

# Reimagining the College Experience in a Pandemic

## Summary

As the COVID-19 pandemic has swept the nation, higher education is confronted with a monumental challenge: how to plan for the fall semester, the apex of the academic calendar, without the certainties of campus and classroom. Higher education must plan now but cannot know whether campuses will be able to open come September, the feasibility of social distancing on site, or what role online learning must play.

This report takes seriously the prospect of a fully remote fall semester for some or many schools. While we hope this scenario will not come to pass, colleges and universities need to plan for it nonetheless. Experience with emergency “remote instruction” this spring has been mixed: appreciation for the heroic efforts of faculty and staff but concern that the result is often a far cry from the campus ideal.

If the fall must be online, higher education leaders must strive to conceive as much of the full college experience as possible. Mere “remote instruction” will at best depress enrollment and disappoint students, and at worst threaten institutional viability. This report lays out arguments, ideas, and examples of how to reimagine the college experience in a pandemic.

## We have a problem...

*“An online Fall semester is not a possibility... We had no choice to go online mid-semester... but it would be academically irresponsible to take the Fall semester online. It is taking 70 to 80 hours a week to maintain a semblance of instruction. [In the fall] it would not be physically possible to sustain the same effort faculty. If normal academic standards were being applied, huge numbers of students would fail. If it is not possible to resume in-person instruction in Fall, the only responsible course of action would be to cancel the semester and close the colleges.”*

This is an excerpt from a comment posted on Inside Higher Ed in mid-April, and no doubt is a view shared by many faculty members as they battle to “maintain a semblance of instruction”: over-worked, out-of-their-depth and convinced the whole thing is a travesty. The prospect of a repeat performance in the fall seems the height of folly.

It is hard not to be sympathetic, and there is no doubt that many college presidents and staff, quite rightly, are skeptical that any form of remote learning can truly emulate the college experience.

Higher education, decentralized and faculty-led, works well-enough within the habits of campus and classroom. But take those away and higher education's strengths become weaknesses. Armed with only a laptop and a Zoom account, each faculty member is left to figure out how best to replicate instruction online; this is at best a recipe for duplication of effort and at worst, chaos.

Frustrated and exhausted, it is no wonder that many faculty feel vindicated in their belief that the essence of college and the campus medium are inseparable. Some schools are contemplating delaying the start of the fall semester rather than start on time online.

Many students are no happier. The college dreams of high school seniors are suddenly in doubt. Admits face an unappetizing choice between sticking to the plan in the hope that their college opens in the fall and deferring admission to embark on whatever gap year might be possible in a global pandemic.

Current students face their own dilemmas and compromises. "I feel like I'm 16 again," the 20 year-old daughter of a family friend studying at a private college out-of-state complained. "Like I'm back at high school."

Residential students forced back home are often cramped for space, unable to socialize or go out as normal, and crave the freedoms of college life. Commuter students have lost the in-person rhythms of classes, support services, and friends. Perhaps family members are ill or vulnerable; jobs and income may be on the line. Throw in often rudimentary remote learning, inconsistent between instructors, and little more than homework assignments for many, and college seems a shadow of its former self. A few students are even party to class action lawsuits, alleging that schools cannot offer the same value online and demanding tuition refunds.

But what if the fall semester does have to be conducted remotely?

If this is a plausible scenario, which it surely is amid the vagaries of a pandemic, we must think differently. Yes, the physical campus facilitates higher education fundamentals—learning communities, diversity of ideas, human formation—but if something, in this case COVID-19, shuts that down, surely the right move is not to give up, postpone, or settle, but to recreate those fundamentals in new ways.

