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Liberal Arts Online: Educating for Human Dignity in the COVID Era

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Liberal Arts Online: Educating for Human Dignity in the COVID Era

INTRODUCTION

As the new Dean of the McAnulty College and Graduate School of Liberal Arts, I came to Duquesne University in July 2019 committed to advocating, celebrating, and promoting the important role of liberal arts disciplines in fostering the University's Catholic Spiritan Mission. For that reason, I was delighted when Fr. James Okoye, C.S.Sp., editor of *Spiritan Horizons*, invited me to contribute an article for the journal related to the topic of "education for human dignity." Such a topic was one that could highlight the importance of the liberal arts in the twenty-first century at a time where the concern among students and their families about employment prospects can make the choice of a liberal arts degree admittedly a "hard sell." As I had planned to write, however, the liberal arts are the hallmark of any undergraduate education in their emphases on ethical decision-making, creative problem solving, and rhetorical communication skills to promote a culture of civil discourse and respect for human dignity and difference within and across cultures. Indeed, the liberal arts are aligned with the tenets of Spiritan education, notably, as Fr. Jeff Duaime, C.S.Sp. asserts by, "responding to the most pressing educational needs of the people of their times" through "global vision," "a sense of community," "commitment to service," and "high academic standards."[1] This includes both educating our students' minds, hearts, and spirits, and understanding, as Fr. Duaime writes, the role of Spiritan, and I would contend liberal arts, education, in which "every human person journeying toward becoming fully alive, humanly, spiritually, intellectually, and socially . . . possesses a specific vocation in and through which the personality unfolds and character is developed."[2] In my short time at Duquesne, it was clear that the University and the McAnulty College embodied these goals. They were palpable in our emphasis on community engagement and social justice curricula and in our core educational foundation to prepare students for a hopeful future dedicated to the public good.

And then the world changed. In mid-March 2020, Duquesne University, like almost every educational institution across the country, announced its decision to migrate all courses to completely distance delivery in response to the rampant, uncontrollable spread of COVID-19, after having canceled some, but not all of its spring break study abroad programs earlier in the month. In the case of the McAnulty College, this meant that hundreds of courses had to transition to

remote instruction in less than one week, and that internships and other field-based experiences either had to be completed remotely or concluded early. While the University canceled courses for several days to expedite this transition, to say that College faculty, students, staff, and yes, their Dean, weren't fully prepared for this would be an understatement.

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As a teacher-scholar whose research agenda has focused on the teaching of writing in digital and fully online environments, and as an administrator who had created and migrated several programs at the department and university level online, including a fully online Masters of Arts in English as a Department Chair at Bowling Green State University and an online degree completion option for a Bachelors of General Studies as a Dean at Youngstown State University, I was familiar with best practices and an increasing need to create innovative new online programs to appeal to a broader range of students. This included more transfer, veterans, and global learners, in light of the predicted significant downturns in traditional college-age populations, referred to as the demographic "cliff" or "storm."[3] But an entire College? In a week's time? While I had advocated more online delivery in the College and the development of new programs in addition to our Masters of Leadership and our two undergraduate programs in Organizational Leadership and Computer Systems Technology, I hadn't planned for this. No one had.

Inevitably, it could and would be done, with the initial priority of maintaining instructional continuity and upholding course and program learning outcomes. As Dean, I was heartened by the way our faculty and staff came together to support each other and our students. From impromptu College Blackboard learning management training sessions, to identifying faculty super-users in departments, to unit-specific sessions on technology that all faculty could attend, to gathering extra laptops and Wi-Fi hotspots for those without devices and network access, to touching stories of faculty mentoring faculty, our community made the transition to remote learning in five days, working to identify faculty who would need extra assistance because of their inexperience with digital delivery. Throughout my career, I have advocated the necessary connection between pedagogy and technology and the need to not integrate technology for its own sake, but in ways that align with curricular outcomes and that enable access to diverse learners through diverse, multimodal communication processes. Yet I have also addressed the larger rhetorics of online learning that promote narratives of convenience and 24/7 delivery models that may benefit students, but don't always benefit faculty because of the invisible labor associated with online instruction. Other tropes

