The Unique Challenges Universities Face From COVID-19

Universities And Students Alike Seek In-Person Learning But Difficulties Remain

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has created health and humanitarian challenges for millions around the world. While the first and foremost focus is on ensuring the health and safety of the global population, many industries and subpopulations are grappling with additional effects.
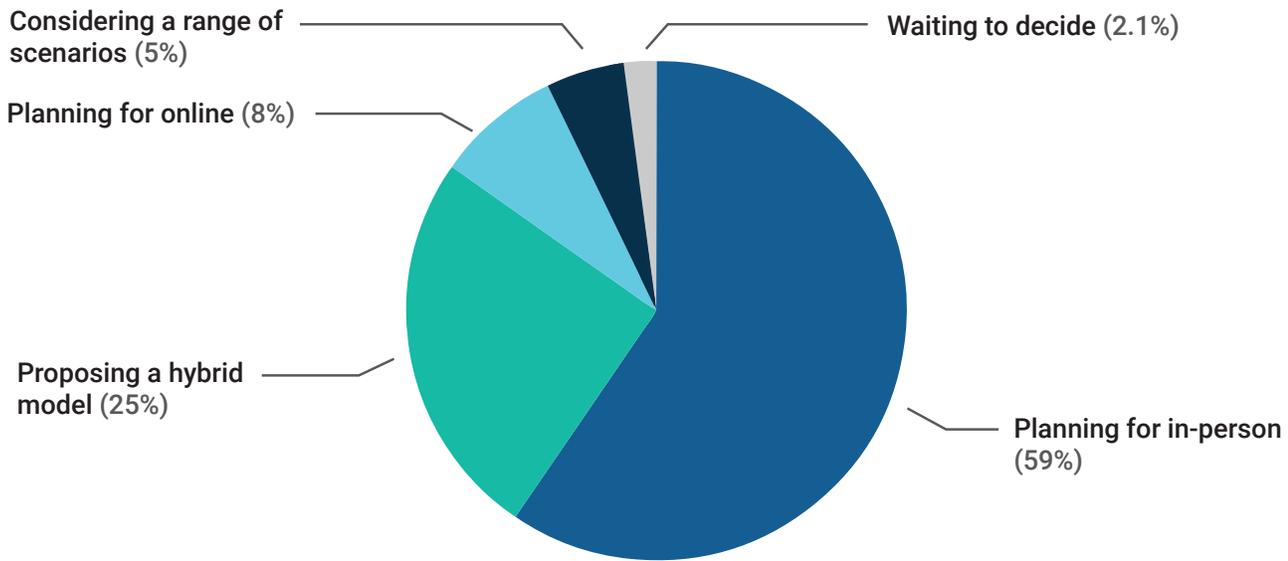
The higher education space was challenged during the spring semester, as many institutions were forced to make an emergency pivot to distance learning. While the suddenness of the pandemic did not leave desired time for preparation, higher education administrators have acknowledged that the spring semester left much to be desired. Among college presidents polled by *Inside Higher Ed*, just 31% said their college was very successful or extremely successful at maintaining student engagement, and only 17% scored their institution highly with regards to ensuring students' emotional well-being.[1]

The Presidents' sentiments regarding the challenges of distance learning align with those of their students. An Axios/College Reaction poll found that 77% of students say distance learning is worse or much worse than in-person classes. Many cited concerns over future job prospects and the effects of social isolation.[2]

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[1] https://www.insidehighered.com/digital-learning/article/2020/07/01/presidents-give-their-colleges-mixed-grades-remote-learning-how
[2] https://www.axios.com/college-students-summer-jobs-85205102-e7e9-401e-b92c-3fe05fd52de5.html

Given these challenges, it is unsurprising that 59% of universities are planning to be in-person this fall, with only 8% planning to be fully remote.[3] While reopening is preferable to students and institutions alike, the COVID-19 pandemic will undoubtedly require additional precautions and changes.
Barely half of college Presidents felt that very or extremely confident that they could ensure the safety of faculty, staff, and students residing on campus.[4] Universities are prompted with a number of novel considerations, including testing, contact tracing, and environmental and policy considerations.

