

Higher education: Using academic innovation and student engagement to differentiate your brand in challenging times

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Abstract

COVID-19 has changed the game in higher education. Universities and colleges across the globe are faced with staying true to their brand and delivering their coursework in a time when physical presence on campus is severely limited — if possible at all. There are ways to differentiate an Institution's strategy and engage students so that they get a full college experience — even if they cannot set a physical foot in the classroom. Through this paper, educators and administrators will be introduced to three key strategies that can be employed to keep students engaged in content and perhaps even provide a more inclusive environment than the physical classroom. Threaded throughout the paper are theories on how to incorporate innovative strategies and communication channels to enhance brand messaging and build community in a largely virtual world.

Keywords

engagement, experiential learning, global immersion, virtual classroom, communication

INTRODUCTION

In March of 2020, universities across the country pivoted quickly to the model of complete virtual delivery of classes. Some universities and colleges were prepared — quickly making the switch from face to face to online like the flicking on of a lightbulb. In many of those cases, faculty and students quickly came up to speed, using technologies like Zoom and WebEx alongside their respective Learning Management Systems to deliver coursework to students without skipping a beat. For other universities — or for some specific majors, the switch was not quite so seamless. Spring Breaks were elongated to allow faculty time to switch gears, some classes were forced to end abruptly with the pivot to online and some struggled to find the rhythm to engage in the classroom. At the start of the Fall 2020 semester, the future looks uncertain as to when the normalcy of a college campus will resume. Institutions of higher education are faced with the challenge of maintaining student enrollment and their brand reputation with a very different set of available resources.

As the summer of 2020 unfolded and universities and colleges across the globe began to navigate the complex government mandates around social distancing and maintaining student and faculty safety in the face of COVID-19, it became clear that faculty and administrators would need a clear path on how to deliver courses in the Fall 2020 semester in a largely digital world. As early as May 2020, universities across the country began to reveal plans to open their campuses in the fall, after the coronavirus pandemic forced universities across the nation to shut down in favour of remote learning.

From the start, institutional responses varied across the United States, from a fully in-person model to a completely virtual offering. Purdue University was one of the first to announce that they would be back on campus for Fall 2020.¹ While other universities, the University of Notre Dame and NYU to name a few, announced they would welcome students back to campus in the summer of 2020, tweaking the academic calendar a bit — starting the semester two weeks earlier than usual. Students on those campuses would skip fall break, allowing them to complete the semester by Thanksgiving to hopefully avoid an uptake in illness after Fall break travel. The California State University System has opted to deliver almost all classes in a virtual format.² Other schools and colleges have followed suit — providing all learning activities in a remote environment. Finally, other schools have opted to pursue a hybrid delivery mechanism — offering classes partially in person and partially online — allowing students to partake in some on campus engagement, while safely social distanced. These various decisions and reopening plans have been the subject of much debate across campuses and in social media forums for a large portion of the summer, 2020.

Institutions also needed to look inwards at the technical aptitude and technology assets of both faculty and students. Faced with challenges of providing remote learning opportunities to students showcased a need to supplement or perhaps even deliver physical technology (ie laptops) to those that may lack a device suitable for attending virtual classes or participating in asynchronous activities. Schools began supplementing their loaner laptop programmes to provide access — showcasing a commitment

to their students and community. This commitment to providing technology to all students only serves to build the relationship with the community and also assist the students in keeping up with their degree programmes.

GO-TO-MARKET STRATEGIES FOR UNIVERSITIES

In business, marketers know that — in some fashion — they need to break through the clutter and noise of the competitive landscape if they want to grow revenues or even just survive. And this is even truer during a global pandemic where every brand is struggling for a share of the consumer’s wallet. The bottom line is that how an organisation acts and communicates during any crisis will impact its brand in both the short and long term. Several strategies of differentiation need to be considered as detailed in Figure 1. Many universities chose to acknowledge the effect that the pandemic would have on their students and tackle it head on — focusing on how the community could come

together and possibly even thrive during a time when physical proximity was not likely. Through a constant stream of communication from the top, universities maintain positive focus on their commitment to providing quality, directed education — even if it was posed in a manner that was not what students were expecting of their college experience. In messages sent out across the globe, schools committed to their brand — education, research, student success — while delivering hard messages.

THE UNIVERSITY BRAND STORY

Decisions around the brand must be continuously monitored and evaluated. In terms of branding, differentiation can relate to any combination of physical product (or service) characteristics. Companies need to ensure that their brand is part of the evoke set of brands. It is important to remember that branding is only one form of strategy for a strong market differentiation. And in a time of a pandemic, that branding is even more critical.

