



DEPARTMENT OF HIGHER EDUCATION & WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

ADDENDUM TO

AFTER-ACTION REPORT:

SPRING 2020 INSTITUTIONAL RESPONSE TO COVID-19

Lessons Learned: Identifying Best Practices and Considerations for Campus Closures and Reopenings, Remote Education, and Community Support

In early July 2020, in response to campus closures caused by the initial wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, institutions of higher education (IHEs) had to make a decision regarding the start of the fall 2020 term. Leadership used the insights on pandemic readiness that were gained during the spring 2020 and summer 2020 terms in order to prepare for the fall term. Reopening plans from states and local communities gave additional insight as well. From the lessons learned, this document briefly discusses best practices that are relevant not only during this COVID-19 event and other future disruptions, but also how to best serve students moving forward. These best practices are in three broad categories – safety measures and protocols, course modalities, and student/campus community support.

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SAFETY MEASURES AND PROTOCOLS

From a survey of 270 college and university presidents by the American Council on Education (ACE), among the most pressing concerns in July 2020 were safety measures and protocols for the fall term.¹ These safety measures and protocols were important to IHEs as reopening options ranged from going primarily online to fully in person. Davidson College's College Crisis Initiative (C2i) is tracking the reopening models of nearly 3,000 institutions. As of October 2020, 82 percent of the institutions represented in C2i's data dashboard involves faculty, staff, and students being physically on campus at some capacity during the fall 2020 term.² This percentage includes 67 institutions in the state of Missouri, seven of which are going fully in person.

Regardless of whether safety measures and protocols are specific to the COVID-19 response, there are general guiding principles to keep in mind when creating plans and addressing scenarios caused by pandemics and other emergencies. Below are best practices learned from the spring 2020 and summer 2020 experiences:

1

Look at the particular needs of individual campuses³

These needs are influenced by factors unique to the immediate community. As a result, institutions were free to implement what was appropriate instead of waiting for and wondering what other institutions were doing for safety measures and protocols. For example, in rural areas, providing online courses may be more viable to help prevent the rural, regional hospitals from filling up should a campus have more than a certain number of cases.

2

Take a phased yet agile approach to reopening

By reopening slowly and not getting too invested in a particular plan, IHEs are able to change directions quickly if necessary. For example, colleges and universities in Massachusetts used a four-phase reopening plan.⁴ The reopening plan included not only guidance for a phased repopulation of campuses but also for monitoring health conditions, containment, and scaling back if necessary.

3

Provide constant and consistent communication

Institutions had to find the balance between warning students of the dangers of COVID-19 exposure, while also instilling confidence in the campus community guidelines set in place to help keep students safe. To build trust, IHEs must be transparent and honest in their communications. Leadership in IHEs can build trust if the campus community knows the efforts being made, and that leadership is doing as much as possible during these uncertain times. One important place to facilitate finding up-to-date information is college websites.⁵ Make it easy for users to find COVID-19 information by featuring a prominent, clearly labeled link "above the fold" (at the top of the screen) to avoid the need for scrolling.

¹ Turk, Jonathan M., et al. (2020). "College and University Presidents Respond to COVID-19: July 2020 Survey." American Council on Education. Available at <https://www.acenet.edu/Documents/Presidents-Respond-COVID19-July2020.pdf>

² College Crisis Initiative. (2020). "Welcome to the C2i dashboard!" Available at <https://collegecrisis.shinyapps.io/dashboard/>

³ Mitchell, Ted, et. al. (2020). "Reopening College Campuses during COVID-19 Part 9: ACE President Ted Mitchell." Available at <https://www.acenet.edu/Pages/Engage/Conversations/COVID-19-Part-9-Ted-Mitchell.aspx>

⁴ Massachusetts Higher Education Working Group. (22 May 2020). "Safe on Campus: A Framework for Reopening Colleges and Universities." Available at <https://d279m997dpfwgl.cloudfront.net/wp/2020/05/Higher-Ed-Framework-.pdf>

⁵ Stoner, Michael. (1 October 2020). "Covid-19 Info on Your Website: A Few Best Practices." Available at <https://www.insidehighered.com/blogs/call-action-marketing-and-communications-higher-education/covid-19-info-your-website-few-best>

4

Promote new norms

Current safety measures and protocols such as wearing masks and social distancing are not what students had in mind as part of the college experience. As a result, IHEs must find creative ways for communicating risks in addition to websites, emails, and posters on walls and doors. For example, the University of South Carolina asked students to share on social media their pledge to do their part in protecting themselves and others using the #IPledgeColumbia hashtag. West Virginia University sent free masks to students who signed up to receive them in exchange for sharing selfies wearing official university masks on social media. Manhattanville College provided a free summer course for credit about COVID-19.

5

Collaborate within one's institution and with other IHEs and organizations

Just as the scientific community has worked together to address the current COVID-19 problem, so too can IHEs benefit through cooperation from a large number of people.⁶ For example, the Missouri Department of Higher Education & Workforce Development and the Missouri Department of Health & Senior Services hold weekly COVID-19 calls with colleges and universities. This type of collaboration allows for the quick dissemination of useful and timely information from health experts and other officials.

