Making Bets for Fall: Two Important Trends

By John O’Brien

Colleges and universities around the world are making their bets for fall, though certainly some will be changing their bets as new facts emerge from the remarkably uncertain landscape of the COVID-19 pandemic. Every week brings a new set of headlines—medical, political, and everything in-between. Ultimately the most consequential decisions—statewide declarations, lockdowns, reopenings, and closings—may well be out of our hands. Making these bets for fall is like having to play a game of poker you’d rather not play with precious resources you’d rather not lose in a game whose rules change without notice.

Amid the unsettling uncertainties, two important trends that started well before fall have accelerated and intensified in the shadow of the pandemic. We should work to ensure these trends continue long after the current crisis has calmed.

The Accelerating Trend: Digital Transformation

EDUCAUSE has made digital transformation (Dx) a priority, defining the phenomenon to include more than technology. Dx is the combination of technology, workforce, and culture shifts that will transform the institution’s operations, strategic directions, and value proposition. In fact, the subtitle for the EDUCAUSE 2020 Top 10 IT Issues article is “The Drive to Digital Transformation Begins.” However, progress has been sluggish. As noted in a June 2020 EDUCAUSE report, only 13% of survey respondents said that their institutions are engaged in Dx. The majority of IT professionals said that their institutions are either exploring Dx (38%) or developing a Dx strategy (32%).

The pandemic dramatically changed the short-term picture of technology change, but the overnight “ready or not” technology lifeline we experienced in the spring is not necessarily transformational just because it was a monumental achievement.

On the other hand, the pandemic response of higher education institutions this fall semester offers a powerful opportunity to accelerate Dx far beyond pre-pandemic levels. Dx requires “integrative CIOs” to play a growing role in the strategic direction of their institutions, and COVID-19 has opened this door: 73% of respondents to a June 2020 EDUCAUSE QuickPoll reported that their CIOs have a seat at the pandemic-response table. Moreover, the workforce and culture elements of true Dx have accelerated as part of the “Zoomification” of everything from happy hours to religious services, setting a new standard as digital-everything becomes the norm.

It is impossible to imagine that the majority of institutions will quietly return to only contemplating Dx. We must continue the jump-start and accelerate progress well beyond 2020.

The Intensifying Trend: Wellness

Long before COVID-19, concern about the unique and growing needs of students with behavioral or mental health challenges has been growing. COVID-19 and its financial impacts have added never-before-seen levels of stress and have elevated the need for even more attention to wellness initiatives for students. Along with the increased sense of urgency comes a growing understanding of the ways that technology innovation can be a force for good in this situation. Vassar College President Elizabeth Bradley and Psychological Science Professor Michele Tugade, writing recently in EDUCAUSE Review, make a compelling case for technology-based interventions that they believe “could revolutionize mental health care in higher education.”

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Concurrent with the pandemic stress, significant tensions related to the social outage and unrest linked to the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis and racial injustice toward Black individuals will likely continue on campuses. The Black Lives Matter movement demands a new understanding of the world we live in and a dismantling of long-standing structural racism. Yet the pandemic and the racial crises are decidedly not the same: one is linked to a virus that we can reasonably hope to disarm in a certain number of months, whereas the other is a vicious consequence of 400 years of discrimination and injustice.

In addition, the pandemic and its economic impacts have disproportionately impacted specific communities: “Lower-income students were 55 percent more likely to delay graduation than their higher-income peers. COVID-19 also nearly doubled the gap between higher- and lower-income students’ expected GPAs.” According to the New York Times, “Latino and African-American residents of the United States have been three times as likely to become infected as their white neighbors.” Latino and Black people die from COVID-19 nearly twice as often.3 The Chronicle of Higher Education reports that the combination of the pandemic and racial injustice has taken a toll on students of color and other marginalized groups, underscoring the need for a “new-found urgency to support the mental health of students of color.”4 A spring 2020 study of nearly 20,000 college students found that financial stress and depression rates are increasing with COVID-19 and that 60% of students “indicate that the pandemic has made it more difficult to access mental health care.”5

As we look toward a challenging fall, institutional leaders must attend to the wellness not only of students but also of staff and faculty. Lee Skallerup Bessette’s words written in the early days of COVID-19 remain pertinent: leaders must “acknowledge and validate what your colleagues are experiencing.”6

2020

The year 2020 will be a milestone: the year that brought us a global pandemic, a global recession, and a chance at the progress toward racial justice that has been long overdue and desperately needed. In the throes of such dramatic changes, people naturally focus on the immediate challenges at hand, but in higher education, we would do well to ask ourselves “what’s next?” sooner rather than later. We have a remarkable opportunity to return to the accelerating and intensifying trends of digital transformation and wellness with a renewed commitment. I believe it’s a bet worth making. ■

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