Fostering Rapid Institution-wide Curricular Change in Response to COVID-19

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Abstract: To aid students during COVID-19, the University of Pikeville transitioned all undergraduate classes to no-cost alternatives for course textbooks. Additionally, the academic calendar was modified for the first time in the institution's 130-year history from a traditional 16-week semester to 8-week block scheduling. This case study explores strategies, approaches to corresponding with constituents, and lessons learned in leading an institution through two major curricular changes in under six months in response to a global pandemic.

Keywords: Open Educational Resources, calendar changes, coronavirus.

Overview of Initiatives and Context

Concern continually surrounds enrollment at small, tuition-driven institutions. Loss of even a few students can negatively affect the campus community. With predictions of up to a 20% drop in enrollment at four-year colleges in fall 2020 amid coronavirus uncertainties (Jaschik, 2020) institutions around the world began contingency planning.

At the University of Pikeville (UPIKE), a liberal arts-based school of opportunity in the United States, conversations in the spring of 2020 centered upon two key factors for institutional health: enrollment and retention. The university community recognised that while cost has always been a major driver of student choice, the situation was exacerbated by job loss and the uncertainties of COVID-19.

Amid this backdrop, and with the goals of addressing student financial need and academic success in a flexible and sustainable approach, the university embarked on two significant changes prior to fall 2020: transition to no-cost alternatives for all course texts and conversion from a 16- to an eight-week course format.

Initiatives using OER to reduce student costs are not uncommon. Conversion of all courses within a highly compressed timeframe, as done here in under six months, is atypical. Additionally, although many colleges offer options for eight-week courses, institutional conversion from 16- to eight-week scheduling is uncommon, particularly at liberal arts institutions. Our approach, and what we have learned from these initiatives, told here from the point of view of the Provost and Professional Development specialists, may be valuable to others considering similar strategies.

Phases of Innovation: Phase I-Planning and Approval (March-April)

In mid-March, the University Provost convened a task force composed of the Provost, Assistant Provost, Dean of Student Success, Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences (CAS) and the Office of Professional Development to evaluate eliminating textbook costs as well as moving from 16- to eight-week courses. The task force was charged with reviewing research, communicating with the campus community, and preparing a formal recommendation. This report, including budgetary needs, personnel implications, and an implementation timeline was to be ready for consideration by the Cabinet the first week of April.

Prior to engaging the community at large, task force members systematically reviewed the literature. Research on the use of Open Educational Resources (OER) or other free textbook options suggested that they positively impact students. OER were found not only to save money (Griffiths et al, 2018; Hilton et al, 2013) but also to improve student outcomes such as access to learning materials, pass rates, satisfaction with a course, and the number of credits taken (Martin et al, 2017; Murphy & Rose, 2018; Pina, & Moran, 2018; Wiley et al, 2016).

Primary literature related to accelerated/compressed courses was also compelling. Accelerated courses were found to be equal to or improve overall student success compared to traditional-length courses (Tatum, 2010). These findings were consistent regardless of the class delivery modality (Anastasi, 2007; Boeding, 2016) or student demographics (Austin & Gustafson, 2006). Compressed courses were found to lead to higher student grades and lower withdrawal rates compared to longer courses (Gamboa, 2013; Sheldon & Durdella, 2010).

Following assessment of the literature, conversations began with key academic leaders. Task force members were each assigned contacts. The purpose of this dialogue was to share findings related to potential changes and gather feedback for writing recommendations. In addition to discourse with faculty, discussions took place with the following offices: Registrar, Offices of Admissions and Financial Aid, Tutoring/Academic Excellence, Student Affairs, and Public Relations.

Focus groups with key student leaders were organised to present the idea of a no-cost text initiative and calendar modifications, and solicit feedback. The Dean of CAS led these focus groups, took copious notes, and shared findings with the task force.

Ultimately, the task force presented the President with a synthesis of research findings, campus feedback, and a formal recommendation. After reviewing this, the President supported the proposal and discussed it with the Board of Trustees, who similarly voiced support.

Phase II: Implementation (April-August 2020)

With leadership approval, the Provost engaged in strategic planning and drafted a marketing plan with Public Relations that announced the change. Internally, the changes were introduced first by the President via a campus-wide email. The announcement detailed the initiatives, impact on student success, and feedback from campus constituents. In addition, virtual luncheons, college-level meetings facilitated by deans, one-on-one discussions with faculty and staff, and continued dialogue with the Admissions, Financial Aid, and Business Offices took place. Externally, announcements were made via email and various social media platforms. The greatest impact came from a short video released on Twitter.