COURSE MODALITY CONSIDERATIONS

The current experience on various course modality offerings is providing IHEs with real-time data about how to deliver courses and programs. Educators can explore which aspects to substitute, replace, complement, or augment. A report from the Missouri Department of Higher Education & Workforce Development (2020) demonstrated that many institutions responded to the need to provide equitable access to technology.⁷ Strategies included the distribution of necessary hardware such as computers and mobile hotspots, the creation of Virtual Desktop Infrastructure (VDI) for remote access to specialty software, the provision of funds to assist with necessary purchases related to technology, and increasing Wi-Fi access to parking lots and green spaces. Fortunately, educators have also identified additional best practices and intentional strategies beyond those previously mentioned to help in closing the digital divide caused by the pandemic and to provide educational equity.

1

Find ways to relieve financial burden

By relieving the financial burden of tuition and fees, students have more financial aid funds available for living expenses. For example, the Alamo Colleges District has a “Keep Learning” plan with four major initiatives: (1) eliminate outstanding student balances up to \$500, (2) allow students to take free classes in the summer, (3) reduce the fee to set up a payment plan, and (4) cover the cost of a required test.⁸ However, the pandemic has increased expenses and decreased revenues for institutions. A 2020 fall term survey of 295 college presidents by ACE revealed that one of the top five most pressing issues is long-term financial viability.⁹ One strategy for addressing financial challenges is to control cash flow by postponing planned capital expenditures and by looking for new ways to generate revenue. For example, some institutions have offered empty dorms as temporary housing for health care professionals. Another strategy is to reach out to all donors instead of concentrating on top-level donors only. For instance, Eastern Michigan University raised \$2 million from small donations that were typically between \$25-\$100 each.

⁶ TCS Education System. (27 April 2020). “Collaboration: A Benefit for Colleges during COVID-19.” Available at <https://www.tcsedsystem.edu/blog/collaboration-a-benefit-for-colleges-during-covid-19/>

2

Develop free technology loan programs

Institutions and agencies should rethink tuition and fee models to include technology costs that would allow students to request and receive necessary technology which would then be returned at the end of the semester or the student's academic work. For example, the University of Michigan has allowed students to borrow laptops since 2015 without affecting their financial aid package.¹⁰

3

Equally reward students in technological use

The increased use of technology requires maintenance. According to one study, low-income students and students of color disproportionately dealt with technology and maintenance problems due to issues like a poorly-functioning laptop.¹¹ However, teachers may only reward more affluent students who communicate their need for extensions due to technological issues. One approach is to be proactive in recognizing gaps in learning outcomes related to the use of technology. In other words, watch for signs of students needing help, thus avoiding the requirement for disadvantaged students to have to ask for assistance.¹²

4

Design courses to be equitable

The Conversation, a network of not-for-profit media outlets with news articles written by academics and researchers, provides several suggestions for improving equity and access.¹³ One idea is to create more accessible materials. For example, institutions must ensure compatibility with assistive technologies and readability of all text using appropriate colors and fonts. Another idea is to understand student needs by asking them directly about their requirements and expectations. One of those needs, for instance, is to be able to asynchronously access captioned audio and video recordings of lectures. Lastly, there is a need to be culturally responsive, designing learning activities and content that acknowledge students' cultural capital.

5

Reimagine the learning environment

Inside Higher Ed published a booklet that encourages educators to reimagine grading and other traditional policies during a pandemic.¹⁴ For example, a professor from Eastern Michigan University changed his view on deadlines and penalties. He realized that due to several struggles such as unemployment and poor internet service, vulnerable students already had a lot on their plates. When designing policies, educators can be empathetic to their students. As another professor put it, "grades aren't necessarily a measure of skills or ability, but rather the socioeconomic and other privileges students have – or don't."¹² It should be noted that the suggestions from the aforementioned booklet are to protect vulnerable students during a pandemic. However, now is a good time to continue the work in recreating courses to be more equitable, taking a hard look at deadline policies, grading policies, nonessential course content, etc.

