

# ENROLLMENT CONCERNS



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# Introduction

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Enrollment concerns are always important, but the coronavirus has made them more so. Will students (freshmen and other students) enroll at their normal rates? Will more students opt to take a semester off, or to stay closer to home and take classes at a local community college? What would the impact be of continuing online-only instruction? Will students expect tuition to be lower than it has been?

The articles in this compilation explore what the experts think, and how colleges are planning.

*Inside Higher Ed* will continue to cover these issues, and we welcome your reactions to this compilation and your ideas for future coverage.

**--The Editors**

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# Leveraging Learning Technology to Reach More Students

If you asked faculty and staff to name the biggest challenges facing higher education institutions like theirs, enrollment would be one of the top items on the list. That's what *Inside Higher Ed* found when they surveyed admissions leaders in 2019. Of those who responded, the overwhelming majority were worried about being able to meet their enrollment goals.<sup>1</sup>

Working closely with colleges and universities throughout North America and around the world, I'm not a stranger to these frustrations. Yet I've also been fortunate to see firsthand how technology can help institutions overcome these hurdles in a variety of ways.

It's about making learning something people want to do. I think about the interactive audiovisual exercises that equip learners with practical knowledge and give them the confidence to put it to use. There's personalized learning that helps students align what they're doing with their unique interests and goals, plus collaboration and feedback tools that foster a sense of community and encourage learners to seek advice and feedback from peers, educators, and experts.

It's about ensuring that learning is something people can do—allowing students to learn on their terms. For learners with disabilities, that means making education accessible with experiences that facilitate closed captioning, are compatible with assistive devices, and are intuitive to use. Enabling all students to take full advantage of education can play such a powerful and important role in helping them reach their full potential.

It also means making learning flexible so people can study how, where, and when they need. I've seen how valuable this can be for “new traditional” or mature learners, for example, who have already been in the workforce for several years and are returning to either upgrade their skills or make a career change. Being able to access learning online can remove barriers that would otherwise prevent them from taking part in academic initiatives, such as a difficult commute to and from campus or having to balance learning with their busy work and family lives.

And finally, it's about making learning easier for faculty, staff, and administrators to deliver. I picture solutions that help instructors organize and set up courses, customize experiences to suit individual learner needs, and track how students are progressing. Ultimately, it comes down to giving educators the time and space to focus on what matters most—providing students with the education and support they need to thrive in and outside the classroom.

Improved experiences for students, faculty, and staff can play a key role in driving better results and growth for colleges and universities. That's how you can transform learning, and it's how you can set your higher-education institution on the road to success.



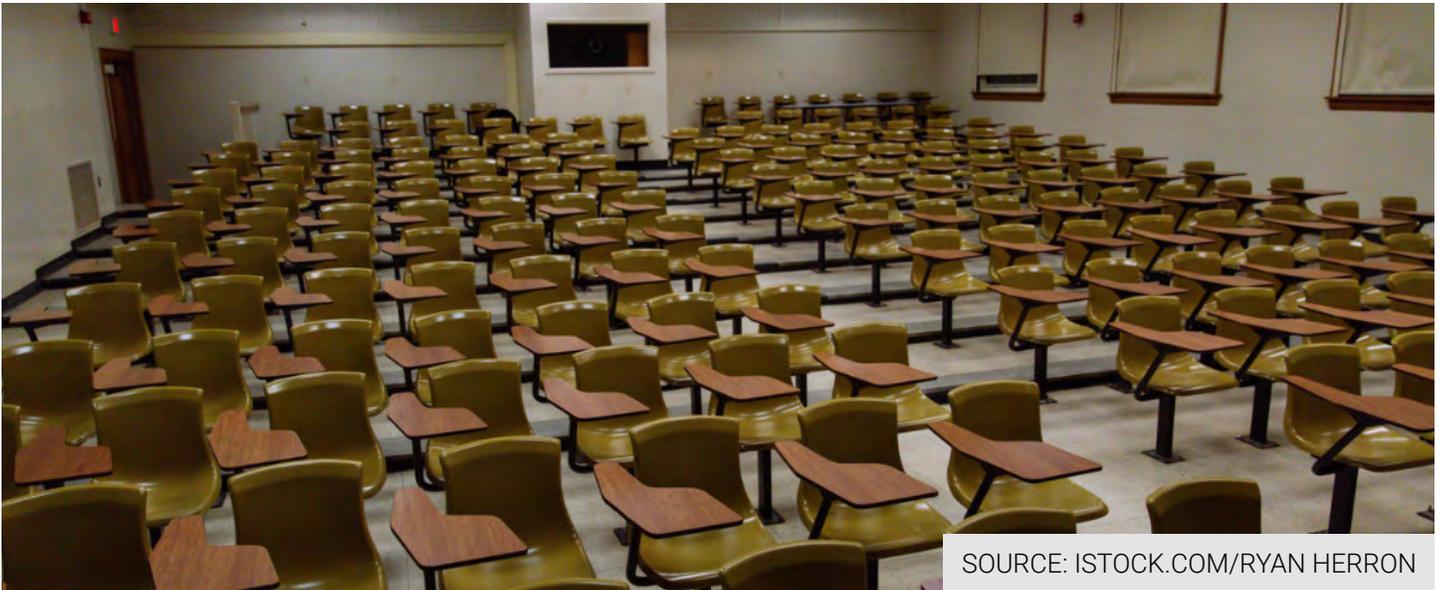
**April Oman**  
Senior Vice President,  
Customer Experience  
D2L

<sup>1</sup><https://www.insidehighered.com/news/survey/2019-survey-admissions-leaders-pressure-grows>

## 20% Enrollment Drop Seen

Survey figures are for four-year public colleges and don't consider international students. Minority students are at greater risk. Plus, details on numerous other studies.

By **Scott Jaschik** // May 4, 2020



SOURCE: ISTOCK.COM/RYAN HERRON

Four-year colleges may face a loss of up to 20 percent in fall enrollment, SimpsonScarborough, a higher education research and marketing company, has predicted on the basis of multiple student surveys it has conducted.

The findings are based on surveys of more than 2,000 college-bound high school seniors and current college students in March, just after the coronavirus began spreading in the United States, and in April, after three weeks of record unemployment claims.

The findings are based on several surveys, [one of which](#) was released previously.

- In April, 10 percent of college-bound seniors who had planned to enroll at a four-year

college before the COVID-19 outbreak said they have already made alternative plans.

- Fourteen percent of college students in March said they were unlikely to return to their current college or university in the fall, or it was "too soon to tell." Exactly three weeks later, in mid-April, that figure had gone up to 26 percent.
- Gap years may be gaining in popularity. While hard to track, there are estimates that 3 percent of freshmen take a gap year in normal circumstances. Since the pandemic, internet searches for gap years have skyrocketed.
- College students do not like the online education they have been receiving. To finish their degrees,

85 percent want to go back to campus, but 15 percent want to finish online.

The numbers are particularly bleak for minority students.

Forty-one percent of minority high school seniors say it's likely they won't go to college at all in the fall or "it's too soon to say." That compares to 24 percent of white high school seniors. With deadlines looming (some colleges expected answers to admissions offer by May 1, although many have delayed the date), 24 percent of minority students say they haven't decided which college to attend. The number for white students is 14 percent. Because of COVID-19, the top choice of college has changed for a third of undecided minority

## 20% Enrollment Drop Seen

students but only 15 percent of undecided white students.

Minority students who are in college are also feeling the impact of COVID-19 and related matters more than white students are. Thirty-two percent of minority students and 22 percent of white college students said it was unlikely they will return to their college this fall or "it's too soon to say." Nearly two-thirds of minority students (64 percent) said their plans were being affected by COVID-19, compared to 44 percent of white students.

Some colleges will fare better, the SimpsonScarborough report says, based on prestige or location or particularly sensitive administrators. But as a whole, "the effect on higher education enrollment could be catastrophic."

Elizabeth Johnson, chairman of SimpsonScarborough, said, "We felt after our first survey that we couldn't make predictions," because COVID-19 had just spread in the U.S. and most students and more colleges weren't prepared for it. But having surveyed again, after a full month with COVID-19, the results were mostly the same or (from colleges' perspective) worse.

By combining the various factors, she said she came up with the 20 percent figure for decreased enrollment. Obviously, there is a giant what-if to consider. But most of the what-ifs that colleges hope for -- what if a vaccine were developed, for instance -- aren't going to happen by the fall, she said.

She strongly advised colleges to start talking with their students about the various scenarios they face. She noted the blog post "[15 Fall Scenarios](#)," which *Inside Higher Ed* recently published, by bloggers Joshua Kim of Dartmouth College and Edward J. Maloney of Georgetown University. Colleges

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As we prepare for economic downturn, everyone's wondering about the implications for education -- we don't fully know the impact yet, but we're tracking this closely. What we do know so far, based on this survey and our historic surveys, is that Americans want to see direct career benefits from their education.

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should try to figure out which of those scenarios they are embracing and talk to students, she said. SimpsonScarborough's is not the only recent survey. And the other surveys, while some take different approaches, have the same overall tone.

An estimated 28 million Americans have canceled their education plans due to the coronavirus pandemic, [according to an ongoing Strada Education Network survey](#). And nearly one in five Americans have changed their education plans.

"We expect this is a wide range of formal and informal education activities," Dave Clayton, senior vice president for consumer insights at Strada, said in an email. "As we prepare for economic downturn, everyone's wondering about the implications for education -- we don't fully know the impact yet, but we're tracking this closely. What we do know so far, based on this survey and our historic surveys, is that Americans want to see direct career benefits from their education."

The [longitudinal survey](#) has wrapped up its fifth week and has garnered more than 5,000 responses. Each week Strada, an education

and employment research nonprofit, asks respondents about their job security, income and general feelings of anxiety about the virus. It also includes questions on educational attainment and future education plans.

Tyton Partners recently [surveyed parents](#) and found many of them are dubious of paying full tuition rates for a continuation of online education in the fall.

Lipman Hearne last week released a new survey of parents of high school seniors, conducted in March and in April, which found that the parents surveyed in April were more likely to want their children to go to college close to home (52 percent versus 45 percent). And it found that 56 percent of parents were interested in a delayed January start, and 46 percent said they wanted their child to start at a less expensive institution and then transfer. And 61 percent believe online instruction of the sort started by colleges this spring will reduce the quality of higher education.

Art & Science Group [polled 1,171 high school seniors](#) from April 21-24 and found that one in six students who'd planned to attend four-year colleges full-time no longer

## 20% Enrollment Drop Seen

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plan to do so.

Richard Hesel, a principal with the group, said further numbers showed that 60 percent of students have no interest in online education. And two-thirds of students think they should pay "much less" for tuition if the programs they have been shifted to in recent weeks should continue in the next academic year.

David Hawkins, executive director for educational content and policy at the National Association for College Admission Counseling, said such surveys serve a valuable purpose.

"At a time when information is at

a premium, surveys like this can be useful in helping colleges plan for an uncertain future," he said. "Of course, survey research has limitations, in that it tends to rely on a snapshot in time, so responses today might change substantially based on new information or events in the future. Colleges will have to conduct outreach to their own population of students to assess the pandemic's impact on fall enrollment, as changes are bound to vary by institution. But as a general indicator that times will be difficult moving forward, these surveys are sending a message to colleges and to policy makers that this crisis

might put college out of reach for a large number of students."