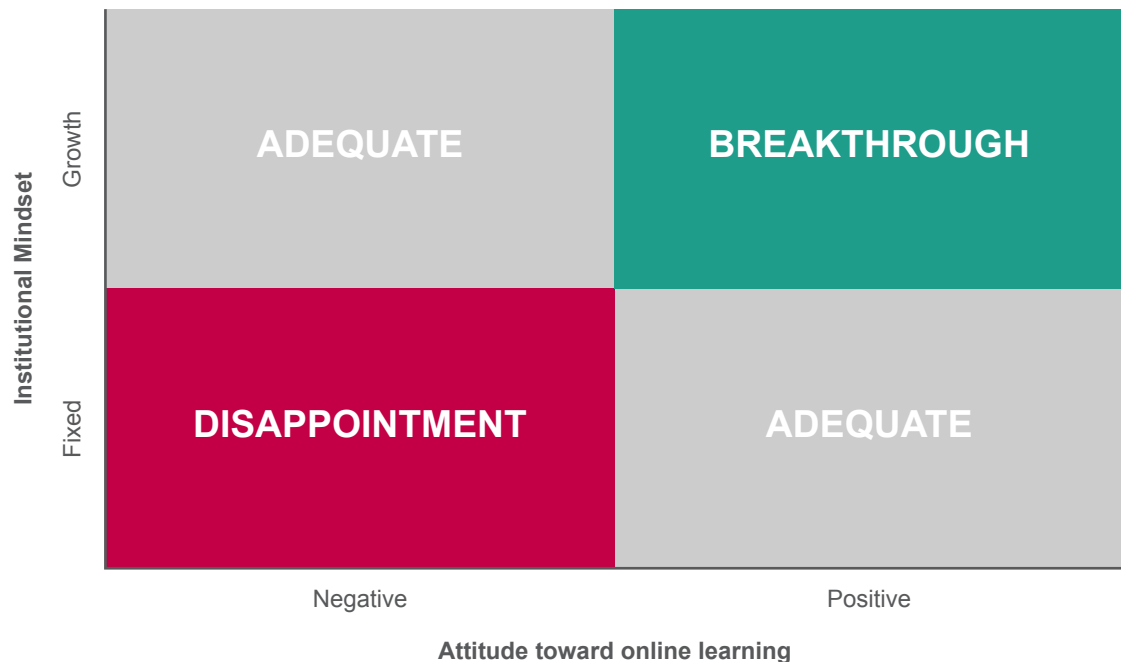
This is a moment to be seized. We are living through a major event in world history that is rattling the assumptions of every academic discipline and every profession. Higher education's superpower is to bring light to the complex and intractable, to solve the unsolvable, and through the interplay of faculty and student, to craft thoughtful, responsible citizens who move society forward. We need higher education more than ever. If fall 2020 can't happen on campus, we need to find a way for it to happen, vibrant and unchecked, online.

## Growth Mindset: Not Just for Students

As student advisors tell their charges, a growth mindset, an outlook limited only by imagination and hard work, is the key to college success. A growth mindset is in collegiate bones: counter

to the stereotype, only the combination of timeless value and strategic creativity has allowed the higher education ideal to endure for centuries. Colleges need to once again dig deep and reimagine themselves online in a pandemic. Figure 1 considers the alternatives:

**Figure 1. Planning for Fall 2020 & Anticipating the Student Experience**



A better right way to think about online is as a toolkit: tools that can be used well or poorly, for an appropriate task or otherwise. If presidents, faculty, and staff—and students—approach a remote fall term with the attitude that online learning is inherently substandard and no amount of imagination or effort will change that, then the result will either be a poor facsimile of a student experience or no higher education at all until the pandemic has passed. Neither scenario, in terms of school mission, student well-being and mobility, institutional finances, or national fortitude, is a welcome one.

Institutional leaders need to find a way to convey a vision for the fall semester that increases student enthusiasm, deepens faculty loyalty, and galvanizes support staff. In extremis, higher education is not defined by buildings, desks, and chairs. If it is then the pandemic will win, and higher education will be bowed.

It is all very well for the likes of Eduventures to recommend growth mindsets and breakthrough models. What do colleges need to do? In our view, the way forward is not about buying a gaggle of slick and novel technology, although specific technology may be essential for some classes. In general, a Learning Management System (LMS) and a video conferencing tool, plus

the essential ingredients of some imagination and buckets of collaboration, perspiration, and good will, will make the difference between success and failure. Amid the disillusionment and frustration, green shoots are emerging across the country as schools and students start to find new life online.

