The Flexible Future: Actionable Scenario Planning for Higher Education Leaders

By Mark Finlan

Scenario planning for the 2020- 2021 academic year is top of mind for higher education leaders, but predicting what will happen this fall (and beyond) is more than complex — it's near impossible. Absent a crystal ball, institutional leadership must engage in robust scenario planning that evaluates the benefits and risks of several potential responses.

Experts are forecasting multiple variables, including the spread of COVID-19, development of testing and treatments, readiness of vaccinations, and the speed of herd immunity, each factor tied to a litany of imperfect or incomplete data. Any one of these variables could significantly change the outlook for the fall and the feasibility of residential education with the associated experience students (and their parents) expect.

The one thing higher education leaders can control is how they operationalize a team to plan for the myriad potential scenarios that they (and their students, faculty, staff and community) may encounter in the fall. To that end, many institutions have started forming cross-functional war rooms or task forces to manage their plans for reentry (e.g., HyFlex, block scheduling, adjusted academic calendar, reduced dorm room occupancy, etc.) as well as potential student responses to the pandemic (e.g., deferrals, transfers based on price sensitivity, semesters closer to home, etc.). The resulting imperative is that universities — often challenged by inertia and cultural entrenchment — must develop mechanisms to be more agile in their decision making and ensure they are building actionable, flexible and adaptable reopening plans.

Some institutions will emerge from this crisis in better shape than others; some may not emerge in the same form. The ability to be agile in strategy development and deployment may be the differentiator.

Moving Beyond Traditional Scenario Planning

While there are three primary high-level scenarios institutions are planning for — fully in-person, fully remote and a hybrid approach — there are countless more granular scenarios within each of these possibilities that leaders must also consider. Strategic reopening plans that deal in absolutes and do not take into account the day-to-day risks of managing colleges and universities run the risk of quickly becoming obsolete as dynamics change or being

so high level that stakeholders operationalize them inconsistently or in a manner that is misaligned to institutional leadership's intent.

Benefits of Detailed Scenario Planning

- Execute Quickly Today
- Improve Tomorrow's Agility
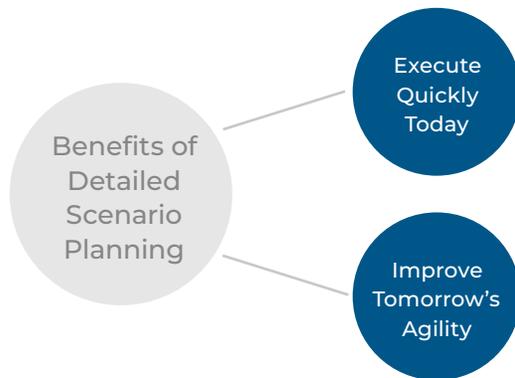
Unlike many other large organizations, the complexities inherent in operating a college or university are more similar to those of a small city; leaders must consider not only the delivery of education but also housing, food services, research operations, retail and each intersection in between. The benefits of a more granular scenario planning approach are twofold; it improves the institution's ability to execute quickly today and develops the knowledge required to respond in an agile manner to future shifts.

To provide a sense of the general landscape for fall planning, the Chronicle of Higher Education is maintaining and updating a list of more than 870 institutions' announced plans for fall 2020. As of early June, 67% of responding schools noted their intention to host an "in-person fall semester." Yet, even those colleges and universities that are optimistic about their ability to reopen their campuses will be required to modify their existing operations to some extent. Most institutions will be planning for a variety of potential hybrid models that support assorted ratios of in-person and online activities.

Further, success will also rely on the ability to quickly determine in real time which scenario is in play and operationalize the planned response. Bryan Alexander, a higher education futurist, recently

dubbed this scenario "toggle term," meaning that institutions would be required to build the capacity to toggle back and forth between in-person and online operations as needed based on fluctuations in epidemiological status, state and federal guidelines, public sentiment and safety considerations. Or, in other words, be agile.

