Staying Connected When Virtual Becomes Reality: Transitioning to All Online

As Director of eLearning for Copiah-Lincoln Community College (CLCC), I am tasked with managing our online courses. In early March of this year, I was completing administrative tasks related to getting students and instructors into the flow of a new term. COVID-19 had not crossed my radar as an imminent threat. During spring break, I received a group text message from my president asking the administrative team to meet with her virtually the next day. "We need to discuss our closure plan," the message read.

During the meeting, I was asked if we could go "all online" within a week. The former algebra teacher in me quickly did the math. Online courses make up approximately 20 percent of our course offerings. So effectively, I was being asked what it would take to quintuple that percentage. Yes, times five. In less than a week.

Each of our courses, online or otherwise, already had a blank shell built into the learning management system (LMS). While all CLCC online courses use these shells as their digital classrooms, our traditional face-to-face courses use them less often, if at all. As a former face-to-face instructor, I had loved using my digital course. It was a helpful place to store all my course materials, provide my students with an electronic calendar, post announcements, and supplement what we were doing in person. Even with this experience, I still had no idea of the breadth and depth of the tools available in our LMS.

Meeting Our Instructors' Needs

I soon realized that there were three levels of instructors: Instructors who used the LMS in their online courses extensively, instructors like myself who could manage basic tasks, and instructors who had to call me to ask for their login credentials. We worked to ensure everyone had access to the tools and support needed to be successful in their courses. We put together the Instructional Continuity Guide, a quick-start resource that had several important aspects:

1. It used plain, easy-to-understand wording.

2. It outlined the most important features within the LMS and explained their purposes so instructors could decide which features were necessary for their course.

3. It had a detailed click path for using tools within the LMS that contained written, visual, and video explanations.

This guide was not just for our less tech-savvy instructors. It included special suggestions for using tools at the next level, which gave previous users more ways to improve their courses.

Next, we held live, virtual meetings that catered to each level of LMS comfortableness. This training consisted of a 45-minute showcase and a 45-minute question and answer workshop. Some departments requested one-on-one training where they could ask content-specific questions. We also created a new Online Instruction Resource Course that houses each of the tools and recordings that we provided. It also includes many of the resources that were being used to support instructors who were already teaching online.

Meeting Our Students' Needs

Our students were a little more prepared. Around 90 percent of students had taken at least one online course. Still, we needed to ask three questions: Do all students have a computer? Do all students have reliable access to the internet? Do all students have the technical abilities needed to continue learning?

Amid the instructor preparation, we brainstormed what our students would need to be successful. One important necessity was reassurance. Again, this reassurance came in the form of online transition tools. Through email and our LMS's global announcement feature, we provided a sister document to the Instructional Continuity Guide that was student-facing. In addition to the descriptions, click paths, and videos that were geared toward what they would be experiencing in their online classes, we also provided details about completing administrative tasks through our student information system portal. We promoted the department-wide email addresses that allowed a student's email to reach a group of people, instead of just a specific person. Our Office of Public Information worked overtime to post relevant material on social media. Through our LMS, instructors were able to monitor their students' course interactions and were asked to attempt to contact those students who seemed to be participating at a low level or not at all. Our on-campus tutors set up virtual tutoring hours and met with students remotely.

Another hurdle was the lack of internet access that we knew our students were experiencing. To combat this, we shared a document that listed public Wi-Fi spots across the state. Our information technology department also set up parking lots that were Wi-Fi enabled on each of our campuses.

By the time the new week began, we were ready to "go all in."

Making It Work

We were able to successfully make it through the remainder of the spring semester by stomping out any fires one by one as they sprang up. During the weeks between spring and summer term, we held "Transition Tuesdays" and reiterated most of the information that had been presented during in the initial transition. We also promoted the following "be" ideas:

1. Be simple. Online students could reasonably be expected to know how to navigate their courses, but there was no reason to try to incorporate the more in-depth tools at first.

2. Be open. We are all going through this historical event together. There is no need to act like "business as usual." Be willing to incorporate these current events and encourage sharing.

3. Be present and responsive. Behind the computer screen are still those faces that would normally be meeting multiple times per week. Anonymity did not suddenly take place. Talk. Listen.

4. Be intrusive. It has been important to be proactive instead of reactive. Try to anticipate what the learner is experiencing and address it before the questions come because sometimes students are paralyzed by the unknown. In these times, silence is not necessarily golden.

5. Be flexible, but firm. It would have been easy for other students to falsely claim they did not have the resources to continue their work. We encouraged instructors to set up plans of action based on what their students said they could do instead of what they said they could not do. Students may have gotten extensions, but maintaining deadlines was important for all involved.

Did we work together to form a plan and execute it? Yes. Did we do everything perfectly? No. Are we still learning? Absolutely. Circumstances are constantly evolving, but we are committed to supporting our faculty and students online. We have recently set up virtual test proctoring, virtual advising and counseling, and virtual registration. Things that were once considered routine are now being analyzed and reworked. As we move forward, we are reconsidering class sizes, cleaning protocols, term dates and length, sports, and dormitories.

I hope you can learn from us as we continue to make our way through this unprecedented time. Do not let this opportunity to improve the way we deliver instruction pass you by!

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