## Getting Real: Academics, Extracurriculars & Social

We are fortunate that this pandemic is happening at a time of pervasive technological sophistication. Certainly not all, but most students, faculty members, and support staff wield devices and connectivity that are an embarrassment of riches compared to little more than a decade ago.

College, for traditional-aged undergraduates at least, is defined by three things: academics, extracurriculars, and social life. No question that getting a good job is also central to today's college value proposition, but this trio are the engine of career development.

The following suggestions are no more than that. There is no magic or proven formula to manage a fall semester online nationwide. Equally, there is no denying that some aspects of the campus experience work better online than others. Each institution needs to craft the online experience components that best match their mission and identity, and best meet the needs of their students and faculty. But the fundamental point remains: not grappling with this challenge may prove an existential threat to many schools.

## Academics: Pedagogic Structure, Third Party Resources, and Faculty/Student Creativity

Conventional online learning grew up on a diet of convenience and flexibility for working adults. Time-poor and pragmatic, most of these students appreciate rather than like online study. With no time for student clubs and no patience for youthful campus shenanigans, schools built online programs to be straight-to-the-point. High quality and engaging, yes, but not the traditional college experience.

To succeed in the fall, traditional colleges serving 18-21 year-olds cannot simply adopt the online course quality standards of Quality Matters or the Online Learning Consortium, excellent though those are, and leave it at that.

Numerous schools have put out quick turnaround guides to help faculty teach and students learn remotely. While these are invaluable resources, the speed of the pandemic's growth has meant that much has been left to the preferences and initiative of individual faculty, staff, and students to figure things out on the ground. In fall 2020, for traditional colleges and students, when enough time has passed for everyone to get more comfortable operating remotely, teaching and learning might look something like this:

- ▶ **Flipped Classrooms.** Many educationists have argued that lecturing to a live class and reserving problem-solving for homework is backwards, whether online or in-person. An alternative is to create—or better curate (see below)—self-paced “lectures” for students to watch and re-watch on their own time and preserve precious live sessions for addressing areas where students get stuck or have next-step questions.
- ▶ Re-thinking class pace may also be a good idea: get the most out of a few readings rather than expect distracted and disoriented students to churn through a normal load. Dwell on core issues and debates: focus on quality not quantity. Perhaps play down high-stakes assessments that require complex proctoring. The better you know your students, the less you need to rely on exams.
- ▶ **Live.** To sustain intimacy and camaraderie, faculty might facilitate live group interaction by classmates at least twice a week to discuss class material. Arguably this is not best left to faculty preference or comfort levels. On campus, no instructor would opt out of in-person teaching. Advocates say that there is no reason that online cannot embody the Socratic ideal of reasoned debate. Indeed, online has the advantage of equal visual presence in a video conferencing window; there is no back row. Let us not overstate the pedagogical virtues of the average college classroom, large or small. Technological advances mean that live college seminars online are in reach for the majority of students.
- ▶ **Asynchronous.** To avoid instructor burnout, ensure pedagogic variety, and help class momentum, faculty should consider requiring students, between live sessions, to contribute to text-based discussions, but...
- ▶ **Peer-Driven.** Instead of the instructor trying to respond to and grade all comments and contributions, a different approach is to empower students to take on a lot of the work: it not only reduces faculty workload but increases student engagement and comprehension. Just as on campus, students who aced a course can be paid to mentor the next cohort online, so long as the process is managed by the institution and expectations are clear. Students can also be the face of self-paced study materials.
- ▶ Arizona State University, in partnership with Crash Course, an education YouTube channel, partnered pre-pandemic on student-led [video study guides](#) on core subjects such as English composition and algebra, and is now deploying them widely (Figure 2). These kinds of self-paced and student-led resources can reduce email burnout for faculty and give students other ways to problem-solve.

