The Low-Density University
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II. Equity, Place, and Learning

Until an effective vaccine for COVID-19 is developed and widely distributed, the reality is that the future of residential education is uncertain. At the time of this writing, some schools have announced plans, while others are still in the planning stages. Some of the announced plans were covered in our discussions of the scenarios (*Fully Remote*, *HyFlex*, *Students in Residence Learning Virtually*) and others were ones we mentioned but didn’t discuss fully (*Late Start*). The point of our developing these scenarios was never to provide an exhaustive or exclusive list of strategies for universities during this unprecedented time. Our goal, instead, was to provide our colleagues with a framework in which planning can occur. A good framework provides both a structure in which decisions can be evaluated as well as a set of defined terms that can help ensure a baseline of shared understanding.

The overnight shift from residential to remote learning in spring 2020 revealed much about what matters most, and what accounts for little, in the bundle of services, structures, and relationships that constitute higher education. As the 2020–2021 academic year unfolds, we will learn more. At this point in the story of higher education under threat of COVID-19, at least three themes have come into focus: equity, place, and learning.

**Equity**

The first area that the system-wide pivot to remote learning illuminates has to do with equity. What we are learning during the pandemic is that residential education can act (if imperfectly and unevenly) to normalize at least some aspects of the college experience. While it remains very much the case that success in college is not randomly distributed, with students from more privileged backgrounds retaining many advantages across measures of student success (attrition, STEM success, time to graduation, etc.), it is also true that residential education does create some opportunity for success that may not be available to all students in their home lives. Students from less privileged backgrounds might not come to campus with the advantages of years of tutoring or access to resources from well-funded secondary schools, but the experience of being an undergraduate offers some consistency of opportunity that may not necessarily be available to all students at home. First-year students from different backgrounds have access to space in residence halls. Students from across the socioeconomic spectrum attend class in the same classrooms, study in the same library, and work out in the same
athletic center. Wealthier students may have newer computers than their less well-off peers, but everyone logs into the same Wi-Fi.

Again, we don’t wish to deny or minimize that there are huge differences in opportunity faced by students within any given college or university based on their backgrounds and access to resources. Too many of our students must navigate the basic challenges of housing, food, and educational materials—even within wealthy universities. Students of color and LGBTQ students continue to face significant issues of bias and harm on campuses across the country. First-generation students are often at a disadvantage in managing the expectations of college. These issues can make it incredibly difficult to be a successful college student. Many residential campuses acknowledge this and try to do better. They have developed support structures to address some of these disparities and work toward equality of opportunity.

The pandemic has both revealed and exacerbated the higher education opportunity divide. We’ve seen just how important access to these fundamental services and these basic support structures are to the well-being and success of many of our students. During the months of enforced remote learning, we have witnessed how advantages in resources can accrue into advantages in learning. Students with private places to study, reliable Wi-Fi, and less economically stressed home environments enjoy tangible benefits in their efforts to navigate online courses. If the future of higher education might include less time spent on campus, then colleges and universities will need to figure out how to extend the residential-based resources that students rely on for success to a more virtualized environment.

During the initial response to the spread of the novel coronavirus, the role of supporting learners through complicated and difficult situations often fell to faculty and staff. Since then, professors and support staff have been on the front lines of responding to the broad array of student needs. Going forward, and even if we return to a situation that resembles prepandemic higher education, it is likely that faculty and staff will have a sharpened appreciation and knowledge of the obstacles and challenges that their students face. How this knowledge will impact pedagogy as well as the institutional structures designed to bolster student success are questions that should be top of mind for everyone who works in higher education.

As schools think about the teaching and learning under requirements of reduced campus density and social distancing, student success will depend heavily on their access to the fundamental services of their institutions. Without careful attention,
moving away from residential education will likely result in less equity, particularly in areas of student learning and other student success outcomes. Each of the scenarios we proposed in this book impacts this access in different ways. Decisions around timing—when the semester starts—could keep students away from these services longer. Choices about student population and location might disadvantage certain students over others. This is especially true if the scenarios are taken as sacrosanct. We expect and hope that all schools are in fact adjusting these scenarios based on the unique characteristics of their student body and institutional circumstances as they work to support their students in greatest need.