Considering a range of scenarios (5%)

Planning for online (8%)

Waiting to decide (2.1%)

Proposing a hybrid model (25%)

Planning for in-person (59%)

Beyond quality of education, career prospects, and social opportunities, there is also a significant economic argument for reopening universities. Christina Paxson, the president of Brown University, asserted in a recent opinion piece for the *New York Times* entitled "College Campuses Must Reopen in the Fall. Here's How We Do It" that: "Higher education is also important to the U.S. economy. The sector employs about three million people and as recently as the 2017-18 school year pumped more than $600 billion of spending into the national gross domestic product. Colleges and universities are some of the most stable employers in municipalities and states. Our missions of education and research drive innovation, advance technology and support economic development."[5] A failure to reopen this fall will have significant negative effects on the communities within which universities reside, and the harm may well be irreparable.

Universities also face an unenviable challenge in supporting the mental health of their student body. The American College Health Association (ACHA) notes that "even prior to the pandemic, the demand for mental health services often outstripped campus resources. Innovative approaches to stretch those resources further will be needed as this pandemic continues to take its toll on the mental health of students, faculty, and staff." The ACHA notes how "enormous efforts to establish physical distancing" via remote learning "have resulted in isolation" and "emotional, social, and financial
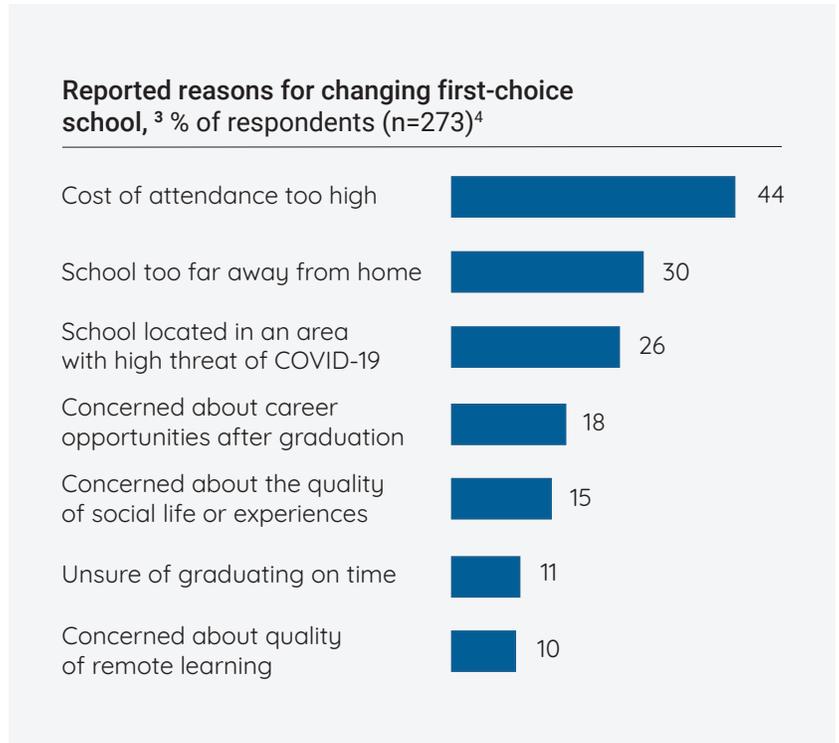
3 https://www.chronicle.com/article/Here-s-a-List-of-Colleges-/248626
4 Inside Higher Ed
5 https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/26/opinion/coronavirus-colleges-universities.html

disruptions."[6] Accordingly, institutions can reduce the mental and behavioral health burden on their student body by both reopening and lifting the pain of isolation and offering more significant on-campus mental health resources to treat, diagnose, and reduce the associated stigma.

Demonstrating leadership and installing robust COVID-19 safety protocols is an urgent imperative of a successful reopening. Of incoming students who have changed their first-choice school between January and April, 26% of students explicitly cited concerns that the school is located in an area with a high threat from COVID-19, and another 43% cited concerns around career opportunities, social experiences, or remote learning, all of which could be exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.[7] In order to maintain their 2020 enrollment, universities must explicitly signal to the incoming student body that the campus will be a safe and healthy environment for rich learning in the fall.