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I have addressed include the "rhetoric of loss,"[4] typically among faculty, that online delivery will never approximate its face-to-face counterparts in areas such as richness of class discussion, instructional delivery of content through the lecture mode, or in maintaining academic integrity. As we know from the online migration of university curricula across the country, the students forced to leave their campuses have also felt what Peter C. Herman quoted one student as stating "a profound sense of loss,"[5] unaccustomed to online delivery and missing the importance of immediate contact with students and their professors. And faculty here and elsewhere have viewed their initial efforts as emergency online triage rather than carefully planned online course delivery created via a team-development model of faculty experts, instructional designers, and educational technology specialists.

that online delivery will never approximate its face-to-face counterparts

In such a moment of crisis, the typical instructional design process for migrating courses online was more cursory, though we benefitted greatly from the University's Educational Technology unit, which offered individual assistance, provided documentation, and embedded consultants within the College and the University's other schools. However, it has become clear that as federal guidelines and state mandates impact the delivery of instruction, we have to move beyond the technological what's and how's of online and blended delivery of liberal arts curricula to the "why," and how we maintain that emphasis that Fr. Okoye initially asked me to address, "education for human dignity." For that reason, the remainder of this discussion will focus on the possibilities and constraints of this process in the midst of a pandemic. Based on our experiences in the liberal arts, any emphasis on human dignity must include an enhanced ethic of care, both for students and faculty, in ways that align with both Spiritan charism and the University's Strategic Plan, and that enhance and sustain the efficacy of online learning in the age of COVID and beyond. As I shall stress, many of the longstanding issues and concerns about fully online learning continue to be relevant, including issues of access to technology infrastructure, faculty development about best practices, shared expectations between students and faculty, and more proactive strategies to accommodate various students and faculty populations whose access to online education are mitigated by a range of material and social conditions.

any emphasis on human dignity must include an enhanced ethic of care, both for students and faculty

STUDENT ACCESS

Perhaps the greatest aspect of educating for human dignity involves the guarantee of reliable, equal access to education regardless of cultural and socioeconomic background. For many institutions, there is often a presumption that students, in part because of their generation and their enhanced skill

equal access to education regardless of cultural and socioeconomic background

sets in navigating digital life through social media, have broader access to and comfort with technology. In a now controversial labeling, Marc Prensky identified students as the "native speakers of the digital language of computers, video games and the Internet" or "Digital Natives," with faculty, by contrast, depicted as "Digital Immigrants," "instructors, who speak an outdated language (that of the pre-digital age) . . . struggling to teach a population that speaks an entirely new language."[6] One challenge with Prensky's binary is that it embraces metaphors of colonization[7] in subordinating one group to another in terms of their value and is ultimately reductive and invalid, conjuring rhetorics of conquest over individual groups and cultures. The binary is inevitably grounded in ageist and generational assumptions, but also is based on class and potentially race-based assumptions about a typical generation of students and their access. A recent Pew Research Center report, in response to the pandemic, provides a more nuanced understanding of student access, referring to it as a "digital homework gap,"[8] based on unreliable access to both a computer and an internet connection. The report concludes these gaps in access are frequently tied to race, ethnicity, and family income, with greater disparity among African-American and Hispanic youth.

Duquesne University's 2019–2023 Strategic Plan (2020)[9] acknowledges the institution's origin story of educating the underserved populations whose families had emigrated to Pittsburgh for work in the steel mills and the new opportunity that America represented. That mission stands as a historic legacy and has expanded to include students beyond the traditional college-age populations whose access to technology cannot, as we learned during the transition to online learning, be taken for granted in the way that Prensky originally suggested. In a unit as large as our McAnulty College of Liberal Arts, a one-size-fits-all model for its nearly 1900 students was not viable and required a far broader sense of empathy toward both undergraduate and graduate students whose technological challenges in some cases became a barrier to educational access. Perhaps the greatest access issue for students involved sufficient data plans to access the prolific number of Zoom meeting sessions now part of our daily routines for both instruction and business operations. Faculty in such instances displayed a strong willingness to accommodate students in some form of backup access, including posting lecture notes and other materials online, especially in consideration of those returning to homes in different national and international time zones.

