



What Schools and Colleges Have to Rethink for Fall 2020

COVID-19 Issues and the Impact on Education

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The end of August/beginning of September has always felt like the real New Year's celebration for many. It's the start of a new school year and another opportunity to teach, learn, nurture, and grow. In the Boston area, it's when bucolic campuses show off their colors to a new crop of freshmen, and students from all over the world merge, as Bostonians wait to see who will get their moving van stuck under a low bridge on Storrow Drive.

The fall of 2020 will be different. Nobody knows for sure what it will look like, but most would agree that it will be different, which raises many questions for those of us involved in the construction and design of academic facilities. I spent some time over the last several weeks speaking with folks from both Higher Ed and Independent K-12 schools in the Boston area, in a very unscientific survey, to get a feel for what they are thinking, develop a shared understanding of the issues, and generate some ideas to move the conversation forward.

While these discussions haven't provided definitive answers, I hope they give a helpful overview of the landscape as we consider options and opportunities.

Outlook for the Fall Semester and Enrollment Management

For most schools, this is the most significant, most impactful, and most unanswerable question right now. The developing state of this healthcare crisis is something that is out of the control of institutional leadership, and continued closures may be necessary, so schools need to be prepared for this possibility. In discussions with leaders at schools and universities, I heard words like: "daunting," "far-reaching," "infinitely complex," and one person even referred to the whole situation as an "involuntary transformation." Most schools and universities would not be quick to call off the fall semester on their own because of the inherent impacts on education, culture, and of course, finances. For some schools already on the brink, this is a question that impacts their very existence. Many would not be able to weather a fall semester without tuition. The other factor out of the control of schools and universities is the mindset of students and their parents. The emotional and psychological impact on students who have already lost their spring semester on campus is also very real. But will they feel safe enough to return?

Will new students choose to take a gap year instead of having their first college experience take place online? Will returning students decide to come back?

And what about international students? Will they be able to return? Some international students were unable to make it home once travel restrictions were put in place to inhibit the spread of the virus. Others may face issues related to time constraints on their education visas. Most schools that I spoke with were in a very good position with their admission data. Still, as deposits come due, it's clear that the commitment level of students is weaker than last year and that evolving conditions could affect these decisions in significant ways.



Some institutions have begun to make limited decisions, but most are scenario-planning for unknown conditions as the situation continues to evolve. In late April, Harvard announced that it would open on time, but did not confirm in what format that opening would take. Merrimack College, on the other hand, announced that they are planning to open as a full residential campus on time. Many others are waiting for the situation to evolve before making any commitments.

As a way forward is found, it will come with changes, challenges, and compromises. Many of the schools involved in these interviews identified possible changes, including fewer students in classrooms and lecture halls, staggered dining hall times, decentralized dining options, online events, and a mix of online learning added to the curriculum to eliminate large seminar sections. Some are exploring “what-if” scenarios like cutting back enrollment to eliminate shared bedrooms, and prohibiting attendance at sporting events, concerts, and performances, which would have difficulty accommodating social-distancing guidelines.

Summer Programs

With summer fast-approaching and the status of the pandemic in the Northeast still in flux, many institutions are anticipating a significant impact on summer programs. At a minimum, there would be many programs that make the shift online, with the worst-case scenario preparing for full cancellation of many typical offerings. This component of educational programs strikes a deep nerve on a social issue that many schools indirectly serve: childcare.

Many private secondary schools and colleges offer summer camps for children with a range of activities like retreats, art, theater, and athletics that don't easily lend themselves to an online format. These programs provide a service to parents who will need to get back to their jobs once stay-at-home orders begin to ease in different occupations. The cancellation of such programs would put a significant strain on families that rely on this long-trusted option for childcare and enriched summer experience. Those same schools, like colleges, also offer educational programs and training that could more easily move to a web-based meeting application. Still, it's unlikely that revenue would be the same for these programs given demand and a possible lowering of fees. Furthermore, online formats obviously don't offer the same childcare service that on-campus programs provide.

