

CANCELLED: THE OLD STUDENT EXPERIENCE

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With an eye toward the perpetual pandemic, how to address the beginning of this academic year and its effect on students has been at the forefront of all institutional decision making. There is a cynical perspective from some critics of higher education that institutions are merely biding their time to reach the semester academic deadline of adding and dropping classes, historically happening within the first several weeks of when classes begin. Now with virtual learning, this deadline has shifted for many institutions, and to call a spade a spade, this is when administrators can genuinely get a sense of “butts in seats” and solidify a student’s tuition for the semester. That feels transactional. Students want to be on campus and in classrooms. They want to live with their new roommates, meet other students in the residence halls, eat at the dining hall, experience a college party, navigate their class schedule, and so much more. That student experience is momentarily cancelled. Students are virtually showing up; agile faculty, flux pedagogy (Ravitch, 2020), and empathetic administrators are the new, needed approaches to the student experience. If a rigid add-drop deadline can be fluid, so can we.

Be comfortable with the uncomfortable We cannot forget that not only are we in the middle of a pandemic—with no end in sight—we are in the middle of a necessary social justice movement. Our students are the ones that are propelling this movement, with information in the palm of their hands, they seek the truth (Frey, 2020). The country is divided, and this generation is immersed in media narratives, marketing campaigns, and the upcoming presidential election. They are paying attention, let’s give them the virtual space to have a dialogue across perspectives.

Additionally, who knew wearing a mask would be so divisive? A few days before virtual classes began, I sat outside the bustling main street on campus, with a mask on, waiting for a meeting to start. Four students passed by and happily greeted me: “Professor Murphy! Can you believe we’re seniors?” I quickly responded with an energetic, “I can’t believe you’re seniors! I also can’t believe you’re not wearing masks!” Taken aback, momentarily indignant, but ultimately besmirched, they pulled the masks out of their pockets and put them on. Having an open mindset for divisive dialogue, and encouraging students to engage in difficult conversations is an important part of their growth and ultimately, the college experience.

Give them structure and feedback. There are 400 incoming, first-year business students in the College of Business at Ohio University. The institution decided on a phased opening, where most students are starting their semester virtually. The student engagement course I teach in the college—designed to acclimate business students to the university culture, professionalism, and career management—requires me to teach four sections in one day, 100 students per section. Prior to the first day, each student received their first touchpoint explaining how the virtual, live, synchronous class would flow for the fall semester of 2020.

In the past, I would teach this class with enough energy to fill a room four times in one day (forgive my hubris). This year however, the energy required feels daunting. How does one convey excitement and connection through a live stream as a way to connect with these new students who, by the way, are stuck at home with their parents? The normal experience, in the *Before Times* (B.T.), would have them on a campus, tucked away in the southwest, Appalachian region of Ohio—the type of college bubble that the phrase “went away to college” personifies. How do I convey connection, empathy, support, and care through a 50-minute lecture with 100 students in a virtual room (and do that four times on a Monday)? I was prepared for only half of the class to show up, or for their cameras to be turned off. What I did not expect was that 394 of them not only showed up for class, but their cameras were on, they were engaged with the dialogue, and many of them sent follow up emails filled with gratitude. Why? Because this generation is hardwired for technology. They have been trained through their social media channels to speak up.

Clear expectations inside and outside the classroom were necessary for this success. Students have already shared how frustrating it is that each class has different delivery models (asynchronous, synchronous, hybrid), along with varying platforms (Zoom, Microsoft Teams, Google Classroom), and even still, many of their virtual classrooms (via BlackBoard) were only made available on the first day. Students need structure and transparent communication—and to have it repeated a few times until it resonates. If we as educators empower them, they know how to step up to the plate.

Don’t forget the empathy and grace. This generation of students talk about mental health. There has been a spike in anxiety and depression since the start of the pandemic (Kluth, 2020), and we must address the issue and build space for students to share. Social distancing and quarantine have done more than help to “slow the spread,” they have fostered feelings of loneliness. In addition to teaching the four sections to business students, I have added “Jen Talks” on Monday evenings: Simple,

optional, open forums for students to bring their issues. Think of them as mental health office hours. And they are showing up. Not all of them, but enough to validate that it makes an impact. In these sessions, we discuss worries of the college experience, or professors they need help with, or tutoring resources, and most importantly, their mental health. Wellbeing is a focus of these sessions so they feel comfortable connecting with faculty and administrators at the institution. Students are going to forget things, or may need things repeated. Showing them grace and understanding will go far in their emotional bank account, especially considering they would much rather be having their experience on campus as they would have in the B.T.

It would be nice to be able to resume the traditional ways of campus life, but higher education is changing. Faculty and administration must embrace the change in order to provide a new student experience—one which for now is virtual. Educators feel the weight of a virtual classroom, added pressure to perform, and the pivot in pedagogy (Ravitch, 2020). Now, facing an historic financial challenge, we must boldly reimagine how we meet the complex and dynamic changing needs of students' experience. In some institutions, the student experience is highly variable, expertise is siloed, and coordination is difficult. To improve the effectiveness, efficiency, and quality of the student experience in a virtual world, the academic support system does not rest on the shoulders of advisors and student affairs. Rather, it takes a village to build towards a goal of improving student satisfaction, retention, equitable educational attainment, and graduation. For now, we need to show up and be comfortable with uncomfortable conversations, changing structure, and demonstrate empathy because it is way more than just “butts in seats” to meet that add-drop deadline.

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