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DIGITAL DISRUPTION
The future of higher education promises to be more digital and decentralized, good news for the businesses depending on schools to provide the next generation of workers.
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Nearly 9,500 undergrads and graduate students earned degrees from UT Austin the second to last week of May, including the first 49 grads of Dell Medical School, shown here taking the Hippocratic oath virtually during an online commencement ceremony.

SCREEN CAPTURE FROM DELL MEDICAL SCHOOL YOUTUBE CHANNEL

CLASSROOMS OF THE FUTURE ARRIVE EARLY

BY WILL ANDERSON | wanderson@bizjournals.com

The coronavirus has changed nearly everything about higher education for the time being. Some of those changes are likely to persist, in some form, for decades to come.

Prabhudev Konana, associate dean for instructional innovation at the McCombs School of Business, has tried for years to get faculty at the school within the University of Texas to adopt some form of online instruction in their courses. Through early 2020, he had succeeded in getting just a few to try it.

The Covid-19 pandemic boosted adoption to 100% virtually overnight,

Going virtual during Covid-19 pandemic offers glimpse of higher ed’s tomorrow.
a. Higher education can provide job security, especially during an economic disruption like the COVID-19 pandemic.

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after UT decided in March to move all classes online for the rest of the spring semester.

"After convincing three people in about two years, in two weeks we were able to change the minds of the approximately 255 faculty in our business school," Konona said.

In a recent survey of faculty members, only one of the roughly 170 who taught courses this semester said the virtual teaching experience was bad.

"We were shocked it was so low," said, "the general attitude was it was good. Some of them were really surprised with the experience. A majority of them, 70%, said it was good but they can make it even better.

Similar situations are playing out at colleges and schools across the Austin area, and the nation, as their leaders grapple with how to educate when proximity is a liability and unprecedented economic uncertainty prevails.

Austino 2040: Our Business Future is a series looking at how the Texas capital may change in the next 20 years, with the population expected to nearly double to about 3.6 million. This installment looks at education, and specifically higher education and workforce training - subjects of utmost importance to business leaders interested in sustaining the region's economic boom and ensuring it is distributed equally.

All conversations about the future are right now colored by the coronavirus. But the current crisis actually allows for some big picture thinking about higher education that might otherwise be dismissed as unrealistic, especially when it relates to decreasing inequities in the system around income and race.

You've got class

Online education has been growing in popularity and acceptance for decades but it had never before seen the kind of widespread adoption prompted by the coronavirus. Resistance from teachers and staff worried about the quality of instruction was a big barrier prior to the pandemic.

At Southern Careers Institute, an Austin-based trade school with eight campuses statewide, administrators "literally shifted 4,000 students to online classes or a hybrid program over one weekend," said Nikki Englehard, the organization's president.

SCI still brought in small groups of students for some lessons but also leveraged technology to teach very hands-on topics - using software that can simulate welding, for example.

England said in the future she wants all of SCI's courses to be flexible enough for hybrid instruction, so that students could log into classroom sessions on Zoom. She said SCI has seen record attendance for the last three months since switching to online and hybrid learning.

Don Christian, president and CEO of Concordia University Texas, said higher education has "transitioned into the future faster in the past three months than in the past five years."

He said he has been heartened by his institution's flexibility, as well as what he's seeing at other colleges and universities in the niches they fill. And he expects professors, by and large, to continue teaching online courses.

"I no longer have any faculty members who say, 'I'll never teach online,'" Christian said.

At Austin Community College, about 25% of all courses were already online in fall 2019, said Richard Rhodes, the community college district's president and CEO. Add in hybrid courses combining online learning and some element of in-person instruction and the number was around 30%.

Yet, Rhodes acknowledged, the "almost overnight" jump from 30% online to 100% was still a big change.

Students had a choice about whether they wanted to learn online before the pandemic, Rhodes said in mid-May.

"Now they don't have that choice," he said. "But at the same time, now they know they can be successful in it. They see the type of support and support services offered in terms of online tutoring, online advising."

Online education is customizable. At Western Governors University, which has 25,000 students nationally and about 14,000 in Texas, students enroll in 16-week semesters just like they would at a physical university. But students can rush through the course work and complete it in a few weeks if they want to, while others meet the whole time.

"Students bring different learning styles and experience to the table," said Steve Johnson, chancellor of WGU Texas.

The promise of online education boils down to numbers. To go back to population estimates, the Austin metro has a little more than 2 million people right now. The Texas Demographic Center estimates the metro population may reach 5.6 million in 2040, although it's important to note those estimates are based on historical trends, and migration may be impacted by COVID-19.

Will the Austin area have twice as many college professors by 2040? Will universities double enrollments?

UT-Austin had 51,432 students - 40,804 undergraduates and 10,628 graduate students - in fall 2018. It's highly unlikely it could grow to 100,000 students on campus by 2040, especially since its Central Austin real estate is largely tenanted by urban development.

But online, there are no such physical limitations.

Konona at McCombs imagines all introductory classes with hundreds of students will be conducted online in the future - with videos of the lectures archived and easily accessible for students who might need multiple listenings to fully understand.

