

Back to the New Normal: Finding Efficiencies and Managing Expenses

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Our New Normal

A year into the pandemic, many institutions are finally beginning to see the light at the end of the tunnel. With many states re-opening and record numbers of vaccines being distributed, campuses are showing cautious optimism for returning to in-person learning. As institutions look towards the future, however, it's becoming increasingly clear that our 'return to normal' will be quite different than before with the digital transformation of institutions becoming increasingly important.

While survey results from Inside Higher Ed's 2021 Survey of College and University Presidents show leaders are optimistic about their future financial stability, only 46% strongly agreed that they were able to "implement some positive, long-lasting institutional changes during the pandemic." The survey also highlighted how only 68% of leaders strongly or somewhat agree they have the "right tools and processes" to respond quickly to needed changes. As institutions develop their plan for financial stability for the future and beyond, having the right tools in place becomes more important now than ever.

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Robin Hanselman
VP Sales, Vertical Markets
Emburse Chrome River

Introduction

The pandemic has been a huge shock for American higher education. Every college has been affected. But now colleges and universities are seeing the end of the pandemic in sight. Many are hoping for a normal – or somewhat normal – fall semester.

This raises an interesting question for colleges. Which practices that they adopted to save money and to be more efficient during the pandemic should they keep now? Some colleges have actually thrived – at least financially – during the last year. Others have struggled. The articles in this booklet examine the strategies of colleges and universities during this last year – and moving forward.

Inside Higher Ed will continue to cover these issues. We welcome your feedback on this booklet and ideas for future coverage.

–The Editors

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A Pandemic Financial Success Story?

Endicott College's strength during the pandemic highlights the importance of diverse revenue streams. What might it teach other small private colleges?

By **Emma Whitford** // April 6, 2021

Endicott College is in a better financial position now than it was before the pandemic, according to its president. After one of higher education's most difficult years, marked by enrollment declines, furloughs, layoffs and steep budget cuts, Endicott's success stands out.

The small private, nonprofit college in Beverly, Mass., recently trumpeted its accomplishments in a [press release](#): its endowment has grown to \$119 million, no employees were laid off or furloughed during the pandemic, enrollment hasn't wavered and the college maintained its study abroad program this academic year.

It's the first college Jim Hundrieser is aware of that is coming out of the pandemic doing better than it was a year ago. Hundrieser, vice president for consulting and business development at the National Association of College and University Business Officers, has seen other colleges boast about single victories. For example, Florida Southern College, Belmont University and Vanderbilt University did not lay off any employees during the pandemic, he said. But no announcements have been as broad as Endicott's.

Last spring, experts worried that small private colleges would be especially squeezed by pandem-



ENDICOTT COLLEGE

Endicott College in Beverly, Mass., reports strong financial performance through the pandemic, which has stressed some other small private colleges.

ic-related enrollment declines, unforeseen expenses and a volatile stock market. For some, like [Becker College](#), [Concordia College in New York](#), [Pine Manor College](#) and [Mills College](#), the pandemic did push leaders to decide to merge or close.

But closure concerns may be overblown, Hundrieser said.

"We talk about all the school closures, but proportionally there haven't been many," he said. "People predicted hundreds, but we haven't

seen hundreds. There have been a few."

Right now, Hundrieser doesn't see a clear pattern to show which types of private colleges fared better through the past year than others. He pointed to a few prudent financial decisions that likely helped certain institutions, including disciplined budgeting that didn't result in recurring deficits, setting aside money for cash reserves and maintaining low debt levels.

It's possible that institutions that

A Pandemic Financial Success Story? (cont.)

cater to wealthy, white students – whose family finances have, on average, fared better during the pandemic than those of students of color or low-income students – had a leg up through the past year. Experts also suspect that institutions with strong brand power and greater wealth may have continued to grow despite the pandemic.

But as the pandemic winds down, it's also possible that fears of widespread closures could wane and a few more success stories will emerge.

So how could Endicott – and another other institutions like it – do so well during year of exceptional turmoil?

Enrollment and Retention

In fall 2019, Endicott welcomed its largest-ever incoming class with 820 new students. This fall, it added 780 students, and it is projecting an incoming class of 800 for fall 2021.

"Enrollment is strong," said Steven DiSalvo, president of Endicott. "We're tracking about 40 heads over our goal, year to date, in terms of deposits. This current year, we started the year over our budgeted goal and we had good retention."

Endicott has had students on campus since September, and the busy campus helped enormously with admissions, DiSalvo said.

"When we opened the semester in September, we were running tours. And the comment that we were hearing from families is that it was so wonderful to be on a college campus where there is activity, where you see students and



We talk about all the school closures, but proportionally there haven't been many. People predicted hundreds, but we haven't seen hundreds. There have been a few.



you see faculty members," DiSalvo said. "Many have done self-guided tours at other institutions, and there wasn't anybody there."

Endicott was able to reopen in person thanks to a rigorous testing program that required students and employees to be tested once a week, and which allowed the college to keep COVID-19 cases under control.

The college is also earning more tuition revenue per student than some other private colleges, due in part to a low tuition discount rate. A tuition discount rate is the percentage of the tuition sticker price that a college subsidizes with financial aid. Endicott's discount rate averages 38 percent, which is lower than the **51.2 percent average** for all private, nonprofit four-year colleges.

Ripon College in Wisconsin also has reason to celebrate. It has maintained steady enrollment levels through the pandemic. So far this spring, the college received 20 percent more tuition deposits than

it did at the same time last year. Ripon is also on track to collect more deposits this year than it has in nearly 50 years. The private non-profit college currently enrolls 816 students.

Ripon's president, Zach Messitte, attributes the enrollment growth in part to the fact that many students are looking to attend college closer to home during the pandemic. Ripon enrolls two-thirds of its students from within Wisconsin, and half of the remaining third come from neighboring states, Messitte said.

"In a pandemic, when people are nervous about traveling and going far away from home, people may have actually looked and said, 'Actually, no, I think I'm going to stay closer to home for the next few years of my education,'" Messitte said. "I think we've benefited that way."

In some ways, Endicott's enrollment stability through the pandemic is unsurprising. Only 16 percent of Endicott students are eligible for

A Pandemic Financial Success Story? (cont.)

the federal Pell Grant, which can be considered a proxy for low-income status. By comparison, **about 30 percent** of students at all four-year private colleges received Pell Grants during the 2018-19 academic year, the most recent year for which data is available from the National Center for Education Statistics.

The demographics at Endicott may have provided a cushion against pandemic-caused enrollment declines. Endicott's student body is overwhelmingly white – 82 percent of Endicott students are white, 4 percent are Hispanic or Latino, 2 percent are Asian and 2 percent are Black or African American, according to NCES. White, wealthy and middle-class students were less likely to **leave higher education** during the pandemic than some of their nonwhite, **low-income peers**.

White and wealthy Americans were also more likely to maintain financial stability or even grow their finances during the pandemic, according to a **March survey** from the Pew Research Center. About four in 10 upper-income adults – defined as adults who earn more than double the median family income according to Pew's **American Trends Panel** – say their family's financial situation has improved during the pandemic. One in 10 upper-income adults say their family's financial situation has worsened in the last year. By comparison, only two in 10 lower-income adults – adults who make less than two-thirds the median family income – say their family's financial situation has improved during the pandemic, and a third of lower-income adults report

“

When we opened the semester in September, we were running tours. And the comment that we were hearing from families is that it was so wonderful to be on a college campus where there is activity, where you see students and you see faculty members.

”

that it has worsened.

The Pew survey also showed that financial stability during the pandemic varies somewhat by race. Two-thirds of Black Americans and 59 percent of Hispanic Americans said in March that their finances are in fair or poor shape, compared with 40 percent of white Americans who said the same.

That said, Endicott's low-income students still returned to the college through the pandemic, DiSalvo said. When the college refunded \$9.2 million in prorated room and board fees last spring, it gave students and families three options: they could opt for a direct refund, apply the money to future room and board expenses, or donate it to the Wings fund. The Wings fund is intended to provide additional financial aid to students facing economic hardship during the pandemic. The college raised more than \$250,000 for the fund.

