

Destroying the box: Thinking outside of the box is no longer enough

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As higher education moves forward in the wake of COVID, going back to "the old ways" of doing things won't serve students now--or in the future

In March of 2020, life as we knew it came to an abrupt halt. At the time, we optimistically thought we'd have "two weeks to slow the spread" and then life would resume more or less as usual. Over a year later, life still hasn't returned to normal. And yet, life has continued, in a modified form. We haven't spent the last 12 months in full lockdown. Individuals and institutions have innovated to adapt ways to continue essential activities. From reimagining the way we get groceries to the way [students](#) learn to the way our offices are structured, some things may never go back to a pre-pandemic way of life.

Surviving the pandemic has invigorated a creative, problem-solving spirit that's always been within us. As the pandemic quells, we must resist the allure of the familiar. Defaulting to old ways of doing things is an easy and erroneous strategy. Thinking outside the box used to express expanding our creative outlook. We now know we can—and must—think much bigger.

In order to chart a path forward, it's important to distinguish between the asset and liability that experience can be. In higher education, just as in many other industries, identity and values are grounding realities. Understanding the heritage of your college will shape how you step into the future. What values drive your activities? What narratives are your touch points? Colleges lose their way when they become disconnected from their mission and values. A mission will be expressed in different ways across an evolving context, but there should be a through-line. Legacy is the positive aspect of experience that should be honored and applied. We must allow our principles to inform our future.

There is, however, a danger to relying exclusively on experience. Inertia is a powerful force. In any given department of any given organization, if you ask an employee why they do something the way they do, far too often the response will be, "because that's the way we've

always done it.” Tradition is a precious asset, but not if it becomes an immutable rule that squelches fresh thinking. We must avoid becoming automatons of the past.

In between senseless iconoclasm and mindless repetition lies the path to productivity. With an eye on the lessons of the past and the challenges of the future, we can move forward with creativity and ingenuity. Colleges have a unique opportunity to harness the power of new and limber processes invented by necessity. The power of innovation has enlivened our practices. We can carry this momentum forward as we define what’s next and shape a positive, innovative future. Students have grown to think differently about their education. We must, too.

As my colleagues and I have reflected on the pandemic, there are a number of lessons we believe colleges must take to heart as we shape a new normal.

1. The accessibility of online. Many individuals who would never have considered an online program previously have now gotten their feet wet with Zoom, online conferences, and virtual collaboration. Colleges must be strategic so they use tools effectively and adequately serve students who remain online-only. This will be a key differentiator between online programs that languish and those that thrive.

2. The importance of the tangible. As life migrated online, individuals craved sustainable routines and physical practices to ground their existence. Daily walks and sourdough starters gave concrete rhythms that people needed. Students who participate in an online program want to feel like a real part of the campus community, not a forgotten annex. Colleges should pair support materials with online programming. Send a welcome box with school swag and academic tools, such as a school sweatshirt, notebooks, pens, and a calendar for their homework station. Include resources for effectively managing time, engaging online, and creating a focused place to complete assignments and virtually attend class.

3. The priority of integration. COVID-19 exposed just how interconnected our lives are. During the pandemic some students have been hesitant to attend classes, due to the risk it could pose to elderly family members or other at-risk people in their lives. Schools must recognize the complex web of responsibilities students carry. Non-traditional students have long pushed schools to consider the other pressures students balance with their academic coursework. Savvy colleges will structure classes and expectations in a way that helps students succeed in their entire lives, in addition to their academic lives. This awareness of interdependence also offers opportunities for colleges as they forge deeper connections and begin new initiatives with community partners.

As you embark on your own process of reflection and reinvigoration, remember that this year has been a process of iteration and readjustment. Your first idea might be brilliant and transformative—but it’s more likely that it will be your seventh or seventeenth. Innovation is founded on a hope in a bright future and a desire to reach it in creative and fresh ways.