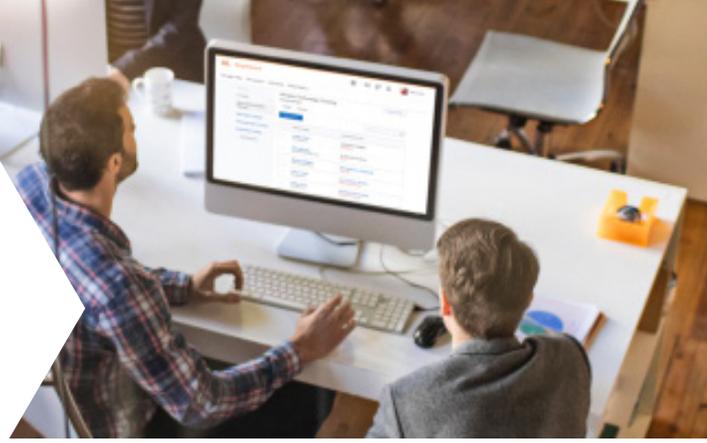
What is he looking for? "Over all, the primary effect we're considering, both for students and institutions, is financial. The COVID-19 outbreak seems likely to result in an economic downturn that rivals or outpaces the 2008 recession, absent a significant infusion of public assistance from state and federal governments. That will affect students' ability to enroll and colleges' ability to maintain services for students." ■

*-- Emma Whitford contributed to this article.*

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<https://www.insidehighered.com/admissions/article/2020/05/04/surveys-reveal-bleak-picture-colleges-fall>

# Supporting Students with Competency-Based Education



## The benefits of competency-based education (CBE)<sup>1</sup>



### Self-paced learning

Empowers students to progress through the course at their own pace and complete their program without set time restrictions



### Flexible course structure

Enables students to have control over their individual learning path without rigid schedules or set semesters



### Increased student engagement

Provides students with ownership over their courses and offers a more personalized learning experience to increase engagement



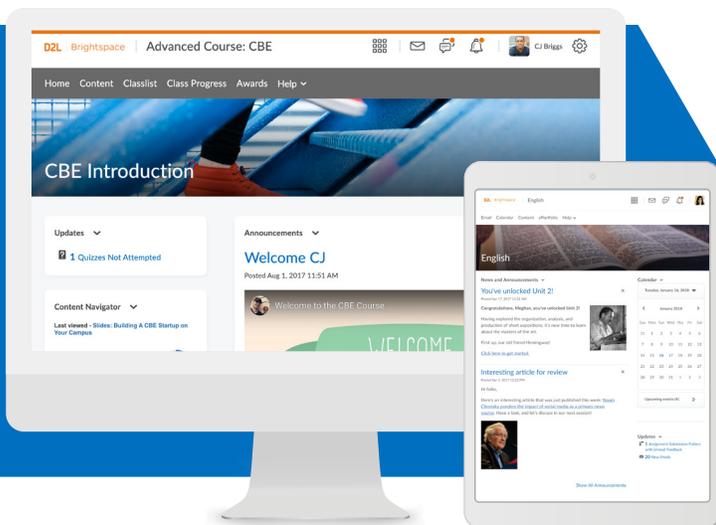
### Affordable options

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## A College Dream Deferred?

As more students ask about deferring admission, admissions officers try to determine what it might mean for their institutions -- and for students.

By **Elizabeth Redden** // May 4, 2020



SOURCE: ISTOCK.COM/SSHEPARD

In normal years, most undergraduate admissions offices deal with relatively few requests from incoming students to defer admission. This is not a normal year.

It's too early to know if formal requests to defer admission will increase, but college admission officers and college counselors alike report many more inquiries about deferrals from students and parents who are unsure whether their chosen colleges will resume in-person classes and normal (or seminormal) campus operations this fall.

High school seniors are "thrown off" by the idea of possibly having to start college online, said Ibrahim Firat, an independent college consultant.

"What I have heard from these seniors is, 'I've been sold on the col-

lege experience before I chose to attend this particular college. If I'm not going to have that experience for the first semester or even probably the whole year, then what's the point of paying full tuition to sit at home and watch videos all day?'" he said.

"In prior years, I had very few students elect to defer matriculation and pursue a gap year," said Laura George, an independent college consultant.

"In the past six weeks, I have observed a significant increase in these types of questions, as parents and students contemplate the potential reality of starting their college careers online," George said. "For current seniors and their parents, the many uncertainties about the safety of living on campus in tight quarters and attending class-

es in close proximity to tens or hundreds of students causes concern. For others, the idea of paying full tuition for remote learning instead of the expected in-person, on-campus experience does not make practical or financial sense, particularly for those who have lost their jobs or taken significant pay cuts. As such, parents are increasingly asking about viable options for next fall."

Colleges vary in their deferral policies: some have a policy of granting a yearlong deferral of admission upon request almost automatically, while others review requests individually and approve them based on a consideration of their merit. Some institutions are more or less agnostic about the reasons students defer as long as they don't enroll as a degree-seeking student

## A College Dream Deferred?

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elsewhere, while more selective colleges say they'll only grant deferrals if students can demonstrate a plan for a meaningful alternative work, travel or volunteer experience, or if they have reasons related to a military service commitment or illness. More than half a dozen colleges contacted by *Inside Higher Ed* say they aren't changing their deferral policies at this point. But they will be managing competing goals in the months ahead.

"Everyone in an admissions office right now is trying to bring in a class and meet their institutional goals," said Jayne Caflin Fonash, the president of the National Association for College Admission Counseling and an independent college consultant. "If there are decisions made to increase the number of defers that they offer or change any of the policies about the criteria those students need to meet, I think that will all be considered on a case-by-case basis, trying to strike a balance between keeping the best interests of students in mind and the institutional goals of bringing in a new class."

"If there is a significantly higher number of those requests, schools are going to have to decide what they're able to do and if they're going to put any limit on those spots. That will be a varied school-by-school decision," Fonash said.

### Gap Years or a Community College Option

Admission professionals are trying to build their classes in unprecedented circumstances. [A survey of more than 2,000 college-bound seniors](#) released last week by a higher education research and marketing company, SimpsonScarborough, found that one out of 10 students who planned to go to a residential four-year college before the pandemic have changed their



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plans. Nearly half of these students plan to attend a community college, and about a third plan to enroll in an online college.

The survey also found increased interest in gap years, which a report on the survey results notes, would "create myriad challenges for higher ed," including "the impact on tuition revenue for this fiscal year in addition to the housing, advising, and scheduling complications that will be created by a surge in the freshman class for Fall 2021. Many colleges will not be able to approve all the deferral requests, piling bad will for the institution on top of the hit to enrollment."

Other evidence suggests that interest in gap years – typically a structured year between high school and college when a student pursues travel, volunteer service, paid work or an internship opportunity – is spiking. Ethan Knight, executive director of the Gap Year Association, said the association has seen a 65 percent increase in page views of its website.

"I think many families are turning almost to desperation, 'OK, we'll

take a gap year,'" said Jason Sarouhan, a gap year consultant. He said in a typical year, most students who wanted to potentially pursue a gap year would have already given the option serious thought by this point in the spring, but this year, "we are being flooded with inquiries from students who never considered a gap year in their life."

But if in-person learning options are constrained this fall, options for how to spend the gap year could be limited as well. International travel might not be a guaranteed or ideal option, much less a safe one given the uncertainty about when the global pandemic might be contained. That's assuming such travel is within financial reach; for many students or parents, it is not affordable.

The consulting firm Sarouhan co-founded, J2Guides, has been organizing workshops for students on what to do if their ideal gap year program or ideal college is not available. Sarouhan said gap year programs that might be comparatively more likely to operate this fall would be those that are based

## A College Dream Deferred?

in the U.S. with a built-in isolation component, something like a wilderness expedition program. He said there's also a lot of interest in virtual internships, as [more and more companies](#) have converted them to online or remote opportunities to ensure social distancing.

A more accessible option for parents who can't afford to subsidize a year of travel and don't want to pay full tuition costs for a college that may start the fall semester online is to think locally.

"Postpone your freshman (or sophomore) year at the university and enroll at your local community college, taking 30 credits of general education classes over the course of a year," Matt Reed, vice president for learning at Brookdale Community College in New Jersey, and a blogger for *Inside Higher Ed*, [wrote in a recent post](#). "Then, in a year, when the whole virus situation has settled, return to the university and transfer those 30 credits there."

Reed described this alternative option as a "visiting year."

"But wait!" you say. "What about the college experience?" he wrote in his blog, "Confessions of a Community College Dean." "If you're sent home or have to stay home anyway, then the experience of taking classes online from home won't be notably different. Except, of course, for the tens of thousands of dollars you stand to save."

But enrolling full-time for a year at a community college is not compatible with deferral policies at many colleges that bar students from enrolling as degree-seeking students at other colleges during their deferral year, or that cap the number of credits they can earn elsewhere. For example, some colleges cap that number at six, others at eight or 12. Taking more credits than allowed could mean having to

reapply as a transfer student, which can have implications for eligibility for institutional aid. Analyses by Mark Kantrowitz, an expert on student aid, have found that [students who transfer tend to get thousands of dollars less in institutional grant aid](#).

Still, faced with the possibility of another online semester or year, Reed thinks that students who planned to attend relatively unselective four-year colleges won't be deterred if they have to turn down (rather than defer) an admission offer and reapply as a transfer if that means they can save money on the first year of college.

"I think a lot of schools are going to have to loosen up their policies on transferring credits because this is going to become very common," Reed said.

Hugh Gusterson, an anthropology professor at George Washington University and the parent of a high school senior, said his son wrote to all the colleges where he was admitted and inquired about deferral policies. With the exception of one college, the institutions all responded that they would discuss deferral

options once he accepted their admission offer and that there needed to be a good rationale for deferring.

"I think the subtext was a good rationale is not that you don't want online instruction," Gusterson said.

### **The View From the Admission Office**

Just how flexible colleges will be in addressing deferral requests may depend somewhat on how many requests they get.

Jerome F. Dueweke, interim director of admission at Butler University, a private university in Indiana, said Butler received slightly fewer deferral requests compared to this time last year. But the university, like more than 400 others across the U.S., [pushed back the deadline for confirming enrollment from May 1 to June 1](#), giving students more time to make decisions about enrolling or deferring.

"I think we're all holding our breath to see what happens over the coming three, four, five weeks coming up to June 1," he said.

Corry Unis, vice president for strategic enrollment at Fairfield University, a Jesuit university in Connecticut, said families are thinking

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## A College Dream Deferred?

through all the possible scenarios.

"I don't know if we're going to see a big increase in students asking formally for these options," he said. "I don't anticipate a significant number, but we'll work with every family, like we always have."

Raul Fonts, an associate vice president and dean of admission and financial aid at Providence College, a Roman Catholic institution in Rhode Island, said the college usually gets between five and eight deferral requests every year. "The question is, is it going to go from five to eight to 25 to 50? I don't think it's going to be that drastic, but I think it'll be more than what we've traditionally seen," he said.

"If you told me it would only be 16 instead of eight, I'd say we'll probably be pretty flexible and allow it, but if it's 50, then we might have to have another conversation about letting every single one do that. That has implications on our fall enrollment."

Some highly selective colleges that have the luxury of drawing students off wait lists have indicated they'll be generous with their deferral policies. Cornell University [announced](#) that it wait-listed more students than usual this year and would be "very, very generous with our deferral options."