Commencement Ceremonies and Events

With the limitations of social distancing and stay-at-home advisories in effect, spring graduations — as we’ve come to know them — will not be happening in New England in 2020. While some schools are considering an online experience, most are looking to postpone until late summer or early fall. And some are scaling these events back to limit large gatherings and to work around other commitments. The postponements may pose a problem for international students and even long-distance domestic students who may be challenged to return to campus many months after their educational requirements have been completed. Commencement is traditionally a time to showcase the beauty of a residential campus to parents and to reengage alumni through reunions and events. It’s a lost opportunity for schools in their efforts to broaden the appeal and build affinity. It’s also a significant loss to the graduates who relish this time to celebrate their high school or college experience and to solidify those relationships and shared memories with classmates. Senior proms, special events, and long-held traditions that mark this unique moment of passage have already been postponed or canceled. Other institutional events like galas, balls, or fundraisers are also being scrapped or reconsidered, expanding the financial impact of this crisis.

Educating Students Online and Exploring Change

Many have referred to what’s happened in education over the last month as a forced social experiment. In a recent [Boston Business Journal](#) report, Bentley University president Alison Davis-Blake called it an “...unplanned social experiment on a massive scale” and is looking at ways to adapt in the face of this crisis. At the same time, UMass Lowell Chancellor Jacqueline Moloney stated “Quite honestly, I feel that higher education is going to be revolutionized by what happened...It’s been an absolute breakthrough moment...” I’ve heard similar refrains in my one-on-one Zoom calls with school representatives. Is this a point where the industry contracts and those that survive look to innovate by creating sustainable models for both higher education and private secondary schools? It remains to be seen, but this could be looked back upon as a pivotal moment in the evolution of our educational system.



The response to online learning is mixed. Some schools already had robust programs for distance-learning, so the transition to a full online curriculum was reasonably seamless. For others with less experience in this arena, their focus on hands-on teaching methods and interactive classrooms have made the switch extremely difficult for both students and faculty. Still, others have faced technical issues either due to student access or because of limitations with the school’s technology infrastructure. Fixing these types of problems may stress already-strained budgets and take significant time to implement. In some cases, faculty members lack experience with technology and either resist or struggle to adapt. While students are typically more adept with these tools, their experience may fall short of what they’ve come to expect from their institutions.

In addition to improving the delivery of education through technology, schools may need to look at other facets of the current systems to impact meaningful change. New models may challenge the notions of schedule by moving to year-round methods that don’t treat the summer months so differently. There could also be shifts in the makeup of a school week that deconstruct the typical 5-day structure into blocks of time in traditional settings,

with other time spent on things like online learning, service work, or experiential learning activities. This could allow for more students to the share use of campus facilities at different times, increasing the reach of a school with the same facilities at a lower price-point. Others still may abandon the residential model for a combination of online and experiential learning at shared locations. I'm sure some great minds will be working on the possibilities in the months and years to come, but those I spoke with do feel that lasting change is on the horizon.

The Money Issue: Paybacks, Revenue Losses, and New Demands

This is a huge issue that schools and universities everywhere will have to face. It's not only refunds on tuition and housing that are affecting schools, but also a host of other financial impacts costing millions more, including: loss of dining and bookstore revenues, loss of summer program revenues, support of students with moving costs, assistance for students in need during the pandemic, added technology expenses, and added cost on capital projects for COVID-19 requirements and schedule overruns.



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Some senior administrators have taken pay cuts, and many schools have frozen hiring and raises with the hope of avoiding furloughs or layoffs. Others have already had staff layoffs or reorganizations, and more see such measures taking effect as the fiscal year closes.

In addition to revenue losses, the other side of the coin is an increased demand for financial aid. So many parents have sustained salary reductions or job losses, that returning their sons and daughters to independent schools or universities without help is seen as impossible. Some schools are tackling this by engaging their donor base in a cause that hits at the core of many institutions – access and affordability. Many donors who would be slow to fund capital projects or new programs are proving to be more open to making sure that those enduring tough times during this pandemic can continue their education without adding insurmountable debt to their plates.

