The Low-Density University

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The Low-Density University: 15 Scenarios for Higher Education.

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I. Fifteen Scenarios

The pandemic caused by COVID-19 is forcing colleges and universities to rethink the entirety of their operations around the health and safety of their students, faculty, and staff. As institutions look to resume residential education, the first questions many schools are asking are “how many students are safe to bring back to campus, when is it safe to do so, and what precautions will we need to take?” Questions about academics, financial stability, operations, sports, and cocurricular activities follow from these questions. Within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, health and safety are intimately tied to a number of characteristics, including density—or the number of people on campus relative to the physical spaces where students, faculty, and staff live, learn, and congregate—personal and collective safety, and decisions and actions the faculty, staff, and students make as a community.

As those of us living under these conditions have come to understand, social distancing guidelines force us to consider all of these issues as we try to understand how students will learn, how campus cocurricular activities will be carried out, and how the core functions of research and scholarship will continue. The effect of PPE (personal protective equipment, such as face masks) on the ability to actually teach is becoming a more serious consideration as the issues of density are resolved by individual campus decisions. The further students must sit apart from one another in a physical classroom, the lower the number of students that can attend a given face-to-face class session. With these decisions in place, schools are struggling with the best mode of curricular delivery, whether fully remote, in person, or some hybrid of the two.

In writing the fifteen scenarios that appear in this book, our goal was to develop a list of strategies that might prove useful to colleges and universities trying to make sense of the educational and curricular possibilities under what is likely to be the new normal. One way to think of each scenario is as an individual hypothesis for how colleges and universities might approach planning for a future in instruction that is impacted by a dynamic set of health and safety considerations. We first published the original list of fifteen scenarios on the website InsideHigherEd.com on April 22, 2020.¹ Over the three weeks following that, we published a more in-depth description of each scenario. This book brings all of the scenarios together in one place to provide higher education decision-makers a road map for planning for instructional resiliency.

While each scenario stands on its own, the scenarios themselves can be placed on a continuum, bound on one end by Back to Normal and the other end by Fully Remote. In between these poles are scenarios related to timing (Late Start, Moving Fall to Spring, and Structured Gap Year), student population (First-Year Intensive and Graduate Students Only), curriculum (Targeted Curriculum, Split Curriculum, Block Plan, and Modularity), location (Students in Residence Learning Virtually and Low-Residency), and instructional method (HyFlex and Modified Tutorial) (see Figure 1). In conducting research for this book, we’ve heard from schools about a variety of ways they have used these scenarios. On some campuses, the scenarios served as points of conversation and general ideas about how to approach planning. At other schools, the scenarios were explored one by one, with unlikely scenarios jettisoned while likely scenarios rose to the surface. And at still at other schools, they narrowed the discussion down quickly to two or three scenarios that seemed most likely for their campuses. For many schools, the value of articulating the scenarios in their planning was in giving a name to the plans they were already considering. For others, it introduced some complexity to their thinking.

Figure 1

The interesting thing for us is just how different each school’s response has been in planning for educational continuity. In some cases, it seemed perfectly obvious that a modular approach was the right thing to do, but the idea of starting late was impossible to imagine. In others, the exact opposite. Starting late seemed the most ethical choice, while modularity seemed far too complicated to imagine pulling off. The novel
coronavirus pandemic has highlighted the many common traits all colleges and universities share but also the unique challenges and affordances each place has based on a myriad of factors, from the financial to the geographic to the makeup of their communities to the institutional structures and governances. We also have been hearing about how schools have been working to create their own versions of a combination of scenarios. The scenarios were not intended to be either exhaustive or mutually exclusive. Indeed, it is entirely possible to derive hundreds, if not thousands, of scenarios for what higher education might look like during an ongoing pandemic. Schools interested in modularity may also be considering how a late start would affect the modules, while HyFlex approaches could be designed with first-year students on campuses. The best result for us is the way in which we’ve heard schools mix, match, and modify the scenarios we describe.

As we dove deeper into each scenario, we tried to be careful to articulate both the reasons why a school might consider that option and why not. Of particular concern for us is the impact of each scenario on student access to, and equity within, a quality postsecondary education. The pivot from residential to remote education has both revealed and amplified the inequalities embedded in the postsecondary system. The degree to which residential education helps bridge these inequalities was clarified by the pandemic-driven cessation of those residential programs. Where equality of educational opportunity never fully existed across the postsecondary ecosystem, it is also true that students from all backgrounds learned and lived in more or less similar circumstances when on campus. Everyone attended class in the same lecture halls, had access to the same academic libraries, and at least as freshmen lived in the same residence halls.

While everyone was learning remotely, the goal that students who attend the same college or university should have a mostly similar educational experience was more difficult to achieve. Students with dedicated access to newer computers, fast and reliable internet connections, and quiet places to study are at a significant advantage. Student-life professionals across the postsecondary ecosystem worked furiously to virtualize the web of academic, social, and psychological supports that have evolved on campuses over the years. Despite their best efforts, however, the speed and scale of shift from residential to online learning have resulted in uneven success. Many students have been left behind. And while the true extent of the level of student disengagement and suboptimal educational outcomes during the weeks and months after the cessation of residential education can’t be quantified at this point, anecdotal evidence suggests that it is likely to be severe. At the same time, we are seeing more and more clearly the
impact of systemic racism throughout our institutions of higher education. The killings of George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, and Breonna Taylor in the spring of 2020 highlighted the complex relationship between colleges and universities with racial injustice.

The challenges of equity, access, and racial injustice run parallel with many other pressures facing higher education. Questions about value, cost, higher education’s willingness to change, to evolve, and to adapt have been made more pressing by the crisis of COVID-19, but they are not new. While the fifteen scenarios were meant to give some framework for thinking about a specific challenge facing higher education—COVID-19 in the fall of 2020—we do think many are worth understanding as possible models for academic innovation and transformation well into the future.

As we write this book, many colleges and universities have announced their plans for fall 2020. Most are planning on bringing back some combination of students to campus, either to be taught online or to be taught in some hybrid mode, such as HyFlex or, more and more, a modified tutorial. At the same time, the COVID-19 pandemic has seen a new surge of cases. Spring 2021 is looking more and more like it will parallel, in some form, the fall, with reduced campus density, masks, and remote learning becoming norms across campuses. So, while decisions about the fall have been announced by many schools, most include significant caveats that recognize that the public health concerns may obviate and outweigh any possible decisions made now. It’s entirely possible that these choices will be revised given the recent increase in confirmed cases, just as it’s possible that the spring will force schools to adopt new approaches to teaching and learning under the conditions of social distancing. We hope these fifteen scenarios will continue to prove useful as a framework for making future decisions.