**Figure 2. Student-Hosted Crash Course English Composition Video**



*Source: Arizona State University*

- ▶ **Materials.** Exhaustion is the most likely outcome if every faculty member tries to create their own instructional videos and assessments. Much better to leverage the wealth of resources already available, often at little or no cost. Open Educational Resources collectives are well-established, such as [OER Commons](#) and [MERLOT](#), and many institutions and systems already make strategic use of them. Coursera, the MOOC platform, has developed a [CourseMatch](#) tool that ingests institutional course catalogs and matches them to Coursera courses, in two business days for free. These courses, and thousands of others like them, from the world's leading faculty and universities, are high quality, typically have top-notch production values, and have built-in assessments.

As [many](#) have done, entire institutions should consider buying access to these course libraries: some upfront spend will pay-off many times over in faculty sanity and student success. Expecting faculty to cobble together their own materials will likely prove more expensive and less effective.

- ▶ **Labs, Practicums & Field Trips.** All the Zoom sessions and threaded discussions in the world fall flat if students need to conduct lab experiments or undergo hands-on training. Various kinds of virtual labs (e.g., [Labster](#), [Praxilabs](#), [ChemCollective](#)) or simulated practicums (e.g., [iHuman Patients](#), [VirtualPT Clinician](#)) exist, and in some circumstances can have an edge on physical settings in terms of repetition, cost, and safety. The

California Community College System recently announced a systemwide investment in virtual labs. During a pandemic, regulators will have to allow high quality simulations to substitute for a portion of licensure hours; otherwise professional pipelines will seize up.

This is undoubtedly an area where online learning can only go so far. At some point nursing and physical therapy students and the like need to practice on real patients, and commercial simulators are aimed at lower division or more commonplace classes. As social restrictions start to ease, certain lab and professional students should be a priority when schools plan a gradual return to campus.

What about field trips? Everyone may be stuck at home, but the Internet can take you anywhere. Each week faculty can mix it up and “take” students to a virtual museum, gallery, scientific body, government agency, or historical recreation; give students things to find and reflect on. Ask students to suggest places to go.

- ▶ **Curriculum.** Nobody wants to suffer a pandemic, but it is nonetheless an unparalleled learning opportunity. Every class can fold in the topic in some way, not least how COVID-19 might impact, short-term and long-term, the professions students aspire to and how this could influence student choices and plans. Media coverage of the pandemic, public health responses, government stimulus efforts, local, regional, and international differences—things that are front-and-center for students can enliven classes during this wrenching time and underscore the higher education fundamental of debating different perspectives and evidence-based decision-making.

Of course, deploying the online toolkit to these ends takes time to learn, and trial and error, for students as well as faculty. There is no pandemic playbook. But the key missing piece for remote learning efforts to date has often been institutional coherence, facilitation, and structure. Schools should consider institutionalizing the sort of framework and resources outlined here. Faculty need autonomy to run their classes but also the ability to focus on teaching and their students. They can do this by employing broadly common pedagogic scaffolding and by taking advantage of pre-existing and third party course material.

If not familiar, campus leaders might take a close look at [Minerva](#), the highly selective, low-priced, online-centric bachelor’s pathway for traditional-aged students. Whether or not you buy Minerva’s claim that its interactive online learning environment is “better than a traditional classroom,” the initiative’s pedagogic features are worth considering. They include: a mix of live video seminars, with whole class and small group options, document sharing and editing, polling and simulations, as well as asynchronous engagement between classes.

While some Minerva elements, such as common housing and international travel, have been disrupted by the virus, competitive admissions and a focus on 18-21 year-olds make it a particularly valuable model for more conventional schools that are similar in population but different in modality. Minerva’s platform, [Forum](#), which embodies the pedagogical model, is now available to other schools.