The majority of consumers want a brand to ‘tell’ them how a product can fulfill a basic want or need with regard to problem recognition.

Branding and brand differentiation within higher education is no different. How should universities pivot their branding in higher education? How should institutions adjust their marketing strategy? And how do universities transition to a virtual world and make it known to their customers (current and prospective students) that the product offered is superior to the competition?

Higher education has already shown itself to be incredibly agile at adapting to the new normal by transitioning to

Strategies for Product Differentiation
Brand building
Brand history
Brand content storytelling
Customer-centricity
Niche or mass product
Innovation
Price differential
Unique point-of-purchase
Unique brand collateral

FIGURE 1 Strategies for Product Differentiation

a fully remote course delivery option in the face of a global pandemic. It now needs to make sure that it highlights and focuses on its product. Higher education must showcase what makes their product unique or innovative. To identify its uniqueness, administration within universities needs to hunker down and focus truly on the ‘why’. Why does their institution exist? How is their institution different from other institutions across the globe or even in the next zip code? What is their university’s ‘brand promise?’ Once they know the answers to those questions, it becomes easier for Higher Education Administrators to hone in on their own brand differentiation strategies. Again, the brand image for an institution may focus heavily on strong educational programmes and research — it is in the pivoting of the brand message that the challenge arises. Providing a strong classroom experience and on-campus inclusion requires a different type of message in mid-pandemic world.

In addition to accommodating and retaining current students, universities

Would current high school seniors form the class of 2020 who have already committed and sent a deposit to a college consider not enrolling or try deferring their admission?

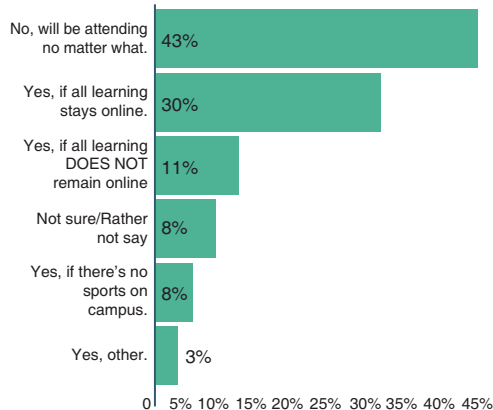


FIGURE 2 LendEDU Findings on the Plans of Current High School Seniors/Incoming Freshmen
Source: www.lendEDU.com.

are pressed to consider their incoming freshman population and how to represent the brand to that group. As institutions all over the world offer some degree of remote instruction, the uncertainty can be anxiety-inducing for students; in fact, many are reconsidering their college plans altogether. A market research study conducted by LendEDU found that many high-school seniors are considering a gap year, rather than start their college career as planned in Fall 2020, due to the coronavirus and its impacts, in addition to considering less-traditional alternatives like online college or community college.³ The findings of this market research are highlighted in Figure 2 and provide valuable insight into the mindset of the incoming class. It is incumbent on marketers within each Higher Education Institution to highlight the innovative ways that their school is engaging and making connections with students, even if not physically in the same location.

Faced with an ever-evolving plan to deliver coursework and maintain student satisfaction, universities must innovate and derive plans that can mirror their face-to-face offerings, engage current students and attract an incoming class. These innovations need to differentiate the course offerings but provide students with an opportunity to experience a traditional university level education in unprecedented times.

DIFFERENTIATING IN CHANGING TIMES

In a time of a global pandemic, universities — not unlike other businesses — have found themselves looking for opportunities to differentiate their brand against the competition. In other words, how can universities

distinguish themselves against other universities as well as from other suppliers of online education? Universities are faced with the challenge of providing a typical college experience in an untraditional time. It is during this time that universities can take advantage of online resources and operate uniquely. But what separates truly engaging online learning from typical remote instruction? And how can an institution maintain its brand image when students are not coming to campus for instruction? The answer lies in providing virtual education in ways that highlight the students, the faculty and involvement of both — not just the consumption of educational lectures. It lies in providing students with experiences that mirror in many ways, their expectations of a physically in-person semester.

The pandemic has presented challenges in higher education but also amazing opportunities, impactful partnerships and ways to differentiate the Institution. It is the opinions of these authors, that if done right, online education is more engaging than traditional on-campus instruction. Virtual learning can provide access to people and resources in the classroom that might otherwise not be available. Guest lecturers from across the country can join a Zoom call for an hour to share experiences with students, companies from across an ocean can present real-world problems to a class and the students can work virtually from anywhere to develop and present solutions. In a traditional, in-person class setting, guests may be limited due to having to incur travel costs if coming from elsewhere, and if joining the classroom via WebEx, or other web-conferencing tool, the personal connection with the students may be lost when the speaker is

connecting over WiFi to a room full of physically together students. In this new era of all remote connections, everyone is on the same ground — students connect and engage with guest speakers in the same manner in which they are connecting with each other. This aids in breaking down the barrier between the speaker and the students. Through the use of video and artificial intelligence, students can be immersed in a foreign country and their culture — all from their apartment or dorm room. All of this access is available in a virtual delivery and can be done in a fairly seamless manner.