"Large classes should never be
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an actual class, face to face, with 500 students," he said. "I've gone in to evaluate faculty in these large classes. Most students are shopping, testing, backtracking."

He continued: "Now, if I can do that virtually, I can engage students with polls and quizzes during the lecture. I can easily keep track of who is there and who is answering."

Kona said classrooms should be "high order problem solving," like collaborating on a project.

Many businesses are also operating completely virtually during the Covid-19 pandemic. He should learn how education and training for their employees can be done through the Internet in the years and decades to come.

"Education and work are both happening more places and more often," said Gilbert Zanisi, vice president of education and talent development for the Austin Chamber of Commerce.

The never-ending education

Education can be transformational, Blake Garrett, CEO of Austin educational technology startup Aecable, likes to refer to a anecdote about a woman who used his platform for an 18-year-old platform to earn her real estate license.

"It was an 18-year-old platform to earn her real estate license."

A former Aecable student is identified only as Amy decided to become a Realtor after a difficult divorce from an abusive partner. She passed the course, earned her license, and in her first year as an agent sold 22 homes, Garrett said.

"It's so cool to see a product with a platform to let thousands of people like Amy, who need a change in their life, to help them succeed in her career."

"He wants," he said. "She could do it in her schedule. She didn't have to quit her full-time job. She could do it whenever it worked for her."

That kind of story is where higher ed experts see the field moving. The notion of going to college at 18, graduating at 22 and then never returning to campus is quickly becoming outdated. More and more schools are offering shortened degree programs as well as courses that allow students to earn credentials throughout their degree, which can help them get a job even without a degree.

"ACG's Rhodes believes this kind of "short-term, intensive training with stackable credentials" will be more important than ever to supply the workers needed to meet employers' needs in 2040. At Aecable, the average student age is 34 – a working adult who is usually looking to advance in their career or change fields. It recently launched at the national level what it calls a "micro-bachelor's degree" in information technology. It is designed to help those who already have jobs explore different areas of IT and any work in the course can be incorporated into the requirements for a full bachelor's degree from the school.

It is an attempt to more directly match the skills taught in college with the skills taught by employers, WCU's Johnson said.

"We are going to see [in the future] is students are going to be able to get back and retrain online, coming back for a second or third credential," he said.

Higher ed administrators dream of a "mobility future where coursework from different schools easily transfers, for example allowing a student to combine a course from ACC here, a couple of semesters at UT and online classes from WCU into one degree."

"They're going to be taking courses, potentially from different institutions, potentially simultaneously, and pulling that coursework together into some type of a degree." Rhodes said.

Systemic shortcomings

The need for greater access to higher education across all groups is clear, especially in light of the current pandemic's economic turmoil. Prior to coronavirus job losses, about 11.6 million jobs were created in the United States in the economic recovery after the Great Recession. Of those, 11.5 million went to people with some level of college education, according to data from Georgetown University's Center on Education and the Workforce.

The more than 2 million Texans filed for initial unemployment claims from March 15 through May 16. Even before the pandemic, the state's industries lost or furloughed 95% of workers during the Great Recession.

Job losses for those without any college education can be twice as high as the overall rate in some places, highlighting how educational levels can help protect jobs during a downturn.

"If you don't have a postsecondary credential of some sort, you're not in a really good place," said Kwane Lam'io, vice president of talent development with the Austin Chamber.

Of course, going to college online is only possible if a student has internet access. That can be an issue in low-income communities. This spring, Austin Independent School District parked 110 unused buses equipped with WiFi in parts of the city where reliable internet service is less prevalent, providing Internet access for younger students taking classes and tests online.

"This is really demonstrating there still is a digital divide that exists in the opportunity to learn online," Rhodes said.

"I think we've got to as a community, as a state, as a country work harder at making sure we eliminate that digital divide," he said.

Nicki England, president of Southern Careers Institute, said many students drop out of college because they don't see a clear pathway from their studies to a lucrative career and those from poor backgrounds are less able to afford a delay in entering the workforce.

"The current system we have has not really worked well for those at the lowest income levels," said Johnson of WCU, which pulls more than 70% of its students nationwide from populations underserved by higher ed, such as racial minorities or first-generation college students.

Starting higher ed earlier in life can help people from all sorts of backgrounds. Dual-credit courses allow Austin area teenagers to take college courses while still in high school, earning credits for their diploma and as evidence that they are college ready. Students in the program also demonstrate a path to college.

"The people in the field are hopeful lessons learned in the current crisis can help lower costs and increase positive outcomes like graduation rates and job placement.

"There is opportunity that arises out of any challenge," SGU's England said. "There is real drama happening because of this but I think, as we see into the future, this is created between those who have the skills and the jobs who can work remotely and those who do not, so are at risk of being left behind."

"We have a major limit on higher education participation. The cost of a four-year degree has risen much faster than inflation in the last 10 years, rising about 25% at private colleges and about 30% at public colleges from 2008-09 to 2018-19, CNBC reported in December. Aceable, the online education startup, charges about $500 for the real estate agent course. Competent Realtors, in a hot market like Austin, can generate annual income in the six figures.

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