

TECHNOLOGY MEANS MACHINES

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When I walked into the nearly empty classroom building, I was forced to weave my way around dozens of boxes that had just been delivered—most noticeable were the 6-foot-high stacks of Dell laptop boxes. The only people in sight were technology support staff who were moving equipment into rooms.

In one large multidisciplinary private university, the order to move online came slowly with little or no cross-campus consultation. It was apparent that administration was in the process of making decisions. Initial decisions were for faculty to stay home, and for staff to continue to come on-campus to work. Then, the decision was to keep the university open, but to significantly reduce the presence of people. Very quickly, the campus became empty.

A raccoon family regularly ran across the campus green area—from one bush to another. Any campus with even a modest amount of open spaces is the home for more than people—most animals stay hidden, and only come out when it is safe. Within days after employees began working from home the “beasts of the campus” began to come out—usually looking for food. This was a real-world sign that the campus was deserted.

One positive characteristic of this campus’ leaders was the commitment to communica-

tion—notices, announcements, directives, and orders started being distributed in March, and continue today. As with much written communication, as much was left out as was written.

Positive actions included:

- regular announcements were sent concerning what was happening related to the impact of the pandemic on the campus;
- a concern about everyone’s well-being was obvious—and clearly important;
- decisions and links to resources were the primary method used to prepare faculty for teaching, staff for task completion, and students for how to access courses and professors;
- a campuswide zoom license was secured for all employees and students to use;
- campus cleaning accelerated, even though very few people were on campus;
- equipment was ordered, classrooms were retrofitted, and online teaching resources were made available, even though they were largely unused;
- online training about remote teaching was required of all faculty.

Other actions included:

- help desks or helpers for faculty who were struggling as first-time online instructors were not provided;
- instructional design assistance was virtually nonexistent;
- decisions were ad hoc, spur of the moment, and in reaction to a specific situation; as the pandemic continued, decisions began to have the appearance of being part of a plan, even if no plan was ever made available; and
- online training about remote teaching was required of all faculty.

It has been easy to identify the primary way the pandemic was attacked on our campus—the decision was made to spend money and resources on remodeling, and hardware and software. However, the single most-needed area of support was people—trained support people—specifically instructional designers and faculty developers.

Finally, the sense of foreboding that increased from spring through the summer and into fall has leveled off, and even though the university continued to function, staff were terminated, and positions were left unfilled. Generally, the university has done a commendable job—classes have continued, staff functions have been completed, faculty have struggled but persevered, and optimism is beginning to return. While obviously not prepared for the severity of the pandemic, the leaders of our university have guided the institution successfully. Only the next months will reveal whether lessons were learned and if contingency plans for future crises will be forthcoming.

Oh, and one other observation. The raccoon family disappeared after about a month—most likely because they could no longer find food in university trash barrels. They have not returned. Hopefully, they have moved back into their hiding places as more employees and students have returned to campus.