

Pedagogies and Practices: An Institutional Framework for Flexible Learning

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Higher education institutions around the world transitioned rapidly from traditional face-to-face courses to some form of synchronous or asynchronous online delivery due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This case study explores how a large, open-admission, regional university developed a robust infrastructure for the development and delivery of flexible delivery modalities, specifically online and hybrid courses. The framework represents a holistic approach to organizational change and the development of new modes of delivery to accommodate a growing and diverse student body. The framework and related infrastructure were in place prior to the pandemic. The case study examines the extent to which the framework was effective in managing the changes resulting from COVID-19 and identifies new strategies that had to be quickly adopted.

Keywords: flexible learning, online education, distance learning, organizational change, COVID-19, pandemic

INTRODUCTION

Higher education institutions around the world transitioned rapidly from traditional face-to-face courses to some form of synchronous or asynchronous online delivery due to the COVID-19 pandemic. One survey indicated that only 7.5% of the 706 respondent institutions had 50% or more students taking online courses prior to the pandemic with 47% reporting that they had transitioned 90% or more of their students to remote learning as a result of the pandemic (Watermark, 2020). A survey of higher education institutions in the U.S. indicated that 56% of faculty members needed to acquire new pedagogical methods to accommodate pandemic-related delivery modality changes (Seaman, 2020). A global study of 424 universities in 109 countries and two administrative regions found that 67% of the institutions represented had implemented online learning due to the pandemic and reported challenges with technical infrastructure, teaching competencies, and strategies for addressing disciplinary needs (Marinoni et al., 2020).

This case study explores how a large, open-admission, regional university developed a robust infrastructure for the development and delivery of flexible delivery modalities, specifically online and hybrid courses. The framework represents a holistic approach to organizational change and the development of new modes of delivery to accommodate a growing and diverse student body. The framework and related infrastructure were in place prior to the pandemic. The case study examines to the extent to which the framework was effective in managing the changes resulting from COVID-19 and identifies new strategies that had to be quickly adopted. The contextual background is discussed followed by an overview of the problems that prompted the framework development. The framework is explained, and its effectiveness is analyzed followed by a reflection on lessons learned with implications for other institutions.

INSTITUTIONAL BACKGROUND

The flexible learning framework presented in this case was developed and implemented at an open-admission institution with approximately 41,000 students characterized by the following profiles:

- 37% are first-generation (neither parent completed a bachelor's degree)
- 19% are minority background
- 30% are 25 years old or older
- 38% are married or have a partner
- 17% support one or more children
- 81% are employed
- 49% work 21 or more hours per week
- 24% work more than 31 hours per week

Enrollment headcounts at the university have been steadily increasing from 26,696 students in 2008 to 39,931 in 2018 to the current count of nearly 41,000 and are projected to reach 57,000 by 2030 (Utah Valley University, n.d.). These increases are primarily due to regional population growth, and specifically, to increasing numbers of students graduating from secondary schools and seeking post-secondary education opportunities. Enrollment increases are not due to recruitment strategies nor is the institution's emphasis on flexible delivery motivated by concerns with decreasing enrollments as is the case for higher education institutions generally, even prior to the pandemic. The latter is blamed for a 4.9% drop in undergraduate enrollments in Spring, 2021 in US higher education institutions (Higher Education Dive, 2021). Decreases are attributed to the economic recession, a decline in international student enrollments, and fewer high school graduates continuing to higher education, and are particularly severe among low-income and minority-background students (St. Amour, 2020). Even prior to the pandemic, however, higher education enrollments were decreasing although enrollments in online courses within these institutions were increasing (Seaman et al., 2019).

PROBLEMS, TRENDS, AND GOALS

The institution's mission is to provide access and opportunity for a diverse range of students in order to meet regional workforce needs. The student profiles shared in the previous section demonstrate the types of diversity represented among the student body. Of note is the high percentage of working students with families. This indicates the need for flexible course delivery options.

With a growing student body and limited physical space or budget to expand the physical infrastructure, the university determined to extend its capabilities with flexible delivery. This entails providing options for how, what, when, and where learning occurs, (Higher Education Academy, 2015), thereby addressing institutional and student needs, and positioning the university well for flexible course delivery during the COVID-19 pandemic. The steady increase in student enrollments accompanied by an increase in diversity was viewed as an opportunity rather than a problem, particularly given the mission of the university to admit and support the success of all students.

