

Transcription for

**THE KEY WITH INSIDE HIGHER ED**

EP. 6: THE GREAT ONLINE PIVOT AND WHAT COMES NEXT

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THE KEY INSIDE HIGHER ED

EP. 6: THE GREAT ONLINE PIVOT AND WHAT COMES NEXT

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NARRATOR: Support for this podcast is provided by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, which is committed to preserving and expanding educational opportunity for today's students. Now more than ever.

PAUL FAIN: Welcome to Episode 6 of the Key with IHE. I'm Paul Fain, the host and a new editor at Inside Higher Ed. In this episode, we're taking stock of the unprecedented move by almost all of higher education to go online in a matter of days or weeks.

To look back, and forward, I spoke with Lindsay McKenzie, a reporter at IHE who covers technology. Lindsay talked about how the pivot to online learning has worked and not worked, including Zoombombing and privacy problems with conference technology. Lindsay also drew from her reporting to do some scene setting for what to expect in the fall, including the question of whether asynchronous instruction will become more common in higher ed.

For more of the inside scoop, I also spoke with Myk Garn, assistant vice chancellor for new learning models at the University System of Georgia. Myk talked about hybrid online learning and its potential to help colleges be more agile.

MYK GARN: I think hybrid is going to turn out to be the sweet spot, because we realize we need to have some of that technology, and so we can be online when we need to be, and it's going to help people figure out what's missing right now and be a little better prepared for the future.

PAUL FAIN: Myk also talked about improving social engagement online, and bulking up online advising and faculty office hours. Finally, he discussed the potential for microlearning in this changed and changing environment. Now on to the conversation...

I am speaking with Lindsay McKenzie, our tech reporter. Good to see you, Lindsay.

LINDSAY MCKENZIE: Good to see you too. How are you doing?

PAUL FAIN: I'm doing well. How about you?

LINDSAY MCKENZIE: I'm good.

PAUL FAIN: So you've been working hard on our next deep dive special report. Can you talk about what the topic is for that one?

LINDSAY MCKENZIE: Yeah, I mean, we started working on this long before the pandemic. The report is taking colleges online and looking at strategies and different ways that colleges are moving online, whether that's full degree programs or alternative credentials, or just creating hybrid programs, classes. But obviously, all to that looks completely different now to what it did just a few months ago.

PAUL FAIN: Yeah, so you're in the reporting on this as this is happening. You know, going online takes a decent amount of time and planning typically, but not this time around.

LINDSAY MCKENZIE: [LAUGH] It really does. I think we've heard in the past that developing a fully online

degree can easily cost millions of dollars. It can take months, if not years, of planning. What we're seeing right now is instructors moving classes and courses online in a space of days, with very little funding and support.

PAUL FAIN: And that's... Where does that stand now? I mean, it's obviously the pivot to online instruction happened very quickly across pretty much all of higher ed. It's been a few weeks, and where are you seeing things right now?

LINDSAY MCKENZIE: I think it was a huge adjustment for everyone. What I'm hearing is that it's getting a little bit easier, but also the unrest and dissatisfaction from some students is increasing. When you move something online, there are things that are going to go wrong, especially if there's technology that you're not used to using. And a lot of people...

PAUL FAIN: No jinxes here. We're using technology right now...

LINDSAY MCKENZIE: Yeah. We are talking on a video conferencing platform right now, which is what a lot of instructors are using. And as I was mentioning to Paul before we started talking, even for me as someone who, you know, uses technology every day, writes about technology every day, there's still a learning curve to using these platforms. I think a lot of instructors didn't get much training or support in how to set things up. So it was really a trial by fire. And I think now we're seeing people get a little bit more comfortable, but still it's a big adjustment, and it wasn't going to go smoothly.

PAUL FAIN: Absolutely. Well, one of the adjustment issues that caused the most consternation, which you reported on, is the trend of Zoombombing. Can you tell the audience.... Quite a few of them are aware of what this is, but what happened there and where that stands now?

LINDSAY MCKENZIE: Yeah, this is an issue that has got a huge amount of coverage. Zoom is one of the most popular video conferencing platforms. It has been under a lot of scrutiny recently because so many people are suddenly using it. It wasn't designed for everyone in higher education to be using it, and problems have arisen.

