

HIGHER EDUCATION COVID-19 RESPONSE: SHARPENING YOUR CLOUD ERP PLAN AND BUSINESS CASE FOR CHANGE

Higher education technology and business leaders across the country are demonstrating how effectively they collaborate, lead and respond dynamically to COVID-19 challenges to support their faculty, students and staff. Through this pandemic, there are opportunities to proactively take steps to position institutions to lower operating costs, adopt leading practices, reduce administrative burden and become a more agile organization before the next disruption.

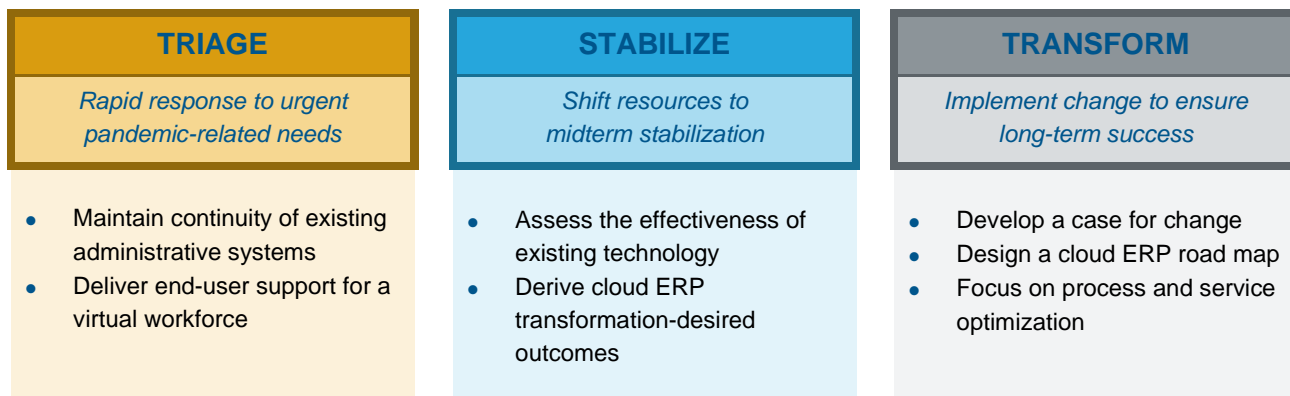
The past decade has proven that cloud enterprise resource planning (ERP) programs can enable high-impact, large-scale transformation. The COVID-19 pandemic provides an even stronger reason to initiate a case and plan for change in the near term.

As face-to-face meetings have been supplanted by daily video conferences, many have been abruptly reminded how technology supports every aspect of higher education. It is clear now more than ever that cloud ERP systems present an increasingly stable path to ensuring your institution is prepared to support the needs of the workforce and students of today and tomorrow. [Cloud ERP solutions](#) address every facet of your mission — from enrolling and supporting students, using predictive analytics in academic advising, procuring research equipment or requesting time off on a mobile device.

A disruptive event such as the COVID-19 pandemic can help institutional leaders further understand and appreciate the need for overhauling administrative technology, service delivery models, support strategies and processes to improve service and reduce recurring costs. Higher education has encountered disruption before and will face it again. Getting on a path to deploy enterprise cloud systems and optimized processes is a key step in optimizing long-term adaptability and sustainability.

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.

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



Triage: Verify Access to and Support for Administrative Systems

Most institutions have moved rapidly to remote operations in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, requiring the activation of business continuity measures, particularly for back-office functions such as payroll, accounts payable, cash management and research administration. Sustaining these operations in a remote delivery model that may persist for months requires specialized equipment and secure access.

Users of core finance, human resources, payroll and student applications continue to need access, support and training while they work remotely. Employee onboarding and user security provisioning must be accessible while still ensuring proper controls. Help desk and training functions must move online, perhaps leveraging technologies such as Zoom, Google or Microsoft Teams for other ongoing campus communications.

Stabilize: Assess Current Technology Effectiveness

The COVID-19 pandemic is forcing organizations to introduce flexible work arrangements and support a virtual workforce. In many cases, we anticipate these temporary adjustments will be extended into long-term policy changes that necessitate innovative technology solutions.

Higher education leaders should assess the effectiveness of their current administrative technology platforms to meet the needs of an evolving, flexible workforce environment. This evaluation should include a detailed review of ERP, customer relationship management (CRM), third-party solutions and ancillary systems, as well as the infrastructure and skilled personnel required to maintain these applications.

Modern cloud-based ERP solutions with native mobile capabilities encourage process standardization and reduce administrative burden for administrators and end users alike. Consolidating functions once served by multiple best-of-breed applications into a single, integrated ERP solution presents an opportunity for institutions to refocus employees' time from administrative-support to mission-support activities.

Transform: Develop the Case for Change and Cloud ERP Road Map

The COVID-19 crisis has highlighted areas for improvement in administrative systems and business processes. Once the crisis settles from triaging urgent COVID-19 business continuity needs, leaders should get a clearer picture of where core institutional processes failed or simply were bloated with years of workarounds and tribal knowledge. This provides insight that must inform future-state operating standards and institutional goals.

- Where can quality, responsiveness and cost reduction gains be realized?
- Which service levels are most critical to be improved?
- What functions are redundant or vary unnecessarily across administrative and academic units?
- What risk exposure must be mitigated?
- What information required for decision making is unavailable or difficult to obtain?

The answers to these questions will further inform the need for a [transformational cloud ERP initiative](#) as well as provide a baseline for measuring the success of such an effort. Methodically moving through planning, scoping and readiness activities will instill confidence in executive leaders and institution stakeholders that such an investment directly supports overarching institutional priorities.

Internal and external factors, such as demographics, government funding and evolving technology, have led to increasing pressure to [operate efficiently and effectively](#) in order to remain competitive. The COVID-19 crisis will amplify these pressures, particularly as it jeopardizes critical revenue streams such as tuition, athletics, and federal and state funding. In the months to come, institutions that are not already on a path to move to the cloud will need to begin these efforts to best position the institution to sustain its ability to serve its students, faculty and staff, particularly in the face of future disruption.

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