Scenario #2: Late Start

For most campuses, the academic year begins sometime in late August through mid to late September. Given the potential unknowns about the state of the COVID-19 pandemic, including the availability of a vaccine or widespread testing, some colleges and universities looked at ways to shift the increased density of their campuses to a time when we have more resources to support the health, safety, and well-being of our students, faculty, and staff. A late start is one option.

Starting late suggests a number of possible approaches, from beginning the semester in earnest at a later time to beginning the semester online at the usual time and then transitioning to an on-campus, face-to-face environment when the global health crisis is more stable. In the case of the former, it could mean attempting to compress the semester into a shorter period (October through December, say) or extending the fall semester into winter and what might normally be the spring semester at many schools. The idea of extending the semester past the normal calendar might mean the suspension of winter breaks as schools attempt to meet the curricular requirements in a reorganized semester.

One advantage of starting late is that it gives colleges and universities a great deal of flexibility, even if pulling off a late start to the semester will require rethinking many of the institutional structures and traditions that define much of college life. Institutional mainstays, such as new student orientation, would need to be reimagined or postponed. Occupancy of residence halls will likely need to shift to later in the semester (or blend into one of many other possible scenarios; see Students in Residence Learning Virtually). Beginning the semester early, on the other hand, would allow schools to deliver an entire semester’s worth of study before the Thanksgiving break, meaning that our students would not need to travel more than necessary and could finish the semester before a second wave of the pandemic might strike.

If courses were to begin remotely, faculty would be able to engage with students online for a period of time with the expectation that on-campus experiential and hands-on work might happen later in the semester. Students, then, would have an opportunity to build relationships with their faculty and go into the semester with some comfort knowing that their fall semester—for many, their initial experience with college—will continue once the global health crisis is stabilized. Cocurricular activities will continue, albeit at a later time, giving students a key element of the formative and social aspects of college life.
Still, the curriculum and the structure of classes would also likely need to change. Courses might need to run longer to meet seat-time requirements, necessitating changes to course schedules. More courses might need to be fit into a normal week, potentially running courses into the evenings and weekends. Or a blended approach to course delivery might be employed even when students and faculty are on campus. Faculty might use one part of a week to meet with students face-to-face and the other to meet with them online. However we look at it, a late start helps colleges and universities commit to an on-campus experience with students should the health crisis subside. It creates opportunities for a full, rich learning experience for students at the expense of a traditional semester schedule. It does not come without its challenges, however.

Considerations

Starting online and planning to move to face-to-face classes runs the risk of accentuating inequities across student populations. As the forced remote learning weeks of spring 2020 revealed, the pandemic had the effect of magnifying the impact of resources on academic achievement. Those students with access to quiet study environments, fast internet connections, and new computers enjoyed significant advantages over students with fewer of these resources. Vulnerable learners may find themselves starting behind their classmates once the residential portion of the semester begins.

Another challenge to students for a late start plan is, as we’ve mentioned, first-year orientation. Students accustomed to the expectations and tempo of college-level work may be able to handle the time management and self-motivation necessary to succeed in online courses. First-year students who are both new to college-level work and have likely never learned online may experience more difficulty. Orientation may require a similar rethinking and redesign as courses within the curriculum if a late start is to be successful.

The alternative late-start plan is to announce a later beginning to the residential semester, compressing the remaining time into a more intensive experience. Other options include extending the semester through the December/January winter break, with an October or November start date. If a second wave of COVID-19 should hit, then the late semester start could move from residential to online. The question that many
institutions are asking is whether the benefits of a consistent learning modality—residential or online—may outweigh the costs of starting late and going longer.

Transitioning midstream from residential to remote (as in spring 2020), or online to residential, requires a leap in learning behaviors that many students might struggle to master (and possibly reintroduces issues of equity and access for our most vulnerable students). While the future may require rapid transitions from residential to online and back again, depending on the path of the pandemic, institutions will need to develop robust support mechanisms to help their students succeed.

How might a late start look from a faculty and staff perspective? While students would likely be asked to stay away from campus in the late-start model, faculty and staff are another issue. Starting the semester late might mean that faculty and staff return to campus as usual and on time to prepare for the semester, teach from campus, even if online, and engage in research. Having staff return to campus early would allow staff to plan for the complex changes necessary to pull off the late semester.

Or, it may mean that faculty and staff, too, will need to stay home until later in the semester. Our faculty and staff continue to deal with the same family and life challenges that everyone faces. The assumption that they can return to normal while the rest of the campus explores alternatives does not acknowledge the very real stresses of taking care of sick family members, childcare challenges, and the ongoing strain of the pandemic on their lives. Colleges and universities will need to make difficult decisions about the tenure clock, contingent faculty support, and ongoing research support. Whether faculty are on campus or teaching remotely, this time could allow professors to build relationships with their students before seeing them in the lectures hall, seminar rooms, and labs. A focus on interaction, connection, and presence in the online portion of the semester may alleviate some concerns about both course design and student equity.

Like students, faculty will need to rely on institutional support to make starting late a meaningful possibility. Support will need to be in place to help them develop engaging course designs that blend online and face-to-face teaching. The Herculean efforts that were undertaken at most institutions during the spring of 2020 to move courses to a remote learning environment will need to continue. Schools will need to begin working with faculty once the spring semester is over to help them begin preparing for the new normal of teaching and learning under COVID-19. Faculty development, learning design, and technology support will need to be combined to help faculty design course models
and approaches to teaching students in blended modes. These designs will need to take advantage of the challenges of the time and space shift in order to make the student experience as dynamic as possible.

Pushing back the date when students, faculty, and staff will return to campus will be appealing to many college and university leaders. The decision to resume residential operations puts a stake in the ground that residential learning will return. Students and parents may be more willing to accept residential delays than a continuation of remote courses. A soft launch of campus operations, perhaps aided by a transitional period of online learning, provides schools with flexibility in the transition back to business as usual. As we have noted, however, there are any number of discernable and hidden costs to pushing back the start of the semester.