One of the issues is that instructors when they were setting up classes didn't make the classes very secure and that opened up opportunity for people who were not supposed to be in the class to intrude

in the class. That is Zoombombing. Zoombombers like to cause chaos. Their objective is just to be as disruptive as possible.

I did a story a few weeks ago, trying to understand how this was happening, you know, where, these online trolls were getting the information for these classes. And it seems like a lot of the time it was students inviting people to disrupt their own classes, which is sort of disappointing. We thought maybe it just might be random because online meeting IDs can be random numbers. There's a thing called 'Zoom roulette,' where you just type in random numbers and see what you get, see where you land. But Zoombombing seems to have been pretty targeted to higher education in a lot of instances. It's also a big problem in K-12.

So yeah, I thought what I was looking into it, oh, this might be kind of funny, like, this might be people just playing a joke. The instances that I saw were really, really horrible. It was a lot of racist comments, a lot of people sharing really graphic pornography, a lot of people just sharing really loud horrible noises, and a lot of people piling on at once, you know, not just one person joining a meeting, but dozens of people, and completely shutting it down, making it impossible for the instructor or the meeting host to continue.

PAUL FAIN: That's just what faculty members needed as they make a very difficult transition. So I know Zoom made some improvements. You know, I'm wondering how much of a problem that still remains. And this is a recurring theme on this podcast that's a ridiculously broad question, but what are some of the other privacy-security issues that you're hearing about now?

LINDSAY MCKENZIE: Yeah, Zoom did make a lot of improvements. And a lot of people have praised them for their response. Their CEO wrote a long apology detailing how they were tackling this, and that included changing the settings on meetings so that they are a bit more secure. There's also been a big education effort to make people understand how they can secure their meetings. And to be clear, it's not just Zoom that is having issues, it's any video conferencing platform. They all have similar flaws. So we're seeing ongoing issues. It seems a little bit less. It's really hard to get a handle on how many incidents there are, because the reporting isn't consistent and a lot of higher education intuitions don't shout about when these incidents happen. I actually spoke with an instructor who this happened to and she didn't want to go on record. She felt embarrassed that this had happened. You know, she said she's just getting to grips with this technology and didn't want to publicize. She didn't want to know what she was doing, didn't prevent this. So there's a lot of kind of stuff that's happening that we might not be able to see.

But when I was researching the Zoombombing story, I did go into some dark corners of the internet, which was distressing. It was really horrible.

PAUL FAIN: Hazard duty...

LINDSAY MCKENZIE: It was, it was. I joined lots of chat groups where people were sharing meeting IDs and planning, coordinating attacks. I was like in ten groups on Discord, which is a messaging service that a lot of people in the gaming community use. And I was in something like ten groups, and this week, all but one had gone. So I think a lot of them have been shut down, and I think a part of it is that instructors, people who are hosting these meetings, know what they're doing and they're just not getting as much success. The hit rate is way down. It's not fun when you try to get in meetings all the time and don't get anywhere.

I think another thing we're seeing is that the trolls who were trying to disrupt these classes were really spooked by the FBI and some state attorneys saying this could be a cyber crime. You could get in real trouble doing this. It's not 100 percent clear to me that just hijacking a video conference is a crime in itself, but there's a lot of related crimes that you might be charged with, like indecent exposure or hate crime, so I think people were worried and have kind of blunted some of the worst instances.

PAUL FAIN: We'll notch one for the feds. Thanks to you have taking one for our team by going into those dark corners of the internet.

Looking forward is a very difficult thing these days, but, you know, in the time between now and when this podcast comes out, I think we'll have some more reporting on the issues of synchronous vs. asynchronous in this instruction universe. I wonder if you could give us a little bit about the trade-offs between those two modalities and what you see as perhaps taking shape in the summer and fall, if we might see a bit more of the asynchronous form.

