The Role of an Online Campus in Supporting a Sudden Shift in Students' Preferences to Enroll at a College: Forecasting the Next Five Years in Higher Education

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Abstract

Overnight, the higher education community experienced a shift to remote teaching and learning. The shift benefited online-only learning institutions, as students discovered their ability to manage their time in a virtual environment. This shift has generated a need for educational institutions to recognize students' scheduling preferences. TCC Connect Campus opened in 2014 as Tarrant County College's sixth and fully online campus, serving over 29,000 students each semester. Tarrant County College is located in Fort Worth, Texas, and is a large urban community college. The campus has been on the cutting edge of adapting to students' preferences, resulting in a 25% increase in enrollments from Fall to Fall. The significant rise in enrollments resulted in friction towards the online campus with the five sister campuses, which were experiencing an opposite trend post-pandemic. Given the clientele's behavior, this complex situation required additional iterations and analysis to align "the online and face-to-face campuses in a One College framework." To support growth, an approach based on planning, soft launching, and data analysis was implemented while leveraging previously developed projects. As institutions returned to the classroom and student preference for online instruction increased, the College Chancellor, focusing on being a student-ready college, directed the online campus to open sections until demand was satisfied. Our campus Data Analyst was asked to provide continuous reports on enrollment status and fill ratios impacting the need to release additional courses. The authors will discuss strategies for providing leadership during a rapid change in student preferences, including data for forecasting and communication across the institution.

Keywords: Online Learning, Distance Learning, Higher Education, Strategic Planning, Quality Assurance, Student Success

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Introduction

Overnight, the higher education community experienced a shift to remote teaching and learning. The shift benefited online-only learning institutions, as students discovered their ability to manage their time and experience success in a virtual environment. This shift has generated a need for educational institutions to recognize student preferences when deciding in what modality to offer course selection.

Tarrant County College was established by a county-wide election on July 31st, 1965 as Tarrant County Junior College. The name was later changed in 1999. Located in Fort Worth, Texas, with a current credit enrollment of more than 80,000 credit and non-credit students, Tarrant County College is a two-year public institution with six campuses in a large urban community. Distance Education offerings started in the fall of 1973, with two courses delivered via instructional television, reaching an enrollment of almost 800 students. This immediately showed that there was interest in a flexible and convenient mode of taking classes. TCC Connect Campus, which opened in 2014, is the only stand-alone online campus built from the ground up in the state of Texas. Today, the campus offers 40 programs, which translates to about 29,000 enrollments (Tarrant County College District, 2013, 2022b). Throughout its nine years as a campus, TCC Connect Campus has seen phenomenal growth, making eLearning at TCC the most extensive online program in Texas.

TCC Connect Campus is Tarrant County College's sixth campus, fully online, serving over 26,000 students each semester. The campus has been at the forefront of adapting to students' preferences, resulting in a 25% increase in enrollments from Fall to Fall (Morales, 2011, 2017). The significant rise in enrollments resulted in friction towards the online campus from the five sister campuses, which were experiencing an opposite trend post-pandemic. Given the students' behavior, this complex situation required additional iterations and analysis to align "the online campus and the face-to-face campuses in a One College framework." To support growth, an approach based on planning, soft launching, and data analysis was implemented while leveraging previously developed projects. Since its inception in 2014, the campus has focused on creating tools that promote quality online learning, such as Peer Developed Courses (Morales, 2017), Online Instructor Certification, eFaculty Coaches (Morales, 2019), and Instructional Design Support (Morales Irizarry, 2006). These innovations enabled rapid adaptation to change while ensuring students' needs were met.

As institutions returned to the classroom post-pandemic and the students' preference for online instruction increased (D'Agostino, 2022), the College Chancellor, focusing on being a student-ready college, directed the online campus to open sections until demand was satisfied. We asked the campus Data Analyst to provide continuous reports on enrollment status and fill ratios to determine when to release additional courses. As the majority of our sections were filled within one hour of being published, immediate access and attention to data allowed the academic divisions to quickly identify subjects requiring additional capacity.

