Forced Hand: Educational Entrepreneurship and the COVID-19 Pandemic

Katie Rybakova
Thomas College, katie.rybakova@thomas.edu

Jeremy Pare
Thomas College, jeremy.pare@thomas.edu

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Forced Hand:
Educational Entrepreneurship and the COVID-19 Pandemic

by Katie Rybakova and Jeremy Pare

INTRODUCTION

Welcome to the future of college, where students are not tied to a three-credit-hour structure based on seat time. Instead, they work through a mixture of independent and collaborative work with access to instructors who act more as curators and coaches than experts. Students have an individualized program, gain content knowledge from multimodal online materials, and learn skills through hands-on, community-driven experiences. The four-wall classroom structure has been obliterated. Students work as often with real businesses, schools, police forces, governments, and clientele as they do with their instructors and peers. They are not being educated about arbitrary and archaic content simply because it has always been the canon of Western education. They are learning to think critically about solving problems in the real world. They learn to collaborate. They learn that their actions have consequences. They learn how to use their knowledge of sustainability to build a successful business strategy or their knowledge of polluted oceans to help teach a seven-year-old to read.

Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, educational innovation has been accelerated. What was considered innovative at the end of 2019—multimodal assessment, hybrid/hyflex/remote teaching platforms and paradigms, or flipped learning and digital credentialing—has become an expectation in 2021. The changes that occurred during the pandemic, however, need to continue because students will only be prepared for a world of radical change with a radical change to the structure of college and curriculum. COVID-19 forced our hand and showed us that significant change is not as impossible as we thought it once was. There should be no going back, and policymakers have a role in this transition to help build, measure, and learn from innovations at educational institutions across the country.

We offer a look at the way the COVID-19 pandemic has helped us innovate in our classrooms and build upon hands-on, virtual experiences that prepare our college students for the real world. It is our intention to illustrate existing innovation along with the red tape that prevents us from doing more at a classroom and institutional level. We also examine the issues faculty face in this changing world and offer ideas for policymakers to use as they consider the future of higher education.

REAL WORLD

Dr. Rybakova had been teaching online for years and did not have to shift classes from a face-to-face to remote format at the start of the pandemic. She focuses on curriculum and instruction with an emphasis on digital literacies and English, so technology, multimodality, and online education are within her expertise. Yet, the pandemic still drastically shifted her curriculum. She cut out almost half the remaining assignments in her classes in the spring of 2020. As everyone came to terms with the massive paradigm shift from face-to-face to remote education, Rybakova had an opportunity to consider how she makes her online classes come to life for students. The pandemic gave her a real opportunity to authentically support K–12 teachers. In a class dedicated to teaching preservice teachers how to integrate technology in their future classrooms, Rybakova shifted an assignment to have her students make augmented reality modules for local schools to support the schools' remote learning (Shelly 2020). The class also continued with the original Winslow Writing Project, where middle school students submitted prose and poetry to preservice teachers who acted as judges and provided feedback. Preservice teachers practice providing authentic feedback to real middle schoolers and middle schoolers get multiple forms of feedback from college students. Ultimately, these two examples show that real world application is possible online.

DIGITAL BADGES

The constraints of the Carnegie unit and traditional class objectives have prevented students from taking on self-paced, autonomous, interdisciplinary, project-based online learning opportunities. Digital badges, however, allow for such innovative learning experiences. In fact, digital badges allow students to demonstrate objectives through self-generated projects, which are often real-world based and meaningful to students. Students can build on these experiences to gain useful certifications.

Thomas College uses digital badges to recognize learning outside of the

typical classroom environment.[1] Badges are skills and experience based and verified by an external entity. Digital badges can increase employability by demonstrating the application of particular skills and knowledge. These badges can be shared widely on social media platforms, in emails or resumes, or embedded in a website. Professor Pare participates in professional development programs for students at Thomas College. The programs allow students to engage in learning at their own pace and aligned with the needs of their current employers or anticipated job opportunities.

