



Reflections

The Haves and Have Nots: A Call to Close the Digital Divide in an Urban Access College

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In March 2020 we held a symposium, and unbeknownst to anyone, that would be the last campus-wide event to take place before the institution was shuttered in response to the Coronavirus global pandemic. This symposium featured students, alumni, staff, and faculty presenting ideas around innovation and academic programming. During the symposium, we addressed concerns common amongst the campus community and adult learners. Concerns of note included work-life balance, along with educational and fiscal resources. While the day held an optimistic tone of what was to come, there was an air of concern surrounding a little-known entity that was brewing – Coronavirus. Handshakes were traded for fist bumps and air high fives while hand sanitizer was the order of the day. At the forefront of our minds was the health and safety of our students and the campus community, yet the brewing pandemic would cause harm to another critical facet of our students' lives. In our work as administrators and faculty, we champion causes around educational access. We would soon realize that one of the most significant issues related to educational access was our students' lack of adequate technology.

OUR REFLECTION

Access

Educational access is a complex issue that consists of a myriad of variables, with access to postsecondary education continuing to be problematic, particularly for underrepresented populations. Open access colleges in urban and rural areas across the U.S. play a vital role in expanding opportunities for individuals. The National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education defines open access institutions as those that accept at least 80% of their

applicants (Doyle, 2010). Adult learners are a population of individuals that often pursue higher education via open access institutions, which do not have competitive admissions practices. While these institutions provide a critical access point, it is important to note that access goes beyond opportunities to enroll in higher education. Another significant barrier to access is the ability to source technological resources. It is important that learners are equipped with adequate resources such as technology to overcome barriers to academic success. Systemic inequities to technological access have long existed. As we traverse the unknown terrain of the pandemic, these inequities have become increasingly apparent. To provide context for this reflective essay, we examine our experiences with a Laptop Loaner Program at an undergraduate degree granting open access institution situated in an urban area in the Southeast. This institution has an enrollment of approximately 2,500 students with one-third of the students identifying as adult learners.

Distance Education

It is important that learners are equipped with adequate resources such as technology to overcome barriers to academic success.

One of the critical areas of impact regarding educational access is the ability to engage in distance education. Distance education provides benefits for adult learners, yet for every proponent of distance learning, there is also an opponent. The convenience of an asynchronous learning schedule for busy adult learners makes it possible for adults who are balancing work, life, and family to pursue higher education that they

might otherwise delay. There are adult learners who appreciate the convenience that distance education affords due to scheduling and freedom from a physical presence on campus. However, there are also adult learners who prefer an on campus learning environment who even in the best of circumstances are reluctant to engage in distance education. Further, some adult learners face anxiety about utilizing technological devices and, if given the choice, would opt for a face-to-face course.

As an academic community we came to embrace the largely technology driven response to the Coronavirus pandemic. Courses were shifted online, administrative meetings moved to virtual meeting rooms, and soon after we found ourselves working from home. We began connecting with colleagues and students via virtual platforms. At first glance, moving courses online seemed an easy fix to the temporary inconvenience of social distancing. But as days of quarantining became weeks and weeks turned into months, flaws in this sudden and swift digital migration became more apparent.

At the onset of the pandemic, those with a preference for a face-to-face learning environment found themselves suddenly at the mercy of the transition to distance education. The sudden shift to distance education created angst for even the savviest online instructor and learner. Instructors were tasked with quickly pivoting in progress face-to-face instruction to online modalities. Admittedly, distance education can have a learning curve that is not always intuitive for some learners and instructors. Included amongst suggested strategies for engaging in distance education are support resources that include orientations to an online learning environment, assessments that determine best learning style, and adequate technology. Given the rapid and unexpected transition, students did not have the opportunity to engage in many of these

suggested support strategies at the onset of their distance education experience. In our experience as educators we found this sudden pivot to be a major contributor to anxiety for learners. This anxiety is heightened when a learner has inadequate technological tools and resources.