“We did not have to reach into operating expenses to help those students. These were families helping

each other bridge the gap to allow students that extra semester or two of additional financial aid,” DiSalvo said. “We're able to retain those students at all levels, particularly at lower income levels, at the same rate we did before.”

Diverse Revenue Streams

The anchor of Endicott's financial security, particularly at the beginning of the pandemic, was its auxiliary revenue. The college makes up about 18 percent of its budget with income from auxiliary services. Its picturesque campus on the coast is a popular spot for events, especially weddings – Endicott hosted 127 of them the year before the pandemic.

Even after COVID-19 forced a temporary ban on large gatherings, Endicott had enough cash from prior events that it could cover additional, unforeseen expenses.

“We had enough excess cash on hand to absorb some of the unexpected expenses that came about, like the refunding of room and board,” DiSalvo said.

A Pandemic Financial Success Story? (cont.)

In all, Endicott spent about \$5 million on COVID-19-prevention-related expenses, including personal protective equipment, signage, additional personnel and testing. Regular COVID-19 testing was by far the largest expense, requiring \$2 million.

Like most colleges, Endicott did a bit of belt-tightening at the outset of the pandemic. College officials slimmed down travel expenses, and staff and administrators did not receive a cost of living adjustment, although faculty members did.

Leftover auxiliary revenue and federal assistance from the CARES Act stimulus package helped the college get through the academic year without furloughing or laying off any employees.

Endicott's financial buffer, funded by auxiliary revenue, is exactly why colleges should seek to diversify their revenue streams, NACUBO's Hundrieser said.

"It's a great case study on how to figure out how to maximize your facilities and how do you push yourself to think about alternative revenue streams," Hundrieser said. "This is another reminder of the fragile business models that exist today, and that institutions need to be thinking holistically about how to diversify their revenues and be less tuition dependent."

The college also managed to keep study abroad operating this academic year by negotiating postponed start dates with its partners abroad. More than 70 students participated in the college's study abroad programs in Madrid; Flor-



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ence, Italy; and Cork, Ireland. Endicott is expecting between 130 and 140 students to go abroad next fall.

Federal Aid

Endicott received \$2 million in federal relief through the CARES Act, and half of that was passed through to students as direct financial assistance as required by law. The college is expecting to get another \$5 million or \$6 million, some of which will also go directly to students.

Hundrieser warned against using a few colleges' success stories as evidence that the federal aid distribution was botched or that it was unnecessary.

"I do think some will make that leap – 'Oh, see, we gave them all this free money and they didn't need it.' I think there's always some who are looking for the negative angle," Hundrieser said.

But many more colleges have needed the relief to stay afloat.

"I've talked to a whole lot of schools

who have said the exact opposite," Hundrieser said. "That 'Without this aid and support, we would not know what we'd do, or the layoffs would have been so massive.'"

Endowment

Ripon announced last week that its endowment has grown to over \$100 million for the first time. Just over a decade ago, the endowment was only \$35 million.

A lot of the growth was funded through a five-year giving campaign, which began before Messitte, Ripon's president, arrived at the college.

"People thought they were nuts," Messitte said. "Coming out of the Great Recession, people aren't going to have money; people are going to be very nervous about making contributions to their alma mater. But they persevered."

In total, Ripon raised \$67 million through the campaign, \$17 million more than it had anticipated.

Endicott also saw its endowment

A Pandemic Financial Success Story? (cont.)

grow this year amid market volatility. Prior to the pandemic, the Endicott endowment totaled about \$100 million, and it dipped to \$87 million when the market crashed last spring. Now the endowment sits at \$120 million.

Endicott never spent the principal of its endowment to cover unexpected expenses.

"We got the full effect of the market rebound because the principal was kept intact," said DiSalvo, Endicott's president.

In a recent conversation with a large bank, DiSalvo said he was told that of the 52 higher education institutions the bank worked with, only two – Endicott and one other

– did not dig into their endowment to pay for COVID-19-related expenses.

For years, the private higher education market has trended toward a landscape in which wealthy, successful institutions continue to grow and smaller, less resourced institutions struggle to continue to fundraise and attract students, said Susan Shaffer, vice president of the higher education practice at Moody's Investors Service.

"The ones that have greater wealth, and a stronger brand and reputation, do well and continue to do well, because they're building on the strengths that they already have," Shaffer said. "There are others that are small, with not as

much wealth, not as much brand recognition and probably a really regional draw. They perhaps have not, over time, evolved as much as they could have in terms of meeting what students and parents and families want from college."

The pandemic likely widened this gap, but it also presented an opportunity for the market to shift to benefit colleges that hadn't been as successful before the pandemic, she said.

"The problems were there, and it certainly exacerbated problems," Shaffer said. "The flip side of that is it could also spur change. Higher education is not typically an area that changes super quickly, and guess what? It did." ■

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RHONDA CATON
Procurement Director

Campus Zero

Lake Washington Institute of Technology was likely the first college in the United States to be affected by COVID-19. One year out, many things have changed.

By **Lilah Burke** // January 28, 2021

On Feb. 29, 2020, Suzanne Ames was in downtown Seattle giving a workshop at the National Community College Baccalaureate Conference. Ames is vice president of instruction at Lake Washington Institute of Technology, a public technical college about a 20-minute drive east of the city.

“Coronavirus” was, at the time, a word just starting to climb out from the back pages of newspapers. The United States, on Feb. 28, had only 64 confirmed cases of the emerging virus. But that morning, local news outlets reported that Life Care Center of Kirkland, a nursing home in the area, had two confirmed cases, with nearly 50 people experiencing symptoms. It was America’s new epicenter.

Eventually, 42 people associated with Life Care Center of Kirkland died of COVID-19. This was before all that, before masks and tests, quarantines and social distancing.

“A dean of instruction called me to tell me that we had nursing and physical therapy students and faculty at the Life Care Center for their clinicals,” Ames said. They had been there just the day before. “It became very clear that LWTech was in the heart of the epicenter.”

Shortly after, Ames got another call. A different dean had been contacted by state officials. They



LAKE WASHINGTON INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

asked if college facilities could be commandeered to store dead bodies if necessary.

“At that point there was no mistaking that this was real.”

LWTech is very likely the first college in the country that was impacted by COVID-19. Officials, students and faculty there recount experiences that are, at this point, the norm at institutions across the country – feelings of getting sick, of being scared, of running on empty. But there are also feelings of gratitude, of hope, acceptance

and pride. This was not, by any means, a normal year.

‘Out of Control’

Ruth Gelbach, a first-year nursing student at LWTech, was at Life Care Center of Kirkland with 15 other students for her clinical course on Feb. 28. She had heard of COVID-19. Nursing students had read about it in pathophysiology. But she thought nothing of it that day at Life Care.

“We just thought there was a flu or cold virus going through the nursing home, which is not at all un-

Campus Zero (cont.)

usual," she said. But near the end of the day, students were told that the nursing home was in touch with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

After the news of the COVID-19 cases at Life Care Center broke, the college was left scrambling.

"It became very clear that we were alone in this. We couldn't get officials on the phone. We couldn't get answers. No one had answers," Ames said. "We were in uncharted waters." The college closed campus for two days for deep cleaning.

"This was really back when we didn't know what quarantine meant. We didn't have the vocabulary and the understanding of the disease that we do now. We weren't masked," said President Amy Morrison. "I didn't have public health advice to give them right away."

It took health officials three days after initial exposure to recommend that the students and faculty self-quarantine, but diagnostic tests were still hard to come by.

Gelbach began to feel symptoms and grew worried. She has asthma and is a single mom to a young son. At the time, no one knew how the virus affected children. She and her cohort entered quarantine, and the college provided them with grocery store gift cards to make up for lost wages from their outside employment. Ames and a college dean started doing contact tracing themselves.

Theresa Cadondon was in class when she began to feel symptoms of COVID-19, a high fever and body aches. She was studying physi-



A dean of instruction called me to tell me that we had nursing and physical therapy students and faculty at the Life Care Center for their clinicals," Ames said. They had been there just the day before. "It became very clear that LWTech was in the heart of the epicenter.



cal therapy assistance and hadn't been to Life Care. She still doesn't know exactly how she got infected.

"I never felt this bad before," she said.

