

A Student Affair: Globalizing and Mobilizing with Online Learning

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Abstract

While many countries, including so-called third world nations, have slowly been building their education systems, America—despite its policies, programs, and good intent—has paid mere lip service to the realization of its educational goals. Consequently, education in many states in America is witnessing a breakdown. Georgia is a case in point. To mobilize education, we need to reassess online universities as a viable and marketable study option for diverse populations in an ever-changing and globalizing economy.

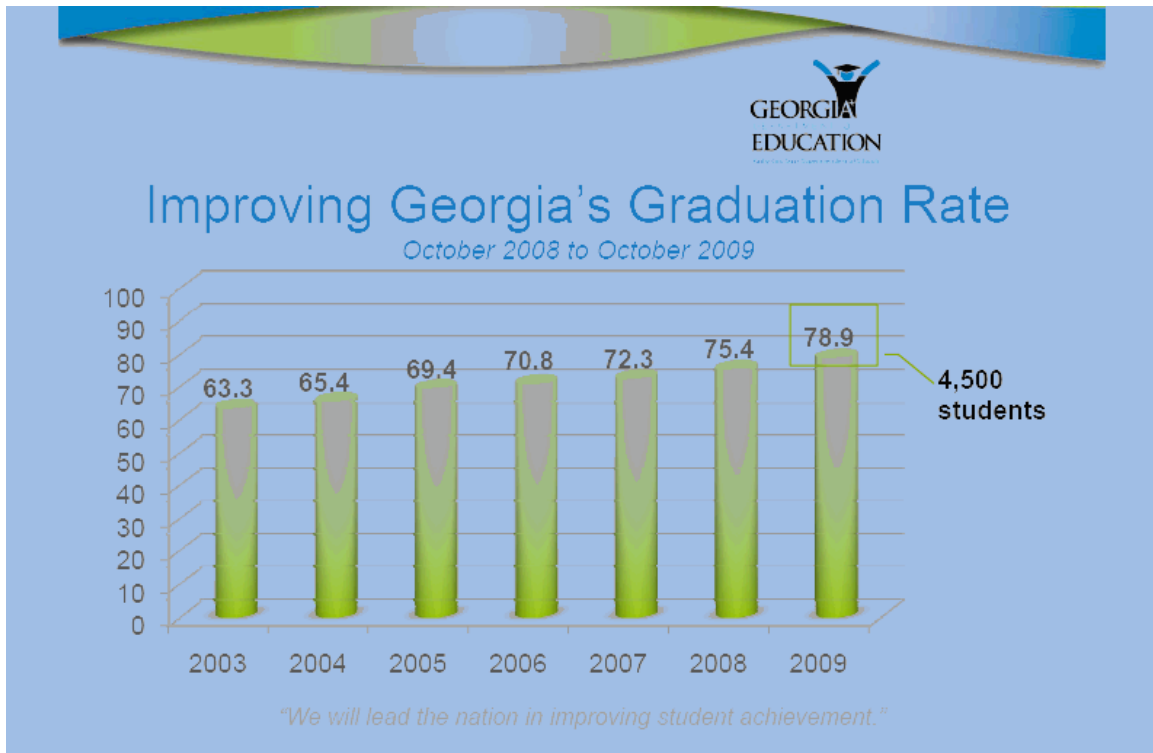
What does a scheduled caste/scheduled tribe person from modern rural India have in common with a descendent/product of the feudal system in Europe? What do either of them have in common with the modern day public school student from a depressed neighborhood in the United States? Ostensibly, nothing. But just a brief google look into the three categories shows that money, or its lack, is what they all have in common. And lack of mobility. In other words, they all share the possibility of a bleak future.

Whatever the times, education is an important vehicle to rise above certain of life's inequities. While many countries, including so-called third world nations, have slowly been building their education systems, America—despite its policies, programs, and good intent—has paid mere lip service to the realization of its educational goals. Consequently, education in many states in America is witnessing a breakdown: the state of Georgia is a case in point.

Georgia, the United States and the International Stage

No such dire headline introduces the 2009 Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) Report. Certainly, the report begins by setting forth five clear goals, the first of which is to increase the high school graduation rate, decrease drop out rate, and increase post-secondary enrollment rate. However, right next to this goal, a graph charts the steady improvement of Georgia's graduation rate: from 2003 to 2009, the high school graduation rates have steadily improved from 63.3 to 78.9 percent.

