

Higher Education 2020–21: The Hybrid Institution

A D2L Policy Brief



Executive Summary

For the last decade, predictions about the future of work and the changing skills demands brought on by technology and automation have abounded. The calls to action were largely met with acknowledgement of a future problem and a patchwork of experimental solutions—all while the demand for new skills increased at record speed. Over the last few years, D2L has published the [Future of Work and Learning whitepaper series](#), outlining the shifting landscape of work and the importance of preparing national systems of learning to keep workforces resilient and able to adapt.

The 2019 Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, however, got to our jobs faster than automation did and has effectively shuttered the global economy. As the pandemic stretches on, it becomes increasingly likely that many businesses and associated jobs will not revive until economic activity resumes at full capacity and many pre-pandemic jobs may never return. A recent report from the Becker Friedman Institute at the University of Chicago estimates that 42 percent of “pandemic-induced layoffs will result in permanent job loss.”

While COVID-19 has brought about an unprecedented hit to the global economy, it has also brought about perhaps the greatest existential crisis to our higher education systems—the backbone of our ability to prepare for the future of work. The jobs people were forced to leave just a few weeks ago are likely to be quite different as everyone—consumers, employers, workers—and systems alike adapt to a ‘new normal.’ The ability to adapt to the new realities imposed by returning to life amid a pandemic will be the true test of the resiliency and adaptability of our state and national economies.

There has been much talk about how to prevent an economic depression and limit the impacts of the recession(s) caused by COVID-19. To adapt to a new normal and to seize the opportunities that do exist amid the economic and societal upheaval, our higher education systems must be properly enabled. It is imperative that the federal government, states, and institutions make strategic investments not only to save our learning systems but to redesign for resiliency and to serve learners in a globally competitive environment.

The danger facing higher education in the fall

The rapid onset and spread of COVID-19 brought global economies to a standstill. With fear of community spread, physical distancing, and stay-at-home measures put in place, many businesses and schools were forced to shut down without a clear re-opening date. In the United States, the response from the higher education sector was a near universal closure of campuses and a rapid shift to remote learning to close out the spring semester.

Though most states have started to allow some businesses and other entities to resume operations at limited capacity, the phased approaches to re-opening suggested by federal guidanceⁱⁱ and being implemented by state governmentsⁱⁱⁱ have dramatic implications for when and how higher education institutions will re-open their campuses—especially for students and faculty.

Based on the recommended guidelines, campuses will be deemed safe to re-open in some capacity only when the state and local community where the campus is located are able to achieve all of the following:

1. Testing capabilities for any individual with COVID-19 symptoms;
2. Contact tracing systems are actively monitoring all confirmed cases;
3. A sustained reduction of cases over multiple weeks;
4. Health system capacity allows for the safe treatment of all patients; and
5. Personal protective equipment (PPE) is in sufficient supply to protect faculty, staff, and students.

Consequently, without a vaccine as a firewall from further outbreaks, higher education institutions will face challenges next fall that may include reduced enrollments, especially in international student programs, mandatory physical distancing and anxiety around a return to campus, and the need for preparedness for a potential second or third wave of outbreaks that close campuses—all of which will impact their ability to provide learning and threaten their very existence.

REDUCED ENROLLMENTS & INCREASED COMPETITION

Some students may choose not to return to campus over health and safety concerns and others because they cannot continue in-person and on-campus. Given the hurried switch to remote learning during the spring semester, many students expressed disappointment in the online learning experience. Student coalitions have started to form at institutions around the country to demand refunds for this pandemic period.^{iv}

There is a growing concern that students may choose to sit out the next semester or even school year until campuses fully re-open. The American Council on Education, an association of colleges and universities, estimates that enrollment will drop by at least 15 percent.^v

With the student population shrinking, institutions are now finding themselves with empty slots on their enrollment rolls which is increasing the competition for students.^{vi} Elite schools with long wait lists will find it easier to meet their enrollment goals, even if they implement a fully online model, given their brand name and reputation. But those previously waitlisted students would have been admitted elsewhere, leaving mid- and lower-tier reputation schools to struggle to replace them and likely unable to meet their enrollment numbers.

Restrictions on travel for international students

With travel restrictions on non-essential travel and caution around travelling to affected areas, international travel will be reduced overall. It is unknown when border crossings will return to their normal state and international restrictions will be lifted. Even with online learning programs in place, international students may opt to not enroll in US institutions if they cannot travel and receive the education they desire in person.

So in addition to reduced domestic enrollments, most institutions will face a loss of international student enrollments.^{vii} The American Council on Education is estimating a 25 percent drop in international student enrollment.^{viii} For institutions, this will be a major hit to revenue as international students typically pay full tuition rates—sometimes triple the in-state tuition rate.^{ix} For in-state and out-of-state domestic students, this loss of revenue may translate to higher tuition rates, fewer scholarships and other tuition discounts in the future. International students provide a vital source of income for institutions as state and local funding has retreated.^x

MANDATORY PHYSICAL DISTANCING & ANXIETY ABOUT A RETURN

To mitigate the potential risks and reduce anxieties surrounding the spread of COVID-19, institutions will need to ensure that physical distancing guidelines to keep students, faculty, and staff safe can be met, which includes at least 6 feet of distance between individuals. This can be difficult for undergraduate institutions that not only provide education to students, but housing as well.