LINDSAY MCKENZIE: Um-hum... I think everyone has to balance openness and security, and that's a difficult calculation to make. If you want to host a public meeting, you want to make it easy for everyone to attend and participate, but then you increase the security risk. So I think we'll see instructors thinking carefully about whether their sessions really need to be synchronous, whether they have to be able to see the students' faces, whether they have to, you know, have the students actively responding to the questions, whether they could just use a chat messaging, instead of, you know, the students asking to

speak, and then you seeing a video of them doing that. There's a lot of boundaries that are being blurred. It's pretty weird to see into a student's bedroom, for example. You know, that's something I think we've kind of skirted over, you know, it's a weird situation.

There are a lot of security and privacy concerns. If you think about FERPA, student data protection law, you aren't supposed to record students without their permission. And I think that's been happening quite a bit. There's a lot of....

PAUL FAIN: And that's [UNCLEAR]... I'd seen an issue where instructors were posting screen grabs of their students, and, you know, in good intention, and that might have been a violation of FERPA some folks thought as well.

LINDSAY MCKENZIE: Yep. I think if you aren't familiar with what you should be doing in regard to student data privacy and protection, talk to your IT team. You might have a registrar who's familiar with these issues. Just think about what you're sharing and whether you really need to be sharing it.

PAUL FAIN: We'll close on the hardest question of all here. You know, as you look to the summer and fall semester, you know, what are some of the issues you're going to be watching most closely in your reporting and what should listeners be paying attention to in terms of some of the more innovative and early adopter types out there in higher ed?

LINDSAY MCKENZIE: I am wondering when we're going to see more questions about quality and assessment. I think a lot of people are understandably getting a pass right now and maybe the quality isn't as high as it could be. That's because we're doing things superfast, lightning-fast speed, we're just trying, you know, triage, trying to get things done as quickly as possible.

But I think as we move on in a couple of months, there will start to be more scrutiny of what are actually students receiving right now. Are they going to meet the learning objectives that they're supposed to meet? We're going to see a lot of questions around assessment. I think online proctoring is going to become a big discussion again. There's a lot of open questions, really. [LAUGH] It's going to be interesting to see what happens, but I'm curious about quality.

I also think we might see more instructors kind of reverting a little bit to asynchronous instruction. So

instead of trying to do everything live, maybe they have the time to record themselves giving a lecture, and then the students can do that in their own pace, at their own time. That also addresses some concerns of synchronous instruction, which is that, if you don't have a good internet connection, it's really hard to listen to something that's happening live.

If you're a student who's second language is English, maybe captions would be really helpful with you. Maybe you have a disability and you need captions, or you need something that's screen reader accessible. With synchronous instruction, that's not always possible. So I think we'll see more questions about the best way to be delivering content.

PAUL FAIN: Well, we traffic in open questions on the Key here and Inside Higher Ed quite a lot these days, as well as concerns around equity. So, Lindsay, thanks so much for talking this through with us. We'll be watching to see your special report and your reporting going forward. And for listeners who don't know, I sit about four feet from you in the office, right over a little cubicle wall. I can pop over the bother you a lot of times of day. So I've been missing that, so it's been good to at least see your face here on Zoom.

LINDSAY MCKENZIE: I miss that too, yeah. One day we'll go back.

PAUL FAIN: Hopefully soon. Well, thanks again, Lindsay.

LINDSAY MCKENZIE: Thank you.

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So I'm speaking with Myk Garn from my basement to his house. And it looks like you can't see us here. I can see him on video, but he's got guitars behind him and I have a guitar behind me, so share that.



MYK GARN: Yeah, yeah, we can strum together here.

PAUL FAIN: So I often say this on the podcast, I'm losing track of time, but some period of time ago, not that long ago, you and the University System of Georgia made a pivot to online, and I know you all have been experimenting a lot at the system level with modalities and all sorts of hybrid and competency-based learning approaches. Can you tell me how you were able to make the pivot from the system's view?

MYK GARN: Sure. We were probably in a more fortunate position, given the size of the system, the way we operate the learning management system. But in our system, we have 26 institutions, 25 of which are on Brightspace by D2L. And we've been on that for about eight years now, so the LMS is connected to our student information system banner, and whenever a section is created in banner, it spawns a section in the LMS, whether faculty use it or not. So when we got the charge to move from about probably 60,000 people using online across the system to making it available so 330,000 people could use it, all those sections were there. It really just took some work to make faculty aware of that, how they could get into it, a lot of work on the campuses helping them maybe put more in if they didn't have it or the basics that they needed to get in to teach with.

