The Low-Density University
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Scenario #4: First-Year Intensive

Under the first-year intensive scenario, only first-year students would be invited to begin the academic year on campus. Sophomores, juniors, and seniors would continue to live and study at a distance. Choices around graduate and professional students might be made separately, as these older learners are likely to live off campus and have smaller classes and therefore pose a completely separate challenge in plans for limiting campus density.

The first-year experience privileges one of the most important aspects of college for those institutions that provide a residential educational experience for newly minted high school graduates. While a minority of students new to higher education are able to enjoy a campus-based living and learning experience, as the plurality of students are now nontraditional in age and circumstances, freshman year remains disproportionately important across the spectrum of residential institutions.

The rationale for a first-year intensive plan is found in its name—the first year of college is intense. First-year orientation programs are critical in acclimating new students to the academic rigors of college life as well as to the pitfalls possible in the newfound freedoms of living and studying away from home. For many emerging adults new to the demands of college-level work, it is the first week and months of freshman year that lay the foundations for a successful college career. This is true, too, for the students historically categorized as “nontraditional.” These students are often starting (or returning to) school while balancing families and full-time work. The first-year experience could help acclimate them to college work and college life as well.

The resources that residential institutions have invested in first-year orientation programs have been dramatically increased in recent years. At most institutions, special care is now taken in the intentional building of community and support networks. Individual counseling, planned events, and other resources have been directed toward underrepresented populations and other specific groups, such as first-generation and LGBTQ students. This support is perhaps more important now in this period of uncertainty.

For schools, committing to bringing first-year students to campus for as close to a traditional freshman experience as possible may have the advantage of attenuating the

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anticipated matriculation melt. For many newly entering college students (and their parents), the likely dislocations of a fully or partially remote academic year enhance the appeal of a gap year. The perceived opportunity costs of taking a year off from school between high school and college seem to be less at the start of a college career than in the middle. Pre-COVID-19, the idea that many students would benefit from a gap year before starting college was a commonly expressed sentiment and was not discouraged by institutions of higher learning.³

As the pandemic plays out, uncertainty about the value of a first-year experience during a time of social distancing may cause a dramatic increase in students choosing to defer enrollment. For tuition-dependent institutions, big jumps in the number of accepted students choosing to matriculate at a later date could result in significant financial hardship. Large drops in the number of first-year students would scramble the budgets of even relatively well-resourced institutions. A first-year intensive strategy may go some distance in ameliorating the concerns of new college students and their parents and may discourage many from choosing to delay the start of their college careers. Whether or not continuing remote classes will cause large numbers of women and men who are further along in their college careers to take a semester off—while perhaps taking online classes at less expensive community colleges—is unknown.

Down the road, the advantages of bringing first-year students to campus may pay off in attrition and retention.⁴ For all but the most selective institutions, four- and six-year graduation rates remain atrociously low, and over a third of students may choose to transfer to another school.⁵ The potential impacts on time to graduation and retention from having first-year students begin their college careers as remote learners are unknown. We know that the support and community-building structures that have evolved over decades for first-year residential students are difficult to translate to remote learners without significant resources.

Considerations

If schools decide to follow a first-year intensive plan, what might an academic year look like for all students? For first-year students, the start of college is likely to be very different than the traditional freshman experience. The enforced personal growth of adapting to living in a dorm room with a stranger (or two) is likely not to exist for this entering class, as likely all rooms will be singles. Perhaps first-year students will not see this change as a loss. Other differences may be more jarring. A semester with only first-year students in residence means no sporting events to attend since social distancing rules will delay any gatherings with large crowds regardless of the school’s plan to de-densify the campus. At schools where fraternities and sororities play a big role in the campus social scene, alternatives will need to be discovered. Dining halls may be open, but students may be required to eat in shifts or perhaps grab their meals to go.

Having first-year students come to campus to live and to study does not necessarily mean that all, or even most, classes will be face-to-face. First-year students would likely be asked to enroll in a combination of residential and online courses. Large-enrollment gateway courses may need to shift to online teaching, as packed lecture halls are unlikely to conform to social distancing guidelines. Normally, most college courses contain a mix of students at different places in their college careers. Even in a first-year intensive strategy, first-year students would join their sophomore, junior, and senior peers in online classes. The risk to older faculty of contact with young people may result in first-year students learning on campus from faculty who are remote.

A first-year intensive strategy also raises any number of questions and concerns about equity and access. How feasible is it to expect that undergraduates who have had to navigate a spring and a summer of remote courses to continue on this path? As we have pointed out in our discussions of the three previous scenarios, remote learning tends to concentrate student privilege while further disadvantaging vulnerable learners. Bringing only first-year students to campus might deepen structural inequalities of opportunity. Continuing remote learning for sophomores, juniors, and seniors may also make it more difficult for these students to progress toward graduation. Courses with heavy lab components and other forms of hands-on instruction remain challenging to transition online. First-year students may benefit most from the orientation activities and development of social networks that campus life encourages, but they may need physical classrooms less than their further-along peers.

For professors and staff, a first-year intensive start to the academic year would still mean the additional challenge of developing both residential and remote courses. Student (and parent) expectations for the quality of remote courses are likely to be
significantly higher than were expectations in spring 2020. During that emergency pivot, schools were careful to label courses as *remote* rather than *online*, as online courses carry with them expectations of advanced course design and significant investments in faculty training. Students (and parents) may expect that courses offer *no significant difference* in quality between residential and online delivery modes. They will likely be less patient about variation in course design and methods of delivery. A first-year intensive plan may make it difficult for faculty, and the staff they work with, to develop and teach high-quality online courses while simultaneously developing and teaching their face-to-face courses.

However, this strategy would also potentially allow for greater resources to be allocated to first-year academic experiences, such as first-year seminars and experiential learning activities. Faculty could potentially invest more time in mentoring first-year students, building relationships that could last for a student’s entire time at an institution. As with all the scenarios we discuss in this series, every choice to begin the fall semester in the low-density university has serious drawbacks. Bringing first-year students to campus has many advantages for both students and schools, but downsides are considerable. Communicating the rationale for this plan to all stakeholders is essential. These communications should be open about the rationale for adopting this strategy, while transparently addressing its shortcomings and difficulties. Finding ways to keep residential and remote learners together as a cohesive community will occupy much of the time and energy of campus leaders.