



A pandemic opportunity? Reassessment of institutional patterns and practices

Equilibrium is a coming together of opposing forces where the result is a position of rest and stability. A state of equilibrium need not be all that we desire, or even much of what we desire, but rather is a point of some steadiness. The pandemic has disrupted any semblance of equilibrium in higher education today. While continuing to address immediate and pressing needs, leaders also can take this time to reassess long-entrenched institutional practices to better position their institutions for the future.

Key forces at play at colleges and universities today appear to be moving in opposite directions. That said, those forces often are splintered and moving in different directions themselves. Undergraduates, who constitute much of the higher education population, have a strong preference for in-person courses. They highly value camaraderie and a fully textured college experience. Yet, a number of undergraduate students are extremely anxious and, given COVID-19, prefer not to be in person.

Faculty, many of whom had no online teaching experience until last spring, tend to favor in-person classes. They prefer a personal touch and recognize that remote teaching has a steep learning curve. However, the thought of being in a classroom now, even with social distancing and masks, often is unappealing for even the most passionate teachers. Instead, the classroom has become a source of discomfort, and faculty demand has shifted to remote teaching.

But that is just the start of the complications brought on by the pandemic. While institutions are facing reduced revenues from tuition, residence halls, and other sources, they are also encountering substantially increasing costs for remote teaching and meeting COVID-19-related safety requirements.

Before COVID-19, higher education was facing challenges from several long-term demographic, financial, technological, and political trends. Add a pandemic to the mix, with students wanting one thing and faculty another, declining revenues and rising costs, along with tremendous uncertainty, and the challenges multiply dramatically. To respond, higher education leaders can begin to encourage and support difficult discussions about reexamining organizational structures, practices, and decision-making processes. These discussions will call for open communication and for all constituencies—particularly faculty and administration—to work together: Everyone needs to understand their importance in mitigating the serious risks confronting higher education institutions.

First, we need to look more critically at our missions and whom we aim to serve. Many colleges offer similar academic programs. Is it beneficial to offer every possible major to attract every possible student? The result is a substantial number of low enrollment majors, and higher per-student costs. Program review, including enrollment projections, is essential.



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We also must consider longer-term horizons, for example, for class scheduling. Schedules tend to be released one semester at a time, and it is not unusual to offer the same classes each semester that attract 10-15 students each. It would be far more efficient to offer those courses once a year with an enrollment of 20-30 students; publicizing the schedule in advance would reassure students that the courses they need will indeed be offered.

Ongoing review of personnel is crucial. While essential new positions should be added if possible, existing administrative and staff positions should be reviewed and consolidated or eliminated as necessary—and not just in times of crisis. For new and replacement faculty positions, need is typically considered; however, faculty review, particularly of full professors, is limited and often perfunctory. Further, diversity and inclusion needs to be a priority when hiring for any position.

Ideally, a COVID-19 vaccine will help to reestablish equilibrium in higher education. But a vaccine alone won't be enough. Leaders must understand that higher education will continue to change at a rapid rate for a wide range of reasons. Institutions will need to be agile and innovative, and before it is too late, look candidly at how efficiently they operate institution wide. No doubt we can do better.

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Read more:

Berliner, Herman (2015). *Campus-Based Perspectives from a Long-Time Provost*. TIAA Institute: NY.

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