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# How Should Colleges Prepare for a Post-Pandemic World?

Anticipate and plan for change rather than merely hope that it will not arrive.

By *Brian Rosenberg* | APRIL 13, 2020

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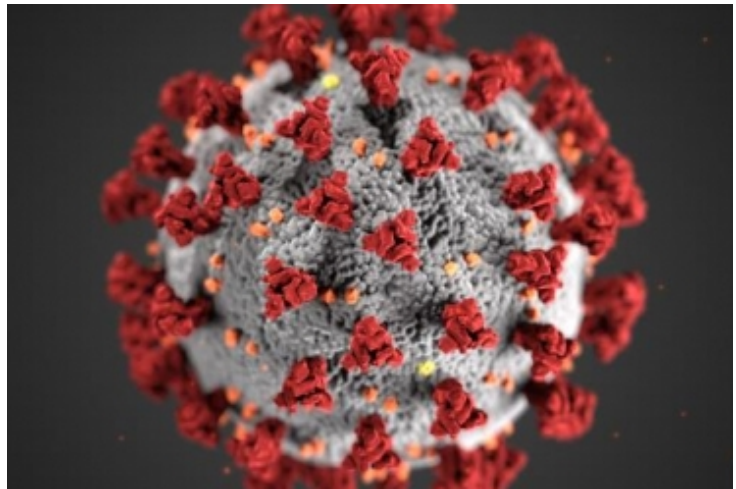
If one were to invent a crisis uniquely and diabolically designed to undermine the foundations of traditional colleges and universities, it might look very much like the current global pandemic. An industry that for decades has seemed immune to radical change has been confronted by an enemy that appears to turn its strengths into weaknesses and its defining characteristics into vulnerabilities.

Higher education, in its traditional form, promises many things — vocational preparation, rites of passage, a broadening of the mind — but at its heart what it promises is closeness: closeness between students and their teachers, closeness among students in classrooms and residence halls, closeness on sports teams and in organizations, lifelong closeness among graduates. Whether it is a small liberal-arts college promoting a low student-to-faculty ratio or a Division I powerhouse promising cheering crowds of students at football games, the narrative that draws students to college campuses is one of community.

## Coronavirus Hits Campus

As colleges and universities have struggled to devise policies to respond to the quickly evolving situation, here are links to *The Chronicle's* key coverage of how this worldwide health crisis is affecting campuses.

- For Would-Be Academics, Now Is the Time to Get Serious About Plan B
- Under Covid-19, University Budgets Like We've Never Seen Before ✓ PREMIUM
- Should You Keep Working on That Book Manuscript?



Alma mater, "generous mother": Alumni of a college imagine themselves as part of a family, bound together by common experiences and common values.

Now we have a disease that has pathologized closeness. Working side by side with a professor in a laboratory? Forbidden. Meeting with an adviser in an office to discuss one's academic future? Impossible. Living together, dining together, studying together? Banned by medical advice and often by governmental edict.

It is true that some of these activities can be approximated by their virtual equivalents, but if the virtual is an adequate substitute for the real, what is the point — what is the value — of the real?

Certainly it is possible that at the conclusion of this extended period of forced isolation, people will so crave contact that the traditional college experience will become even more prized. There are, however, reasons to doubt whether that outcome is likely.

First, that traditional experience is staggeringly expensive, and the pandemic is likely to leave economic devastation in its wake. If families were struggling to afford the cost of college a year ago, imagine the financial challenges many will face in 2021. Colleges that have lost enormous sums of money will be attempting to attract students from families

that have lost income and savings: That does not seem like a recipe for success. The wealthiest and most prestigious institutions might be able to resume something approaching business as usual, but they will be the exception, not the rule. Most will be forced to provide more financial aid and fewer services with fewer people.

Second, it seems almost inevitable that the current period of forced isolation will be followed by a period — perhaps an extended period — of voluntary separation. Until and unless a vaccine is developed and universally distributed, Covid-19 will remain a recurrent part of our lives. Even after the virus is eradicated, the fear of contact will not immediately dissipate. One of the great unanswerable questions of the moment is how people will behave in a post-Covid-19 world. How soon will people return to baseball games? How soon will they re-patronize restaurants? How soon will they return to college campuses? The viral epidemic will almost certainly be more short-lived than the epidemic of anxiety and the instinct to remain apart.

Finally, and most interesting, will people find the model of distance learning that has been forced upon us to be satisfactory? Almost no one will claim, I believe, that it is in most instances as good as the teaching and learning that take place on most college campuses. My own early experience with an exclusively virtual world is that it is serviceable but exhausting and, in some ineffable way, deeply unsatisfying. But the question will not be whether distance learning is as good as on-campus learning; rather, it will be, Is distance learning good enough in a world of sharply diminished resources? For no small number of families, I suspect, the answer will be yes.

**A**ssuming that my rather dire assumptions are correct — and I hope they are not — what is the best way for colleges to prepare for the post-pandemic world? In this instance, as in most others, it is better to anticipate and plan for change than merely to hope that it will not arrive. I would focus on two areas that seem particularly ripe for evolution and that hold some potential to lower the cost while preserving much of the value of traditional colleges.

I would be looking right now at potential changes in the traditional academic calendar, which is almost unique in its inefficiency. Many campuses across the country are in full operation for only eight or nine months a year. This is a luxury that we can no longer

afford and — more important — that students can no longer afford. My guess is that many colleges will be forced in 2020-21 to experiment with variations on the traditional calendar that include a fuller use of both winter and summer breaks. If at least some of those changes became permanent, it would allow colleges to educate more students or to educate them more efficiently or both. The simplest way to lower the cost of college is probably to eliminate the long breaks and make it easier for students to graduate in three years.

I would also pay careful attention to the lessons learned from this period of distance learning. What works and what does not? For what courses and subjects is a distance model a less expensive but still highly effective way to teach. Can a hybrid model of in-person and online instruction bend the cost curve of higher education? Like it or not, we are living in a real-time laboratory in which such questions can be asked and answered. The answers should not be ignored or casually dismissed.

For decades traditional higher education has not deviated from its fidelity to the aphorism attributed to the future U.S. president James Garfield, that the ideal college was embodied by Mark Hopkins — a former president of Williams College — on one end of a log and a student on the other. Now, for the first time, we must add a qualifier: The log must be more than six feet long or, better still, a virtual background on Zoom.

Things have changed.

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*This article is part of:*

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