Williams College, in Massachusetts, has [communicated to admitted students](#) that it "has a flexible gap year policy and you should have every expectation that your request will be approved." Williams

said that if it has not made a decision about fall operations by June 15 -- the normal date for requesting deferrals -- it will push back the deadline for requesting deferrals until one week after the decision is announced.

"We don't expect a dramatic shift, but we know that there are some populations of students for whom enrolling on campus in the fall would be a challenge even if we were to open," said Sulgi Lim, Williams' director of admission. She noted, for example, that international students might not easily get visas, as the U.S. Department of State has [suspended routine visa processing](#) at embassies and consulates around the world.

Greg Orwig, the vice president for admissions and financial aid at Whitworth University, a Christian institution in Washington State, said the deferral requests the university is getting are "entirely based on uncertainty and anxieties around the coronavirus."

He said admissions officers are telling families, "It's simply too early to know for sure what the fall semester might look like either in terms of health risks or in terms of alternative educational platforms or pedagogies. So if the reason you're thinking about deferring now is because you don't want your son or daughter to start a college education with online courses, we just don't know yet whether that's going to be the case, and we'll work with you to extend

deadlines to have as much time as you need for those uncertainties to be clarified."

Orwig noted another downside of deferring that some students may not be considering. "We want to minimize the number of students who wind up not pursuing or completing college, and then there's the opportunity cost," he said. "A student who defers a year is trading one year of postcollege earning potential for whatever income or experience they would be able to have in the year ahead. And that should be a trade-off considered with great care."

Roger J. Thompson, vice president for student services and enrollment management at the University of Oregon, is hopeful that most students will ultimately choose to start on time.

"I think students and families are ready to close the chapter on high school and begin college," he said noting the proms, graduation ceremonies and other milestone events of the senior year of high school that were canceled across the country to reduce the spread of the coronavirus.

"My sense is students and families are going to shift quickly to college," he said. "We think people might be considering other options and considering things they hadn't before, but taking a year off -- I'm not sure what you're going to do with that year. If the virus is forcing universities to go remote, you're not going on a plane to Barcelona." ■

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<https://www.insidehighered.com/admissions/article/2020/05/04/colleges-field-more-questions-seniors-about-deferring-admission>

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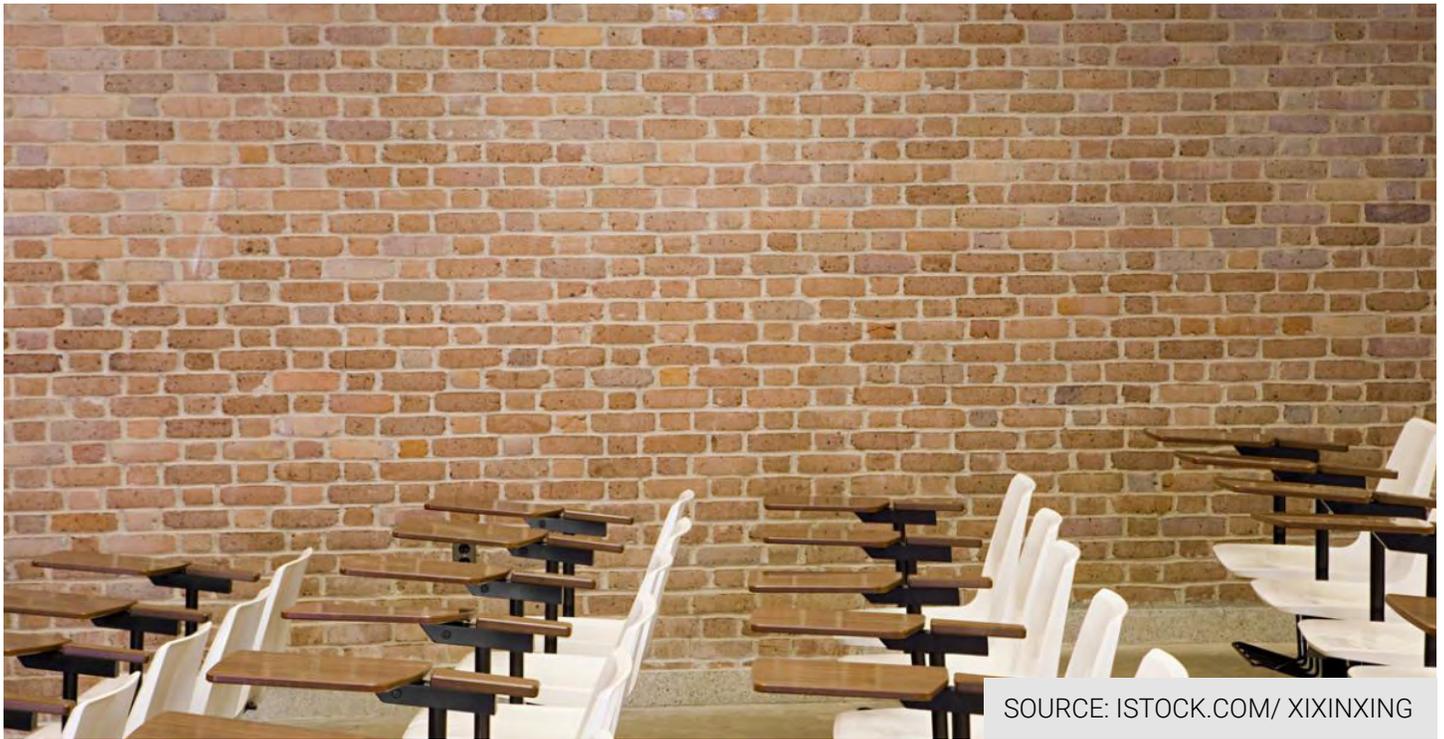
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## Can Public College Systems Stave Off Closures?

Some public colleges are already on the chopping block. But as college and university systems brace for incoming state budget cuts, they can streamline services and work cohesively to save money, experts say.

By [Emma Whitford](#) // April 22, 2020



SOURCE: ISTOCK.COM/ XIXINXING

The coronavirus outbreak has torpedoed the budgets of public and private colleges alike.

Revenue shortfalls, student fee refunds, possible declines in fall enrollment and unexpected cost increases have set the stage for a difficult financial future. Public college systems are facing all of that and another threat: impending cuts to state higher education funding.

It all means renewed debate over the controversial idea of closing public college campuses.

The Vermont State Colleges System, projecting a near-term operating deficit of up to \$10 million this fiscal year, announced plans last week for a “[substantial transformation](#)” of its colleges that included

closing several campuses. Days later, the board [deferred a vote](#) on the plan amid public backlash.

The Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education forecasts a \$52 million loss, even after federal stimulus money is applied. The University of Alaska system projects a \$35 to \$40 million loss. The University of Maine system is looking at a \$20 million short-term loss. Many states have announced, or will announce, budget cuts as a result of the coronavirus, and higher education funding is [expected to take a big hit](#).

New Jersey has frozen higher education dollars. New York is expected to cut higher ed funding despite a proposal earlier this year by Governor Andrew Cuomo to boost state

support. California hopes to make good on a \$217.7 million increase proposed by Governor Gavin Newsom, but he recently called the January budget “no longer operable.”

Despite the hardship, public college systems are rejecting closure proposals and remain focused on collaboration, experts say.

The Pennsylvania state system struggled financially for years and has yet to reverse declining enrollments across the system. Dennis Jones, president emeritus of the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems, remembered proposals by the state Legislature years ago to close “a campus or two or three.”

“There are lawmakers in Penn-

## Can Public College Systems Stave Off Closures?

sylvania that would love to close a campus or two just because they think that's a way to save money," he said.

Daniel Greenstein, system chancellor, is adamant about keeping all system campuses open.

"Politically it doesn't make sense, and from a public policy standpoint it doesn't make sense," he said about closures.

Small campuses with fast-declining enrollments and that serve low-income students are most often threatened with closure, Greenstein said. In Pennsylvania, it's the colleges in the rural parts of the state.

But closing those campuses does damage twofold, Greenstein continued. Any region with a closing campus would lose its largest employer and access to education for local students who need it.

"It is difficult for rural communities to source the rural and business leaders they need," Greenstein said. "So they use universities as a way of training their teachers and their nurses and their Main Street businesspeople."

But for a public college system hemorrhaging money, the quickest way to stop the bleeding is to lop off a campus, right?

"No," Jones said. "Not in the short run, anyway."

Many colleges have bond debt, meaning they still owe money to investors for buildings, residence halls and other projects.

Closing a campus means losing the opportunity to generate revenue to pay off that debt, Greenstein said.

"That just gets absorbed by the

other universities in the system," he said.

That said, Greenstein emphasized that just because a college remains open doesn't mean it will continue with business as usual.

"When you say you're not going to close an institution, that doesn't mean it's just going to continue as is," Greenstein said. "It can't. It's bleeding cash."

He suggested keeping successful programs where they are and moving less popular programs online, to be taught virtually by another system campus that executes them well. Systems can also consolidate services that are required across the board, like payroll, to save money.

The initiatives Greenstein mentioned relate to the idea of "systemness," a term that Jason Lane and Rebecca Martin use often to describe public college systems working as one unit rather than as a conglomerate of independent colleges. Lane is the director of the Systems Center and dean of the School of Education at the State University of New York at Albany. Martin leads the National Association of System Heads.

"We're seeing presidents of campuses, in many cases, talking weekly if not daily with system administration. Provosts are meeting with each other to talk about coordinated academic policies and programs," Lane said. "There is no doubt there's been an unprecedented level of coordination and systemness that has come out of this."

But not all campuses are follow-

ing such a model.

"Vermont treated this as a campus-by-campus problem," Jones said, "instead of saying, 'We need to provide access to education ... how are we as a system going to do that?'"

The Vermont State College System's plan to overhaul its colleges includes closing Vermont Technical College's Randolph Center campus and Northern Vermont University and laying off 500 employees. After community pushback, the system Board of Trustees chair, J. Churchill Hides, [announced Sunday](#) that a vote on the plan would be deferred by at least a week.

"I have listened to my colleagues on the board and want to give them time to consider the very significant decisions we have to make," Hides said in a press release. "But ... delayed action increases the profound financial risks facing all four VSCS colleges and universities. Those risks grow daily. We simply do not have the funds to afford a protracted discussion and debate."

The Vermont State Colleges System did not respond to a request for comment.

As to whether there will be more closure proposals like Vermont's, Jones, of NCHEMS, said yes.

"The systems that have their act together won't close them. They may repurpose them," Jones said. "Those systems that are less able to behave as a system may in fact close some, because I think that we're going to be in for at least a year or two of pretty tough economic times for higher education." ■

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<https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2020/04/22/financial-peril-prompting-calls-close-some-public-college-campus-systems-can-often>

## Pricing Pressures Escalate

The second economic crisis in a dozen years could take a bite out of colleges' ability to set prices, but pressures were mounting long before the coronavirus arrived.

By [Rick Seltzer](#) // April 27, 2020



SOURCE: ISTOCK.COM/JCJGPHOTOGRAPHY

The coronavirus outbreak placed sudden downward pressure on the price of attending college this spring, as students being sent home from on-campus programs demanded room and board refunds and in some cases filed lawsuits seeking partial tuition rebates.

At first glance, it may look like a short-term disruption that will resolve itself once the public health threat is over and students can go back to campus. Some of the immediate pricing pressure stems from questions about whether students are willing to pay as much for temporary online substitutes as they will for an in-person education.

But as the crisis stretches on and prospects for in-person education this fall remain shrouded in [uncertainty](#), it's becoming increasingly clear that the pandemic is exacerbating a larger squeeze on college prices.

