Next Practice: Campus Operations for Fall 2020

Introduction

VHB's Virtual Roundtable on May 28, 2020, brought together facility and design leaders from public and private universities and colleges across the country to explore the impacts of COVID-19 on higher education. Participants represented a wide variety of higher education touchpoints, including sustainability, capital planning, campus planning, facilities and safety, design and construction, and transportation departments. A summary of challenges, concerns, ideas, and creative thinking that were shared during the conversation are detailed below.

Summary

The discussion revealed the vast impact of COVID-19 on higher education institutions, as well as the array of similar responses across campuses, including mobilizing task forces, implementing enhanced safety procedures, exploring multiple campus-return scenarios, and rethinking master plans for a post-pandemic world. While participants did not go into the 2019-2020 academic year with a pandemic on their radar, **the majority noted students and their educators as being well-prepared for remote education, with administrators rising to the occasion** to aid students in need. University employees had a more difficult adjustment, depending on the school and workforce population. Universities are starting to announce fall 2020 plans for students, and it will look different than most expected, and no two schools will be alike. Lucrative athletic programs expect a surreal sports experience for players and fans alike, especially with travel restrictions and social distancing still in place. The roundtable discussion was robust and leaves us with hope for a safe return-to-campus for all and renewed interest in sustainable, future-proof places to live, learn, work, and play.

Topic 1: Immediate Response to COVID-19

Closing campus was an urgent decision which schools did not take lightly. **Spring Break coincided with the initial spread of COVID-19 in the U.S. Some universities took advantage of the planning time by adding another week to the break.** In most situations, campuses were depopulated of students immediately, with staff and faculty generally following right after. Multiple layers of required buy-in from administration created a barrier and slow decision-making process for schools to move forward more expeditiously.

STUDENTS

Universities known for strong online education programs pivoted to remote learning at once. But not all students could return to stable homes and some at home still lacked internet access. **The crisis exposed economic inequality on campus.** Administrators also had to adjust for international students with travel restrictions and Pell Grant students with financial need and no residence besides campus housing.

Participants cited that up to 1,000 students remained on campus at one institution. **Staff made accommodations to feed and care for them without putting anyone at risk.** This included providing free meals to students and staff on campus from a campus vendor with plenty of food in the freezer. Another school started a charitable fund to help students in need.

Schools had to pack student belongings in dormitories and put them in storage so buildings could be deep cleaned. Some institutions are just now starting the packing process due to an earlier expectation of student return that did not materialize. Universities on a quarter system had different concerns. Instead of Spring Break, students were taking final exams. **Facilities staff stayed close to student affairs in planning.**

EMPLOYEES

Institutions may have previously invested in online learning for students, but were not uniformly prepared for the technological challenges of remote work for all employees. From an operations perspective, the adjustment was rocky, especially for skilled trades. **The pandemic reveals where colleges and universities are behind on technology.** One institution turned to LinkedIn Learning for online employee training when normal job duties disappeared overnight. Facilities and housekeeping staff returned to campus early with renewed safety precautions. Paid administrative leave kept furloughs at bay, but just how long remains to be seen. Some facilities and safety teams remained on campus to work on capital projects with approaching deadlines.

Construction crews onsite for capital projects at a remote university were accustomed to commuting during the week. The school provided a health facility for them onsite and made arrangements for food to be delivered so the crew did not have to venture into the community.

Universities put an emphasis on preserving research activities and allowing some researchers to stay on campus. Of note is one institution that had several COVID-19 research projects put on high priority to help the national response.

Topic 2: Will Students Show Up? Current Efforts, Scenario Planning, and Alternatives

Colleges and universities are now laser-focused on planning returns to populate campuses in the fall. Many scenarios allow for phased introductions of employees first, ahead of students. Even those populations have been restricted to researchers first, then top-level administrators, then staff and faculty.

Communication will be key to a safe return. Signage will be critical: what the message is and where it is posted. People are looking to university leaders for reassurance and guidance. Communications teams are planning social media campaigns focused on caring for each other and staying safe and healthy.

Most schools agree that students, faculty and staff will return in the fall in some type of hybrid situation. The number of scenarios to plan for are endless, and a common concern among participants is the idea of planning for a "moving target." Without a vaccine in place and plans for reopening relegated to states instead of federal authorities, return to campus will look different at each school.