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Similar access issues impacted graduate education

as well, as doctoral students in Clinical Psychology had difficulties meeting with campus clinic patients via Zoom, clearly impacting the Spiritan and strategic commitment to community engagement and to "serving God by serving students who serve others." But access to technology had other unexpected facets. As students returned home, in some cases there were competing needs, younger siblings suddenly needing to "do school" online, not to mention parents now tethered to email and those daily, sometimes hourly Zoom meetings. As we learned, our students were not a homogenous group; instead, we heard of the challenge of the veteran student having to find alternative access to computer networks with relatives, or the realization that some of our students were themselves parents. Thus another significant access issue was ultimately time and space to work.

the challenge of the veteran student having to find alternative access to computer networks with relatives

Teaching some of my first online courses in the early 2000s, I learned that students with such access problems frequently sought out public spaces for technology access, including the county library and their own workspace settings, spaces not available during a pandemic. And while synchronous activity via Zoom was stressed as a viable way to enhance delivery of course content, faculty deploying these tools soon realized that a much needed balance was required between mandated synchronous with flexible asynchronous instruction, the latter a standard of online best practices. This balance ensured students had multiple points of entry into the online course and paths to successful completion by fostering a rhetoric of convenience that promoted 24/7 access to content and communication via tools such as Blackboard discussion boards. But access to technology is more than about convenience. Much research on online learning and andragogy has long recommended that such flexibility was necessary to accommodate the students for whom such learning modes were intended, frequently place-bound adult working professionals. But this flexibility also reflects an important ethic of care. As bell hooks has written, "To teach in a manner that respects and cares for the souls of our students is essential if we are to provide the necessary conditions where learning can most deeply and intimately begin."[10] Understanding that our students were no longer just our students, that they were sisters and brothers and sons and daughters, and in some cases mothers and fathers, mandated a more flexible model that sustained hooks care for the soul and Duquesne's commitment to educate the mind, the heart, and the spirit. Part of that commitment, as Duquesne University President Ken Gormley and Fr. James McCloskey, C.S.Sp. powerfully assert, must include "the polestar of all decision-making: listening to our

Duquesne's commitment to educate the mind, the heart, and the spirit

students," and attending to their well-being and focusing "upon individual attention to students' needs and aspirations."[11]

FACULTY DEVELOPMENT

The same access challenges impacted faculty as well. Not unlike other larger liberal arts colleges, the McAnulty College may have a full-time faculty base of 140, but relies just as heavily on nearly 200 adjunct faculty per semester, as well as graduate student instructors. Many of these individuals are among the most vulnerable populations in the academy in terms of the contingency of their labor and the decades long compensation compression for that labor. As a result, the same concerns about technology access arose, including the lack of a laptop or desktop device for home use, the lack of Wi-Fi and/or the lack of appropriate bandwidth, with the access issues spanning multiple generations for both part and full-time instructors, some with child and eldercare responsibilities, and some who had not only never taught a fully online course but in some cases because of a lack of perceived pedagogical necessity had never used the campus learning management system, Blackboard. These challenges spanned many aspects of the curriculum, from areas such as English and Philosophy that had substantial numbers of graduate student instructors, to areas like Modern Languages and Literatures, with large numbers of longtime adjuncts. Given the faculty numbers, I knew I had a challenge in identifying the diverse needs of faculty. Under normal circumstances, preparing faculty to teach online involves strategies such as curricular and pedagogical needs assessments, ongoing training, and the labor-intensive process of migrating existing content and creation of new content through digital audio, video and other more visual, multimodal genres that enhance both teaching style and learning styles, appealing to diverse visual, auditory, and kinesthetic modalities. In this typical design stage faculty have the opportunity to develop a sense of the affordances of various tools in reaching student audiences. Regardless of the demographics, what was clear is that we had very little time, and the impact on faculty labor would be significant.