Reported reasons for changing first-choice school, [3] % of respondents (n=273)[4]

Reason	%
Cost of attendance too high	44
School too far away from home	30
School located in an area with high threat of COVID-19	26
Concerned about career opportunities after graduation	18
Concerned about the quality of social life or experiences	15
Unsure of graduating on time	11
Concerned about quality of remote learning	10

While universities' considerations are numerous, our discussions with these and other organizations indicate that three rise to the top: ensuring sufficient onsite clinical support to screen for symptoms and monitor other health data, developing the infrastructure and strategy for COVID-19 testing, and reevaluating the institution's physical footprint and accompanying policies to institutionalize safeguards.

Many universities will need to augment their health infrastructure to ensure clinical support exists to meet students' newfound health needs related to COVID-19 symptom screening, education, and counseling. It is unlikely that student health services centers will be sufficient to meet students' needs and expectations. Research published in the *International Journal of Health Care Quality Assurance* indicated that ~80% of students strongly agreed that they expect student health centers to be knowledgeable and safe. The actual perception was that under 15% of students actually feel that way.[8] Universities may need to augment their on-campus clinical support model to ensure that students feel confident that they will receive quality care as COVID-19-related questions and symptoms arise.

[6] https://www.acha.org/documents/resources/guidelines/ACHA_Considerations_for_Reopening_IHEs_in_the_COVID-19_Era_May2020.pdf
[7] https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/social-sector/our-insights/covid-19-and-us-higher-education-enrollment-preparing-leaders-for-fall
[8] https://129.7.121.11/doctoral/scm/docs/Fletcher-2.pdf

Matrix's COVID-19 work with leading organizations shows that bringing in an independent third-party highlighted the seriousness and commitment and built confidence with employees and other constituents.

Table II
Students' "strongly agree" responses

	Knowledgeable	Safe with interaction	Willingness to help	Up-to-date equipment	When services will be performed
Expectation	81.9	78.9	65	66.1	63.3
Perception	12.9	14	13.3	10.1	11.6
Difference	69	64.9	51.7	56.1	51.7

COVID-19 positive students are likely an unavoidable element of the fall semester – whether students are on-campus or otherwise. Quickly identifying symptoms, diagnosing cases, seeking testing, quarantining, and contact tracing will be an imperative. The ACHA listed "access to immediate viral testing for all students, faculty, or staff with symptoms" and "contact tracing, identification, and quarantine of all persons exposed to COVID-19" as the top-two capabilities that institutions should develop.[9] The ACHA posits that these capabilities can be developed by student health services or with a partner healthcare organization. Given the aforementioned perceptions of student health services, universities may seek to partner with a trusted healthcare organization that can bring COVID-19 testing at-scale, capable test administrators, and proven contact tracing capabilities to campus.

Lab capacity is crucial to any COVID-19 testing strategy

While clinical support, testing, and contact tracing will be imperatives upon students' return to campus, per the CDC, "the most important thing to do now is plan and prepare." This includes "review[ing], update[ing], and implement[ing] emergency operations plans," preparing procedures "for how to ensure safe housing for students," and "intensify[ing] cleaning and disinfection efforts."[10] Complying with the numerous CDC, FDA, and other regulatory guidelines is no small feat for institutions with significant footprints, numerous sites, and countless risks for spread. Universities will likely need to engage in a wholistic environmental assessment, including reviewing the layout and airflow of buildings and classrooms, designing appropriate cleaning and disinfecting protocols, identifying incentives for compliance, and more. Universities may need to engage an experienced third-party to ensure regulatory compliance or risk exposing themselves and their community to potentially significant exposure.

[9] https://www.acha.org/documents/resources/guidelines/ACHA_Considerations_for_Reopening_IHEs_in_the_COVID-19_Era_May2020.pdf
[10] https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/guidance-ihe-response.html

Environmental reviews for COVID-19 safety particularly benefit from the outside perspective and expertise of a partner.

Universities have strong incentives to reopen and welcome students back on campus this fall. These desires do not come without headwinds. Universities and their leaders must ensure that the appropriate infrastructure is in place to ensure that the student body can return with conviction and faculty and staff can safely restore the desired in-person dynamic with the students.

Matrix Medical Network has developed leading insights around COVID-19 mitigation and is providing COVID-19 clinical support, testing, and environmental reviews in support of large national retailers, protein producers, hospitality organizations, and the entertainment industry. Matrix Medical Network offers a leading COVID-19 testing platform focused on fast turnaround and highly accurate and reliable results to maximize workplace safety.