To meet requirements upon re-opening campuses, institutions may consider reducing the on-campus student body size to allow for smaller class sizes, modifications to required, in-person lab courses, and reduced residence and dining hall occupancy. Some institutions are already transitioning their large-capacity courses to entirely online formats.^{xi} Others are considering approaches that would see campus access limited to certain categories of students, including:^{xii}

The ‘Bookends’ Proposal — Only freshman and senior students are allowed to attend classes on campus. Institutions can provide necessary supports to freshman students adjusting to the change of pace in college courses while giving seniors their last opportunity for the on-campus experience. With freshman and sophomore students being the predominant users of residence hall and dining facilities, having only the freshman class may allow institutions to better spread out students in living quarters.

The ‘Nurture’ Proposal — Only freshman and sophomore students may attend on-campus classes. Junior and senior students can take their coursework online. This model is thought to give younger students a chance to establish social connections and provide interventions for students who are more at risk to ‘stop out’ than more senior students.

Any approach that is adopted by an institution to facilitate some level of on-campus activity will have significant implications for student learning, faculty working conditions, and the institution’s bottom line. An empty campus can affect donors and the ability to attract new students if face-to-face alumni events and campus tours stop.

Finally, even if an institution devises a strong plan to balance physical distancing mandates, there is still the uncertainty of whether students or faculty will choose to return to on-campus learning. With cases on the decline and stay-at-home provisions lifting, a level of anxiety about the safety of campus buildings, classrooms, and residence halls persists. Nearly 8 in 10 Americans (79%) are still concerned about coronavirus infection for themselves or someone they know.^{xiii}

Though willingness to participate in essential activities, such as higher education, is rising, a gap may still exist at the start of the fall semester.

SECOND WAVE AND SUSTAINED OUTBREAKS

Though many states and communities started to see a reduction in the rate of confirmed cases at the start of the summer period, as states have relaxed their stay-at-home orders case counts and hospitalizations have crept back up again.^{xiv} Even before this new trend, the director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention was warning of second wave outbreaks during the winter months; which, when combined with the seasonal rise in influenza cases, could again overwhelm our healthcare systems nationwide.^{xv} Should more significant, localized outbreaks occur in communities, campuses may be required to close again to prevent a spread or even due to rising absenteeism of students, faculty, and staff.

Because of the likelihood of the sustained presence of COVID-19 in the United States and the risk of students who return home for the fall breaks bringing back contagion, some institutions are now proposing changes to their fall semester course calendars.^{xvi} Changes would allow for early semester adjournment or, at least, a semi-structured ability to switch to online learning if necessary, with options including half semesters, 12-week + 4-week term, and three 5-week terms.

Addressing these challenges will require a fundamental change in the way we think about how higher education can and will need to be delivered. Technology point solutions, such as document sharing, word processing, or video conferencing apps, are not viable, long-term solutions. Institutions will need to work with faculty to identify a holistic learning solution that will provide flexibility for student location, provide for learning progress and mastery measurements, and maintain the quality standards of the institution.

The hybrid institution model

Addressing the immediate challenges presented by COVID-19 requires higher education institutions to build resiliency into their existing operating models. If students and faculty are not able to be on campus because the physical infrastructure is no longer accessible, learning cannot again be obstructed, delayed, or reduced in quality.

In the long term, building resilience into higher education systems is necessary in order to adapt to the future of work and learning. The terminal degrees upon which higher education systems are built and which require significant time commitments and physical co-location of learners, are no longer sufficient to sustain a person throughout their career. As the skill needs of the workforce rapidly shift with the evolution of technology and automation, every person will be required to be a lifelong learner and to continually re-engage in skills and knowledge training to remain relevant in the workforce through their careers.^{xvii} Therefore, a system of lifelong learning must be readily available to every person regardless of age or participation in the workforce.

A resilient higher education institution keeps all learners moving forward. Never stagnant. Never falling behind.

Redesigning higher education institutions for resiliency in the face of COVID-19 and the changing nature of work requires the implementation of a **hybrid learning model**; where an increased amount of faculty-led learning happens outside of the classroom through online methods with face-to-face instruction used to supplement the online activities. Success and validation of knowledge is measured through demonstration of mastery rather than seat time.

