Why Online Is an Ethical Practice

> Online is a crucial path for many underrepresented students and should expand. But if colleges don't understand how virtual students differ from their residential peers and support them with robust online student services, Robert Ubell writes, they will miss the mark.

By Robert Ubell

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For those, like me, who have defended digital education for a couple of decades, enrolling thousands of online students feels like a triumph -- at first. But with a closer look, it raises concerns. Enrolling students without ensuring they can succeed is terribly unwise. To do it right, senior academic leaders must know who their virtual students are.

Work represents the biggest divide between residential and online students. Nearly 50 percent of on-campus students are enrolled full-time nationally. In sharp contrast, about 80 percent of remote learners work, either full- or part-time, strikingly different key data points that tell us almost everything we need to know about these very different populations. In other ways, too, online and on-campus learners are quite different, with those online being predominantly older, adult learners who admit they have lower expectations about their academic achievement.

With the race now on to recruit many new thousands, the record is not very encouraging about how accommodating academic institutions are to make room for them. Compared with what colleges and universities spend on residential student services, pathetically little goes for virtual services and support.

In an earlier essay, I noticed that while between 20 and 30 percent of academic budgets support on-campus student services -- study centers, career services, health care, clubs and support for learning and other disabilities, among dozens of other benefits -- I was hard-pressed to find a single line item anywhere I searched showing what colleges and universities spend on online student support. A very telling disparity in how much deliberation and resources go to virtual learners.

When budget records are silent, it's a sure sign that very little is actually spent. Most schools hardly give it a thought. It's as if online students don't need anything but digital classrooms taught by virtual instructors to make it through. Most schools act as if remote learners can get along almost entirely on their own, like teenagers playing video games.

Virtual education is not a panacea. At Wall Street-backed for-profits and, sadly, even at some exemplary institutions, too, virtual students are merely fresh fish, ready to be reeled in as profitable revenue streams. Tossed about in life, underrepresented students are often knocked about again online, with endless video lectures -- no better online than in lecture halls on campus -- with little or no interaction, sending listless students fleeing. Chances are that dispiriting low retention and graduation rates at some schools result from remote students escaping death by PowerPoint.

Recent research on the wisdom of students from underrepresented populations taking online courses is not easy to untangle, with contradictory results, depending on what investigators are looking at and which population slices are being studied. Some conclude that retention rates for low-income students are worse online than face-to-face. Others say that there is little or no difference between the two. Most agree that mixing and matching online with on-campus delivers the best results.

Karen Swan, James J. Stukel Distinguished Professor of Educational Leadership at the University of Illinois, says that her research predicts a few essential features about the composition of online students -- apart from being more likely to be female, they are also older and poorer than their face-to-face peers, and consequently, more likely to go online part-time. As expected, part-time students on campus, too, have a high dropout rate. But insightfully, her research concludes that "there is no difference between online and on-campus part-time students."

Digging through the dizzying literature, some observers, focusing on poor outcomes, caution low-income students about going online, fearing that the virtual classroom is a setup, driving them to fail or drop out, causing them to stumble out of higher education without a prized degree in hand. *The New York Times* summed up some dismal findings with this troubling headline: "Online Courses Fail Those Who Need the Most Help."

For Many, Not a Choice

But the advice given nontraditional students to stay away from digital education is gratuitous, since low-income, working adults are pretty much stuck. If they're looking to earn a degree, they don't have much choice. Forced to work, they often can't cavalierly quit their jobs and take conventional

courses on campus. With families to care for and demands at work, online is naturally their best -- and may be their only -- possible option.

As the economic gap between rich and poor widens, the historic role higher education played in bridging the divide is more important now than ever. That's why online education is an ethical practice, especially for those who find it nearly impossible to attend on campus. Online rescues them, giving them the unprecedented opportunity to earn a degree without the stress of commuting or taking classes at night. Since its invention over two decades ago, online has permitted millions of working students to leap over the class divide.

But instead of entering confidently through the front gate as residential students, online learners often struggle to scale high college walls virtually. Commonly, once digital students are admitted, schools don't welcome them with the same generosity they offer the conventional, residential population. New online leaders may not have thought deeply about what remote students need or how to help them succeed. Chances are not one in 100 university presidents or provosts has taken an online class or taught one. Removed from the pressing demands of distant learners, senior academic officers rarely add even a sliver of a line item in their academic spreadsheets to cover virtual student services.

Lisa Bellantuono, now director of graduate admissions operations at George Washington University, who recently ran online student recruitment at NYU Tandon School of Engineering, is among the most astute leaders recognizing the obstacles virtual students must jump. I worked closely with her when I was online dean at NYU's School of Engineering a couple of years ago. Long ago, Bellantuono championed life-cycle recruitment and retention, with responsive

staff supporting remote learners right from the start, from admissions all the way through to graduation. I spoke with her in a telephone interview last week. Bellantuono stressed the importance of hosting virtual learner orientation sessions, guiding online students on how best to navigate the often baffling system. "Be truthful about what they are getting into," she emphasized. Skilled staff must run students through what to others may seem trivial -- explaining how to submit an assignment or how to communicate effectively with peers in different time zones who may be located practically anywhere in the U.S. or abroad.

The biggest challenge, Bellantuono recognized, is encouraging online students to burrow remotely into campus services, to become embedded in the university, to feel part of it all. Luckily, some on-campus services are available remotely, but not all departments recognize that the university is also home to students at a distance. "Just stop by" is not very helpful to learners in Shanghai.

Online units must also be aware that remote students often face financial stress, especially when changing jobs, commonly losing sponsorship. "It's tricky to figure out how to collaborate with your school's financial aid office, seeking university aid possibilities for virtual students," Bellantuono said. "Financial resources are often readily available for residential students, but rarely online."

Apart from accessibility and financial aid, virtual students face other obstacles off site -- notices and email communication sent to residential students, but not to those at a distance; lectures and other activities impossible to attend if you're not on campus. Out of sight; out of mind.

"Universities must think strategically about remote students," Bellantuono advised, recommending a one-stop shop for remote students, staffed by an advocate who represents them everywhere on campus -- at the bursar's, student aid, bookstore and elsewhere. "To be completely accessible remotely, schools must move everything online," she concluded. (A good checklist, outlining how to begin delivering online student services, can be found at *Educause Review*.)

Appealing to the titans of new virtual academic enterprises, I ask them to step back a moment, take a breath and stop pumping the virtual gas. Reflect on who your newly enrolled online students are and pay close attention to what they need to earn a degree -- an uncanny document that opens them to vast, new life choices.

For your ambitious plans to succeed, of course you'll require a cadre of skilled digital recruiters, but also high-quality, active-learning virtual courses, supported by compassionate staff that helps them navigate mystifying academic bureaucracy.

In a commencement address recently, Senator Elizabeth Warren acknowledged, "Throughout their lives, people who graduate are more likely to be economically secure, more likely to be healthy, and more likely to live longer. Face it: a college degree puts a lot in your corner."

Bio

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https://www.insidehighered.com/digital-learning/views/2019/04/10/colleges-need-go-online-must-recognize-how-different-students-are?utm_source=Inside+Higher+Ed&utm_campaign=0615cafc6d-

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