The Digital Divide

The digital divide is a descriptor that speaks to the phenomenon of those who have access to technology in comparison to those who do not. A significant dearth of technological resources is a centerpiece of the digital divide. While the pandemic has illuminated this issue, the digital divide is not a phenomenon that is unique to the Coronavirus context. The Pew Research Center (2021) indicates that internet access is a significant challenge for many families. Many of these families were already feeling financial strain prior to the pandemic and face financial challenges that have only been exacerbated due to job loss during the pandemic. The reality is even more dismal for students depending on public access points for internet connectivity. The lack of public access points impacted the ability of many students to succeed at the onset of this pandemic and continues to present an additional hurdle to access. To further illustrate the issue, data from the Pew Research Center indicates that only 56% of individuals who make less than \$30,000 annually have broadband internet access at home. With numerous public facilities such as libraries, schools, and coffee-shops closed, students struggled to access reliable high-quality internet.

Other considerations for digital access are the technological devices utilized to access the internet. A significant issue that we encountered was ownership of adequate devices for learning. In the aforementioned demographic of individuals earning less than \$30,000 annually, the data indicate that 29% of these individuals do not own a smartphone and 46% did not have a traditional computer (Pew Research Center, 2019). Amongst the student population at this institution, ownership of adequate technological devices was a significant challenge.

Feedback from our students indicated that providing laptops was the most readily accessible technology to meet student needs in our efforts to close the digital divide.

Although understanding the data on a national level was of value, the importance of having an accurate account of the technological needs of our campus was greater. To gather this critical information, we deployed an online survey to examine students' technology and accessibility needs. We surveyed students on three major components: analysis of equipment usage and needs; accessibility necessities; and instructional technology preparedness. The findings from the survey assisted us with real-time data which informed strategies to support students in a virtual/remote learning environment. Feedback from our students indicated that providing laptops was the most readily accessible technology to meet student needs in our efforts to close the digital divide.

LAPTOP LOANER PROGRAM

Program Overview

A laptop is an important learning tool for educational purposes. The Laptop Loaner Program provided enrolled students short-term access to a computer on a semester-by-semester basis. Student participants were able to remain connected and on track within

their courses. They were strongly encouraged not to use tablets, mobile phones, or netbooks as their primary computing device. Individuals who had dated technology or shared one device within their household found it helpful to have a new laptop to meet their technology needs to successfully engage in distance education.

Program Implementation

Implementing the Laptop seamless. A program this task as an additional organized the process. The included providing during the application logistics of the loaner application was available

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Loaner Program was coordinator who took on duty to their current role program coordinator role outreach to applicants period and completing process. The laptop loaner electronically via the

campus website or in person at the campus library. The program coordinator reviewed the loaner laptop applications detailing the students' requests and electronic needs. To aid in providing a robust network of support, notification was also sent to the respective students' instructor to inform them of the laptop request. Students were notified by the program coordinator within two days by phone that their application had been processed. Follow-up emails were used to provide directions on how to pick up laptops from campus. If any problems arose throughout the semester, the students were asked to reach out to the program coordinator to triage any concerns.

In order to check out a laptop, students were required to accept the terms of the program. They had to be currently enrolled and actively attending class in order to maintain possession of the loaner laptop. To receive the loaner laptop students had to present a state-issued photo ID and campus ID. Lastly, the student had to return the laptop upon completion of the final exam period. The students were welcome to complete the laptop loaner process again for the next semester. To date, student requests have not been denied.

Program Benefits

While some students own a personal laptop device, this is not the case for all students. Laptops are seen as a luxury and not a necessity in many working-class households. During this time of financial insecurity exacerbated by the pandemic many students were unable to secure a laptop without incurring additional costs and strain to their family budgets. It became increasingly difficult for our students to provide for their families as well as to afford tuition and their books on top of the additional cost of an expensive device in order to take courses.

The Laptop Learner Program assisted students who lacked technology by giving them an opportunity to borrow a laptop. In response to this critical need, the Laptop Loaner Program proved to be extremely beneficial for numerous reasons. Before the implementation of this program, many of our students depended on mobile devices and/or tablets as their primary technology conduit. While small devices such as cell phones or tablets are convenient, user-friendly mediums for utilizing the internet and watching movies and videos, these devices are not efficient tools for completing coursework within a learning management system. Mobile devices

have limited word processing capability, do not allow for deep engagement in faculty lectures, and impact the level to which students can make meaningful connections with their classmates. Laptops served as user-friendly devices, providing a larger screen and sufficient word processing capabilities to complete assignments and applications that allowed students to fully engage with the college learning management system.

