

MIND THE GAP

CREATING EQUITABLE AND INCLUSIVE ONLINE SPACES FOR STUDENTS AND FACULTY

by Amy Leonard

Are you one of the teachers who spent the spring or summer sessions driving to your campus or local library just to have enough broadband to Zoom your class? If so, you might be experiencing an impending sense of dread at the prospect of an online fall term and possible full 2020-21 year of remote learning. Do not despair! The sudden shift to online instruction due to COVID-19 offers the greatest opportunity in recent memory to advocate for equitable and inclusive methods that can not only bring 21st-century learning to students, but also close the achievement gap.

First, it is useful to unpack some of the data from spring 2020. According to a recent study by Common Sense Media and the Boston Consulting group of nationwide K-12 students, “15 million to 16 million lack adequate internet or devices to sustain effective distance learning at home,” and up to “400,000 teachers can’t teach because of lack of internet.” These statistics are sobering and, more troubling, the study revealed that of the students without adequate connectivity, 26 percent were Latinx, 30 percent were Black, and 35 percent Native American. Each of these populations already face troubling inequities from early learning through higher education. The numbers are just as troubling in California where a study by the Education Trust-West found: “50 percent of low-income and 42 percent of families of color lack sufficient devices at home to access distance learning.”

Historically, online classes have had greater success and achievement gaps than face-to-face classes. According to the California Community College 2017 Distance Education Report, “The gap in success rates between traditional face-to-face (71 percent) and distance education courses (66 percent) has closed from 17 percent 10 years ago to 4 percent in 2016-17.” This success gap is significant because, “In 2016-17, the average distance education student was female, 20-24 years old and Hispanic.” With online education becoming a lifeline for students from historically disadvantaged backgrounds, it is imperative we close those gaps, especially now that instruction may be online for most students all year.

The good news is that work on closing the success and achievement gaps has been improving since 2017 and some community colleges are proving that success gaps do not need to be simply accepted. During spring quarter in the height of COVID-19 lockdown when the campus was fully virtual, Foothill College in Los Altos increased success rates in a year-to-year comparison by one percent for all students, including in their targeted populations of African-American and Filipinx students. Creating this type of online student success is achievable for all institutions if attention is paid to creating inclusive dialogue about strategies and solutions to online delivery issues rather than erecting barriers.

The initial steps to success for online instruction require advocacy and action from colleges to provide broadband and device solutions because this is where schools actively seeking to close the achievement gap can have the biggest impact. We know from the data that frequently our disadvantaged students have trouble with access to individual devices to complete work with sufficient broadband to download or participate in assignments. Districts, colleges, and faculty should be conducting “a needs assessment with parents and families to evaluate distance learning and continued gaps in access.” Additionally, faculty and administration need to “Work across local public and private sectors to secure 1:1 devices and low/no-cost broadband access for students and families while advocating to state & federal leaders for a 1:1 match commitment.” These steps can not only help the students in your classes be more successful today, but they also can create a framework for digital

equity that will last long past the pandemic. Some school districts in California are already taking these actions.

While it might be tempting to say the problems are too great and we need to have our disadvantaged students and faculty attend class in-person or via the lowest-tech options, that will not close equity and achievement gaps. Instead, we must look at COVID-19 as an opportunity to create, advocate, and implement opportunities for success. Faculty should be working to advocate for students to have access, and faculty to have training in high-quality synchronous and asynchronous learning strategies.

Many districts this fall were seduced by the idea that students need to participate in synchronous learning, and faculty need to be forced to teach live via Zoom to prove they are doing their job. Yet this faulty logic ignores the fact that many Latinx, Black, Filipinx, and Native American students are often working as essential workers in front-line jobs with fluctuating hours. If district policies force those students to choose between taking a synchronous class and working to keep a roof over their heads and food on the table, those districts are not supporting their students' needs. True digital equity means a commitment to providing high-quality instruction in a variety of options that fit the diversity of student needs.

Furthermore, faculty or bargaining units must advocate for funding the technological needs of faculty. High-quality online classes do not just happen because you can connect to Zoom or the LMS of the school. High-quality instruction is possible today with proper investment. In-person class instruction often gives the impression that faculty can walk in already obtaining the knowledge needed to create a high-quality learning experience since much of the prep work is invisible and the technology is provided in the classroom. However, if you want to create a high-quality 21st-century learning environment, investments need to be made in hardware like broadband access, webcams, mics, high-quality headphones, and computers, as well as software options like Adobe suite, video editing and captioning programs, and slide sharing apps allowing faculty to deliver their content in a professional and user-friendly package. Faculty and bargaining units need to advocate for professional development that trains faculty on how to best leverage the hardware and software to create a dynamic learning experience to reach students. One way to fund the technological needs of students and faculty is

to defund Calbright, the unaccredited fully online college, and redirect that funding to our existing colleges.

Finally, faculty and bargaining units need to be mindful of not giving up their academic freedom to use pedagogical tools that promote equity. Colleges like Skyline in San Mateo have academic freedom statements asserting, "Academic freedom encompasses the freedom to study, teach, and express ideas, including unpopular or controversial ones, without censorship or political restraint." However, if colleges and districts force faculty to teach synchronously, via Zoom, or message out promises of "checking up on faculty to make sure they are Zooming," academic freedom and the ability to teach with a full toolbox of pedagogical strategies will be hampered, which will prevent instructors from providing equitable and inclusive methods that they would otherwise be using in a classroom setting.

In "For Schools to Reopen Congress Must Include Broadband Funding in the Stimulus Bill," Nicol Turner Lee reveals that studies "found that of the counties where school-age children had the highest share of special learning needs, over 18 percent of their households lacked broadband access."

In-person classes allow teachers to use a variety of methods to meet the diversity of needs in their classroom.

Likewise, "A recent survey of California students by the ACLU of Southern California found that 32 percent of students who were not receiving mental health services prior to the pandemic feel that they may now require mental health support." Asynchronous, hybrid, and creative scheduling can allow for the flexibility that instructors need to create a high-quality, high-touch, equitable environment personalized with feedback and high-touch, more personalized feedback, equitable environment that helps faculty support students' social and emotional well-being, and advocate for supportive services. Stripping faculty of equitable and inclusive methods of instruction by limiting them to the equivalent

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of a Zoom prison will certainly lead to a widening of the achievement gap and a troubling precedent that erodes faculty's ability to control their classroom.

As we enter into a brave new world of remote learning, we faculty have a choice to shape educational policy

that will close the online achievement gap and create 21st-century learning experiences for our students, or we can idly sit back and accept policies that do not reflect current pedagogy or the experiences and needs of our students. Choose wisely. ■
