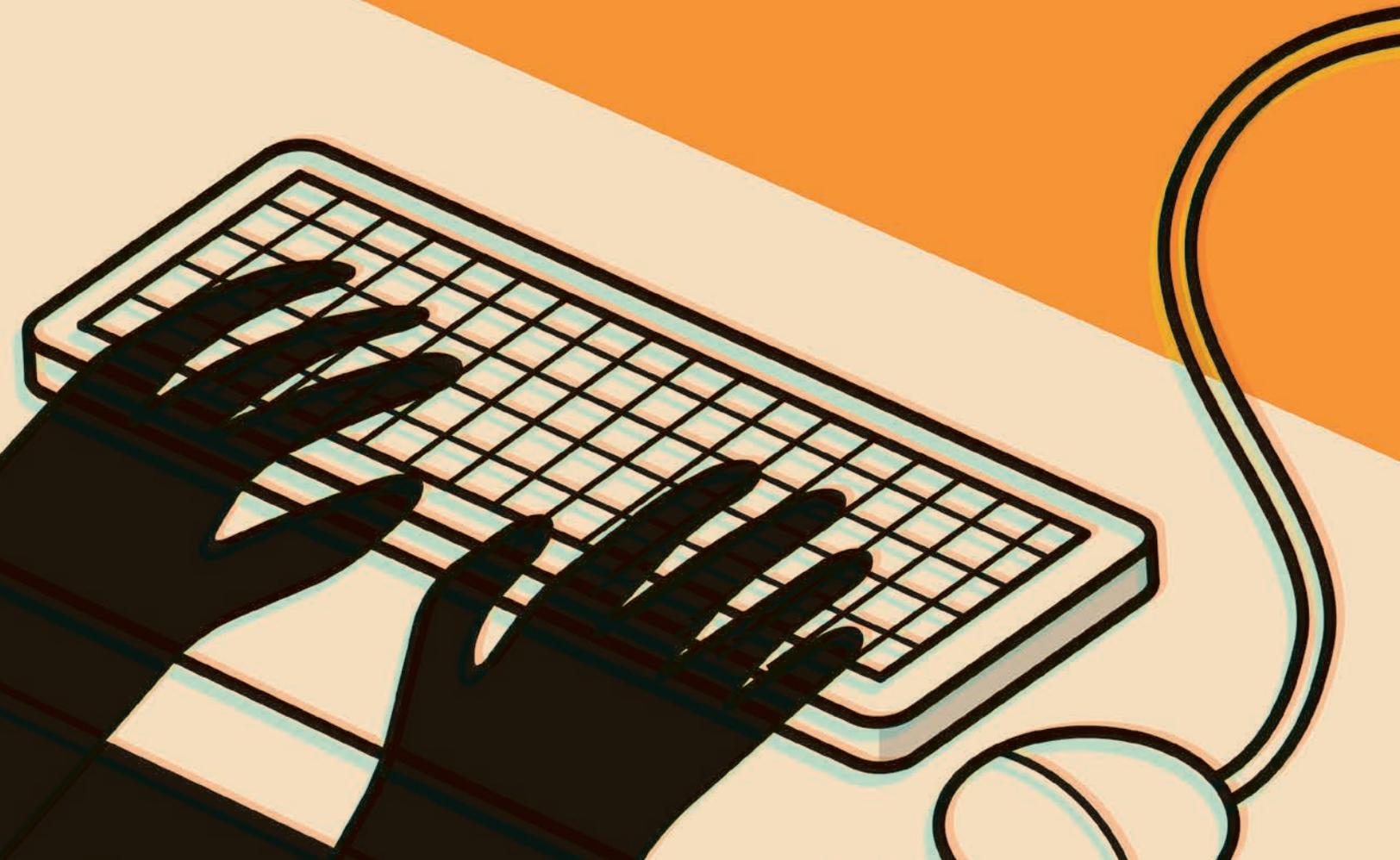


# DOES YOUR TECHNOLOGY HELP *or* HURT YOUR COLLEGE?

FROM YOUR COLLEGE WEBSITE TO STUDENT SERVICES, TECHNOLOGY CAN MAKE STUDENTS' LIVES EASIER — OR SCARE THEM AWAY. EITHER WAY, IT'S NOT OPTIONAL.

BY DIGI EDWARDS



# FOR A LONG TIME, COMMUNITY COLLEGES MORE OR LESS HAD A CORNER ON THEIR MARKETS. TODAY, STUDENTS HAVE THE OPTION OF ENROLLING REMOTELY AT FOR-PROFIT ONLINE UNIVERSITIES. DON'T LET YOUR COLLEGE'S TECHNOLOGIES DRIVE THEM THERE.

ACCORDING TO COMMON SENSE MEDIA, STUDENTS SPEND nine hours a day on some form of electronic device. Technology has influenced almost every aspect of their lives, including education.

Even as someone who has spent her professional career in the higher education market for 29 years, I must admit that sending two children to college radically opened my eyes to the vast differences between my personal college experiences, the experiences I have had as a technology developer and advocate, and the experiences I have had as a parent. Each experience, however, has offered some common lessons about educational progress.

