to the more frequent use of learning management systems and are comfortable with setting virtual class meetings, and classrooms across America sit empty as students engage from home. But as the spring semester draws to a close, instructors and students will face a final challenge: producing, administering and scoring final exams.

The [equitability of online learning](#) was called into question in March when institutions ceased classroom instruction. Educational institutions had to face the disparity of technological access needed to transition students to an online environment. Though [recent data from the Pew Research Center](#) show that 73 percent of adults have home broadband internet, the disaggregated data by household income paints a different picture. Fifty-six percent of adults in households earning below \$30,000 report having internet. Students with access to technology may be facing other barriers, such as home

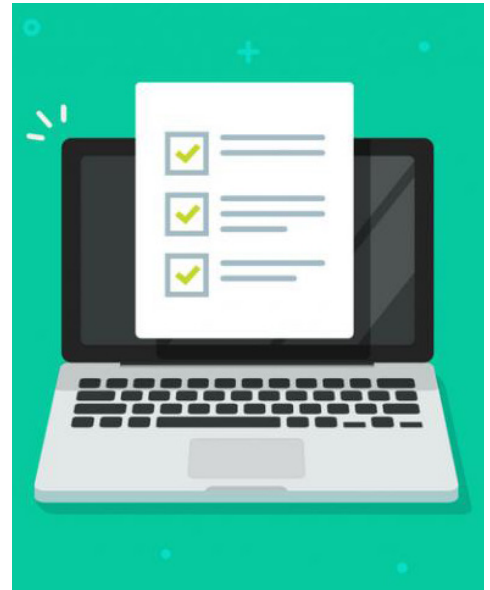
distractions or the needs to care for family members. To mitigate some of the inequity, [some institutions moved to pass/fail](#) rather than letter grades, offering more flexibility to students.

Now, institutions must consider equitable final exams. Even under normal circumstances, instructors must consider the purpose of an exam. Is it formative or summative? Are we testing for skill acquisition or memorization of knowledge? What is the purpose of the time limit? What is an acceptable deadline? As final exams draw near, instructors must consider how to create, administer and score final exams that are fair and equitable during this pivotal time.

As community college instructors and co-coordinators of our department's assessment committee, we have considered equitable assessments (such as quizzes, midterm and final exams, and informal assessments) the cornerstone of our work. In light of the sudden changes to higher education, here are several considerations for institutions and individual instructors to keep in mind as they prepare for the end of the semester.

Time Limits and Deadlines

Final exams for face-to-face courses usually have date and time restrictions. In such courses, students take an exam all at once during class time, there are time limits and absent students are often required to present reasonable excuses before being given makeup exams. But time limits and deadlines may create additional



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barriers and stress for students who are struggling to balance the changes caused by COVID-19.

We suggest you consider the following instead:

- **Adjust time limits to account for the technology learning curve.** Some students may not be comfortable taking an exam on a computer. You should adjust traditional time limits to account for the learning curve.
- **Consider getting rid of forced completion.** Some students may be dealing with a number of distractions at home -- children, sharing space with family and so on. Forced completion doesn't take into account interruptions they may experience. Giving students the opportunity to save their exams and return later may relieve the burden of such home distractions and interruptions.

- **Provide students several days to complete an exam.** Students' schedules may be inconsistent and heavily impacted by varying responsibilities. For example, some students may have children or siblings at home whom they need to share a computer with. Others may be responsible for taking care of elderly family members. If you are a community college instructor, some of your students may be working to balance school and work. Providing several days to complete an exam will give students the flexibility to select a day and time that works best for them.
- **Be flexible with deadlines.** Hard deadlines are as out of style as hugs and kisses during the COVID-19 pandemic. Allowing students room to negotiate deadlines and gain some extra time may help relieve their stress.

Access to Exams

One of the biggest challenges that educational institutions faced when they made the quick move to online instruction was that **not all students had access to a computer and internet**. While many internet providers and companies worked to meet students' technological needs, barriers have remained. For instance, some students only have tablets, and others may need to share technology with their spouses and/or children. It's important to consider how students are accessing exams and provide alternatives for students who can't meet the technological need.

In our course, some students don't have access to a computer but have a smartphone. They have been able to complete discussion boards and assignments through the learning management system's app on their phone. Howev-



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er, it would be an added barrier to request that they complete their exam on a phone. Alternatively, they have been given the option to handwrite their exam and send a photo through text, like a modern-day fax.

Also, learning management systems were not all made equal. Some have more user-friendly interfaces than others, and how an exam looks on the system will influence student success rates. Whether the impact is statistically significant is up for research and debate, but you should take into account what your students will be seeing as you design your exam. Be sure that the text of your exam questions is large enough for a student to read with ease on a screen. Reconsider lengthy and complex instructions and opt for simpler, easy-to-understand directions.

Additionally, typing may be difficult for some students. Consider offering alternatives. Smartphones have impressive capabilities. For short answer or essay exams, consider the option of handwritten answers. Students can take a photo

of what they've written and send it to you with their phones.

