

PCOE Focus Group Study on Digital Equity May 13, 2021

In February 2020, the University surveyed students' understanding of their technological and informational needs. The broad-based survey results proved inconclusive. In Fall 2020, university employees facilitated separate focus group discussions with a small number of students about their use of technology during the COVID pandemic, and about their general feelings regarding diversity and the campus environment. The focus groups were meant to tease out information from students (i.e., "what do you mean by ____"); they enabled facilitators to probe into students' opinions more deeply than the survey. Below are the major themes expressed by the students.

Technology and digital equity

Problems with Internet access

1. Students can live with extended families, with multiple people simultaneously accessing the Internet. This lowers the bandwidth available to the student. One student's Internet access at home is unreliable, and he was penalized for his nonattendance when he could not connect.

Old Hardware

2. Some students' laptops are old and can't use necessary software. When one student checked out a university laptop, it didn't have Adobe Premiere, and they couldn't download it without an administrator password. The student had to return the laptop to get the proper software loaded.

Software

3. The students prefer to submit work in the learning management system Blackboard. However, Blackboard is not perfect. Blackboard works best on a laptop; it is not always effective on or compatible with an iPad or iPhone. One student said Blackboard should have cut and paste image capability so students don't have to type out equations. Blackboard also has space limitations.
4. The students don't like ProcterU. They believe it demonstrates:
 - a. Instability—it kicks them out randomly
 - b. Inflexibility—students can't get up and stretch during long exams; small movements elicit accusations of cheating
 - c. Privacy—ProcterU also has access to the entire computer and doesn't stop running in the background; it tracks everything.
 - d. In general, "it's creepy, weird, stressful, and not effective at all."
5. The students expressed confusion switching between Zoom, WebEx, or Blackboard Ultra; they would prefer a single tool. They reported problems accessing Zoom on a MacBook, an Apple iPad Pro, and a Chromebook. One student struggled with meeting passwords. The students would also like instructors to send meeting links to their Zoom or WebEx sessions via Blackboard as well as by email; students felt frustrated if they had to search old emails to find meeting links.

6. Not all students are proficient in certain software, such as Excel, PowerPoint, Publisher, and Adobe Premiere. Some assignments require these tools, and an instructor is unlikely to familiarize students with basic functions.

Learning modalities

7. The students very much like viewing recorded lectures online, but wished instructors were more consistent providing them. Students expressed a mix of preferences for learning online or face-to-face. Synchronous classes allow students to engage with the instructor during class. Recordings help students if they miss key concepts. Asynchronous classes allow students the greatest flexibility with time, but it's harder to interact with friends or faculty.

Committee Recommendations

Internet access

1. Until highspeed broadband is available throughout Texas—especially south San Antonio—the Faculty Fellow should encourage faculty to be flexible when students report Internet problems.

Hardware

2. ITS should provide faculty with a list of software available on all loaner laptops; the Faculty Fellow should encourage faculty to contact ITS before the semester if other software will be necessary.

Digital Literacy

3. The PCOE Equity Committee should work with Distance Learning and Instructional Technology to develop best practices for the submission of work through Blackboard, to create a FAQ about Blackboard for faculty to share with students at the beginning of any online course, and to assess faculty experiences within Blackboard. The ITS should update its [“How Do I...?”](#) page.
4. The Student Academic Success Center should explore alternatives to ProctorU. At the minimum, that unit should create a FAQ for ProctorU to share with students (similar to [this university](#)). The Digital Equity Committee should verify with the Testing Center how ProctorU records cheating, and seek data regarding amount of cheating reported in AY21.
5. The Faculty Fellow should encourage instructors to standardize how they send meeting links, e.g., through Blackboard and email.
6. Ask the Provost to direct faculty to clearly state required technology in the syllabus and to include boilerplate language directing students to services that offer live tutorials on certain programs.
7. The Faculty Fellow should encourage faculty to record their lectures and make them available to students, whether the classes are synchronous or asynchronous. Promote instructional design services.

Diversity and the campus environment

Current Satisfaction

1. Students are generally satisfied with the state of the University's diversity.
2. Although the student population is predominantly Hispanic, students sense that we are representing other cultures—African American, Asian, Jewish, etc.—and they want this diversification of cultures, races, and ethnicities.
3. Transfer students appreciated the value our university places on diversity. Even small posters about other cultures feel more authentic than their experiences at other universities.
4. Non-traditional students feel like they fit on campus.
5. Students perceive diversity in the population of faculty, and even feel that is one of the university's strengths.
6. Students greatly appreciated the University soliciting their advice and feedback about the topic.

Current discomfort

7. Students can feel uncomfortable openly discussing issues of race and equity.
8. The student population of individual academic programs don't always feel diverse.
9. Societal stereotypes (eg. snarky male students in STEM) can affect female students, but it takes only a small cohort within a classroom to make someone feel represented.

Desired improvement

10. Students are still learning the diversity of diversity. Race is more understood than sexual orientation, gender, and other identities.
11. Although students feel the university tries to help pregnant and parenting students, these students can still struggle with childcare.
12. Students expressed appreciation for the Virtual Zen Den in Student Counseling, and would like opportunities to experience different aspects of diversity without needing to sign up.
13. Students would like to interact with more students from other backgrounds (eg. Asians or Muslims) on campus, and not just learn about them.

Committee Recommendations

1. The Office of Student Involvement should promote opportunities within the Cisneros Center and other spaces for students to learn about protected classes and to discuss DEI in a safe environment.

2. PCOE should seek data on the diversity of faculty individual disciplines, and then make further recommendations.
3. The Office of First-Year Experience should provide a strategic orientation to incoming students about the culture and history of our campus, and the core concepts of diversity, equity, and inclusion.
4. The Office of Title IX has a page of resources for Pregnant and Parenting Students. PCOE should provide a signal boost from its webpage.
5. If a Diversity Office is unlikely because of limited space, PCOE should investigate virtual spaces to explore diversity.
6. PCOE should regularly seek feedback from students about the campus climate.

The Equity Committee recommends the Faculty Fellow share this report with the Faculty Senate as well as the Deans and Chairs.