A faculty member tested positive on March 4.

"At that point it became clear to me," Morrison said, "this virus was out of control."

Gelbach tested positive March 5. Cadondon tested positive March 6. Forty-five people were now in quarantine. That Friday, after a week of quick and sporadic closures, LWTech announced it was moving to online instruction. Other Washington institutions did the same.

The Year That Was

What happened next should be familiar: the college finished up the winter quarter online. Officials gave out tablets to students without computers and tied up the phone lines of technology companies, as large research universities followed close behind them.

In the spring, officials delayed the start of the quarter and announced that labs for the college's many technical programs, such as auto work and welding, would be given in the summer. Lectures would be online. Students in the culinary and baking associate programs recorded videos themselves whisking and pouring for their assignments.

"They made the call [to be online] prior to the spring quarter, and I'm really glad the college did that," said Andrea Westman, a professor of physical therapy and president of the faculty union. Announcing decisions well in advance allowed faculty time to prepare.

Similar to other technical and community colleges, LWTech lost 20 percent of enrolled students in the transition to online, mostly those who said that just wasn't the experience they wanted.

"We were actually relieved it wasn't more," Ames said. Some programs, like digital gaming and human resources management, instead saw growth.

Campus Zero (cont.)

That summer, students like Cadon don raced through their labs.

"We had to learn all the [physical therapy] techniques in a short amount of time. I'm grateful that we had that time to do that, but it was so fast," she said.

Like many institutions, LWTech made cuts. Some facilities workers and librarians, whose work had now become less pertinent, were laid off or furloughed in the spring. Then came voluntary separations and early retirement incentives. In September, anticipating difficult news from the Legislature, the college made a 7 percent budget cut, affecting 15 more staff positions. Over all, the college has seen a 15 percent enrollment drop, one that's even larger for students of color.

By this fall, LWTech had settled into a new normal. All classes are now hybrid, with hands-on activities in person and lectures online. While some students have struggled with the new format, others have thrived. The early childhood education program, now totally online, has so far seen increased enrollment and engagement from students, most of whom are adults working in childcare centers.

Officials are considering keeping

some of that flexibility in the future. Westman, the physical therapy professor, said her students have actually improved at mastering some tough topics, since they now have to listen to her lectures before meeting with her.

"We'll never give up on our learning signature of hands-on learning," said Ames, "but I do think the old model of coming to class five days a week is over for many programs in the future."

LWTech officials say they're committed to shepherding their students through the remainder of the pandemic. There are bright spots still ahead. Last March, for example, the physical therapy assistant program had to cancel its "pinning ceremony," where students graduating in the winter quarter get their certificates, invite their families and say goodbye to their professors.

"We never really got to send them off," Westman said. "I didn't even see them face-to-face because they were just uploading videos."

This year, while there will be no gathering or hors d'oeuvres, there will be an official ceremony online.

The college is beginning to think about bringing back some of the librarians and front-line staff who

were let go when everything began. Classes where Black and Indigenous students and other people of color or students with disabilities are struggling will be the first to come back to in-person, officials said.

Gelbach, the nursing student, said the pandemic has strengthened her resolve to be in health care. She's worked as a nursing assistant for 13 years and currently works on a COVID-19 floor.

Officials at the college said the experience made them more grateful for their colleagues, faculty and the resilience of their students.

"It has been the most challenging year of my career. I have found myself needing to answer questions that there are no answers to," Ames said. "And yet through it all, I have the most phenomenal instructional team."

Morrison echoed the sentiment.

"Twenty twenty was an incredibly humbling year. And one of which I am incredibly grateful for," she said. "I'm very grateful that the college hung in there together and to have the foresight to realize that we were the first, but we were not going to be the last college community impacted by COVID." ■

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<https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2021/03/03/first-college-impacted-covid-19-one-year-out>



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Eyeing a Crosstown Merger

Saint Joseph's University and the University of the Sciences make a play for scale and health-care programs, but issues of identity will need to be addressed.

By **Rick Seltzer** // February 12, 2021

A merger proposal between two long-standing private universities in Philadelphia that was revealed Wednesday seems to make sense from the perspective of the institutions' programs, scale, financial condition and the state of the higher education market.

But like any merger-and-acquisition activity between two unrelated universities with hundreds of years of their own history, the potential deal raises deep questions of identity and strategy. It prompts some renewed reflection on a fast-changing higher education market that's leaving some small institutions and their students with no simple options for the future.

The deal would have Saint Joseph's University, a 6,800-student institution on the western edge of Philadelphia, acquiring the University of the Sciences, a 2,400-student university in West Philadelphia. Saint Joseph's would keep its name, and leaders currently want Saint Joseph's to continue operating both institutions' campuses, which are located about five miles apart.

Few details are set in stone at this moment. Leaders at the two universities have signed a nonbinding letter of intent. They'll spend several months evaluating the proposal before making a call on whether it should move forward. In other words, both sides could still walk



CHICAGOMAYNE/WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

Saint Joseph's University is in talks to acquire the University of the Sciences in Philadelphia.

away if new rounds of expanded negotiations fall apart.

For now, they're saying glowing things about each other.

"Recently, a particularly promising and exciting opportunity has come to the fore," Mark C. Reed, president of Saint Joseph's, said Wednesday in a letter to faculty and staff members. "University of the Sciences, a premier health sciences university located less than five miles away, approached us as part of a structured and thoughtful process they decided to undertake.

We were quick to see many potential benefits of a combination and were happy to begin talks."

His counterpart at the University of the Sciences, Paul Katz, sounded similar notes.

"USciences is built upon a strong academic, geographic, and historical foundation," Katz said in the university's announcement to its faculty and staff members. "In exploring this partnership, we have the potential to be even stronger. We also believe in the rich history of Saint Joseph's and their com-

Eyeing a Crosstown Merger (cont.)

mitment to the same values that we hold dear.”

Neither university made their president available for interviews Thursday. They **told** *The Philadelphia Inquirer* that the proposed deal is about growth and scale but that it's too soon to say whether it could lead to job cuts.

Faculty members at the two institutions were optimistic and even enthusiastic about the deal's possibilities. Saint Joseph's is a small, liberal arts-focused Jesuit institution in a competitive higher education market that increasingly demands scale, they said. The University of the Sciences is even smaller and has faced greater financial challenges of late, but it brings a suite of desirable health-care programs to the table.

“I'm really excited,” said Ann Green, a professor in Saint Joseph's English department, president of its chapter of the American Association of University Professors and a past president of its Faculty Senate. “I think the partnership with the University of the Sciences brings a lot of new fields to Saint Joe's that would really benefit us, and hopefully they're as enthusiastic about liberal arts as we are. It gives everybody a lot more opportunity for growth.”

Green said she teaches a course in medical humanities. She's excited to work with physical and occupational therapy students, as well as other students interested in health professions, if the deal is completed.

Saint Joseph's **opened** its first new



For Saint Joseph's to be a Philadelphia university and not have a strong health presence beyond what we currently have, that would be tough.



school in three decades, the School of Health Studies and Education, in 2019. It was a foundation for health care-related expansion, said Ronald Dufresne, interim chair and associate professor of management and director of the leadership, ethics and organizational sustainability program at Saint Joseph's. But adding the University of the Sciences would represent a whole other level of opportunity.

The University of the Sciences, which was known as the Philadelphia College of Pharmacy and Sciences before 1998, considers itself the first college of pharmacy in North America. It was founded in 1821, making it older than Saint Joseph's, which opened in 1851.

“We have a great history and we do great work,” said Dufresne, who is also a past president of the Faculty Senate at Saint Joseph's. “We just haven't had a big presence in the broad health-care realm in ways that schools really need. We have a really great health studies program, but we're lacking all sorts of other programs in the health space.

To merge is a great way into that space.”

Still, many issues remain to be hammered out. Some students and faculty members at the University of the Sciences are uneasy with the idea of their health-care programs being absorbed by a university related to the Roman Catholic Church, with its widely publicized stance against contraception and abortion.

“It has been a question from the student perspective, for me and for many other faculty who are not Catholic and not Christian,” said Eric Pelletier, an assistant professor of physical therapy at the University of the Sciences and Faculty Senate president there. “I think there will be an open dialogue about that. I really believe that will be discussed. If such a merger happens, it will be with an understanding that we need academic freedom and freedom for research.”