Even before the coronavirus hit, many colleges and universities were finding it difficult to collect enough money from students to meet rising costs. The traditional bread and butter for four-year campuses, wealthy white high school graduates, [were expected](#) to decline in number in parts of the country in coming years. And many families struggled to pay full price for big-ticket items like higher education after the uneven recovery from the Great Recession failed to lift all incomes equally.

Now, families face a second massive economic disruption in a dozen years, even as colleges don't know when they'll be able to say for sure whether they will be continuing remote education in the fall

or bringing students back on campus. Speculation runs rampant that student behavior will change, with some sitting out the year and others enrolling in low-cost options or colleges close to home.

The disruption comes shortly after a federal investigation [prompted changes](#) to admissions counselors' code of ethics -- changes that on their own were expected to significantly increase recruiting competition. That leaves many colleges scrambling to provide financial aid packages large enough to keep existing students enrolled or to convince new students to enroll for the first time in the fall, whether or not campuses open.

"We're just being inundated with conversations coming at us in waves," said Bill Hall, founder and president of Applied Policy Re-

## Pricing Pressures Escalate

search Inc., a consulting firm based in Minnesota. “What do we do about the rest of the spring term? How do we prepare ourselves for any wave of money which we’re adding into packaging? Then what are the criteria we use for taking an appeal? And then, finally, we’re at the point where people are asking, ‘What if this goes into the fall?’”

Last week, the pricing pressures burst into full view as several colleges and universities across the country announced actions ranging from tuition freezes to steep cuts to options allowing students to defer tuition payments until well after the fall semester.

The College of William & Mary [announced](#) it would roll back a planned 3 percent increase for new in-state undergraduates arriving in fall 2020. Instead, the prestigious college in Virginia expects to hold tuition and mandatory fees unchanged for all students next year. Halfway across the country, Kansas City University took a similar step, [announcing](#) a tuition freeze and killing its own planned 3 percent tuition increase.

Christopher Newport University in Virginia announced it [will not](#) increase tuition, fees and room and board for 2020-21. Delaware Valley University in Pennsylvania [froze](#) undergraduate tuition and fees.

The University System of Maine [launched](#) a program targeted at students affected by the coronavirus outbreak. Under the program, called the Maine Welcome, the system promised resident tuition status to “any successful U.S. college student or law student displaced by a COVID-19-related permanent closure of a U.S. institution of higher education.” In Ohio, Franciscan University of Steubenville [rolled out](#) a plan covering 100 percent of fall 2020 tuition for new on-campus

undergraduates, after scholarships and grants.

Davidson College in North Carolina [unveiled](#) an option allowing students and families to defer payment for the fall semester for up to a year. The prominent college in North Carolina will issue bills for the fall semester in July, but all students except for seniors will be able to defer payment until August 2021. Seniors who are graduating next spring will be able to defer until April 1.

Perhaps more significant than any other move was one [announced](#) by Southern New Hampshire University, a private nonprofit with massive online enrollment and scale.

It announced plans to cut tuition for campus-based learning models by 61 percent by 2021, down to \$10,000 per year. Southern New Hampshire is also offering scholarships for all incoming freshmen enrolling on campus that will cover the full cost of their first-year tuition.

Those incoming freshmen are expected to live on campus but take courses online, allowing them to participate in the experiential side of the institution. Then they can continue with the \$10,000 on-campus rate in their sophomore years, when

new models based on online, hybrid or project-based modalities are expected to be ready.

### ‘We’re Looking at Everything’

Southern New Hampshire University looks like few others because of its size, scale and online [capabilities](#). In normal times, the private nonprofit reported 3,000 on-campus students and 135,000 students studying online.

That massive enrollment helps make possible pricing experiments that might be difficult for smaller colleges and universities. Still, Southern New Hampshire’s tuition changes are connected to the larger environment.

The university is acknowledging that freshmen are enrolling in an uncertain time by providing full-tuition scholarships for those enrolling in on-campus programs this fall.

“We really de-risk for those first-year students,” said Paul LeBlanc, Southern New Hampshire’s president. “We think this turns out to be exactly the right strategy at exactly the right time.”

Southern New Hampshire had been working toward rolling out the new model in 2023, LeBlanc said. Then the pandemic hit. Current

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We really de-risk  
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## Pricing Pressures Escalate

high school seniors don't have the luxury of waiting a few years, so the university accelerated its plans.

"It's not our timing of choice, but it's what we need to do," LeBlanc said. "This is not a response to the challenges of September 2020. It's actually much more a response to the recession and this astonishing level of unemployment."

LeBlanc cautions against seeing Southern New Hampshire's announcement solely as a single-year pricing move. It's paired with significant efforts to improve pedagogy and rethink assumptions about the way on-campus education works. Even though it's being put in place on an accelerated schedule, the university has been laying the groundwork for quite some time.

"We're looking at everything," LeBlanc said. "We're looking at the whole student life cycle. How do we leverage the kind of technology and platforms that we've built? How do we think differently about the structure and term of the academic year? Could we move to a 12-month academic year? Could we contemplate the student going around the calendar and graduating in two years, which removes two years of opportunity costs?"

That parallels something experts often say about pricing conversations: a college's price is best considered in concert with market position, long-term strategy and developments in the broader higher education environment.

"There is downward pressure in pricing, but what we're seeing is that what each institution should do is idiosyncratically different from what every other institution should do," said David Strauss, a principal at Art & Science Group, a Baltimore-based consulting firm. "If you can't afford to study and get the right answer, it's usually the

wrong answer over the long term."

### 'You Have to Be a Very Good Listener to the Market'

Signs of pricing pressure existed long before the coronavirus crisis exposed them.

The National Association of College and University Business Officers conducts an annual Tuition Discounting Study that looks at the sticker prices four-year private non-profit colleges and universities post, the amount of financial aid they provide and the tuition discount rates that reveal what percentage of sticker prices institutions never actually collect from students. That study has also examined net tuition revenue -- the amount of money institutions do collect from students.

Net tuition revenue was largely flat in recent years, according to the 2018 discounting study, the most recent available. Across all types of private institutions in the study, net revenue per first-time, full-time freshman rose by just 0.4 percent without adjusting for inflation in 2018-19. It fell by 0.8 percent in 2017-18.

"I think there's been downward pressure on price now for some years," LeBlanc said. "It's been a little bit masked for many privates because of the way it's manifested in the discount rate. They have been effectively lowering their price without saying it publicly across many institutions."

Even so, the current crisis is accelerating that pressure. Research is showing that students and families are thinking about staying closer to home than they normally would, according to Stephanie Dupaul, vice president for enrollment management at the University of Richmond.

"This is already the safety-focused generation; this will just increase that focus," she said in an

email. "And cost has become a significant factor as these high school students are now watching their parents go through a second economic crisis."

Even well-off students seem likely to try to minimize risks in this environment, said Allen Koh, CEO of Cardinal Education, an education consulting firm that caters to wealthy families seeking admission to elite institutions.

"You're going to start seeing an unprecedented number of kids who are going to college in the fall who will do summer school at a community college to try to get some general education requirements cheaply," he said. "You're going to see a lot more students take three years to graduate, and you may even see this impact medical schools and law schools."

Different admissions officers and experts have theorized that well-off families could hedge their bets by putting down deposits at multiple colleges. Doing so would allow them to select the best option of price, prestige and location once the extent of pandemic-related shutdowns becomes clear for the fall, all while dodging traditional spring commitment deadlines.

It would also throw enrollment, yield and summer melt models into disarray over the summer, leaving some colleges without their most lucrative students on short notice.

Some experts also believe gap years could become more popular if students don't want to take the risk of enrolling at all in an uncertain environment. Other students may scrap all plans to attend college, particularly if mounting financial troubles make higher education seem unattainable for first-generation students or those with little savings. [Data show](#) declining completion rates for the Free Application

## Pricing Pressures Escalate

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for Federal Student Aid, indicating that at least some students may be rethinking college attendance next year.

At the same time, students who would have been likely to attend prestigious second-tier institutions are now focused on entering the Ivy League, Koh said. Families that continue to have a large amount of wealth -- those that pay the full cost of tuition -- are always sought after. But they're even more valuable to colleges today, when less wealthy students have larger financial needs and rising coronavirus-related costs are stretching budgets across the board.

In other words, wealthy families suddenly enjoy even more leverage than they had before. The most prestigious institutions in the country are most able to choose their students, so they are most able to shield themselves from pricing pressures.

"Very prestigious schools and schools with strong endowments, they won't do anything on pricing for at least this admissions cycle, maybe two," Koh said. "It's hard to raise prices after a massive deduction. Plus, universities just have too many fixed costs."

Still, universities of all types could feel at least a net revenue pinch because of uncertainty in international student enrollment. As wealth levels and the number of traditional high school graduates have leveled off in the United States, many colleges and universities leaned heavily on international enrollment, which produces a large number of students paying high prices.

Now, Koh asks if international students will be able to fly to the United States to attend college in the fall. Will the federal government grant them visas? Will they want to come?

All those pressures translate to



We share in each other's celebrations  
and support each other in our struggles.  
This is an expression of who we are.  
The option to defer payments is an act to help  
our students and their families, to make it  
easier for students to return to -- or start -- their  
educational experience at Davidson.



difficulty for institutions that would normally be considered safe from enrollment and pricing shocks. That makes moves such as Davidson's tuition deferral worth watching closely.

The deferral option at Davidson applies to tuition and fees as well as room and board for the fall. All or part of family contributions can be postponed. Davidson left open the possibility of expanding the deferred tuition option to the spring 2021 semester.

A Davidson spokesman declined to provide any estimates of financial costs associated with the deferral option being offered to students because of uncertainty. In emailed responses to questions, he emphasized the college's community.

"The option to defer fall tuition springs from the sense of community that makes Davidson distinctive," the spokesman wrote. "We share in each other's celebrations and support each other in our struggles. This is an expression of who we are. The option to defer payments is an act to help our students and their families, to make it easier for students to return to -- or start -- their educational experience at Davidson."

Depending on how it's structured, such a deferral program could carry risks for students, families and colleges. It could mean families facing not one but two tuition bills next year, experts pointed out. If families can't pay, any college offering a deferral plan will be left with a financial hit.

Even so, it's one way to shift billing and address short-term market shocks.

Other colleges and universities that rely on the on-campus experience to attract students may not have the financial resources to spot families the cost of tuition for a significant period of time. Tuition-dependent small private liberal arts colleges that tout small class sizes and intimate campuses are scattered across the country. What happens if they're unable to leverage that close community to attract new students in the fall?

What happens if the pandemic prevents students from returning to campus in the fall, prompting rising sophomores or juniors not to re-enroll? What if those students reason that paying a liberal arts tuition for an online experience makes no sense when they can just as

## Pricing Pressures Escalate

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easily pay a lower price point at a fully online college?

Melody Rose was the president of Marylhurst University outside of Portland, Ore., when it closed in 2018. She is now working on a book tentatively titled *Achieving Graceful Transitions in Higher Education* and is a senior consultant for the Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges.

“I think if you’re a small private or public regional institution without a lot of investment capacity in an on-line pivot, and the very reason people select you -- the community, the intimacy of small in-person classes -- is gone, then you may be facing an existential crisis by fall of 2020,” Rose said.

Should the coronavirus force

campuses to remain closed in the fall, long-term questions about pricing pressure may fade into the background in lieu of the newly burning question of for what, exactly, students at traditional campuses were really paying. Was it credit hours or the full in-person experience, rich with living among fellow students, taking part in activities and receiving a full slate of support services?

