

HIGHER EDUCATION COVID-19 RESPONSE: OPPORTUNITIES TO IMPROVE STUDENT EXPERIENCE

Colleges and universities acknowledge four important contributors to student success: academic ability, financial capability, sense of belonging and wellness. If an institution can meet student needs across these areas, it has every reason to expect positive outcomes. The ability to deliver successful services is challenging for any institution, regardless of resources and in even the best of times. Impacts of the current pandemic are placing extreme pressures on institutions' abilities to provide high quality student and academic services, especially remotely.

COVID-19 *has* created an opportunity for institutions to focus efforts necessary to create a positive experience for students. Creating a sense of place and belonging in this remote environment will be not only be crucial to sustaining the loyalty of current students but also solidifying the opportunity to attract new students. In a [recent whitepaper](#), Huron outlined a three-phase framework for higher education's response to COVID-19 and the 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. This framework is used to establish both a traditional and a remote student experience that incorporate institutional strengths and cultures.

TRIAGE	STABILIZE	TRANSFORM
<i>Rapid response to urgent pandemic-related needs</i>	<i>Shift resources to mid-term stabilization</i>	<i>Implement change to ensure long-term success</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Expand virtual tutoring and counseling services• Post daily community building messages on institution Social Media channels• Assess key support programs for remote offering• Review student financial impacts and assess emergency financial aid funding	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Increase support and training for remote learning• Translate support services to a virtual environment• Review and enhance communication strategies• Develop virtual structures to support wellness and sense of belonging	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Adopt AI to anticipate student needs and provide proactive interventions• Implement student success coaching strategies• Create mentorship and pathway programming opportunities• Develop student cohorts to develop sense of belonging

Triage: Take Immediate Action to Support Wellness and Stability

As students shifted from in-person to remote college experiences, the remote classroom environment was naturally the immediate focus. Now, access to key student support resources, such as counseling services, academic advising, career planning and extracurricular clubs, will increasingly be sought. Frequent communication with students about these resources is necessary—especially if remote experiences continue into the new academic year. Areas for strengthened remote services include financial aid as well as technology, internet access, and for some students, guidance on finding local resources for food and childcare.

Stabilize: Create a Sense of Place and Belonging

Leaders should consider using surveys to ask students about their experiences to date with remote learning: what types of technologies do they have access to; and what types of assignments, exams and deadlines fit within their newly chaotic lives? While it may not be possible to deliver on all critiques and suggestions, the sense that students have some

voice in a time when their lives have been disrupted could create greater connections with the institution, peers and faculty. The faculty, too, will need new forms of support to ensure they are delivering the best experience possible.

Conversations outside the classroom will be crucial in support of quality interactions among faculty and classmates. Important will be providing access to faculty via virtual office hours, hosting talks and previously planned events, and supporting student club and organization activities remotely. Additionally, institutions should consider how students can assist in supporting and expanding resources like virtual peer tutoring and writing support. Investments in remote support services now may serve to differentiate your institution and strengthen students' loyalty moving forward, showing them their school is flexible, and can support them both on- and off-campus.

As campuses increase student outreach and ensure that students maintain their connection with the institution, coordination of units across campus must be seamless in supporting clear, consistent, and timely communication. Institutions should review their communication vehicles and create an engagement platform to optimize targeted communication opportunities. Areas of focus are students who may be at risk for attrition, such as international students, out-of-state students and other identified at-risk populations. Outreach should also encourage discussion from students whenever possible by hosting virtual "get-togethers" and platforms for students to post videos of activities they are doing at home, new hobbies, or thoughts on coping with the remote environment. Such platforms can also support students' physical and mental health: students can be encouraged to create virtual wellness programs that support regular interactions, such as student-led online aerobics classes, meditation sessions, and personal training sessions to foster well-being and continued campus connection.

Transform: Leverage Data and Communication Strategies to Support Campus Connection and Student Success

In recent years, college and university leaders have also become increasingly aware of the importance of data and AI to support a more personalized college experience with proactive support and engagement. In the wake of the pandemic, building upon this data infrastructure to better anticipate trends, student needs, and attrition risks will be an even greater priority to ensure student success and a sense of belonging. With mounting financial pressures and uncertainty regarding the incoming class, having a more intentional and proactive approach to student success programming, risk identification, and timely and relevant messaging will become essential to retention. Remote learning may make it more difficult to build meaningful connections, as "dropping in" for assistance can be a less personal experience. To support students who might feel disconnected or may struggle academically in a remote environment, institutions can make increased use of data to provide academic staff and faculty advisors with the necessary tools to provide intrusive advising, including leveraging key analytics and self-service activity indicators. Investments in these indicators will be a tremendous boon to residential students as well as remote learners, for the learning landscape of the future is irrevocably a mix of both. The value proposition of a college education can reflect stronger outcomes based on proven technologies.

The pandemic has also highlighted the desire to commit to community service and to find new ways for building connections across our communities. This extends to opportunities for institutions to leverage their alumni and support networks to develop mentoring programs and build partnerships for career pathways during a time of hiring uncertainty. Creating partnerships will not only enhance career programming but can also sustain institutional loyalty, as students perceive and appreciate the strong network associated with the institution. This programming can be expanded upon as institutional activities return to campus, but also retained in a remote capacity if needed in the future. During this time of social disruption, students will also naturally seek peer networks. Institutions can assist in development of cohort models built on affinities and shared experiences, interests or backgrounds. These structures will provide students an additional avenue for engagement that may develop into more organic and sustained interactions as they eventually return to campus.

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