Flexible delivery entails rethinking teaching and learning paradigms and the policies, practices, and organizational culture that supports traditional forms of delivery. All stakeholders need a voice in these discussions with student success at the forefront, particularly as higher education institutions seek to democratize and open their doors to a range of diverse students. Opening doors is not enough; helping these students be successful is a critical need. As such, the university kept these principles of inclusion in mind as it planned for future higher education needs in the region.

Restructuring

The university had a strong infrastructure in place for online learning has had a designated unit for distance education since the 1990s. This centralized unit worked with departments and individual faculty to develop and deliver online courses and paid stipends to faculty for course development and teaching. Students paid a fee to take online courses.

This unit was decentralized in about 2015 to enable distance learning to be integrated into the mainstream systems of the university and to encourage faculty members and departments to take ownership of their online course offerings. Course development stipends were still offered but teaching online became part of a faculty member's regular duties. Initiatives for increasing online offerings were launched due to enrollment increases and physical infrastructure limitations. The student fee for online course enrollment was discontinued.

As a result of the restructuring, a new comprehensive teaching and learning office was created, which was located centrally on campus, with the mission to integrate both pedagogical and technological support for faculty members. Additional funding was directed to the center over time to build a strong infrastructure of instructional designers and instructional technologists, create a faculty fellowship program, and fund other strategic initiatives related to training and to building staff and faculty expertise. The faculty fellowships established in the teaching and learning office entailed selecting faculty role models, giving them reassigned time to work in the center, and assigning them responsibility for specific initiatives. Their main role was to mentor their colleagues across campus.

This initial restructuring step, accompanied by strengthening the physical and human resources dedicated to teaching and learning at the university, aimed to encourage innovations and growth in flexible learning. It supported the university's strategic plan, which was informed by enrollment projections as well as broader higher education trends.

STRATEGY AND IMPLEMENTATION

Based on the university's mission and vision for the future, which was informed by data and collective thinking to identify existing strengths and weaknesses as well as future opportunities and threats, flexible learning was identified as a key initiative. As such, a framework was developed to account for the variables that would facilitate successful changes in practice and culture at the university. The strategy and framework adopted enabled the university to begin responding to pressures and opportunities caused by enrollment growth, and also to respond to COVID-19 although this was an unanticipated event. The framework did, however, establish the foundation to effectively manage changes related to COVID-19.

The 11 aspects of the guiding framework are outlined below. The framework was implemented approximately five years before the pandemic (e.g., see Andrade & Alden-Rivers 2019). It was developed collaboratively, being spearheaded by the assistant vice president over the teaching and learning office and informed by her staff, and refined by meetings across campus. The final framework was presented in an attractive graphical format.

The process for developing the framework as well as the components themselves reflect widely accepted models for change such as those of Kotter and Cohen (2002) and Bolman and Deal (2017). Kotter's framework focuses on eight specific steps while Bolman and Deal offer four broad frames. The Kotter and Cohen model accounts for creating a sense of urgency, forming a guiding coalition, developing a vision and strategy, communicating the vision, removing obstacles and empowering stakeholders, celebrating short-term wins, building on wins, and embedding changes into the culture. The reframing process suggested by Bolman and Deal entails examining an organization and proposing change through four lenses: structural, human resource, political, and symbolic. Elements of these models are evident in the descriptors of the framework and the implementation process and outcomes.

- **Vision.** The vision for flexible learning was aligned with the university's mission and strategic plan, specifically to offer a variety of delivery modalities to reflect student demographics, increase enrollments, and diverse scheduling needs, and decrease time to graduation.
- **Instructional design.** Additional instructional designers were hired, and workshops were created to assist faculty members with course redesign for new delivery modalities; training for online teaching was implemented and required for all faculty members (with a stipend for completion). The course redesign workshop introduced was based on a research-informed approach (e.g., see Salmon, n.d. and Institute of Teaching and Learning, n.d.).

