

By William G. Tierney

The recession seems to be creating a new norm at our traditional four-year colleges and universities that has the feel of online learning. The experiences of a young friend during his freshman year typify the changes.

I met him when he was in high school, and ever since I've been chronicling the challenges and changes he encounters as he moves from high school to college. Now a sophomore at a large public university in California, he earned a respectable 3.3 grade point average and says he made many friends.

Because he comes from a poor family, he has not had to pay for his education, though he has gone into debt to cover his living expenses. If he graduates in four years – a big if – he'll have about \$25,000 in student loans to pay off, a scary burden for a poor kid.

One day last summer he startled me. "I wonder if I am learning anything," he said. A snapshot of his year explains his doubt.

Of the nine classes he took, the class sizes of six exceeded 200 students. In three of them, students numbered more than 300. In six classes, he never met the instructor.

Assessments of his progress were sparing. He took a final exam in three classes, receiving a letter grade without commentary. He had no writing assignments in two classes, and in those classes that supposedly emphasized writing, barely 20 pages of work were required. A letter grade was sometimes accompanied by a brief comment.

He told me that most of his classes had teaching assistants but noted that all but two of them seemed disengaged. "They were too busy with their own work to have time for my questions," he said. Academic support services offered by the university were either oversubscribed or unavailable when he needed them.

As is the custom at traditional colleges and universities, my student friend had to choose from a smorgasbord of classes to satisfy bachelor-degree requirements. For example, he needed to complete three courses in scientific inquiry. He opted for a class on earthquakes because all the alternative courses were full. The next quarter he took life science, receiving instruction in such topics as good eating habits and good hygiene. His final class was astronomy. While each class was intellectually fun, he had no idea of any academic coherence in his selections, other than they were on the list of required courses.

My young friend reported virtually no interactions with any adults – in or out of class – throughout the academic year.

That experience was particularly disheartening to me, though certainly not unexpected. The National Survey of Student Engagement continually finds that up to 40% of first-year students have never discussed ideas from readings or classes with faculty members outside of class, and the number is even higher at large public universities.

One of the reputed weaknesses of online learning is that interaction between student and professor is absent. But in today's classrooms on traditional campuses, with class sizes in the hundreds of students, distance learning begins in the fifth row -- and students all too often experience what my young friend encountered.

If this is the kind of academic life we now accept as the new norm for our traditional students, why not take the leap and opt for more online learning, where costs are less, learning can happen at the student's convenience throughout the year and technological advances increasingly offer creative ways to think about improving learning outcomes.

I don't want to romanticize "the good old days," but a college education for full-time students coming out of high school always involved so much more than students holed up in their dorm rooms chatting with one another on Facebook. The opportunities to learn in and out of class not just among students but also with the faculty are largely declining precisely at a time when we know that such engagement is critical for learning.

We can blame shrinking state budgets for this emerging norm, and, certainly, they are a factor. But the increasingly online character of a college education also reflects a broken culture on our campuses, private and public.

We no longer look to college presidents to be intellectual leaders as they scurry about raising money. Provosts and deans have meekly accepted their role as development officers rather than academic leaders. The faculty continues to defend a bloated curriculum that lacks internal coherence. We choose methods of assessment that offer the least work -- a final exam with only a letter grade affixed to it -- and offer few opportunities for students to reflect on what they are learning.

We know students learn more when expectations are high and when feedback on what they need to do to improve is constant. Gigantic classes limit this kind of personal interaction. But even when class size is not a barrier, the incentives for engagement between student and faculty are few. No wonder students are left guessing about their intellectual progress.

Replenishing state coffers, even if that were realistic, would not solve this problem. If the new norm on campus is to be reversed, long overdue academic and intellectual reforms are needed, and everyone -- including college presidents, provosts and deans-- must participate. For starters, the curriculum as undergraduate buffet should be replaced with a pared down list geared toward the advancement of the intellect and the acquisition of skills needed in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. We have to decide what students should learn and then offer courses that will enable them to achieve the goals we have set. As it stands now, we assume that simply sitting in a lecture class and earning credits is a proxy for learning.

A streamlined, stripped-down curriculum would help free up professors' time to get to know their students. But, here again, we have to decide what kind of student-faculty interactions we want to have in and outside class.

Unless we recognize our common interest in truly developing a 21<sup>st</sup> century curricula and in restoring the student-faculty relationship that once was the norm, the large public four-year college and university will continue to be outpaced by alternative providers.

My student friend sent me an email this fall, which read: "For the first time, a professor in one of my classes said, 'I want to get to know you.' That's good!"

Should we be content that the professor's interest in a student is the exception rather than the rule?