INNOVATIONS OUTSIDE THE TRADITIONAL CLASSROOM

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, Thomas College emphasized employability for its students. According to Thomas College President Laurie Lachance (2018), "it is absolutely imperative that the college experience we provide equip [students] with the full complement of knowledge, skills and personal attributes that ensures [students] are fully employable." To do so, Thomas College provides relevant curricula, innovative career services, and internships. The COVID-19 pandemic, however, raised many difficulties for student internships. Working with the Harold Alfond Institute for Business Innovation and the college's Career Services Department, Pare created a plan with partners at the University of Maine Mitchell Center to have students intern at a distance. The distance internships allowed Thomas students to practice the skills they had been learning in the classroom with ongoing support from mentors at multiple institutions. The Mitchell Center internships allowed students to have the typical cooperative experience while remaining remote and safe. The interns were selected by the

mentor at the Mitchell Center, funded by Harold Alfond Institute for Business Innovation, and then spent the semester working with their mentors and Pare on assignments. The experience culminated with an online conference where students shared their work with stakeholders from across the country.

The college has also worked with industry partners to create innovation challenges for students of all levels. The Center for Innovation in Education has partnered with multiple stakeholders during the pandemic to host an Education Innovators series and made this available online for educators.[2] In addition, Pare has worked with the Center for Innovation in Education and the Harold Alfond Institute for Business Innovation during the pandemic to reconfigure capstone classes he teaches for the business school. The reimagined classes challenge students to use their personal attributes and other managerial skills to solve a real-world problem.

FACULTY PERSPECTIVES

In addition to the specific experiences of pandemic-driven innovation outlined so far, we also informally surveyed college faculty regarding their successes and challenges while teaching during the pandemic. A total of 33 out of 46 full-time undergraduate faculty responded to the survey. Key results of indicated challenges and successes that paralleled across modalities. For instance, across online, hybrid, and face-to-face modalities, technical issues and student engagement were challenges. Across the modalities, faculty felt that synchronous meetings (whether virtual or not) worked well. Overall, the satisfaction with face-to-face coursework was highest at a 4.19 average on a Likert scale of 1 to 5, while online course satisfaction was 3.79, and hybrid

satisfaction, 3.75. These results show the work yet to be done to encourage professors to engage with students in multiple modalities and platforms, but also paint a picture of the individualization necessary both for students and faculty. Some faculty will never enjoy online teaching. Other professors found online and hybrid teaching allowed for more participation. This was a key finding as participation unlocks enhanced discussion, further learning, and increased understanding of what students need from their professors.

The professors in the middle—those who are eager innovate and take risks but who don't know where to start—are in need of professional development to increase their skills in the various modalities.

THE RED TAPE

Innovation often occurs in classrooms despite curriculum and structure not because of it. For instance, imagine what would happen if we structured an entire class on engaging with middle school students rather having that just be a month-long endeavor. Imagine if preservice teachers could apply for real educational technician or substitute teacher positions and then engage in brief synchronous reflective exercises about real happenings in the classroom. Imagine if we could have time to help others construct open educational resources classes, and get feedback on our own classes through peer review and lesson study rather than outdated and ineffective student course evaluations. Seat time, for instance, is a barrier to true innovation. Instead of needing 45 hours of converted seat time in online classes, we would like to use experience towards those hours. Imagine a college curriculum where students choose digital badges and create self-paced, reality-aligned experiences

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that then build their skillset. Imagine encouraging the conversion of traditional textbooks to open educational resources with grant funding and time for professors to do the work. Imagine celebrating innovative professors for their teaching, much like Educate Maine celebrates the K–12 Maine Teacher of the Year. These are the types of activities and discussions taking place at Thomas College as a result of the pandemic and our perceived need for innovation in education.

Many stakeholders share these ideas. For instance, Mintz (2021) considers the future of higher education will include video lectures freely available online, test-optional admissions, greater use of educational technology, more online options, accountability for diversity metrics, less reliance on high-stakes exams, the opportunity for faculty and staff to work from home, virtual internships, and a flexible academic calendar.

These innovations face significant red tape:

- fiscal and philosophical barriers to effective IT and technologies
- lack of celebratory rhetoric on innovative professors in higher education
- outdated notions of seat time and work environments
- fiscal barriers to professional development access
- philosophical and time-related barriers to community-based projects in coursework
- lack of buy-in from traditionalists

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The Maine Department of Economic and Community Development worked with stakeholders all over the state to develop a 10-year economic development strategy. The report states that the workforce of tomorrow will require continuous upgrading of knowledge, skills, and abilities to meet ever-changing market needs. By 2025, Maine's economy will need 60 to 65 percent of its workers to have credentials, a number that now stands at approximately 44 percent. The report recommends that Maine (1) develop a system of stackable, micro-credentials that enable students to quickly and affordably obtain a credential of value, which can be used to build toward other credentials and be transferred fluidly among Maine educational institutions, (2) increase the availability of online learning and other flexible programs that are relevant to Maine employers and workers, and (3) institute statewide programs that provide co-op experiences, internships, research experiences, and apprenticeships (Maine DECD 2020).