- **Institutional expertise.** Developing expertise was a priority and involved investing in staff training, prioritizing hiring needs, and bringing in consultants, and guest speakers. Experts from all over the country and globally were invited to spend a few days on campus, give presentations, and hold training workshops. Staff members developed expertise in specific areas related to key elements of flexible learning and became champions for these areas. This provided them with opportunities for growth and engagement and increased their motivation.
- **Policy and infrastructure.** Policies and guidelines related to online instruction were reviewed and amended as needed to enable the expansion of flexible delivery. This entailed examining various processes and practices that could potentially inhibit the new direction. The re-organized center for teaching and learning is an example of an infrastructure change as were modifications in compensation to faculty for developing and teaching online classes, the elimination of fees for students, budget decentralization, and shifts in responsibility for scheduling and other logistics.
- **Analytics.** Data was collected to inform decisions and shared with stakeholders. Regular updates on progress and challenges were provided to key decision-makers to raise awareness about strategies, goals, and achievements, and to request needed support. Data dashboards were created to enable deans, department chairs, and faculty members to track various aspects of online and hybrid courses such as numbers of sections, percentages of sections, and student success measures for different delivery modalities.
- **Quality assurance.** Quality assurance measures were adopted for peer review of online and hybrid courses; these review processes were initially overseen centrally but were gradually expanded to involve more faculty and to be largely faculty-driven and under the direction of the colleges and schools. This aspect of the framework resulted in developing greater expertise among the faculty as well as increasing confidence in the quality of online and hybrid offerings. These offerings are subject to far more scrutiny and quality control than traditional in-person courses. All online and hybrid courses need to be certified before being offered and must be reviewed every 3 years. Faculty member quality reviewers are trained, follow consistent rubric-based standards, and are paid a stipend for their work.
- **Strategic campaigns.** To promote goals related to flexible learning, ongoing promotional campaigns were designed to raise awareness and generate wide support. These campaigns included themes such as “Hybrid is the New Normal,” “Hybrid is Double Awesome,” and “20 by 2020.” The campaigns utilized technology and multimedia with creative messaging to capture the attention of faculty members. They focused on increasing the number of courses offered in online and hybrid modalities.
- **Student success.** This area received considerable attention including coordination with other task force groups and committees on campus working in this area, including those focused on specific student populations (e.g., first-generation students, non-traditional students) to ensure that students enrolling in courses offered in various delivery modalities were informed and well-prepared, and had 24/7 support for the technology. Orientation videos and tutorials were developed that were general in nature and also course specific. As mentioned earlier, measures related to student success were tracked and widely available.
- **Faculty development and recognition.** Several teaching excellence certificate programs were developed to help faculty learn strategies related to new delivery modalities and technologies. These offerings were greatly expanded during COVID-19. Recognition was provided with various awards, showcases, honors, and stipend schemes. These forms of recognition significantly increased during the pandemic to recognize the willingness of faculty to learn, change, and share their insights and growth with their colleagues. Stipends and other forms of recognition helped accelerate the needed changes. Many pieces of training involved a considerable investment of time and payment always required evidence of application of the concepts learned. Several award programs have been developed including design and delivery

awards for online and hybrid courses which are limited in number and considered fairly prestigious.

- **Shared governance.** Faculty advisory groups were formed related to various flexible delivery initiatives. These have evolved and changed over time depending on needs and directions and initiatives of current focus. Recently, quality assurance has come under the oversight of the faculty with logistical support from the university's teaching and learning office. Another example of shared governance is a committee consisting of faculty members and key administrators with oversight for various aspects of flexible learning. This committee collected data based on predictive analytics that indicated students who took one online course had higher retention and graduation rates than their counterparts who did not enroll in online courses. The faculty members on the committee felt compelled by this data; a student-centered argument for expanding online offerings was more compelling to them than an administrative directive.
- **Shared understanding.** This is an ongoing and critical area of the framework. It involves making information transparent, visible, and widely available. An example is an information related to the various pieces of training sponsored by the teaching and learning office, including a monthly email featuring timely topics such as a semester start checklist, pieces of training and practice sessions for live stream classes, video tutorials, learning management system skills, and student tutorials and login steps for live stream classes. The communication also includes information about upcoming events and technology updates. Additionally, reports on strategies and achievements are prepared and distributed to various stakeholders. While the pandemic has accelerated interest, support, and understanding of the need for flexible learning among stakeholders, the foundation had been established before its onset.

Guided by the implementation of this framework, considerable effort was made to address concerns with online and hybrid delivery and help the institution accomplish its goals. The pandemic accelerated the incremental progress that had been made over a period of decades. This prior work was foundational to the university's ability to pivot quickly and move nearly all courses to online, hybrid, or live stream modalities during the pandemic. Students were provided with options, which were communicated to them and the faculty. Faculty were given appropriate training and support due to the expertise and structures already in place.

Rapid Response Strategies

The university's response to rapidly moving all instruction online was enabled by existing structures, as indicated in the flexible learning framework, and specifically the availability of support staff. These expert staff members installed needed hardware to stream classes live from both on and off campus. In terms of training and support for the faculty, instructional designers and instructional technology staff refocused their attention on developing websites, videos, and workshops related to new technologies and delivery modalities as well as continuing their efforts to support course redesign for the different course delivery options. A rapid response design and approval system for online course quality review was also implemented and overseen by faculty members with expertise and experience.

