

Moving Courses Online



- **The Digital Divide Still Divides**
- **Less Is More**
- **Doing Away With High-Stakes Testing**
- **Resources to Support Faculty**
- **Controversy With HyFlex**

When the coronavirus forced colleges to switch to online instruction last spring, expectations were modest — and plenty of students say colleges struggled to clear even that low bar. Now that institutions have had time to adjust to the pandemic, students and their parents want remote learning that works, especially if colleges insist on the same tuition rates that they charge for in-person classes.

With the bar rising, colleges and instructors should pay close attention to what's already working as they rapidly shift thousands of courses online. Here are five trends affecting the move to online courses:

The Digital Divide Still Divides

Rural students and low-income students in urban areas are likely to have more trouble participating in online classes than others. A recent study by Pew



As a sponsor of The Chronicle of Higher Education Trends Snapshot, Zendesk recognizes the major shifts the education industry is currently facing and the importance of providing teachers and students with the support they need to successfully transition to online learning.

Now that this transition is well underway, we should focus on ways to improve our online experiences. Although our goal—to provide students with the best education possible—remains unchanged, it is imperative that we understand the trends in online learning as our decisions will inform the future of the education industry.

With both students and faculty at home, it can be tough to keep communication channels open and respond to requests quickly and effectively. Zendesk enables university administrators to remain in control of their operations while keeping students and faculty at ease. Our solution is designed to be flexible so that your staff is empowered to resolve issues efficiently. Support teams can interact and communicate with everyone on the channels they prefer—like email, chat, phone, and even social messaging apps. With a clear communication strategy, you can keep conversations running smoothly and focus on what really matters—helping your students and staff.

Ensuring that information is easily accessible is key in supporting your students and faculty. With Zendesk, you can build a knowledge base of help center articles to answer common questions and organize content such as frequently asked questions, system setups, and the latest announcements, all in one place. You can even lean on your staff to write articles about any given topic and distribute them through all of your channels. This guarantees that all stakeholders remain in-the-know, without having to leave your website or platform.

At Zendesk, we provide institutions with the right solution to support students and faculty under any circumstance. Whether you are looking to streamline your school or department's support requests into a single, easy-to-use interface or would like to intuitively manage requests and set up a knowledge base for FAQ, Zendesk is committed to tailoring our solution to best fit the needs of universities and colleges, no matter how big or small.

Zendesk' mission, to build software designed to improve relationships, is more timely than ever. We pledge to be a continued partner to universities and colleges, as we believe that together, we can navigate these uncertain times and frame new industry best practices.

Thank you for your interest in the Chronicle of Higher Education's "Top 5 Trends for Moving Your Courses Online." To learn more about Zendesk and how we support universities and schools, visit our [Zendesk for Education](#) webpage.

With kind regards,

Joe Jorczak

Higher Education Specialist

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Research Center found that one-third of rural households still don't have access to broadband internet.

A separate study by the Urban Institute found that Black and Hispanic households were less likely than other households to have a broadband connection, and that low-income families were far less likely than others to have one.

She was turned away from her local library, which didn't want visitors using their computers during the pandemic.

Coupled with library-usage restrictions made necessary by Covid-19, a lack of broadband at home has made it nearly impossible for some students to complete college courses. Paige McConnell, a Roane State Community College student featured in *The Washington Post*, didn't have Wi-Fi at her home in Crossville, Tenn., and she was turned away from her local library, which didn't want visitors using their computers during the pandemic. She tolerated the college's online classes for just two weeks before dropping out.

Campus Wi-Fi and computer labs solved most problems prior to Covid-19, says Vikki Katz, an associate professor in the School of Communication and Information at Rutgers University.

But remote learning has laid bare the divide. Katz and collaborators found that more than half of the 3,100 students they surveyed last spring reported that their internet connection at home was slowed by having too many people online at one time, and a quarter said they weren't able to livestream reliably.

Professors should communicate early in their course — and in the syllabus — that they are aware that some students may have technology struggles, Katz says.

When a student raises the issue, she says, instructors should direct the student to campus support services or figure out another workaround.

Less Is More

Even in pre-Covid times, the days of a professor lecturing for an hour straight were numbered. In online courses, such an approach is sure to be a disaster — in part due to the student technology challenges discussed above.

But breaking up course material into digestible chunks isn't just about coping with bad internet connections; it's also a good way to keep students engaged. Students can be worn out by long Zoom meetings that include dozens of people. Many experts recommend a teaching approach that is heavy on asynchronous instruction, supplemented by live meetings with small subsets of students.

