

RISING DEMAND FOR INSTRUCTIONAL TECHNOLOGISTS 2020's New Normal in the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Southern United States

Instructional technology helped to sustain learning in virtual environments when the novel coronavirus COVID-19 locked down campuses. This article is the success story of a large, public university in the southern United States, that smoothly transitioned into abrupt online learning with central support from instructional technologists. When unemployment was exponentially rising globally with COVID-19, the demand for instructional technologists was paradoxically rising. Amidst budgetary uncertainties, in April/May 2020, the university prioritized filling the positions of 18 instructional designers/multimedia specialists and learning technologist. Advancing with learner-centered education, the instructional technology program at the university is termed learning technologies.

INTRODUCTION

Social distancing became the new normal, darkening the bright spring 2020 semester. In March 2020, an invisible virus abruptly locked down buzzing campuses. Instructional technologists rose to the occasion to build virtual learning environments and communication corridors for students across the world. Businesses shut down, with millions queuing up for unemployment benefits, but the demand for instructional technologists rose. Universities faced budgetary challenges to cope with the new normal. Amidst the constraint, in a large public university in the southern United States, a job listing of late March and April 2020 was

to hire seven instructional designers to support the university's virtual courses. Soon after, in May 2020, additional positions were posted for multimedia specialists for the development of educational content to work hand-in-hand with the instructional designers and faculty. By fall 2020, the university is providing robust learning experience with three instructional delivery models

Generic Details

The institution is a large public university in the downtown area of a metropolitan capital city in a southern state of the United States. It is one of the 26 public institutions under the

state government agency of a university system, and one of the four R1 research universities of the system. The university has 11 colleges including business, law, arts, and sciences and offers 2-year college to undergraduate, graduate, and doctoral programs. The student population is one of the top diverse student populations in the nation.

Organization During COVID-19

On February 28, 2020, the university's office of the president sent out a letter about the global, novel Coronavirus advising students and faculty to stay informed with links to websites for state public health offices, Centers for Diseases Control and Prevention, and to the university system. The virus was spreading across the globe with growing fatalities. On March 4, 2020, the university floated a coronavirus resource website. The university is governed by the university system decisions applicable to all the 26 institutions. Classes were suspended for 2 weeks following spring break, with all students directed to depart campus by 5 P.M. on March 13, 2020. A website link was provided on technology resources to work and collaborate remotely.

On March 20, 2020, the office of president confirmed the first COVID positive case of a collage staffer. The university system soon after announced moving all classes online for the rest of the 2020 spring semester, followed by the canceling of the in-person graduation ceremonies scheduled for May 2020.

Instructional Technology— Pre-COVID-19

The university's instructional technology program has for years had a robust reputation. After a reorganization a few years back, instructional technology is within the learning technologies program under the department of learning sciences in the college of education and human development, offering graduate and master's degrees in instructional design and technology entirely online, along with

doctoral degrees in instructional technology. The college of education and human development is an interdisciplinary unit focused on designing innovative learning environments and investigating the learning process of humans.

In addition to technology resources, the instructional innovation and technology unit of the university has a center for excellence in teaching and learning, which was established in the past decade to support the university in advancing best practices in teaching and learning through a range of programs. The center for excellence in teaching and learning houses instructional technologists to support all colleges, and faculty.

Instructional Technology During COVID-19

Instantly rising to the catastrophic new normal of social distancing and closed campuses with online classes from March 2020, the center for excellence in teaching and learning announced hiring of seven instructional designers. The positions were also posted in the listserv of the internal learning technology program. Additional positions were listed in May 2020 with a focus on multimedia designing to go together with instructional design. The spring semester and summer semester were successfully completed.

Apart from adding instructional designers, three faculty members of the learning technology program are on the coronavirus experts panel of the university, along with faculty from various divisions like health, law, among others, to support the public and media with scientific solutions to tackle the global crisis of COVID-19 pandemic.

Current Status of Organization

During the ongoing 2020 fall semester, the university system allows in-person learning for classes that may benefit with hands-on experience, while encouraging to follow the guidelines of social distancing. So, many classes are

online learning. Facilities such as library, counseling, health and others have also enhanced virtual presence to limit a physical crowd on campus. Every virtual service is conducting excellent functions.

Observations: Summary

1. The seamless transition to the new normal of universitywide virtual learning by March 30, 2020 was led by instructional technologists. They supported a fast systematic move to a “new moral.”
2. Multiple positions of instructional designers¹ and multimedia specialists were filled soon after the university shifted to online learning from March 30, 2020, amidst budgetary uncertainties with the growing demand of online learning, which was prioritized as critical to serve the students with effective learning strategies virtually.
 - The initial posting was for multiple instructional designers in April 2020; in May 2020, additional positions were posted with the focus on multimedia specialists to work hand-in-hand with instructional designers to develop educational content. Having a multimedia designing skill set will be an added advantage for instructional technologists.
3. The university formed a team of faculty members as coronavirus experts from various disciplines like health, law, and others for the public to get valuable information. This reflects the critical role instructional technology plays in the time of crisis in all spheres.
4. March Madness was cut short to shelter from the COVID-19 global pandemic.

Sports events and extracurricular activities stopped, much to the disappointment of students. In early April 2020, the university established health and well-being support through online counseling services and the #BeWell hashtag

5. *University ahead*—it is the positive, optimistic name of the prime link for coronavirus updates. For fall 2020 classes to start on August 24, 2020, the three learning models—blended, face to face, and online—were detailed on the website early enough. Currently, classes continue smoothly.
6. The university has a strong, mature instructional technology program for years; there was a posting from another university on a listserv in June 2020, for a learning experience designer and program manager for online services. So, having a legacy in instructional technology has helped the university to support with systematic guidance and resources for effective online learning and well-being of the learning community in a period of unprecedented crisis, not only its own online distance education, but also other institutions and public.

NOTE

1. Instructional designers are now also called as learning experience designers, focusing on the experience of learners, while being provided with effective instruction. The program is called learning technology, moving with the times of learner-centered education. Degrees are instructional design and technology for graduate and master’s program, and instructional technology for a PhD, with real-world internship and continuous research initiatives.