

BUSINESS CONTINUITY DEPENDS ON STUDENT EXPERIENCE

BUSINESS CONTINUITY MEANS REMAINING PRODUCTIVE DURING DISRUPTIONS. FOR COMMUNITY COLLEGES, IT ALSO SHOULD MEAN DELIVERING AN OUTSTANDING STUDENT EXPERIENCE.

BY JIM ANDERSON

POTENTIALLY ANXIETY-PROVOKING TERMS LIKE BUSINESS CONTINUITY, RISK management, business disruption, and many others are grabbing headlines today for clear reasons. Responses to the novel coronavirus, severe weather, and the effects of shifting higher education demographics all vary from state to state, region to region, and institution to institution. Combined, all these concerns may feel overwhelming, but what if they didn't have to? What if business continuity was reframed as ensuring an outstanding student experience?



Business continuity should be incorporated into building a top-tier student experience. No matter what is currently happening, institutions must be able to offer continuous service to students — especially during key enrollment periods. When the student experience is enhanced, good things will follow, and when students have a poor experience, the fallout can be great. A year ago, most institutions had a week's notice before moving all operations online. Fewer than two months ago, the colleges across the south were impacted by a severe winter storm which left staff and students without essentials. The consistent theme: disruptions will occur, though when they will happen and what form they will take cannot be known.

In traditional risk-management planning, neither of the events noted above would rise to the top of a risk-management matrix because they are rare, and because the chance of widespread events such as a global pandemic happening is fairly low. Most plans account for more acute events affecting the campus itself or a region for a limited period of time. Just a few years ago, few could imagine planning for these types of rare events, let alone allocating resources to avert them. Now we know that doing so was a worthwhile exercise for the institutions that planned ahead.

Changing Perspective Makes the Investment Clear

If we were to consider combining our need to build an outstanding student experience with our business continuity plan, the investment would look much different. It would no longer seem isolated to a rare occurrence or an initiative which never makes it out of the planning stages of various strategic planning sessions. It would be viewed by the institution as an investment which all can see as valuable, if not a direct benefit.

What does it take to build an outstanding student experience, and where do we focus efforts first? The experience is built through highly functioning components students interact with daily and that are required to run an institution. This translates into admission, registration, financial aid, bursar, and new student orientation. Hallmarks of these operations are quick processing, accurate answers to questions, access to personalized and customized information, easy-to-process transactions, and the ability to have one-to-one interaction with staff. Vulnerability exists when student services departments are inaccessible to students. By modifying frontline service delivery, colleges can quickly and positively impact the student experience.

Begin with Partnerships

Creating effective and efficient external partnerships is an excellent way to accomplish building the student experience while simultaneously investing in your business continuity. Higher education is not efficient at quickly scaling up or down or decoupling itself from constraints put upon it through infrastructure limitations. Cultivating external student-service partnerships provide all these elements and a personalized and customized student experience.

Our experience of operating in the pandemic proved the need to be flexible in delivery of instruction and support services. Students need even more support from their college during times of disruption. It makes sense to explore service configurations that ensure frontline services remain open and fully accessible. External partnerships that do not depend on college personnel or technical infrastructure may be a better use of campus resources.

Historically, higher education has been slow to recognize that students have choices and do make choices based on their interactions with institutions. Fewer students in the coming years means greater competition and less tolerance for a lack of personalized and customized service to students. Investment in the student experience or creating more continuity is a worthwhile investment and one with a significant return.

College of the Mainland is a comprehensive community college located in Texas City near the Texas Gulf Coast, with a fall 2020 enrollment of 4,335. Prior to the pandemic, the college began to reimagine student-service operations. Out of a need to provide better service to students, redeploy existing staff resources, and to speed up processing, it partnered with Edamerica. In turn, Edamerica offered better technology, enhanced scalability, and a continuous service model, lifting student service past in-house alternatives.

The partnership between College of the Mainland and Edamerica is helping speed up and improve service, setting the institution apart from its competitors. Transcript request response times went from 3 days to 24 hours. Application processing time dropped from one week to 24 hours and, when combined, increased the application conversion rate by 9 percent.

Student access to direct personalized service also increased because of the partnership. College of the Mainland saw an increase of 7 percent in face-to-face contact with students, and students experienced a 60 percent reduction in wait times to see an advisor. In the six-week periods leading up to fall and spring semesters, the college staff conducted a total of 3,480 virtual advising sessions. Simply stated, staff were able to focus on the quality of the student experience.

The example of the College of the Mainland-Edamerica partnership can be replicated many times and illustrates the point that building an outstanding student experience through service and stabilizing the institution during difficult times are not mutually exclusive — in fact, they are mutually beneficial. Combining large-scale initiatives can and will prove to be a worthwhile daily investment over the long term.



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