

5 Bigger and Better Ideas for Fall 2020

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It's time for campus leaders to start generating more innovative options for fall 2020, which means considering some wilder ideas, argues José Antonio Bowen, who offers some suggestions.

By

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Any way you slice it, this fall is going to be hard on everyone. Higher education institutions are desperate for some tuition revenue, but we all know we are not offering the usual college experience. So far, most of us are planning some combination of:

- **Fewer students on campus.** Some institutions (like the University of Texas) are simply offering the option of taking remote classes only (but with no reduced tuition), while others (like Bowdoin College) are only letting first-year students come to campus along with a few senior honors thesis students and those who have home situations that make online learning nearly impossible. Stanford University plans to rotate students with half on the campus for one quarter and then another half the next.
- **Fewer students in class.** Many campuses have made all large classes online only and are reducing the capacity of rooms. Students spaced six feet apart and wearing masks has led to its own set of concerns about pedagogy: what kind of active learning will work, for example. But recent analysis suggests that colleges are massively overestimating how many students they can safely have in spaces. A Cornell study found that colleges should be planning for only 13 to 24 percent of capacity. A California Institute of Technology study assumed eight feet of distance, since longer proximity demands more distance and airflow is uncertain. The researchers concluded that 11 percent was the maximum safe capacity, which allows for only 16 students in a 149-seat, 2,000 square-foot classroom.



- **Social isolation outside class.** Students can expect singles, bathroom assignments, boxed meals and severe restrictions that they won't like. But in the words of the most recent academic mathematical models: "It is extremely important that students refrain from *all* contact outside of academic and residential settings."

What that means for students is less incentive to come, and if they do come (and pay with no refund option), the prospect of isolation and quarantine on top of a compromised education. For faculty members, that means some combination of virtual and face-to-face teaching (i.e., more work) and preparation even in small classes for some students in quarantine and online for some of the semester.

Part of the problem is that we always want to replicate rather than innovate. Forget about the past. This disruption is real and massive. It is time for campus leaders to look at some wilder ideas -- even some beyond the 15 scenarios Joshua Kim and Edward Maloney have proposed -- although a few of my suggestions are updates of those. Before you say no, consider the following:

- What you are currently considering is already a lot of extra work, is motivated by a potential budgetary collapse, is unappealing to almost everyone, could fail terribly and will increase inequity.
- Really big ideas are iterative. None of these are fully baked, and all will need adaptation to your campus and students. Many could be combined, and maybe only a piece of something will work for you.
- Yes, these ideas might fail, but everything we are trying comes with risk. Which is most likely to prepare your institution for success this fall and in a few years? Try first asking, "How might we make this work?" and generate a few more detailed alternatives for your campus. Then decide which two or three to pursue in greater detail.
- Yes, time is short, but the situation is also changing quickly: What will you do if your state demands a two-week quarantine for students coming from California, Arizona, Texas or Florida? Is your campus already reporting COVID cases in staff and students? Now is the time to start generating more options, like the following:

No. 1: Quarantined residential learning communities. Groups of families are deciding they can cooperate and quarantine together: after two weeks of individual quarantine, they remove the social barriers between their households and act like one extended family. Similarly, small groups of faculty, staff and students could live together in isolated clusters for a few weeks or an entire semester *without* social distancing after testing or a short quarantine. Think of this like one of the 38 Oxford colleges: an isolated social and educational unit as part of a larger university. Students might need to isolate in dorm units, but faculty could quarantine at home.

This unit would have no need for low density. Students could eat, sleep, party and have sex together. Some older dorms have their own dining halls, but a housing unit could also eat in its own group shift in the main dining hall without restrictions. Even double rooms, with some reserved singles for quarantine, perhaps, might be fine. Faculty who were willing and able to live in the dorm might teach a double load for a semester (or perhaps a shorter block within the semester of four or eight weeks) and then be off the next block. (They would have to pledge to self-isolate when away from the campus to be most safe.) As is the case at Oxford and Cambridge, individual colleges would offer limited subjects, but students could take virtual courses from any other part of the university. But this way, they would at least get some of the other social benefits of college and some great face-to-face classes.

The advantages would include almost full capacity and full revenue. People would have to social distance when they leave their dorms but would get to socialize within their cohort. If the entire campus is isolated in this way, then after two weeks, larger groups could be allowed to mix -- depending on the risk your institution wants to take.

This model would also work for graduate students in the same program. The incoming cohort of physics or history Ph.D.s will take some group of courses together anyway. Building a cohort might even increase retention and a sense of community.

No. 2: Big-problem interdisciplinary seminars. Offering a couple of larger interdisciplinary courses would create engagement, relevance and focus; allow for small group projects and experiences; and build community through shared experiences for students. It would allow for high-quality, asynchronous video content combined with synchronous small group, high-touch faculty and student interactions.

This is work that can be divided and shared. Not everyone has to design and teach every part of the course. If individual faculty are recording only a few lecture videos a semester, they can be really good, and not everyone would have to or would want to do what is a highly specialized skill.

Imagine every student on campus taking one of three or four big ideas courses (or even just one big course on the pandemic). Individual faculty could still supervise small groups doing individual projects. The planning could also be done virtually in large interdisciplinary committees. Many of us have now attended a virtual conference, and students routinely use social media and other virtual tools to think about how to solve large social problems.

Such an interdisciplinary seminar could focus on racial equity. Plenty of naysayers might say that chemistry or engineering is immune from such issues, but what would happen if you really looked at the potential for how everyone feels in these classes? Why are certain diseases and projects funded? Who benefits? How might science be done more equitably?

