Higher Ed's New Normal: Remote Learning the Right Way

Students, parents, the media, and so many others are trying to make sense of what colleges will do when it comes time to start the fall semester and begin a new academic year.

Much of campus life will be different and students and faculty will be operating with different ways of learning, living, and engaging. One thing is certain, however: colleges will adopt at least some elements of remote learning, and they need to begin preparing for this shift now.

Higher education's transition to remote learning

Most colleges have already had some aspect of remote learning built into their course offerings when they started to close physical campuses in March. After all, this generation of college students have a high degree of comfort with technology and schools already began to build course and university service options compatible with students' digital behavior.

Things changed dramatically, however, after COVID-19 became a harsh reality. School IT departments had to work at warp speed to transition almost all learning into an online format, and they had to get creative to do it. Remote learning was no longer an option -- it became the only way to conduct classes.

For most schools, the time from shutting down physical campuses to initiating 100% remote learning was done in a matter of weeks. To move at that pace, IT teams were only able to provide the essentials; things like basic collaboration and video conferencing tools, such as Google Classroom and Zoom. From there, professors had to get creative with how they taught and students had to pay close attention to make sure they knew where to find assignments and attend virtual lectures. Perhaps it wasn't elegant, but it got universities through a semester unlike any they've previously experienced or anticipated. It also created a lot of questions about what comes next.

Schools face the prospect of the "next normal" as they try to stay true to their charter of educating, conducting research and providing what most consider to be an essential component of society––it won't just be about adopting and rolling out a single remote learning platform. There are so many ancillary considerations, and it will require the integration of many applications and processes to provide students and faculty with a meaningful remote experience.

Instead, schools are going to have to think about how they can best simplify a complex set of systems and applications. Data will have to be used effectively and communication will be critical.

3 things to include in your remote learning roadmap

College students today have grown up more technology-savvy than any other generation, so this shift won't be as disruptive. The population of Americans in the 17-24-year-old age range has become avid users of smartphones and mobile applications and view them as essential to their daily life management. This generation was first introduced to technology while still young elementary students and over time has seen a variety of tablets, phones, and other mobile devices change how they operate as students, employees, family members, and citizens.

This is the time for schools to leverage the experience their professors and students are going through in the face of COVID-19 and turn this into an opportunity to provide a mixed format for learning. Students want a high level of engagement and simply publishing Powerpoint to a shared folder and providing online video conferencing won't be enough.

While seeking to limit the learning curve for new technology adoption, schools will need to find a creative way to deliver courses. They also have to recognize that doing so will be important to retain students. Schools also stand to benefit because, with an effective remote learning framework, they will ultimately be able to enroll more students, which can drive more revenue, all without having to build additional costly physical infrastructure.
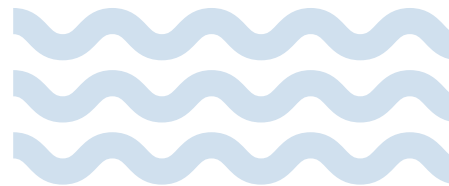
Here are three areas that will guide higher education IT teams in developing a roadmap for remote learning:

1 **Reduce disruptions with process automation**

Remote learning does not have to be disruptive. Recent research indicates that digital instruction, aided by mobile apps and other technologies, appears to foster better student attention and subsequently increases retention of academic material. In fact, 94% of today's college students believe they will improve understanding and retention of knowledge when delivered in a digital format.

That group also expressed a desire to have learning material embedded into their classroom learning materials. A McGraw-Hill study discovered that 4 out of 5 college students felt that school-sponsored mobile tools helped them save time, boosted their grades and provided them with a more complete education.

The starting point to transition to remote learning as a long-term solution will require process automation and workflow. By incorporating a workflow-driven, process mindset, college IT teams can innovate with the technology they're already using and can integrate data from a variety of repositories and applications to deliver customized learning experiences for students and reduce disruptions.

IT teams are able to apply this process-driven approach to aid in distance learning through a variety of things like registration and onboarding, communication and adapting to unique needs. Specifically, it supports the ability to do things like:

• Build processes and create forms to meet all facets of the student remote experience lifecycle. This includes everything from scheduling, delivering lectures, providing documents and online interaction among fellow students and with professors. Built into the student experience, this will eventually become integrated into day-to-day activities that constitute a student's daily interaction with their academic material, their instructors, and fellow students.

• Access data that can help provide customized learning and other ways of guiding students into courses best suited for them.

• Insight and visibility into student academic performance by analysis of online activity and faster delivery of material between students and professors.

• User-friendly interface and functionality that can be used in the comfort of the students' home.

2 Ensure accessibility for students

Inclusivity has become a priority for most colleges and universities in the United States and remote learning has to be developed to continue supporting it. Programs and initiatives need to be created to meet the needs of those with varying abilities, as inclusion leads to a more diverse educational environment that is better equipped to prepare young people for a life in a complex world.