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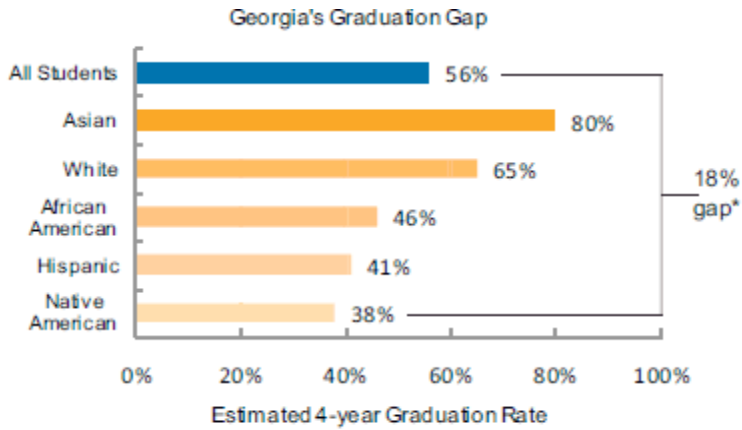


(Georgia Department of Education
<http://public.doe.k12.ga.us/DMGetDocument.aspx/AYP%20Board%20Presentation%202009%20FINAL.pdf?p=6CC6799F8C1371F67F748FE12E14157BF05F6F31E416590B38A508EFF52256B8&Type=D>)

Graduation rates are generally considered a significant marker of performance at school. They are consequently used to determine policy both for schools and for students. The Georgia reports for High School would have us believe that Georgians are moving from strength to strength. But nothing could be further from the truth. This is because there is a divide between figures reported by federal, state, and independent bodies.

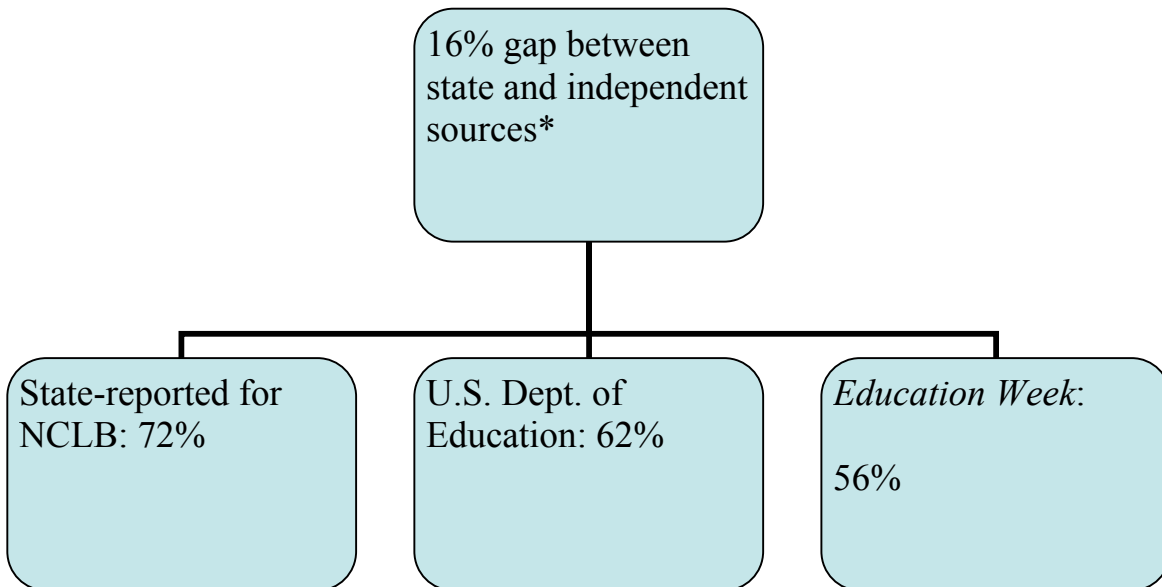
High school graduation figures for 2005-06, for instance, published by all4ed.org, an advocacy organization, were as follows:

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http://www.all4ed.org/files/Georgia_wc.pdf

The 2005-2006 report card shows a 16 percent gap between the Georgia rate of graduation from separate sources:



http://www.all4ed.org/files/Georgia_wc.pdf

The report on “Graduating America: Meeting the Challenge of Low Graduation-Rate High Schools,” by the Jobs for the Future advocacy group and the Everyone Graduates Center at Johns Hopkins University (Balfanz, Almeida, Steinberg, et al, 2009), in fact, places Georgia among 17 states with the lowest graduation rates “that produce approximately 70 percent of the nation’s dropouts.”

James J. Heckman and Paul A. LaFontaine (2007) underscore and expand the issue of variance in graduation data to the national level. In their essay, “The American High School Graduation Rate: Trends and Levels,” they assert that “Depending on the data sources, definitions, and methods used, the U.S.

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graduation rate is estimated to be anywhere from 66 to 88 percent in recent years—an astonishingly wide range for such a basic statistic. The range of estimated minority rates is even greater—from 50 to 85 percent” (<http://ftp.iza.org/dp3216.pdf>).

Despite such disheartening high school graduation rates, the National Center for Education Statistics (2005) reports an increase in college enrollment of 18-24 year-olds over the last three decades; however, by and large, male enrollment decreased while female enrollment increased. “The enrollment rate for females increased from 20 percent in 1970 to 41 percent in 2003. The enrollment rates for males decreased between 1970 and 1980 (32 percent and 26 percent) and then increased to 34 percent in 2003. In 2003, 42 percent of White, 32 percent of Black, and 23 percent of Hispanic 18-to 24-year-olds were enrolled in college.” (<http://nces.ed.gov/programs/youthindicators/Indicators.asp?PubPageNumber=22>)

Further, according to The National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, in the state of Georgia, only about 28 percent of young Black males are enrolled in college, compared to 39 percent of White males (Georgia’s 2008 Report Card).

