

Why traditional four-year college isn't enough anymore

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Higher education must change its approach if it hopes to remain relevant for the needs of today and the opportunities of tomorrow

The long, established history of higher education brings with it certain strengths. The stability, wisdom, and deep relationships that typify higher education are assets to our students and to our culture. It is important, however, that an established history does not become an entrenched approach. The COVID-19 [pandemic](#) has increased pressures and accelerated changes already at work in higher education.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, [college enrollment is down one million students](#). The complexity of attending school during a public health crisis has caused many to sit out college for now—or for good. The pandemic has prompted people to evaluate their life choices and ask what they really want from their lifestyle. People have moved from cramped city apartments to more spacious, affordable homes. Entire industries have seen a mass exodus of employees as individuals change career paths. Higher education is not immune to this appraisal. Prospective students are asking themselves if now is the right time to go to college, and what college should look like for them.

Students have changed the way they approach college and higher education must do so as well if it hopes to remain relevant for the needs of today and the opportunities of tomorrow. Long before the pandemic, there was already a growing awareness that a one-size-fits-all approach to college was insufficient. Accelerated and hybrid programs have grown in popularity as colleges seek to respond to the needs of students.

Fifty years ago, college was structured for full-time residential students in their early twenties. Today [39% of students attend college part-time and 41% of college students are older than 25](#). Significant portions of the student population are commuters, parents, and first-generation college students. I believe far too many colleges are operating under a false binary as they discuss traditional and non-traditional students. The reality is that the “traditional college student” is a myth. There is not one homogeneous majority with a few variations. Today’s student landscape is complex and diverse. Our approach to higher education must follow suit. Students come from a broad array of backgrounds, pursue college for disparate reasons, and

attend college at different intervals. Colleges need to think strategically about ways to better serve today's students. I propose four dimensions for leaders in higher education to consider.

Time

As you schedule classes, are you accommodating a wide variety of schedules? Is your course offering structured to cater to full-time students or does it have abundant options for part-time students who are balancing classes with other commitments? This includes not only time of day, but also day of the week and month in the year. Do you offer weekend intensives in addition to regular weekday classes? A traditional school year may not best serve the needs of all students. Are you gathering and evaluating data to help you make informed decisions?

Location

During the pandemic, life shifted online. This not only expanded the possibilities of *what* could be accomplished, it innovated new avenues of *how* to get things done. Individuals who had never attended an online meeting became familiar with the technology. Online collaboration has become second-nature for many. I believe this will be one of the enduring legacies of the pandemic. Colleges must strategically integrate online and hybrid options that best accommodate their students. This does not mean repackaging in-person offerings into an identical online version. Rather, colleges must be attuned to what elements students need and value in virtual education. Do online courses have the tools students need to succeed? How are cohorts integrated through online programming? Online courses bring new opportunities, but also new challenges which must be addressed from the outset.

Satellite locations are also an underexplored option for colleges. Through offering courses and seminars at satellite locations, colleges can serve a broader geographic range of students while forging strategic partnerships in communities.

Goal

Finally, colleges must not only think of the *what* and *how*, but the *why*. College is not the linear journey it used to be, where four years of college preceded a 40-year career at one company. Individuals now engage with college at different times for different reasons. Career advancement and skill development is still a resounding aim for many. Others are not seeking professional development at all, but rather personal growth and enrichment. Understanding the full breadth of reasons students take courses at your college is key to serving them well. Higher education must embrace an outcomes-based approach that cultivates quality programs by having clear objectives and measurable success.

Community

Finally, there is one final way the pandemic has highlighted what is vital in our lives. The decreased personal interaction necessary to combat a communicable disease created seclusion and loneliness. Isolation brought into stark relief how much we need human connection. Even as colleges shift to more dynamic models for student learning, it's essential that they consider how to keep a clear institutional culture and foster community among their students. Culture and connection are the distinctives that will set the enduring colleges apart.