The Low-Density University
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Scenario #1: Back to Normal

We think any exploration of the range of scenarios for ensuring academic continuity during the COVID-19 pandemic should begin with a baseline. We call this baseline back to normal. In many respects, it may seem as if there is little need to write about a return to normal. Wouldn’t a return to normal just be the same as all the previous semesters? Perhaps. At some point, our colleges and universities will return as places that do not feature social distancing. There will come a time, sooner or later, when campuses will again be safe places to study, reside, teach, learn, research, and play. But we think things will have changed, too. Even if a combination of COVID-19 testing availability, declines in new diagnoses, and a widely available vaccine make it possible for students, faculty, and staff to gather on our campuses in the same exact way we did in the fall of 2019, we will be different. There will be ongoing challenges, lessons learned, and valuable experiences that will impact how we teach and learn. These are all things we think are worth exploring.

For many of us, the sudden interruption of a face-to-face model of higher education revealed just how precious the opportunity to study, teach, live, research, and work on campus is. Students and professors across the country missed the intimacy, immediacy, and human-scale activity that is face-to-face teaching and learning. At the same time, the experience of spring 2020 asked all of us to think more carefully about the range of challenges facing our students, the importance of good teaching, the affordances and problems of technology, the limits and flexibility of our institutional structures and traditions, and the strength of the educational community. A return to normal should necessarily be accompanied by increased attention to each of these issues and more.

If we return to residential teaching and learning, it should be with greater care of our students; a redoubling of our efforts to provide support for the health and well-being of our students, faculty, and staff; a transformed understanding of the important gift of face time with our students; meaningful institutional support for academic advising and mentoring; an investment in the judicious use of technology; a willingness to think creatively and thoughtfully about the institutional structures that support teaching and learning; and a renewed appreciation for the resilience of the campus communities that worked together to make spring 2020 possible. Some of these we highlight below.

Considerations
It has been clear from the early days of COVID-19 that a pandemic magnifies and concentrates academic privilege. Students with abundant resources, including access to computers and fast and reliable bandwidth, enjoy significant advantages over less affluent learners. Vulnerable students may have unstable and chaotic home lives and be exposed to considerable stress as their families bear the financial challenges of a novel virus spread. Institutions have been challenged to extend the system of student support and care that has developed at many residential campuses to the remote learning environment.

Prioritizing educational equity and access is important to all of higher education. There is variation in the success of our institutions in living up to the goal of higher education as an engine of mobility and opportunity, but this is as close to a universally shared value as our sector gets. It is for this reason that the inequalities in equity and access that COVID-19 has both revealed and exacerbated are so painful. The experience of living through a time of educational inequality of opportunities should, we believe, focus our institutions’ attention on equity and access once everyone returns to campus. There will be time for students to share their stories of facing the challenges of navigating COVID-19. Exposing the unequal obstacles to succeeding at college, through discussions of the experience of learning in a pandemic, is a necessary step in developing durable and long-lasting structural supports for all learners.

Conversations about universal design for learning will also be more urgent once campus life returns. Unfortunately, higher education as a whole has not matched an investment of resources around universal course design practices with its stated commitments. Ensuring that instructional methods, both residential and online, are accessible to all learners takes preparation, expertise, and resources. Even well-intentioned faculty will have difficulty designing their courses to be accessible to all learners without assistance from accessibility experts and learning designers. The awareness of the struggles that so many students experienced in remote learning will serve to shine a light on the essential work of accessibility and learning design teams. Courses designed around universal design principles will have shown to have had greater success in enabling student success during the pandemic. These practices will likely continue once residential teaching returns.

Moving to virtual learning environments required a quick pivot for all of us. One of the things spring 2020 highlighted for all of us was the need to be flexible. This meant rethinking assignments on fly, adjusting expectations of class time, redefining our learning goals, and adapting experiential and engaged learning to new modalities. This
necessary flexibility foregrounded different aspects of our teaching, however, forcing us to look at our content and our assignments in new ways.

That moment also forced us all to learn more about the tools and technologies available to us. While the overnight shift to remote courses was not anyone’s idea of a well-planned, -supported, and -executed online learning experience, we’ve all learned a great deal about what technology can and cannot do. When a return to normal comes, those of us who teach will have much more experience with managing discussions and assignments in Canvas or Blackboard or D2L, and running synchronous online course meetings in Zoom or Hangouts or Teams.

It’s conceivable that more faculty will also think differently about the time they are together with students in the classroom. It may take on a new urgency and value. Faculty may attempt to leverage the preciousness of that time together by shifting to recording their lectures on their computers and then asking students to watch before the class meets. This would allow for more meaningful teaching, mentoring, and student research experiences. The tools that made emergency teaching at a distance a reality might be employed to a greater degree to help faculty engage in virtual office hours, manage dynamic peer engagements, and bring in guests from around the world to extend the boundaries of the classroom.

COVID-19 necessitated a move to remote teaching and demonstrated the power of technology to enable academic continuity, but the experience also revealed the limits of technology to catalyze student learning. What matters most in education are the skills and experience of the educator, the level of preparedness and engagement and support of the student, and the degree to which the educational environment is conducive to learning.

When and if we return to a new normal, we hope colleges and universities of all types will engage in sustained conversations about the factors that support or impede student learning. Those conversations, we think, should focus on areas around caring for learners and finding ways to ensure that all courses (independent of course size) contain elements of active and experiential learning. Technology will be part of this conversation as an enabler of student learning, but the limitations of technology will have become clear to the entire campus community.

No doubt a return to normal will bring many changes to our campuses. Social distancing requirements will recede at some point, but we will all need to be prepared to revert
back if necessary. Everyone will need to be ready to quickly leave. This awareness of the possibility that the activities of the institution may need to shift at a moment’s notice, in part or in whole, to a remote stance is something new in higher education. Knowing this will mean greater attention to what is important about the work we do, the experiences we give our students, and the community we rely on. We expect a return to normal will bring new challenges and new opportunities, many of which will overlap with the other possibilities we see playing out at campuses around the world.