## Students Haven't Changed Much...

Today's classroom scene is not much different from my college experience in the late 1970s. The brick-and-mortar front of the class and the instructor's lecture are much the same as when I was a student taking handwritten notes; however, contemporary students usually take notes on their laptops or on their smartphones. Some of these methods camouflage their boredom — but who is the wiser as to whether the student is paying attention? Then the class concludes, and students leave with their assignments to submit or with study guides to prepare for testing that ultimately will prove or disprove their ability to master the concepts of the course.

## ...But Technology Has Changed How They Learn Dramatically

While I (and probably you) spent lengthy research hours perusing the Dewey Decimal System in a card catalog, stacking books under my arms, ultimately flipping through an endless volume of encyclopedia pages and other books,

today's students have lightning-fast responses served to them via a multitude of electronic devices to complete their research and assignments. Furthermore, the study groups of yesterday hovering around an institution's round library tables with those stacks of books being shared have universally expanded as technology offers this notion of collaborative online learning — any time, any place. The expanded ability to obtain immediate knowledge through YouTube videos, blogs, email communication to the experts, including authors, scientists, and professors, as well as the benefit of the world of videoconferencing sharing information reduces the barriers of learning and has allowed for the experience of education in a very dynamic way.

Not only has the landscape of learning changed over the years, so has the landscape of the world of the instructor who traditionally was the foundation of information. There has been an outward transference as the students branch out on their own to utilize the technology available at their fingertips. Many students need that ability, as the online educational community provides the best option as they juggle work, family, finances, and transportation.

## Questions for College Leaders

As these kinds of tools enable both traditional and nontraditional students, institutional leadership must recognize the need to keep up with the technology that students are so fond of and depend upon.

What is being offered at the institution to attract students and encourage them to attend classes and to plan for their career? Is it the academic offerings that align with a student's career aspirations? Is it the proven sports team? Is it the clubs? Is it the location? Is it the faculty? Leaders should take

an introspective look at what obstacles might discourage a student from applying.

Understanding the answer to that question will lead us to understand what college leaders need to do to get around obstacles that might discourage students from applying. With the continuous advancement of technology in the higher education space, all institutions must continuously reflect on how they appear to the world.

Some might assume that community colleges don't need to invest as much as selective universities do in appealing to students online, or to implementing technologies that facilitate education. Those people are wrong. Today's college students — especially but not exclusively young students — are acclimated to a world in which technology is so thoroughly integrated that it is part of their natures. Missing, wrong, or dysfunctional technologies, beginning with your college's public facing website and continuing through online admissions applications and other forms and followed by course software, can create barriers to learning, and therefore major obstacles to student success.

Technology opportunities should be implemented in such a way that they present effective, efficient, and timely education any time, any place to everyone everywhere. Redesigning the institution's public facing offerings will encourage the traditional and nontraditional student, the credit and non-credit pursuer of a chosen profession. But how can an institution outwardly promote itself? The traditional admissions counselor will reach out to the community in many ways, including through high school college night events to discuss the myriad of potential opportunities available. The institutional employees provide the requisite knowledge about their college to their family and friends. But what about the student who isn't able to attend a college event or who doesn't have the inside information? This is where an institution's public facing website can encourage or discourage the searching student.

In the past year as a vice president of Ferrilli, I have had the opportunity to meet and work with numerous college presidents and other leaders through attending and presenting at conferences, including ACCT events as well as the Higher Education Research and Development Institute (HERDI). Because of these experiences, I have continued my collaboration with numerous presidents regarding, among other topics, the advancement of technology from the standpoint of the student experience, student interest, and student success. A typical theme for many is the lack of knowledge of the technology solutions used on their campuses. Of course, these leaders are intimately aware of the curriculum offerings. To confirm this finding, during the most recent HERDI presentations a survey was distributed asking each panel member if they have ever applied online to

their own institution, or even if they have ever navigated their institution's website. Wow — the feedback was remarkable!

College presidents are at the helm of their individual institutions. They are the final confirmation, in conjunction with their board, of what is available, offered, decided, and encouraged at their institution. They are already educated, experienced, and determined leaders. Their college experiences were many, varied, and similar to my own college experiences. However, are they confident that their public facing website offerings guide the student to successfully apply and learn about the institution? A surprising number confessed that they are not.

My advice to all college leaders, including both presidents and trustees, is to spend some time navigating your institution's website. Think about the resources your college provides. Are they easy to find? Consider requesting more information or clicking through the enrollment process. Is it easy? Is it intuitive? According to researchers, Millennials have an average attention span of 12 seconds; for Generation Z, it's even shorter at eight seconds. What path will your prospective or even current students take as they begin to navigate your institution's technologies? What has your college done to ensure that these services are enabling students and facilitating their experiences rather than discouraging them?

Students who can't find what they are looking for online will look elsewhere. For a long time, community colleges more or less had a corner on their community markets. Today, students have the option of enrolling remotely at for-profit online universities. Don't let your college's technologies drive them there.

If you find that clicking through your college's website and other online resources creates a lengthy, frustrating experience, then my advice is to work internally with technology and communications teams to make certain that your institution's forward-facing website creates an interesting and motivating introduction to begin their academic careers. Once this is done, then be sure to continue to periodically review both the website and the other technologies that your students regularly interface with. Otherwise, they can create invisible barriers to student access, persistence, and completion, and you could be unwittingly driving students toward another college that attends to these concerns.



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