A calling campaign was launched to speak individually to all current students and their families in the two months following the public announcement. Twenty-five leaders contacted families to discuss planned changes, answer questions, and build relationships. Students and their families relayed annual textbook costs of over $2,000. Summer employment, we learned, is typically when students save for books. During COVID-19 saving money was not possible. Students were living at home and unemployed, not by choice but due to job loss. Many families were aware of the initiatives from PR releases; for others the phone call was the first they had heard of the changes. Parents and students saw free textbooks as a transformational initiative that would alleviate a significant financial burden.

The situation was different in relation to student and family views of the transition from 16- to eight-week courses. While the move to no-cost texts immediately connected, there were many questions about accelerated classes, due in large part to their unfamiliarity with this approach. The literature review was invaluable in discussing the benefit to students. This minimised concerns about taking fewer concurrent courses in a compressed format.

The task force identified instructor support as vital. In response, a number of part-time, temporary employees were added to the Office of Professional Development. Seven faculty were selected based on their success during the Spring 2020 online transition in teaching students and mentoring colleagues. These individuals were offered a stipend to serve as "Learning Designers" (LDs) during the summer. Each LD was assigned faculty outside their department, and served as a point of contact and mentor for those restructuring courses. In addition, an Instructional Designer (ID) and Instructional Technology Trainer (ITT) were temporarily hired to work with instructors on course design and provide weekly virtual training.

Faculty were apprehensive about situations where no-cost alternatives were not available. This was of particular concern in specialised subjects such as nursing, teacher education, and some upper-division courses. To ameliorate anxiety, the Provost redirected $50,000 in savings for purchasing items where no OER existed. An application process was developed wherein an instructor wishing to have their course materials purchased for students would submit a form requesting funding. Instructors were encouraged to search OER and library databases but could also seek assistance. A completed application for funding included a statement from either the Office of Professional Development or a librarian indicating what OER or eBook resources were found during the search process, a statement of support from the college dean, and the cost of the material. Applications were reviewed by a faculty committee to determine which would be approved, with preference given to eBooks that could be added to our library collection for ongoing use.

Impact of Innovation: Lessons Learned

In today's turbulent environment, collaboration is more important than ever. The ability to execute strategic initiatives depends on combining peoples' potential and willingness to share knowledge. University leadership discovered that in times of emergent crisis, innovation is triggered by three major factors.

1. *Substantial research-based support must underlie initiatives*: Questioning significant changes should be welcomed if a trusting and open culture exists. Challenging decisions and demanding rationale are healthy for institutions. Supporting research helps articulate benefits and alleviate concern when planning innovation. In our case, the Dean of Student Success has

extensive experience in student retention and persistence theories. He was tasked with collecting over 100 peer-reviewed journal articles, textbooks, and other primary resources to discuss the migration from 16-week semesters to eight-week block scheduling and elimination of textbook costs. This literature review provided a foundation that was critical to subsequent decisions.

2. *Focused dialogue and cross-pollination with on- and off-campus constituents must occur*: Without support by on- and off-campus constituents, truly innovative initiatives will falter. Face-to-face and virtual discussions gave institutional leaders the opportunity to relay research-based findings for proposed initiatives. When issues were raised, campus leaders were able to assist with targeted problem-solving and amend strategies. For example, when the Registrar's Office indicated concern about the ability to shift already-registered students from 16- to eight-week courses, an approach was found where a roadblock was initially perceived.

3. *Create an inclusive marketing and dissemination plan*: Public Relations involvement and marketing are often forgotten when executing innovative plans. This may be due to the impression that PR and marketing are not as important for on-campus constituents, including students. Good PR and marketing is one strategy that drives innovation and helps meet target goals. Collaboration with experts on campus who understand these principles and the decision-making process for our multi-generational students from varied backgrounds helps avoid confusion, miscommunication, and barriers to implementation.

As the department spearheading implementation of these innovations, the Office of Professional Development identified several lessons to be learned valuable to our future plans and those considering similar initiatives.