Remote learning for everyone, irrespective of physical ability, enables schools to carry out their missions to help improve students' learning, create meaningful educational outcomes and provide career opportunities.

A major component of inclusivity is accessibility. For disabled students, being able to interact and engage with academic tools and material in a way that works for their abilities is critical to participation and success. For staff, access to important information and the resources to perform their jobs create a level playing field, irrespective of abilities.

To effectively deliver remote learning to all members of the campus community, barriers must be removed and availability has to be universally guaranteed, regardless of users' physical or cognitive abilities. Ensuring this as part of a school's mission can be effectively carried out with an informed strategy and the right technology foundation that ensures the mission is continuously attended to.

The IT departments at colleges and universities must develop a plan for how to effectively accommodate students and employees with all manner of abilities as they adapt to remote learning. This can be a challenge and without awareness of stakeholder needs, schools can find themselves building solutions that don't necessarily address the issue. There are so many different ways in which campus stakeholders engage with the school, their coursework and with others, that it can be difficult to know what is in scope.

IT can lead the efforts by identifying the data, systems and tools used to accommodate students and university employees, such as case management systems, job banks, disability guidelines, job descriptions, roles/functions and an inventory of skill sets that can meet these requirements. It's also important to understand the students, faculty and other staff and stakeholders and their responsibilities. That way, they can provide information and support during the interactive process and may even help identify a need for accommodation.
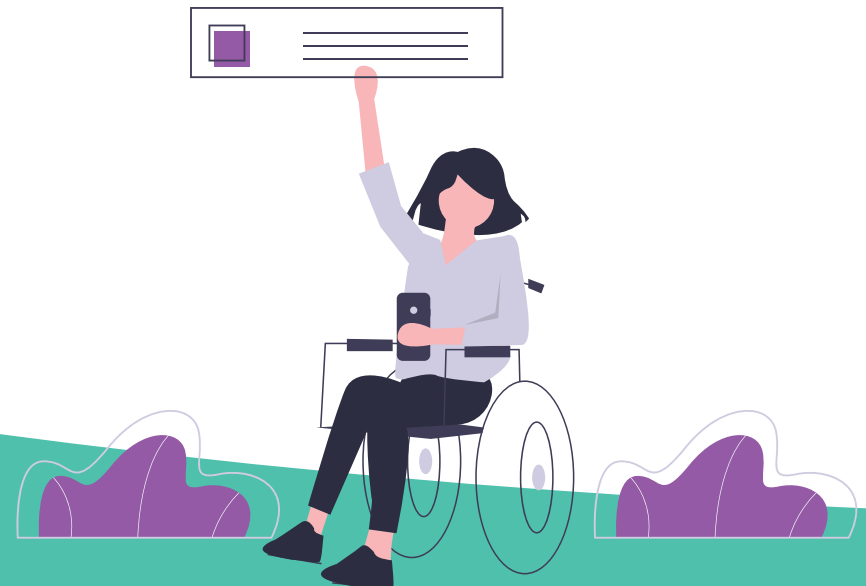
3 Deliver an exceptional student experience

Colleges and universities do far more than academic, classroom teaching. Perhaps more than any other institution, they are very much alive with social opportunities, health and wellness programs, rich cultural experiences and various types of ways for young people to learn and grow outside of the classroom. Those things are easily disrupted in the face of a crisis like COVID-19, but schools are still called upon to deliver their broad array of services to students. Doing so will require a focused effort to streamline various processes so that with remote learning, schools will be able to continue their mandate to deliver a full, comprehensive student experience.

This will allow college students to operate their lives in a seamless, integrated, and highly connected way with technology. They are already accustomed to digital activity as a way to connect, which is serving them well in a time of social distancing. In fact, the time, financial, social and even educational aspects of their lives are mobile extensions of the many processes they are involved in every day. And increasingly, those different processes converge in a way that is critical to determining their success as college students.

While some schools will view remote learning as simply a repackaging of material into a new delivery format, to be effective it must deliver more than just that. Students are adapting to a world facing social distancing and shelter-in-place policies, and the daily regimen of learning must take into account how engagement is so critical to keep students motivated and connected. IT departments at universities have to find ways to capture the information, processes, forms and other data that are critical to student success and present it in a seamless, effective way, irrespective of where the student is.

The right processes and workflows developed for students must bring together important information, which makes it important to package it in a way that provides students with more control and connectedness. It empowers students with the ability to manage the timelines and requirements demanded of them so they can take advantage of school-related opportunities, meet important deadlines, and become active in campus life, even when that activity is done through non-traditional ways.

A path for future learning

If nothing else, the COVID-19 pandemic can be an important teaching moment for higher education and it should help provide a path for the future of learning. In order to survive and thrive during this pandemic and beyond, colleges and universities need to use technology effectively to develop and distribute "modern" learning methodologies.

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