But college enrollment rates, though important, must be balanced by graduation rates. Georgia’s 2008 Report Card also shows that in comparison to the top rate of 65 percent, just 48 percent of entering Georgia freshmen complete their bachelor’s degree in six years.

These low college graduation rates point the finger at a number of issues, one of which is the lack of preparation of high school students entering college. This in turn points the finger at the *inaccuracy* and *undependability* of the high school graduation data put out by the state department of education. And so we get caught in a merry go round, with little chance of getting off.

It is clear then that in the state of Georgia, high school graduation rates are low, and college graduation rates even lower. Even within these categories, the figures are divided along race and gender lines, with women performing higher than their male counterparts. Disturbingly, Georgia’s 2008 Report Card also shows that it lags behind internationally (to its European counterparts and Australia and New Zealand, as well as Korea and Japan in some instances), in the categories of Participation (of ages 18-24 enrolled in college), Completion (of degrees) and Educational Level of Adult Population (ages 25-34 are lagging behind ages 35-64 in acquiring a college degree). What these figures project for the future of the people in terms of jobs, and the attendant quality of life (leave alone gender and race relations), is anyone’s guess. A competitive world market and an increasingly aging America merely exacerbate the issue. Like a call from a person on the verge of committing suicide, these figures are a clarion cry for help which must not be ignored.

More importantly, what applies to Georgia, also applies to many other states or pockets of states in America. Indeed, nationally, “one-third of students—about 1.3 million each year—leave high school without a diploma” (www.all4ed.org). And only after we acknowledge that we are in trouble, can we proceed to putting systems in place that will encourage students to enroll in school/university, and graduate.

The Need of a Changing Population: Why it Matters

To begin, we need to assess what are some of the ways to motivate students to do so? Certainly, assessing our changing economy and our changing culture is one way to go. America is no longer an agrarian society, requiring certain school hours within a day or even a certain cycle of school year. Young people today are also not like their grandparents. They are much more culturally aware, and savvy beyond their parents and grandparents. Not to speak of, in a hurry to don the cloak of adulthood that has been glamorized by the media. In a culture that seeks to inculcate independence at an early age, including economic independence, it is then hard to lay down institutional rules and set teaching systems that contradict that same independence. Exacerbating this dilemma is the ever-increasing cost of higher education in the United States. Independent organizations and studies by the National Center for Education Statistics all show how many students rely on loans to finance their studies, and have to cope with substantial debt following their sojourn. Like high-end stores with high overheads, higher education institutions need to reconsider their strategy. If students are somewhat self-disciplined, goal-oriented, and not easily demoralized, but chafe at the regimentation of a regular school day, then online learning could be the answer for them.

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For the last couple of decades, all levels of education at traditional institutions have been engaged in trying to utilize a certain amount of technology for learning by developing their online arms as well as by fostering global initiatives. But with the state of education at high alert, *all* means should and must be harnessed to bring more education to more students. Setting aside lofty rhetoric, we must mobilize education. With online learning already established as a powerful global communication tool, it is time to re-evaluate distance learning institutions to determine how they can serve as a viable and marketable study option for diverse populations in an ever-changing and globalizing economy.

But is online learning a viable option for all levels, including high school and college students?

In Fall 2008, the US Department of Education, NCES, conducted a study based on a Fast Response Survey System on the use of educational technology by public schools. Among other things, the First Look Report showed that: “Eighty-three percent of district respondents agreed with the statement ‘teachers are interested in using technology in classroom instruction,’ while 58% agreed that ‘teachers are sufficiently trained to integrate technology into classroom instruction’ Forty two percent of respondents agreed that ‘funding for educational technology is adequate,’ and 83% agreed that ‘funding for educational technology is being spent in the most appropriate ways.’” (<http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2010/2010003.pdf>).

While more technology options for disseminating knowledge, and assimilating it, at the high school level may be welcome, especially in conjunction with other andragogical approaches to education, I will focus my study on online learning for college students.

A. ROLE OF VIRTUAL UNIVERSITIES

While most recognize that to fit into a rapidly globalizing society, to get well-paying jobs at home and abroad, we must move out of our geographically-insular attitudes, many American students are lagging behind. Brick and mortar institutions have historically understood that to enhance understanding and forge constructive communication, it is imperative that we facilitate interaction between different cultures. Academics has traditionally answered this purpose. Among other measures, Study Abroad Programs have been a significant means of exposing students to new cultures. Now, many (big) colleges/universities are making participation a prerequisite for graduation. Inclusiveness is also evident in new curricula for existing and new courses/programs of study. Under the aegis of the Quality Enhancement Program (QEP), many traditional institutions are also forging partnerships, nationally and internationally, to share resources and provide a more rigorous and comprehensive educational experience to students.