Return-to-campus possibilities for Fall 2020 include:

1. Restrict student population to 50% on campus, 50% remote.
2. Delay start time for semester and extend the academic year.
3. Early start date with no fall break and early semester end.
4. Bring 50% students back the first half of semester followed by 50% students the second half.
5. Pivot to online for classes with 100+ students; smaller classes remain on campus using new space.

STUDENTS

Residential planning is difficult due to the unknowns. How will enrollment figures be affected if administrators plan for all-single rooms? International students will need to be quarantined for two weeks with food delivered to their rooms. **Classroom capacity is a big topic.** Rooms must serve smaller populations due to social distancing. Private colleges in small towns must consider the community and how they would handle a surge in COVID-19 brought on by returning students.

Athletic departments are planning for different scenarios: no tailgating, reduced ticket sales, and loss of revenue from lucrative media contracts. Student athletes are returning to campus, but travel restrictions will impact where they can compete.

EMPLOYEES

Institutions are planning a very controlled return for employees and are following their state directives. **Some employees may continue to work from home permanently, meaning more space will open on campus.** Many employees are now on task forces at the local and state level to help with planning. When the semester begins, schools must anticipate visitors and student control points on campus to test and evaluate health—no small task. High level policies about social distancing will be finalized soon.

Some institutions are rushing to make decisions due to issues with supply and demand. For example, obtaining polycarbonate (plastic) material for shielding workers is already difficult. A few capital projects, including crucial student housing, are behind due to supply issues.

Universities are learning best practices in safety protocols from contractors on site for capital projects. These can be shared with administrators to enhance health and safety for fall. One positive outcome of the pandemic is a reduction of energy and water consumption on empty campuses.

Departments that depend on receipts for funding, like parking, are rethinking revenue sources. Unknown occupancy makes transportation planning difficult. How many students and employees will want to continue to commute on public transportation? How many will want to buy a parking pass? Is the campus equipped to handle an influx of parking?

Topic 3: Looking to the Future—What Does Fall 2020 Look Like?

Universities and colleges will have to look at balancing a return to campus with a close eye on the bottom line. Students and parents will not want to pay full tuition for a fully online education. **Universities will struggle if they cannot base budgets on full tuition models.** Over-communicating with constituents and finding new ways to foster community are very important.

COVID-19 challenges came at the tail end of many other challenges to university and college officials: crisis planning and security adjustments due to active shooter incidents and major climate disruptions like hurricanes. Schools need to be robust enough to respond to all of these things. **A big challenge is the need to keep shifting focus.**

The pandemic has prompted lively discussions at institutions which are no strangers to discourse. Can face coverings be required? To what extent can contact tracing or card access at doors be enforced? Will adverse student behavior undermine health and safety precautions?

Innovation on campus continues, as one school has already developed a mobile health screening app to test employees before they return to campus via self-reporting and answering a number of travel and health-related questions.

Opportunity abounds despite the challenges. Participants agreed that we will see more creative ways of setting up classrooms for close to full capacity. Space plans are changing every week. **Schools will need to think long-term and design buildings that can be sanitized easily.** The pandemic has presented opportunities to rethink design and campus planning projects. Facilities can take a second look at a Student Health Center in schematic design and make accommodations for pandemic issues. The architecture of a building may look great, but the materials inside make it difficult to clean. Future projects will see more attention to selection of finishes and not just layouts. Campus master plans will be looked at again with a different set of eyes. **Reduced energy and water consumptions will prompt schools to make permanent changes to classrooms and buildings typically open 24/7.** Expect adaptability, sustainability and public health to be at the forefront of planning.

Next Steps: Future Discussions

We want to stay connected! VHB will be hosting several virtual roundtable discussions, connecting varying perspectives across geographies. Future questions and discussions around this roundtable topic include:

» How did staff and faculty adjust to return-to-campus? What accommodations were put in place?

» What types of classroom and facility space planning scenarios are working best?

» What does resiliency planning look like now on your campus? How will design and operation of higher education facilities have to change?

» To what extent did social distancing and safety concerns affect student enrollment?

Connect With Our Institutional Thought Leader

David McIntyre, Institutions Market Leader - DMcintyre@VHB.com