Depending on your subject area, you may confront additional challenges. If you're teaching reading comprehension in developmental education or English as a second language, you may want to consider how students without a computer can access passage-dependent exams. It's an additional barrier for students to flip between a passage and comprehension questions unless the learning management system allows the passage and questions to be displayed side by side. These are all things to consider as you design your exams.

Types of Exam Items

Consider getting creative with the types of questions you use in your exam. Many instructors might be tempted to create multiple-choice items to ease grading time and provide a measure of standardization to student knowledge. However, considering the unprecedented changes in education, now may be a good time to incorporate different types of exam approaches. Multiple-choice items are great for mea-

asuring student retention of facts and can guide students to focus on the topics, but short-answer questions and essays give students an opportunity to showcase their critical thinking and problem-solving skills.

Also keep in mind that [the type of assessments, particularly the final exam, proctored during a pandemic](#) may have very different goals than ones given during traditional face-to-face instruction. Traditionally, instructors might require students to exemplify complete mastery of skills. However, given the stress of a pandemic and sudden changes to their academic life, demonstration of complete mastery may not be necessary. Other creative alternatives to assessing student learning may also be beneficial at this time, such as final projects or meaningful written reflections.

If you teach a subject area where multiple-choice questions provide the best means of assessment, consider the following:

- **Reduce the number of choices.**

Typically, instructors will provide four, five or even more choices for each multiple-choice question, but research increasingly shows that three choices work just as well for determining the extent of students' knowledge, with no decrease to the validity or the reliability of the item. What that means is that the item is still just as rigorous for your students while decreasing the work for you as an instructor. This does the additional job of reducing the amount of time students need to answer individual items while still accurately measuring their knowledge of course material.

- **Avoid "all of the above" and "none of the above."** Both these choices reduce the ability of students to differentiate well among



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the available test choices while providing minimal benefit. "None of the above" is particularly notorious for luring both high- and low-performing students into choosing an incorrect answer. That makes it less reliable as a measurement instrument.

- **Item Analysis**

Item analysis is a process by which you systematically examine student responses to particular parts of an assessment to evaluate their quality as a metric for outcomes. Stated simply, it's looking at your exam questions and checking that they're doing what you want them to do. This process is worthwhile at all times, but it is especially valuable now as exams are being rewritten for the online teaching environment. Evaluation of how well students performed may help you determine which questions aren't serving their purpose and should be re-evaluated.

In one of our reading courses, we realized that a particular type of test question that asked students to define vocabulary, contextualize it and categorize its part

of speech all in the same section was doing a substandard job of determining who understood the material and who did not. (That's called "discrimination" in assessment parlance). We used this data to separate the activities into separate items, which ended up better demonstrating student understanding of the material.

Blackboard has [a tool](#) that allows you to run an item analysis from inside a test canvas. This tool approaches the issue from a purely mathematical standpoint, and you'll have to do a little leg-work to interpret the data on your own. If you'd like to approach this task manually, a [TurnItIn blog post](#) shows the kinds of questions to ask yourself as you design and review exams.

- **Rubrics**

In the absence of face-to-face guidance, clear criteria for expectations become more important. A good rubric makes those expectations explicit and describes what learning looks like. Once you've decided to make a rubric, you'll need to choose either an analytical rubric

(measuring criteria separately) or a holistic rubric (measuring all criteria together as part of a whole).

To use an English class as an example, an analytic rubric might assign points separately to the grammar, style and cohesion of an essay for a total of 100 points. A holistic rubric would instead consider the grammar, style and cohesion as simply parts of the whole and assign a letter grade for the overall strength of the essay. While the former is a good pedagogical choice toward the beginning of the semester, you might consider giving students a break from reading detailed rubrics and yourself a break from filling them out by transitioning to a holistic rubric as the semester progresses. This [ASCD article on how to create and use rubrics](#) provides a detailed look at the construction of a good rubric.

Final exams are a large part of higher education and what has



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been the traditional student experience. With COVID-19, campuses sit empty while instructors and students navigate instruction during a pandemic. As you approach final exams, it's vital to reconsider

time limits, deadlines, student access, the types of exams created and how to evaluate exams. Such considerations provide a space for flexibility, understanding and, ultimately, student achievement. ■

Bio

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Pandemic Teaching Prescriptions

Faculty members and students have had better experiences in online classes that shared six factors, writes Regan A. R. Gurung.

By **Regan A. R. Gurung** // June 10, 2020

A bike ride can be a very pleasurable experience if you are well prepared for the weather and terrain. I remember a time when I set out on a gloriously sunny day. All of a sudden, a squall blew in and rain pelted down. I could still get to my destination, but it was not the same. I was taken by surprise. I was not prepared. It was a very uncomfortable trip. Remote teaching reminds me of that ride.

Although spring semesters have ended, terms still have a week or so to go, and the final verdict on how well higher education kept teaching is some time away. Public opinion, and early returns on both faculty and student surveys across universities nationwide, paint a bleak picture. Students and faculty members are tired and stressed, and many report varying levels of dissatisfaction with the remote teaching and learning experience.

