

Inclusive Higher Education in the Time of COVID-19

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The Spring 2020 semester began like most others. College and university campuses opened, students returned from winter break, and academic courses resumed. By the middle of March, the COVID-19 pandemic began to impact every aspect of our lives. College campuses, where students live and learn closely together, were some of the first places to close. On March 7th, 2020, the University of Washington was the first large university to close its campus, and others quickly followed (Hess, 2020). It was a time of confusion, as higher education administrators grappled with how to keep their constituents safe while continuing to educate and meet the needs of students. Some extended spring break by a week to allow time for faculty to move to remote instruction. We found ourselves suddenly at home, perhaps alone or with children who were no longer in school, reliant on videoconferencing technology such as Zoom to stay connected.

For students with intellectual disability (ID) enrolled in inclusive higher education programs, these changes upended business as usual. Program staff quickly pivoted their supports as classes moved online. Connecting with staff at other programs to share resources and strategies became critically important, and Facebook emerged as one platform for this. Think College at the Institute for Community Inclusion at UMass Boston began hosting weekly program staff support group meetings via Zoom on March 27th, providing a space for staff to share challenges and crowdsource solutions. Although most inclusive higher education programs continued via remote instruction, at least one was at a campus that suspended all non-degree programs, meaning students with ID were not able to complete the semester.

In this article, we describe how programs responded to meet the needs of students with ID in response to campus closures and remote learning. We draw from our own experiences as well as notes from the Think College program staff meetings, focusing on academics, social inclusion, and employment, as well as the changing roles of peer mentors and families (Think College, 2020a, b, c, d). We end by looking forward to the Fall semester and beyond, examining the longer-term impact of remote instruction and what this could mean for inclusive higher education.

Academics

The academic side of the shift to remote learning was the first consideration of most colleges and universities. Initially, programs needed to ensure students had access to technology for remote learning, including laptops or tablets and internet in the home.

Basic concerns about accessing platforms for remote learning were less of an issue for students who were officially registered in their classes. Students who were not formally enrolled in their college or university classes needed access to the learning management system (LMS; e.g., Blackboard, Canvas), and in many cases program staff and peer mentors needed to be given access to the LMS so they could continue supporting the student. Like other college students across the country, some students were faced with challenges in finding physical space at home to access their classes as well as quiet places or times to be able to focus on schoolwork.

Program staff responded to the academic needs of their students in several ways (Think College, 2020a). Staff prepared step-by-step guides to help students learn how to log into Zoom or their LMS and how to upload assignments. Some created course shells in their LMS to house all of the resources they were developing for students. One-on-one check-ins over the phone or via Facetime became important, and Zoom emerged as the preferred platform for virtual group meetings. Several programs reported requesting that faculty add peer mentors or educational coaches as “observers” in the LMS so they could follow along to support individual students.

Social

The social impact on students was significant. Students who had a robust social network on the college campus found themselves suddenly at home like everyone else, isolated from friends and peers. While faculty focused on transitioning classes to online formats, this had the potential to sacrifice some of what is important about inclusive postsecondary education. Many programs worked to move social opportunities online in order to keep students connected (Think College, 2020c). Some programs connected to peer partnerships like Best Buddies or other existing networks on their college campuses. Other programs created their own social content, such as online karaoke parties, at-home guided paint nights, or Zoom lunch meetups. Virtual Activity Calendars sprung up across the country and utilized a variety of platforms from Google Hangouts to FlipGrid and Houseparty. Students organized gatherings on their own as well, and connected with friends in a variety of ways, such as Facebook Live dinners and Zoom parties to celebrate the big 21st birthday milestone. Some programs connected with one another, like Auburn and Mississippi State University’s virtual student exchange. Some programs emphasized the inclusivity of utilizing existing campus resources, which continued to offer students opportunities to interact with peers in an online environment.

Employment

The COVID-19 pandemic affected employment across the globe, and our students were no exception. With over 40 million Americans filing unemployment claims by June and a youth unemployment rate of about 25% (Inanc, 2020), the graduates of 2020 were in a difficult position for career placement. Many were social distancing and could not leave home to apply for jobs. Many students were not able to complete their internships or employment preparation programs as originally planned. Just as with academics, colleges and universities quickly pivoted to support students in these endeavors during the transition to online learning in the spring of 2020 (Think College, 2020b). Program

staff reported that they worked creatively to provide online opportunities such as virtual job shadowing, company tours, and industry chats. Some schools utilized videos to focus on building essential work skills. Others supported students in accessing the university's online career services. Some inclusive postsecondary programs created weekly work-based learning projects, such as building a LinkedIn presence, or completing career interest surveys or other occupational profiles. Some students and staff commented that the shut-down created more time to build resumes, practice interviewing skills, and focus on technology development.