State of Digital Learning

Distance education, online learning, and the more recently coined term, Digital Learning, all aim at defining a variant of a mode of instruction that is mediated through technology (Witze, 2020). Distance education in its various forms has been in existence for over 70 years. The main impetus is creating learning environments that provide flexibility of time, space, and learning styles through the use of instructional technology tools. The sector is poised to

continue its growth trajectory as more institutions recognize the value, importance, and opportunities that can be achieved for both students and the institution. It is well known that through distance education, Institutions of Higher Education (IHEs) can reach underserved populations, provide equity, and increase access to achieve credentials leading to high wage, high demand professional opportunities . The COVID-19 Pandemic may have accelerated the role digital learning plays both administratively and academically as many institutions have experienced growth in the modality (Lee, Fanguy, Bligh, & Lu, 2022).

In the case of TCC Connect Campus, the institution has striven to create the conditions to widen access to higher education while reducing barriers that some students face. By employing a centralized operational model, campus staff have focused on student success through quality assurance and faculty development (Morales 2019).

Student Preference for Online Learning

In the Fall of 2020, Tarrant County College started to track how students prefer to learn and go to college. Increasing student preference for online instruction predates the pandemic, as evidenced by the rise and evolution of distance learning in the past 20 years. Prior to 2020, TCC Connect experienced an average annual growth of approximately 10%. Since students returned to the campuses in 2021, the annual growth has been 20% with record enrollments each semester.

In a recent institutional survey of student preferences, 24% of student respondents preferred all online classes and about 38% of respondents working 40 plus hours a week preferred all online classes. Students choosing all online as their preferred modality ranked flexibility, the ability to attend to family members at home, and concerns about being in-person due to Covid-19 as their top 3 reasons (Tarrant County College, 2022a). Other reasons included not having to commute to campus, learning better at home, and social anxiety due to the pandemic (Keeling & Haugestad, 2020). Interestingly, about 18% of respondents who preferred all online courses stated they were not likely to enroll in any course if online was not available. This was the highest value in that enrollment decision group by 10 percentage points.

Understanding that students who have a strong preference for online learning would potentially not enroll at all makes attention to data and scheduling of paramount importance.

The Pandemic caused by COVID-19 triggered shelter-in-place orders, turning colleges and universities into ghost towns (Reference here empty colleges). The goal was to reduce virus transmission rates by dispersing people as much as possible, while preserving the continuity of academic operations. IHEs quickly turned to Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT) as a temporary solution, although it came with its own challenges (Hodges, Moore, Lockee, Trust, & Bond, 2020). The speed at which the transition took place the lack of professional development culture toward instructional technology, and the absence of Academic Continuity plans complicated for some students—and faculty—the benefits of technology-mediated instruction (Morales, 2020). On the other hand, institutions with mature and well-established online learning operations experienced less difficulties. The campus led by the authors of this article provided assistance, knowledge, and expertise to the rest of the college, which predominantly conducted operations face-to-face.

Achieving Student Success in Online Learning

Tarrant County College defines *success rate* as earning an A-C in a course. TCC Connect Campus has experienced steadily increasing success rates since the campus was established going from 68% in Fall of 2018 to 83% in Summer 2022. There has also been an upward trajectory in retention rates, from 86% in Fall 2018 to 93% retention in Summer 2022. Several key factors contribute to student achievement in an online environment (Area-Moreira, San Nicolás, & Sanabria, 2018; Villasenor, 2022). Intentional design for the online classroom is achieved through the use of a dedicated instructional design team that offers assistance in accessibility, regular and substantive interaction requirements, and online pedagogy best practices. Moreover, the campus focuses on quality and design with intentional attention to online student versus remote teaching.

The success achieved by the students that attend the campus has been significant. Conceptualized as a non-traditional campus that serves non-traditional students, online learning and weekend college require students to be self-directed and have discipline (Morales, 2019). After all, online learning is a form of independent study that allows students to learn at their own pace, quickly apply knowledge to the workplace, and obtain educational credentials at their own time and pace. The success of those students is evidenced in Table 1.