This level of quality does not come easy. It is not remote instruction, where a professor simply transfers their in-class product online. Courses need to be built with the online learner in mind. There is no back seat with truly engaging global online classrooms. To that end, small breakout sessions and group work can create instantaneous team bonds within the classroom.

One key to success for faculty teaching online — measured by the degree and level of learning from the students, as well as high student feedback scores — is the level of engagement. When students feel connected to the faculty, the material and each other, they report higher levels of satisfaction with the course and a deeper cognitive understanding of the material.⁴ When we write of engagement, it is assumed that this is not just intellectual engagement with the course content, but human engagement — between faculty and students, and among students.

STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

Even back in 2011, the national trend towards online university instruction had been bolstered by a Department of

Education-funded report that analysed nearly 100 studies and concluded that online instruction ‘actually tends to be better than conventional instruction’. A good lecture or seminar has its foundation in words but gains its texture and flow from countless other subtle cues and interactions in the classroom. These include the body language of the students that an alert instructor will observe and use in modulating the pace and content of the discussion, the pauses and inflections in student questions that would escape capture by a microphone and the dynamism that occurs because each student, sitting among different neighbours at a unique location in the room, experiences and engages with the class slightly differently.⁵

Given the lion share of institutions moving to online learning in 2020, the real question is how universities can and should engage with students in the current pandemic. Face-to-face instruction, on-campus, in-person office hours and interaction may not be possible, depending on the current regulations and threat level of the virus in a university’s location. The implementation of technology and its subsequent engagement will be a key differentiator for universities going forwards and allow for a continued connection to the brand.

Temple University’s MS-Digital Innovation in Marketing programme has been conducted wholly online since its inception in 2015. Students regularly report high levels of satisfaction with the faculty, content and each other. The key differentiator in this online programme is the focus on interaction via technology. Students meet twice weekly with their professors each semester, via Zoom and class is conducted as if everyone was in the same physical classroom. The professors lecture and hold open

discussions, incorporate case studies and group projects with no concern for physical barriers — the barriers are removed by the use of conferencing software and a willingness to engage. Just as today’s corporate business is now conducted over Zoom — schoolwork can be completed in the same fashion. In addition to the weekly class sessions, students and faculty engage through virtual discussion boards and attend guest lectures by leaders from companies like the Philadelphia Eagles, Google and L’Oréal. The virtual nature of this course lends itself to interactive discussions with guests without them present in a physical classroom. Universities can leverage this student satisfaction and engagement to build deeper relationships with students who very much feel connected to the institution — perhaps without ever stepping foot on a physical campus.

In undergraduate classes, faculty can provide the same level of engagement by taking advantage of a variety of tools available. In some classes, in addition to the conferencing tools and learning management systems, students have created alternative modes of communication through applications like GroupMe to stay connected with each other. This connection enables them to interact in a casual, class specific way without feeling the pressure of a formal discussion board. In some cases, students will include the professor or teaching assistant — in others they remain student only. Without the pressure of a faculty member overseeing their communications, students report feeling more comfortable asking questions about course material, assignments and class sessions.

Another great way to engage students is to immerse them in the content. Students immersed in what they are learning motivates them to fully understand

it. It will require less cognitive load to process the information. As early as 2016, US-based EdTech company Nearpod reported that more than 6 million students in the US and beyond have experienced its VR-based lessons, such as virtual field trips, after it began offering the service two years ago.⁶ One of the beneficial uses of VR occurs when visualisation, manipulation and interaction with information are critical for its understanding; it is, in fact, its capacity for allowing learners to display and interact with information and environment that some believe is VR's greatest advantage.⁷ That is why a global immersion class either from a true VR headset or a GoPro camera being worn by an intern on site in Cairo, Egypt, will set an institution apart from other institutions.

Regardless of the tools used in online learning, the key to differentiation for universities across the globe will be the technology and engagement. Professors need to bring the world to their classrooms. This means expanding the class topics and guests beyond local issues. This type of learning allows students in online classes to make connections and friendships with people in other parts of the world and learn skills to work in international teams.