**Place**

A second theme that emerges in thinking about the coming academic year through the lens of *15 Scenarios* is an evolving understanding of place. While only three of the scenarios are explicitly about location (*Students in Residence Learning Virtually, Low-Residency, and HyFlex*), the industry-wide rapid pivot from residential to remote learning has revealed some new things about the idea of place in higher education. It turns out that many of the practices related to location that we had previously understood as driven by some fundamental and underlying truth about how higher education works, were, in reality, merely practices that were determined by habit and tradition.

The most obvious change in how higher education is likely to think about place in the future has to do with staff, and specifically where staff work. While remote work may have been growing in pockets, possibly driven by high housing costs close to universities, working on campus was very much the norm. Many if not most schools had telework policies, but these were usually considered as exceptions, deviations from the norm of working on campus. While flexibility regarding where and when to get one’s work done has long been a purview of faculty, staff were still expected to mostly show up physically. This idea, that productivity benefits from propinquity, was by no means limited to thinking about higher education staff. This was, prepandemic, a widely held belief across a range of industries and occupations. Just as the future of work in technology, finance, and media is likely to be more (maybe even majority) remote, so might we see a change in this basic assumption for academic staff. The current pandemic has revealed, to the great surprise of many, that productivity is a function of motivation and communication and technology and incentives and culture and a myriad of other factors, with location being only one of many considerations. In some cases, it
may still be the most important consideration—staff working directly with students, for example—but it’s not a given.

That said, it’s entirely possible that we’ll see as much of a push to return as many people as possible to campuses as can be accommodated. There are many advantages to be present with colleagues, from the serendipitous conversations that lead to productive work to the ability to manage difficult conversations and work habits in person. As with online learning, the jury has yet to yield a judgment in the value of teleworking for large numbers of college employees. At the very least, we know that campuses will be very different places if large swaths of academic staff work remotely. How other aspects of higher education’s relationship to place will change once the pandemic passes are equally unclear. The biggest question mark for everyone in the online learning community is will COVID-19 accelerate or inhibit the growth of distance education? There are reasons to believe that both results are possible.

Looking at this question from where we are now, it is likely easier to make the case that the forced pivot to remote learning will end up setting back the perception that online learning is a destination that higher education should be aiming for. One thing we know we can say about remote learning is that it has been difficult for many of our students. How difficult? This is yet unknown. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the number of students who faced considerable challenges succeeding in remotely taught courses will be high. Only after the survey results and data on student success and return rates are analyzed will we know how challenging things have been at schools across the country. To the extent that online education is tarnished by the remote learning brush, the image of online education will surely suffer.

On the other hand, what the COVID-19 emergency has shown some students and faculty is that online learning is not some mysterious practice. Given the right students, enough time, and the proper resources and assistance, online learners and educators can thrive together. Professors have at least caught glimpses of the connections that can be built with learners when communications are not limited by the few hours classes meet in a physical classroom but can extend to virtual communications on asynchronous discussion boards and synchronous online class meetings. Online courses, when designed well, can allow all students in a class (even the quiet ones) to have a voice. Faculty have seen that remote teaching is not perfect. But they have also been given an indication of how good online education could be, if only there was more time to prepare and more resources (like learning designers) to provide some help.
Where thinking about place is certain to change on the other end of the pandemic, whenever that should come, is around the affordances of face-to-face interactions. The gravitational pull of students and faculty back to campus may be strong (many staff will stay remote), but what is done on campus is likely to change. The emergency shift to remote learning has demonstrated both the value of social closeness (the opposite of social distancing), educational cohesiveness, and engagement as well as the reality that some things work very well when accomplished digitally.

For instance, time on campus may be seen as more precious, causing face-to-face interactions between learners and educators to receive greater care and attention in design and implementation. Tasks that can be moved to asynchronous online platforms, such as content delivery and assessment, likely will be. Office hours and advising appointments might shift to synchronous meeting platforms. Class time will be reserved more for interaction, collaboration, creating, and coaching.

None of these ideas are new, and indeed they have long been advocated for by educational developers and learning designers. Blended learning has long been thought of as an ideal. What will be new is that these practices might find much more widespread acceptance and adoption. COVID-19 certainly has highlighted the divide between residential and remote learning, with much more of the teaching and learning experience existing across modalities. The result may be that even after the pandemic has fully passed—meaning an effective vaccine is available and universally distributed—that the relationship between higher education and space will likely be permanently altered.