Detailed Risk Inventories Enable Institutional Agility

Just as waiters, Uber drivers and day care workers have different types of interactions with the people they encounter each day, so too do university staff members, students, faculty and community members. Take, for example, collegiate athletics. Often, the most hotly debated topic centers around whether to allow fans to attend events. Yet, resuming a college football program creates many other possible points of interaction — including team practices, weight room training, team meetings, locker room time, media events, academic tutoring and travel — that must also be considered. All major campus interactions (e.g., housing, dining, academics, retail locations, research labs, common spaces, restrooms, athletic facilities and student services) and specific situations (e.g., travel requirements, high-risk individuals, positive COVID-19 tests, special education accommodations) should be similarly dissected.

Ultimately, institutions need to consider multiple factors for each identified interaction, including health and safety, operational feasibility, mission impact, and financial effects, when making decisions. Mapping interactions to key risk factors will help prioritize higher-risk areas and inform a corresponding set of overarching policies and procedures (e.g., testing, tracing, isolation, cleanliness, social distancing, etc.). For each interaction and situation, detailed action plans should be created to define how policies are applied.

Interactions Scorecard (Facility-Based)

Interactions	Risk Level	Health and Safety	Operations	Mission Impact	Financial Impact
Math Building Stagger class times; hand sanitizer stations; masks required; wipe down desks every hour					
Lecture hall 101	6	All large lectures online	Reconfigure (2 X 25 class)	Low	Enrollment impact — Low
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Classroom 201	8	Social distancing guidelines	Reconfigure desks	High	Enrollment impact — Med
Main Library Hand sanitizer stations; masks required; limit capacity					
Study rooms	5	Clean every 30 minutes	One person per room	Medium	None
Reference section	1	Closed	Closed	Low	None
Coffee shop	.	Follow dining protocols	To-go only	Low	25% decline in sales
University Center Hand sanitizer stations; masks required; limit capacity					
Post office	1	Closed	Closed	Low	100% loss of revenue
Business center	6	Clean every 30 minutes	10-person capacity	Low	None
Food court	10	Remove all tables/chairs	To-go only	Low	40% decline in sales
Public restrooms	10	Wipe down after each use	Four-person capacity	Low	None

Preparing to Pivot

This fall and beyond, leadership teams should be prepared to be responsive as dynamics change across all the different areas of interaction on campus.

·   What happens when several cases of COVID-19 break out in a residence hall? A fraternity or sorority house? An off-campus private student apartment?

·   What if several members of an athletic team contract the virus? What about the teams that share their training facilities?

·   How can the institution respond appropriately to the presence of COVID-19 among actors and crew in the school's musical theater production?

·   What safety measures can be taken to mitigate risks for students at campuses that require bus transportation from residence halls?

·   How will the institution address the nuances of faculty safety, especially for those that fall into vulnerable populations?

·   What if an antibody test becomes available and accessible? What if its false negative rate is 5%? 15%? 40%?

These types of questions are seemingly endless and will change as time goes on. While scrutiny has been placed on institutions as they have navigated this largely unexpected crisis over the past several months, public sentiment is destined to be much more critical in the fall, both in the context of safety and of the richness of the educational experience provided. With months rather than days to innovate and plan for the upcoming semester, stakeholders will likely expect a more strategic, comprehensive and thoughtful response.

The goals for planning are more than just determining the logistics of delivering classes this fall, but rather they include balancing strategic and financial needs to deliver education with a duty of care and commitment to mission and institutional values. Now is the time to start building additional mechanisms that can both anticipate disruptions and operationalize contingency plans swiftly. The institutions that do not adopt more agile decision making and granular, flexible operating plans may face the difficult choice to send everyone home again — and stakeholders may not be as forgiving the second time around.

Key Takeaways

To continue to respond to the evolving COVID-19 pandemic in higher education, leaders should:

Think differently.

Understand that the safety landscape and requisite responses will shift as new information emerges and public expectations evolve.

Plan differently.

Ensure that scenario plans are detailed, actionable and take into consideration a wide range of potentially risky scenarios.

Act differently.

Be aware of updates to guidance and regulations and ensure your team is ready to deploy alternative plans at any given moment, as needed.

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