ACADEMIC INNOVATION: GLOBAL IMMERSIONS IN A VIRTUAL SPACE

Before the COVID-19 crisis transitioned Temple University to fully remote instruction, experiential learning courses like International Business (IB) 2509, were poised to provide students with a one-week experience in a specific country to study the business practices of different companies. In this immersion experience, students are not

only engaging with faculty and peers but also in the culture around them. Brand messaging from the university included highlighting Temple's Global Campus and the ability for students to immerse themselves whether for a semester or a week in a foreign location. Year after year, full cohorts of students would travel to countries like Italy, Spain, Thailand and Argentina to observe the global business environment. In addition, study abroad programmes have proven to increase student satisfaction, retention and GPAs and for some are an integral component of their college career.⁸ Temple University has offered study abroad and immersion experiences for students for over 50 years and is a cornerstone of the university's delivery offerings. It is critical for the student populations that universities find a way to provide a global experience in a virtual setting. The immersion course's main objective is to provide many memorable learning and networking experiences and expose students to the country's economy, political environment, major industries and businesses. Students also get an up-close look at the country's local culture and obtain an understanding around conducting business outside the United States.

Since Temple's Global Immersion programme inception in 2008, there has been in excess of 50 courses provided for students to visit over 25 countries, including Argentina, Austria, Brazil, Cambodia, Chile, China, Colombia, France, Germany, Ghana, Greece, Hong Kong, Hungary, India, Israel, Japan, Malaysia, Spain, Thailand, United Arab Emirates and Vietnam.

Like many universities across the nation, Temple University shifted to remote learning in March 2020 in an effort to stop the spread of COVID-19.

As the regulations around travel progressed, universities around the globe were forced to expand their planning from traditional classes and consider how immersion trip courses might change if a few site visits or the entire trip were cancelled. These global opportunities are critical to the brand image of the university and many students anticipate their inclusion in an immersion. In 2020, just days before students were set to leave the United States, universities began to fall in line and cancelled study abroad programmes of all types — whether a week or a full semester. Students who were ‘in-country’ at the time were instructed to return home as soon as possible. Regardless of how the academic side of the course would proceed, travel accommodations needed to be addressed for those students and plans in place modified for the uncertain future of global immersions.

It is important to reiterate that global immersions, in an in-person learning environment, are usually short study trips embedded into an international business-oriented course that allow students a chance to experience global business rather than simply learning about it in the classroom. As the site visits are the focal point of the course, Temple University had to focus on how to translate that immersion into a remote environment. Some companies were able to provide virtual tours of their facilities using Zoom, some could only provide information and answer questions via e-mail, and others had to pull their participation completely. Faculty and administrators worked tirelessly to provide students with an experience that, while not ‘in-country’ would highlight the reasons why that country’s global business sector was selected for the immersion.

The final assignments for the course remained mostly unchanged. While students could not share their findings through a standard in-class presentation, they worked virtually in small groups to create narrated PowerPoints, comparing the focal points of one American and one ‘in-country’ organisation, and wrote papers that compared the business practices of all the organisations ‘visited’. Virtual tours and e-mails provided the necessary academic and analytical resources. But, another vital aspect to the course — social connection — had to be considered. Had the course gone as planned, the group would have travelled together, stayed in the same hotels, had daily meetings and activities and shared meals. Nothing could fully replicate the experience, but maintaining a close connection was still important. Through a virtual classroom setting and consistent communication between faculty and students, a meaningful exposure to the country was still provided — without ever leaving the home country. While this may not be a complete substitute for the opportunity to explore a country, the students can still gain a deeper understanding and appreciation for the content and countries around the world. This experience, while not quite the same, enabled Temple University to stay within brand messaging and provide students access to the Global Campus.

DISTINCTIVE BRAND COLLATERAL: EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING ONLINE

Another option for expanding the online presence and enabling students to immerse themselves in the culture of the institution is to offer experiential learning opportunities. In face-to-face classes, these experiential learning experiences

often include live interviews, in-person site visits and workshops to enhance the material in the course. The underlying description of experiential learning is that students learn by doing — or provide the opportunity to take the content from the classroom and directly apply it to a project of their own creation. Experiential learning in itself is a unique experience for the university's customer (ie the student). This 'go-to-strategy' should be highlighted as it depicts how the customer's learning experience is memorable.

Distinctive brand collateral is a key differentiator for higher education institutions. In Temple University's User Experience Design classes, students spend the first half of the semester learning core User Experience (UX) concepts and building their skills in both researching, developing and understanding an organisation's needs for a website or app. In the second half of the semester, through workshops and studio sessions, students apply their knowledge by researching and then designing a User Experience for a sometimes real, sometimes fictitious client. In both cases, the expectation is that the students will take the skill-set that they have been developing in the early part of the semester and apply it in the second half. Students utilise both an understanding of design thinking as well as technology to develop and deliver a functioning, pleasurable User Experience.