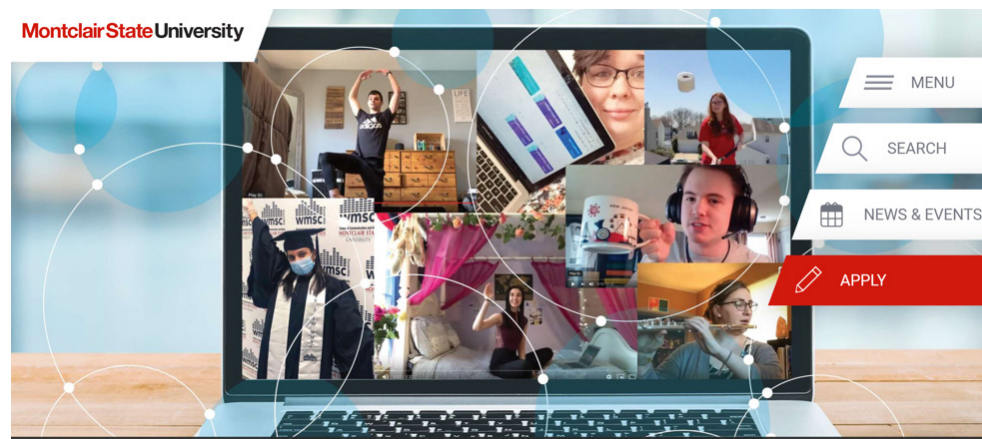


In a Minerva-for-all type-move, Southern New Hampshire University (SNHU) recently announced a one-time 100% scholarship for traditional in-coming freshman, envisioning students living on campus but studying online, and \$10,000 tuition a year, a 61% reduction, for other campus students. This is a new normal for SNHU's physical campus, not just pandemic management. SNHU's war chest, amassed from conventional online learning revenue, makes such a radical move possible.

## Extracurriculars: Necessity & Invention

When normal college is forced online, the Internet should be regarded first and foremost as a resource, not a hindrance. Extracurriculars span everything from athletics to volunteering, arts, culture and politics, religious life, and work experience. Some of these are particularly daunting to imagine online but already some schools, exemplified by the screenshot of Montclair State University's homepage (Figure 3), are turning negatives into positives.

**Figure 3. Montclair State University Homepage**



*Source: Montclair State University*

Here are some ideas for reinventing extracurricular activities online:

- ▶ **Athletics.** Needless to say, this is a tough one. Team sports are impossible to move online. Online universities have longed joked about their football teams. Esports might come to a partial rescue, offering virtual replicas of nearly every college favorite, and many other things besides. Institutions could try to build the same school spirit with extramural and intercollegiate competition, but the hole in institutional budgets from lost games and broadcasting is unfillable. Perhaps by the fall some team sports will re-start in empty stadiums, broadcast online. Athletes missing traditional sports could collaborate on home training regimes.