Instructors might tape and upload short, personalized videos, such as those described by Karen Costa in her book, *99 Tips for Creating Simple and Sustainable Educational Videos*. As for live interactions, Aimee Pozorski, a professor of English at Central Connecticut State University, says she's going to replace long Zoom meetings with shorter "mini-meetings" — perhaps

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30 minutes of live discussion with just five students at a time.

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to use a standard course “shell” in its learning-management system when possible.

Doing Away With High-Stakes Testing

High-stakes final exams had been under assault for years prior to the pandemic, but the switch to online courses is hastening their demise. The technology gap — the unreliable internet access that many poor and rural students must deal with — is one reason such tests are controversial. Critics have also taken aim at the software employed by universities to confirm the legitimacy of student performance — so-called “online proctoring.”

Services provided by companies such as ProctorU can involve the use of webcams to confirm that the student enrolled in the class is the actual student taking the test. Critics say such monitoring is an Orwellian invasion of privacy.

Justin Reich, an assistant professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, calls remote proctoring “a truly insidious development” with roots in malware. In August, MIT issued new academic guidelines that discouraged professors from using third-party online proctoring.

Many experts say professors should change how they assess students, perhaps turning to open-book exams. Flower Darby, an instructional designer and the co-author of *Small Teaching Online: Applying Learning Science in Online Classes*, suggests that instructors use weekly tests and also ask students to sign an honor agreement prior to each exam affirming that the answers are their own.

Instructors might even consider allowing students to come up with their ways of demonstrating knowledge, she says, such as submitting a weekly reflection or creating a video.

Resources to Support Faculty

At a time when many colleges and universities are facing broader financial challenges related to the pandemic, they also have to make tough decisions about what investments in faculty training and resources are likely to have the greatest impact. Few institutions have a large enough staff of IT

experts and instructional-design teams to spend significant time with all the instructors moving courses online, so colleges have become creative in finding ways to help. The Alamo Colleges District, which has five campuses around San Antonio, created an asynchronous online boot camp for instructors moving from in-person to remote teaching.

Academic consortiums — groups of institutions that collaborate to save costs — are also helping move courses online, at a lower cost than universities would pay on their own. For example, Colby, Bates, and Bowdoin Colleges collaborated this summer to help professors design courses through both live and asynchronous programs.

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Professors who aren’t receiving enough help from their own institution can access six free, one-hour webinars about effective online instruction from the Association of College and University Educators. More than 8,000 instructors from 1,500 institutions have watched the webinars, according to ACUE.

While many institutions are emphasizing course design, wealthy institutions are also investing in technology and infrastructure to make the remote experience easier for professors and better for students. The Johns Hopkins University has created 60 new “virtual teaching studios,” featuring state-of-the-art equipment, on its Homewood campus.

Controversy With HyFlex

Many colleges have turned to HyFlex, a hybrid model that allows professors to teach

simultaneously to students in the classroom and others who are connecting remotely. But the approach has been controversial with some professors, who argue that the required juggle produces the worst parts of teaching online and in person. After the University of Nevada at Reno said it would offer courses using HyFlex, professors pushed back, circulating a petition arguing that HyFlex has “a limited pedagogical evidence base” and the instructors should retain control over teaching methods.

Chris Ireland, an associate professor of art and digital media at Tarleton State University, in Texas, compared the HyFlex approach to a single restaurant that offers meatloaf, pad thai, sushi, and barbecue — great in theory but typically bland in execution.

Some students, however, have praised the approach as a way to provide social distancing in the classroom while allowing live interactions with the professor and other students. Some professors at Bellarmine University are using HyFlex to reduce classroom density — with half the students meeting in person for one class per week and the other half connecting online. In the second class of the week, the in-person and remote students switch. Olivia Atkinson, a sophomore history and political science major at Bellarmine, says HyFlex offers a “happy medium” — and she’s glad to have a

once-a-week, in-person class to break up the exhausting experience of taking a class via Microsoft Teams.

As the controversy over HyFlex shows, colleges are still experimenting with the

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best approach to moving courses online, especially when many students — if not for changes required by Covid-19 — would rather learn in person. Colleges and instructors who pay attention to the emerging best practices — including shorter teaching segments, fewer high-stakes tests, and a willingness to help students who don’t have or can’t afford high-speed connections — are likely to find the greatest success.

*“Moving Courses Online” was produced by Chronicle Intelligence.
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