Though Online colleges/universities have often been stigmatized for their brash newness and failure to maintain standards, these arguments must be reexamined against held stereotypes and prejudices. In line with President Obama’s initiative for higher education, and to be competitive in this volatile economy, we must lift the stigma surrounding Online education in higher learning and accept it as a viable option for many students. By educating students from Beijing, to Delhi, to Ibadan, to Seattle—many of whom may not fit in a traditional classroom—Online education is already addressing many student needs. For example:

a) Cost effectiveness

With smaller campus facilities, and reduced faculty and maintenance costs, most distance learning institutions are able to pass on some of their savings to their students. Most of these institutions consequently charge tuition and fees that are significantly lower than those charged by traditional campus-based schools. Further, students also save transportation costs. Boarding and lodging that constitute a considerable portion of expenses for dorm-dwellers may also be reduced, or eliminated in many cases, by staying at home or living in a region with a lower cost of living.

b) Overcoming life constraints in a busy life cycle

Like everyone else, students have multiple commitments, which can crop up at inconvenient times. The option to participate in both real-time and asynchronous coursework at distance learning institutions allow students to fulfill these commitments without interrupting their studies, and potentially lead more complete and less stressful lives.

c) Dynamic, relevant and timely curricula

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While the procedures and processes put in place for new curricula and course development serve a valuable purpose in brick and mortar institutions, they are also often needlessly time consuming and sometimes misused for personal and political gain. With less red tape required for approval times, Online institutions can offer a more versatile and timely course of study that is available when the student needs it.

d) Bridging time, space, and other boundaries via the Virtual Campus

Human beings have historically defined themselves on the basis of boundaries. Over a period of time, however, these boundaries have become more limiting and counter-productive. Reaching out to other individuals is essential to break barriers of ignorance. Online learning, via chat rooms, discussion boards, email, and multiple social networking tools (in addition to the online lectures and 24/7-available, user-friendly programs and services on the Web sites), allows students to reach out to individuals across regional and national borders, making knowledge more accessible, exchange of ideas more possible and human understanding more achievable.

e) Multiple teaching and learning styles

Students no longer come in certain race, gender and age packages. They also do not reflect a single life background or experience. Over time, these categories have become increasingly complex. Education must reflect and respond to this complexity. Online education, with its dynamic and versatile tools at hand (as outlined by the other points above) is successfully able to answer the diverse needs of diverse populations.

B. LIFELONG LEARNERS

Of all the categories of students that stand to benefit from these institutions, I want to focus particularly on lifelong learners. These may be students with some higher education background, or none at all. That is, they may include some students who were high school dropouts. They may also be in various stages of being considered adult or returning students. Over time, many institutions have tried to address the needs of these students through their Continuing Education Division/Department. A range of non-degree programs and individual courses are commonly offered. Most recently, however, certificate courses have been included that are often tied to the degree programs offered by the corresponding departments. A student may then choose to take up an individual course, a series of courses to earn a Certificate, or even continue on and earn a degree at their own pace.

Students who enrolled in such courses, in the past, have often been stigmatized. While this attitude is much more evident in developing countries, America, too, could stand to make further improvements that make students of a non-traditional age group fit in more easily. After all, lifelong learners are so for many reasons: they may have missed an opportunity due to circumstance or personal decisions, need to enhance their resume for their job, gain professional development credit as a matter of course, or just possess a desire to learn.

Whatever the reason, these lifelong learners are a unique category. Their independence, needs, commitment and determination, and the life experience they bring to the table, require an equally unique system of delivery. Of course they also bring multiple commitments and limited study time, as well. A virtual campus often serves these students well, and offers them the freedom to which they are already accustomed in a busy life cycle. If universities are to truly serve their communities, then they must revisit their curricula, and their teaching methodology. Andragogical approaches to teaching/learning need to be consciously adopted.

As departments of education have sprouted everywhere, the emphasis has shifted a little more to methodology each day. Historically, pedagogy refers to teaching practices used by teachers for children. But as the student population shifts to adults, it is apparent that the role of the teacher and the purpose and goal and way of the learner shifts. It is therefore natural that additional, even different teaching methodologies be employed to teach these adult students.

Investing in new technologies, training all personnel, all leads to higher costs per student. Certainly, the issue is not merely theoretical and philosophical, but economic as well.

For those whom money is the only or at least chief signifier of the importance of things, let me be clear: the relation between education and economics is direct, certainly. According to the Georgia Department of Labor (April 18, 2010), Georgia's unemployment rate has risen to 10.6 percent, which is above the national average of 9.7 percent. Together with the need to create new jobs, we need to create individuals with qualifications to work these jobs. A poorly educated America will not be prepared to apply

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for jobs right here on its own soil, leave alone overseas. And since, for most people, jobs are their only source of income, this will mean a poor lifestyle and resentment towards those who are perceived to have what Americans no longer have, or have enough of.