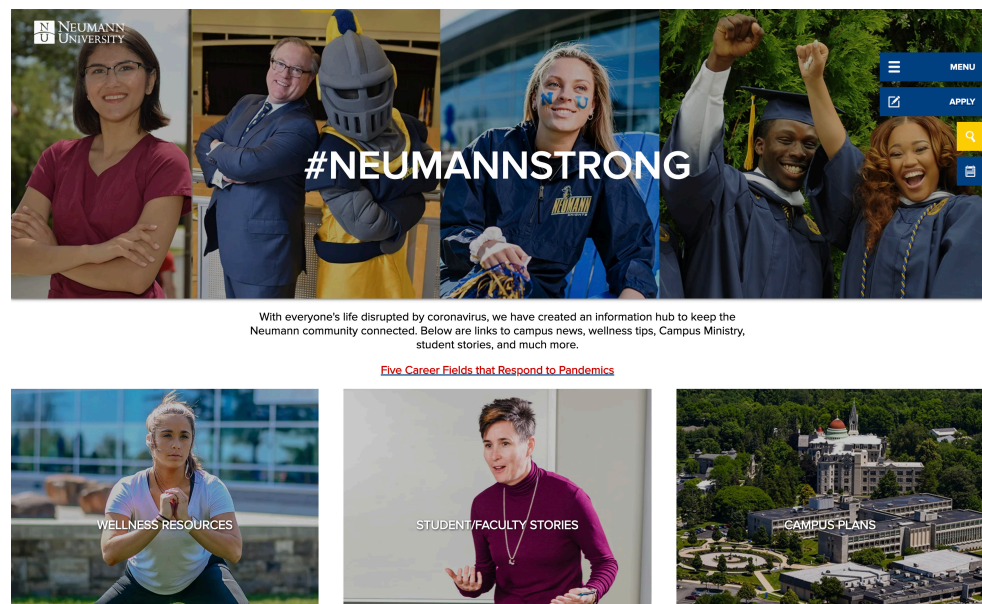
- ▶ **Volunteering.** A world wrestling with a pandemic means no shortage of need but lockdowns hamper conventional volunteering and service learning. Possibilities include students from the same neighborhood banding together to assist vulnerable locals with shopping and yard work (along the lines of the [Invisible Hands](#) effort in New York City), helping to disseminate information about stimulus relief funds to small businesses, and phoning elderly neighbors living alone to check on them and have a chat. As localities start to emerge from lockdown, students could be part of mass screening and contact tracing efforts, much of which can be done from home. In rural areas, helping to pick crops might be needed.
- ▶ **Arts & Culture.** The Internet is both a window into performances of all kinds from every culture, and a medium for individual creativity. A student chorus might record their parts separately and use software to knit them together, or even perform live; a theater group might write a play about life in lockdown and premiere it via videoconference. Exploring, through art, the impact of COVID-19 on different language or cultural communities might be the driver for some students. Students have kept campus newspapers going online from their homes. Even Study Abroad programs are reinventing themselves online. See Arcadia University's [Virtual Europe](#) page, for example.
- ▶ **Politics.** The pandemic is rife with politics: sites of authority and influence, federal versus state and local governments, and decisions to shut-down or open-up economies. The intersection of race, poverty, and vulnerability to the pandemic, impact on the census, impact on voting: the list goes on and gives students plenty of scope to get involved and coordinate on issues they feel passionate about.
- ▶ **Religious Life.** Faith is both a source of strength during times of stress but can also be shaken. Faith-based institutions and religious clubs and communities do not sit by the wayside when the going gets rocky. Worship, discussion, and support can continue, powerfully and sensitively, online, using the same mix of live and asynchronous technologies that make sense in the classroom. Service learning, never more essential than during a pandemic, can deepen academics, experience and belief.
- ▶ **Work Experience.** Internships, work shadowing and summer jobs are suddenly out-of-reach. Here some online learning pioneers show the way. Northeastern University in Boston, for instance, has spent the past few years building up a network of [virtual internships and assignments](#) for their thousands of adult learners, most of whom study fully online. Known for its co-op model, Northeastern did not want its non-traditional students to miss out. Assignments need to match the student's studies and results are assessed by faculty, with inputs from the student and supervisor.

When so many jobs are undertaken virtually, a trend accelerated by COVID-19, remote projects can be just as relevant as in-person ones. Indeed, with many organizations shedding staff and trying to sustain operations, local firms may be grateful for student help. Alumni, eager to help their alma mater, might seed online work experience opportunities.

The right mindset is not to start with the assumption that most extracurriculars cannot be reimagined online, but to explore ways to make replication a reality. Of course, there will be trade-offs and instances where online learning is less than ideal or even downright inadequate. But the very process of seeking solutions and refining workable options will help students grow in ways that business-as-usual may not have done. Shoestring college might sometimes be more effective at the fundamentals and enable schools to give students both academic continuity and gap year energy. Schools should consider how to seed and encourage campus activities to live online, if that is not happening already, and help connect different groups and publicize them. It may not be feasible to attempt every campus club or activity online but an engaging extra-curricular menu should be non-negotiable.

A good example of an institution creating a visually-engaging online presence mid-pandemic is Neumann University, a small Catholic institution in Philadelphia. The [#NeumannStrong](#) page is a hub for everything from wellness resources to online classes, and campus plans to students and faculty stories (Figure 4).

