

North Atlantic SCUP Symposium: “Lessons from the Fall”

North Atlantic SCUP presented a quartet of panels in November 2020 around the topic, “Lessons from the Fall.” Dr. Persis Rickes was invited to make introductory remarks for the two-day virtual symposium as well as to moderate the opening panel on Academic Affairs, “Mission Critical: Academic Delivery in the Time of COVID and Beyond.”

Higher education is at an inflection point and the solutions that worked in the past will work no longer. Some of the issues confronting higher education pre-pandemic – including a looming demographic cliff, shrinking resources, and aging facilities – have only been magnified. When the shift to remote learning took place in March, it has been suggested that higher education institutions powered through two years of change in just two months, resulting in “the new normal.”

There have been notable challenges, however, and the question is to what extent can higher education recover – or has it sustained insurmountable harm? For example, early Fall 2020 data indicates that undergraduate enrollment is down 4% from last Fall. Most concerning, FIRST-time enrollment is down by a staggering 16%. It is too early to tell what proportion of these potential students are taking a gap year – and what proportion has opted out of HE altogether.

Academic Affairs

While perhaps one-fourth of campuses successfully resumed face-to-face classes, the majority went the remote learning route. Not all students, however, fared equally well during this transition, given inequities in access to technology and other resources.

Online teaching was also new to many faculty who are now learning themselves to juggle multiple teaching modalities – sometimes even simultaneously. And everyone appears to be suffering from Zoom fatigue.

Student Life

Student life all but evaporated with the shift to remote instruction. Learning happens not only in the classroom, but across campus through co-curricular engagement. Institutions are grappling with ways to retain and foster this critical sense of connectedness and community.

Meanwhile, growing proportions of Gen Z students have been focusing on the value proposition of translating their educational experience into employment, a trend that will likely accelerate post-pandemic.

Financial

Institutions are in clear financial distress as revenue streams have dried up. Housing and dining alone generate up to one-third of the income at smaller residential institutions.

The academic research enterprise has been upended, impacting not only institutional revenues but faculty tenure clocks.

Academic programs have been slashed.

Some institutions have announced tuition re-sets.

As campuses shut down, most of the day-to-day institutional operations were curtailed or put on hold. As a result, fewer personnel are needed. By the end of August, higher education as a whole had eliminated 350,000 jobs, or 1 in 14 employees (7%). In public colleges and universities, 1 in 7 positions are in a holding pattern right now (14%). Some are certainly temporary losses but other positions may never be restored.

The same is true for institutions. The Chronicle of Higher Education anticipates that within the next few years, 100 colleges and universities could be pursuing mergers and another 100 institutions could be closing – and that’s just the beginning.

Facilities

Pre-pandemic, institutions were grappling with the approaching demographic cliff of 2026. That cliff has eroded, which means that many institutions are discovering that they suddenly have a deficit of students and a surfeit of space. Some are consolidating operations into fewer buildings and mothballing underperforming ones. Or they are taking advantage of the space to address near-term social-distancing requirements.

The pandemic experience has demonstrated that there are opportunities to potentially recoup office space, as some individuals work from home permanently. Meanwhile, if hybrid teaching modalities are retained when students and faculty do return to campus, that could effectively halve the amount of instructional space needed. Something to think about.

Clearly, there are some silver linings that can be leveraged. Rather than simply accepting the current state as the “new normal,” we should instead be working toward shaping the “next normal” as we collectively envision the post-pandemic college.