What can we learn from this pandemic?

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What can we learn?

Higher education has been, and continues to be, profoundly disrupted due to the emergence of COVID-19. Colleges and universities are managing through significant changes in their operations, while striving to maintain the health and wellness of their community; to comply with new and developing laws, regulations and ordinances; to care for their students, faculty and staff; and to weigh short- and long-term changes to their operating model to ensure the continued success of the institution.

Given the breadth and scale of the response at most institutions, now is an opportune time to reflect on those actions taken and assess their effectiveness, replicability and potential enhancement opportunities. Research suggests that there may be a resurgence of COVID-19 in the fall, which may require similar responses to those that were adopted in the early spring of 2020 — not to mention a separate pandemic that may have similar levels of disruption in the future.

To prepare for these potential crises, institutions should assess the emergency preparedness and business continuity efforts associated with their COVID-19 response. Institutions should also evaluate what long-term opportunities exist to update, enhance or transform their operating models to take advantage of advances in technology, as well as newly entrenched work-from-home preferences and capabilities.

The following three sections highlights the different phases of crisis response, specifically as they relate to higher education institutions. While the hope is that a pandemic such as COVID-19 ends quickly and does not return, learnings from your institution’s response will support not only potential responses to a pandemic resurgence, but also will enable better responses to future crises.

1. **Immediate crisis response**: What actions should be taken in the days immediately following the outbreak of a pandemic on the campus of an institution?

2. **Pandemic operational continuity**: What changes in the institution’s operations, instruction and research were required during a long-term suspension of normal operations due to a pandemic?

3. **Future-state planning**: What changes that were forced out of necessity have the potential to turn into permanent changes? What long-term changes in student, faculty and staff preferences will be necessary to remain competitive? Considering that many institutions may be facing significant economic challenges for several years, what long-term operational and financial changes are being adopted?
Immediate crisis response

Overall emergency preparedness plan and governance

As your institution became aware of the scale and impact of the COVID-19 virus, was there a pandemic emergency preparedness plan in place? If not, was a plan developed contemporaneously, and could it be replicated in the future? Now is the time to review your response to the crisis, to understand what crisis management elements worked well and to identify potential areas for improvement. A thorough “after-action” debrief will allow your institution to be better prepared to respond to future unanticipated crises.

Considerations for the future include analyzing the following questions about the current crisis:

• How were growing concerns across the institution monitored, aggregated and analyzed?
• How and when did disparate groups come together in their assessment of increasing threats?
• How was a crisis ultimately “declared”?
• Was a timeline of events maintained, including a list of actions taken?
• What was the governance supporting the crisis management activities? Was there a crisis committee with cross-sectional representation from the university, and was there a leader with the appropriate amount of delegated authority? Was the crisis committee sustainable for the length of the response?

• When thinking about communications, how were the institution’s emergency response communicated to faculty, staff, students and critical third parties?
• Was a central resource or communication center established?
• Was an employee/student hotline or call center set up?
• Was there a mechanism to obtain feedback from stakeholders?

Functional areas

Listed below are after-action review items and/or considerations for actions that were taken in the days immediately following when your institution realized it needed to rapidly transition to a new operating model: a majority remote learning, research and work environment, with only essential staff remaining on-site.

Operations

• Were any adjustments needed to expand remote work capabilities, either through new or expanded licenses of remote work collaboration tools? Many institutions leveraged Zoom, Microsoft Teams or Google Meet, some of which offered temporary discounts for educational institutions.
• Were adjustments needed to allow remote access of business-critical systems, such as two-factor authentication? Such systems could include those within the registrar’s and bursar’s offices, the enterprise resource planning system and the treasury/banking systems.
- Did students, faculty and staff have devices (laptops, tablets, etc.) they could take home? Were asset-tracking systems or programs in place for newly provisioned machines?
  - Were other peripherals needed to conduct work, such as monitors or printers/scanners?

## IT resiliency and security

- Were key systems and/or the network able to handle the transition to using a virtual network from a capacity standpoint?
- Was the institution able to maintain its operations and cyber security posture, whether through multi-device controls, remote identities, availability of access/use of VPN and/or virtual desktops?
- Were IT investments identified in order to reduce the burden for future events that would require similar levels of remote work or changes in the operating model?
- Were physical spaces with critical IT assets secured and prepared for potentially lengthy periods when there were limited to no IT personnel?

## Research

- Were researchers provided adequate guidance to determine if they were conducting essential research that could continue on campus, or if they needed to transition to remote research?
- How quickly were researchers able to transition to remote research?
  - Was research data still available in a remote environment?
  - Were collaboration tools available for research teams?
- Were shut-down protocols shared with principal investigators (PIs)?
  - Did this consider animal and human clinical trial research protocols?