A few months into the pandemic, conferences, and workshops for the faculty were organized with a focus on technology-based teaching and learning. These featured panels of faculty members sharing their experiences with the transition from face-to-face to live stream or online delivery modalities. Federal funding enabled stipends to be paid to those attending these professional development events. These pieces of training also familiarized faculty members with people they could contact for help—both faculty colleagues and teaching and learning expert staff. Each month the teaching and learning office sent out a list of pieces of training and resources to help faculty manage new technologies and support student learning.

Communication

Effective crisis management requires effective communication. The university managed this well with regular, timely, and informative updates from the provost, deans, and the faculty senate president to relevant stakeholders. This section provides examples of these communications and analyzes their effectiveness.

Regular and detailed communications from the university's provost to the faculty supported the substantial efforts across the university to respond to the ever-changing circumstances surrounding the pandemic. Following are examples of directives from the provost regarding how to communicate with students about changes in course delivery and how to access needed training:

- **Communication.** Please contact your students if you have not done so. Talk to them often. Let them know how your class with work. Give them the details of course delivery and who needs to attend on which days. You do not want everyone showing up on the same day. We must keep social distancing guidelines. If you are teaching online, please communicate frequently with your students. That is critical to their success in your classes.
- **Training.** All faculty using live streaming need to participate in training. All in-person classes will be live-streamed to students who cannot attend. Learn to use the equipment in your classroom. Please sign up for training with the teaching and learning office if you have not already done so.

Additionally, regular updates were provided encouraging faculty members to allow students to participate in courses remotely to lessen COVID-19 transmission risks and to accommodate appropriate numbers of students in the classroom. The provost also provided information on technology installation in classrooms to enable remote teaching, and arrangements to move classes into appropriately sized rooms to support physical distancing. All in-person classes were live-streamed so that students would not be required to attend and could participate in class in real-time or view recorded sessions. This allowed optimal flexibility for students who were experiencing a variety of stresses and pressures while also meeting safety requirements. Data was also regularly shared. For example, during the initial lockdown for COVID-19, the provost reported that 70% of the university's students were enrolled online and that 500 faculty had received live stream training. Similar informative and encouraging communications were regularly sent to students.

All communications had an extremely positive tone and expressed appreciation to faculty and staff for their efforts and expertise and their willingness to be flexible and

open to change. The provost acknowledged that the university was well-positioned for the transition due to existing expertise among the teaching and learning office staff who quickly developed needed pedagogical and technological training.

Dean communications reinforced messages from the provost as well as expressing sincere appreciation for faculty efforts to help students and for "being wonderful, creative, competent, and caring." These messages focused on the larger purpose of faculty efforts and the end goals of higher education to change people's lives, help them find gainful employment, become self-sufficient, and contribute to their communities. The messages also reminded faculty to be understanding of the challenges students and their families may be facing and consider that short-term inconveniences should be considered in terms of the long-term differences that faculty members were making in students' lives.

Faculty senate president communications included practical and helpful information such as statements that faculty could include in course syllabi regarding various delivery modalities and health and safety requirements as well as sources of support for students related to managing stress, reporting symptoms, using technology, and understanding delivery modalities. The messages also focused on scheduled training events and individual technical assistance for both faculty and students.

University leaders concentrated their efforts on unifying the campus community and conveying a clear sense of calm and confidence. Campus stakeholders collaborated across divisions and departments to share expertise and contribute to the greater good. The rapid change necessitated by COVID-19 was enabled by the availability of expertise in the form of teaching and learning staff who were prepared and knowledgeable about pedagogy and technology. The training was rapidly developed to address fears and anxieties and build skills, and communication about available help and resources was warm and encouraging. Incentives were offered to provide more encouragement. The flexible learning framework implemented at the

university several years before the pandemic provided a solid foundation for moving forward and doing so quickly and effectively. The university was prepared.

OUTCOMES

Throughout the pandemic, the university administered several pulse surveys to identify stakeholder experiences with various aspects of teaching and learning. Findings allowed the university to make appropriate decisions for moving forward while balancing stakeholder views with government regulations and safety measures.

