The Low-Density University
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Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

Kim, Joshua and Edward J. Maloney.
The Low-Density University: 15 Scenarios for Higher Education.

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Scenario #10: Modularity

A modular course model shares some of the features and benefits of a block plan, but with a greater degree of flexibility and variability. In essence, modularity considers the semester-long course structure to be one of many possible ways to organize teaching a particular topic. Some topics might lend themselves to shorter engagements, while others might be organized in such a way as to acknowledge that different students may need different sequencing. Whereas a block plan generally forces a particular structure for each course and credit unit across the entire institution (e.g., three-week modules of one course per module), a modular approach allows for much greater variation across an institution. Within a modular course model, academic departments could create courses with shorter durations and flexible start dates while keeping within the current semester structure. Unlike a block plan, which requires schools to engage in a full curricular and system redesign, shifting the course schedule from simultaneous semester-long classes to a shorter, perhaps highly integrated modular course structure could work within a traditional semester structure without too much modification.

The key to modularity is flexibility—flexible course lengths, flexible sequences, flexible topics, flexible interdependence. In a modular approach, schools, programs, departments, and even individual course sequences may all even be able to approach this flexibility differently. One option might be two 1.5-credit half-semester experiences. Another option would be to move to clusters of three-week courses that share a common, integrated week in the breaks between each cluster. Universities might define some common, agreed-upon parameters, such as the need for modules to be taught more than once a semester to give students equal opportunity to take a module regardless of their schedule. Or they might see this as an opportunity to experiment.

Modularity is an approach to curriculum design and course scheduling that has some distinct advantages during a time of public health unknowns. For students feeling disconnected from school and schoolwork because of the effects of social distancing, modular courses could help build stronger student social and learning communities. Students would be able to develop better relationships with peers across shorter, intersecting modules instead of longer classes run parallel with little intersection. Moving between highly curated modules might also help students maintain much of the initial interest and excitement that often accompanies the beginning of a new course. Anything colleges can do to help maintain connections with students is important. Additionally, modular courses that are created during and in response to the pandemic might be designed to be as topical, relevant, and immediate to students’ lives as
possible. Modular courses on education, wellness, public health, economic dislocations, public policy, virology, and electoral politics are just a few examples of topics that may lend themselves to this particular moment.

Modular courses that are online, short, topical, and experiential may not only relieve some pressure on campus density but may also do so in a way that is more attractive to students. Students might consider online modular experiences—ones that both contribute credit toward graduation requirements and have a different sort of rhythm and tempo than semester-long classes—as distinct from and possibly more attractive than online versions of semester-long courses. For students in residence on campus, perhaps spread across nontraditional housing options such as hotels and university-arranged long-term Airbnb rentals, participating in online modular experiences might be a particularly appealing option. Attending a semester-long online course while living in a residence hall may feel odd, but engaging in shorter, more intense, timely, and integrated online learning experiences while living on or near campus may even feel like an upgrade.

Instructors may also find short, modular course experiences an appealing departure from the traditional rhythms of teaching. The shift to a curricular structure that enables modularity could even open up the process that faculty must navigate to propose a new course, even if only temporarily. Professors could be free to experiment with new course topics and approaches. Modular online courses could move in and out of interesting problems, unique approaches, and complex curricular dynamics while also keeping students engaged in exploring wicked problems. Creative modular courses offer opportunities for differentiation. Faculty could create modular courses around their research specializations and use the flexible modular format to invite students into their areas of inquiry. Multiple, sequenced modular courses could be designed to serve as prerequisites to more advanced courses or for progressing through a major. Either way, faculty could be given greater license to be creative with course design and student activities.

Ultimately, the advantage of modularity is its adaptability and flexibility. Modular courses could be designed to pivot rapidly serving residential and remote students. Different learner expectations for modular courses as compared to semester-long courses could reduce friction, and ideally student and parent consternation, around online delivery. A short online modular course need not be the online analog to a residential course, it could and should be something different. As their own thing,
modular courses are not burdened by history or expectations. They could be free to be new.

Considerations

The advantages that we’ve articulated for building modularity are intriguing, but many of these assumptions have not been tested. The idea that students may prefer short, topical, and less-formal online modules to semester-length online courses is just that, an idea. Signing up for many online modular experiences as opposed to a few semester-length online courses may in fact not prove appealing to (all) students. Part of the college experience that defines the value proposition of residential institutions is the chance to invest deeply in a topic. Students may feel that modular classes—online or face-to-face—no matter how creatively designed and relevant to their lives, are still poor substitutes for gathering around a seminar table for fifteen weeks.

Additionally, it is not immediately clear that a supply of short modular courses would actually meet the demand for reducing classroom utilization or decreasing density on campus. Short modular courses might require more space, not less. A large number of face-to-face courses might need to be taken out of the system if adequate classroom space is to be freed up for smaller modular courses. Any plan that contemplates modularity as the answer to the puzzle of dedensification should first confirm that there is enough classroom space to handle core courses under conditions of social distancing, even with most electives removed from these spaces.

Modularity may also be particularly challenging for faculty, whose capacity is severely stretched. Faculty may be excited to offer a single new concise, topical, and experiential online learning experience, but designing these modules is no easy feat. Similarly, while it may be possible to design modules that sequence together to meet course prerequisites or the requirements of a major, this would take a good deal of planning. Some majors are highly prescriptive, with students having to fill their course schedules with required courses and only infrequently enjoying the option of signing up for an elective. For professors teaching both full-term residential (or possibly online) courses and modular courses, it may be particularly difficult to design courses and modules on different schedules. Relatedly, how modular courses factor into faculty load becomes a complex problem in and of itself. This may be solvable but the solution might require complex internal institutional negotiations that might be more than any school could bear right now.
Whichever way a school chooses to introduce some elements of modularity as a strategy, it is highly likely that the long-run results of this approach could prove generative in the evolution of the curriculum. The freedom for professors to create and teach short, topical, and experiential courses would enrich and enliven the campus learning ecosystem long after the pandemic has passed. For students, modular courses that speak closely to their concerns and their challenges, and which are a break from the regular rhythms of the full semester (or quarter) may prove to be restorative and invigorating. A silver lining of COVID-19 could end up being an accelerated pace of curricular innovation, with modularity a prime example of this sort of progress.