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As the environment of higher education changes, educators and academic leaders have a unique opportunity to expand learning and community engagement and equip students with real-world skills and closer connections with the needs of their community. The COVID-19 pandemic drastically shifted learning to digital platforms and highlighted the need for flexible and individualized educational approaches. In response, today's leaders in higher education have the chance to integrate experiential learning through service-based programs and community partnerships that enrich students' academic journeys and address societal needs.

COVID-19 forced higher education to adapt quickly to online learning and exposed gaps in access to resources like technology and internet connectivity in students who did not have these luxuries. Education faced challenges in delivering the proper materials and information to those communities with little or no internet access and encountered financial difficulties because of the sudden transition. The pandemic taught us the importance of accessibility and adaptable learning environments. Leaders in higher education can learn from these lessons to create models that allow access for all students, regardless of their socioeconomic status (McClure et al., 2023).

The dental students at Midwestern University serve as a strong example of experiential learning, gaining hands-on, real-world experience while serving community needs. Clinical rotations allow these students to develop practical skills beyond what they learn in the classroom.

Rotations at VA hospitals and community clinics enhance their abilities and skills in patient care and professionalism while better understanding the unique challenges underserved populations face. Mays and Maguire (2018) noted that community-based education enables students to learn through direct interaction with diverse patient groups. This highlights the benefits of service-based learning because the students acquire essential skills while communities benefit from more healthcare support.

Traditional grading does not capture the full scope of a student's learning, especially in practical fields like healthcare. For example, dental students gain more from clinical experience with live patients and assessments in real-world settings than from classroom-based grades alone.

Alternative assessments, such as rubrics and performance evaluations, are more effective in capturing essential skills like communication, empathy, and problem-solving. There is a need to better understand a student's overall growth by using holistic assessments that consider traditional academic performance and achievements and experiences outside the classroom, giving a fuller picture of student development. These assessments benefit from collaboration between faculty and student affairs professionals to capture learning in off-campus settings (Provezis, 2010). For students in hands-on fields, performance-based assessments offer a clearer understanding of their readiness to apply knowledge in real-world contexts.

Education leaders are pivotal in moving these innovative approaches forward by fostering student-professor relationships and creating adaptable learning environments that meet students' and society's changing environments and needs. By supporting firsthand and service-based learning, we, as educators, can reshape education by prioritizing academic excellence and interaction with practical learning in communities. Programs incorporating flexible assessments and real-world learning experiences give students confidence with essential skills for the workforce. Students are empowered in adaptability, critical thinking, and empathy. Programs like these require an ongoing commitment to collaboration with community groups and investment in resources that support interactive learning. As higher education expands these opportunities, an impactful educational model is created that prepares students for personal success, strengthens ties to their community, and aids in creating skilled and socially aware graduates.

As higher education embraces these opportunities, leaders can create a more dynamic approach to learning that equips students to thrive in and contribute to a changing world. Integrating experiential learning, community partnerships, and holistic assessments allows institutions to create an adaptable, student-centered model. The challenges brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic remind us of the value of rethinking traditional education. By committing to these revolutionary practices, leaders in higher education empower graduates with skills, knowledge, and connections that benefit their personal growth and the communities they serve. This approach moves education beyond the classroom, fostering development that reaches into the heart of society.

References

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