Scenario #8: Split Curriculum

In a split curriculum, courses are designated as either residential or online. Scheduled face-to-face courses are optimized for maximum classroom utilization under conditions of social distancing. Careful thought is given to which courses work best for students when taught face-to-face and which courses are more amenable to online delivery methods. A split curriculum has many of the advantages of a targeted curriculum in that schools can make proactive choices about which courses to offer to maximize student success. The main difference between these two strategies is that a targeted curriculum would likely result in fewer courses being offered as faculty are redeployed around high-demand/high-impact courses. A split curriculum seeks to preserve as much of the full catalog as possible by distributing courses across residential and online options.

Organizing classes under a split curriculum has a number of advantages. For students, this plan maximizes the number of potential face-to-face courses in which they are eligible to enroll. Courses that are likely to be especially beneficial for students if run face-to-face can be prioritized for classroom space. Some students may prefer a residential learning experience for introductory and other foundational courses. Other students, even those living on or close to campus, may instead prefer the flexibility of online learning. Depending on how it’s implemented, a split curriculum could offer students the option of being able to choose the course delivery method that best meets their needs.

For faculty, a split curriculum has the advantage of narrowing the course design and delivery process to a single modality. Professors would be able to plan their courses as either residential or remote. As expectations rise for online course quality as virtual learning becomes the new normal, faculty require more time and assistance to develop quality online courses. A split curriculum clearly delineates residential courses from online courses, enabling both professors and schools to focus time and resources into course development and delivery. Faculty preferences for teaching in a classroom or remotely can be taken into account in the development of the schedule, though we imagine this will be a difficult negotiation regardless. For faculty who are concerned about potential health risks in teaching on campus, a split curriculum can accommodate their preferences for teaching online.

Among the most significant concerns colleges and universities are facing is the worry that students may end up deferring if the semester is taught under social distancing conditions. The in-person portion of the college experience is a crucial value for
residential institutions. Layered on the potential loss of the full campus experience may be a diminishing willingness among students (and their parents) to pay residential-level tuitions for a remote-learning education. The understanding and patience students had with the initial shift to emergency remote instruction in spring 2020 is rightly being replaced with an expectation of high-quality courses, regardless of their modality. This means online courses that are designed around established instructional design principles, that are consistent in quality, and that prioritize student engagement and faculty presence.

A split curriculum would attempt to address at least some of the concerns of students and their parents. By choosing this approach, colleges and universities would be committing to online as part of a strategy, rather than as a last resort. To achieve this, faculty development and instructional design resources would need to be made available to all faculty teaching a remote course. Faculty would need to commit to adapting their courses to an online mode rather than attempting to translate existing courses to a new space in a pinch. And students would need to be given support and resources to make the online component a rich part of their educational experience. Universities would be able to provide a rich, if split, residential experience and they will be able to point to institutional investment in quality online courses. Schools previously unwilling to see their undergraduate curriculum taught online were in spring 2020 running both residential and online operations at the undergraduate level. The split curriculum is in many respects an acknowledgment that we are in a new normal.

Considerations

The challenges of split curriculum are (at least) threefold. The first challenge—one that runs across all of the scenarios—is student housing. Every scenario that includes face-to-face classes must first answer the question, where will the students live? Social distancing guidelines make it difficult to imagine students living in doubles or triples, while a student in a residence hall exposed to the virus would likely need to be quarantined. These will be difficult operational challenges from a public health, legal, and logistical standpoint. Some colleges and universities may be able to sign semester-length leases with local hotels. Of all the challenges of the low-density university, student housing may be the most vexing.

If the student housing puzzle can be solved, however, colleges and universities may be in a good position to provide a quality (if different) learning experience. Despite long-standing assumptions about the inability of higher education to change, one of its great
strengths is the ability of individual institutions to rapidly evolve and adapt to new circumstances. That every institution was able to quickly pivot in a matter of days from residential to remote learning in March 2020 as the COVID-19 pandemic unfolded is testimony to the resilience of higher education. In contrast to other industries, and even other sectors within education such as K-12, higher education was able to maintain academic and business continuity at an unmatched speed and scale.

Moving to a split curriculum may be the next step in higher education resilience under the demands of social distancing and pandemic preparation. This step and the second challenge, however, is likely to be organizationally difficult and resource-intensive. A split curriculum would likely require colleges and universities to develop parallel operations to support both residential and online learning programs. For large residential institutions, the scale on which undergraduate online courses must be designed and run is far beyond anything experienced or even contemplated in the past.

Even if schools are able to maximize the number of face-to-face courses by full classroom utilization, social distancing regulations will undoubtedly constrain the total number of residential courses that can be offered. You can only fit so many students in a classroom if the requirement is to keep everyone six feet (or more) apart. This will require that many courses be offered online, even if the students are living on (or close to) campus. How colleges and universities will build the institutional capacity to train large numbers of instructors in best practices around online course design and teaching is a difficult challenge to address, to say the least. It will depend largely on the existing instructional design and faculty development resources that are available.

Recruiting new instructional designers will likely be difficult given the high demand for these professionals right now. Some institutions may look to outsource faculty training and instructional design to online program management and other related companies. The expense of outsourcing instructional design, however, is substantial and not a guarantee of quality or faculty buy-in. This outsourcing option also may only be tenable at better-resourced institutions. Nor is it clear that outsourcing these functions is wise, as it has become increasingly clear that institutional capabilities in instructional design and online learning are core capacities in assuring institutional resilience.

The third challenge of a split curriculum model is that it does little to prepare faculty and students to pivot to a new modality should circumstances require it. If in the middle of the semester, schools are once again forced to close down campus, only a portion of the courses will be ready to shift into remote learning. The face-to-face courses could be at
a disadvantage unless those courses are also designed to be hybrid courses from the beginning. While this would be prudent planning, it does create more need for already scarce design and development resources on campus.

The challenges of a split curriculum are many but perhaps no more so than many of the other scenarios schools are considering. Acknowledging that a balanced curriculum, one that emphasizes quality across all modalities, is perhaps its most important strength is a critical step if we are going to keep our students engaged. Implementing scalable training and design support to help faculty adapt their courses, learning goals, and classroom activities to an online modality is just one of the important steps worth considering.