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The Spiritan charism reflects the commitment to working and walking with those on the margins, and this ethic of care was reflected in the short-term strategies we deployed to help identify faculty and offer both individual and group opportunities to migrate instruction online. Even before the transition to remote delivery of the liberal arts curriculum, I asked department chairs to conduct their own internal needs assessment in the areas of technology access and faculty development, and to be proactive about reaching out to those

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who would have challenges, something we did at the College level as well. Because we knew some faculty had never used Blackboard in as robust a way as it afforded, we scheduled multiple open sessions led by the College's Associate Dean for faculty to drop in with questions, both technological and pedagogical, about Blackboard, Zoom, and other tools such as VoiceThread for presentation development. As Dean, I began applying for the limited number of Wi-Fi hotspots for most adjunct faculty who did not have internet access at home, and we scrambled to locate extra laptops in the College and loaners through Central Technology Services for the numbers of faculty without home computers. Other strategies promoting mentoring and even intergenerational learning, as some faculty were paired with or supported by those department faculty or graduate students with more experience and expertise, helping as many people "get up to speed" as quickly as possible through efforts that reflected an ethic of care as we attempted to equalize knowledge and experience to benefit the faculty and their students. These pairings often defied Prensky's native/immigrant binary in that the faculty lacking experiences teaching in blended environments were in the minority. Department chairs in both in Mathematics and Computer Science and Media suggested a Blackboard community space for all Chairs to share resources and pedagogical strategies. These latter efforts modeled communication strategies at the national level, based on social media communities such as the Facebook group "Pandemic Pedagogy,"[12] but they also meshed with the best practices in training that included team development and train-the-trainer models.[13] The College also scheduled specialized workshops for units, such as for the Modern Languages and Literatures faculty who had never used Zoom, and the Mathematics and Computer Science Chair scheduled a workshop initially for her own faculty, and then included others, in the use of Zoom. These and many other efforts represented a profound community charism to support our colleagues and ultimately our students.

I began applying for the limited number of Wi-Fi hotspots for most adjunct faculty who did not have internet access at home

some faculty were paired with or supported by those department faculty or graduate students with more experience and expertise

Through my own experiences as an educator and a faculty developer, I have deployed various types of heuristics to help faculty self-assess the relationship between technology and pedagogy, including the following questions: How do you deliver content to students; how do you communicate with students and have them communicate with each other; and how do you assess and evaluate students? As a result, some of our preparation efforts became more individually consultative, listening to faculty talk about their reliance on lectures, group discussions, and writing assessments. I talked with individual faculty about the need for flexible models that honored our commitment to student success; for example, a faculty member expected students

various types of heuristics to help faculty self-assess the relationship between technology and pedagogy

to login in to Blackboard at the same time to participate in a synchronous conversation in the discussion forum. In this instance, I recommended a more asynchronous approach that gave students time to read and reflect upon students' written commentary, and also gave them time to develop more robust responses of their own, particularly because of the new challenges of mandating real time interaction that would disadvantage some students returning to their home country or those with lessened or shared computer access from the family residence.

Other concerns were related to academic integrity for exams even when robust digital assessment tools including Respondus were available

Naturally, it is important that faculty expect similar academic rigor in ways that hold themselves and their students accountable and that standard deadlines for completing responses and other assignments was part of that process. Other concerns were related to academic integrity for exams even when robust digital assessment tools including Respondus were available. New strategies included students taking language exams proctored through Zoom, yet there was a point where faculty, in the spirit of mercy and grace, had to presume the best of students rather than the worst, although other options, especially in future semesters, could include weighting exams differently so that they not comprise so much of the final grade. Ultimately, by the end of the spring semester reported instances of academic integrity violations on exams or written assignments were in the single digits and no more prevalent online than they would have been face-to-face, which counters the presumption that going online represents a loss to academic rigor.

flexible structures that kept students engaged as a community co-equally responsible for their learning

Overall, we encouraged faculty to create flexible structures that kept students engaged as a community co-equally responsible for their learning. As hooks writes, "It is rare that any professor, no matter how eloquent a lecturer, can generate through his or her actions enough excitement to create an exciting classroom. Excitement is generated through collective effort. Seeing the classroom as always a communal place enhances the likelihood of collective effort in creating and sustaining a learning community."[14] Inevitably, hooks' emphasis on community aligns with Spiritan educational philosophies and pedagogical practices. For Durbin, Martin, and Margolis, "This idea of students and teachers having a reciprocal role in learning, requiring ongoing interaction, is evident in the Spiritan and other spiritually based pedagogies we have examined. The Spiritans encourage students and teachers to experience learning together in a mentor/mentee relationship."[15] Although many faculty and students feel such reciprocity is more fully realized in the traditional brick and mortar classroom, with technological access and training, along with faculty development about the potentially powerful

Spiritans encourage students and teachers to experience learning together in a mentor/mentee relationship

relationship between technologies and pedagogies, it is possible, and I would argue vital, to sustain the integrity of both academic curricula and Spiritan values.

