

Trust, Value, Safety

HIGHER EDUCATION BEYOND THE PANDEMIC

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Plans made during the coronavirus pandemic are often tied to a tenuous clause: “When things return to normal.” But for most colleges and universities, such short-term stopgaps are not only unsustainable— they are overlooking an important opportunity to evolve and to build the trust of students and families along the way. To prepare for the prolonged impact of the pandemic over the next several years as vaccines roll out, higher education’s leaders should reframe and refresh their plans for delivering high-quality programs and services.

Many college and university leaders spent the majority of 2020 focused on what they needed to do to get through the school year. But as the pandemic [persists](#) and [new surges](#) in cases continue to emerge, many plans for the fall and the spring have [changed course](#), [unraveled](#) or [drawn scrutiny](#). Some institutions have managed to keep the on-campus spread of the coronavirus at bay by deploying a combination of testing, tracing, hybrid learning, quarantining and mask enforcement tactics, but success has come at a high premium. Toward the end of September, pandemic measures had already cost universities more than [\\$120 billion](#).

While the viability of many of today’s approaches remains in question, one thing is certain: the need for scalable, long-term strategies to make education valuable and safe through the pandemic and beyond. As urgently as leaders must plan to protect the health of their constituents, they must also consider how to earn students’ confidence and deliver experiences that are lasting, enriching and valuable for years to come.

To mobilize agile plans that protect and engage students over the next several years, leaders should carefully consider how they will enhance their ability to monitor campus activity; measure students’ health, wellness and experiences; and answer three critical questions related to safety, students and learning strategies:

- **Safety.** What is our long-term, scalable suppression strategy for testing, tracing, treating and vaccinating students, faculty and staff, and how can we develop and evolve successful measures to protect health and safety beyond the pandemic?
- **Students.** How can we protect students but ensure we meet their social and emotional needs by providing experiences that are valuable, supportive and enriching?
- **Learning.** How will we optimize our students’ learning experiences and build successful virtual strategies into our long-term operating model?

Scaling Strategies for Safety and Suppression

After what was for many students a tumultuous lockdown in the spring and an anxiety-ridden summer, fall reopening was a rocky start to the school year. Admissions officers across 300 U.S. colleges and universities gave themselves “mediocre grades” this fall, according to a [Kaplan Survey](#). When asked to assess higher education’s reopening performance as a whole, considering factors like implementing new safety precautions, delivering courses, and communicating with students and parents, more than 60% gave a C or lower.

The public has also looked on with scrutiny. Americans are divided on whether colleges and universities that brought students back to campus made the right decision, according to a poll conducted by the [Pew Research Center](#), and [56%](#) of Americans stated that colleges and universities are going in the wrong direction in general.

There are significant opportunities for institutions to improve their safety and suppression strategies on campus and, in turn, garner the trust of the American public, students, faculty and staff. But to do so, they should focus more on the long term. In preparing to scale and sustain the institution’s pandemic suppression plan over the next several years, leaders should consider the following factors:

- **Vaccine prospects are unfolding in real time.** [Trial results](#) and [authorizations for emergency use](#) yield great promise, but more work must be done before we will know if vaccines are safe, effective and [long-lasting](#). While a vaccine may be ready for the general public by the spring, [distribution](#), access and uptake are complex challenges that will take time to coordinate. Students are not likely to be high on [the list](#) to get vaccinated, but [educators may be](#). The vaccine may require multiple injections, and even then, it is not a silver bullet. Like the common cold, which is in the same family as the COVID-19 virus, vaccines will likely require boosters to maintain sufficient levels of antibodies in patients. Institutions

and school districts should prepare to sustain and evolve suppression and tracing strategies over the next few years as vaccines roll out; booster schedules are implemented; and global, national and local reopening plans manifest.

- **Success requires a baseline.** While researchers and developers race to prepare a vaccine, college and university leaders are contending with a [dramatic rise](#) in new cases of COVID-19 across the U.S. How they respond to the health crisis is critical, but so is their ability to define success in realistic terms. Rather than aiming to have zero cases on campus, leaders should consider effective suppression and treatment a measure of success, establish benchmarks relative to region and population, and take extra care in communicating that to the public.
- **One size does not fit all.** Testing, tracing and treating coronavirus throughout [college campuses](#) will require a strategic approach, prudent planning and seamless coordination. When refreshing your institution’s strategy and approach, consider the makeup of students and staff, your state’s regulations, the local or regional risk levels, whether your students and staff are insulated or required to commute, and other factors to determine what the most effective model may look like. Leaders should embed these plans in operational strategies and, at minimum, consider how they will approach the following issues:
 - Continued testing and tracing. Consider the cost of testing and tracing over a three-year period, wherein the price per test (currently ranging between [\\$10 and \\$50](#)) may decrease over time and the availability and efficacy of various types of tests may evolve along with costs. Vaccines may not be widely available to all, so evolving student systems to support contact tracing strategies is paramount. Doing so will allow institutions to track individuals as they receive vaccine injections and booster shots.
 - Strategic partnerships. To establish testing and vaccine administration programs,

colleges and universities should continue to seek partnerships with academic medical centers, on-campus health clinics, local health systems, and national pharmacy chains like Walgreens, CVS and Walmart. Laying the groundwork for those partnerships today may streamline the complicated work of administering vaccines to the campus community. Similarly, partnering with a national pharmacy chain to administer a rapid saliva testing program could lead to a smooth transition to vaccination administration.

