The Low-Density University

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Scenario #7: Targeted Curriculum

Developing a targeted curriculum enables campus social distancing through a strategic design of face-to-face and online course offerings and schedules. In a targeted curriculum, certain courses are designated as high priority, are provided with institutional resources, and may be given precedence for being taught on campus. For example, courses with high demand but capped enrollments, such as seminars, might be taught on campus, as might courses that are essential to allow students to fulfill graduation requirements. Similarly, experiential courses, performance-based courses, and labs might be given priority for on-campus meetings, as might courses that require intense faculty-student feedback and discussion, such as writing courses and first-year seminars.

What “priority” means will vary from school to school. Some schools may give additional resources to courses designated as high priority, such as learning designers and teaching assistants. For others, it might simply mean they are designated to be taught on campus or even taught at all during a semester of limited resources. Deciding on the priority of certain courses over others might mean that courses with unintentionally low enrollments are either taught online or more likely not offered at all. At the other end of the class-size spectrum, large-enrollment gateway courses could either be taught online or divided into smaller sections that would be taught on campus in classrooms freed up by moving other courses online. To account for these changes, faculty used to teaching upper-division electives and seminars might be asked instead to teach face-to-face versions of the now divided up large-enrollment gateway courses. Things would have to change at all levels for a targeted curriculum to work.

Whatever the choices, a targeted curriculum path requires that the schools and departments within the university design the course offerings as a cohesive plan, working within constraints of student needs, pedagogical opportunities, and social distancing guidelines. On the student need side, developing a targeted curriculum plan might involve careful effort to offer courses on campus that enhance the likelihood of student success while also ensuring that university-wide and major requirements can be satisfied. Students, particularly students wishing to major in STEM, are at greatest risk of falling off the path to a degree while attempting to progress through foundational
courses. First-generation and underrepresented minority students in STEM majors are at particularly high risks for attrition.\(^\text{13}\)

A targeted curriculum plan would to some degree indicate that the college or university believes that all students do not succeed equally in residential and online classes. Students who are advanced in their majors might find online courses manageable, as these learners have presumably developed the foundational knowledge, study skills, and time management abilities that are critical for online learning success. Students new to a subject or a major, as well as those who are still finding their higher ed sea legs, might benefit more from the defined structures and visibility inherent in face-to-face courses.

This is not to say that introductory or gateway courses can’t be taught well online, but rather that doing so is highly resource-intensive and may not be possible at many institutions, particularly at the scale and speed necessary to be ready for the start of the new academic year. Planning to run gateway courses as face-to-face classes, and doing so by spreading out students across sections and classrooms, has the added benefit of creating smaller student-to-faculty ratios—a change that might yield significant benefits in student outcomes.

A targeted curriculum could also begin to address the challenge of running lab, performance-based, and experience-intensive courses as well. Committing to offer these courses—or a part of these courses—as face-to-face offerings avoids the challenges of virtualizing labs and adapting experiential and performance-based studies to an online modality. At the same time, it would allow the school to suspend low-enrollment courses and move electives online. Reducing the overall number of residential courses based on student needs, pedagogical goals, and social distancing requirements could also create more space in schedules to offer residential courses that have hands-on and laboratory components.

**Considerations**

Thinking through a targeted curriculum scenario is challenging because the curricular facts on the ground vary so widely across the higher education ecosystem. Each school has some combination of student needs and course offerings that is unique to its

circumstances. Each school seemingly has its own wrinkles in faculty governance, major and graduation requirements, and instructional practices. At most schools, the courses offered in any single semester result from the interplay of various forces, incentives, guidelines, rules, structures, requirements, and preferences. The courses that faculty are assigned to teach result from a combination of structure and of agency, with some professors having some degree of voice in determining their courses.

Under a targeted curriculum, course offerings would likely need to be coordinated across the institution rather than at the level of the department or school. The schedule of courses would be holistically designed around the requirements of reducing density, with attention to student needs and pedagogical best practices. The end result might be more faculty teaching core, introductory, and required courses, with a commensurate decline in the number of electives on offer.

A targeted curriculum would also need to be developed in the context of classroom availability. Decreasing the number of low-demand/low-enrollment residential courses (by moving these courses online or to not running) would open up classroom space to spread other courses out. Unless a university has an amazing surfeit of classroom space, however, moving some courses online will likely not be enough to ensure a student and faculty classroom density that is low enough to meet social distancing guidelines. Classroom utilization will also need to increase, with more face-to-face classes offered in the early morning, during evenings, and perhaps on weekends.

Increasing the number of professors assigned to high-demand/high-enrollment residential courses might also mean that more faculty could teach in teams. Many introductory courses already share a common curriculum, textbooks, lecture materials, and exams. Teams of professors, hopefully augmented by both learning designers and teaching assistants, could work together to prepare and manage sections. This collaboration could have significant benefits for students in a time of greater need for attention, care, and mentoring. Unfortunately, a targeted curriculum does not solve the challenge of where students live under the requirements of a low-density university. It is possible, if likely difficult, to spread students out across classrooms. Space in residence halls may prove less fungible than space in residential classrooms. There is no online option for a bed. Schools may move students into hotel rooms in order to maintain residential social distancing.

For many schools, a targeted curriculum would likely be part of a larger set of considerations. Do they bring all their students back to live in dorms? Only some? Are
courses not prioritized taught online or not at all? Any consideration of a targeted curriculum, however, should not just be exclusively taken with an eye toward managing the teaching and learning during the pandemic, but rather it should consider the potential effects on the future of the entire curriculum at that institution. A worst-case scenario is for courses not given priority under the current crisis to be considered somehow less valuable than other courses, determinations that should rightly be made at the department and school level. Such courses might be mistaken to have less value to an institution and be left out of the curriculum for longer than intended. This would mean long-term curricular decisions were made in haste and without full consideration. The variety of academic experiences that students come to expect as part of a college degree could be unintentionally diminished without careful curation of a targeted curriculum.