

HIGHER EDUCATION COVID-19 RESPONSE: STRATEGIC PLANNING BEYOND THE PANDEMIC

Today, as higher education institutions face the fallout from the COVID-19 pandemic, it's more important than ever to engage in effective strategic planning to preserve resources, increase agility and deploy new business models to meet emerging needs. Importantly, this is not merely another task for the emergency response team but represents an opportunity for an institutionwide approach. The future will indeed be different, and many of the assumptions under which colleges and universities operate will fundamentally evolve.

The global impact of COVID-19 has confronted college and university leaders with sudden and complex public health and economic challenges. But this moment also allows institutions to reaffirm their fundamental purpose, recommit to their core values, and build a long-term vision upon the foundation of their traditions and core strengths. In this context, clarifying strategy becomes critical to institutions seeking to optimize current operations and plan for an uncertain future.

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.

- **Triage:** Respond rapidly to urgent pandemic-related needs.
- **Stabilize:** Shift resources to midterm stabilization.
- **Transform:** Implement change to ensure long-term success.



As in virtually all areas of institutional management, higher education leaders are likely to find themselves confronting three often overlapping phases in their efforts to rethink their strategic priorities, each of which will focus on a distinct set of actions. The bulk of strategic planning will, by definition, fall largely in the transformation period.

Transform: A Refreshed Strategy Using a Dual Transformation Framework

A dual transformation approach to strategic planning requires institutional leaders to focus on both the near-term optimization of current services (transformation A) and the long-term innovation of their business (transformation B). The goal of transformation A is to strengthen and reposition the core functions of the institution; the goal of transformation B is to identify and execute on opportunities for market differentiation and long-term growth.

Review Strategic Plans and Market Trends

A futurist, someone once said, is a person who talks about the present to the 98% of us who live in the past. Clearly, no one has a crystal ball. In many respects, the best view we can get of the future results from looking very closely at the present. For leaders focused on transformation, that means looking closely at market trends related to the labor market, federal and state budget allocations, consumer preferences, and competitor behavior.

Concurrent with that close examination of present trends, leaders should revisit the most recent strategic plan and ask whether its priorities fit present and anticipated market conditions. Is the vision still achievable and focused on the most important outcomes? Is there a commitment to the values articulated to motivate desired behavior? Will resources need to be reallocated in order to cope with immediate pressures? Once there's a point of view on the current state, it's time to consider the future in a new way.

Deploy a Future-Oriented Approach to Ensure Alignment

Most strategic planning efforts can be characterized as instances of present-forward thinking, relying on recent performance and assessments of current conditions to inform decisions about the deployment of existing capabilities. This approach can be effective when markets are stable. However, when the environment is fraught with uncertainty, taking a “future-back” orientation to planning allows leadership to see beyond the present.

This approach requires engaging in scenario planning and considering how the institution and its students, competitors, funders and other stakeholders might behave in the distant future.

- How might the potential for recurring pandemic conditions affect longer-term educational delivery?
- How might demographics and migration affect the addressable market?
- How might growing numbers of professions seek to embed education in employees' working lives?
- How might competitors respond to current trends, and how should institutions shift their positioning relative to others?

Develop Predictive Models, Contingencies and Future Road Map

Another critical activity for strategic leaders during the transformation phase will be to develop more agile business models and contingency plans that take into consideration what they have learned from the industry's emergency response to the COVID-19 pandemic thus far.

First, convene a small working group of creative and influential academic and administrative leaders to think beyond the current pandemic, align on market trends and consider scenarios regarding the longer-term environment. Based on those scenarios, translate anticipated market needs into a set of transformative initiatives, identifying resources and operational considerations for each. Finally, update the strategic plan to reposition core operations for sustainability and long-term growth.

When developing and evaluating scenarios, institutions should focus on understanding the “jobs to be done” for students, faculty and other stakeholders. Post-pandemic, students will inevitably have a fresh set of concerns and expectations. They will expect their personal, financial and health needs to be addressed, in addition to achieving a return on their investment and developing the necessary skills for thriving, sustainable careers.

In an increasingly competitive marketplace, the need for institutions to differentiate their value proposition to a more informed, albeit nervous set of education consumers becomes even more urgent. For institutions to rise to this challenge, leaders must reimagine the educational experience and optimize their strategic planning efforts by focusing on the “jobs” that students and other stakeholders are expecting them to do.

Authored by Peter Stokes and Chris Slatter

Access other educational resources on our [COVID-19 resource page](#). For more information, [contact us](#).