Nonetheless, Pelletier described a largely warm reaction to the news that Saint Joseph's was a potential

Eyeing a Crosstown Merger (cont.)

acquisition partner. Faculty members, who knew USciences sought a deal, were wondering whom the partner would be and how well they would know it.

"It's interestingly positive, being a local university we're all familiar with," Pelletier said. "We know Saint Joe's in the community. I think with the potential of this large change, there is some anxiety. But I think it's more tempered with this sense of there is an opportunity here."

Universities' Challenges in a Tough Market

The University of the Sciences has been seeking to improve its market position in light of financial challenges. Its leaders have been open about seeking institutional partnerships. In 2019, the university [announced](#) agreements with Salus University to set up an optometric clinical site and give USciences students pathways toward doctoral degrees in audiology and master of medical science in physician assistant studies degrees.

In 2018, USciences executed a tuition reset, slashing annual undergraduate tuition and fees from \$39,994 to \$25,000. Professional program tuition also dropped. Undergraduate enrollment jumped from 1,231 in 2018-19 to 1,405 in 2019-20, although enrollment of graduate students, whose tuition was not reset, fell by seven students to 913.

Even so, the University of the Sciences has seen the number of its undergraduate applications fall and its acceptance rates rise since the 2018-19 academic year. Its



The partnership with the University of the Sciences brings a lot of new fields to Saint Joe's that would really benefit us, and hopefully they're as enthusiastic about liberal arts as we are.



endowment and similar funds declined from \$171.8 million in 2018 to \$145.6 million in 2020, according to [documents](#) filed for bondholders.

This December, Fitch Ratings downgraded its rating of the University of the Sciences bonds and revised its outlook to negative because the ratings agency didn't expect improving cash flow margins.

"The university continues to weather challenges presented by its business profile, characterized by volatile enrollment and demand and high tuition dependence, as well as declining but moderate capital needs," said a notice from Fitch explaining the move. "The Outlook is revised to Negative reflecting USciences inability to stabilize operations in the near term, which drives the need for ongoing support from its quasi-endowment and which relies heavily on investment returns for growth of its resource base."

Moody's Investors Service issued a similar downgrade earlier in the year. Both agencies kept the university's ratings in the lower range of investment grade, however.

Saint Joseph's offers the potential for a more secure future in the eyes of some faculty members at the University of the Sciences. Saint Joseph's net assets increased by almost \$1.8 million in the 2020 fiscal year, according to [audited financial statements](#). The University of the Sciences saw its net assets [decline](#) by about \$13.3 million.

The 2020 fiscal year was a difficult one for many institutions because of the COVID-19 pandemic. The divergence in the institutions' financial performance was even more stark in the prior year. Saint Joseph's added \$8.5 million in net assets, while USciences lost \$10.8 million

"From my perspective as a faculty member, it is having more finan-

Eyeing a Crosstown Merger (cont.)

cial stability and trying to worry less about drawing down the endowment," said Pelletier, the Faculty Senate president at USciences.

It should be noted, however, that Saint Joseph's is not a big fish in the pond – and the pond in Philadelphia isn't expected to grow. Saint Joseph's total head count, including undergraduates and graduate students, fell from 8,415 in the fall of 2016 to 7,362 in the fall of 2019. This fall, it fell by almost 600 more students.

Demographers project the number of traditional-age students entering college from the Philadelphia market and the Northeast to decline in coming years. **Projections** in well-known demographer Nathan Grawe's **new book** expect the number of high school graduates attending private four-year institutions after graduating from high school to be 5 percent lower in 2025 than it was in 2018 for Philadelphia. By 2035, the number is expected to be 36 percent lower than it was in 2018.

That's important because both Saint Joseph's and USciences draw heavily from the surrounding area. About four in 10 enrolling Saint Jo-

seph's students come from Pennsylvania, and another four or five in 10 have come from the Mid-Atlantic in recent years, according to **documents** filed for bondholders. That's not far from enrollment at the University of the Sciences, where 54 percent of students came from Pennsylvania in the fall of 2020 and 34 percent came from New Jersey.

Simply expanding outside the region isn't necessarily the answer. Demographic declines are expected to be felt in different ways across the country as a drop in birth rates following the Great Recession hits colleges and universities in the coming years.

The same trends are unfolding in the Northeast and across the country, said Omar Blaik, CEO of U3 Advisors in Philadelphia, which consulted with Marygrove College in Detroit as it faced challenges in recent years, ultimately **deciding** to repurpose its campus. U3 has done some work with USciences in the past, but not recently or regarding the new acquisition proposal.

"There is a stagnation in birth rates that probably will be with us for at least two decades if not longer, which basically is saying, in lay-

man's terms, we have more seats than warm bodies to fill those seats," Blaik said. "Who is being affected the most? It's the smaller colleges that have higher tuition than publics."

But Saint Joseph's reported the biggest enrollment declines over time in its College of Arts & Sciences. Its new School of Health Studies and Education received just under 100 deposits in its first two classes.

Eds and meds are extremely important to the Philadelphia economy. Eleven of the 15 largest private employers in Philadelphia were in education and health-care professions, according to a 2019 **report** from the Pew Charitable Trusts. Eight of the top nine largest employers were in those fields.

"For Saint Joseph's to be a Philadelphia university and not have a strong health presence beyond what we currently have, that would be tough," Dufresne said. "For us to be able to do it here with a merger, it's very much what Saint Ignatius, if he were alive today, would be doing – figuring out how to partner with others to advance the mission." ■

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<https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2021/02/12/saint-josephs-and-university-sciences-deal-built-potential-health-care-programs>

Vaccine Timing 'Fortunate' for Admissions

Colleges trumpet fall plans in recent weeks because they feel they need to share concrete information with prospective students. Good vaccine news helps, too.

By **Emma Whitford** // March 12, 2021

Good news about the COVID-19 vaccine couldn't have come at a better time for college admissions officers. Dozens of colleges and universities have recently announced that they'll be open in person this fall after waiting weeks or months to go public with fall plans.

Colleges' fall announcements **started a few weeks ago** as vaccination rates began to pick up, but student inboxes and news sites have been flooded with fall reopening news this month, due in part to the ongoing admissions season. Experts call March and April prime yield season, during which colleges and universities work tirelessly to build a strong incoming class. After a year of exhausting transitions, students are looking for certainty and normalcy, and promising those things could give institutions a leg up as admitted students decide where to enroll.

"After being in quarantine for the better part of a year, if not a year, many people – and that includes students – are anxious to get back to some semblance of normal," said David Hawkins, chief education and policy officer for the National Association for College Admission Counseling. "A big part of the residential college experience is arriving on campus and living in a dorm and doing the things that we all associate with college."

The stakes are high. **Undergraduate enrollment** across the country has



SEAN RAYFORD/STRINGER/GETTY IMAGES

Students walk on campus at the University of South Carolina, which will open fully in person this fall.

been declining since the pandemic began a year ago. It will take effort for colleges to bring students back into the higher education fold – especially students of color, who have left the sector at higher rates than their white peers during the pandemic.

"The idea that a college will be opening is big news to prospective students," Hawkins said. "That is an especially important message to get out to help ensure that the class you've enrolled is at least something close to what you would have projected in normal times."

Though colleges' fall plans may be primarily driven by public health news, communications to students and the timing of those communi-

cations are always strategic, Hawkins said. Stephanie Coldren, vice president for marketing and external relations at Goucher College, echoed Hawkins's comments and noted the importance of announcing an in-person fall semester for residential colleges like Goucher.

"If this past year taught us anything, it's that uncertainty has become a certainty in these times, and so the more that we can put out strong messaging that reinforces the fact that we will be open, we will be residential, it only reassures prospective students, current students and their families that we're moving in the right direction," Coldren said. "Part of what we offer is that residential experience and the commu-

Vaccine Timing 'Fortunate' for Admissions (cont.)

nity that is built out of being a residential campus.”

Goucher, a small private college just outside Baltimore, [said this week](#) that all students will be able to return to campus for the fall semester. Several other small private colleges, including [Blue Mountain College](#), [Finlandia University](#) and [Kentucky Wesleyan College](#), have announced in-person fall semesters.