## Students

- How were students sent away from university owned or operated residential buildings?
- If students were abroad, how were they brought home?
- For students who had difficulty returning home (due to international or personal reasons), how were they accommodated?

## Education

- How were faculty prepped to conduct remote/virtual education?
  - How were labs — and other types of learning and instruction, such as dance, sculpture and music — accommodated?

## Operations

- How were essential workers determined? Were those decisions documented and in alignment with local/state work-from-home guidance?
- How were personal protective equipment (PPE) and cleaning supplies sourced and allocated to essential workers?
  - Police/security
  - Facilities/custodial
  - Postal services
  - Information technology
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Pandemic operational continuity

Overall business continuity

As your institution transitioned from immediate emergency response to an ongoing modified pandemic operating model, have you documented the decisions the institution made, including an evaluation of the operating, financial and regulatory impact? This may help your institution prepare for a future crisis and speed the transition to an efficient and effective pandemic operating model.

Below are additional considerations for a pandemic after-action review. These considerations may be worth incorporating into your formal pandemic debrief and future business continuity planning.

Financial and budget

- If you were not able to achieve your desired class size, will that have a continuing impact on the institution? Will it be possible to admit transfer students in subsequent years to return to a “normal” enrollment to limit the financial impact of a decreased incoming class size in the period after the pandemic?

Enrollment and admissions

- What budgeting exercises were performed to assess immediate and long-term cost savings? Were decisions made to reduce payroll expenses through pay cuts, furloughs or terminations? What impact did those decisions have on the overall year-end budget, and were there other unforeseen repercussions of those decisions?
- Was the profitability of academic offerings and departments examined to determine if curriculum changes needed to be made?

- How did the institution modify its enrollment and admissions process? What factors were evaluated, and how quickly could a similar decision be made again?
- Were changes needed in applicant quality to meet class-size expectations?
- Was the tuition discount rate consistent with the prior year, or was additional discounting needed to encourage students to accept offers?
- Was there a significant drop off in international students? Did that have a large impact on the operating budget?
- Are additional outreach activities planned to encourage international student applications to return to pre-pandemic levels?
- What preparations were made to model the endowment impact for an economic downturn?
  - Did your institution adjust its endowment spending rate during the pandemic?
  - Was liquidity increased through lines of credit, sales of investments, additional borrowings or other means?
- Were there any issues procuring PPE for essential workers? Were there existing stockpiles to leverage?
- What new business processes became necessary, and were effective internal controls put in place to review and approve them? Consider widespread room and board refunds, student support costs and international faculty/staff/student costs, etc.
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Technology and information security

- How did the university respond to increased instances of cyber attacks and phishing, as well as malware and ransomware attacks?
- Were VPN security, multi-factor authentication and incident response protocols assessed during the pandemic to determine if they were operating as intended?
- Were data protection guidelines still able to be followed? Were existing systems and processes able to be deployed in a remote environment?
  - Including research, student, payroll and other sensitive data.
- Were non-standard user devices (i.e., employee-owned laptops) enabled for remote work, and were any risks and exceptions related to those devices cataloged?
- Was an interim assessment against data protection regulatory requirements conducted to confirm that remote technologies and practices were able to be met?
  - If regulators allowed temporary exceptions, were those exceptions tracked and actively worked to remediate in the event the temporary exception period was terminated?

Employee Well-Being

- How were COVID-19 information and support resources made available to students, faculty and staff?
- How were decisions made to support essential workers who became sick or were exposed to the virus?
- How were decisions made to compensate or furlough/terminate workers whose jobs were obviated, or who were unable to work remotely?
  - Was extra time off provided to be used at employee discretion?
- Were contact-tracing programs established? Were they mostly manual efforts, or were they supported through contact-tracing technology?
- Was COVID-19 testing provided to employees the university deemed essential workers?
- Was PPE provided and made available depending on the nature of work performed by essential workers?
- Were mental health, coaching and other well-being services provided to employees?

Space

Did certain spaces (such as older buildings) suffer damage as a result of prolonged absence? Were there unexpected costs related to unoccupied buildings? How could this be addressed in future periods of prolonged vacancy?

