Distanced Learning

After his high school closed, a counselor confronted the digital divide — and the meaning of connection

By Eric Hoover  |  April 24, 2020

On a Thursday in March, as the spreading virus shuttered the nation, Sanjay K. Mitchell stayed late to plan for the unknown. His high school was about to close, and an urgent question loomed. Did students have the technology they would need for distance learning?

That evening, Mitchell and his colleagues huddled inside the Thurgood Marshall Academy, a public charter school in Washington, D.C.’s poorest ward. Before discussing logistics, they counted every available Chromebook in the building.

As it turned out, the school had one for each of its 380 students. The next morning, teachers asked teenagers to complete an online survey about their at-home tech needs. Later, about 100 students checked out a Chromebook. Mitchell, director of college and alumni programs, left school that day feeling confident.

Everyone, it seemed, was set.

But as Mitchell soon learned, the situation was more dire — and complicated — than it first seemed. “We weren’t oblivious to who our student population is, the type of households they come from,” he says. “We just didn’t realize the scale of how much our families do not have.”

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The Covid-19 pandemic is revealing the breadth of education’s digital divide, separating those who have access to the internet from those who don’t. Yet in this spring of makeshift virtual instruction, many low-income students face challenges that go well beyond a lack of computers and connectivity.

A laptop with a 10-hour-battery can do a lot, but it can’t change this: School shutdowns have disconnected vulnerable students from a hub, a routine, and a face-to-face support system that helps them overcome barriers to college. Disruption isn’t just exposing inequities; it’s multiplying them, too.
Mitchell, a thoughtful 39-year-old with a powerful presence and a silken voice, is just one counselor in one corner of one city. But his concerns echo those of counselors everywhere who know that hardships will follow many high-school students to college — or prevent them from getting there at all.

A wireless connection is a poor substitute for all the support structures that high schools provided. Mitchell fears that the unfolding crisis and crumbling economy will cause students on the margins to lose their focus, their momentum, their sense of who they were before the crisis. “I worry about how they’re going to make it through this,” he says, “feeling like a whole person.”

In-person chats have always defined Mitchell’s work. Once his school closed, students could no longer stop by his office to fill his ears with questions and concerns.

But one thing hasn’t changed. Anyone who needs to talk — about financial-aid forms, family crises, managing anxiety, or whatever else — can call his cellphone day or night. He’ll answer.

Connection has many meanings. These days, anyone with a working computer and a way to get online is, in one sense, connected. To information and digital portals, to Zoom and a zillion other services. That’s what Mitchell and his colleagues were thinking about when they took inventory of the school’s Chromebooks on that Thursday evening.

Determining right away what everyone needed was difficult, though. For one thing, when the charter school surveyed students the next Friday morning, many teenagers happened to be absent. Some didn’t know about the survey until their friends told them about it later. Because the survey was online, teenagers with no internet access at home couldn’t complete it.

More than a few students lacked that access. “Wi-Fi is not at the top of your list of needs,” Mitchell says, “when you’ve got to figure out how to eat and keep the lights on — it’s a luxury item.” After the Thurgood Marshall Academy closed, that luxury became a necessity.

The school tried to secure a slew of mobile hotspots, but heavy demand delayed their delivery. Though the city’s cable providers offered discounted internet service for low-income families, customers had to get online to order it. School officials got on the phone with several families and used their own computers to help them sign up.

Some families couldn’t get signed up because they had outstanding balances. The school helped some of them reduce or clear those debts, Mitchell says. “We told them ‘This is a judgment-free zone. Tell us what you need. Don’t be embarrassed to say ‘My Wi-Fi isn’t up and running.’”

Broken Ladder: Higher Ed’s Role in Social Mobility
Higher education is supposed to be a pathway to the middle class, but too often low-income students don’t make it to college, or fail to graduate. In this occasional series, undertaken with support from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, The Chronicle examines what colleges and universities can do to change that, and what’s standing in their way.