STUDENT-FACULTY EXPECTATIONS

Once the semester fully migrated to online learning, the greatest challenges came through these various gaps in expectations for both faculty and students, often tied to the level of engagement of either group in the delivery and continuity of the course. Because of the experience levels, teaching styles, and curricular materials of our diverse faculty, a continuum of delivery models evolved. On one end, faculty and departments made extensive use of Zoom for classroom lectures, discussions, and student presentations. The most common level of faculty in the middle of this continuum utilized other interactive tools such as the discussion board, with some synchronous activities for office hours and other more individual and small group activities. At the other end of the continuum were more independent styled delivery modes, instructors often relied on study guides, intensive reading and writing activities, and more individualized interactions with students through email or telephone. Because of those gaps in needs assessment, it was not always clear what modes would benefit most students, and for every student who expressed concern that they had technology challenges accessing Zoom and thus had difficulty completing assignments and projects, there were others who expressed dissatisfaction with the perceived presence of the instructor not relying on such synchronicity. We were definitely caught in a Goldilocks syndrome, but regardless of modality, some faculty reported the challenges of actually motivating students to participate, in part because of students' unfamiliarity and discomfort with fully online delivery. Although many faculty demonstrated considerable concern by reaching out to students just to check in (a common best practice in online learning), in numerous instances when there was non-response, they had to reinforce more traditional forms of accountability and mandate check-ins regarding receipt of course announcements and assignments.

students' unfamiliarity and discomfort with fully online delivery

As national educational media reporting documents, some students and their families across the country perceived and deployed that rhetoric of loss into a rhetoric of litigation, with class action lawsuits at institutions such as Drexel, Purdue University, and the University of Colorado.[16] In these cases, education is a business and they are dissatisfied customers wanting a refund for coursework and other fees for campus services and extracurricular activities no longer available. Clearly such examples reflect a tension between the values of mercy and a larger culture of

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accountability for both students and faculty. The challenge of migrating courses online for many faculty represented a significant amount of visible and invisible labor to move beyond that "pedagogy of triage" to as bell hooks has advocated, a "pedagogy of love." As she states, "When teachers teach with love, combining care, commitment, knowledge, responsibility, respect, and trust, we are often able to enter the classroom and go straight to the heart of the matter, which is knowing what to do on any given day to create the best climate for learning."[17]

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Despite these gaps in expectations between students and faculty, I can report far more instances of not only shared accountability between the two groups but also shared charism, regardless of the technology involved. A political science forum involving three faculty panelists went forward via Zoom, creating intellectual dialogue among the faculty experts and allowing students to organize and plan the session by facilitating dialogue and generating questions and moderating questions, a testament to the important of mentoring students and allowing them to shape the learning space. Equally significant, another professor shared with me his surprise and comfort in the check-ins he had received from many of his students, to let him know they and their families were well and that he realized that his communication was as equally consistent and mutually supporting in online courses, perhaps more so given the time and space to connect out of class. This aligns with Margolis, Durbin, and Martin's contention that that there are material constraints upon the teacher-student relationship, including class size. Just as there is a rhetoric of loss, there is a similar rhetoric of community that, despite the important emphasis on the power of the collective, can lead us to discount the power of older technologies, including email, in maintaining what was perceived to be lost for students and faculty across country: much needed human connection. This is an important reminder that we are brought together by a love of learning. In past research, I have stressed that "successful online instruction must include a range of interactions between students and instructors that extend the more public concept of community to better acknowledge the importance of personal, private interaction."[18] These interactions foster reciprocal roles that enable listening and empathy for students and faculty as individuals and that emphasis on education for human dignity that Fr. Okoye originally asked me to address.