Our students, and all of us, also saw the jobs that are considered essential during a crisis and what that means for employment. Many programs have students or graduates who are essential workers—hospital aides, grocery workers, shipping and receiving clerks, and many other critical positions that kept our communities running during the shutdown. Many programs also saw the impact on students who lost their jobs that they had worked so hard to obtain and had hoped to keep for years to come. As we prepare for fall reopenings, online or in person, and the prolonged effects of the pandemic, our students, graduates, and their families are bracing for the impact of higher unemployment rates in the US. One in four employers have already revoked internships for students this fall (collegecliffs.com). The loss of career development activities could have a long-term impact on employment for our students, and the national unemployment rate could affect our graduates particularly hard. Reduced employment outcomes could have dire consequences for the future of our field.

Changing Roles for Everyone

The move to remote instruction meant changing roles for everyone involved: students, families, and staff. Students took on greater responsibility for managing their own learning, using a variety of tools to stay on top of their schoolwork. Families took on greater responsibility for the day-to-day supervision of their students' schoolwork. Early on, program staff identified a need to teach families how to support their students in the home (Think College, 2020d). Some held Zoom meetings for families or developed step-by-step guides on how to access LMS tools to ease the transition to remote learning. Some program staff developed documents laying out expectations for both parents and students. For many students who had been living in campus dorms, moving back home with parents was a dramatic step that created tension with the freedom that they had had on campus. Just like in families of other college students across the country, families of young adults with ID struggled to figure out life with their young adults at home again. Some programs even set up online support groups for parents who needed to talk this through with their own peers.

Program staff worked from their own homes, spending their days in front of their computers or on the phone, diligently overseeing programming for their students. In some programs, mentors used FaceTime to talk with students on one device while they Zoomed into class on another to provide virtual support. Peer partners checked in often to make sure that situations were not too isolating. Friends supported one another in a variety of ways.

When the spring semester ended, many students and families lamented that the support would suddenly end. Online classes and virtual social activities came to a sudden halt for many, but social distancing and stay-at-home orders were still in effect in many states. The usual summer activities, vacations, and plans with friends had all been canceled, and students were facing many empty weeks. Several programs responded by creating online summer programming and allowing students to take summer classes. Others continued their virtual social calendars or other activities. Some programs began fall programming early, with multi-week orientations and career preparation activities beginning in the summer.

Looking Forward

The ways in which inclusive higher education program staff and students responded to the impact of COVID-19 on their college programs show the tremendous depth of creativity and resiliency of everyone involved. One theme we heard many times on the Think College program staff virtual support group calls was how the transition to remote learning was not as bad as anyone had expected. Students completed their classes, some graduated from their programs, and program staff made it through to the end of the academic year. But surviving an academic semester that was disrupted partway through is not the same as starting an academic year with remote learning. Looking forward, what will be the long-term impact of this pandemic on inclusive higher education?

At the time of writing, some colleges and universities had begun to reopen their campuses in the fall, while others were continuing remotely. Many others were in the midst of making decisions or shifting mid-course, as upticks in virus rates were making continued remote instruction seem increasingly likely. For programs trying to return to campus, program staff were supporting students to understand social distancing requirements and requirements around mask wearing. Some reported that wearing a mask or even weekly COVID-19 testing was being written into the college's code of conduct and reopening protocols, so programs were planning for the implications for their students.

For programs that were looking at a continuation of remote instruction, program staff were planning for virtual orientation and how they would assess the needs of incoming students. Plans were put in place for students to be able to access the college's virtual orientation, but some also supplemented this with virtual events over the summer to get to know new students and establish social connections. Some were concerned about enrollment and the potential to lose new students whose families may not understand the value of a higher education program that is delivered remotely.

Looking further to the future, the continued closures of college and university campuses could have a sustained impact on inclusive higher education. Many colleges and universities are struggling with budget shortfalls and are looking for ways to cut costs. Already we have learned of at least one program for students with ID that has been discontinued as part of strategic reassessment of academic offerings (New York Institute of Technology, 2020). Although we hope that program closings will be exceptions rather than the norm, the reality we face is that many program staff will be in a position of having to advocate for their programs to remain open. This will involve ongoing outreach to higher

education administrators to provide education on the importance of inclusive higher education and to document the impact and outcomes. It will also involve continued outreach to families to explain the value of a higher education program delivered to students in their own homes.

Beyond this, though, there is great potential for long-term reliance on remote instruction to threaten the *inclusivity* of inclusive higher education programs. It is often easier to design activities or coursework for groups of students with ID to meet common needs than to support students in inclusive online settings. Our desire to continue to support students in working towards vocational and independent living goals may lead us to pursue simulated work settings or to ask parents to become “work supervisors” for chores around the home because this feels better than doing nothing. But we must continually step back to reflect on our choices and ask ourselves if the opportunities we are providing to students are in line with our mission of inclusivity. We also must guard against becoming so deeply invested in specialized curriculum or simulated programs that we cannot give them up when we are able to return to campus.

Students with ID who have made it to college in 2020 are still at the forefront of inclusive postsecondary education. They are still the trailblazers of our field. These students, their families, and the programs that support them have been creating solutions to educational barriers at every step. We have the flexibility, ingenuity, strength, and purpose to make it through difficult times together.

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