But at the end of the day, education is about more than the diploma. On the simplest level, it is about learning. And the question that needs to be asked, is: What is the role that technology can play in the process of learning? If technology can enhance how students comprehend an issue, if it can enhance understanding faster and more clearly than was possible before—that is, if it can help digest an issue, question it, develop it, and help arrive at a conclusion, then it has a purpose and a place in the world of education. If technology—by the use of mixed and multimedia, with or without interactive capabilities, can peak curiosity and imagination, then it is viable.

Partnerships with other institutions

The policy of No Child Left Behind, while theoretically not without meaning, has led to inflation of data to get grants and privileges. It has also done a disservice to the very population that it needed to protect and nurture: the students. Deflecting attention from the uneducated and the under-educated. As the *US News and World Report* and other agencies publish their annual reports of institutional rankings, the competitive spirit of the Superbowl that is so uniquely American is palpable within the halls of academia. However, no game can be won without the implicit cooperation of the players within the team. And so the value and place of the spirit of cooperation must also be learned. No child, indeed, must be left behind. Regionally, nationally, globally. E-learning has made this possible. By using technology, not only can schools and colleges/universities reach out to a more diverse student population, they can also reach out and partner with each other. Undergraduate- and Graduate-degree granting institutions can partner with schools of their own level, as well as with junior colleges and high schools. By channeling the spirit of cooperation, schools and students can actually move towards the kind of enrollment and graduation figures that reflect lived social and economic reality. Mentorship programs—such as Big Brother, Big Sister—can serve as a module for putting together a high performing school with a low performing one. These partnerships can be a source for:

Academic Resources (teachers, lectures)

Facility resources (Laboratories, libraries)

Job preparation (Internships)

No Diploma Mills, Please: Criteria for Online Universities

Distance education has functioned and survived in the world for a long time. In many cases, the new technology serves the mere purpose of hastening the same old system of correspondence studies. For this reason, among others, the value of distance learning institutions has been questioned. However, even on this simplest level, this service should not be devalued: to the corresponding student, the pace at which he/she can pursue a program to its completion can be a powerful argument in favor of it.

As in other areas of life, people must behave themselves into learning new education strategies till these become natural and normal for them. Certainly, standards must be maintained. The criteria considered for Online universities must be the same as for traditional ones:

- Academic Rigor, with a competitive and challenging curricula;
- Qualified Faculty, who are academically and professionally respected;
- Academic Facility, that takes into account student diversity;
- Student Outreach, with strong institution-student interaction that begins before admission and continues beyond the degree; and,
- Department of Education/appropriate recognized US-accreditation, that approves and maintains the US government-held standards in education. (Indeed, in order to continue to enjoy recognition by the United States DOE, accreditation agencies must be ever more vigilant of their member institutions to ensure that academic standards are being met.)

It is important to state that online learning and self-paced study is not for everybody. The student who was happy to shirk responsibility may feel additionally encouraged to do so. Acknowledging and evaluating one's ability to recognize opportunity is an adult act. Sadly, chronological age does not always measure that ability. Further, as with all things, we need to acknowledge that, depending on the student and the teacher, e-learning can either remain a new tool for performing old tasks or it can evolve into a dynamic

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interactive tool that opens up new gateways to learning. With all the criteria listed above being met, at an affordable cost and at the student's convenience, Online universities can contribute much good—including, securing and saving the future of generations to come.

A Student Affair: Creating a Blueprint for Student Services at University of Atlanta

Because education on the simplest level implies content-based knowledge, an academic institution is most defined by the academics it offers. Certainly, all divisions and departments exist on campus as a kind of satellite, to play a supporting role for student success. However, in this age of online learning, these divisions too must alter and adapt themselves. My experience at the University of Atlanta, where, since March 2009, I was called upon to create the Division of Student Affairs with diverse student departments and services, and then adapt them to the needs of an entirely online student body, is a case in point.

Newly-accredited by the Distance Education and Training Council (DETC), University of Atlanta had a student population of a couple of hundred students, many of whom were academically inactive and not progressing; I had a difficult task ahead. Departments and services that are taken for granted in institutions of long-standing, their structures established—their functions known, and their value undoubted, all had to be re-envisioned not only to shape the needs of a new institution but especially to motivate and shape the needs of a student body largely spread across the world—primarily, Middle East and later Asia.

I began with very few resources, human and technological, and many questions: What should we do when the institution is new, with most of its students of adult age (typically between 20 and 50) and scattered around the world? What should we do when systems and structures we have taken for granted are yet to be articulated leave alone set in print or carried out? How should we create campus life, when there is no campus—as we know it? How should we connect with a student whose phone and internet connection is down—often, and who lives 10,000 miles, or more, away? How should we respond to the frustration of a student who is anxious to reach someone at a time when we are asleep? How should we connect to students who are culturally not conditioned to share their personal constraints, and we do not even have their body language to guide us? All these questions, and many more, needed answers that were often as unique as the students themselves. Consequently, the experience was frightening, challenging, and exhilarating, all at the same time.