Honest advertising is part of any good admissions strategy, said Ronald Rochon, president of the University of Southern Indiana. Being up front with students and parents about what kind of experience students will have at the university is essential to swaying their decision.

“Admissions is always on my mind with regard to, not just new people in seats, but also ways in which we convey a very accurate understanding of what people will receive when they come to the campus,” he said.

Public universities and university systems have also been churning out in-person-fall announcements in recent weeks. [The University of Tennessee](#) announced Thursday it would offer a fully in-person campus experience this fall, which means teaching in classrooms at capacity, returning to normal campus housing, reopening dining halls, fully staffing campus student services and allowing more fans at athletic events, among many other things. [The University of Alabama system](#) also announced this week that it would return to fully in-person instruction with no classroom capacity restrictions this fall. East Stroudsburg University, the [New Jersey Institute of Technology](#), the



After being in quarantine
for the better part of a year, if not a year,
many people – and that includes students –
are anxious to get back to some
semblance of normal.



University of Arizona system, the [University of Mississippi](#), [Mississippi State University](#) and the [University of South Carolina](#) were among those making similar announcements regarding this fall.

The timing of the vaccine rollout is fortunate, said Shannon Ellis, vice president of student services at the University of Nevada, Reno. University officials wanted to let students know what to expect for the upcoming fall semester but hesitated to make any announcements without more concrete public health information. With recent vaccine progress and updated information from county health officials, university leaders went public with their plans.

Because of the new information about the long-term effects of COVID-19, making a decision about this fall felt even more serious than past reopening decisions, Ellis said.

“We clearly understand that we’re talking about people’s lives and their health and not just getting sick for a short period of time,” she said. “There’s an extra responsibility in

considering bringing back students and faculty and staff who have not been back on campus for various reasons, whether it’s health or child-care or caring for an elder.”

Community colleges have also rolled out fall announcements in recent weeks. Itawamba Community College in Fulton, Miss., mostly returned to in-person instruction for the spring semester but recently announced it will offer in-person classes for the fall semester. The college went public with the fall plans because it knows that its prospective pool of students will be looking to make college decisions soon, Jay Allen, president of the college, wrote in an email.

Any bump from a reopening announcement may be blunted by the fact that so many colleges are doing it, and some college officials may have felt the need to go public with fall plans because their competitors were doing so. That wasn’t the case at Itawamba, Allen said.

“Often we lean on trends by other institutions to know what’s coming

Vaccine Timing 'Fortunate' for Admissions (cont.)

down the pipeline," he said. "However, this was a decision that had been discussed for months before we announced."

Rend Lake College in Ina, Ill., Northeast Mississippi Community College, **Grand Rapids Community College** in Michigan and **Ivy Tech Community College** in Indianapolis recently announced in-person fall semesters.

Not all colleges have planned to bring all students back in the fall. Several community colleges in California, which has been hit especially hard by COVID-19, have decided to stick with hybrid or online learning models through the calendar year. The **Los Rios Community College District**, which includes four community colleges near Sacramento, said it was planning a hybrid

online-in-person semester for fall 2021. The **San Mateo Community College District** will also remain mostly online for the fall 2021 semester.

Experts agree that no institution should make a decision about the fall based on admissions prospects alone. But whether they chose to open in person this fall or stay online, colleges would benefit from telling students what they're planning before the May decision deadline, Hawkins and Coldren said.

"It's advantageous for them to make that decision before May," Coldren said. "If a first-year student is between two different institutions and one is saying vehemently that they are going to open and the other is uncertain, it would make sense that the student would probably lean

more toward the institution that is prepared to open."

College officials are feeling optimistic about reopening, but none have forgotten last fall. Many institutions **announced in-person fall semesters last spring** only to **modify** or **reverse** their plans weeks before the fall semester began – or in some cases after students were already on campus. Lots of institutions are planning to continue masking, social distancing and enhanced cleaning protocols to keep their fall reopening plans as robust as possible.

"There's always a contingency that we will have to walk back," Coldren said. "With all of the uncertainty that we've dealt with, that's been a really real lesson that a lot of institutions have learned." ■

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<https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2021/03/12/why-colleges-are-racing-tell-students-they%E2%80%99ll-be-open-person-fall>

Don't Mess With the Kiddos

In reversal, Mount Holyoke says it will keep on-campus childcare center open – for a year.

By **Colleen Flaherty** // March 4, 2021

Budget cuts, layoffs, burnout: a year into the pandemic's hold on U.S. academe, faculty members aren't getting too many wins. So Mount Holyoke College quickly scrapping a plan to shutter its on-campus childcare center stands out.

"First, let me say how deeply sorry I am," Mount Holyoke president Sonya Stephens wrote in a campus memo this week, promising that the Gorse Children's Center would not in fact close on June 30, as **previously announced**. Instead, Stephens said that the college had secured a one-year contract extension with the center's corporate management partner, Bright Horizons, to ensure continued operations.

Stephens said the biggest flaw in the college's plan to close the center, announced last week, was that it had no "clear plan for continuity of care." Indeed, in recent days, enrolled families reported scrambling to secure spots in centers elsewhere in town and finding none were available. Several parents reported wait lists of a year or longer at alternate facilities, whereas they were given just four months' notice of the closure. Some professors also said the lack of transparency in the college's decision making about the center was symptomatic of bigger faculty-administrative trust issues on campus, which were documented in a recent faculty satisfaction survey.



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"As president, I take full responsibility for these errors, for the decision and for the enormous stress and turmoil it has caused," Stephens said in her reversal announcement. "The college leadership team and I continue to examine the errors and lessons we have all learned from this experience, and we commit to establishing more collaborative processes for decision-making on issues of such consequence."

Mount Holyoke initially said it was closing the center because an internal review found it presented equity issues. Specifically, the college only provides families a subsidy to the on-campus care center, and employees who send their children elsewhere for reasons including

cost don't get the same help. So instead of paying Bright Horizons \$325,000 annually to manage the center, Mount Holyoke said it would add \$100,000 to an existing emergency fund available to all employee families struggling with childcare needs.

Faculty and staff members immediately challenged that reasoning, however, accusing the administration of dressing up a blunt cost-cutting measure in language about equity. Some professors who would have qualified for the income-based childcare subsidy to the center said they never knew it existed, casting doubt on how many families benefit from the supposedly inequitable discount in the first place. Others

Don't Mess With the Kiddos (cont.)

faculty members of color said they felt safe sending their children to the on-campus center. And many said it was anything but equitable to be stripping hard-to-find childcare away from families during a crisis that has **disproportionately impacted academic women** – especially at a women's college.

Mount Holyoke faced **additional criticism** from local families who send their children to the center, saying closing it was a betrayal of community relations.

Calling the one-year contract extension an “interim solution,” Stephens in her email said the college “will maintain its commitment to expand financial support to all Mount Holyoke employees with young children in their care.” Any non-Gorse parents seeking support for childcare will be able to access the employee emergency fund beginning in July, she said.

“I know that all of my colleagues on the leadership team join me in making a firm commitment to do what will be required of each of us to restore trust and to move forward in our shared endeavors,” Stephens added.

Jessica Maier, an associate professor of art history at the center and a Gorse Children's Center parent, said the Mount Holyoke administration was apparently doing some “soul-searching on how this mistake came about” and that she hoped the



Many of us feel this is a very special place, in part for the community among students, faculty, staff and the larger area, and that very much includes our childcare center.



incident “is seen as a time to take stock of the shared governance process and to make transparency in decision making once again the norm.”

The contract extension is a “great relief” to center families and staff members, who will keep their jobs, and a “step in the right direction,” Maier continued. The one-year promise is not, however, “an explicit commitment to long-term, quality, on-campus childcare beyond next year.”

Only that, she said, “to me and to many others, would fully redress the situation and be consistent with Mount Holyoke's values.”

Kate Singer, associate professor of English, who sent her 7-year-old son to Gorse as a baby, toddler and preschooler and who still relies on the center for drop-in care during faculty

meetings and more, said she appreciated Stephens's apology. But the announcement falls short of a “directly needed commitment to financially sustainable on-campus childcare now and in the future,” she said.

