5. Graduate Students Only

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Scenario #5: Graduate Students Only

Much like the previous scenario, having only graduate students on campus reduces density by selectively allowing certain students to return to campus. There are many possible approaches to selecting which students might be allowed to return to campus and which would be asked to learn remotely. Colleges might choose to bring to campus students who are the most vulnerable and need the greatest support, students who are in certain schools or disciplines, students in certain classes, and so on. While a first-year intensive approaches the issue of density by focusing on the all-important first-year experience, graduate students only prioritizes the benefits of bringing a distinct group of advanced students back to campus.

At schools with a sizable graduate student population, a graduate students only approach to meeting the needs of reducing the density of campus has a number of advantages. The first is that bringing back only graduate students to campus solves one of the more vexing challenges of residential education under social distancing—the residence hall. While it is true that many graduate students live in university-provided residences, these units almost always differ from the dorms that house most undergraduates. Most university-provided graduate student housing consists of singles, suites, or apartments. On residential campuses with graduate programs, a higher proportion of graduate students live off campus than do undergraduates. If university-provided graduate housing is still too dense, then graduate students could occupy the rooms of undergraduates who are studying online.

A second advantage of following a graduate students only path has to do with research. While library research can more and more be conducted online, graduate students in the humanities often still need access to special collections and unique on-campus resources. Even more complicated are graduate students in STEM fields who often require labs for their work. Progressing toward completion of the degree means conducting experiments. Graduate students often work to support faculty research as well. Graduate students also help conduct research on grant-funded projects out of faculty labs that require access to specialized equipment. While it is possible (if challenging) to move undergraduate STEM instruction from physical to virtual labs—shifting from atoms to bits as teaching tools—it is much more difficult to imagine original research of a similar kind happening online. Simulations may work well for learning, but we are not yet at the point where all graduate student research can be virtualized. It is often a hands-on enterprise. Having graduate students return to campus helps address this issue.
The third benefit of graduate students only might be the positive impact that this plan could have on undergraduate instruction. One of the big lessons of higher education’s emergency pivot to remote instruction has been that the rate limiters to quality student learning experiences have less to do with technology and more to do with people. Remote learning is massively labor-intensive. Moving instruction to digital platforms heightens, rather than diminishes, the need for complementary faculty resources such as teaching assistants. The biggest single predictor of a successful online course is instructor presence. Having course assistants to distribute the grading and student engagement to frees professors up for high-value activities such as coaching, mentoring, and just-in-time content creation.

If funding is available, graduate students (who are not themselves teachers of record in a course) could be asked to help support remote instruction for other faculty, including other graduate student teachers. This would not only benefit the ongoing university instruction but it would be an invaluable experience for graduate students as future teachers. Participating as educators in online courses would provide graduate students with marketable skills, both in and out of academia.

Considerations

If graduate students only carries with it a number of advantages—no need to worry about social distancing in large lecture classes since the largest of the professional school classes could likely relocate comfortably to the largest undergraduate lecture halls; less worry about violating social distance guidelines at parties and social events, as graduate students have smaller parties and are (on the whole) less social; additional assistance in getting faculty research restarted, to the extent that graduate students are inexpensive and indispensable research labor—what are the challenges with this approach? Perhaps the most obvious is that many schools do not have significant graduate student populations. This is both a positive and negative. Smaller graduate student populations would contribute significantly toward reduced density on campus, but for many schools, the population would not be large enough to help support undergraduate teaching or faculty research.

Another consideration is housing. On campuses with larger graduate student populations, bringing graduate students back to campus would help reduce density in residence halls and would mean a university would have less to do to manage the social distancing of students living on campus. The variability of graduate student housing
does pose two problems, however. First, for many residential campuses, revenue from renting dormitory rooms is a significant source of revenue. Graduate students tend to live off campus and would not help universities recuperate this lost revenue. Second, if a graduate student becomes sick, it becomes much more difficult for the college to trace contacts and to quarantine the student. A single graduate student could end up creating problems for managing the spread of an outbreak on campus.

A third problem with the graduate students only approach may simply be that colleges and universities already know how to create immersive, rich, and intensive low-residency and online graduate programs. Indeed, outside of the most selective residential professional degree programs, the trend has been for master’s programs to transition from residential to online.\(^6\) Why bring back the students who are best able to adapt their work to online learning? What colleges and universities have not figured out how to do, outside small experiments such as Minerva, is to replicate the residential undergraduate experience online. The traditional undergraduate bundle has been difficult to disrupt not because of its instructional aspects but because of its social attributes. This is why the plan at Southern New Hampshire University (SNHU) to give undergraduates the option to live in residence halls and take classes online is so fascinating.\(^7\) The press stories about SNHU’s plans unsurprisingly focused on the waiving of tuition, but the real long-term story is SNHU’s move to use its campus for social learning while seeking to leverage online learning to lower overall costs.

Bringing only graduate students back to campus, then, may not address some of the more palpable existential worries of starting a new academic year amid the uncertainty of the pandemic’s progression. We don’t know what the public health situation will be going forward, but offering a campus-based experience to undergraduates is a key value proposition of predominantly residential institutions.\(^8\) The graduate students only scenario is likely to be little more than a thought experiment in solving the puzzle of reducing the density on campus. Exploring this option illuminates how complex the situation is and how important it is for colleges and universities to think about all possible options. It also foregrounds just how important a campus option for undergraduates is to the future of residential colleges and universities.

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