

Thinking and Acting at Scale for Internal University Services

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Abstract

It is too early to understand the total impact of COVID-19 on higher education. For many institutions in the United States, the pandemic meant an almost immediate move to remote instruction, using online delivery at a scale previously considered impossible. Online learning is no longer new, but many psychological and cultural barriers to adoption have fallen as the mode became a necessity to survive. Universities have always served as mechanisms to scale education. As societal needs shift, our concept of scale must shift once again. Online learning has created an opportunity to rethink universities and position all aspects of our work so that educational equity can be increased. To be successful, we must consider scale beyond courses and degrees.

Keywords: At-scale learning, higher education, student services, COVID-19

Introduction

As we consider at-scale learning in this particular time, in the midst of a global pandemic, we must remember that all of this is very in-the-present-moment. Perspective is difficult when you are living through a major change. We are all still learning together.

When I think about the big picture around the changes we're making in response to the pandemic, and the plans we're making for terms and semesters in the immediate future, it's less about predicting or dictating, and more about wondering. Disruption is often personally uncomfortable; it's also what drives impactful change and meaningful advancements. There is value in everything we're learning as a collective group in this unique moment in history.

The knowledge we are gaining holds great potential as we look to the future of education and the need to horizontally scale across our institutions. The rapid transition has shown that there are many areas for improvement. Enhancing our team infrastructure, improving communications, and understanding that there is a learning curve for all involved, are just some of the gaps that must be improved. There also exists tremendous potential to think more broadly about how we design, with whom we design, and how those designs enhance education. We are seeing that it is possible to reach more people, in fact, almost all people, and realize the

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power of education to promote positive change in each student's life, in our institutions, and in society.

Scale: It's What Universities Do

Universities have long been a mechanism to scale educational opportunities. Hundreds of years ago, the advent of the printing press and architectural advancements meant that the technological infrastructures were available so that a single tutor could effectively teach many learners and not just a few wealthy family members. Even if that scale was limited to certain societal classes in centuries past, and remains out of reach for the majority today, moving beyond a single tutor teaching the children of royalty to dozens or hundreds of students in a classroom today is perhaps one of humanity's greatest innovations. Incremental improvements in the last two centuries have allowed many of the large research institutions, including the University of Washington, to exceed tens of thousands of students.

In 1876, the University of Washington was known as the Territorial University of Washington (University Libraries, n.d.) and the first ever cohort was ready for its graduation. The size of that first class was just 17 students. Only one student out of those 17 was eligible to graduate: a young woman named Clara McCarty. She was the only woman in her class, and she was the only student to graduate. Despite a 1/17 completion rate for the first cohort, the university persisted and grew. From 10,000 students in the 1940s to 30,000 in the 1970s and now, in 2020, nearly 50,000 matriculated students attend the University of Washington. This growth generally came through incremental change, only one or two percent each year. But there were times in our history when new experiments in pedagogy and practice led to dramatic increases in University of Washington student populations. After World War II, for example, UW offered night programs through its Extension Office^b that were geared toward adult part-time students. These offerings led to substantial enrollment gains through the 1950s.

Universities all over the United States grew post-World War II and again in the 1970s as grants, loans, and other programs like the "GI Bill" were put in place to make college more affordable for veterans. But society's demands today are even more than we can deliver with our traditional approaches to scale. Rather than printing presses and impressive buildings, the new era of scale is happening because digital technology allows us to vastly increase both the pedagogical and geographical reach of our programs in different ways.

^b University of Washington-Extension changed names several times and became Continuum College in 2016.

COVID-19 as a Force Factor

Will COVID-19 be a catalyzing event, much like the GI Bill, and open the door to an era of rapid scaling of our institutions? It is still early, but we can already see dramatic changes that have rippled across higher education. As the coronavirus pandemic arrived in the United States, the University of Washington found itself in an early COVID-19 outbreak zone. On March 9, 2020, UW became the first U.S. higher education institution to cease in-person learning and move exclusively to temporary remote instruction. The University of Washington Continuum College (UWC²) responded to this sudden shift to remote learning by bringing nearly all its programs online in a matter of weeks.

Before that decision to move all classes to remote delivery, transitioning programs to online or distance instruction that quickly was unheard of, and any directive to do so would have been met with great skepticism. One senior leader at a large research institution noted in a private conversation, “Can you imagine a university president at a major research institution, with limited online offerings, announcing to faculty that we will make 30% of our university available online in *two years*? They [the leader] would have been driven out of the academy. And yet, we did about 90% of our entire catalog in two weeks.”