**Figure 4. #NeumannStrong: Creating a Visually-Engaging Online Presence**



Source: Neumann University

## Social: Facilitate, Monitor, and Get Out of the Way

Finally, the third college pillar, and the one least beholden to institutional dictates or arrangements: casual conversations, meetings in the hallway, late-night philosophizing, parties,

themed-housing, events, and Greek Life. Schools may provide a bit of structure, but students tend to take the lead. Socializing is spontaneous and organic, and very much about co-location.

Equally, the typical young college student, and many older ones, are enmeshed in a flurry of virtual relationships, with friends near and far. Social networks and video calls have tamed distance and afforded interaction impossible a decade ago. Confined to home, many students will keep up virtual contact with fellow students, but time zones may get in the way and some students may fall through the cracks.

Let's be honest, co-location alone is no guarantee that every student is part of a nurturing campus community. With appropriate privacy controls, technology can help schools better understand student social connectivity, and reach out to students who appear isolated. Here are some examples:

- ▶ **Buddy Systems.** Just as many campuses organize “buddy systems” or peer mentoring to link students from the same or different backgrounds or connect less experienced students to their more experienced peers, “remote campus” mode can do the same. If interaction routines are not in place, online can fulfill the isolated student stereotype. Student pairs might be supplemented with groups of four-six, broadening networks and softening personalities. Natural online socializing will grow from structured connections, if it has not already.
- ▶ **Housing.** Students may not be able to choose where they live or who they live with, but opt-in virtual groupings are a viable way to connect students with similar interests. Institutions and faculty can socialize suggestions, templates, and examples and then get out of the way.
- ▶ **Events.** Just as a campus or parts thereof might plan a get-together to celebrate a milestone, honor a star student, faculty, or staff member, or convene an outside speaker, the same can be done online. Webinars are now commonplace, and speakers of all kinds are eager to showcase their work and help students thrive, pandemic or not. Setting out a calendar of online events helps bring order to the weeks and months ahead and gives everyone something to look forward to. Informal events can be a great way for students to introduce family members or housemates, perhaps over a videoconferenced meal.

It is also important to remember that when Internet access remains out-of-reach for some, remote instruction, whatever its quality, can inhibit equity. Schools have responded valiantly by providing equipment, such as laptops and hotspots, to those in need, and broadcasting wi-fi across parking lots. As public restrictions start to lift, many schools may judge the least connected students, and those with the most limited study environment at home, as another priority for a socially-distanced presence on campus.

## A Pivotal Moment

Taking the long-view, perhaps how higher education responds to COVID-19 will be of little consequence. A few schools may go to the wall, but for most, normality will resume soon enough. The more likely scenario: how higher education responds will matter a lot.

The naysayers have long accused higher education of frivolity, bias, and poor value for money, (almost) arguing that the smart consumer might skip college altogether. If too many institutions position a remote fall semester as second-rate or undermine shiny vision with shoddy reality; if the headline is that schools try to levy normal tuition for a poor quality experience, then higher education's critics will be emboldened. Optics aside, it is hard to see how many smaller or less financially sound institutions could survive a big drop in enrollment just as other funding sources dry up.

For most schools, bringing in a decent class for fall 2020 and retaining most existing students, is mission critical. Schools need to be able to charge normal tuition with a straight face. More financial aid may be needed to make enrollment possible for hard-up families, but cutting tuition simply because of online is very risky. If the fall semester must be online, school leaders cannot let modality further imperil an already fractured and uncertain situation.

With employment and travel opportunities severely curtailed, students want to stick with their enrollment plans. Colleges need to be a guide to students, newcomers and current, as they make decisions between now and the fall; talking up re-opening plans but also being up-front (and positive) about Plan B. With other funding sources caving, and livelihoods and communities on the line, schools need to make a compelling case for enrollment. The online toolkit, in the hands of committed leaders, students, faculty, and staff, can build the resilience and know-how to keep college alive and kicking. This is not about schools finally acceding to the prophets of techno-disruption; this is about medium-term survival, values intact, for long-term prosperity.

Higher education is among the most essential services. In this time of adversity, higher education needs to shine against all odds. Everything depends on it.



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