

In Memoriam: Dr. A. Frank Mayadas

Peter Shea
Editor-in-Chief, *Online Learning*
Professor, School of Education, University at Albany

Eric Fredericksen,
Associate Vice President for Online Learning &
Professor of Educational Leadership, University of Rochester

Anthony Picciano
Professor, Hunter College and CUNY Graduate Center, School of Education

The world of online learning suffered a significant loss recently with the passing of Dr. A. Frank Mayadas, former Chair of the Board of Directors of the Online Learning Consortium. An early pioneer and a visionary behind what were then known as asynchronous learning networks (the “ALN” in the former name of the *Online Learning Journal*, JALN). Prior to his role with the OLC, Frank (to those who had the privilege to know him), was the program officer for the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation’s *Anytime, Anyplace Learning Program* (AALP), which began under the tenure of his colleague Dr. Ralph Gomery, President of the Foundation.

Under Franks thoughtful guidance, the AALP program provided more than \$70M in start-up funding for the early asynchronous online programs for many of the country’s largest public systems of higher education: The State University of New York, The City University of New York, The University of Massachusetts System, The University of Illinois System, The University of Central Florida, The University of Maryland University College, Penn State World Campus, and many other institutions that would go on to serve tens of millions of students.

Beyond his stewardship of the financial resources from the Sloan Foundation, Frank’s role as an advisor proved valuable. He was a kind and supportive colleague and friend; he welcomed visits to the Sloan Foundation offices in Manhattan. We treasured his encouragement, which was forceful and had no end. We appreciated his insight and his abundant sense of humor. Many of us are truly grateful that the relationship with Frank continued after the grants. For some of us, this good fortune lasted more than three decades.

It is no exaggeration to say that Frank reshaped higher education as we have come to know it. Through Frank’s efforts, we saw a transformation from a centuries-old form of physical distance education to the birth of a new interactive medium, a new pedagogy, and a new system called “online learning.” The system led to the development of new theories of teaching and learning, (including, e.g. the Community of Inquiry model), which became possible only through the implementation of asynchronous learning networks in which student-to-student interaction was feasible at increasing scale. The now ubiquitous learning management system (LMS) itself was an outgrowth of earlier models of asynchronous learning networks and the homegrown systems that were made possible through funding from AALP.

Organizationally, online learning required the development of new administrative structures and roles and an explosive growth in instructional design and faculty professional development. In the 90s, Frank had the foresight to bring together the early Sloan grantees to confer about what

he dubbed the five pillars: faculty experience, student experience, learning effectiveness, access, and scale.

Frank's view of "network" was not always related to technology. The meaningful definition for him was a network of people—students and professors. As the *Anytime, Anyplace Learning Program* grew, the definition of "network" expanded to include a connection among colleges and universities. Frank sponsored meetings for grantees to get together and share their experiences. He reveled in our updates on progress and growth. Our first sessions were possible around a single conference room table. These early meetings grew into larger and larger conferences organized under the Sloan Consortium (and later, the Online Learning Consortium).

The entire notion of blended learning was launched through these early conferences and supported through Frank's "localness" initiative with the assistance of luminaries such as Mary Niemiec and Tanya Joosten. For decades, the Sloan Consortium became the "go to" place to learn and share what has arguably become the most popular mode of learning throughout the world.

Frank was a champion for research. He was a very early advocate for collecting data on the faculty and student experience, especially in institutions scaling up. He urged us to publish, present, and share our work to benefit others who were just getting started. He sponsored research workshops and retreats that yielded some of the field's first books. He took great pride in the research community for online education. As the *Online Learning Journal* kicks off its 30th year of publication (and its 12th as OLJ) we must offer a word of thanks to Frank who provided the backing and vision for the earlier iteration of the journal (known as the *Journal of Asynchronous Learning Networks*). Frank's recognition of the tremendous opportunity to develop a scholarship of online teaching and learning encouraged many early scholars (including Randy Garrison, Terry Anderson, Karen Swan, Chuck Dziuban, Starr Roxanne Hiltz, and Murray Turroff) first published in *JALN*.

You might argue that Frank's contributions may not have been the LMS, or that online and blended learning might have happened without him, that the growth in new roles and in the scholarship of online teaching and learning might have occurred anyway. Nonetheless, Frank's greatest gift may have been his quiet but confident leadership. We don't believe that the technologies, roles, pedagogies, organizations, and scholarship would exist in their current configurations if Frank had not taken the initiative to direct the process. Certainly, we would not have had them so quickly.

Was Frank's contribution consequential? Ask the tens of millions of learners who were able to access higher education who otherwise would have been left on the sidelines. Without Frank's agenda, foresight, and commitment, we might have had to imagine the pandemic period without online learning. In the final analysis, we believe that Frank's leadership led to the higher education ecosystem we see today, one in which the only area of growth in US college enrollments has been via online learning, and one in which anyone, anywhere, has the opportunity to improve their station in life through higher education.

This was the original mission of Frank Mayadas, one that met with wild success. His passing marks the end of an era.