Control environment

- Once transitioned to 100% remote, did key controls need modifications to maintain their intended design?
  - Did those changes weaken or enhance the effectiveness of those controls?
- In looking function by function, were process weaknesses and control gaps identified — either due to system, process or “key person availability”? Examples include:
  - Supply chain: the ability to deliver supplies and/or equipment to essential functions.
  - Accounts payable: the ability to submit, process and approve purchase orders and invoices.
  - Treasury: the ability to approve payments and manage cash.
Staff performance

- What strategies were employed to maintain worker productivity during the pandemic? Were they successful? Were there opportunities to obtain performance feedback?
  - Were there differences in approach for exempt vs. non-exempt employees?
  - What about employees subject to collective bargaining agreements?
- Broadly, was employee support sufficient?
  - Did employees (both essential and non-essential workers) receive COVID-19 communications on how to adjust their job duties? Did those communications include who to contact with questions and locations for FAQs that were prepared?
  - Were employees provided with adequate IT support to both conduct their job duties and maintain cybersecurity and IT resiliency? Were some jobs/functions affected more than others, and, if so, what changes could be made in the future?

Education delivery

- Regarding the underlying technology that supported the institution’s transition to remote learning, has your institution conducted an assessment to determine what has been working well, what needs to be fixed in the short term, and what are potential enhancements to consider long term?
- Were education delivery technologies organized and distributed centrally, along with support and leading practices?
  - Including considering the differences in class type, such as lectures, labs and discussion groups.
  - Did guidance include administration of exams/testing?
- For faculty, did this change the amount of time they need to focus on instruction, vs. research and other responsibilities?

Research

- Did students have access to necessary resources (laptops, broadband internet connection, etc.)? How was any lack of access addressed?
- How did students who required special accommodations fare, including the learning disabled, physically challenged, mentally/emotionally challenged and others.

Athletics

- Assuming most, if not all, athletic programs were suspended (including camps and clinics), how did the university maintain engagement with current team members, incoming recruits and potential recruits?
- How did the university manage ticket sales, revenue and any refunds that were processed?
The significant upheaval caused by the pandemic has resulted in profound disruption for almost all colleges and universities. This has required institutions to undertake rapid changes to maintain operations and continue to care for their communities of students, faculty and staff. The post-pandemic future timeline remains uncertain, and a modified pandemic-based operating model may continue until there is an effective vaccine or therapy for COVID-19. As institutions start thinking about a post-COVID-19 future, they should also think about adjustments made during the pandemic that may be beneficial on a go-forward basis. Additionally, some changes from the old ways of doing things may be necessary to adapt to changes in consumer (student, faculty and staff) preferences brought about by the pandemic, such as remote work flexibility, and hybrid in-person and remote learning options.

Below are considerations for your institution as you begin to plan for the post-COVID-19 future.

### Education delivery

- Is there a benefit to offering an ongoing hybrid model that mixes remote learning with in-person learning experiences — either because of preferences from students or faculty, or to accommodate short-term disruptions from life events?
  - Will your institution offer different price points for different learning experiences? Would you be able to compete with other online degree programs on price?
  - How will you offer unique digital interactions?
  - How will an online degree be viewed from a value perspective, including by employers, graduate schools, students and parents?
  - What incremental costs would be necessary to create these new remote learning degrees, and what type of financial modeling is needed to project a return on investment?

### Business processes

- Did the transformation to remote operations identify any business processes that can be streamlined?
- Can technology be implemented to enhance the effectiveness or efficiency of processes? Consider increased system integration, RPA, analytics and workflow software, etc.
- Is there any consideration of making changes to the current insource/outsource status of certain functions?

### Space planning

Were some units or departments able to work from home successfully? Could that permanently decrease space needs for the university?
Summary

The impact of COVID-19 is ongoing, and the future remains uncertain regarding what the lasting impacts will be for the higher education industry. However, now is the time to engage in critical self-reflection on the actions and decisions your institution was required to make during the start of the pandemic, while institutional memories are still fresh.

A robust assessment of risks, actions and organizational capabilities will allow your institution to not only better prepare for a COVID-19 resurgence, but it will also enhance your ability to respond to other “black swan” events if they occur. Additionally, there may be previously unseen opportunities to increase organizational effectiveness and cost efficiency based on how your institution responded. Periods of great change can offer tremendous opportunities to challenge the status quo and envision what the near- and long-term future of your institution may look like.

Contributors

Matt Booth, Partner, National Higher Education Risk Leader, PwC US
matt.booth@pwc.com

Chris Cox, Partner, National Higher Education Assurance Leader, PwC US
christopher.cox@pwc.com

Tom Gaudrault, Managing Director, National Higher Education Chief of Staff, PwC US
thomas.k.gaudrault@pwc.com

John Powers, Director, PwC US
john.powers@pwc.com