As much as some administrators may want to argue that students will be willing to pay full cost for a short-term remote learning substitute, the spate of class action lawsuits filed after students were sent home this spring suggests other scenarios.

For now, however, that question remains part of a larger environ-

ment of uncertainty that continues as spring admissions season enters its critical phase. Hundreds of universities have postponed decision day, when deposits are due, from May 1 to June 1. Coming days and weeks will still be crunch time, when many high school seniors will decide where to attend college after summer’s end.

“It’s difficult to feel very confident about how some of these key value points might play out, and that’s especially true in that competition for students,” said Peter Stokes, managing director at the consulting firm Huron’s education strategy and operations group. “You have to be a very good listener to the market in order to compete effectively in a highly dynamic situation.” ■

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<https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2020/04/27/tuition-freezes-and-cuts-show-colleges-and-universities-are-face-downward-price>

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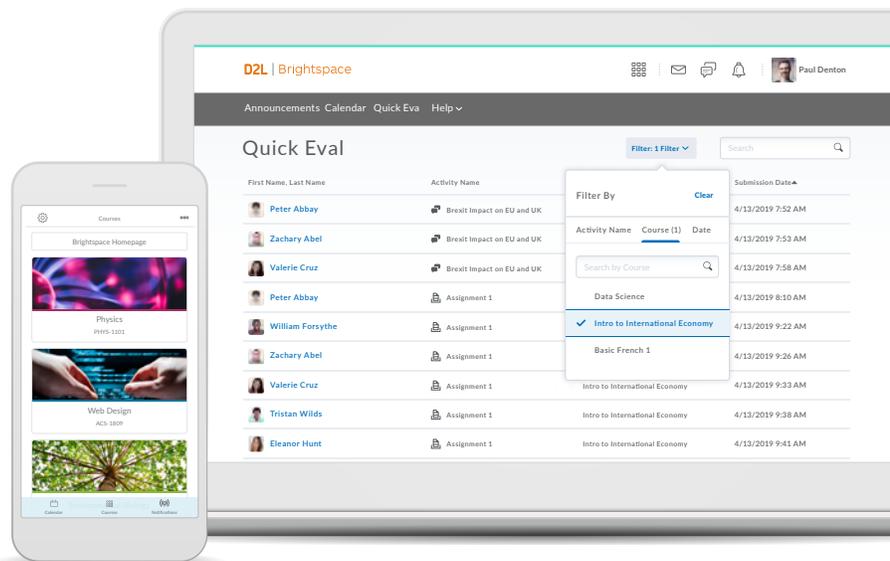
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# Decision Points Loom for College Leaders

Scenario planning is getting attention as a tool for navigating an uncertain time. But when will leaders need to make big decisions?

By [Rick Seltzer](#) // April 30, 2020



SOURCE: ISTOCK.COM/MANANYA KAEWTHAWEE

The novel coronavirus pandemic converted many college and university leaders into fans of scenario planning.

It's easy to see why. The fast-shifting landscape and massive changes to core campus operations beg for a mechanism that allows board members, presidents, top administrators and deans to prepare for vastly different futures. Many have attested to scenario planning's usefulness, whether they outline [three](#) or [15 different](#) scenarios for the future.

But at some point, leaders need to switch from planning to making decisions about which scenarios to follow.

Making choices tied to one decision point doesn't preclude future

choices changing as more information comes available. In such an unsettled time, the scenarios are always changing, experts stressed. The decision points are, too.

"Our scenarios must be robust, must be clear as daylight, and we must be willing to make adjustments to decisions that we make in real time," said Benjamin Ola Akande, assistant vice chancellor for international affairs, Africa, and associate director of the Global Health Center at Washington University in St. Louis, who this month was named president of Champlain College in Vermont.

In conversations over the last week, leaders and the consultants they work with outlined some of the most important decision points

they're watching. Those points are explained below, grouped loosely by whether they're tied to a specific date on the calendar or other condition. Many lend themselves to decisions about whether to reopen for the fall or not. But they may still be pertinent even for colleges that have made that decision and must still plot other scenarios, such as whether to shuffle the academic calendar or make major operational restructuring decisions.

## Points in Time

[Pre-May 1 Admissions Milestones](#): Early indicators showed the COVID-19 pandemic generating cause for concern as competitive colleges built their classes for next year.

Recent private polling indicat-

## Legal Battle Over Captioning Continues

ed that one in six students who'd planned to attend four-year colleges [no longer plan to do so](#). Other surveys led a firm to conclude that four-year colleges [may lose](#) as many as a fifth of students. Many families [reported](#) losing income amid the coronavirus, and existing college students [pushed back](#) on the idea of paying full price to traditional in-person colleges for remote instruction should campuses be unable to reopen in the fall.

So it's no surprise that college leaders report making various decisions based on how their spring admissions seasons were taking shape. Those decisions include [pricing actions](#) like freezes or even cuts to tuition. Some changed the way they communicate with prospective students, emphasizing how colleges have supported students who were being sent home for the spring semester or accommodated students with flexible grading policies.

Some may find it too cynical to suggest admissions considerations factored into colleges beginning to [announce plans to reopen](#) for the fall semester this week, during the run-up to deposit day on May 1. But in the last week or so, some colleges have grown much more aggressive about communicating their intention to reopen, and leaders made clear that many campuses need to reopen in the fall to secure their own futures.

"The basic business model for most colleges and universities is simple -- tuition comes due twice a year at the beginning of each semester," wrote Brown University's president, Christina Paxson, in a Sunday [opinion piece](#) for *The New York Times*. "Most colleges and universities are tuition dependent. Remaining closed in the fall means losing as much as half of our revenue."

And at least one community college in Northern California connected student decisions to an announcement that it will stick with distance learning in the fall.

"We want students to know what they're signing up for," Sierra College spokesperson Josh Morgan said, [according to](#) CBS Sacramento.

**May 1 and June 1 Decision Days:** Many colleges pushed their decision days -- the dates by which high school seniors committing to attend must submit deposits -- back from the traditional May 1 to June 1. Experts anticipate both dates will be important for colleges and universities that need to count their freshman classes and decide on next steps.

"If we wanted to timeline it, I do think May 1 is still going to be an important milestone," said Peter Stokes, managing director at the consulting firm Huron's education strategy and operations group. "The information we get there will be very telling."

**Mid-June:** Once the new, later June 1 decision day has passed, some admissions experts suggest-

ed colleges and universities will turn their full attention to retaining rising sophomores, juniors and seniors, as well as avoiding summer melt among incoming freshmen. Feedback they receive could filter into decisions about additional retention actions or even cost-cutting.

**Annual board meetings:** Most colleges and universities close their fiscal years at the end of June. It would seem to be a natural time for major decisions to be made as boards hold regular meetings at the end of the year.

That may happen in some cases. But in the current crisis, engaged boards aren't always waiting for end-of-the-year meetings to make decisions that are critical.

"Boards are meeting more frequently in order to consider information," said Merrill Schwartz, senior vice president for content strategy and development at the Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges. "Decision points are very much on everyone's mind."

**Cutoff dates:** Major undertakings like reopening campuses for

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Most colleges and universities are tuition dependent. Remaining closed in the fall means losing as much as half of our revenue.

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all students come with deadlines driven by logistics. It simply takes time to bring back staff members and prepare campuses for a fall of in-person instruction. For example, Radford University in Virginia said plans to reopen in the fall will require select employees to return before the state is scheduled to lift a shelter-in-place order June 10.

How much time varies from campus to campus. But leaders have likely reverse-engineered a cutoff date by which they'll have to make certain major decisions.

"There's going to come a point where we're going to have to make a decision about when we are going to physically be on campus, because we have to gear up," said Thomas Galligan, interim president at Louisiana State University. "But other than that, our decision points are substantive, and safety is our guidepost."

This type of deadline is more about closing off scenarios. Leaders could move to keep open their options long before it's clear whether in-person classes can actually resume.

"The question becomes, 'What do you think is likely to happen, and given what you think is likely to happen, how achievable is it in the space of May, June, July, August, to be ready?'" Stokes said. "If you want to be there by fall, you've got to be running right now. That's not something you can put off for a couple of weeks."

### **Government and Regulatory Decisions**

**Elected officials:** One of the biggest decision points comes when elected officials make their own decisions. But the landscape here is highly complex.

When do governors lift stay-at-home orders? Do mayors or local officials ban large gatherings, pre-

venting large lecture classes in the process? Do any health officials place restrictions on dormitory living? What about travel restrictions?

"Think about if you do have residential students," said Nicholas Santilli, senior director for learning strategy at the Society for College and University Planning, who has been developing a scenario planning guide intended to help colleges recover after the pandemic. "You decide to open up on a particular date. But what happens if there is still a quarantine order in place for individuals traveling across state lines?"

Most college leaders appear to be focused more on conditions than dates, Santilli said.

**Health-care officials:** Guidance from health-care officials and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention will play a big part in helping colleges decide whether they can reopen for in-person instruction at any point and how to do so.

Any information about how facilities need to be cleaned will be taken into account. So too will guidelines for distancing and detailed plans for phased reopening within states.

"We're still on a stay-at-home order," said Galligan, of LSU. "Once our governor lifts that stay-at-home order, in part we'll be coming back in phases, and getting to the next phase is going to depend in part on not only what the governor does and CDC recommends, but on staying safe for two weeks under the previous phase."

### **Changing Data and Conditions**

**Watching states open for business:** Experts suggested colleges and universities will closely watch the experiences of states that are slowly reopening their economies, like Georgia, Florida and Texas.

Spiking infection rates, or consumers who refuse to go out, would suggest very different courses of

action for higher education than would an orderly return to business as usual.

Texas governor Greg Abbott has detailed plans to reopen restaurants and other businesses starting Friday. The state's higher ed leaders will be watching -- likely along with leaders in other states.

"In the timeline that Governor Abbott laid out, we're all going to be monitoring the next couple of weeks very closely as they start to open up certain kinds of businesses," said Harrison Keller, commissioner of higher education for Texas. "There is going to be a lot of attention around May 18 for updated guidance coming out. It could come out sooner if it's necessary and appropriate. But that will be an important date for us in Texas as we see what happens over the next couple of weeks."

Some higher ed leaders may balk at the idea that decisions about students should be informed in any way by the experiences of, say, reopening restaurants. But economists see some parallels. Some predict more long-term pain if restaurants or colleges reopen too soon, only to have infection rates spike and consumer confidence plunge further.

"Think about it from the standpoint of the student or prospective student," said Roland Rust, a professor at the University of Maryland's school of business, during a Thursday conference call. "Economic problems combined with behavioral problems of students not wanting to be here, those combine to be a very tough problem to solve."

While the experience of one state or region may inform decisions in others, experts caution that wise courses of action will still vary between different areas.

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## Health care and medical factors:

How widespread does testing become? What's the likelihood that a vaccine is developed in a year? What is happening to infection and death rates nationwide? What is happening to infection and death rates within a certain region?

Changing answers to all those questions will trigger different decisions.

"We'll know a lot more in 30 days," said Galligan, of LSU. "We're just going to try and keep up with the knowledge and public health data."

**State finances:** The state funding picture will be critical to public institutions and many private institutions across the country.

It's no secret that the economic collapse prompted by the pandemic has slashed state tax revenue while ramping up costs such as unemployment insurance. And as experts at the State Higher Education Executive Officers association have taken to saying, higher education tends to be the wheel upon which state budgets are balanced.