These interactions foster reciprocal roles that enable listening and empathy for students and faculty as individuals and that emphasis on education for human dignity

CONCLUSION

Throughout the process, and even now as we prepare for the 2020–2021 academic year, our Educational Technology unit has

make instruction less dichotomous and provide a stronger sense of consistency in the frequency and quality of faculty-to-student and student-to-student interaction

continued to offer both technical and pedagogical workshops remotely, including on topics such as Universal Design for Learning, an approach often aligned with the need to make instruction accessible for students requiring accommodations based on physical disabilities or neurological challenges. These are vital considerations, and moving forward, the McAnulty College is working at the unit level to create more opportunities to make instruction less dichotomous and provide a stronger sense of consistency in the frequency and quality of faculty-to-student and student-to-student interaction in a model where students will be accessing a portion of their classes remotely. The faculty have more time to reflect on strategies that proved more engaging, and as we come back together in a HyFlex model[19] that provides choices to students in how they engage the classroom, as well as fosters social distancing and protection of vulnerable students, faculty, and staff through a limited percentage of students in classrooms.

These and other efforts will certainly move the curriculum beyond a correspondence course model, though admittedly the history of distance education is rooted in an epistolary modality when Isaac Pittman first offered shorthand courses in 1840s Britain by mailing postcards with directives to remote students to transcribe Biblical passages.[20] Such an example documents the ability and necessity of available communication technologies, however high or low tech, in a particular historical moment to foster learning and professional advancement of students then and now, to design learning environments that meet their needs so that we maintain that emphasis on educating the mind, heart, and the spirit. There were undoubtedly challenges to meeting this goal as some of the hallmarks of Duquesne's Strategic Plan and the Spiritan mission, including community engagement and field experience components within courses and programs, were postponed and canceled. These are important "third space" applied learning venues that, according to Margolis, Durbin, and Martin represent a "zone of transformation."

to design learning environments that meet their needs so that we maintain that emphasis on educating the mind, heart, and the spirit

Nevertheless, we must attend to the ways that the hybrid and fully online learning models in which we will continue to engage can become those transformative spaces. Our continued development of online pedagogies can and must provide access to the Spiritan mission and meet the unique teaching and learning needs for our faculty and students in what Gerald Beyer has referred to as a "pedagogy of the present"[21] that balances the communal aspects of our curriculum and liberal arts experience with the health and safety of our campus environment. Just as President Gormley and Fr. McCloskey stress the importance of listening to students, it is imperative to listen to faculty as well,

that both students and faculty are not as technologically adept as administrators assume

especially now that they have firsthand experience of the reality of transitioning to remote learning. A recent *Chronicle of Education* report (June 2020)[22] of national survey data results from faculty and administrators concluded that both students and faculty are not as technologically adept as administrators assume and thus mandates greater flexibility and understanding of the diverse needs of both groups in areas such as access and training.

Margolis, Durbin, and Martin rely upon an interview with Fr. Okoye, who concludes that some of the barriers to Spiritan pedagogies include "prejudice, politics, and society itself."[23] I contend that one of those barriers includes the ever-present rhetoric of loss not only for online learning but also for physical and emotional well-being, economic prosperity, and a now heightened sense of social justice and equity in a moment where citizens are protesting for racial justice, civil liberties, and police reform, even in a pandemic. In an historical moment where students and their families desperately want a "return to normal" in all aspects of their personal and professional lives, we have both an obligation and an opportunity to reflect on the delivery of the Spiritan educational mission in a digital age, for our students need that education now more than ever to foster both a pedagogy of the present and a pedagogy of hope and resilience. Undoubtedly, this involves aligning technology and pedagogy to reinforce those constant liberal arts' emphases on ethical-decision making, creative problem solving, and rhetorical communication strategies with the goal of promoting social justice in local and global contexts, and to ensure our online and soon to be HyFlex models have as much efficacy for our students as our face-to-face counterparts. In this way, the McAnulty College and Graduate School of Liberal Arts extends and sustains Spiritan educational values not despite our move to more online delivery but because of its equal ability to meet the needs of diverse learners in our present and future, and to honor our nearly 150-year commitment to education for human dignity.

I contend that one of those barriers includes the ever-present rhetoric of loss not only for online learning

Dean Kristine L. Blair,
Duquesne University

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