The recently released Maine Jobs and Recovery Plan highlights the need to connect workers to job opportunities to help the state's 10-year economic development strategy move forward. There are gaps between the types of skills needed and existing and available workers, and communication gaps that make it difficult for workers to match with available jobs (Office of the Governor 2021). Tapping the American Rescue Plan (ARP) funding, a recently allotted block grant to the state for COVID-19 relief, would be a great way to make such connections. The plan also describes how the ARP funds offer an opportunity to build new infrastructure and start pilot programs to support skill advancement and outreach and build the bridge to connect workers to open opportunities.

The state should create a series of business councils to aid in the process of connecting workers to job opportunities. Business councils could be created anew or existing groups like Chambers of Commerce could be used to get this effort off the ground (E. Cervone, personal communication, June 14, 2021). These councils could be linked to the Maine Technology Institute's ongoing cluster initiatives and the proposed Hubs of Excellence, such as those in Portland and Bangor that are outlined in the state's new economic development strategy.

The Maine Jobs and Recovery Plan also discusses the need to train workers through competitive grants available to all higher education institutions in Maine. Such competitive grants could be used to increase the digital badging and credentialing efforts at Maine's colleges and universities. It could also allow these institutions to partner with workplaces to create paid internships. Internships, and the resultant real-world experiences that can lead to credentials, are effective tools to enhance students' experiences and fill the employers' needs. The $30 million proposed to leverage these educational opportunities under the ARP, as well as other funding mechanisms already in place at the state level, would go a long way toward building entrepreneurial programs. Such funding could also allow all interested postsecondary students to take part in a paid internship or credentialing program through direct subsidies to the sponsoring institutions.

In a world with immediate access to constantly updated information via the internet, and where the publication process means textbooks are almost always at least a year out of date, we need policies that reward instructors for ensuring the educational resources they use are completely current and innovative. There needs to be funding for faculty to create open educational resources, preferably multimodal in nature, as such resources are not only up to date, but they also they save students money.

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Perhaps the state level could use funding from the American Rescue Plan or through public-private partnerships to help accomplish this goal.

Inadequate internet connectivity impedes the daily lives of many students. The Maine Jobs and Recovery Plan urges long-term investments to connect every community to affordable high-speed internet access. The new Maine Connectivity Authority will leverage $129 million from the American Rescue Plan's Critical Infrastructure Fund and $21 million from unallocated federal ARP funds to make such investments across the state (Office of the Governor 2021). These investments will ensure that innovative, multimodal educational experiences are available to all Maine postsecondary students regardless of where they live.

CONCLUSION

Given the complexities posed by COVID-19 to classroom instruction, along with Maine's need for a more educated workforce, policymakers need to think more entrepreneurially about higher education in Maine. The state needs policies that build infrastructure for demand-based online courses, open educational resources, and the internet that supports them, and credentialing and internship opportunities. These new resources and opportunities must be based on real-world needs. Faculty should be celebrated for these efforts and encouraged, through professional development, to continue innovating for our students and workforce. Policymakers can measure successes of these structures and programs through numbers of new online courses taught, credentials earned, and internships supported in partnerships with institutions across the state. Such evaluations will show

what works and what doesn't, what we should keep and what we need to change. Then the innovations forced on colleges and universities during the COVID-19 pandemic will serve as the backbone of the future of higher education in Maine.

NOTES

1 https://www.thomas.edu/digital-badges/
2 https://www.mainechamber.org/webinar24.html

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Katie Rybakova is an associate professor of education at Thomas College. Rybakova also serves as the executive director of the Maine Association for Middle Level Education.

Jeremy Pare is an assistantprofessor of law and policy at Thomas College. He focuses on the areas of lean organizational behavior in business, state and local politics, and sustainability management. He is also a visiting assistant professor of business and the environment at Duke University.