Scenario #3: Moving Fall to Spring

As we speak with colleagues from across the country considering different contingencies for institutional resilience, we hear a great deal of nuance to the scenarios we’ve described. There are complex combinations, extensions, and amendments that build on each school’s unique context and signature strengths. Similarly, most schools we speak with are not developing one plan but many. This is prudent. As they put together these contingency plans, every school throughout the country has had to consider a multitude of factors, including the health and safety of their students, faculty, and staff as well as the advice, guidance, and restrictions imposed by their local and state governments. They have had to consider the makeup of their student body, the implications of any scenario for giving students the richest possible learning experience, and the pedagogical approaches most likely to succeed.

Research-heavy schools think specifically about the impact of any one scenario on research and scholarship, not to mention promotion and tenure and the capacity of their faculty. Hopefully, they also consider the well-being of their nontenure line and contingent faculty. These are some of the most vulnerable members of our communities. Any scenario under discussion needs to bear in mind the administrative and operational structures in place to support a given scenario. And, of course, schools have no choice but to consider the financial impact of any given contingency plan. This brings us to our third scenario, moving fall to spring.

As with the previous two scenarios, moving the fall semester to a spring start addresses this issue of campus density by considering alternative approaches to the traditional academic calendar. It is a time-based plan. This scenario is perhaps the easiest to describe while at the same time being one of the most difficult to choose. The assumption behind this scenario is that a school would skip the fall semester entirely and begin face-to-face instruction in January 2021. Among many reasons, a school might choose to pause until the spring for health and safety reasons alone, believing that the extra few months will bring with them increased testing and perhaps even signs of a vaccine. They might choose this path because they do not have the infrastructure to support robust remote course delivery. They might choose this path because they believe social distancing would be impossible to manage effectively on a densely populated campus. They might choose this path because they believe it would give them more time to prepare the campus for a potential second wave. Or they might choose this path because they are concerned about inequities among their students’ access to the necessary technology, space, and safety required for attentive online
learning. Likely, the choice to move the fall semester to the spring would be made based on a combination of these and many other reasons.

The challenges of such a choice are at the very least academic and financial. Skipping the fall means progress toward a degree is lost. Students’ first-year experience would be postponed and possibly shortened, while students in need of campus support services might have difficulty receiving them if any were offered. Much like the late-start scenario, starting school in January does not necessarily mean that faculty and staff could not return to campus to prepare for the spring, maintain research continuity, and help support students from afar. But how would schools pay for this time? Losing a semester’s worth of tuition at a time when most schools are already struggling because of the financial hit from spring 2020 is a very difficult proposition. Few have massive endowments with cash flexibility. Lost revenue from residence halls and other on-campus activities is a problem in many of the scenarios we outline. Losing a semester’s worth of tuition as well is very difficult to imagine given already tight budgets.

These challenges might be mitigated by trying to compress the fall, spring, and summer semesters into eight packed months starting in the spring and running through August. Still, for a variety of reasons, this may not be not ideal. Schools would need to have enough financial flexibility to pay their bills, students would have a semester with nothing planned to do, and faculty and staff would be working in relative uncertainty. Students who need the greatest support might be asked to accelerate their studies in ways that are unmanageable. None of these are good choices, but this is a time of increasingly difficult choices, and finding the option that resonates with the factors each individual school is considering is necessary.

**Considerations**

For schools choosing this path, we think it will be crucial to make resources available to support our most vulnerable students, faculty, and staff. This is not a consideration unique to this scenario, but a full semester away from campus places this challenge in stark relief. With unemployment likely to remain high throughout the pandemic, it will be difficult for our students to find work as an alternative to staying enrolled in school. Students with the greatest needs while on campus will also need support while off campus, even if the semester is on hold.

How this will happen at each school will depend on the resources, culture, and context of the school. Will it be possible to ask students to propose a project for the semester?
Will they receive ongoing support from health and counseling services? Will the timing of financial aid packages shift? Will international students be able to adjust their visas? These are only a few of the questions that schools would struggle with if they decided to go this route. Decreasing density on campus for a semester might not preclude faculty returning to campus to perform research and scholarship. Still, since campus-based research often involves student support, not having students on campus may slow down significant portions of research. Promotion and tenure clocks will likely need to be reconsidered. Many faculty and staff will, like spring 2020, be balancing complex home lives within an economic and social environment that might mean daycare and family care options are also shut down. A January start might give them time to prepare for classes.

If a school does pursue this approach, we believe it will also be crucial for them to consider the plight of contingent faculty and graduate students serving as teaching associates. Many of our adjuncts and lecturers depend on piecing together four or five courses a semester to make ends meet. Our graduate students will have similar issues. Their stipends support their living expenses. One possibility would be to employ our contingent faculty and graduate students to help the rest of the campus prepare for the January start, working alongside colleagues to prepare classes and online materials. But this option depends heavily on available funds, something likely to be a challenge at most institutions. There are few perfect options for the colleges and universities designing contingency plans.

All of the available options have tradeoffs and will force difficult decisions. The idea of starting the academic year in January highlights just how complex managing this will be.