In the short-term, a hybrid learning model provides institutions with the flexibility to meet student needs in the fall semester while remaining flexible and able to react to the COVID-19 reality. A hybrid learning model, underpinned by a comprehensive online learning platform, would enable institutions with the flexibility to dial up or down their on-campus learning based on needs—from totally virtual to partial on-campus attendance to full on-campus attendance. By engaging faculty to identify and leverage best practice pedagogy for online learning design, courses and programs can be deliberately built for the hybrid experience to ensure quality. Because student progress and outcomes are measured on mastery rather than seat time, faculty will be able to accommodate full-time online learning without adding to their workload or compromising the quality of their instruction should campuses need to close again due to additional outbreaks or students choose to stay at home (by choice or by requirement),

In the long-term, the fundamentals of a resilient learning system instilled by the hybrid model can enable institutions to gradually adapt their courses, programs, and certifications to a system of lifelong learning. A learner-centric system of lifelong learning is one designed with entry points based on our existing skills, experiences, knowledge, and abilities; along with exit points based on our personal learning pathway. It is also flexible enough to meet varying life circumstances, including family and work commitments, with anytime, anywhere access and affordable to ensure the benefits are inclusive.

Implications for the economy

Due to COVID-19, economic forecasts are pointing towards the possibility of the first recession in the US in 11 years and a long one.^{xviii} National unemployment started the year at 3.7 percent and has grown sharply in the last weeks to 14.7 percent.^{xix} For 20-24 year-olds, the outlook is more grim at 25.7 percent unemployment.^{xx}

States and the Federal governments are understandably focused on the here and now, providing direct economic aid to businesses and individuals and shoring up healthcare systems. The long-term implications of COVID-19 though, whether it be a long-term recession or other structural changes to the economy, are taking root now too. Our education systems must be the third priority area for government in ensuring recovery and long-term stability post-pandemic. If we do not take steps today to redesign our systems of learning to be accessible for everyone and able to rapidly adapt to learner and employer needs, our populations won't be ready for the recovery and able to adapt to new jobs. Any recession caused by COVID-19 would likely persist indefinitely. The necessity of investing in a true system of lifelong learning is more critical today than it has ever been.

When the global economic engine starts moving again, economies that do not adapt their learning systems will be further behind those that made lifelong learning investments. The jobs and economic opportunities of the future will grow where the workforce has the tools and access to learning to be resilient to change.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Fund institutional resiliency

States and the federal government should invest now in projects to help institutions achieve resiliency goals for next fall and aid institutions in adapting to lifelong learning. With their pedagogical prowess, expertise across a vast range of fields, and capacity, higher education institutions are vital to developing a readily accessible learner-centric system of lifelong learning.

Provide additional institutional support to bridge short-term revenue gaps. While stabilization funding provided by the CARES Act was critical to mitigate the immediate needs of institutions, there is a steep road back to normalcy and additional support will be necessary to prevent institutions from becoming insolvent. A system of lifelong learning requires multiple access points and regional relevancy of learning options. A consolidation of the higher education market if struggling mid- and lower-tier institutions cease operations will limit access to affordable learning options in the future and not provide the same regional relevancy.

Provide resources for faculty to develop best practice pedagogy. Student dissatisfaction with the online learning offered this semester was, in no small part, a result of the rushed nature of the transition. Research that shows online learning can be as effective as, or more effective than, in-person learning, but intentional design of the learning and instruction for the mode is the key.^{xxi,xxii,xxiii} Engaging faculty to develop best practice pedagogies and redesign their courses will improve learning outcomes in the short-term and provide the building blocks for a complete redesign of programs and learning pathways.

2. Encourage the development and scaling of new, flexible models of higher education for learners of all ages

The predominance of the traditional degree as the primary labour market signaling function is changing as employers increasingly seek specific, verifiable durable and job-specific skill sets in potential employees. A system of lifelong learning will increasingly value the ongoing, stackable accumulation of skills that may be gained through formal learning but also informal, unstructured forms of learning.

In recognition of this paradigm shift, the current model of learning in higher education must be redesigned to achieve a true system of lifelong learning. Aid provided to institutions should support and incentivize this redesign by promoting stackable credentialing that enables entry- and exit-points based on personal learning pathways and the validation of skills and knowledge developed independently of formal learning.

3. The federal government and individual states should develop a strategy for creating learning opportunities for adults, with special attention to low-skilled and disadvantaged individuals

A strategic vision for a cohesive system of learning, accessible by everyone, is necessary to drive change at scale and to garner buy-in from key stakeholders. It should be guided by a set of practical principles:

- Affordable and accessible for learners
- High-quality, personalized and flexible
- Motivated and encouraged by a Learning-Integrated Life culture
- Data-driven for informed decision-making
- Technology-enabled to be accessible everywhere
- Assessed against learning outcomes
- Responsive to learner demands and economic needs

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About D2L

D2L develops software that makes the learning experience better. Our cloud-based platform — Brightspace — is the leading learning management system (LMS) for blended and fully virtual learning. It's easy to use, flexible, and smart. With Brightspace, schools can personalize the learning experience for every learner to deliver real results. Brightspace is used by learners in K-12, higher education, and the corporate sector, including the Fortune 1000.

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