

The Silver Lining of a Pandemic Disruption in Academia Vicky V. Johnson

The pandemic caused by COVID-19 has undoubtedly been a disruptive force and has caused many challenges in academia. However, disruptions can also bring innovation and progress. This presentation will gather and summarize some of the positive consequences of the pandemic disruption from the department head perspective.

One of the most difficult things for a new manager (or department head) to deal with is “We’ve always done it this way.” Changing “this way” is an uphill battle in many cases. The underlying mantra supporting a reluctance to change is “If it ain’t broke . . .” Well, the pandemic has broken our standard model of higher education, so change is inevitable, at least in the short-term.

Some examples of innovation/progress caused by the disruption of COVID-19:

- Some faculty have been reluctant to use technology in the past, and have even refused to use the institution’s learning management system. In the middle of the spring semester of 2020, they had no choice but to participate. Basics that were beneficial to students, such as keeping a gradebook in the LMS were suddenly accomplished.
- The prolific use of Zoom made video recordings readily available for both teachers and students. In the disciplines of Fine Arts and others where the development of skills are central to learning, students watched the videos of themselves that they sent to faculty or shared with classmates. They noticed things to improve and even did assignments multiple times to get a better product.
- Faculty watched their own content delivery. It was easy to observe the need to be more concise, less chatty, less boring. [As department head, I intend to add a goal for all faculty in my department to identify areas to enhance/improve after watching themselves teach].
- Faculty looked at content with fresh eyes when the delivery mode was different, reorganizing, prioritizing what was really important. When assignments had to be streamlined or revised, the student learning outcomes became more central. Pedagogy based upon “the way I was taught” had to be set aside in favor of “the way that will work.” Some of those latter ways will no doubt survive for the future.
- Some discovered that courses typically taught face to face worked better online. We had a digital media film class that met twice a week for 2 hr. 45 minutes. Students preferred working on their own after shorter periods of instruction, avoiding reduced concentration from long periods in the classroom.
- Our music faculty ventured way beyond their silos to bring in fresh ideas from colleagues across the country. Our choral director led online trainings for colleagues nationally and beyond to produce virtual choral works. His advocacy for the arts is a striking example of the reliance of student focus.

There will be a pent-up demand and appreciation for personal face-to-face interaction when vaccination allows us to come back together more normally. But the lessons we have learned, the new things we have tried, and the indomitable spirit of those invested in teaching and learning will be the silver lining of this disruption.