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- Why Higher Ed’s Promise Remains Unfulfilled
- How to Make College a Better Bet for More People
Eventually, many technical problems got solved. Many students got the access they needed. Many learned how to use their cellphones as hotspots. The academy’s staff members contacted families regularly to check in. Was anyone having problems? Did everyone have enough to eat?

But challenges endured. Some students with slow, unstable connections kept getting bumped offline. Some were sharing a computer with one or more siblings, as well as with parents or guardians working from home (the school lent second Chromebooks to several families in need). In some homes, heavier usage meant slower connections, but upgrading to high-speed internet wasn’t an option many families could afford.

As of mid-April, about a fifth of the academy’s students hadn’t turned in a single assignment since the switch to distance learning. Some who had indicated that they needed a Chromebook never picked one up; the school didn’t know if they had found an alternative, or if they just couldn’t get back to the building.

Throughout this chaotic spring, Mitchell worked on his living-room couch with a computer on his lap. He could stare out the window, gaze at the painting of the sky meeting a lake on his wall. But he couldn’t engage with his students the way he wanted to. He was used to reading their facial expressions, their body language. He was used to listening for the tone of voice that told him whether a student who said “I’m fine” really meant it.

Maintaining connection is difficult when distance grows and the usual pathways shut down. You have to find someone, understand that person in a context that’s now strange to you, and figure out how to talk to them in a way they’ll hear.

Connection. Hardware and networks provided one kind, for sure. But another kind — deeper, more essential — was proving impossible to fully preserve.

Across the Anacostia River from Capitol Hill, in a neighborhood often overlooked by the rest of the city, the Thurgood Marshall Academy stands three stories tall. Its main entrance is an inviting brick building with painted red columns that feel smooth on your palm.

What defines this school, like any other, is intangible. The relationships students share with teachers and staff, and with one another, are especially important here. When the school shut down, those relationships got disrupted.

That worried Mitchell. After 11 years at the school, he knew how much mentoring happened within its walls. He and his colleagues strive to support all facets of students’ development — academic, emotional, social — and provide stability they often lack outside of school. After teenagers spend enough time in the building, he says, “a mind shift happens.”
The academy is widely known as an engine of transformation. The nonselective college-prep school draws mostly from Wards 7 and 8, where about one-tenth of residents have a bachelor’s degree. Nearly 85 percent of the academy’s students receive free or reduced lunch.

Many ninth-graders enter with skills three or four grade levels behind. A summer-prep program prepares younger students for the academic and behavioral demands of school. Double-block scheduling gives students 90 minutes of English and math instruction a day, much more than they would get in a traditional public school. Ninety percent are proficient by 10th grade and take honors or Advanced Placement courses in 11th and 12th grade.

Along the way, they get to know Mitchell. Born in Jamaica, he was a middle-schooler when he moved to the States with his mother and stepfather. At first, the shy, sometimes melancholy kid, felt out of place in New York City, the capital of loud.

When his parents split, he and his mother, a home medical aide, moved into an apartment in Queens, which she filled with the comforting smells of curry and stewed meat. He studied hard and graduated third in his high-school class. Though he had no clue about applying to college, his principal helped guide him through to the State University of New York at Albany while also persuading his mother to let him attend. And he thrived there.

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Understanding what low-income students might lack is important, but don’t forget to ask what they possess. Mitchell describes his students as bright, talented, inquisitive. When he asks seniors why they hope to attend college, they say they hope to change the trajectory of their families, become someone their younger siblings look up to, break cycles of generational poverty. “They don’t want coddling or handouts,” he says. “They want to be seen and judged just as students.”

Since 2005, 100 percent of the school’s graduates have received an acceptance from at least one college. About 85 percent enroll at a four-year institution.

Most families, in Mitchell’s experience, support their child’s postsecondary aspirations. Show them a ladder to the moon, and they would climb all the way up to help their sons and daughters get to college. What parents tend to lack isn’t love or faith; what they lack are resources, know-how, and networks that can make things happen. They relied on the academy for all of that.