And our information technology services folks that support that for the system actually created some special reports. So the SIS admins on campus could see our faculty checking in or students getting in and identify problems that they might have missed before. In fact, those reports are going to be part of our operating process as we move forward. So we were kind of fortunate in that. And we had some good experts at ITS. Also, our eCampus folks that do online gen-ed courses and eMajor programs at our system level offering that brought a lot of expertise to the table as well.

PAUL FAIN: So looking forward, obviously, quite a few variables, really hard to plan for everybody around everything right now. As you look at the fall and beyond, the potential for hybrid learning opportunities is one that I know a lot of folks are interested in. And we were talking just before I hit records here, we were discussing James DeVaney at the University of Michigan and his piece on the resilient hybrid. It seems like an issue that you're interested in as well.

MYK GARN: Yeah, I think that has a lot of promise in terms of our thinking as we move forward. We've, you know, focused on, if you're using the classroom, this is how you do it. We knew from data, from studies, that hybrid was probably the most effective combination of classroom and online. And we have people who are focusing on online, because for students that don't have geographic access, that just

made the most sense. I think what came out of this, and DeVaney's article really pointed it out well, is this ability to have something that's agile and can go back and forth. If it's in the classroom today, it can move to totally online tomorrow, or it can blend those as faculty and the situation kind of dictate. So I...

PAUL FAIN: So you have a range of choices available depending what happens in the near future...

MYK GARN: Yeah, I think there's a lot of debate right now with this kind of emergency distance remote teaching that's going on, that a lot of people are saying that it's hard, it doesn't work as well as you thought, unless you really work on it. And we're getting a little bit of pushback on should we do this.

I think hybrid is going to turn out to be the sweet spot, because we realize we need to have some of that technology and so we can be online when we need to be. And it's going to help people figure out what's missing right now and be a little bit better prepared for the future.

PAUL FAIN: Are you optimistic about folks opting in to hybrid on the backend of this crisis?

MYK GARN: It would be nice if we say maybe a growth in some folks, now that they've been forced to sample this, to say, oh, I see how that could work, and maybe add in a little bit more. That would be great. I think the real push is going to come more from institutional readiness, and the need that we be able to do that. So we'll probably see some more training and some more use of it.

PAUL FAIN: Gotcha. You know, when we, again, I feel bad asking about the backend of something we certainly are still in, but even in the early recovery, I think there's a lot of question about what students will, what sort of credentials and academic programs will be of value to them, how to tweak them or make sure that they're agile enough to provide the right sort of education and training for jobs that we don't really know what they're going to look like. Can you talk a little bit about you're approaching that challenge?

MYK GARN: Well, I think one of the things we've learned right now is learning engagement is very important. And that's something that, if you hadn't been online before or you've been using this hybrid, that building that engagement for learning, and really tracking that, is a challenge. And something that it's a new skill set of how do you communicate with students in the right way. How do you design assignment where they be more engaging? And generate more data about what students are doing, so

that you know they're on track? Just assigning a paper that's due in two weeks, you've got two weeks you don't know what they're doing, or if they're really making progress, so breaking that up into smaller things.

I think for the fall as we look forward one of the real things we're going to be looking at is, how do you social engagement? How do you really think about... And this is not so much on the instructional side, but how to provide the other kinds of services--the tutoring, the mentoring, the advising, the financial services, all of those things? I mean, we have campuses that are really great at handling that when a student is on campus.

But they're really, they're kind of campus forward now. I think and I hope that we'll see more of a pivot to more online services, and really thinking of those are being online forward, that the student doesn't need to come to campus for things like advising, for things like faculty hours and stuff like that. Not that they shouldn't, not that that's not great, but we're in a situation where that doesn't work for a variety of reasons.

I think those are the systems that I'd like to see become more robust and useful, more people trained on how to do that-- things like using CRM, customer relationships management tools that bridge across mentoring, advising, instruction, so that we get a clearer picture of how students are proceeding through by data rather than just by seeing them on campus and catching them in the hallway.

PAUL FAIN: Sure, and I'm guessing the System's already done some work on all of these areas.

