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Scenario #11: Students in Residence Learning Virtually

In the scenario where there are students in residence learning virtually, residential colleges and universities would teach courses online while students live together on campus. Prior to COVID-19, this approach was most directly associated with the Minerva Schools at KGI (Keck Graduate Institute). This partnership between the for-profit Minerva Project and the nonprofit Keck Graduate Institute integrates an in-residence learning experience (in multiple global cities) with courses delivered through an online platform. The Minerva Schools at KGI example is instructive in thinking about a students in residence learning virtually scenario. Part of the argument of the Minerva experiment (or business model) is that online courses have the potential to offer traditional college-age undergraduates a superior learning experience to face-to-face classes.

What online learning does less well, the argument goes, is to provide students an immersive and experiential educational environment. Those experiences—the socializing and playing and networking, the team projects and late-night discussions—happen best when students are physically together. They can’t be easily replicated online. Minerva solves this problem by bringing students together in common living situations while still holding classes online. They live in the same building, eat together, socialize all in person. When classes start, they return to their rooms to get online to learn together in a virtual environment.

In the scenario of students in residence learning virtually, colleges and universities attempt to preserve much of this social engagement in on-campus living while also maximizing flexibility around the fluid public health situation by teaching all courses online. Despite potentially seeming counterintuitive, this approach has some significant advantages. Perhaps first and foremost is that this would allow campuses to make flexible, adaptive decisions about students in residence based on the constantly changing public health information. If the public health situation warrants, (some or all) students could be asked to return home while instruction would simply continue as it had been. This approach also would allow for a relatively dynamic quarantining of students who test positive for the disease. Assuming they are not showing symptoms, they could continue classes relatively easily since the courses would all be online.

Having students living on campus would also allow for targeted use of campus resources, such as the library, labs, internet access, and technology support. Students in the greatest need of campus support services such as academic resource centers and student health and counseling services could have access on campus while observing
social distancing guidelines. Depending on the size and technology of classrooms at a given school, keeping all the instruction online would allow schools to avoid potentially expensive investments in classroom upgrades for blended courses or to design complex course schedules to take advantage of the larger classrooms on campus, classrooms that would be necessary even for small enrollment courses to maintain social distancing.

Colleges and universities have experience now teaching online. Throughout the strictest periods of stay-at-home orders at the initial height of pandemic’s virulence, colleges and universities remained open for business by moving courses to a remote learning environment. Classes were taught, papers were submitted, exams were taken, and credit was conferred. Having students in residence learning virtually maintains the online learning experience while layering in a residential experience as public health restrictions are loosened, assuming of course that some social distancing guidelines will be flexible enough to allow for residence on campus but restrictive enough to warrant continued remote learning.

Considerations

One challenge of the students in residence learning virtually scenario is that faculty would be asked to plan to teach online. Despite what we said earlier, teaching online is still a relatively new experience for most faculty. Good course designs for online and residential learning experiences share many common elements: Backward course design. Aligning student activities with learning objectives. An emphasis on formative rather than summative assessment. And a prioritization of presence, care, and community. Despite these core similarities, online and residential courses require different and distinct strategies to succeed. Colleges and universities would need to work with faculty to help them adapt from one mode to another. Students would be on campus and would expect high-quality online courses. All faculty, from tenured to contingent, would need to be given the time, resources, and support to make this happen, just as the school would need to recognize the extensive time and energy required to do so. That recognition might come in the form of future course releases, lower caps on course enrollments, and a positive impact on annual reviews and in the promotion and tenure process.

Another challenge of students in residence learning virtually is an effect of one of its greatest strengths. While a distinct virtue of this approach is its inherent flexibility—students could move off campus quickly without disrupting academic progress—this kind of pivot will still hit students with the greatest need of support (via internet access,
stable living environment, funding and resources, accessibility and accommodation) the hardest. A flexible approach might mean schools would unintentionally pay less attention to helping students be prepared for the potential pivot if it were to come. It would be important for schools not only to prepare for the online mode but to help their students prepare for a potential move back home.

The third challenge of this scenario is its impact on international students. Students from outside the United States make up a significant percentage of students at an increasingly broad number of institutions. These students are perhaps least likely to be able to return to campus. Developing an educational strategy that assumes that students will be in residence and learning virtually could pose significant problems for international students if they are not considered in the design process.

A fourth challenge has to do with housing. As we have highlighted throughout our tour of scenarios, maintaining social distancing while providing a bundled campus-based education may be both academic and residential, but the residential piece may prove to be the most difficult to address. Figuring out how to spread beds and bathrooms apart is significantly more difficult than creating scenarios for social distance in classrooms. The definition of the residence hall is likely to expand to encompass campus-adjacent hotels and long-term rentals of private homes. But these choices may not be possible at many schools, and the idea of creating a socially distant residential space on a residential campus may exacerbate inequities and accessibility issues.

In the final analysis, students in residence learning virtually depends on the ability of campuses to absorb a critical mass of campus-housed students. Developing educational plans under the assumption that most students will be living on or near campus will drive different course designs and teaching strategies than planning for students to learn online from their homes. This could lead to many exciting and dynamic learning experiences while still offering students at residential schools rich, on-campus college experiences.