Founded in 2001 by students and professors at Georgetown University’s law school, Thurgood Marshall Academy uses legal principles as teaching tools to promote understanding of democracy and advocacy. Each year, students give “portfolio presentations” — in which they reflect on their academic work, behavior, and community service — before the faculty and staff.

Confidence. Engagement. Responsibility. The school’s all-in, intimate approach is meant to instill all that.
Mitchell didn’t see how that could continue if the students weren’t in the building, if they weren’t in close quarters with the teachers and administrators they looked up to, if they lost contact with peers. “All this work that’s been done to change the track of their lives,” he said in early April, “is kind of curved now.”

A few days later, Mitchell was a guest on National Public Radio’s All Things Considered, during which he discussed the effects of school shutdowns. The program’s host asked him what was keeping him up at night.

“Definitely the ability for our students to really access technology in a great way that would allow for them to continue to keep up with their studies and allow for them to continue their growth — their academic growth,” Mitchell said. “We’re worried about … how much gap is going to happen when our students eventually do come back into the classroom.”

Two weeks later, Washington’s mayor announced that the city’s schools wouldn’t reopen this spring. Mitchell’s students would remain scattered and mostly unseen behind hundreds of doors.

Let’s imagine a very specific kind of home. A home where a child’s education is a Top Priority at All Times. This dwelling could be luxurious or modest — just so there’s some place to study. Maybe it’s a room with a desk, an uncluttered table, something like that.

In this home, it’s a given that kids will do their chores after their homework is done. They don’t have to look after their baby brother today — or ever. Each adult at this address knows that a big science project is due soon; the date is circled on the calendar stuck to the fridge, which is full of groceries.

Listen. It’s quiet, right? No blaring TV.

All the utilities work and have never been shut off.

Hey, here comes Mom with a snack and a tall glass of juice.

For some students, this environment is as familiar as can be. For others, it’s unrecognizable, a fictional scene.

This, too, is an educational divide. It has always existed. It has always helped explain the gap between success and failure, going to college and not going. School shutdowns just made this divide more difficult to ignore.

Before March, the nation’s high-school students knew a here and a there. Home was here, school was there, and the difference between them mattered. It mattered especially for low-income students like many of those at the Thurgood Marshall Academy.

“The moment they leave that space, they’re on their own,” Mitchell says. “An academic mind-set is often not a top priority within the family structure.”

As the school’s teachers threw themselves into delivering virtual content, they discovered challenges that electronic hardware and hotspots couldn’t solve. Generally, students felt overwhelmed. It was difficult for them, Mitchell says, to “warp” into the independent-learning mode that asynchronous instruction requires. Many students, especially those in Advanced Placement courses, had benefited from eye-to-eye instruction and in-class discussion when wading into new material. That was gone.

Being home all day also meant wrestling with competing priorities. Once elementary schools and day-care centers closed, some students had to look after younger siblings. One young woman told Mitchell and some of his colleagues that with all her at-home duties, turning in every assignment would be impossible. “Whatever you

get,” she said, “is what you get.”

Space was an issue, too. Many students live in small houses or apartments where it’s difficult or impossible to find a quiet spot.

Alexis Jones, a senior at Thurgood Marshall, shares a two-bedroom apartment with her father, his roommate, and her 16-year-old sister, Ariel. Until recently, the roommate’s sister was staying there, too.

“It’s pretty claustrophobic,” Jones says.

The 18-year-old has never associated her home with studying. Before, she almost always did her homework at school.

Now, Jones struggles to find a few minutes of peace. Her father, who’s dyslexic and has a physical disability, is an accomplished cook who’s trying to start a food-truck business. He often needs her help with things like reading emails and typing replies. Though she’s happy to help, the frequent interruptions stress her out.

During the day, her sister, enrolled at a different high school, uses Zoom to attend virtual classes, and it gets loud. In the living room someone’s always watching TV. “I can’t escape,” Jones says. “I don’t want to take a quiz in the bathroom.”