Semester	Enrollments	Passed with C or better		Retention Rate	
Fall 2022	27,483	20,423	74.3%	24,528	89%
Summer 2022	20,647	17,268	83.6%	19,175	93%
Spring 2022	28,141	21,154	75.2%	25,008	89%
Fall 2021	24,330	18,579	76.3%	21,845	90%
Summer 2021	8,171	6,813	83.4%	7,621	93%
Spring 2021	22,030	15,886	72.1%	19,410	88%
Fall 2020	22,601	16,253	71.9%	19,641	87%
Summer 2020	18,649	15,452	82.9%	17,104	92%
Spring 2020	22,737	16,777	73.8%	19,537	86%
Fall 2019	21,758	15,074	69.3%	18,877	87%

Table 1. eLearning Enrollments and Success Rates

Year	Enrollments	Passed with C or Better		Withdrew	
2023	1,489	1,313	88.2%	1,411	95%
2022	1,427	1,157	81.1%	1,291	90%
2021	1,466	1,270	86.6%	1,383	94%
2020	1,210	1,021	84.4%	1,089	90%
2019	1,001	890	88.9%	959	95%
2018	753	613	81.4%	676	90%
2017	499	420	84.2%	456	91%

Table 2 Wintermester Enrollments and Success Rate

Semester	Enrollments	Passed with C or better		Retention Rate	
Fall 2022	819	635	77.5%	768	94%
Spring 2022	866	666	76.9%	799	92%
Fall 2021	755	581	77.0%	696	92%
Spring 2021	686	468	68.2%	599	87%
Fall 2020	977	721	73.8%	863	88%
Spring 2020	669	517	77.3%	604	90%
Fall 2019	944	682	72.2%	851	90%

Table 3. Monthly Starts Enrollments and Success Rates

Quality in Online Courses

Centralization of online courses allows oversight and quality assurance. All online and hybrid offerings originate and are managed by the online campus. As in face-to-face instruction, successful course outcomes begin with qualified faculty. The campus certifies the e-learning instructor rather than the course. Prior to assignment, all faculty are required to complete the Online Instructor Certification (OIC), an in-depth 32-hour professional development course based on best practices in online pedagogy (Almerich, Orellana, Suárez-Rodríguez, & Díaz-García, 2016). In addition, faculty are encouraged to use Peer Developed Courses (PDCs) when available. PDCs are course templates developed by discipline faculty across the

institution and the instructional design team. The course is developed to a 70 or 80% completion to maintain consistency in assessment, student experience, and accessibility (Geilman, 2018; Morales, 2017). The remaining 20% allows for faculty customization and signature assignments.

The campus employs full-time eFaculty Coaches to assist faculty in achieving the highest potential success in course outcomes. "Coaching is a collaborative, iterative quality-assurance process designed to empower faculty to improve their online course offerings." (Kelton, 2021) Coaching is also a standards-based approach focusing on communication, Regular and Substantive Interaction (RSI), and student support (Kelton, 2023). The coaches are experts in online pedagogy and provide guidance to new instructors as well as those wishing to improve their online course experience.

Planning for now and for the future

Continuous review of success and preference data allows the campus to maintain a course schedule that is efficient, student friendly, and ensures completion on a timely basis. The campus Data Team meets monthly to review success, retention, and completion rates. Regular comprehensive analysis provides real-time decisions on course offerings and enrollment management. These activities yield an overall low cancellation rate for courses that do not "make," which adversely affects students who must find alternatives.

Conclusion

Online learning is poised to continue growing in quality and prominence. It will develop even further as more and more students and institutions become aware of its benefits. It is expected that pressure points will continue to trigger and shape offerings and student support, which will require institutions to be ready and seize the opportunity through planning and the allocation of resources. The trajectory of the TCCC Connect Campus includes supporting the educational needs of non-traditional students, innovation, continued growth, and quality assurance processes that result in students' high level of familiarity with online learning. The steps taken during the implementation of the campus were an early forecast of what was coming—we could not have imagined that a global pandemic would change the landscape. The campus has been knowingly responding to student preferences for online learning since its inception by fine-tuning academic offerings, student support, and campus operations to their needs.

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