How and when states change their spending plans could have ramifications for the types of spending and tuition decisions public colleges and universities need to make. It will also affect many private institutions in states with financial aid programs for students. Think of private colleges and universities in Illinois, which suffered several years ago when a state budget impasse prevented regular disbursement of grants under the state's Monetary Award Program.

**Institutional factors:** Scenarios available to colleges will change as various institutional factors and capacities evolve. Such factors include the capacity to quarantine students on campus should an outbreak occur, institutions' ability to maintain a strong online or



That doesn't just happen. Either there was some serious coordination, or they are all looking to each other for guidance.



remote education over time, labor levels and how much of a financial cushion exists, experts said.

For example, if a large number of faculty members who have health concerns balk at the idea of teaching in person in the fall, it becomes much harder to bring students back to campus without making major changes. But if faculty members take the lead in developing strong online or remote options, an institution's decision making may become easier.

**When others act:** Generally speaking, higher education leaders like to know what everyone else is doing before they make a decision themselves.

"One of the things our members have been asking us for information about is how other institutions are handling the situation," said Schwartz, of AGB. "It isn't the same for a big public university system as it is for a small college in a rural area. They want to know how other institutions 'like us' are handling a situation. When are they making the decision? What are they doing about tuition? What are their expectations about fall enrollment? How are they handling clinical courses of study?"

Institutions generally follow peers or more prestigious institutions, experts said. They don't usually follow the lead of an institution considered to be less prestigious.

One [new working paper](#) looks at about 1,400 colleges and universities that decided to transition to online instruction between early March and early April. Six in 10 colleges in the data set closed between March 10 and 13, said one of its authors, Christopher R. Marsicano, a visiting assistant professor in the department of educational studies at Davidson College.

"That doesn't just happen," he said in email. "Either there was some serious coordination, or they are all looking to each other for guidance."

One decision point is always "when others act," said Marsicano, who stressed that the paper's findings are preliminary.

## Order of Importance

The above list isn't meant to be comprehensive.

It doesn't take into account many factors colleges and universities are weighing, nor does it touch on the wide range of scenarios different types of institution will be

## Legal Battle Over Captioning Continues

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planning. State and local funding levels may be more important for community colleges than for elite research institutions, for instance.

The same developments might stress institutions in different ways, as well. It's possible students will see uncertainty and eschew high-priced private colleges in lieu of a year of taking general education requirements at community colleges. And only some community colleges in well-populated or wealthy areas may see a surge in student interest.

Others in hard-hit parts of the country may see declines in interest.

Still, experts suggest many institutions follow a rough framework as they move from scenario planning to decision point. First, ask what to do in each scenario. Then ask about cutoff dates for making operational decisions. Finally, ask when the market needs to know about a decision, said David Strauss, a principal at Art & Science Group, a Baltimore-based consulting firm.

When thinking about decision points, many experts observed that leaders sometimes fall into wishful thinking. Only time will tell whether they break that pattern during this crisis.

"The knee-jerk or hopeful planning versus the empirically based planning is fascinating," Strauss said.

"And it mirrors what institutions do on the larger strategic questions when we're not in the midst of COVID-19." ■

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<https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2020/04/30/what-are-some-key-decision-points-colleges-face>

# OPINION

## Enrolling Your Class During a Pandemic

Even amid COVID-19, admissions professionals can have success, writes MJ Knoll-Finn.

By MJ Knoll-Finn // April 13, 2020

I'm fairly certain that many of us never imagined this would be the headline at this point in our cycle. I know I never did, and yet here we are in the midst of a global pandemic and economic uncertainty that has upturned every aspect of our work and lives. During the last few weeks, while working with my team at New York University to adapt, pivot and roll up their sleeves, I've learned mountains of lessons, including that with the right ingredients adversity can lead to innovation, and that social distancing can bring us closer together.

We all face yearly challenges -- from difficult enrollment decisions to meeting yield targets. However, this one, COVID-19, is immensely different. It's not simply a logistical challenge for admissions. There's a great factor of the unknown that impacts all of us on many levels -- both professional and personal: how long the coronavirus disrupts our normal ways of life, how it strains the economy, what it may do to our health and how we continue to achieve enrollment goals and continuity of studies in colleges across the country and world. Newly admitted students, families and our very own admissions teams require agile, innovative and nurturing support this season, unlike anything we've ever seen before.

### Operating in a Global Context

Drawing from our experiences across the globe, starting with our campus in Shanghai that was a

harbinger of change to come at the beginning of our spring semester, I want to share with you our approach to the changes that we've made to the 2020 admissions process.

Identifying forward-thinking solutions is top of mind for NYU, where our student body represents all 50 U.S. states and almost 170 countries. With our flagship campus in the heart of New York City and our other two degree-granting campuses across the globe in Abu Dhabi and Shanghai, we are diligently preparing for and addressing the challenge in front of us. What gives me hope is the spirit, tenacity and sheer inventiveness of our teams in such unprecedented times.

### Three Ideas for Enrollment Managers in a Time of Crisis

**Make the virtual personal.** In an era when technology has been a part of our lives for years, this is an opportune time to think about how to make our online experience more human.

At NYU we got a head start on creating virtual spaces as our Shanghai campus began by crafting a virtual experience for applicants that includes on-demand videos but also live events that allow students and families to connect with our staff and each other. We've been especially careful to ensure our content is accessible to students across the globe -- sensitive to firewall limitations, variations in internet bandwidth, time zones and cultural differences -- working with



New York University

talented staff from University IT, our existing online programs, marketing and admissions. We've also reached out individually to students and set up far more individual and small meetings with students, faculty, deans and alumni in the NYU community. I've even surprised myself by creating an Instagram account -- a work in progress! -- for my team so that we can connect in new ways that keep us energized. This moment has, indeed, separated us physically but also given us many ways to personally connect -- and that is making us a more collaborative, more connected team.

**Provide structure, consistency and compassion.** This is a time of great uncertainty. Every day, sometimes more than once a day, we've had to adjust to change. During

## Enrolling Your Class During a Pandemic

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these times, it is important that we provide predictable anchors for people's sense of normalcy, but it is equally important that we provide flexibility and compassion.

At NYU, this means we are holding to standard schedules for decision release, our May 1 deposit deadline for first-year students, and our course registration schedule. These structures are important and demonstrate that our existing systems have not stopped even while we may be experiencing life differently. For more vulnerable populations, in particular, the key is to be sensitive and open to the challenges that students and their families may be facing and be flexible when they cannot adhere to our new structures. Not only does this give us a chance to connect and support each other, it gives us the opportunity to know who may need a little extra attention during this time. At NYU it's been heartwarm-

ing to see the our community -- enrollment management employees, alumni, friends and parents -- come together quickly to establish a new COVID-19 Relief Grant to help alleviate hardships that students are facing. In one short week we were able to offer funds to over 1,200 students through the availability of this fund that helped connect us to students in need.

**Be boldly creative.** Times of adversity can also bring great innovation as creative problem solvers adapt to new environments. This has been one of the most amazing outcomes of the challenges as we face the COVID-19 pandemic. We were all disappointed to have to cancel our in-person admitted student events, as welcoming our admitted students each April is one of our great honors in enrollment management.

However, these obstacles have forced us to find creative ways to

bring our campus to each student we admit. We know that in the era of Netflix, students expect services and content to be personalized and delivered on demand. Customized videos and interactive tours are a logical place to start. If resources allow, go beyond sending out links to admitted students. Host live video discussions from your admissions team, university leadership and current students based on specific topics, for example, the academic mission of your school, what the dorms are like, the centerpieces of your community and what the resource centers and libraries look like.

I encourage you to think about and share with the enrollment management community what students may need from us. After all, we're in this together, because if we've learned anything from the COVID-19 outbreak, it's that the one way to get through this is to realize our connectedness. ■

### Bio

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<https://www.insidehighered.com/admissions/views/2020/04/13/enrolling-class-during-pandemic-difficult-doable-opinion>

# 15 Fall Scenarios

| Higher education in a time of social distancing.

By **Edward J. Maloney** and **Joshua Kim** // April 22, 2020

## LEARNING INNOVATION

It's difficult to imagine higher education facing a more intense set of challenges than what we are seeing because of the COVID-19 pandemic. These challenges will likely be felt for years to come, but fall 2020 will test many of the standards and structures that we have come to associate with higher education.

While no one can foresee what will happen in the fall, most colleges and universities are thinking through a range of options. These options tend to fall along a continuum, with everything being back to normal on one end and fully remote learning on the other. The former is mostly outside the control of most institutions and the latter an option that many would rather not choose, at least not yet. In between is where

it gets complicated.

Here are 15 scenarios for the fall that we think schools will be considering.

### **1. Back to Normal**

In this scenario, the fall semester looks like any other fall semester. Residential students return to campus; commuting students participate in classes on campus as usual. All co-curricular and curricular activities pick up as usual. Life is back to normal, perhaps (hopefully) with some lessons learned from the upheaval of the spring about the importance of investments in teaching and learning support.

### **2. A Late Start**

One possibility for the fall is that colleges and universities begin the semester later than usual, perhaps sometime in October or even early

November, whenever the social distancing restrictions can accommodate students gathering together in classes on campus. Schools may choose to start online and then pick up face-to-face slightly later in the semester, or they may postpone the start of the semester until there is a vaccine, better testing or a clear turning point in our fight against the ongoing spread of COVID-19.

### **3. Moving Fall to Spring**

While under the previous scenario the fall semester would start late, it still assumes a fall semester would take place within the boundaries of the normal fall semester. In this scenario, the fall semester would be postponed until January 2021. From there, schools might choose to push back the spring semester to the summer, or push through a

## 15 Fall Scenarios

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modified calendar to make spring and a much shorter summer session possible. This is a drastic step, but it is one that some colleges are actively considering as part of their fall planning.

### 4. First-Year Intensive

How a student begins their college experience may be the best predictor of how their college experience will end. The ability of a student to persist through the rigors of college life is in part dependent on the quality of the support they receive in orienting to the independence and intensity of college-level work. Recognizing the importance of the first year and the first few weeks and months of the transition to college, this plan brings only first-year students to campus in the fall. First-year students learn in residential classes, while also participating in a full range of campus-based orientation and social-connecting exercises. Sophomores, juniors and seniors continue to learn remotely for the fall semester.

### 5. Graduate Students Only

Like the first-year intensive model, this approach would identify select student populations for return to campus. In this model, a smaller population of graduate students might return to campus to continue studies and to help with research continuity. There are other ways of identifying student populations -- by school, by major, by class -- that could also be combined with curricular and administrative considerations such as class size and need for face-to-face interaction.

### 6. Structured Gap Year

Many colleges and universities have extensive study abroad and gap year options. While study abroad will still likely be a challenge in the fall, one approach to creating a lower-density model for the fall would be to implement a broader-scale

approach to gap year experiences. Students could propose project-based experiences that could be implemented and managed while social distancing rules are still in place. This model would depend heavily on whether options for students to make the gap year a meaningful experience are available given social distancing restrictions.

### 7. Targeted Curriculum

One approach option for fall is to reduce the number of courses being offered to limit on campus density and to prioritize support resources. Schools are considering a variety of ways of doing this, including focusing on core courses or signature experience courses, eliminating low-enrollment courses, and prioritizing courses that can be more easily adapted to multiple modalities. Courses that are not part of the targeted pool are taught online.