So she goes into her father’s room when it’s unoccupied and works while perched on the bed. At night she sits down at the dinner table to Zoom into her dual-enrollment course, while her sister sleeps down the hall in the bunkbed they share.

Situations like hers inspired Mitchell to write a plaintive letter to the College Board in March. The organization had just announced that instead of canceling or postponing this May’s Advanced Placement exams, it would allow students to take a modified version of each test online — at home. “It is completely tone-deaf to the abrupt upheaval that many students” and schools “are forced to deal with currently. …” Mitchell wrote. “Vulnerable students like mine will find this to be a challenge.”

The College Board has announced an ambitious plan to send thousands of Chromebooks and hotspots to students who need them. But all the free hardware in the world won’t change this fact: More than a million high-school students will soon take college-placement exams under vastly different testing conditions.

Jones is registered for the Advanced Placement calculus exam. The test would be hard enough in a quiet classroom with few distractions, she figures, but in a cramped and chaotic apartment, it would be even harder.

“I don’t want to take it, but I’m gonna take it,” she says. “Am I gonna do well? Probably not.”

“The moment they leave that space, they're on their own. An academic mind-set is often not a top priority within the family structure.”
Even in the best of times, a solid plan can crumble quickly. For many low-income students, though, the plan to attend college is never quite solid. Right up until move-in day, many things can go wrong that prevent them from enrolling — a family member gets sick, a parent loses a job, a major expense arises.

The pandemic has delivered one or more of those circumstances to many households. For families with little or no savings, for those clinging to a rung just above financial ruin, the crisis has turned college into an even more tenuous prospect. The newly imposed distance between students and schools makes these hardships more difficult to overcome.

Mitchell didn’t worry about Jones. For one thing, she had received close to a full-ride offer from Cornell University, which she finally accepted. A versatile artist fond of pastels, she kept herself grounded by drawing and painting. Though she missed her teachers, her routine, she found ways to stay focused on her goal of becoming a juvenile defense lawyer.

But Jones knew students who had given up on school and stopped turning in their work. “The struggle for many kids is that they’re having to be so independent now,” she says. “They think ‘I’m just not gonna do anything.’”

Those are the students Mitchell worries about. Some had parents who weren’t so encouraging. Some felt more at home around classmates they could no longer see each day. “There are students who used to say ‘Yeah, I’m only doing the college thing,’” he says, “because I’m coming to this school every day.”

Now that school was a quiet building with empty desks, he worried some would end up saying Forget it. I don’t want to do it anymore.

No one had said those words to Mitchell this spring. And that, for him, was the scary part. He could work with a teenager who was having second thoughts about college, but only if he knew who it was before it was too late.

He did know that some families’ needs were growing. As the pandemic shut down businesses, some parents got laid off or furloughed. Some students got jobs at grocery stores or fast-food joints to help support their families. Some teenagers who already had part-time jobs doubled or tripled their hours. Several families said they just needed groceries, which, in some cases, the school helped them buy.

One senior had taken a job at Target because the pandemic prevented her mother from working. Though she had planned to go away to college, she figured she would have to stay home, earn money, and take classes at the University of the District of Columbia this fall unless the economy improved.

Michael Blackson was on the fence. He hoped to attend the State University of New York College at Cortland. He just had to figure out how to cover the financial-aid gap of about $16,000 a year.

His mother had promised to help pay, but he didn’t want her to take out loans. The museum where she worked had closed. She worked at a nursing home, too, but it didn’t pay a lot.

Blackson, an aspiring teacher who hopes to major in history and Spanish, wasn’t giving up. With Mitchell’s encouragement, he had applied for three scholarships and was waiting to hear back.

But he was confronting “mental barriers,” too. Distance learning sucked, he said, because it robbed him of the chance to ask questions and process answers in the moment, to talk with his peers about ideas the course sparked. Blackson especially missed his senior seminar, which Mitchell taught. It was a yearlong course all about the admissions process.
“It boosted my confidence,” he says. “It made me feel like a good student, that I was fit for college.”