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- ⁷ Equity White Paper: Five Best Practices for Ensuring Access to Technology in Higher Education during the COVID-19 Pandemic <https://dhewd.mo.gov/documents/whitepaper-technology.pdf>
- ⁸ Brownlee, Mordecai I. "Here's How Colleges Should Help Close the Digital Divide in the COVID-Era." EdSurge, 13 July 2020. Available at <https://www.edsurge.com/news/2020-07-13-here-s-how-colleges-should-help-close-the-digital-divide-in-the-covid-era>
- ⁹ Turk, Jonathan, et al. "College and University Presidents Respond to COVID-19: 2020 Fall Term Survey." 08 October 2020.
- ¹⁰ Koenig, Rebecca. "What Happens When Low-Income College Students Borrow Free Laptops?" EdSurge, 5 November 2019. Available at <https://www.edsurge.com/news/2019-11-05-what-happens-when-low-income-college-students-borrow-free-laptops>
- ¹¹ Gonzales, Amy L. et al. "Technology Problems and Student Achievement Gaps: A Validation and Extension of the Technology Maintenance Construct." Communication Research, 2020.
- ¹² COVID-19, Technology, and Implications for Educational Equity. ASA Footnotes." American Sociological Association, 2020. Available at https://www.asanet.org/sites/default/files/attach/footnotes/may-june_2020_0.pdf
- ¹³ "Online Learning during COVID-19: 8 Ways Universities Can Improve Equity and Access." The Conversation, 2020. Available at <https://theconversation.com/online-learning-during-covid-19-8-ways-universities-can-improve-equity-and-access-145286>
- ¹⁴ Protecting Vulnerable Students during the Pandemic". Inside Higher Ed, 2020. Available at <https://www.insidehighered.com/content/protecting-vulnerable-students-during-pandemic>

STUDENT/CAMPUS COMMUNITY SUPPORT

The COVID-19 pandemic presents numerous challenges to the campus community. Not only are members of this community attempting to stay connected with each other, they are simultaneously protecting themselves from the novel coronavirus. Below are best practices identified by educators concerning this area.

1

Provide consistent, caring, and clear communication

According to an Active Minds survey, many students cite a lack of communication from their institutions as a primary stressor.¹⁵ Faculty members can help with their students' overall well-being by (a) simply asking how the student is doing, (b) offering a virtual space to discuss nonacademic topics, (c) trusting students and considering students' possibly complicated home lives when students reach out to professors, and (d) focusing on students most at risk for dropping out.

2

Consider the mental health and well-being of all campus community members

Restrictions on social interactions and shared physical spaces, on top of nagging concerns about potential infection, only serve to negatively impact mental health. Some members of the community may also be dealing with the illness or death of loved ones due to COVID-19. Additionally, some may be suffering from food or financial insecurity. To help faculty and staff, IHEs can realign expectations for productivity and increase flexibility to help negotiate the balance of work and life. Faculty and staff, in turn, are frequently the primary points of contact with students so supporting them directly impacts students as well. Additionally, many IHEs have offered virtual counseling.

3

Find new ways to interact with students and for students to interact with each other

With campus closures in the spring of 2020, and continued use of online or hybrid learning into fall 2020, students are finding themselves isolated. IHEs may continue to find ways to interact with students outside the standard 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. by holding virtual office hours and sponsoring virtual social events outside regular business hours. For example, Presence offers virtual activity ideas to keep college students engaged.¹⁶

¹⁵ Active Minds. (2020). "The Impact of COVID-19 on Student Mental Health."

¹⁶ Presence. (17 March 2020). "53 Virtual Activity Ideas to Keep College Students Engaged during COVID-19." Available at <https://www.presence.io/blog/53-virtual-activity-ideas-to-keep-college-students-engaged-during-covid-19/>

4

Foster community-university partnerships to create resilient communities

This pandemic has reinforced IHEs' role of public service for their local communities. Faculty and staff members hold public webinars, create volunteering projects, and otherwise support their communities in other endeavors. For example, Iowa State University features a "Community" page in its COVID-19 response page to highlight what faculty, staff, and students have done in support of their communities, from documenting COVID-19 community stories to establishing food pantries and providing a video series on cybersecurity to keep those working from home informed.¹⁷ Hubbub also featured what some universities are doing to help with COVID-19 relief efforts.¹⁸

5

Remember the human element in data-driven decision-making

When collecting student data related to experiences with COVID-19, include students with diverse needs in the data collection. Correspondingly, disaggregate by demographics when analyzing the data to ensure all students benefit from decisions or new initiatives. Lastly, remember the human element. When dealing with student interventions, for example, a simple "How are you?" is more well received than saying, "Why didn't you complete your assignments on time last week?"

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

This report highlighted best practices learned thus far from the experiences of running higher education institutions during the COVID-19 pandemic. These recommendations addressed safety measures and protocols, course modality considerations, and student and campus community support. While the pandemic has certainly been a disruption to many aspects of college life, it also offers many opportunities. As higher education institutions look to the future, now is the time to go beyond asking how to preserve the status quo of higher education. Below is a sampling of questions to ask when reimagining higher education during this time of uncertainty:

- How might we create a system that is much more inclusive, allowing people who had previously been excluded to participate?
- What educational products and formats can best serve the needs of traditional and modern students?
- How might we define the college experience without residence halls and other in-person events and interactions?
- How might we realign our products, budgets, and delivery where students' behavior is different in a post-pandemic world?
- How might we redefine higher education's value proposition?

¹⁷ Iowa State University. (2020). "COVID-19 Response." Available at <https://web.iastate.edu/covid19/community>

¹⁸ Hubbub. (2020). "How Universities Are Coming Together to Support Covid-19 Relief Efforts." Available at <https://www.hubbub.net/blog/how-universities-are-coming-together-to-support-covid-19-relief-efforts>