“We need a creative, holistic vision for the college's financial and academic future, and that has yet to even be approached, in my mind,” Singer added. “Many of us feel this is a very special place, in part for the community among students, faculty, staff and the larger area, and that very much includes our childcare center.”

Mount Holyoke “has been a place that has allowed myself and all kinds of caregivers the ability to research, teach our students, learn from our students and have family and friends, too. I think in our world that is really something worth saving, building and hanging on to.” ■

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<https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2021/03/04/reversal-mount-holyoke-says-it-wont-close-childcare-center>

Moving From the Tactical to the Strategic

We can and should learn from our forced response to the pandemic, but we should not mistake unplanned, short-term adjustments for necessary long-term change, Mary B. Marcy advises.

By **Mary B. Marcy** // January 5, 2021

Since the pandemic commenced in earnest in the United States, colleges and universities have been scrambling to adapt. By necessity, that adaptation has been somewhat ad hoc and reactive as we struggle to understand the nuances of evolving public health protocols, wrestle with the realities of our budgets, attempt to support faculty and staff members, and try to respond to the profound impact on students and their learning.

In an *Inside Higher Ed* essay, Susan Resneck Pierce challenged university leaders to begin to think strategically and long term, rather than only managing the daunting tactical tasks of the moment. Her challenge caused me to reflect, and to develop a framework for beginning that conversation on our campuses.

Last spring, much was made of the academy's ability to move abruptly to online learning, seeing it as evidence that we are capable of rapid change if we simply decide to do it. But that assessment was premature – we adapted out of necessity. The work was profound, even heroic, but that does not mean we did so willingly or in a manner that is sustainable. It was akin to driving full speed on the interstate and blowing a tire: we used the spare from the trunk and that doughnut got us to the end of the semester,



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but no one would mistake it for a permanent solution.

The work of long-term adaptation to a changing higher education environment is still ahead of us. We can and should learn from our forced response to the pandemic, but we should not mistake unplanned, forced, short-term adjustments for necessary long-term change.

Our current state is not the new normal. It is a transition state, and our institutions are reacting as necessary to an environment that is still in flux. Despite an understandable desire to return to work and life “as it was,” we are also not

going back to the old normal.

While the new normal is not yet clear, and the old normal is unlikely to return for most campuses, there is much we can do to plan for a more sustainable and more educationally robust future when we emerge from the pandemic. Before the challenges of 2020, most of higher education was already facing intense demographic, financial and cultural pressures. All of those pressures have been exacerbated by the pandemic, the recession and the visible manifestation of racial inequities in our society.

Four essential questions can help us begin to think strategically

Moving From the Tactical to the Strategic (cont.)

about the future while continuing to adjust to a society and an educational model in flux.

No. 1: What has proved to be truly essential from our pre-pandemic operations and systems? For example, many campuses are finding that, at least for traditional-age students, the campus experience is essential for student persistence and satisfaction. That does not necessarily equate to only in-person classes, but it does mean that students need, in some basic sense, to “go to college” – to be in community with their peers, faculty and staff.

We are also finding that even – perhaps especially – in a largely remote learning environment, investment in professional faculty and staff development is essential. Higher education is still a personnel-driven enterprise, and any time fundamental change is undertaken, support for the people who must adapt to that change is key to its success.

There are other processes and traditions that do not fare well in a remote environment or social distancing model. Student recruitment without campus visits, the performing arts without a live audience, virtual commencements and distinguished lecture series conducted online are temporary replacements for more meaningful in-person engagement.

No. 2: What were we doing pre-pandemic that was unnecessary? This question is the converse of the first. While many faculty and staff mourn the loss of collegiality from campus gatherings both formal and informal, few miss interminable meetings or layers of bureaucracy.



The work of long-term adaptation to a changing higher education environment is still ahead of us. We can and should learn from our forced response to the pandemic, but we should not mistake unplanned, forced, short-term adjustments for necessary long-term change.



In fact, some find that more flexible hours and remote work have resulted in a more productive and preferable experience. To be sure, none of these ideas are new to the workplace or to higher education; the pandemic simply forced nearly all higher education institutions into this space for at least a few months. Now is the time to evaluate that experience and adopt new systems and processes that have proved to be effective.

No. 3: Should we permanently adopt some of our newly flexible systems for remote teaching and learning? Many campuses, even those committed to in-person learning and focused primarily on the liberal arts, invested heavily in recent months in online learning systems and faculty development. As a result, faculty members and students are exploring new avenues for hybrid learning, flipped classrooms and remote course delivery. Some of the outcomes have been surprising, as faculty find they are able to engage in multiple new ways with students and take advantage of the possibili-

ties of asynchronous learning. Other courses or faculty members do not adapt as well to the online modality.

Again, these methods of course delivery are not new to higher education, but the scale at which they were adopted across the country has created an opportunity for us to reconsider where we might use educational technology and flexible course delivery more strategically or effectively. In most cases, the answers to this question will be idiosyncratic to the institution and its faculty, but the pandemic has created an opportunity to learn and adopt new approaches that should not be lost once the necessity of remote learning dissipates.

No. 4: What strategic directions developed pre-pandemic should we revise, discard or perhaps even accelerate? The past year has brought into stark relief challenges to the higher education business model, and those pressures are only likely to increase, given the recession and highly restricted state budgets. Meanwhile, the decline in the number of high school graduates and

Moving From the Tactical to the Strategic (cont.)

demographic shifts in the traditional student population continue, with more first-generation students, Pell-eligible students and underrepresented students graduating from high school and seeking college degrees. The racial reckoning that has begun in earnest will not abate, and as more students of color enter our institutions, they will rightly expect a level of equity-mindedness that has often eluded us.

Strategic plans that do not already anticipate these changes can no longer ignore such imminent realities and will need to be revised. Programs and initiatives that were not designed to support a diverse student population, anticipated a traditional on-campus staffing model or failed to invest adequately in educational technology may have to be revisited. Those plans that were designed to adapt to the shifting demographic, financial and cultural realities may have to be



These methods of course delivery are not new to higher education, but the scale at which they were adopted across the country has created an opportunity for us to reconsider where we might use educational technology and flexible course delivery more strategically or effectively.



implemented with greater speed.

Even as the pandemic has caused suffering, trauma and shock to individuals and society, it has made incredible demands on every facet of higher education. As we move through the immediate crisis and plan for the future, we can evaluate

what we have learned from this unanticipated and painful experience. We need to face old realities anew, to nurture and revive what remains essential, and to craft a model of higher education that is responsive, vibrant and sustainable for the true new normal that is about to emerge. ■

Bio

Mary B. Marcy is the author of [The Small College Imperative: Models for Sustainable Futures](#) and president of Dominican University of California..

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<https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2021/01/05/colleges-shouldnt-mistake-forced-short-term-adjustments-pandemic-necessary-long>

Everything Won't Be Different

Michael S. Roth shares three lessons from the pandemic that should help guide colleges and universities in the future.

By **Michael S. Roth** // January 18, 2021

Everything will be different. How often we have heard this sentence over the last 20 years, and how quickly we forget it when we resume old habits. After the attacks of Sept. 11, the people who felt they could see the future were certain that national security, privacy, travel and the military would never be the same. After the Great Recession of 2008, we heard a similar refrain about banking, homeownership and the ways technology companies were thought to drive economic innovation.

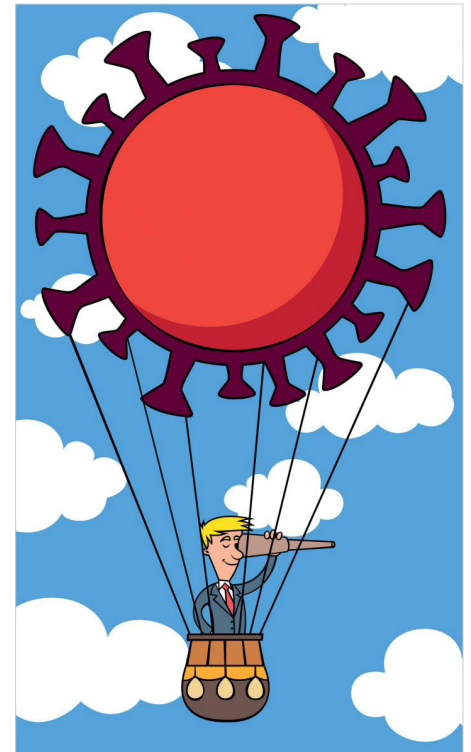
And now, as we slog through a horrifying winter of pandemic hospitalizations and death, and while new vaccines have stirred our hopes, those who are confident of their insights into “new normals” and who can feel in their bones that social behavior has been forever changed by social distancing are predicting that the post-pandemic world will be a brave new one – or at least a brand-new one.

