

May 3, 2020

How Do you Get Where You Need to Go?

I start every day by reading several newspapers and higher education publications. A day doesn't go by without several articles about the future of higher education.

For example, on April 26th, an opinion piece was published in the NY Times entitled, "College Campuses Must Reopen in The Fall. Here's How We Do It," written by Christina Paxson, the President of Brown University. While I applaud her sentiments, it became clear that her ideas were really no different than what we already know. She suggested that campuses need to:

- Have access to testing, tracing and resources for those infected with the virus (e.g., space for quarantine).
- Be sure that everyone wears a mask.
- House students in single rooms in residence halls.
- Have class sizes that are small.
- Arrange things to be six feet apart in classes, dining halls, libraries and labs.
- Use more technology.

And then she shared this comment ... "Taking these necessary steps will be difficult and costly...."

If I was the President of an Ivy League institution, I might be as cavalier about the costs. I doubt Brown is too worried about their enrollment. And while these institutions hate to invade and spend their billions of non-restricted endowment, they have the resources.

Publications like *Inside Higher Education* deliver bad news daily without even attempting to pretend that they have a solution. On April 28th they shared that one in six currently deposited students will not attend in the Fall (a much higher percentage of minority students). On the 29th, they shared the results of a survey indicating an expected loss of 20% in total enrollment. And on April 30th, they shared another study indicating that 28 million Americans have changed their education plans.

While interesting, these articles are of little help to most of us. Why? Advocating for the re-opening of colleges and universities is easy rhetoric. Advice at 30,000 feet is generic at best. The problem with this information is clear. First, no one really has a solution or a plan. Second, no plan, even if it existed, would work for every institution. Third, and most important, no one knows what our reality will be in the Fall.

This is an emergency and requires emergency planning. But what you prefer, what you expect and what you will face is unknown at this time.

- Campuses could be open (the “new normal”).
- Campuses could still be closed.
- Campuses could be open in September, but closed during the semester.

My suggestion is that you definitely plan for these scenarios, all of which are a crisis, but concurrently plan with a focus on your long-term future. Crisis planning may get you to the Fall, but not into the years beyond. And crisis planning often codifies strategies that are not necessarily in the best interests of educational quality. Here’s what I mean.

The first time I was faced with a budget crisis, I did the following:

- I froze open positions (but too often open positions correlate to the most essential people ...they are open because good faculty/staff left to accept better jobs or you can’t find the right person, not because the position is expendable).
- We implemented an early retirement program ... (this may save money, but it does not necessarily preserve quality... the retirees might include your best faculty/staff, and it’s better for your students to keep them as long as possible).
- We cancelled courses with low enrollment or scheduled them to be taught by adjuncts (these classes might be key to your educational mission and adjuncts might be some of your best faculty).

The point is, I was focusing on budget and not quality. And these “solutions” became the first options for every subsequent budget crisis. I needed to learn that it was critical to balance fiscal responsibility with preservation of quality.

Higher education has become expert in addition, but not subtraction. We readily add programs and services to meet the potential interests of students, the interests of faculty and staff, and/or because other schools offer this feature (otherwise known as the defense for the climbing wall).

I often wonder if we ever really assess the return on investment and the value of the investment. In this post COVID-19 world, we don’t have the luxury of sustaining bad investments, nor can we afford to eliminate resources for short-term gain. And we need what is best for our students now and in the future.

As you plan your roadmap, I suggest you consider starting with the following:

- What are the essential elements of a liberal education (assuming that you are committed to a foundation of liberal arts and sciences)? What does it mean to have a degree from XYZ College or ABC University?
- What are the most important educational goals of a pre-professional program (if this is key to your mission and identity)? What distinguishes a Nurse or a Teacher from your institution?

If you, your faculty, your Board, your students and your alumni define this, then perhaps you no longer need the plethora of electives and courses in every discipline. Understanding that professional skills and knowledge evolve over time, it may serve students more to have the necessary foundation.

It really is fine, in fact I would argue that it's a sign of greatness, if every student takes the same courses that signify your educational values. This is your education -- your degree.

This same logic should apply to academic and co-curricular programs. Define your focus and priorities. What is more important -- more viable -- to have small numbers of students in many programs or robust and high-quality programs in mission-related disciplines and activities?

Decide which services are essential to student success while they are at your institution and after they graduate. Retention, academic excellence, life skills and values, and future employment might need to be more important than other activities. This is your degree. These are your students. These will be your alumni/ae.

After you survive COVID-19, and you will, wouldn't you like to have a semester where you are not having to cancel classes because of low enrollment, or losing every men's volleyball match because you only have nine participants? Isn't it more important to increase retention even if enrollment decreases in the near future?

You absolutely need to be ready for whatever happens over the summer. But take advantage of the crisis, don't just try to survive it. It might better serve your institution in the long run to get stronger where it really counts. Now is the time to look beyond 2020, even if we don't have 20/20 vision.

Many institutions are facing a crossroad. I encourage you to map a future that gets you beyond the next rest stop. Your decisions may not be popular, but they will likely be right. And the roadmap will get you where you really need to go.

The next article will suggest specific strategies that might be considered.
Remember that the entire Hyatt-Fennell team is here to help you. Feel free to call
or e-mail any one of us.

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