COVID-19 also has students rethinking what it means to attend college amid so much uncertainty. Unlike the Great Recession, high quality, shorter, non-degree programs are increasingly available online through top institutions. Shorter programs with clear job outcomes are increasing in popularity and anecdotes from potential students indicate uncertainty about the duration of the crisis is a factor in considering a degree or a shorter program (Inside Higher Ed, 2020). At UWC², we added capacity to our non-degree Career Accelerator programs (University of Washington, n.d.), which have continued to grow. Our on-demand online certificate programs are also seeing substantial growth, even in the midst of the pandemic. Some of this growth is being driven by employers looking for professional development for their employees who are working at home right now. While employer-university training partnerships are not unheard of, many business leaders are also discovering the depth and breadth of sophisticated continuing education offerings that did not exist a decade ago. There is demand and need for new forms of higher education in this moment and for the future.

So, as we think about scale, we think about COVID-19, and we think about what it's going to take for our universities to reach the 36 million adults in the United States with some college and no degree (National Student Clearinghouse, 2019), or the 93.3% (Barro & Lee, 2010a; Barro & Lee, 2010b) of people globally who do not have a bachelor's degree, it's going to take more than talking about how we scale a specific instructional innovation. It's going to take more

than firing up a video conferencing platform, putting people online, and hoping for the best. Horizontal scale is going to require us to think very differently about many aspects of the academy.

A Five-stage Process to Recovery and Reimagination

COVID-19's impact on education is still to be determined, but a new normal is emerging. In one McKinsey & Company report (Sneider & Singhal, 2020), the authors posit a five-stage process for organizations to consider as they continue to deal with the pandemic. According to the report, organizations need to prepare for these five stages: Resolve, Resilience, Return, Reform, and Reimagine. At the time of this chapter's creation, most of us are still working to resolve our current challenges and building resilience so that our organizations can survive. In some cases, we are starting to learn how to return but we are still months away from anything resembling a new stasis. Yet, there's already an incredible opportunity as we move through this process to begin to reimagine and reform our work.

Not all of our temporary changes are good for students and many are only going to help us in the moment. For example, we rapidly adapted technology platforms originally designed for business use to move classes online and discovered that mischievous students adapted quickly (some aspects of college do not change) causing some more serious, offensive instances (Redden, 2020). While our novel uses of technology might open the door to students who cannot come to campus, we must also be wary of the inequities created by online learning that may limit success for some students (Baker, Dee, Evans, & John, 2018; *The Real Future of Higher Ed Is Still in High School*, n.d.). We will not know for some time which students benefited and which students suffered from our rushed move to remote learning. It is not too early, however, to build on early successes and be thoughtful about how the positive experiences can be replicated

When we take time to envision a new future and consider what will create a better experience for our students, for the way we work, for how we operate as we continue to move forward in this environment, we must assess what we do at scale and what we can learn from what we're doing right now, that might help us when we are through this crisis.

What can we reimagine today at our institutions? Our answers will evolve as the COVID-19 crisis abates and we gain perspective about what worked and what did not. At the very least, we will have more faculty experienced with using the internet to deliver education and students who will provide a lot of feedback. Our goal will be to listen for both the problems we encountered and the opportunities that were created.

Institutional Instructional Design

I have been using technology to build learning environments since 1991. Despite breaking many barriers and challenging the status quo to support online learning, I have never known a moment like the one that instructional design, as a field, is facing now. Instructional design across all courses an institution has to offer requires very different thinking. Let's start with some rough calculations. Intentional Futures (The State of Instructional Design, 2016) estimates that across the country, about 13,000 people are working as instructional designers in higher education. There are 4,600 educational institutions in the United States. That equals an average of 2.8 instructional designers per institution. But we know that a few larger universities likely have dozens or hundreds of people working in instructional design. That leads us to the conclusion that there are a lot of universities that have one person, or nobody, doing that work.

So, when we think horizontally, or broadly across the institution, we should acknowledge that universities have done really well for several thousand years with very little formal instructional design support. That lack of formal support is important, because as we think about this moment when instructional designers are in high demand, it can be easy to think, "This is THE time for instructional design to shine!" However, that will only be true beyond this moment if designers can also change with the times.

Doing a few more simple calculations makes the scale of supporting online horizontally across all courses using old, one-on-one instructional design approaches appear not just daunting, but impossible. For example, the University of Washington, across three campuses in a typical spring quarter, has 7,000 total classroom courses (McQuate, 2020). Scaling our current instructional design practices for developing "true" online courses across the entire university would require 583 instructional designers. In the best of budgetary times, it is hard to imagine that institutions would invest so heavily in instructional design. Economic realities of COVID-19 may reduce, not increase instructional design support.