### 8. Split Curriculum

In a split curriculum scenario, courses are designed as either residential or online. Students who are able to come back to campus (up to the population in which social distancing rules can be enforced) can choose to enroll in either format. Requiring a defined proportion of enrollments to be in online courses for residential students may increase the number of students that can return to campus. This scenario has the advantage of simplifying the course-development process for faculty and the course-selection process for students, while also running the maximum number of residential courses possible while adhering to social distancing guidelines.

### 9. A Block Plan

This scenario mimics what some colleges already do. Students would take one course at a time during much shorter (three

or four weeks) sessions or blocks, run consecutively for the entire semester. The advantage, besides an interesting and intensive pedagogy, is flexibility. If something were to change in the situation related to the pandemic, such as a new second wave of infections, schools could more easily pivot to remote or face-to-face learning at breaks between blocks.

### 10. Modularity

The block plan is a dramatic departure from the normal curricular structure at most schools. It would likely require a full rethinking of the curriculum, teaching practice and administrative processes. Moving to a more modular course model might be more attractive and more easily implementable within existing structures. Courses could be structured in a variety of ways that would be consistent with the mission and signature strengths of the institution. At one institution, students might take five course modules over seven and a half weeks and then switch to a different five courses. Or students might take a semester-long seminar in their major with shorter modules for electives and labs.

### 11. Students in Residence, Learning Virtually

Much like the model of [Minerva Schools at KGI](#), this approach would bring students back to campus, perhaps at a slightly less dense rate, while still teaching courses in a virtual environment. Students would be able to take advantage of many co-curricular activities that were set up for effective social distancing, but classes, where the correct density of students sitting for long periods of time in a room is still a relative unknown, would be taught online.

### 12. A Low-Residency Model

In this model, similar to how many

online and executive programs work now, students would come to campus for intensive face-to-face experiences and then return home to complete the semester online. Students would be brought to campus in iterative waves. This would allow for greater density control. Rich face-to-face pedagogical experiences with peers and faculty could be developed while still maintaining social distancing. The online part of the semester would be enhanced by student familiarity with each other.

### 13. A HyFlex model

The *HyFlex model* is perhaps the most flexible and for many will be the most attractive. It is also possibly one of the more difficult approaches for faculty. In this model, courses would be taught both face-to-face and online by the same instructor at the same time. Students could choose to return to campus or stay home. Those on campus could be assigned certain class slots when face-to-face is an option, allowing the schools greater control of social distancing in the classroom. This model tends to privilege synchronous learning, and to do it well often requires real-time in-class help (a TA or course assistant to manage the online students), an intentionally designed classroom and a great deal of pa-

tience from both the students and faculty.

### 14. A Modified Tutorial Model

Another approach that gives students and the university a great deal of flexibility is a modified tutorial model. In this model, students would take a common online lecture session. Faculty and or TAs would then meet with small groups of students in tutorials that would allow for social distancing to be employed. Unlike the HyFlex model, a modified tutorial model does not require additional in-class support to manage the technology. The disadvantage is that it asks more of a faculty member's time to be dedicated to meeting with students.

### 15. Fully Remote

Perhaps the most obvious option for the fall is to continue doing what we've been doing this spring. Students would be taught in a virtual environment from wherever they happen to be. Successes from this spring could be carried over to the fall, and lessons learned could be employed. Co-curricular activities would be a challenge, but student groups and many activities could be carried forward online, if only temporarily.

These models are not all distinct, and many overlap. Each brings with it nuances and opportunities for modification and creative solutions

unique to a specific campus. Many will require highly adaptable faculty committed to marrying synchronous and asynchronous learning in flexible, dynamic ways.

Additionally, all of these options may not be completely feasible at any one institution, but all may turn out to be necessary thought experiments as schools plan for the unknowns of the coming academic year.

What is clear with any of these models, though, is that support for teaching and learning, advising, student (not to mention faculty and staff) health and well-being, and coordination and logistics will need to be reinforced in all of these 15 scenarios. Adopting any (or any combination) of these scenarios for the fall will also require us to reimagine how we build a supportive learning community. None of this will be easy.

Over the next couple of weeks, we will be working to delve more deeply into as many of these scenarios as possible. Our goal is to synthesize these ideas and to make some recommendations in a concise digital-only book, tentatively titled *The Low-Density University*. We'd love to hear your feedback on scenarios we've missed or how your school is thinking about the scenarios above. ■

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<https://www.insidehighered.com/digital-learning/blogs/learning-innovation/15-fall-scenarios>

# Might This Be the Beginning of Education?

If nothing else, Paul Hanstedt writes, the global pandemic is breaking the boundary between static university learning and the wicked fluidity of the world.

By Paul Hanstedt // April 28, 2020



SOURCE: ISTOCK.COM/SESAME

Just to be clear: I'm not a silver-lining guy. I've been known to bring down whole birthday parties with a single dour observation. I can find the lone cloud in a clear blue sky. My friends once gave me T-shirt bearing a picture of Eeyore. This was not, I soon learned, because I am a fan of *House at Pooh Corner*.

I'm also -- again to be very clear -- not about to pretend we're not going through something awful. We are. As I write this, COVID-19 deaths in the United States have topped 50,000. Our students' lives are being disrupted in terrible ways. As are ours.

Nonetheless -- and I recognize that two short paragraphs might be too few to justify a shift to "nonetheless," but I'm going to, anyway, if for no other reason than I need to cling to *something*. So: nonetheless. We are teachers. What drives us is the desire to see our students grow, to

rise into their best selves, to achieve a sense of their capacity to enter the world as agents of thoughtful, ethical, meaningful change. And that in mind? Yes. Perhaps there's something of a silver lining here.

Consider: for too long, our educational system has been structured in a manner that fails to parallel the flux and flow of life after graduation. There is something artificial about how universities approach disciplines and their work: students choose majors formed around 10 to 15 carefully constructed courses, each of which covers a list of committee-approved topics frequently contained in lowest-common-denominator textbooks -- many of which include at least some of the answers to life's rich problems at the end of each chapter.

Further, in the academy, students generally have a clear sense of where they are and what rules apply

at any given moment: 9:15 means PSYC and its discipline-approved methodologies; 10:45 is when we do CHEM; ENGL occurs Monday, Wednesday, Friday at 1:00. POLI is a three-hour lecture on Tuesday nights. Occasionally disciplines and fields bump into each other in that messy world called gen ed. But otherwise? Each to its own little box. And every box is reinforced by almost every dimension of institutional rhetoric, from the opening question we ask students when they first walk on campus -- "What's your major?" -- to the closing design of the college transcript, with its clear disciplinary designations.

In contrast, the world is a messy place. [I've written elsewhere](#) of the contrast between the static university and a dynamic world filled with "wicked" problems. Arising from city planning before being adopted in engineering, the concept of the wicked

## Might This Be the Beginning of Education?

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problem refers to challenges that are dynamic and changing, resistant to simple solutions – even solutions that may have been effective in the past. Think poverty. Think addiction. Think the 2016 election, where fake news, social media, automation and a changing economy created a swirl of misinformation and toxic political dysfunction.

Think COVID-19.

So, first silver lining: if nothing else, the global pandemic is breaking the boundary between static university learning and the wicked fluidity of the world. Students in the sciences now understand that science is helpless without sound public policy. Students studying religion now see the interaction between theology, politics, sociology, economics and health playing out in real time. Ethicists are already exploring the decision-making processes at the national and local levels; poets, painters, photographers and novelists are seeing their words, images and ideas shared as an anxious public seeks both comfort and the capacity to understand the unfolding complexities of daily life. Indeed, were we to design a course proposing solutions to problems related to COVID 19, it would involve every field in the academy, from biology to economics to film to physical education.

If we're wise, we'll use this moment to help our students better understand the complexity of the world beyond the walls of academe, the ways in which our various fields and disciplines not only overlap but also influence and shape and reshape each other in substantive ways. If we're smart, we'll use this moment to foreground those messy interactions, asking students to explore such interrelations, to parse cause and effect, to unfold how data influences poetry and how poetry can

shape our ability to give meaning to data.

If we're smart, we'll find ways to ensure that, when things return to "normal," we rethink our curricula, our project assignments, our day-to-day lectures and conversations in the classroom to ensure that our students understand that the major is a historical construct. And that, further, majors have minimal bearing on where they will go with their lives, the sorts of problems they'll be asked to solve, the sorts of skills and ways of thinking they'll need to bring to the conversation to address problems in ways that are constructive, ethical and equitable.

Yes, fields matter. Yes, content matters. But only to a point. Finally, our college graduates need to be intellectually nimble, capable of pivoting quickly to different methodologies, different ways of thinking, different concepts and modes of problem solving.

Second, this awful moment in time may provide an opportunity for us to help students move beyond a mentality of simple answers. Certainly, at this particular moment in time there are answers that are more right than others – wash your hands, for God's sake! – but the idea of certainty itself, of an answer at the back of the book that simply needs to be memorized, has been shattered. We're on a long, curving road. Our understanding of what's ahead of us is changing daily, sometimes hourly. Before all of this happened, a colleague in biochem explained that what he wanted students to most understand was that failure was part of the process. "My experiments fail 95 percent of the time," he told me. "And that's exciting. Because every time they fail, I learn something that moves me closer to an answer."

While the current pandemic, of

course, prohibits the almost leisurely joy of unfolding implicit in his words, it certainly does illustrate the necessity of failure in our lives and work: we hypothesize; we attempt; we get it wrong; we reconsider; we try again. Captured in the current crisis is so much that we want to teach our students about process, about the answer versus an answer, even about those sometimes cloying buzzwords "grit" and "growth mind-set."

Third, present here is a possibility of agency that often eludes many students. When answers are always perceived as something that only the professor holds, students are essentially in the sidecar to their own education. When, though, we allow that answers can sometimes be fluid and elusive, students become partners in the search for solutions, assuming agency in a shared exploration.

What are the proper policy solutions for flattening the curve? How can those best be communicated to an age group that may see itself as invulnerable? What role does art play in that communication? Social theory? Game theory? Translation?

At a moment that requires out-of-the-box thinking, it helps to engage populations who bring more varied perspectives to the conversation, who are less beholden to the various dogma – read fields – that shapes and limits our own thinking. What are the questions that need to be asked? What are the possibilities we haven't even considered? As productive as it may often be, sometimes scholarly thinking benefits from a dose of irreverence.

### **Reconsidering Our Identity as Instructors**

As is perhaps obvious by now, this whole mess is as much a learning moment for us – that is, faculty and administrators in higher education

## Might This Be the Beginning of Education?

-- as it is for our students. As one colleague put it in a workshop last week, "Now we're finally learning all the things we should have learned years ago." The range of "things" is expansive. It includes tech: Yuja, WebEx, Zoom, Canvas, VoiceThread and on and on and on. It also includes more deliberate ways of approaching our classes on a structural level: more expansive deadlines, more ungraded practice, less worry about covering every chapter in the book and more consideration of our fields' driving concepts, of how those concepts operate in a shifting landscape

Perhaps most important, this moment of turmoil in higher education has caused us to think more carefully about ourselves and our identity as instructors. After all, the image of the all-knowing sage is harder to maintain when we have to condense our 90-minute lectures into 15-minute videos. Or when we can't get the audio to work for our Zoom session. Or when the dog is barking or our children are crying or our son keeps walking up and down the stairs behind us in his boxer shorts as we attempt that once-a-week synchronous class.