An example of actionable findings from these surveys was that more females under the age of 25 who were enrolled in live stream classrooms were failing than males (14% vs. 6%), and failure rates were higher for non-White females than their White counterparts (8% vs. 6%). Additionally, first-year students under the age of 25 had higher rates of failure than second-year students (14% vs. 6%) and failure rates overall for ethnic minorities were much higher than for White students (e.g., 25% for minority populations compared to 10% for White students). Statistics for students over the age of 25 were quite different: 0% of first-year students using the live stream classroom modality failed compared to 50% of second-year students. Overall failure rates for females in this age category were high compared to males (17% compared to 8%) (similar to the under 25 age group), but non-White female failure rates were 0%. In the over-25 age category, 47% of non-White students were failing vs. 7% of White students.

Other surveys explored how students interacted with various forms of technology, where and how they accessed course materials, and instructor announcements as well as their levels of satisfaction with key delivery platforms. One survey explored in what areas students needed help and where they sought help. Additionally, it inquired about the technology available to them and their behaviors during live stream classes.

Overall students across the university were extremely or somewhat satisfied with their course experiences, attesting to the effectiveness of those responsible for various aspects of training, technology, and delivery based on the flexible learning framework. Admittedly, some students expressed concerns that they were not learning adequately, their professors had not mastered the delivery platforms, they missed the exchange of ideas in the classroom, and they were not getting their money's worth. However, the majority were confident that they would succeed.

Attendance patterns were also tracked, showing changes over the semester with more students attending socially distanced class sessions early in the semester and an increase in the use of recorded sessions or tuning in to remote sessions as the semester progressed. Interestingly, students felt connected to their instructor and were largely satisfied with live-stream remote classes but reported feeling less connected to other students compared to traditional in-person class settings.

Faculty focus groups were held to get additional perspectives on modality effectiveness, specifically the live stream or automated classroom. They readily acknowledged that students benefited from flexible scheduling, particularly if they had childcare needs. However, teaching two audiences (one in the classroom and one remotely) was difficult. With practice, faculty had identified strategies for overcoming challenges and had opportunities to share these with other faculty. The panels of faculty experts featured at various virtual conferences attested to the innovativeness, creativity, and commitment of the faculty.

Data such as the examples mentioned enables the institution to identify how to move forward and offer an optimal modality mix for course delivery. It also identifies those at risk of failing and enables support staff and instructors to reach out to students proactively. It informs academic advisors on how they can help students find delivery modalities that will help them succeed. Faculty members benefit from this data knowing that certain populations of students will need greater levels of outreach and help.

REFLECTIONS AND LESSONS LEARNED

The following items summarize key lessons learned from this case study.

- Strategic planning that accounts for both internal and external opportunities and threats (known and unknown) is extremely important to the ongoing viability of operations.
- A range and depth of expertise among staff who support teaching and learning processes are central to moving forward with a new vision and at a fast pace.
- On-going, consistent, and transparent communication is critical for managing crises.
- On-going opportunities for stakeholder input and assessment of stakeholder experiences are needed to inform the next steps and areas that need to be strengthened.
- The use of mentoring and role models is extremely effective in encouraging desired change.

Overall, the university was well-prepared for the transition to remote learning. However, a completely new modality was introduced that had not previously been considered—the live-stream classroom. This offered some advantages of a more traditional in-person classroom in the sense that some students could meet in the classroom, though socially distanced, while others attended remotely. It also allowed students who had childcare or work disruptions during the pandemic to listen to recorded class sessions. Another advantage was that though faculty members had to learn the technology for this delivery modality, they did not need to completely redesign their courses for online delivery.

The pandemic accelerated the university's long-standing efforts to expand flexible delivery options to accommodate enrollment growth and diverse student needs. On-going assessments and data are helping stakeholders make decisions about future delivery and needed training and support for both faculty and students. Although no one could have predicted or been fully prepared for the pandemic, effective leadership, a culture of collaboration, shared decision-making, and a deep pool of human and physical resources are great advantages.

Implications for other institutions from this case study are the need for a clear, forward-thinking strategic plan that reflects the mission and vision of the institution and is well-informed by local, regional, and global threats and opportunities. Also vital is to recognize the growth that has resulted from challenges associated with the pandemic as the campus came together to share expertise, solve problems, and innovate. A clear lesson learned from this is to unleash the powers of people within the organization and give them autonomy to pursue work that has purpose and meaning, build their competencies, and develop mastery. This benefits both the employee and the institution. On-going data collection, analysis, and stakeholder input is another critical piece. Overall, the flexible learning framework shared in this case study accounted for the key elements needed to sustain the university during the pandemic and guide its actions.

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