Regardless of whether it's online or face-to-face delivery, we must come up with new design techniques and new ways of operating. During the pandemic, some faculty, working without instructional designers, created groundbreaking instructional interventions. Having the requirement to teach online and the time to innovate is elevating digital teaching. For those faculty, the basics of online teaching will no longer be sufficient. Other faculty are completely stuck, unable to use our massified video conferencing tools to solve wicked instructional problems because they have no support beyond a helpdesk. In other words, as more faculty use digital technology to teach, they are pushing their own boundaries. As the digital teaching literacy of mainstream faculty increases, instructional design will need to change from "building

courses” to solving pedagogical challenges. The techniques and processes must also change to accommodate how these challenges are solved across an entire institution. That's going to also change the way that we operate, because it's not viable to think a university would hire 583 instructional designers to ensure quality across every course. Some techniques are emerging, but is it time to reimagine how instructional design practice scales to support online programs across the entire university, now and in the future?

Student Services

If instructional design practices must change to scale at an institutional level, student services must also change to meet more significant demands from larger, more diverse, and remote student populations. Creating a meaningful digital student experience at scale means rethinking financial aid, admissions, libraries, student research, and significantly rethinking *digital* and *blended* student life.

Prior to COVID-19, universities were just beginning to consider the needs of online and distance students in a more comprehensive way. As online student populations were growing, so were non-instructional student issues. Mental health services, already under growing strain on many U.S. campuses (Field, 2016), were also increasingly in demand by online students. Penn State World Campus was one of the first public research universities to address online student mental health at scale (World Campus Helps Students Find Mental Health Services No Matter Where They Are, 2020) and the timing could not have been better to prepare for the pandemic.

At the University of Washington's Continuum College, serving students at scale also means recognizing the complexity of choice higher education offers in 2020. Prior to the pandemic, Continuum College established an Enrollment Services team to help adult students navigate the complexity of program options and help them fit a program into their equally complex lives. These Enrollment Services Coaches are not only trained in Continuum College programs but are also trained for potentially serious situations callers may be facing. It is not uncommon for a Career Services coach to learn that someone wants to earn a credential while homeless, facing mental health challenges, or balancing impossible time commitments. While Continuum College Enrollment Services Coaches are not trained mental health professionals, knowing where to refer students and how to deal with moments of crisis appropriately became essential tools when COVID-19 hit.

At the beginning of the pandemic, the Enrollment Services Coaches were overwhelmed. But Continuum College already had plans for scaling these services by partnering with a company and cross-training employees. The handoffs between the internal coaches at

Continuum College and the private company were honed during typical busy application periods in the years before the pandemic. When the pandemic hit, having a close partner who could work seamlessly with the Enrollment Services team meant coaches could meet the increased call volume and emotional load of students now dealing with new anxieties and painful situations.

Not every example we could mention is as ready for scale. As we begin to return to our campuses, the need to blend solutions will create new challenges. Student Life units at universities around the world scrambled, and succeeded, to deliver meaningful, remote graduations in spring 2020. While graduations may not seem as critical as other services, these digital ceremonies were often the first-time distance students had the same experience as students who live on campus or who can afford to travel for graduation. As campuses returned in fall 2020, many students were still taking classes remotely. For those colleges with some students on campus, the focus became student safety, virus testing, wearing masks, and maintaining social distance but not bridging physical and digital interaction. Scale in the future will mean considering blends of student populations. Online students are unlikely to want a return to the days when they were unable to fully participate in student life because they were remote, while most of campus was geographically together and participating in activities. How will universities consider blended student populations at scale if all students want the same level of analogous services provided to campus students?

Horizontal Decision Making: Speed at Scale

We must also consider the fact that our systems, facilities and personnel are all under strains that were never part of our best contingency planning. The magnitude of decisions has been daunting and the speed with which they have been made is unlike any time in recent memory for our staid, thoughtful institutions.

These university environments often thrive on concepts of shared governance, where faculty, administration, and students debate major and sometimes minor changes for months (or years) before determining the best course of action. Such practice served universities well and maintained stability until February 2020. Already noted are the thoughts of one administrator about moving online but that was only one of hundreds of decisions during the COVID-19 pandemic: Do we delay the tenure clock? Do athletes get another year of eligibility? How will we balance the budget? What do we do about students who do not wear masks? How do we come back? The McKinsey report (Sneider & Singhal, 2020) notes that if you thought the decision process was difficult in transitioning your university to remote learning, the decision process coming out of all-remote learning will be overwhelming waves of fast decisions and changes.

