The Low-Density University
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III. Next Steps

Schools are making decisions. They’ve all been thinking about delivering academic and cocurricular programs, about finances, and about operations, all under the guidance of public health information and guidelines necessary to keep our communities safe. We’ve presented fifteen scenarios that we hope schools might consider as they make these decisions. Whatever decisions a school makes, however, one message all colleges and universities should embrace is that it’s time to start preparing. This preparation comes in a lot of forms, from getting our residence halls ready for low-density occupation to organizing remote (or socially distanced) versions of the back-to-school and first-year student events that normally kick off the academic year to implementing protocols for testing, contact tracing, and potential quarantining of sick members of our campus communities. While the planning continues, we know we have a lot we need to do to get the members of our colleges and universities ready for teaching and learning under the continued presence of COVID-19.

This is particularly true when it comes to delivering the academic programming our students expect at our institutions. Whether we are on campus in some capacity, fully remote, or some hybrid, it is important for us to prepare to teach under what will no doubt be difficult external and internal circumstances. The situation with COVID-19 will require significant changes to how we engage and interact with each other. Our classrooms will look different. Our faculty, staff, and students will all likely continue to experience the stresses that come along with the ongoing pandemic. We need to prepare to support each other and to do the best work we can while navigating the impact of COVID-19.

This will not be easy. We spent much of the spring of the 2020 academic year, and the early part of that summer, thinking about how to move all of our courses to a remote learning environment. This involved little preparation beyond what schools may have done prior to develop institutional structures to support teaching excellence, learning innovation, or instructional continuity. This was a Herculean effort from faculty and staff across the country. We all worked on adrenaline and good will, resulting in some incredibly creative and thoughtful engagements. We had successes and we had challenges. Some things went very well, and some did not go as well.

We want to suggest that this current preparation involves two important streams. The first is helping faculty prepare to teach under conditions of continued social distancing, masks, and other constraints. This involves working with faculty to consider what it means to teach in whatever mode their schools decide they will be in when they return to campus. James DeVaneey and Rebecca Quintana, of the University of Michigan, have
written eloquently about proposed ways of thinking about resilient teaching.²² Many schools are designing summer workshops and training. They are creating opportunities for faculty to learn in greater depth the tools they relied on in the spring. They are adding resources to websites and making the best pedagogical materials available to colleagues across their campuses and across the globe. The amount of energy and thinking and work being carried out by our educators and learning innovators is incredible. Students across the country will return to campuses with faculty who have embraced the need to make the teaching and learning experience as rich and as meaningful as possible given the circumstances.

The second stream is perhaps less obvious. It’s not something we tend to give a lot of attention to in higher education. We need to prepare our students to be dynamic learners in whatever environment they find themselves in. We need to help them learn how to learn. We need to help them excel in a hybrid mode or in a fully remote environment. We need to give them the tools they need to succeed. And these tools are different from the skills they’ve developed for much of their education prior to college.

We spent time in this book speaking about the need to reach out to students. To help keep them connected to their colleges and universities over the summer. To bring them into their school’s community for the first time if they are first-year students. We also need to communicate to them what they need to prepare. We should be reaching out to talk with them about expectations and to understand their challenges. We need to know what concerns they have and what accommodations they might need.

Just as getting our colleges and universities ready for the low-density university means preparing a complex operation and set of activities to make their transition to campus life possible, we need to help our students transition to the learning environment each of our schools will be designing. Teaching and learning during a world health emergency will be a challenging time for all of us. If we are going to be successful, we need to think about how we all adapt—faculty, staff, and students alike—to this new experience.