First, given the new emphasis on product and manufacturing terminology, I needed to establish the intellectual/educational nature of the service on tap. Further, I needed to achieve a healthy balance between student/client/customer service and the educational product. Clearly, the old way of offering information would not be enough. Creating copy was of course essential; the value of the visual and tangible information for the student can not be underscored enough. It offers a place for the student to return frequently. However, when the demographic of the kind of students attending your institution is constantly changing, revisiting the information for content and clarity, and editing it to suit student needs, becomes a constant. Just as information often has to be altered, so must the services offered be altered to suit the needs of the changing student population.

This ability to listen and respond quickly to the needs of the student body as it tries to pursue academics, in many ways forms the new definition of campus life for students.

It was imperative that all Student Affairs staff that interacts with students have a good understanding of the student body. With all communication between divisions placed in a virtual student file, by the time the student was handed over, post-enrollment, the student affairs staff had a good handle on the background of the student. Studying this file gave the staff an insight into the students' pre-enrollment journey, and gave them a better handle on issues as they helped them get started.

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How to welcome students to a virtual campus, and get started? There are many ways to do this: some effective for some students; others, not at all. The orientation needed to be more than the introduction of a physical place; it must be an introduction to the university's learning platform. Crafting a simple script (that underwent multiple incarnations), and a basic powerpoint presentation with visual images of different divisions, buildings, offices, academic functions, etc., was a starting point. I knew that Orientation must be made mandatory and a prerequisite to beginning any program of study. Though students are often anxious, even excited, to start, they are the first ones to be turned off when they meet with challenges and frustrations at not being able to perform simple tasks, like how to access an assignment, and then submit it.

It was inevitable that as we inaugurated our Live Orientation Tour, we were inundated with requests. Webinars were used to host multiple orientations at one time. As this is a synchronous activity, it had to be timed just right for students whose night was our day in the United States. Despite the emails and phone calls to coordinate the event, there were often frustrations as students failed to find a connection, or could not log in, or logged in late, or could hear but not speak, or speak but not hear, etc. Despite having IT personnel on call at all times, the orientation often had to be conducted via webinar, phone and Live Chat at the same time. People who arrived late had to be accommodated at other sessions. In the spirit of interaction, students were encouraged to ask questions. Inevitably, twenty minutes stretched to forty, sometimes sixty and up; the tours were endless. Clearly, a more permanent solution, a bigger budget and more staff were required. So, it seemed the logical next step would be to tape the orientation. That way students could watch the video, and return to view it as many times as they needed—much as they would a text book.

Once the orientation tour video was created, it was placed in the secure section of the Learn Center, together with the Student Handbook.

The Student Handbook was not just a document of rules and regulations to uphold moral/ethical academic standards and disciplinary codes for students, but also included new material on how to prepare for, and proceed, in an online program of study. This information was considered absolutely vital for the students, as many students enroll in an online program without any real understanding of what it actually entails, and how to create structure and discipline in their own lives. Watching the Orientation video and reading the Student Handbook, and returning the signed last page (to ensure compliance), were made prerequisites to beginning a program of study. Being ID and password protected, students would yet have access to this information at any time, anywhere in the world.

Getting feedback on initiatives is important, so two-three weeks after enrollment, seeing the video, etc, the students were sent an invitation link to an independent web site to fill out a survey on their orientation experience. The questions ranged from their satisfaction with their information, to the ease and accessibility of the programs, to their experience with individual staff who facilitated their progress. While many students chose not to participate in these surveys, those who did do so, consistently responded positively.

Working with the students daily allowed us to learn of their frustrations, sometimes unique to their part of the world. There were small issues, like: what does EST stand for? These and many other questions were addressed both for general audiences, as well as for the enrolled students in the secure Learn Center. These often gave birth to a new kind of FAQs. Other issues were bigger: For instance, I noticed how students could view all assignments for all courses in their degree program. While having a brief description of all academic courses is necessary, having detailed syllabi for every single class to be taken is overwhelming. This was clearly a glitch that needed to be smoothed. Working with IT in Uganda via webinar, we created a simple red and green light system: now students would be able to view all courses yet to be taken with a red light next to them. Each time they needed a course opened, they would send in an electronic request. If the request was valid, the red light would be turned green, and they would receive a message to that effect so they could then proceed with their course in the Learn Center.

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As new services were added, students were informed of the same.

I ID Card Services

In order to offer full-time students around the world some of the privileges and benefits that students enjoy at brick and mortar campuses in the U.S., we were able to partner with International Student Exchange Cards (ISE Cards) to offer a more powerful and internationally recognized card. Working with Student Affairs staff, a student could upload all their data from anywhere in the world.