Many faculty members had to change how they taught quickly and with little to no compensation. Students who thrived in face-to-face settings and online classes (too often mistakenly conflated with remote learning) and some with no other experiences floundered learning remotely.

My rain-sodden bike ride taught me many things. I know I never want to be caught by surprise like that, but I also know that the weather, just like the future of higher education, is difficult to predict. Looking ahead, short-term predictions are for rain. We can idealistically hope skies will clear, but given current information, to believe that would be

unwise. It is prudent to pay attention to the science of the pandemic and face the reality: no one knows how life will be in the fall. Epidemiological data suggests we will not be back to normal.

As higher education looks to the summer and fall terms, colleges and universities have been actively working to reduce uncertainty by planning for multiple possible scenarios. Many, not wanting to play the odds, are not opening at all. For example, the California State system made the call to have all fall classes be online. Many other institutions plan to open for face-to-face classes with physical distancing restrictions, courses split between physical classrooms and Zoom, and heightened testing and extra sanitary practices in place. The fact remains that the spread of the virus and incidence, morbidity and mortality rates are hard to predict, and the availability of a vaccine is uncertain.

In short, it will be some time before we are out of the proverbial woods. We need to be proactive and plan as best we can. Higher education needs to capitalize on the lead time this summer and provide strong guidance for course design and delivery. We need to face the admittedly unappealing prospect that class formats cannot be taken for granted. We cannot avoid the uncertainty. Once we accept that we are probably in for a long ride, we can prepare more effectively.

We all want to avoid another uncomfortable term. Thankfully, we have a wealth of information to



SOURCE: ISTOCK.COM/SORBETTO

capitalize on. At Oregon State University, like many other colleges nationwide, students and faculty members have provided feedback on their learning in surveys and focus groups. Individual colleges have held seminars where faculty members have shared experiences and what worked well for them. Those student and faculty voices can help us triangulate on some key issues. In fact, the consistency and overlap in experiences are uncanny, heartwarming and sometimes unsettling.

When the diverse voices are amalgamated, the feedback allows us to structure recommendations for future terms. The message seems to be clear. Faculty members and students who had better experiences were in classes characterized by six factors: compassion, clarity, organization, multifacetedness, flexibility and engagement -- in short, they were CCOMFE.

What made for CCOMFE classes? These six factors provide a pre-

Pandemic Teaching Prescriptions

scription for teaching and learning during the pandemic, nicely echoing [evidence-based practices](#) for good face-to-face and [online teaching](#) in general yet also reflecting the anomalous conditions. We can easily summarize the key prescriptions.

Getting CCOMFE for the Fall

Remote teaching calls for compassion. Faculty sensitive to the pandemic and the stress that it is causing for all modified their courses to be mindful of how much they were asking of students every week. They also communicated their care and concern for their students. They were kind, thoughtful and, even in the face of their own personal turbulences, cared for their students' well-being.

Faculty need to be clear. We all get more stressed when we do not know what is expected of us and when. Courses with clear expectations and detailed, well-structured learning management system content were easier to learn in. Students knowing exactly what was needed, whether for group discussions or class projects, reported better experiences.

Organization is more important now than ever. A well-organized instructor and class have always

facilitated better learning. Paying close attention to the alignment of student learning outcomes to class activities and assessments stands to increase student motivation as their efforts are better justified.

Multifaceted courses that provide students with many ways to learn and to interact with the content, the instructor and other students -- such as synchronous and asynchronous classes; breakout rooms, discussion boards, Jamboards, Google slides -- tend to keep students' attention more effectively. Setting courses up to have different avenues for learning can be accomplished by leveraging the affordances of Zoom and learning management systems such as Canvas.

Given the many extra challenges that both students and faculty members face, remote teaching benefits from instructor flexibility. Successful instructors found themselves being more flexible on due dates, attendance and how learning was demonstrated. Given the uncertain nature of the pandemic, faculty members also need to be ready to modify their classes for any easing up or tightening of restrictions. Some classes starting face-to-face in the fall may have to switch back to remote teaching

if coronavirus cases spike with college reopenings.

Finally, instructors need to consider ways to build engagement. Faculty members who paid close attention to increasing their presence through introductory and weekly videos, frequent emails, and the like, while involving more students in activities such as Zoom polls, postlecture activities and reading reflections, had students who were more engaged in the material.

Keep Teaching 2.0

The good news is faculty and student feedback, along with a large base of scholarship of teaching and learning, provide pragmatic tips for each component of getting CCOMFE. At Oregon State University, our Center for Teaching and Learning, Academic Technology, and Ecampus have collaborated to create crisp, concise, practical ways to modify courses to get CCOMFE. Because the average instructor does not have time for literature reviews and even an abundance of tips, clear one-page guides to get one started are available for all.

Teaching, like a bike ride, can be immensely satisfying. While we cannot predict the weather far into the fall, we can certainly take the steps to get CCOMFE in preparation. ■

Bio

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