Maybe the reaction of everything will be different is just meant to underscore the importance of what we've recently gone through. We want to believe that what's been happening to us and around us is so powerful that its reverberations will continue long after the events themselves are over. That's understandable, since it gives more seriousness to what we feel is a

life-changing event. And it is painfully obvious that this horrible plague is changing millions of lives around the world – as the death count grows higher, so many more are scarred, sometimes irreparably.

In higher education, some things will be different post-pandemic, especially if we can hold on to what we've learned over the past year. As we begin 2021, the pandemic is still at the forefront of concern, but I already see three areas in which we can make a difference at colleges and universities through the lessons we've learned over these last several months.

Inequality. Many people have noted how remote education has made extreme inequality among students more visible. Teaching on Zoom revealed more about student living conditions than many students – poor or wealthy – wanted exposed. And while we didn't discover the digital divide during the pandemic, its effects on learning and mental health were made more obvious. Many schools, colleges and universities were proactive in getting students technological tools, but not all educational institutions had the resources to do so. Without meals at educational institutions, many students just went hungry; this was true in inner-city elementary schools as well as at Ivy League universities.



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VECTORS/GETTY IMAGES

The reckoning with race that has coincided with the pandemic has awoken more instructors and administrators to the centrality of antiracist efforts to our educational missions. The pandemic experience has only reinforced the obligation of educational institutions to support their most vulnerable students, paying close attention to the intersections of racism and inequality. Just as front-line health workers and residents of nursing homes have been prioritized for vaccine distribution, higher education institutions should direct

Everything Won't Be Different (cont.)

financial aid efforts to the students whose economic conditions leave them most at risk of dropping out of college altogether.

Connection. While educators are understandably rather suspicious of technology, its power to make connections to students and other colleagues is clear. Notwithstanding all the complaints about Zoom fatigue, attendance at faculty meetings and committee workshops at my institution has been significantly better than it was when everyone was on campus. And from crisis communications to routine governance matters, engagement with colleagues in virtual meetings seemed to allow for new voices to be heard. People reluctant to speak up in a crowded room were more comfortable using the “raise your hand” function.

As for teaching, many instructors who were skeptical about being able to really connect to students online discovered that virtual courses allowed them and many of their students to bring their whole selves to class in new ways. The pandemic experience has shown us the power of virtual connections to enhance learning, governance and community building.

Compassion. The final lesson that I hope we take away from our pan-



We want to believe that what's been happening to us and around us is so powerful that its reverberations will continue long after the events themselves are over. That's understandable, since it gives more seriousness to what we feel is a life-changing event.



demic experience in 2020 is that compassion can be greater than outrage. Now, we certainly had plenty of occasions to feel offended and to express fury over the past year, and it is clear that, for many people, feeling outrage is a pleasure and a bonding experience. Outrage, to borrow a phrase from Jonathan Haidt, blinds and binds.

But we have also witnessed the work that compassion does as we celebrated doctors, nurses, supermarket employees and countless friends and neighbors who went beyond the call of self-interest and duty to help their communities be-

come more resilient – or just stay alive. We can shake our heads reproachfully at those who congregated at bars or who attacked others for wearing masks in public places. But we should also allow ourselves to be inspired by those who sewed masks for hundreds of other people or who found safe ways to bring food, affection and community to the hungry and lonely.

Everything won't be different, but by learning a few key lessons from the pandemic, combined with compassionate solidarity, we can make a difference by building a better future at our educational institutions. ■

Bio

Michael S. Roth is president of Wesleyan University and the author, most recently, of *Safe Enough Spaces: A Pragmatist's Approach to Inclusion, Free Speech and Political Correctness on College Campuses* and *Beyond the University: Why Liberal Education Matters*.

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What Awaits Colleges?

David R. Harris shares three lessons his campus has already learned as students have returned for the new term amid some of the worst days of the pandemic.

By **David R. Harris** // February 2, 2021

My young daughter knows what it means when I get the “Do you have a minute?” text from Dean Fran’Cee. When I return from the phone call I make in response, she asks, “Another positive?”

So I knew it was bad news on a recent Saturday morning when Fran’Cee Brown-McClure, Union College’s vice president for student affairs, skipped the text and just called me, the institution’s president. On the last day of testing, at the end of our first week of winter term, 12 students on our campus had tested positive for COVID-19. That brought our total number of student positives for the term to 51, about twice the number we experienced during all of fall term.

Union is on a trimester schedule. This was a huge advantage in the fall, as we started two to four weeks after most semester-oriented institutions. We learned from our peers that some students would arrive COVID-19-positive and largely asymptomatic, but that with aggressive testing, isolation and quarantining, we should be able to minimize the number of subsequent cases. Like almost every small college that tested its students regularly, we had far fewer COVID-19 cases last semester than anticipated.

The situation is very different this

term. Most colleges operating with semester schedules do not return until late January or early mid-February. Our first day of classes was Jan. 11, so this time we are the trailblazers. I’m pining for what now appear to have been the “easy” days of fall.

On the first day of our winter term, the United States reported almost 223,000 cases, compared to about 33,300 cases on the first day of the fall term. A year of politicization of the virus – combined with fatigue over masks, social distancing and other public health measures – has taken its toll on compliance. Nearly 450,000 Americans have died from COVID-19, but most young people have experienced few if any symptoms, which has only bolstered their tendencies to minimize personal risks.

So what can peers learn from us?

First, do not expect that the actions you took in the fall will have the same effects this winter. In preparation for the students’ return to our campus this term, we decided to increase testing from once to twice per week. We secured more rooms for students who test positive and for those who are their close contacts. We implemented stricter and clearer penalties for violating policies. We installed fire pits across campus, waived co-



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pays for employee mental health appointments, shared links to free online fitness classes and announced myriad virtual events and activities. I hate to think what we would be facing if we had approached this term with fall 2020 policies and practices.

Second, do not bring students back to campus unless you are prepared to have more positive cases – perhaps significantly more. That means more students who have to be quarantined, more stress across campus and among parents, more policy violations, and a higher risk

What Awaits Colleges? (cont.)

that you will have to send all students home before the term ends. Even with enhanced preventative measures, this term has been intense. At the end of week one, we had more than doubled the number of student cases we had during the entire 10 weeks of fall term. More than 100 students had already been quarantined, spending two weeks at home or in a hotel room, unable to fully participate in face-to-face classes.

Following the example of higher education institutions that experienced spikes last term, we implemented a two-week campus quarantine on Jan. 17. Our expectation was that limiting interactions on campus and with external communities would allow us to slow the spread. At the end of last week, I announced that our number of positives had declined significantly, and the campus quarantine would end two days early. We've returned to our new normal of masks and distancing, keenly aware that another spike could be around the corner.

Third, as monumental and difficult as it is to confront the daily challenges of COVID-19, you must find a way to pursue the core mission. Our mission is to develop every student to lead, with wisdom, empathy and courage, in ways large and small, now and across multiple tomorrows. Our community expects that Union will protect the

health of its students, administrators and faculty members and will avoid the existential threats that too many colleges have experienced in recent years, but it also expects more. My senior leadership team and our whole community must find the time, energy and creativity to ensure that Union not only survives but also thrives.

It is a struggle to see beyond all of the immediate challenges and requests, but somehow, we are getting it done. Formal and informal daily check-in conversations with students, staff and faculty members help us make more informed decisions and pivot when needed – such as when we opened more study spaces for students whose mental health and academic progress were suffering from the isolation of a campus quarantine. Talking with our community members also brings me something that is much needed this year: joy.