Not to be flip, but it's good for us

to struggle with our teaching. Students struggle all the time. They feel vulnerable, at the mercy of fate and institutional structure and socioeconomics and grading policies that seem to be written in an ancient language no one understands anymore. Our own, lesser struggles force us to understand that some of the things we hold dear -- our bell curves, our attendance policies, those research papers we assign but hate to grade, our own wisdom -- are not actually what makes real education happen.

Put another way, this moment -- this horrible, excruciating, eminently shitty moment -- asks us to recognize that education doesn't happen because we have a Ph.D. and can deliver an hourlong lecture without glancing at our notes. Rather, education -- deep, lasting, meaningful education -- takes place when we have the courage to allow our students to be partners in their own learning. I've never been a fan of the term "whole student," but maybe that's what this phrase means: a student is whole when they have agency in their own learning; they are whole when they are helping us figure out what they need to learn, and why; they are whole when their feedback impacts

how we build our courses week to week; they are whole when they understand that they're learning this stuff not to get a grade but to pivot beyond the college walls and participate in finding solutions to pressing problems -- ensuring, perhaps, that situations like this never happen again.

Of course, under normal circumstances, this pivot happens eventually: after graduation, students drift into work and service and citizenship, sifting through all those hours of lectures and labs and readings to determine what does and doesn't matter in realities far more complex than anything we constructed in the classroom.

But these aren't normal circumstances. The walls between academic life and life beyond the academy have crumbled. Which, perhaps, is OK. Because it allows us to be part of the journey students take into a wicked world, to be there as they move beyond memorization and simple answers toward something infinitely more fulfilling: a complexity that engages their curiosity and places profound demands upon their intellect. We can help them on their journey. And they can help us on ours. ■

### Bio

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<https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2020/04/28/how-pandemic-might-create-better-educational-opportunities-opinion>

# Colleges Should Cultivate More Equitable Transfer Pathways

Equitable transfer for students is more pressing than ever during the pandemic, and institutions should take a more proactive and holistic approach, writes Xueli Wang.

By **Xueli Wang** // April 23, 2020

It comes as no surprise that transfer is a core mission for community colleges, with [nearly four-fifths](#) of their over eight million students intending to attain a bachelor's degree. Yet only a quarter of those transfer-intending students actually transfer within six years, signaling a huge gap between students' goals and what transpires. This issue permeates all areas of study but is particularly pronounced in science, technology, engineering and mathematics fields, [with only 12 percent of these students transferring within six years](#). In a similar fashion, the structural and institutional barriers inequitably experienced by transfer-aspiring students manifest across all fields but are noticeably magnified in STEM.

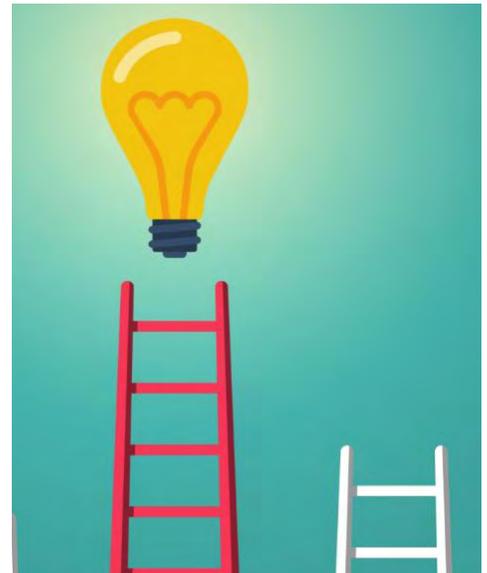
On both ends of the transfer equation, two-year and four-year institutions need to wrestle harder with the question: Why is there such a huge gap?

I offer some answers in my new book, *On My Own: The Challenge and Promise of Building Equitable STEM Transfer Pathways*. Based on a longitudinal, mixed methods research project following nearly 1,670 two-year college students as they navigated STEM courses, programs and the prospect of transfer, I revealed disparities and inequities that permeated the students' paths toward or away from transfer -- with students of color, women, students with mental health issues or learning disabilities, first-generation students, and those from lower-income backgrounds often facing the largest hurdles.

Yet these students held fiercely to their high aspirations and strong perseverance and agency, pushing through structural barriers in hopes of realizing their immense talent. Those hurdles revolved around finances, advising, teaching and learning, institutional services, competing life and job obligations, and more. The types of challenges and barriers are by no means an individual student's problem to resolve. Instead, they reflect the inequitable transfer mechanisms systemically in place and in need of disruption.

How do we combat the structural barriers instead of defaulting to students' own initiatives -- leaving them to navigate the imperfect system on their own? In my book and [a recent \*Inside Higher Ed\* article](#), I outlined a number of intertwined structural, systemic, interpersonal and cultural issues to be addressed. In this piece, I place a more explicit focus on institutional responsibilities: How can we, as institutions sending and receiving transfers, provide high-quality, equitable support for transfer-aspiring students?

**Transfer-receiving and transfer-sending institutions are equally responsible.** The politics around two-year to four-year articulation can be contentious. Much of that has to do with a lack of trust between some four-year and two-year faculty members, including unjust stigma associated with community colleges and their students, as well as power issues around who controls the curriculum, student learning outcomes and, ultimately, which courses are deemed "rigorous" enough to



SOURCE: ISTOCK.COM/  
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transfer. Four-year institutions and faculty are a crucial part of making articulation and transfer work. But the issue is often complicated by a general lack of initiative, understanding and respect for the quality of community college courses. We must break down such dynamics and recognize both sides' common interest in and commitment to students and their success.

To fully realize a shared responsibility, four-year institutions need to step up and carry more of the weight that community colleges have historically shouldered. That starts with elevating community colleges as equal partners and contributors and compelling four-year institutions to re-examine their perceptions. Guided by a genuine spirit of equal partnership, both ends can productively [co-create learning objectives, streamline courses across](#)

## Colleges Should Cultivate More Equitable Transfer Pathways

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institutions and align course requirements. Plus, four-year faculty and advising roles should explicitly involve efforts that facilitate transfer. Only then can these institutions create a smoother and more collaborative transfer process, moving toward what Dimpal Jain and colleagues referred to as a [transfer receptive culture](#).

**Cultivating inclusive classroom environments and experiences is crucial.** As part of their shared responsibility, institutions and faculty must constantly reflect on and revisit their current practices within campuses and classrooms in order to create truly inclusive and empowering environments that support all students – especially those historically underserved student populations in general and in STEM. Specifically, instructors cannot and should not focus solely on who the majority is in the classroom or the overall satisfaction level when it comes to student feedback and course evaluations. Challenging ourselves as instructors and pinpointing problem spots can transform the classroom experience, especially for students who feel marginalized and overlooked.

That means that addressing implicit bias, stereotype threats, racism, sexism and other types of bias and discrimination is essential. Only then can instructors remove previously unchecked friction in this space, resulting in classrooms as safe havens for minoritized students to explore and cultivate their interests in STEM fields and transfer. Otherwise, persistent inequitable and less-than-supportive experiences will only reinforce disparities in the paths these students take toward or away from transfer and STEM.

Along the same lines, instructors need to honor and encompass



Specifically, instructors cannot and should not focus solely on who the majority is in the classroom or the overall satisfaction level when it comes to student feedback and course evaluations. Challenging ourselves as instructors and pinpointing problem spots can transform the classroom experience, especially for students who feel marginalized and overlooked.



more diverse learning styles and cultivate culturally responsive approaches to better support students of color, women, older students and other underserved students. [Universal design for learning](#) is a great starting framework. Further, instilling a [community environment](#) – a significant cultural component for students of color, according to Gloria Ladson-Billings – will go a long way toward developing more inclusive learning spaces.

**Advising approaches must support the whole person.** There are two issues related to advising for transfer. The first involves inadequate, or a complete absence of, advising. The second entails a lack of a humanistic, culturally receptive and responsive advising relationship. Many community colleges are severely underresourced, [with a student-to-adviser ratio in the hundreds or even thousands](#). This makes an advising redesign critical, and it must be systemwide.

Some institutions have explored more innovative options to try and fill advising gaps. [Nudging](#) has gained

momentum recently with great promise, yet [large-scale efforts remain questionable](#). That approach can help communicate timely information to more students, but in the end, nothing can replace direct and personal human interaction between advisers and students. Other [student-centered approaches](#) can help students overcome challenges; leverage their existing knowledge, skills and motivation; and place them in a more active or central role. These strategies and carefully nurtured relationships can make students feel that their college sees them, hears them and cares about them as individuals within their distinct lives and contexts.

In this rapidly changing environment that we are all experiencing during the COVID-19 pandemic, relationship building is and will continue to be even more essential. Institutional leaders, instructors, advisers and students should all be lauded for their agility and innovative use of technology in the face of the challenges imposed by social distancing orders and rapidly changing

# Colleges Should Cultivate More Equitable Transfer Pathways

directives. However, in order to not leave the most vulnerable behind, we need to be especially sensitive of the challenges confronted by those for whom these changes make progress toward educational goals nearly impossible, and do our best to help meet those students' needs.

**An equity-oriented policy environment allows the true value and mission of transfer to be fully realized.** While I highlight the importance of putting the responsibility back on institutions, we can't deny that institutions are constrained within the larger policy landscape, an issue accentuated by a long history of **undervaluing and underfunding of community colleges** by state and federal governing bodies. To complicate things further, when performance- or outcomes-based funding is applied, funding inequity is amplified when transfer is not part of the formula applied to both two-year and four-year institutions.

The jury is also still out on the effectiveness of state **articulation policies**. These policies inherently trickle down to institutions and practitioners to operationalize. So as long as these problems persist, students will continue to encounter a lack of clear and flexible course-, program- and institution-specific

sequences and articulation agreements.

While state policies provide overarching and crucial support in facilitating transfer, we also cannot overlook the vital role institutions play in this process. Both two-year and four-year colleges must step in and flesh out institution- and major-specific articulation agreements, as they are best positioned to account for changes in programs, requirements and other regulations. In particular, such articulation agreements need to prioritize student diversity and issues of persistent inequities, rather than continuing the cycle of marginalization and implicit bias toward equitable transfer access and outcomes. Eventually, federal, state and institutional policies that prioritize explicit and concrete equity-oriented transfer goals, targets and measures would act toward fully realizing transfer and advance social mobility.

**An equity-minded culture that intentionally practices deep, honest reflection is required.** Ultimately, none of the other changes I've recommended are possible without an equity-centered mind shift and purposeful reflection. This includes a full understanding of and action toward **equity-mindedness**, a trans-

formative concept developed by Center for Urban Education director Estela Mara Bensimon. To become equity-minded, instructors and practitioners hold themselves and their institutions responsible for enacting practices, policies and structures that address persistent inequities. The Office of Community College Research and Leadership, directed by Eboni Zamani-Gallaher, offers **equity-guided resources** that can help create inclusive teaching and learning environments.

If we are to truly achieve equitable transfer, in STEM and otherwise, it is up to us to take a holistic, thoughtful and critical approach to break down these systemic barriers, in higher education and society writ large. The fact that we, as educators, have been able to turn on a dime to at least try to adjust swiftly and responsibly in the wake of COVID-19 gives me hope that it's possible to make drastic and timely changes that remedy inequitable access and outcomes for minoritized students that had been sorely needed well before this pandemic. While we are in the process of weathering an unprecedented storm, we must redouble our efforts to ensure that the most vulnerable students are not lost in this sea change. ■

## Bio

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<https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2020/04/23/colleges-should-do-more-create-equitable-transfer-opportunities-students-opinion>

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