In the final class, the students typically present their site to the client and/or the class, as if they were the client. In the Spring of 2020, this class shifted online just as many others did. Rather than face-to-face studio sessions in the physical classroom, students, logged in through Zoom, utilised the class time to treat breakout sessions like they were in

the studio — breaking into small teams and workshopping their ideas from their apartments across campus. Through a series of sessions, the students received iterative feedback, made updates and reworked their ideas. In the final class session, the students presented their sites virtually to the entire class. Many students remarked that the concepts they learnt and the ability to connect through technology and still have live sessions is what motivated them to create an engaging experience.

In order to effectively differentiate the institution, the administration must show value to its current and future students

Even though the students may not all be on campus together, universities can still have an immense effect on the lives of students. The institution must take steps to transition what makes its university valuable in the virtual world — what is its unique selling proposition. This may take the form of regular town halls with leadership, virtual events (ie round table discussions, student run clubs) that bring faculty, administration and students together.

People want compassionate connection and a genuine, human approach to the brands that they support. Universities, as brands, are no different. Universities need to use their social media channels to facilitate a sense of community where its 'brand voice' comes through loud and clear. The Institution must focus on the strength of the brand and leverage it — as well as leverage its digital marketing channels. Early on with the pandemic, marketers saw messaging that was inspiring from brands like Nike, Blue Cross and Lululemon. Universities need to follow suit. They need to communicate frequently with empathy. Universities need to adopt a compassionate tone in communication. This is a great time to

lean into the institution's mission and messaging.

POINT-OF-PURCHASE: A MEMORABLE BUYING EXPERIENCE

Universities need to ensure that their customers (ie students) have unique, memorable buying experiences. The excitement of getting the acceptance letter in the mail or confirmation that they are indeed becoming part of the incoming class, should be no different today than in the year's past. Institutions that have succeeded in this differentiation strategy in a time of COVID-19 have sent 'welcome care packages' to their incoming classes. Leveraging their social media channels again, universities can foster excitement of incoming accepted students and those that have decided by providing an outlet to showcase the enthusiasm in joining their campus – even if it is not a traditional time.

FREQUENT COMMUNICATIONS

Universities that have built a strong brand communicate often are authentic in their messaging and have relevant discussions. It is through this that the students (prospective and current) and faculty have a sense of community. The University of Michigan is continuously updating its website to provide details on the school year and upcoming semesters, as noted in its Winter Term 2021 Plan,

The University of Michigan has developed a comprehensive plan for Winter Term incorporating public health guidelines, lessons learned from Fall Semester and extensive feedback and engagement with the community.⁹

Schools should also utilise their communication strategy and channels to showcase and highlight work that is supporting the brand despite the interruption of normal operations. Students, researchers, faculty continue to accomplish great things, even though the community is physically distant. Showcasing great research that supports the mission of the institution or highlighting philanthropic work organised by student groups feeds into the brand message that despite the distance, our people remain committed to the success of the organisation. Showcasing these items also provides a sense that a University Administration values the work being completed and wants the larger community to feel connected to each other.

CONCLUSION

Providing a quality higher education virtually is now part of a university's culture. It is incumbent on institutions to ensure that the students obtain the best outcomes, regardless of methodology. Thinking this through, the shift online could take several avenues — good or bad. First, if bad-experience stories circulate and have influence, we could see participation and even enrollment decline. Secondly, given equity issues worsened by recession, open education resources and open-access publishing could triumph. We may also see inequality drive different technology uses, with wealthier communities using more demanding technologies (virtual and mixed reality, telepresence) while poorer ones turn to tools with lower infrastructure demands (asynchronous video, audio, images and text).

Thirdly, as entirely online pedagogy continues, certain pedagogies and support structures could win widespread

attention. Colleges and universities might compete for students (as well as faculty and staff) based on how well and prominently they carry out these teaching methods. Fourthly, if the pandemic persists unevenly, coming and going in waves over a long period, we might get used to alternating between face-to-face (ie really blended) teaching and wholly online instruction.

With continued focus on the brand of the institution and incorporating strategies to engage students in a largely digital world, universities and colleges can continue the quality of education that students want and expect. It is incumbent that the focus remains on providing students the opportunities to connect with the material, faculty and each other regardless of delivery method. In order to differentiate themselves, universities and colleges must focus on their core purpose and their values in their communications to establish and reinforce the institution's identity and stay authentic to the brand.

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