



Reimagining Higher Education Post-Coronavirus

How to make colleges and universities less fragile and higher education more affordable, accessible, equitable, resilient and sustainable.

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The future of American higher education has rarely seemed more uncertain than it does today. No one can project with any assurance enrollment yields, retention rates or net tuition revenue. Nor can anyone feel confident that our campuses will physically open in the fall.

Meanwhile, institutional costs continue to mount. Colleges must refund prorated room and board and are under intense pressure to repay a portion of student fees and to continue to pay contract workers. The transition to online teaching is itself very expensive, as campuses license new software and provide computing equipment to ensure that all students can learn online.

But these problems pale compared to what lies ahead. Many existing students will be forced to drop out or transfer if additional financial aid isn't available. Already-strained budgets will worsen as state aid and philanthropic donations fall in the face of more immediate priorities and revenue from ancillary services and contract research declines.

Campus tensions are likely to worsen as tenured and nontenured faculty, staff, graduate students, and other stakeholders compete for scarce resources. Perhaps the biggest challenge of all: the "college experience" -- the concerts, parties, athletic events and informal socializing that have been higher education's greatest attraction -- is now at risk.

The current crisis not only created new challenges, it brought underlying problem to light. These include the enrollment and revenue challenge that many colleges addressed through the admissions of full-pay international and out-of-state students. Or the stark disparities in institutional resources, as growing numbers of students required expensive student services.

If there will ever be a time to rethink the nature of a college education, this is it.

The current public health crisis poses daunting challenges, which will test our capacity to respond to radically altered circumstances. But it also offers a chance to rethink and reimagine existing practices, policies, assumptions and arrangements.

It offers genuine opportunities for higher education to emerge stronger, while retaining the attributes that inspire other societies to envy and emulate our approach.

In the face of the current pandemic, colleges and universities need to devise strategies to adapt to an extraordinarily uncertain environment not just to address the immediate crisis, but the longer term.

Seven principles should underlie the post-coronavirus decision making.

- Equity
- Accessibility
- Affordability
- A learning, learning and outcomes focus
- Flexibility
- Resilience
- Sustainability

Achieving those objectives will require a willingness to think outside traditional boxes. We must be innovative, adaptive and proactive.

How so?

- **We need to better serve the vertical transfer population, the largest market that is currently underserved.** Over 80 percent of community college students aspire to a bachelor's degree, but less than 15 percent ever earn one. Imagine if we could bring 25 to 30 percent to a bachelor's. We need to understand and remove the barriers that prevent so many of these students from fulfilling their dream.
- **We need to create more resilient institutions able to respond more nimbly and successfully to crises and to shifting student needs.** Many working students and family caregivers need an education better tailored to their complicated lives. San Francisco State's Kevin Kelly has advocated [HyFlex courses](#) that students can access in person, in a hybrid format, asynchronously or synchronously online. Some steps forward seem pretty obvious. All student services should be accessible remotely. All classes should have a robust online component. Course materials need to meet accessibility standards and be available electronically.
- **We need to enhance the quality of online learning.** As a first step, institutions might target the high-enrollment, high-DFW classes that are the gateway to high-demand majors, and provide the instructional design and educational technology support that departments need to ensure that these courses attain a high level of quality.
- **We need to think more intentionally about educating the whole student.** The crisis should remind us that our institutions must not only promote students' cognitive development, but their well-being, including their mental health and physical wellness. We might consider emulating the success coaches offered by institutions like WGU.

- **We need to create a more collaborative higher educational ecosystem.** Let's share course content and tools.

We might want to go further. We might:

- **Further blur the divide between high school and college.** The states might expand early college/dual degree programs and access to Advanced Placement courses to allow many more students to get a jump start on college.
- **Shift from a five-course, 15-hour load to a four-course, four-credit-hour load.** Follow a pattern found at many liberal arts colleges that incorporate experiential, collaborative and project-based learning and supplemental instruction into their foundational courses.
- **Simplify degree requirements.** The expanding list of college requirements, such as various skills and experience flags, are well intended but often make it difficult for students to register for the classes they need and delay graduation. Might it not make more sense to embed these literacies throughout the curriculum?
- **Offer more alternatives to traditional courses.** Mentored research and internships, field- and community-based and service learning and civic engagement experiences, and project-based learning offer exciting ways for students to apply and demonstrate their skills and knowledge. These are the kinds of educational experiences that many students remember long after they have forgotten other classes they have taken -- and that better prepare them for future careers.

Let's be bold. We shouldn't just muddle through our current predicaments, but use this opportunity to move forward to a more sustainable future.

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