The Low-Density University

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Scenario #15: Fully Remote

Our final scenario, fully remote, envisions a situation where the public health situation will not allow students, faculty, or staff to return to campus. Students would learn and faculty would continue to teach from wherever they are. Campuses would remain open only with skeletal staffing levels. Cocurricular activities, to the extent possible, would be virtualized. In many respects, this scenario—along with the first scenario of going back to normal—is the most straightforward. It is, however, not without its challenges.

The greatest challenge is, perhaps, an issue of perception. Many faculty and students do not consider online education to be equivalent to face-to-face classes,16 despite substantial evidence that online learning can be as effective or more so than face-to-face learning.17 This perception was reinforced by the hasty move to remote learning in spring 2020, and residential colleges and universities are highly reluctant to signal they are considering a fully remote scenario. Quite the opposite. Mitch Daniels, the president of Purdue, made headlines when he announced that Purdue intended to enroll students “on campus in typical numbers this fall.”18 Christina Paxson, the president of Brown University, argued similarly for the need to be back on campus in a New York Times opinion piece entitled “College Campuses Must Reopen in the Fall. Here’s How We Do It.”19

Despite the full-throated and public commitments by university leaders that fully remote is not on the table, it’s difficult for any school to dismiss the possibility completely, especially considering that institutions may have little choice in the matter. With nationwide spikes in infections and hospitalizations beyond what local ICU’s can handle, schools may have no option but to continue with remote learning. Similarly, if accurate rapid testing kits remain unavailable in the numbers needed, schools may be unable to monitor the health and enact appropriate quarantine measures of residential students.

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Is it possible for colleges and universities to be fully remote due to public health necessity, while offering their students an educational experience commensurate with a residential semester? From a purely teaching and learning perspective, fully remote might be preferable for some schools over many of the mixed residential and online scenarios that we have been discussing. One challenge of mixing residential and remote students for many institutions is providing a level playing field for all learners. Dividing the attention of faculty in course design and teaching between face-to-face and online modalities could potentially dilute the quality of both, particularly at schools without resources to support faculty as they invest in this work. Approaches such as the modified tutorial model seek to overcome these challenges in hybrid learning by bringing students into the teaching and learning process, but it poses its own challenges in terms of faculty bandwidth and the need for institutions to see their students as participants in their learning rather than consumers of it.

On the other hand, going fully remote might give faculty the opportunity to build on their experiences with what worked and what did not in the design and delivery of their remote classes. If decisions were made early enough, schools will have had months instead of days to build training and support structures to help professors think about the best possible ways to design and teach courses in a fully remote environment. Online student support services and cocurricular activities could potentially be strengthened. Colleges and universities will have some space and time (albeit limited) to make the transition from “emergency remote instruction” to full “online learning.” To do so well would mean the adoption of a set of course design practices and pedagogical strategies that have demonstrated long-term empirical success in producing quality learning outcomes in online courses and programs. The variation in course design quality and the student learning experience that was present in remote courses could begin to smooth out if schools invest in this approach.

Considerations

The overwhelming resistance by many schools to consider going fully remote is, perhaps, driven as much by financial necessity as by educational concerns, despite existing biases against online learning. The loss of revenues for fixed expenses such as residence halls and other campus services has been devastating to the balance sheets of colleges and universities. A significant loss of tuition dollars if students choose to forgo enrollment out of concerns about the value remote learning represents could be an existential risk for some institutions, and a deeply difficult financial challenge for all.
These obstacles for a fully remote approach were attenuated, to some extent, during the spring of 2020. As every residential college and university made the emergency shift from campus-based to virtual classes in the spring, students and their parents were (for the most part) flexible and mostly understanding. While there were some calls for refunds, demands for schools to give back (or dramatically lower) tuition for remote courses were largely muted.\textsuperscript{20} It’s unclear if this goodwill will continue if colleges and universities believe it is necessary to maintain a fully remote posture to protect the health of students, faculty, and staff—as well as the communities in which campuses are embedded. The continuation of remote learning may push some proportion of students to turn the 2020–2021 academic year into a gap year. Still other students may continue their studies but choose to enroll in online courses at a less expensive community college, assuming (perhaps incorrectly) that they would be able to transfer the earned credits when campuses return to on-campus education.

To face this challenge of student melt, schools are working hard to make their remote learning plans as rich and dynamic as possible. Shifting from emergency remote teaching to an ongoing fully remote instructional strategy could allow faculty to focus both their energies and attention. The range of support structures that enable and assist students and professors in their learning could be optimized for virtual learners. The institutional focus of attention, energy, and resources that would be difficult to achieve in a mixed online/remote structure might be possible if faculty were focused on teaching fully online.

It will be expensive, however, for universities to continue in a fully remote mode. These expenses would come at a time of considerable financial challenges, driven by both rising costs and uncertainty about students’ willingness to continue to pay full tuition costs. While it is true that online learning can be as effective as face-to-face learning, it often takes extensive resources and hard work to make robust online courses. The few months we have to make going fully remote a success are one-third (or less) of the time fully online courses typically take to develop. And this is with a full team of learning designers, media specialists, and faculty developers working with one faculty member. To teach an online course well is often substantially more work for faculty. Asking more of our faculty at a time when everyone is already stretched thin may be difficult.

Despite this, the decision to remain fully remote may be palatable to institutions with limited residential learners. Institutions with mostly commuter students may feel

greater flexibility in delaying the restart of classroom-based courses. On the other hand, community colleges, with missions built around expanded access and equity, are likely to have significant concerns about the ability of all their students to thrive in a remote learning environment. These schools may need to consider how to support online students with resources like success coaching and the availability of loaner laptops. This, too, is expensive, especially for our schools that have had their public funding continually reduced.

No matter how we look at it, the ability of institutions of higher learning to continue to serve as engines of opportunity, as well as the sources of societal knowledge creation, depends on the ability of schools to balance the books. The combination of eroding public support, demographic headwinds, and the necessity of tuition discounting to fill classes has left most of the sector in a precarious economic situation before the pandemic. Federal financial support from the CARES Act, while welcome, provides nowhere near the level of funds to match the additional expenses that schools have absorbed during the pandemic and will be completely inadequate should revenues drop precipitously.\(^{21}\) Separating economic concerns from educational if schools must remain fully remote is difficult. The education of students is inextricably intertwined with how that education is paid for. The longer colleges and universities are unable to resume residential student operations and face-to-face classes, the more difficult the financial situation of schools will become.