II. Subject-based Support Services

Early studies showed that students may be enrolled for months on end without progressing through a course, till they eventually withdrew. (These studies were later developed into formal withdrawal analysis reports, in the hope of addressing the reasons for lack of progress and withdrawal and move students towards success.) Despite being attracted to the more independent/self-paced asynchronous study, many students seemed unable to ultimately handle the same. Their sense of isolation was great and academically they seemed lost. I therefore hired multilingual Support Coordinators with strong academic credentials, technological and communication skills. While they could not, and did not, replace an instructor, they had to be able to think on their feet, without boiler plates for a response—a tool that fools nobody, and is often unsatisfactory and offputting to the recipient. By virtue of their academic credentials, they were in a strong position to comprehend issues and direct students to the appropriate area where they needed help. Every 10-15 days (limited because of few staff), they initiated student contact by phone, email, IM and Live Chat to see how they were doing, and encourage them to engage in academics, particularly lifelong learners who need motivation to commit time, energy and resources to online learning. They based their conversation on the activity, exchange or lack thereof recorded in the student's virtual file. They listened compassionately to all kinds of reasons/issues/problems students talked about, broke through barriers of isolation, and often were able to serve as real-life examples of what the students could achieve, and thus moved them towards starting or submitting assignments. While some students did not respond, many others responded positively, even forging a special relationship with their Support Specialist by communicating several times a day. There were challenges, of course. Staff in the U.S. was particularly handicapped by the time difference. However, as English is not the first language for most of the students, and they often can not understand the language, accent, information, etc., they prefer communication in writing. Staff in Pakistan, being in a different time zone, were better able to resolve the time difference issue. All staff followed telephonic dissemination of important information with an email, to help the student stay on track. They also kept detailed notes of every single communication with a student in the common internal web site (extranet/intranet), so that the next person had the information at hand for review. My goal was, despite limited resources, to create as personalized a service for the students as possible. We wanted to let the students know that someone cared for them.

III. Judicial Services

Judicial Service functions are a major part of Student Affairs duties. Staff recorded and troubleshooted every student grievance. Some were simple, others were not. Some major grievances that caused considerable friction were: promises made by admissions representatives during enrollment, grades not returned in time, lack of direct contact with instructors, transfer of credit concerns, the differences in the U.S. syllabus and what some claimed was followed in campus locations abroad, etc. Once again, it was imperative that the students feel heard. In order to satisfy the student, limit withdrawal, and increase retention rates, each issue had to be evaluated individually, with great attention and care. Communicating with appropriate division heads, creating direct connections for study center services abroad, encouraging direct contact with local offices for greater transparency, were some measures put in place. Because the students' frustration was often exacerbated by distance, it was imperative that they be in constant touch with their familiar Support Specialists, as we tried to resolve these issues.

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IV. Bookstore Services

Because the university has an offsite bookstore manager in the United States, and with no off-shore book vendors, Student Affairs staff collaborated to direct students as to how to order books as well, so that they could get started on their studies. High cost of books, lost or delayed delivery, high native country tariffs, were all issues that must be dealt with before a student could begin his/her course work. While we could assist with some issues, such as make special arrangements with Financial Affairs to pay for their books (in case the student did not have a credit card, for example) or with lost delivery, we were unable to intervene in cases where high country tariffs were applied.

Ebooks was the answer. But that brought its own challenges. A lot of prescribed books are not available in ebook form. So it was suggested that, in many cases, curriculum be revisited to find alternative ebook options. Meanwhile,, even when ebooks were available, students had access for 90-180 days, or so. For many students, unable to keep to their time schedules for course completion, this ended up becoming an additional source of frustration.

V. Library Services

Many students informed us of lack of local library facilities in the area where they lived. While we did have an e-brary, just like a brick and mortar library, it too can also be intimidating to navigate and use. Plus, students do not know how to use some of its features, such as creating their own bookshelf or an area for taking notes, etc. Student Affairs staff collaborated to show students how to do research on individual assignments using the ebrary. Student Affairs also worked on expanding the library.

VI. Online Tutor Services

As a lot of students lacked English skills, and often could not get past the basic language courses, it was imperative that students be provided with live and immediate help. I therefore engaged staff to maintain Live Chat sessions twice a week, and offer writing help to English 101 and English 102 students. For the benefit of most students, this service was to be offered from 10 am to 11 am on Mondays and Wednesdays. Students were often sent general topics and areas to be discussed, ahead of time. They were encouraged to come in with specific issues and assignments they were working on, so that the help they received was equally as specific and one-on-one. As in a regular classroom, shy students often remained silent but listening, as the tutor explained whatever point was under discussion. In other cases, interaction and collaboration among students was visible: even as some students with English as their second language struggled with expressing their concerns, other students stepped in to help them out.

VII. Social Media for Student Engagement and Retention Purposes

Peer-to-peer interaction is a vital component of any form of study. To address this need, and student grievances about their academic struggles, isolation, etc., I developed our presence on Twitter and Facebook; thus, increasing traffic manifold and also offering us an insight into what was going on with the students. Immediately, University of Atlanta had a presence and a face. Unlike other institutions' use of these utilities, I envisioned using them a little differently. Under the Discussions section, I had groups created for different disciplines and majors. This was to be an exclusively student area. Staff helped maintain the Discussions section by regular promotional contact with students (sometimes weekly, sometimes more often, based on individual, group and mass targeting). Students could "hang out" in these rooms and interact with others according to their majors, disciplines, geographic areas, etc. They could swap books, academic concerns, etc. Soon, we saw them logging in to hold academic discussions, or just say hi, helping each other understand the learning platform, or how to do assignments. From there it was an easy step to their exchange of personal information to pursue their "conversations" more privately. They openly asked each other for support, and looked for student mentors who had already gone through an experience so that they knew what it was about. Admissions was also enhanced by potential students being

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directed here to see for themselves the working campus and student body. Student Affairs staff also assisted in monitoring Discussions, and, depending on the issue, made contact with the students directly to offer help.

