The Low-Density University

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Scenario #6: Structured Gap Year

One of the most prevalent questions parents and high school seniors have been asking about academic offerings under the conditions prompted by COVID-19 is whether they should avoid the challenges altogether and take a gap year? The sixth of fifteen scenarios we suggest as worth considering for conditions under COVID-19 and for future academic transformation is for schools to consider offering the option of a structured gap year.

Creating or augmenting institutional infrastructure designed to enable and support admitted and matriculated students in a gap year may be a difficult choice for many colleges and universities to make. A gap year is a year in which no tuition or fees are collected from the students engaged in this option. Taking a gap year means that a college or university will hold a place for the student, ensuring reentry into the institution in the following year. Institutions are scrambling to develop plans that will encourage students to matriculate, while also figuring out how to work around social distancing guidelines that are likely to be strict. Taking steps to actively decrease enrollment, such as developing plans to widely roll out a structured gap year, may appear to be counter to the financial interests of most schools even while offering other advantages worth considering.

Students and their parents understand that higher education during COVID-19 will almost certainly be different than previous years, and certainly different than what they might imagine college life to be. That will likely be the case for all of us. A gap year for entering freshman has long been understood as advantageous for students’ later academic success.9 The overriding goal for any gap year plan is that the experience is meaningful, ideally leading to greater levels of maturity, independence, and confidence.10

With little likelihood that students will be able to spend the 2020–2021 academic year living outside their home country, or participating in service projects or place-based educational programs, what might a structured gap year program look like? One possibility is for colleges and universities to provide students some structure for a productive year away from campus and classes while keeping the costs for providing

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these resources commensurate with revenues. The structured gap year, therefore, could exist along a continuum, with some student costs for activities that involve more significant efforts by professors and staff, and less costly or no charges for activities that require little to no marginal outlays by institutions.

Schools could establish independent research projects that students undertake with the guidance of a professor, and maybe a cohort of other students. Creative research projects that are amenable to being completed while living at home might be more attractive to some students than enrolling in remote courses, or of even managing the uncertainty of when a return to campus might be possible. The greater the involvement of the school and professors in a structured gap year project, the more room there is to maintain a student’s association with the school. At the far end of the spectrum are credit-eligible projects, which can be evaluated by faculty and charged at the going credit-hour rate.

Independent or small cohort research projects may work for some students in a structured gap year scenario, but not all. Some students would be challenged to develop the discipline needed to complete a large project, lacking the incentives and nudges of a class schedule, regular assessments, and grades. An alternative option for students in this scenario who are unable to either work (as the employment situation is as fragile as the residential campus situation) or live outside of their homes would be to act as course assistants. Normally, course assistants are drawn from graduate students, or in some cases advanced undergraduates as teaching assistants. We are not in normal times, and this new normal could lead to transformative practices that extend well beyond the present moment. To accomplish this approach, therefore, schools could develop online training programs to instill the skills that course assistants need to add value to classes. There are many examples of students acting as peer mentors and learning fellows, a methodology that has proven to be highly successful. Recalibrating these programs to train and deploy even incoming first-year students may prove equally successful.

As schools rely more heavily on virtual instruction, the availability of students to serve in peer mentoring roles, or to even handle some of the elements of digital instruction (video editing, helping with device troubleshooting) may prove invaluable. Course assistants would be there not to grade assignments or exams but to assist in supporting the learning of others, a task that may feel both meaningful and accomplishable for students who want to hold off on taking their own classes. Compensation could be in
the form of credit, helping students build or maintain momentum toward matriculation and graduation.

Considerations

Designing opportunities for independent research projects and course assistants are just two of the potential ideas of the structured gap year. Exploring the awarding of credit absent the requirement of matriculation may free schools up to be creative with student projects and peer engagement. For students (and their parents) a structured gap year program has the potential advantage of keeping rising and existing learners involved in meaningful tasks, activities that should improve the odds of successfully navigating a college career. At the same time, the continuum of possible offerings this scenario, with costs tied to faculty/school involvement and credit, may allow for significant savings in tuition and fees as compared to full enrollment.

For schools, the advantage of investing in the infrastructure necessary to offer a structured gap year experience would be twofold. First, reducing the size of the matriculating student body might go some way in enabling other students to return to campus. Fewer students mean more space in residence halls, dining facilities, classrooms, libraries, and labs. As the overwhelming imperative is for residential institutions to offer campus-based options, any plan that allows students to gracefully self-sort time away from campus may prove helpful.

The second advantage for colleges and universities of investing in standing up and running a structured gap year program may be in the potential of this option to keep students integrated with their school. The alternative of students and their families planning a gap year that is disconnected from the institution is arguably worse than offering an institutionally integrated gap year. And, third, colleges and universities could design a gap year experience that is more equitable and accessible for all students. The practice of the gap year has often been criticized as a luxury available only to the wealthy. The likely need to de-densify campuses may perhaps offer an opportunity for institutions to democratize the gap year experience by offering students a richer and more institutionally integrated set of options under this scenario. Schools could create the scaffolding and infrastructure to make a gap year a viable possibility for students for whom this would otherwise be unrealizable.

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One possible outcome is that the gap year evolves into a visiting year, with homebound students taking classes at community colleges with the goal of transferring less-expensive credits to more expensive residential institutions. This plan may prove attractive for some. A structured gap year offers an alternative for students and their families who may be unwilling or unable to pay retail prices for what they see as a different educational experience but who want to stay connected to their schools while progressing toward a degree.

Much like many of the scenarios we have been discussing, a structured gap year may be more of a thought experiment at most institutions than a fully implementable plan. It may be something that could be made available to a small number of students, or it could simply force schools to consider the advantages of a gap year for all students. This would not be a bad result.

The COVID-19 pandemic is a difficult and challenging moment for all of higher education, but it also has shone a light on so many of the inequities and challenges facing our students. Access to the internet, reliable technology, and a safe workspace are only some of the immense challenges many of our students face. Thinking through the advantages and challenges of a structured gap year during COVID-19 highlights the financial and practical difficulty many of our students would have in taking advantage of this kind of meaningful experience.

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