The early stories from institutions in fall 2020 are confirming McKinsey's prediction (Fausset, 2020).

Some of these fast decisions will not be good ones, but let's hope that we also remember that some decisions, even though made quickly, resulted in positive outcomes. The "goodness" or "badness" of any decision is only truly knowable in hindsight. Just as our instructional designers may need to reconsider some longstanding practices to scale learning support, administrations are going to have to consider what benefits faster decision-making has for an institution now that we know it is possible. These will be fraught reflections that could challenge our practices of shared governance. This challenge does not mean eliminating or even limiting shared governance at institutions where this is sacrosanct, but new ways of practicing shared governance that increase equity, quality, and speed of decisions will matter as we scale to serve more students in uncertain environments.

Digital Leadership and Communication

Scaling vertically, within a single program or in one part of an institution, does not require substantial change in how we lead or communicate. COVID-19 is showing us that shifting an entire institution to digital delivery requires leading and communicating in new ways. Some of these new ways will be temporary, but others are creating expectations for how leaders can and should be using digital tools more effectively.

The University of Washington's Continuum College has nearly 250 full-time professional staff. Prior to COVID-19, the cadence of having an all-staff meeting was dictated by physical spaces. The building housing Continuum College only has one auditorium that seats 250, and during the school year, that space is booked continuously. A focus on physical space, even though digital tools were available, meant the entire team could only meet twice a year.

Fast-forward to March 2020 and the beginning of the pandemic lockdowns in Seattle, Washington. In that early moment, Seattle was at the forefront of early deaths from the virus. Everyone in the Pacific Northwest was fearful. Despite many unknowns, the governor of the state of Washington, Jay Inslee, moved quickly to order remote work for all state employees. University leadership immediately adhered to the requirements, but recommendations and best practices for implementation were changing daily or even hourly. Preparing refined email communications that go through multiple rounds of revision over days or weeks was no longer sufficient leadership communication.

As vice provost of Continuum College, I decided to hold an emergency all-staff meeting using videoconference on the first Friday of the lockdown. The University of Washington had just finalized a contract with Zoom earlier that week, giving the capability to hold a digital

meeting with up to 300 participants. The content consisted of repeating the official statements coming from the university and an “Ask Me Anything” format. In addition to simply sharing existing rules about required practices, we gave science updates from our Schools of Medicine and Public Health. That first digital all-staff meeting also included moments of levity – often leaders poking fun at their own challenges with the technology. An hour after the meeting, the first email came from a staff member, “I did not realize until this afternoon that I had not laughed in 10 days. I needed this more than you can imagine.” And another a few moments later, “Getting to see all of my colleagues made me feel so much less alone.” Several more emails came in. Only one mentioned an appreciation of the latest information. The rest of the emails that came in that afternoon were about the need to feel socially connected to the organization when we were forcibly separated.

The University of Washington Continuum College leadership team began to think intentionally about how we need to vary our leadership communication, not just to share information, but to feed the emotional and social needs of our employees. As we think about using digital technology to scale the delivery of programs, leaders must also consider how institutions will horizontally scale existing leadership practices and create new ones, to maintain a healthy and functional team. In January 2020, we were planning two all-staff meetings for the year. Now the team gathers every Friday for optional “Fireside Fridays.” Staff have indicated that this is a practice they want to continue, even after the pandemic subsides.

Colleagues across the country describe using more digital tools for leadership communication and collaboration than ever before. In many cases, these tools are already available in our environment but there had never been a catalyst worthy of time needed to try something new. Many of the lessons we are learning about how we work can also be applied to our classrooms and other aspects of university services. Which will remain? What are we discovering about our leadership and communication practices that will be more than a temporary fix to the pandemic? What will current and future employees demand from leaders after these experiences? These are all questions that deserve time and intentional thought, even while the future remains uncertain.

Looking Forward

We are in the middle of making history. Future generations will look back at those of us who lived through this time with awe. And yet, perspective is always elusive in the moment. In the midst of resolving the current crisis and giving our institutions the resilience to survive, we have the opportunity to reform and reimagine how our institutions can become more open and

equitable for everyone. Processes long believed to be etched in stone have proven to be as changeable as those created by a word processor.

Let's remember that our understanding of providing high quality higher education at scale is as rooted in our moment as Clara McCarty and the other 16 students (and one professor) were in 1876. Could a professor with 17 students envision a 50,000-student research and teaching institution? What level of scale might we struggle to imagine is possible from the 50,000 we serve students today? What level of scale does society need from us?

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