Strategic messages were also placed on the WALL section of Facebook to engage students. With a direct link to Twitter, we were able to reach a wider audience. For instance, in order to celebrate Women's History Month and International Women's Day, students were encouraged to record their experiences and nominate people from their local community.

By providing an academic support service creatively, we were also able to capture global cultural, linguistic and academic concerns.

VIII. Community Engagement

It is important to give back to the community you live in. With headquarters in Atlanta, I wanted to establish the University's link to the city. So I fought to have approved a full-tuition scholarship based on need and academics, for a minority student from Georgia who was enrolled in a Masters-level program.

By all accounts, many students depend on some kind of financial aid to go to college. In fact, lack of financing is one of the key reasons for students' inability to pursue their studies, and later, their withdrawal from studies. Despite the fact that the university's tuition was relatively low, by offering a scholarship, I hoped also to attract some committed students to the program.

I also set up a "Get Back to Work" Program, and personally volunteered my services to help unemployed Georgians who desired to return to work but who needed assistance putting together letters of application and resumes and interview skills.

Unfortunately, despite tremendous grunt work, with only local and web site publicity made available, these initiatives did not receive the notice they required to take off the ground.

IX. Miscellaneous

Some projects, like setting up Student Government and Alumni Services, did not come to pass—despite many valiant efforts behind the scenes. Setting up Counseling Services was particularly difficult in an online setup. Convincing people of the value of emotional health as almost a pre-requisite for academic health, and consequently, retention and the bottom line, is a process. Students' lack of response, and quite simply the fact that these projects, like democracy, take time to be assimilated before they can be realized, all are challenges I met.

As of March 2010, university enrollment was almost up to 900 students, half of whom belonged to Administrative Offices, and were strictly catered to by off-shore offices. Of the remaining students, though retention rates were high (with only four withdrawals for the month of February, for example; February Withdrawal Analysis, 2010), actual academic performance was low: 22.9% had completed their first course; 34.5% had started their first course, but not completed it; and, 42.6% had not yet started their first course (Student Progress Report, 2010).

The point here has not been to enumerate all the clever ways in which technology was or might have been used to connect with students. Rather, given extreme financial constraints and other resource challenges, how much was accomplished in a little over a year to serve the students and move them towards success.

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A Collaborative Approach: Technology and Education

Online learning is a viable option. Technology must work hand in hand with education to not just serve the purpose of providing information faster, but more efficiently, and in a way that provokes intelligent thought, promotes meaningful exchange and leads to compassionate and creative function. Educational technology, in its meanest form, has shrunk the universe to fit the smallest of screens and has opened our eyes to the possibilities that exist beyond us. It offers time travel with a twist, and brings into intellectual juxtaposition old evils like the caste system in India and the feudal system in Europe, and the more modern public school system in the United States that is funded by tax dollars, and in catering to its own class perpetuates—in many ways—old and divisive ills. Like any boundless potential for knowledge, it can make learning more accessible, possible and even joyful. However, it is in dire need of captaincy and direction. To create a more level playing field, for jobs and economic security, education for all is the answer.

In his fascinating text of lectures on “The Aims of Education”, delivered at the University of Chicago in 1950, T.S. Eliot began by wondering if ‘education’ could be defined. If so, how narrow or encompassing could that meaning be. Progressing beyond simple connotations of scholastic information, at one point he asserts “it [education] becomes ‘culture, or development of powers, formation of character, as contrasted with the imparting of mere knowledge or skill’” (in *To Criticize the Critic and Other Writings* 67-68). The essay acknowledges the added complexity of diversity in society and cleverly proceeds to discuss various definitions only to point out their limitations, as each requires further definitions of terms and contexts. But still, Eliot ends on a note that encourages people on their own journey, despite the elusiveness of meaning.

In that spirit, and despite the fact that with online learning we are encompassing an ever- more diverse society, and, undoubtedly, someone will parse the definition of terms I use here, it is my firm belief that education refers to more than academic knowledge that imparts a skill and prepares students for an occupation. It refers to an encompassing array of experiences and interactions—inside and outside the classroom—that build a functioning, responsible and contributing member of society. So though Academic Affairs remains the backbone of an institution of learning, with content-based knowledge its chief intent, Student Affairs must play an even more integral and directive role in the creation of campus life for students: upholding a strong social, emotional and mental life, with imagination enough to make academic success less onerous, and, certainly, more possible.

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