Now, he finds that feeling harder to maintain. While waiting to find out if college is still possible, he often plays calming music, including his favorite album: George Harrison’s *All Things Must Pass*.

Mitchell and his fellow advisers have been holding virtual office hours three days a week. For 90 minutes, students can pop in and out as needed. He has managed to use online tools to help students compare their financial-aid offers.

But some tasks aren’t so easy to manage virtually. Like verification, an onerous process that requires selected federal-aid applicants to submit additional information to colleges. Some colleges weren’t accepting the required documents via email. Some students didn’t have the ability to fax or scan the required documents from home.

“I’m like, how do you want us to do this?” Mitchell says. “I can’t go and knock on a kid’s door and say ‘Give me the documents’ and then run and drop it off in the mail.”

Counselors who advise low-income students, can’t confine their work to the school day. Mitchell has long believed that. So he gives students and parents his cellphone number. *Call or text, he tells them, whenever you have a question.*

Sometimes, they call him before the sun rises. Sometimes, they call him close to midnight. They call him with questions about financial-aid forms and many other riddles of the admissions process.

Sometimes, teenagers call him after intense arguments with their parents. *Mr. Mitchell, tell me what I should do.*

This spring, many Americans sheltering at home can pride themselves on doing their part to flatten the curve and promote public safety. But some of Mitchell’s students tell him that, for one reason or another, they don’t feel safe at home.

*Where,* he asks himself, *do I tell them to go?*

In some cases, he has known students well enough to say, “Why not go to grandma’s place tonight?” This spring, though, students fear they might make older relatives sick.

Over the years, when teenagers have called to discuss their problems, he has done his best to listen and distract them a bit. He has told them corny jokes. He has talked with them about Lil Jon, Lil Uzi Vert — rappers whose names they’re surprised he knows. He has sung them songs, like DJ Khaled’s 2017 hit “Shining,” which comes to life in repetition (“Shinin,’ shinin,’ shinin,’ shinin,’ yeah (shinin,’ yeah) …”

Each time, Mitchell tries to give students some “juice,” enough to get them through.

*Just hang on,* he tells them.

But the pandemic has taken a toll. He heard it in the voice of a frantic mother who called him one Monday in April. Her daughter, she told him, was distraught.

Mitchell knew the young woman well. She was a top-notch student living in a chaotic household. The spring of her senior year was going like this:
She had received acceptances from several colleges, but she thought the financial-aid packages fell short of what she needed.

She had been trying to keep up with schoolwork while sharing a small apartment with her mother, and the two of them had been arguing a lot.

She was worried about taking Advanced Placement exams on an unreliable computer.

She knew that her mother, who was out of work, might not be able to keep paying for internet service.

*It’s too much for her,* the mother told Mitchell.

He tried to reassure her. *Relax,* he said. *Tell her to take deep breaths.*

He urged her to call a doctor right away and get her daughter some help. And she did.

A week or so later, Mitchell and the young woman chatted twice on Google Hangouts. She seemed calmer, more focused, than before. When they sorted through her financial-aid offers together, the numbers looked better than she had first thought. He could feel her relief through his laptop screen. This was her chance to free herself from poverty.

She’s determined to enroll at a four-year college in August, and Mitchell believes that she will. Still, no one knows when in-person instruction might resume on a given campus. No one can say what she or any other freshman will experience four months from now.

Mitchell can picture two scenarios.

In one, she’s spending hours in the campus library. She’s strolling to the cafeteria with friends. She’s smiling — a happy-go-lucky kid for the first time.

In the other, she’s confined to the same apartment in D.C. Stuck in front of a screen. Disconnected once more.

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*This story is part of a series, Broken Ladder, examining the role of higher education in social mobility. It was made possible by a grant of $149,994 from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, which has no role in our editorial decision-making.*

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