In addition to these experiences, here's what I would share with another college president who is wondering whether to bring students back to campus or have a fully online term. A long time ago, I learned that in difficult situations – and COVID-19 is the most difficult one I have faced – you'll rarely find a path that makes everyone happy. That recognition drives me to select the path that I believe will benefit the most people and harm the fewest. When people complain

and argue that they should be exceptions, it is much easier to respond when you know you have made policy for the right reasons, not because it will face the least resistance.

The question of what colleges and universities should do this term has no single right answer – just as there is no easy answer for students and parents debating whether to return to campus. We brought students back with our eyes wide-open. We knew that the fall was the opening act for the winter. We couldn't have known just how much more difficult this term would be, or how much less energy we would have to confront the new challenges. It will be many weeks, and even months, before the vaccine is widely available.

What keeps us as senior administrators going – and knowing we made the right call for Union – are those daily conversations with students, faculty and staff that reveal just how committed they are to doing what it takes for all of us to succeed. It's also knowing how much more students are learning and growing by being on this campus, even with limited face-to-face interactions, in and out of the classroom.

With the right mix of wisdom, empathy and courage, I am confident that we will not only survive but also thrive. ■

Bio

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<https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2021/02/02/lessons-colleges-students-start-their-next-term-campuses-during-pandemic-opinion>

Let's Not Return to the Old Normal

It's time to create a new normal.

By **Steven Mintz** // February 23, 2021

If your institution expects life to return to normal post-pandemic, disappointment lies ahead.

Even with vaccines and a presidential administration strongly committed to traditional higher education, there are no guarantees that higher education as we knew it will bounce back – and that's OK.

It's OK because our pre-pandemic reality was beset by challenges and inequalities, which the pandemic exposed and intensified. It's OK because many of our students need something different than what we offered, and the pandemic made that clear.

It's also OK because our existing business model was tottering, and the pandemic laid bare the inadequacy of many of our legacy approaches and incumbent practices and pointed toward possible solutions.

Even before the pandemic, American higher education could be viewed from two contrasting perspectives.

There was the rhetoric of crisis: of crushing student debt, eroding state funding, the shift toward a contingent faculty and the competitive threat posed by online providers and purveyors of shorter, cheaper nondegree credentials and certifications, all worsened by controversies surrounding equity, academic free-



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dom, sexual misconduct and the exploitation of student athletes.

Then there was the opposing, far more positive view: that American universities remain the envy of the world; that despite modest recent declines, undergraduate enrollment stood at an unprecedented level; that graduate enrollments, even in the midst of the pandemic, continue to soar; and, in absolute terms, public investments persist at near record high levels.

Any fair assessment must balance the system's great accomplishments in terms of expanded access, inclusion and research productivity against its unquestionable weaknesses: extreme stratification in resources, reputation and comple-

tion rates; increasing reliance on nontenured faculty; and pervasive inequities, which include the underrepresentation of women and scholars of color on the faculty and the relegation of a disproportionate share of low-income students to the least resourced institutions.

Perhaps our salvation lies in increased federal generosity, and while the signs are more hopeful than they were a couple of months ago, I wouldn't count on government largesse, especially if I work at a private institution.

Nor does it make sense to try to cut your way to success, which will only diminish your institution's reputation, demoralize stakeholders and discourage future enrollments.

Let's Not Return to the Old Normal (cont.)

No one leaps aboard a sinking ship.

The real key to institutional sustainability lies in entrepreneurship, experimentation and an enlarged mission. Here are some practical, pragmatic ways to do those things.

1. Embrace data.

Deploy data to evaluate and optimize your program offerings, identify curricular bottlenecks, target advising and support services, and assess the effectiveness of student success initiatives for various subpopulations.

Data can be used descriptively, predictively and proscriptively. Respond proactively to indicators of students at risk of failure or dropping out, including low levels of LMS activity, low grades or credit accumulation during the first semester, inability to enter a first-choice major or delayed choice of major, and a drop-off in credits accumulated. Also use data to inform programmatic investments and identify untapped student markets.

2. Boost students' ROI.

Because college is one of the largest investments that any family will make, students and parents need to know about the return on investment they can expect. ROI is, of course, partly financial, and differs widely by major, institution type and time to degree. But ROI also takes other forms, including the quality of instruction, the level of student-faculty interaction, access to high-impact educational practices, support for career development and engagement in campus activities. Your institution needs

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to do whatever it can to maximize these aspects of campus life.

3. Increase retention rates, academic momentum and students' academic success.

If you've paid any attention to the scholarship on student success, you know that most students drop out not because they're academically unprepared or unmotivated or in poor academic standing, but for other reasons.

They received poor first-semester grades. They're closed out of their first-choice major. They can't get into the courses they need. They failed to receive adequate advising. They feel isolated and disconnected. Or life got into the way and the institution didn't do enough to keep them on board.

In all too many cases, the students dropped out as a result of institutional policies (for example, because credits didn't transfer or didn't apply to gen ed or major re-

quirements) or poor course scheduling or adjustment issues or the misfortune of encountering a faculty member who teaches poorly or grades punitively or unfairly.

We possess the power to address these problems: to intervene rapidly, to “process analyze” students' academic journeys, to optimize course schedules, to remove hurdles to graduation, to redesign gateway classes and to enhance students' sense of belonging – and create first- and second-year catapults to sustain or even boost students' momentum.

4. Create greater curricular coherence.

Why not align mathematics and statistics courses with broad areas of student interest, whether business, health care, the social sciences or the arts and humanities? Ditto for freshman composition and lower-division humanities courses. Offer lower-division courses in the

Let's Not Return to the Old Normal (cont.)

digital humanities, the medical humanities, the history of science and technology, or courses that offer humanistic perspectives on business, engineering and new media.

5. Pursue new markets.

Even though the high school-age population is declining, opportunities abound. Think transfer students, stop-outs, postbaccs and working adults seeking short-term, nondegree credentials. Also consider partnerships with businesses to offer targeted training.

6. Forge alliances.

Consider course sharing and 2+2 programs in high-demand, but costly, difficult-to-staff areas of study. Or how about supplementing study abroad with the opportunity to spend a semester or academic year at another campus? (Certainly, among the high points of my undergraduate education was the time I spent at Fisk University, where I had the opportunity to work with the writer Arna Bontemps and the artist Aaron Douglas.)

7. Make the academic experience more attractive and distinctive.

Good ideas lie all around us. Cohorts offer a way to place relationships at the center of the student experience. You might place many, indeed most, students into a cohort, whether in a meta major, a learning

community or a research or opportunity program. Not only does participation in an interest group enhance a sense of belonging, it helps students identify the major that they wish to pursue.

Expand research and internship opportunities. Integrate certification and skills badges into the curriculum. Offer more studio, field and clinical experiences and workshop classes.

All of us hope that vaccination will allow for a post-crisis return to some semblance of normality. But normal should not mean the restoration of the old ways of doing business.

Going back to the old normal would make sense if pre-pandemic higher education had been challenge-free. It wasn't. We are now in a position to create a new normal that will accommodate greater flexibility and that will open our doors to new student populations.

There are three areas where I think we have no option but to change.

1. We must better serve populations previously underserved.

These range from high school students who need to be college ready to community college students who want a bachelor's degree to displaced workers who need to reskill or upskill.

2. We must do much more to advance equity. That means more aggressive recruitment, greater equity in admissions and financial aid, and greater equity in outcomes – not just higher retention and graduation rates but more diverse students graduating with degrees in high-demand fields.

3. We must design for greater flexibility. Now that nontraditional students represent the new student majority, we need to offer an educational experience that better meets their needs. That will certainly mean making more courses available online and offering courses at times that will make it easier for students to combine their studies with work and caregiving responsibilities. It will require us to double down on the kinds of student services that pay off: intensive, targeted advising; degree mapping and career planning; bridge programs, supplemental instruction, tutoring and grants targeting retention and completion. It also means offering more on-campus jobs.

Rather than viewing the pandemic wholly negatively, we'd do better to consider it a hard-earned learning experience that has opened our eyes, challenged us and driven us to make long-overdue reforms.

We'd be remiss if we failed to learn the pandemic's lessons. ■

Bio

Steven Mintz is professor of history at the University of Texas at Austin.

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