Checking out a laptop supported our students academically, especially during the period of transitioning from face-to-face classes to distance education. Prior to the pandemic many of our students relied heavily on campus computer labs and the library, having a device that could be used at home strictly for their coursework supported their academic success. Many students indicated that even when a laptop was present in their household, it was used either to work remotely or to keep their school-aged children connected to virtual school. Having a laptop contributed to the students' successful academic progression. The laptop was a portable solution that provided ease and flexibility. During the pandemic it was beneficial for students to have a laptop to increase their mobility and to continue coursework if they needed to quarantine or had been exposed to the Coronavirus.

Program Limitations

During the first few weeks of the Laptop Loaner Program, there was minimal interest from the students. The program coordinator noted that students lacked awareness of the program. A mass notification campaign was employed to increase awareness and participation. The institution communicated through mailers sent to their homes, campus-wide text blasts, phone calls to personal numbers, and class announcements from faculty. After a two week push of notifications, the program coordinator was flooded with requests.

Based on information gathered from the laptop loaner application, some individuals indicated that they needed a laptop, but also lacked connectivity to Wi-Fi at home. The institution immediately began to make their parking lot a hot spot area as an additional measure to assist with connectivity. This initiative addressed the lack of Wi-Fi to some extent. However, this did not fully address the issue to the needed scale. With limited fiscal resources, the institution was not able to purchase and lend hot spot units. The lack of hot spot units continued to be a significant unmet need.

RESPONSE GUIDEPOSTS

Amidst the context of the Coronavirus, there are a myriad of exemplars that support adult learners. These include working with state and local agencies, partnering with community-based programs, and distribution plans for CARES funding. To begin with, partnering with a local library and campus partners enabled the college to provide additional remote Wi-Fi locations, virtual tutoring services and an additional supply of laptops available for student check out. Financial donations were also received to increase the internet service bandwidth for student use. Additionally, the institution partnered with grant-funded programs that provided phone calls, text blasts, and mailers which provided academic continuity and

touchpoints that assisted students with feeling connected to the campus in a virtual/remote environment. These personalized touch points were enacted through the launch of care teams which included senior leaders, faculty, and staff to provide check-ins throughout the semester, and connection to the campus.

As senior leaders in higher education, we recognized the significant role we played in leading responses at our respective institutions during crises and disruptions from normal operations. Knowing that crisis response is valuable and critical to the infrastructure and operations of the campus, we focused on maintaining clear, concise and consistent messaging to campus constituents regarding our plan of action. Due to the evolving context of the pandemic, we begrudgingly accepted that at times responses became ambiguous and clouded by uncertainty. As we forged ahead in these uncertain times, we learned valuable lessons about implementing proactive plans and solutions for moving ahead. From a place of reflection, we offer the following recommendations for creating and deploying a response.

In developing innovative solutions, it is important for leaders to prioritize the following:

- Create a dossier of resources that informs awareness of digital literacy
- Provide continuous communication by hosting virtual town hall meetings, comprehensive FAQs for web pages or mailers to students
- Survey students before the semester begins and complete continuous formative evaluations about technology, accessibility, and academic support needs throughout the semester
- Utilize formative evaluations to assist senior leaders in making real-time, informed decisions to better support student needs
- Establish technology expectations and standards within courses to achieve academic success in an online format
- Ensure institutional accessibility by providing remote hotspots for students
- Provide ongoing leadership oversight and delineate tasks with realistic outcomes and timelines

LESSONS LEARNED

The institution has learned that timely, consistent, and clear action is critical to maintaining the access that students so desperately need and deserve. Our urgent response as scholars, educators, and administrators should focus upon stabilizing access, student success, and curating an academic experience that can survive the uncertainty of our times. Navigating a global pandemic is certainly a challenge and will have enduring repercussions for the landscape of higher education and our learners. As leaders we are tasked with protecting the most vulnerable amongst us. The deadly Coronavirus outbreak has not only swept across the world, but its footsteps have interrupted the digital landscape of our colleges and universities (Kennedy, 2020). Educational institutions must prevent limitations to access through the provision of technological tools that bolster student success. The impact of Coronavirus adds to the significant access challenges for underserved, underrepresented, and adult learner populations. Providing support in the form of technological tools is but one component of the solution. The current environment in which institutions serve students brings inequities centered around access

and resources to the forefront. Further, it is a divisional dichotomy of those “that have and have not.”

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