Many schools have also implemented temporary freezes or delays in capital projects and reprioritization of work with an emphasis on mission-critical, life-safety, and regulatory compliance projects. There could be some benefits to those charged with completing projects with an empty campus – but the loss in revenues greatly outweighs any project efficiencies that could be achieved. In schools where construction has been stopped either by choice or local mandate, how will the pandemic impact capital projects once they are able to continue? Factors like increased safety measures for personal protective equipment (PPE), added staff for ensuring safety, and training for wellness checks, will have impacts on job costs and schedule. Will construction costs escalate, or will contractors hungry for work drive prices downward? Lost time in the schedule for a mandated work-stoppage or for new time-consuming procedures could put ongoing projects in jeopardy for completion – a significant concern, should there be students on campus in the fall. This adds one more factor to the complex equation for the fall semester.

So where is this all heading?

Honestly, with so much still up in the air and uncertainty taking center stage, who knows what happens next. I think the key for institutions at this point is to start to pivot as soon as possible from the crisis-management mode to a more forward-thinking mindset. I know this is very difficult in the midst of financial strain, emotional stress, and uncertainty – especially if the pandemic is pushing exceptionally hard on your institution or threatening its survival. But many I have spoken with are already making that mental switch to start discussions about how to adapt, how to learn from this event, and how important it is for schools to pool resources and share information and help the industry and its institutions evolve. Even before our current crisis, many issues surrounding things like access, affordability, diversity, sustainability, emerging financial models, mindful growth and development, evolving pedagogy, data collection, technology integration, privacy and changing demographics (among others) have been pushing gently on the core traditions of education and its role in our culture. Perhaps this is the catalyst to stimulate the introspective dialogue needed for education to transform effectively.

As an architect, former institutional owner, and current construction professional, my thoughts naturally tend toward considering what design and construction partners can do to help. In recent years, we've become accustomed to the desire for expansive student centers, residence halls that rival hotels, large communal gathering spaces, and dining halls resembling food-courts.

Factors like social distancing, financial strain, rising tuition fatigue, and demographic trends could threaten these notions of what campuses should look like to attract students. Perhaps it needs to start with design and envisioning ways to rethink building uses to be more efficient. Can we be more sustainable and functional without sacrificing the uniqueness of educational support spaces? Will large, open, glass atriums in public spaces lose out to more efficient configurations that allow more informal opportunities for connection? Do we need more flexibility in our designs and in building components, so spaces can adjust to changing needs and the unknown factors that may influence those needs in years to come? Revitalizing older buildings to serve evolving needs in a sustainable way will be a crucial area of focus. Architects can also play a unique role in helping schools study space utilization. Changes in class scheduling approaches could yield efficiencies that may accommodate smaller class sizes brought on by this global pandemic, without adding more space to campus.

The construction profession can also play a role. Construction managers who get involved early enough in the process can partner with institutions and design professionals to share their knowledge as ideas hit the table. Understanding market costs in real-time during design creates an environment where late changes and cost overruns can be avoided. With the large dollar amounts involved, these savings can have a significant impact on



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a school's ability to accomplish other goals like access and affordability, technology enhancements, or program development. Construction managers can also help schools understand their options. If a school is considering a new building but is concerned about the cost, renewal of an existing building through modifications and additions may get them there on a more cost-effective path. Another source of support could be through sustainability. Helping owners understand and price alternative energy approaches and more efficient building system options can yield financial benefits for many years to come, having a lasting impact on operating budgets.

COVID-19 has brought a lot of darkness into our lives as we see its toll manifested in many challenging ways. The virus is indiscriminate. If there is an available host, it makes a home there. So, protecting some people doesn't solve the problem. We have to protect everyone, or this silent enemy continues to spread. This crisis highlights our interconnectedness and our interdependence. At the risk of sounding trite, we all need each other, and this goes for the worlds of higher ed and independent schools as well. We are all more alike than we are different, so we need to form partnerships and rely on each other in the shared mission of educating for the betterment of our society. Perhaps this virus is the impetus needed for us to focus together. As Aristotle put it: "It is during our darkest moments that we must focus to see the light."



About the Author

As a Project Executive at Columbia, one of New England's leading construction management firms, Steve specializes in academic projects. His role is centered on developing and maintaining the trust of clients by providing exceptional service and delivering buildings and spaces that exceed their expectations. With over 30 years of experience, including, leadership roles in both academic facility management and architectural design, Steve finds the planning stage of a project exciting because it charts the vision and sets the stage for project potential.

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