1. *Availability of 1-on-1 assistance is critical*: Personalised help is key in finding suitable OER or free materials. A number of studies have indicated that barriers to OER use by faculty include difficulty locating appropriate resources and time to search (see Jhangiani, et al, 2016). One-on-one assistance mitigated these barriers and dispelled the belief held by some that no quality OER existed for their subject.

   As the primary goal was to eliminate text expense for students, library subscriptions and material available on the Web provided an avenue for resource selection. While we provided training on searching these repositories, much time was spent on personalised support for those navigating library collections. This approach aided in negating faculty dissatisfaction with restructuring content to meet their needs, particularly since materials were being organised digitally.

2. *Developed dependency on costly publisher material is troubling*: Lack of "supplementary" course resources is known to be a barrier to OER adoption (Lieberman, 2018). Slide decks, test banks, and videos are often used to supplement instruction. Many publishers now advertise platforms which both supplement and deliver instruction. Some publishers provide complete courses including text material for purchase of an all-in-one access code. These are used to assess student deficits, provide remediation including feedback, and structure future learning experiences.

Faculty selecting this content may be well-intentioned. The result, however, is a sometimes gradual (sometimes not) evolving dependence on publishers. No longer does finding an alternate resource involve replacing only texts but large portions of the course itself. If developing and facilitating learning experiences are major elements of being an instructor, we are voluntarily becoming indebted to publishers for course design. We are passing along this cost to students in addition to what they already pay in tuition.

3. *In some disciplines, OER or other free material are lacking*: Although increasing in availability, lab materials can be difficult to locate, particularly for upper-division science courses. In fields like nursing and education, publisher textbooks may be aligned to external standards. If OER are not aligned as well this complicates assessment of the material. There are initiatives that are building OER in these fields, like the OpenRN Project, but more focus is needed.

4. *Purchasing eBooks to supplement existing library collections can be cost effective*: Often, we found that for a relatively low-cost, ongoing access to an eBook could be purchased. For example, a textbook that would cost each student approximately $80 could be added to our library for under $200. With a class of 25, this represents a savings of $2,000 per class for a $200 institutional investment. However, sometimes while everyone in class could read the eBook online, only a limited number of these could be checked out concurrently.

In relation to the move from 16- to eight-week classes, several dynamics became evident that are relevant to any planned schedule shift.

1. *Pre-existing beliefs are difficult to alter*: Significant research exists demonstrating student success in condensed course formats. However, instructors who believe that their content cannot be condensed do not quickly change their opinion even when presented with research from their field. This potentially represents a significant barrier.

   Those who have taught in shorter blocks have less difficulty envisioning their course in a condensed format and frequently assess content based on its importance to achieving objectives, as outlined by Kops (2014). When all course content is viewed as critical, even though knowledge is lost quickly following a final exam (Bacon & Stuart, 2006), restructuring a class appears impossible.

2. *Students are not identical but we teach as if they are*: Students come to us with varying backgrounds, educational experiences, and learning needs. Instructors often take an input approach to teaching where the focus is what students do and not what they demonstrate about mastery of objectives. Those with this mentality have difficulty compressing courses as it appears unfeasible to have students complete the same work in less time.

3. *Training is important but so are expectations for attendance*: The Office of Professional Development held multiple training sessions per week during summer 2020. Topics encompassed overcoming mental roadblocks, using course design rubrics and templates for course transitions, and use of instructional technologies. Attendees benefited from dialogue and brainstorming with design experts and fellow instructors. Recordings were made for those who could not be present but some individuals did not attend any training. Time constraints and lack of incentives as described in Mascher (2016) were the main reasons provided. Some

indicated they did not attend as they chafed at expectations being placed on them over the summer.

Conclusion

As a result of COVID-19, in under six months UPIKE changed the academic structure of courses through two significant initiatives both directed at improving student success. In doing so, we reasserted our commitment to student-centered and sustainable practice at all institutional levels. These efforts addressed the immediate needs of students for fall 2020, and have been reaffirmed as priorities for spring 2021. These classes are also being converted to eight-week blocks and another $50,000 has been allocated for special material funding.

Our journey was not seamless. Success required investing both time and money: time to listen to diverse voices; time in supporting those impacted by the initiatives; money for hiring mentors and experts who could effectively guide others. Furthermore, communities of practice where faculty could work within a trusted environment proved to be a vital part of this transition, particularly in addressing mental barriers to change. This investment, in conjunction with the efforts put forth by non-academic units, made this re-investment in our students possible.

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