The Low-Density University

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Scenario #12: Low-Residency

A low-residency model builds on the experience of numerous colleges and universities that offer online master’s programs with significant residential components. Courses in a low-residency model include both online and face-to-face components. The face-to-face part typically occurs in short bursts of intense daylong sessions that run for a weekend or a week. For the rest of the time, students live and learn at home online.

The on-campus time in a low-residency course takes advantage of the compressed time students are on campus to create highly focused face-to-face sessions designed to build community, launch group projects, and introduce complex topics in highly responsive, often discussion-based activities. Lectures and labs might be a part of the on-campus experience, but these traditional face-to-face elements are augmented by experiential activities with a focus on social learning. Because of this immersive approach, a large portion of a course’s contact hours is highly concentrated when students are on campus, though the majority of them still occur online. If a typical course has 45-48 contact hours, a third of those might be accounted for during the residential period.

Traditionally, low-residency graduate programs endeavor to provide adult, working participants the flexibility of online learning while also providing the immersive and social learning advantages that are possible through campus-based face-to-face experiences. Translating a low-residency approach would require adapting this model to work across a much larger number of students, perhaps even the entire campus. Adopting a low-residency model for all students would potentially enable a high-proportion of learners to have a campus experience, albeit one that is relatively brief. The advantage of building the term or semester around a low-residency model is that students will still receive the sort of social, experiential, and intensive residential experience that defines much of the perceived value of attending a residential institution. The difference is that these experiences are highly concentrated over a short period of time, rather than a full term or semester.

The length of the residential experience in a low-residency model could depend on a number of factors. One factor, for example, could be a calculation of how many students a campus can safely accommodate under conditions of social distancing. In this approach, the fewer students that can be safely housed in residence halls and taught in classrooms, the more the student body must be divided into discrete residential groups. For example, if a school decides it could safely accommodate one-quarter of all its students at any given time, it could design a robust low-residency model based on this
number. The school could divide the student body into four segments that can safely be on campus at one time. From there a school might decide it wants to bring students to campus for extended blocks (three weeks, say, to allow for all students to rotate through campus) or short bursts (as short as a weekend). While the block schedule is similar to the block plan we described in scenario #9, a low-residency approach has blocks supplemented by off-campus, online learning built into the design.

On the other hand, a short-burst approach instead of a low-residency block plan would enable schools to be more flexible, potentially allowing them to bring students back to campus for multiple visits. Students could come one weekend in the first month, depending on the scalability of on-campus housing because of social distance guidelines, and then return at the midpoint to present a midterm project. A final visit to campus might allow students to wrap up final projects in person.

Alternative constructions for managing a low-residency model can be easily imagined, of course. Each will come with strengths and weaknesses. For example, courses could be categorized by residential periods based on class-size dynamics, course content, or a whole host of possible configurations. In this approach, each category would correspond to a set date range. Students would then be able to enroll only in courses designated for residency within a designated range. If a semester contained four residencies (A, B, C, and D), then students would only register for courses with a single residency identifier.

These ideas are meant to illuminate the concept rather than suggest a set of complete solutions. Building the academic experience around a low-residency model offers numerous opportunities to mix, match, and blend many of the fifteen scenarios we have been discussing, as well to integrate many that we have not mentioned. Combining online courses with intense residential periods to achieve acceptable levels of campus density, while maximizing the proportion of students who receive some residential experience, will likely be compelling to many universities. The strategy builds on a known and successful methodology (low-residency graduate programs) while addressing some of the concerns about academic continuity and the desire for a residential experience under COVID-19.

Considerations

Implementing a low-residency model at an institutional scale will likely prove significantly (if not exponentially) more challenging than the other scenarios we have been discussing. The first difficulties come in scheduling and logistics. Creating a course
plan that merges online and in-person classes for every course and every student is likely beyond the capabilities of the existing scheduling and course management infrastructure. Logistically, it is not clear that campuses could handle the multiple move-in/move-out days that bringing most students briefly to campus would require. The requirement to clean residence halls and ready them for each successive wave of students may also be beyond even the most robust capabilities of facilities and residential life.

From a faculty point of view, the time necessary to design an online course integrated with an intensive residential experience would be substantial. Even if nine-month faculty contracts were not a factor, it is unclear that professors would have enough time or institutional support to develop rich low-residency courses. This educational model would also put large demands on the campus professionals who have been working with instructors during the emergency transition to remote learning and who collaborate with professors during more normal times. Quality low-residency courses at the graduate school level are often designed and run by a team of faculty and nonfaculty educators. Contributors include librarians, learning designers, and educational technologists, among many others. The number of people occupying those roles on campus has not increased during the pandemic, and they are already spread thin.

From an access and equity standpoint, a low-residency model requires students to both absorb travel costs for the brief campus stays while managing the challenges inherent in online learning. Students living in homes with fast internet connections and quiet places to study enjoy significant educational advantages compared to their classmates with neither. As we’ve been saying, this is a problem inherent in many approaches, and we think it important for schools to keep this issue front and center. Our students need outreach, support, and engagement to help them understand how best to learn in the current environment. Implementing a low-residency model would come with new challenges for our students for which schools would need to be prepared.

Finally, from an institutional perspective, a low-residency model comes with numerous challenges beyond scheduling and logistics. Courses with campus-based requirements are unlikely to be accessible to international students. Any student who is unable to travel to campus for a low-residency period, for whatever reason, would miss out on the educational opportunities that campus-intensive interactions can offer. Students used to a class schedule made up of hour-long to ninety-minute blocks would need to learn how to be effective in intense, daylong sessions.
For these reasons and others, it’s difficult to imagine many (if any) schools adopting this model. The model does, however, serve a role in the preparation, design, and thinking all schools are undertaking right now. They might ask, if we are fully remote is there some advantage to imagining scaled low-residency for some students? If we are fully remote, could the intense engagements of low-residency be played out in local communities of students that many schools have across the country and the world? If we are fully remote, could we imagine a low-residency structure for the end of the semester rather than the beginning? These and other similar questions could help a school be more creative, more thoughtful, and more focused as it considers its options designing the low-density university.