Learning

The third theme that has emerged for us in thinking about the future of higher education through the lens of the 15 Scenarios framework has to do with learning. What COVID-19 has helped to clarify is that among all the activities in which colleges and universities engage, learning is at the very core. This is a theme that we explored at length in our book Learning Innovation and the Future of Higher Education and that we think the emergency pivot to remote education has brought sharply into focus.

Claiming that learning is central to the mission of colleges and universities might sound, on initial hearing, like stating the obvious. Of course, learning is what colleges and universities are all about. Who could argue with that? The reality is that while a focus on learning was never absent from every school, its centrality and prominence can vary
significantly across institutions. While many colleges and universities hold dear to the mission to advance student learning, others tend to give it less weight (usually than research) in promotion and tenure.

Institutions of higher learning also have missions beyond that of advancing learning. These missions include the creation of knowledge, service to communities, accomplishments in athletics, and others. During the first months of COVID-19, the diversity of institutional missions were necessarily circumscribed, with most of the energy and resources of schools shifting to teaching and learning. The pandemic has catalyzed an all-hands-on-deck approach, with various parts of often decentralized organizations working together to ensure academic continuity in the form of remote learning.

This is not to argue that learning improved uniformly during the spring of 2020. The speed and the scale that schools needed to move from residential to remote education necessitated a more modest set of goals. In the emergency, keeping classes going was more important than advancing the state of the art of student learning. That said, many faculty took the opportunity to adapt to the new remote reality in ways that few could have predicted. The learning that went on in remote environments was complex, challenging, and exhausting for all involved, faculty and students alike. It required more time, more effort, and constant adjustments. As we’ve talked to colleagues across the country, we’ve heard stories of success and of challenge. The investment of effort required to teach remotely well may be one of the lasting lessons of this time.

To support this work, many campuses threw more resources into the process of developing and running courses—and of supporting students and faculty—than was customarily the case. Across the higher education ecosystem, teams that pre-COVID-19 were in charge of professional faculty development, online education, instructional design, educational technologies, and learning innovation were placed at the center of academic continuity efforts. Campus units that had worked on areas related to digital learning now found themselves at the center of institutional strategies for instructional resilience. Instructional designers and educational developers were more and more acknowledged as a necessity. Expertise in online education that may have resided in individual schools or programs, outside of the core residential undergraduate experience, was now in high demand across the campus. Nonfaculty educational staff, and the units that they work in, such as centers for teaching and learning (CTLs) and academic computing groups, came to be viewed as essential for the continuity of the institution.
How much of this rebalancing of priorities toward the educational mission will remain once the pandemic passes? As we move forward, the ability to rapidly shift between residential and online instruction may begin to be understood as a core competency. At many schools, faculty from across many different types of institutions have developed different working relationships with CTLs and academic computing units, just as staff who may previously have been one step removed from the teaching and learning enterprise were trained in the basic principles of course development and instructional design. Professors with interest or experience in online learning were often trained and deployed as peer mentors. All of this hard-won pedagogical experience and newly formed learning expertise will hopefully point to the possibility of greater investment in innovations in teaching and learning well after the pandemic subsides.

Perhaps more importantly, coronavirus has helped make visible the challenges of many of our students across the country. One effect has been the growing spread of the adoption of the idea of caring for the whole person (cura personalis, in the Jesuit tradition present at Georgetown University, where one of us teaches) across higher education and throughout all aspects of the campuses. An underappreciated aspect of teaching and learning during COVID-19 is the degree to which instructors and staff also filled in as coaches and mentors. Learning is very difficult in the best of times, and incredibly difficult when our students are anxious, stressed, and uncertain—conditions that are synonymous with life during a pandemic.

Throughout all this, faculty and staff have shown incredible care for their students, even while they have had to manage the unique circumstances of their own lives during this pandemic. Going forward, the experience of teaching during a national or world health crisis will likely cause many faculty to be more attuned and aware of the nonacademic challenges that their students face. An orientation toward a teaching approach that explicitly emphasizes the caring for and well-being of learners may outlive the pandemic. This altered relationship between professors and students may ultimately be the true teaching and learning legacy of COVID-19.