Again, not everyone has to design an entire semester of material, but could you change your campus culture and curriculum going forward if the science faculty focused on two weeks of content but spent the rest of the semester involved in this collaborative exploration? I challenge you to think of a more important or transformative project for your institution.

You could go even further and create a single campus seminar or focus virtually all the fall curriculum on race and equity. You would probably still want to offer a few other required courses for majors, but you could design a large course for everyone that tackles a problem that virtually everyone thinks matters right now. Groups of biology or history majors could work on their own projects, but the institution would make a bold commitment to something that is engaging and important. What about how to do campus policing and public safety more equitably? Such topics could also be the focus of a new gap year program, as I describe next.

No. 3: Structured gap years. Gap years (and structured group internships) have been growing in popularity and often result in students who return to campus with more focus and maturity. They were fourth in the *Inside Higher Ed* survey of what appealed to students for this fall and should get more attention.

Gap years struggle at the concept level, because we think of them as lots of disparate individual events without a revenue stream. But if colleges designed them, both problems could be eliminated. Could you charge students a small amount and then hire them out to do work for someone else? Yes, if you really provide value and structure. And if you priced it right, federal aid might cover it. Could you combine some existing data analytics, leadership, sociology or public policy course with a problem that your community might be facing and let students work on it for a year? There are countless new local COVID-19 problems to add to all of the existing ones.

You might also be able to house students while they do such work. That wouldn't solve the density problem, but for many campuses, underenrollment this fall may, in fact, be the problem. If keeping students away but engaged is the goal, then a gap year should be virtual.

Champlain College is charging about a third of its \$21,000 tuition for a six-credit Virtual Gap Program described as “a semester-long, inspiring journey into academic college life, holistic well-being, and finding meaning through virtual internship and service experiences.” The Global Citizen Academy offers leadership training and usually a global fellowship, but this year it will be virtual.

No. 4: Virtual and global partnerships. Thanks to the internet, forming a global network and having conversations with people on the ground in different countries is certainly much easier than visiting those countries these days. Faculty already have

connections around the world; perhaps those connections could be used to create some student projects with a partner university, organization or even corporation somewhere far away. For example, many English-speaking students attend Indian universities, and India also has a growing number of new liberal arts universities and a shortage of faculty.

This could be a simple virtual exchange program, with professors swapping teaching assignments in another country. More complicated but better would be to use this opportunity to create much more diverse classrooms. Most campuses suffer from some problematic homogeneity in classroom discussions -- students are from similar places, backgrounds or academic orientations.

Normally, we think of local when we look for partnerships or consortium, and there is a benefit in sharing services, academic support or course design with another institution. But with more classes going virtual, you could pick a partner institution or two that has a complementary mission but is across the state, country or planet. If your student population is too homogeneous, find an institution that has different students. Partner with a historically Black college or university, a Hispanic-serving institution or an institution that serves a different region, age or demographic. That will indeed create new problems, but it might also increase learning.

The Stevens Initiative of the Aspen Institute has resources (and even grants) to help you get started. It might just be a single project, like the COVID-19 Virtual Global Design Challenge that the Johns Hopkins University Center for Bioengineering Innovation and Design created this spring (with over 200 teams) or IREX's Global Solutions Sustainability Challenge, which uses a project-based learning model. You could look to share a course and create more diverse discussion groups or find a partner institution that already uses your learning management system -- although with Zoom as a common format for so many classes, this approach is much easier lift than you might imagine.

No. 5: Relationship-first hybrids. One common model for hybrid distance graduate programs is to start by bringing people together first; these are sometimes called low-residency programs. The key is that they usually start with a people living together for perhaps a week or two, so they can get to know each other. As has been noted about this spring: relationships already formed in person are easier to continue online. Low-residency programs were designed to allow an international group to meet with each other, become friends and then leave but still learn together while dispersed all over the world. During a time of travel restrictions, that won't work, but the idea might be adapted to our need to limit physical interactions, even if we live near each other.

In this model, you could meet your students where they are -- literally. You already know where your students live -- in which cities, if you are a national institution, or which neighborhoods, if you are a local one. You might simply create neighborhood or local

“cohorts” of students who could get together physically to create some relational bonds. Let students know who is already around them at your institution.

To create true relationship-first hybrid courses (probably mostly for regional institutions, but think also about your feeder schools), students would get together initially in groups physically with the professor. That would require social distancing, but being together physically, even for just a day, can create a sense of connection. You could use your largest spaces and rotate who comes when.

For the first day of class (and perhaps once every two weeks or once a month after that), groups would meet in person and then spend the rest of the time online. Online groups can create a similar sense of community, but for those of us who teach mostly face-to-face, this might be a safe and easy way to simulate the positive feelings of community that we took into our online transition this past spring. For commuter campuses or community colleges, for example, this could significantly improve student engagement.

From Tactical to Strategic

A crisis always shifts short-term attention to the tactical -- or “business continuity,” or how we keep doing what we were doing. But strategy is about what will improve our odds to thrive into the future.

Now is an important time to ask strategic questions like: Which of our courses and degree programs can really only be taught residually, and which might now be moved -- and even improved -- online? That does not mean the end of residential education; the value of community has only been affirmed by the pandemic. But we have also learned that working from home can sometimes be more productive than in person and that well-designed online learning can be effective. You have new data, market conditions, assumptions and behaviors to consider.

Your planning time for fall is short, but at least some portion of your time and some collective group on your campus needs to be thinking wildly outside the box right now. You need options. You also need to be thinking about the bigger what-if scenarios and the “how might we” questions. Try a pilot program of something -- anything -- new this fall, just in case your attempts to recreate fall 2019 fail. Strategy is the art of sacrifice. What do you need to be considering now that can also improve your odds for success years into the future?

Bio

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