MYK GARN: We've done quite a bit of work...eCampus, our on-campus gen-ed program, eCore, they do a good job of building in a lot of touch points with students and they use the CRM tool for tracking students and interventions. And they share a lot of that out to our institutions. So we have a value in our system.

We have Regents' advisory committees on a lot of different areas. We have them both on distance education. We have about 35 of them. But the one on distance education and then our SIS admins for the LMS, these are people that are in the trenches every day and bringing a lot of that stuff forward.

We're beginning to evolve the eCore-eCampus team with more of an R&D emphasis as well. They've

been testing out, and now going into production, with some adaptive learning tools. And we're looking at taking that from kind of the hard science-math places where it really fits and to how do you use adaptive in writing, in other areas.

So I think all of those will become more tools that people can use to better engage with students, get better lesson-level telemetry in terms of data coming out of the courses and things, and give us a lot more to work with in terms of improvement moving forward.

PAUL FAIN: You know, I think the first time we spoke, and a focus of several of our discussions over the years has been competency-based learning and trying to do more breaking learning into smaller pieces and competencies. You know, I think a lot... All of us are thinking a lot about the students and the pressures they're facing and how to best meet them where they are through the crisis. How's that experience shaping what you're looking at in terms of academic offerings that really meet a student who has very limited time, tough schedules?

MYK GARN: Well, one of the opportunities that I see in the crisis we're going through now is really kind of reframing how we think about the size of the instructional chunks that we work with. You know, we used to think traditional students were under 21, and we know that's not true. We used to think the only working students were adult learners, and we know that's not true anymore.

As we looked at some of our institutions, especially more of our metropolitan ones that have a population of students that maybe didn't have the grades to go somewhere else, didn't have the funds, had too many family commitments, things like that, what we find is, you know, 70 percent-plus of those students are working. And they're working on average 30 hours a week or more. You layer on top of that a full course load. On average, it's taking them 10 hours a week to get back and forth for campus, same thing for work.

We asked them, when do you study? When do you find time to really do that? And one of the common answers is, well, we study at work. And when we said, well, what does that mean?... they said, well, I get a 10-minute break, I get a 20-minute break, I, you know, pull out my stuff, and I try to reinforce what I've done, learned, you know, go through my notes, or maybe tackle something new.

But we don't design instruction in ways that really fit and can be productive in that short of a period. You know, a trend in business, microlearning, that we've been looking at pretty seriously, is something

that I think has great application, and good science behind it too, for learning. We tend to think about deep, engaged, you know, reading chapters and things like that, but, you know, we know the human mind loses focus pretty quickly, 10, 12 minutes, can lose focus, throw too many things at it, it has a hard time sorting those things out. So there's some real potential there in microlearning. And, you know, we're seeing trends in other places, things like Duolingo, how to learn a language while you're standing in line at the supermarket. Or what just came out from Hollywood about a week and a half ago, Quibi. Now we're seeing feature-length movies in 10-minute chunks. So I think we're going to see more of that. To me, that's...

PAUL FAIN: How micro are you looking? I mean, what's that experimental size of micro that you could see higher ed actually giving a whirl?

MYK GARN: I think if we focused on, how can you do meaningful instruction in 15 minutes? Kind of hits between, you know, that 10 and 20 minute chunk that people have. I think thinking that way, not to say that you don't have some times when you have to spend a couple of hours or more working on papers and that kind of work, but I think that there's a lot that we could do in that. So I think that as a challenge, how could you make a learning experience meaningful to go through the whole process of, you know, introducing an idea, getting some cognitive dissonance, getting into the content, kind of assessing that and then preparing them for the next piece, could you do that? I think we could.

PAUL FAIN: Well, speaking of time, we are about out of time here. And theoretically, I hope, actually some listeners will learn from this as they do dishes or go to the supermarket with a mask on themselves. So we're in the same spirit here on this podcast. Myk, really appreciate your time. Take care of yourself and keep in touch.

MYK GARN: Absolutely. Thanks for the opportunity.

PAUL FAIN: That's it for this episode of the Key with IHE. Tune in next week when I speak with Eloy Oakley, chancellor of the California community colleges. We talk about how the system, which enroll more than 2 million students, is planning for the fall and drawing on lessons learned from the last recession. Catch you then.

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