- Communication planning. Leaders should develop, execute and monitor a long-term communication plan that speaks to the concerns and needs of its students, faculty and staff. Doing so will build coordination, morale and trust among campus constituents and the public as they continue to [scrutinize and rate](#) institutions' communication methods.

Delivering Valuable Student Experiences

In September 2020, [just 28%](#) of public and private colleges and universities opted to bring students back to campus and hold classes either fully or primarily in person. While some students are happy to be back at school and feel safer there than at home, many students [are struggling](#). The diminished activity level on campus and a lack of confidence in safety measures have caused some students to leave early. Many more are at risk of dropping out.

As [enrollment continues to sink](#) at a rate of 4.4% for undergraduate students and 13% for freshmen, colleges and universities must seek new ways to build valuable, engaging experiences into their long-term strategies to prevent further financial strain.

Over the course of the next several years, leaders should decide how they will deliver their distinctive value proposition while reopening more campus activities. Doing so will require an honest evaluation of what a sustainable, meaningful student experience could look like — both in the near term and in the long term. It will also challenge leaders to

consider which of today's strategies hold value for students or promote better health and well-being. Measuring, retaining and adapting these approaches to support long-term strategies will position institutions for success long after the pandemic.

Leaders should keep these goals in mind:

- **Deliver value.** When articulating your institution's distinctive value proposition, take care to adapt it to fit different contexts, and communicate it clearly to current and future students and their families.
- **Innovate.** Establishing safe, sustainable, valuable student experiences will require leaders to think boldly and creatively. Consider opportunities to engage students in activities that complement your climate or environment, meet safety regulations and integrate successful suppression strategies like social distancing and mask-wearing.
- **Include students.** Design and develop effective strategies to engage students in responsible, social, student-led group activities and establish shared campus community standards. Conduct surveys and course evaluations along the way to learn what constituents value in the new educational delivery models, where they are struggling and what they need to succeed.

Optimizing Learning Strategies

The coronavirus pandemic has been a wake-up call for higher education's leaders, signaling that institutions need to — and can — evolve the quality of multichannel learning. Academic leaders should consider how to effectively build successful virtual learning strategies into their long-term operating models, even as students return to campus.

For many institutions, this exercise will require them to revisit two fundamental questions: *Who are we?* and *Who do we want to be?* Closely monitoring the evolving landscape of higher education and the shifting expectations, needs and behaviors of students will remain critical when answering these questions.

Who are we?

Leaders should consider the distinctive characteristics of their student body and faculty, their academic portfolio, and their regional industry and employer needs when deciding how best to optimize learning strategies in the long term. Institutions that offer the traditional four-year, on-campus experience may find opportunities to better accommodate students' educational needs by incorporating an effective [hybrid online or "HyFlex" learning approach](#). Those that have primarily relied on online or hybrid programs for graduate and continuing education students could begin to apply these strategies more broadly [across their academic portfolio](#). Optimizing the systems and pathways [supporting transfer students](#) may prime institutions for growth in new channels. To retain a competitive edge, institutions should capitalize on opportunities to innovate and enhance students' learning experiences.

Who do we want to be?

Reframing pandemic approaches around the institution's long-term goals and the vision for sustainability will ensure that the decisions made over the next few years are strategic, scalable and meaningful. To do so, colleges and universities should continue assessing, monitoring and benchmarking the successes and failures of today's methods and seek answers to questions that are rooted in students' experiences. Has online learning improved the student experience in some ways? Will online or HyFlex learning create pathways for new student populations we haven't been able to reach before? Can flexible learning models help your institution retain students at risk of dropping out or regain those who have left already? Are there opportunities to promote diversity and inclusion at your institution by making meaningful changes to student services or the administrative systems and processes underpinning the college entrance experience? Answering these questions may lead to insights that help your institution hone today's strategies into long-term channels for growth that are agile and responsive to the evolving conditions facing higher education.

Beyond the Pandemic

As the health crisis unfolds and a vaccine comes into focus, higher education's leaders should look beyond the pandemic for opportunities to strengthen students' trust, enrich the value of their educational experiences, and promote safety and well-being for years to come. The most successful strategies to emerge will continue to be those that are nimble, strategic, scalable and safe — and in tune with the shifting behaviors, needs and expectations of students.



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