

FCDC NEWS

Paul Bean—Executive Director | paul@thinkfranklinco.org



COVID-19 and The Higher Education Crystal Ball

Disruptions to Higher Education

The higher education industry has known for a while now that its future will not look anything like its past. During the last four decades, the industry has endured, adapted, and in some cases incited disruptions that realized or resulted in the massification of college or post-secondary education. Examples of disruptions to the higher education industry have included, the rapid expansion into online education and the ensuing advent of the Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) movement, the rise of the for-profit higher education sector which unleashed an unprecedent marketing and advertising tidal wave, the spike in adult enrollments after the post-911 global financial crisis, and to a lesser extent, the 2007-2008 crisis.

Colleges have also had to adapt to the different generations walking through their doors. We began the century with colleges being chiefly led and managed by Baby Boomers and Generation X, who were educating Generation Y, the Millennials. The Boomers have/are retiring, and Gen Y has graduated. The next generations are in charge and are educating Generation Z, the denizens of the digital world. Gen Z' needs and perspectives about college education are vastly different from previous generations. The higher education industry was able to deal with these challenges and adapted to the evolving educational needs, however, these changes and disruptions pale in comparison to the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic is a game-changer that has shaken the foundation. Why is this one different?

The Uniqueness of the COVID-19 Disruption

The pandemic caught many communities unprepared, a challenge that was further compounded by the politicization of communication processes and responses. Though the world has been dealing with easily aerosolized viruses for decades, its virulence and pathogenicity was extraordinary. Over the years, we have learned how to deal with such infections as SARS coronavirus (CoV), Norovirus, H1N1, bacterial meningitis, influenza A/B, MRSA, and Hepatitis A. However, COVID-19 seems to present a significantly higher infection risk. Additionally, infections rose at a time when the global energy market was in turmoil thus creating a perfect storm for economic misery.

While many institutions including Ottawa University already had the technological infrastructure and online/distance education capabilities, none of them can claim to have been comprehensively prepared for the sudden shift to distance learning. Why? Because of the following seemingly counterintuitive reason. College-age students, Generation Z (GenZ) are digital natives who have lived most of their lives in that world and so naturally the expectation is that they would take to online education like a duck to water. This is an understandable assumption, however, that turned out to not be the case.

Higher Education in the Wake of COVID-19

The pandemic has also disrupted the higher education modus operandi and financial model. Currently leaders are wrestling with the challenges of what this will mean for housing, classrooms, dining and campus cafeterias, and athletics when some semblance of normalcy resumes. No doubt colleges have been hit hard financially with the impact of the closures as they have had to return some payments back to the students for things such as meals and housing. Almost every leader's fingers are crossed hoping for a return to a near-normal this Fall.

The California State University System, the largest in the nation, has already made a decision to not open any of its institutions this fall. Will there be any ripple effects to other states such as Kansas? Probably not, and independent colleges are watching this situation more closely. All colleges have been affected by the pandemic with varied economic impact. Also, the amount of COVID-19 relief and stimulus assistance that institutions were able to qualify for from the federal government ranged greatly. A major portion of the funds were disbursed to students, and colleges were simply pass through agents. While these funds were received with gratitude, they did not cover the losses that independent colleges accrued. In some cases, the federal funds did not even cover a third of the losses.

So, What Does this Mean for the Future of College Educators?

Everything and nothing.

Everything - because as leaders we are having to escalate our out-of-the-box thinking in terms of scheduling, delivering, funding, and structure. Ottawa University is engaged in this process. We are considering how best we can leverage some of our business, nursing, and engineering offerings to meet the needs of local and regional families and business entities. Also for consideration, there is the question of how local industries can benefit from the services that Ottawa University offers? We are not alone. The next few years will see an increase in innovative pedagogies and the rise of new college models.

Nothing – because the value of a college education is not likely to change. An April 17, 2020 Forbes article written by one of their contributors titled, “*College Graduates Are Less Likely To Become Unemployed Due To The Coronavirus*,” is yet another vindication of the value that a college education adds to an individual’s economic prospects. Those that held college degrees were statistically less likely to be laid off. A college education is still and will continue to be a reliable means for stabilizing individuals’ economic outlooks, increasing lifetime earnings and serve as portals for the quest for a fulfilling life and upward social mobility. However, this does not mean that colleges should not adapt to the new realities.

One would hope that the pandemic has presented the colleges with an opportunity for organizational introspection. One thing is clear, things are never going to be the same again. College education, though it remains the same in essence, will not look the same as it did yesteryear. The pandemic has exposed some of the economic and modality assumptions that we have held for years. That said, college education is here to stay.

About the Author

Reggies Wenyika is a resident of Ottawa, Kansas where he serves as President of Ottawa University. Reggies serves on the Corporate Advisory Board of the United Way of Franklin County, the City of Ottawa Planning Commission, and is a member of The American Society for Clinical Laboratory Science. He can be reached at reggies.wenyika@ottawa.edu.

It is a GREAT day to live in Franklin County!

Paul Bean

Executive Director

Franklin County Development Council

785-521-3707 (A New Direct Line)