

HIGHER EDUCATION COVID-19 RESPONSE: ACADEMIC PROGRAM IMPACTS AND OPPORTUNITIES

The global effect of COVID-19 has confronted college and university leaders with sudden and complex challenges. But this moment also presents opportunities for colleges and universities to think creatively about innovative and fiscally efficient ways of delivering quality education and research.

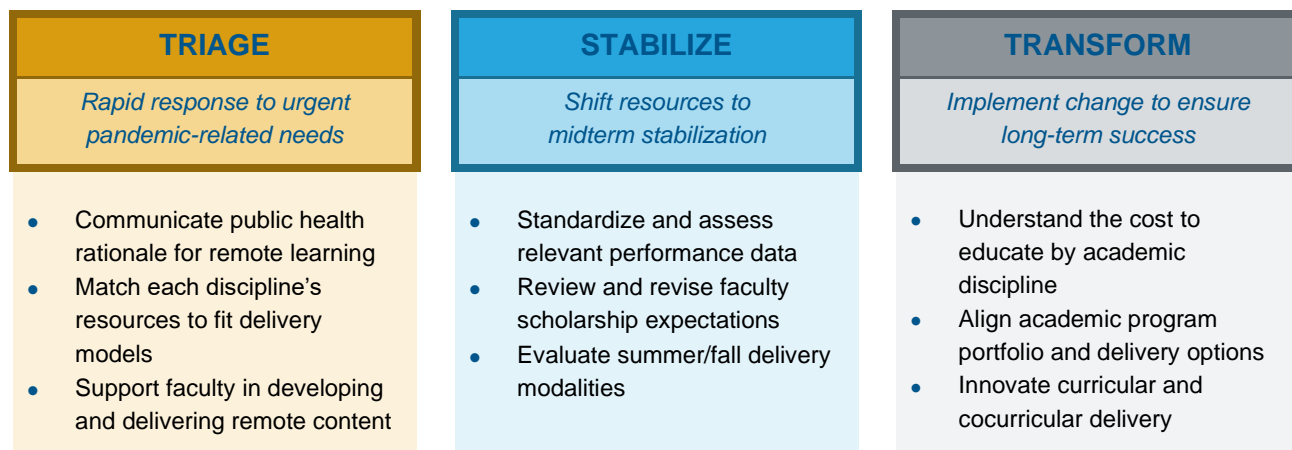
One critical component of that equation is achieving strategic and financial alignment within the context of the academic portfolio. After all, the academic portfolio is the foundation upon which most institutions deliver their core value, while also being a significant contributor to the institution's financial performance, student experience and faculty productivity.

While there are a variety of approaches for institutional leaders to consider, success involves effectively using relevant data and engaging faculty and other key campus stakeholders. Institutions focused on strategic alignment of academic and financial resources will be better positioned to implement transformational change while they clarify mission, strengthen sustainability and deliver a positive impact on society.

In the context of the current public health crisis, it's important to recognize that achieving enhanced academic portfolio alignment is a formative, multistep process that evolves through collaboration between academic leaders and faculty alongside the finance department (that can help all stakeholders understand the financial opportunities and ramifications). Higher education leaders in the face of this pandemic likely find themselves confronting three sometimes overlapping phases in their efforts to better manage the academic portfolio, each of which will require a distinct set of actions.

In a [recent white paper](#), Huron outlined a three-phase framework for higher education's evolution through this pandemic and impending recession. In this framework, the sector enters first into a triage phase, then transitions to a period of stabilization while it begins to explore opportunities for fundamental transformation.

Academic programs can benefit from this model, and there are implications leaders should consider as they navigate each phase.



Triage: Improve and Innovate Online Delivery

The innovation of curricular and cocurricular delivery modalities is unavoidable as faculty and students across the world have been thrust into a remote learning environment. To date, the quality of this experience has been limited by the lack of pedagogically sound technology and expertise necessary for effective teaching and learning in an online environment. A robust academic portfolio alignment process will enable leaders to develop expertise in multiple learning environments, empowering colleges and universities to achieve academic excellence regardless of delivery platform. Beginning this process now will enable institutions to apply recent lessons learned and better prepare for potential disruptions during the upcoming summer and fall terms.

Stabilize: Position Academic Programs for the Future

While it is appropriate for faculty to have the authority over curricular decisions, reconnecting curriculum to resource allocation decisions is critical to successful academic portfolio alignment efforts. A robust academic portfolio management system requires a tailored approach to appropriately articulate the costs to deliver instruction on a per-program and even per-course basis. This cost-to-educate model is best built in collaboration with academic leadership and requires customization to meet the needs of the individual institution. Further, the information derived from this effort should be shared with the larger community to provide transparency for the decision-making process.

Allocating resources to in-demand degree programming and noncredit offerings while at the same time reducing the number of low-demand, resource-intensive programs is another approach to achieving academic excellence and financial sustainability. More specifically, recognizing how labor market challenges may impact the demand for certain academic programs is critical for institutions seeking to continue to thrive.

Transform: The Academic Portfolio as Steadying Force

As college and university leaders reflect upon the pandemic-related challenges and difficult decisions impacting the institutional community, there may be a natural tendency to resume normal planning for the upcoming fall term. However, the fluid nature of COVID-19, the impact of remote learning on academic quality and the negative impact to the institutional balance sheet should serve as salient reminders that priorities and decisions made today will impact the institution far beyond the spring 2020 term.

Adapting an approach to standardize and assess academic performance data will provide a foundation for creating a more proactive and agile organization. With this information, academic leadership can begin to establish key metrics to maximize academic quality and efficiency. At nearly all colleges and universities, these data points are readily available by leveraging curriculum, coursework, compensation and financial information systems currently in place.

Additionally, academic leaders and faculty should assess the impact of recently developed remote delivery modalities and catalog strengths and opportunities related to this effort. Wherever possible, learning outcomes from online experiences should be compared with traditional learning outcomes to establish a baseline for improving remote work to more effectively prepare for unforeseen future emergencies.

To maximize the effectiveness of today's decisions, institutional leadership should plan for a future that will enable timely and informed decision making, and critically assess current curricular and cocurricular delivery models.

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