Navigating COVID-19 as a Higher Education Institution

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Higher-education institutions are on the front lines of the COVID-19 outbreak. They are moving on multiple fronts from shifting classes online to providing patient care to directing promising research into vaccines and treatments. This is a critical time for higher-education institutions owing to both the immense resources and talents they are able to deploy against the outbreak and the profound role they play in the lives of millions of students, staff, faculty, and community members.

As the virus impacts more places and exacts an increasing toll, higher-education leaders are facing questions that go beyond immediate logistical considerations. These include:

- In the near-term, how do I best support my core set of stakeholders including students, staff, faculty, and my local community?
- In the medium-term, how do I proactively respond to sustained impacts and potential structural changes?

Our BCG colleagues recently published a piece on hbr.org on how to lead your business through the coronavirus crisis. Many of these ideas are relevant for leaders of all complex organizations, including those in higher education. Of course, higher-education institutions will face unique issues in the current environment. Based on discussions with stakeholders in higher education, as well as BCG’s extensive work with clients in education and other sectors, we have identified a series of actions higher-education leaders should consider.

Near-Term Considerations

The next few weeks will prove exceedingly challenging. How higher-education institutions respond during this period will have major ramifications.

1. **Support the immediate needs of stakeholders.** The suspension of in-person activities is disruptive for all students, but in many cases more so for international students and students from low-income backgrounds. Institutions should place all hands on deck to ensure the needs of each student are met. Institutions should take a similar approach with staff who may be severely impacted by a closed or partially operating campus, including by guaranteeing wages for those working in areas such as janitorial and dining services. Additionally, given that higher-education institutions typically serve as anchors in their local community, now more than ever it is crucial that they listen to those in the community and step up to play a leadership role.

2. **Stand-up a rapid response capability.** In complex organizations, crisis situations call for streamlined decision-making. Leaders must quickly mobilize on several fronts, including
supporting efforts to reduce the risk of transmission, aiding those that are or may be infected, managing workplace flexibility, providing honest and frequent communication, coordinating with key stakeholders, and managing cash levels. To do this effectively, we suggest creating small, agile teams for each critical area and giving each clear decision rights to take action and channels to escalate situations.

3. **Deliver a quality online learning experience.** Translating in-person instruction to online delivery while maintaining quality is not as simple as posting content into a learning management system or using a video conferencing platform. The higher-education field’s understanding of effective online learning techniques has advanced considerably and many resources are available, including BCG’s recent report on Making Digital Learning Work, EDUCAUSE’s COVID-19 resource page, and Quality Matters' standards and rubrics. Given the sudden shift, students and faculty will not expect perfection immediately; however, it is imperative for institutions to invest in advancing their capabilities either through internal investment and/or partnering with outside firms. Furthermore, beyond coursework, it takes a more intentional approach to engage students holistically, including through career services, mental health, library services, and advising. Institutions should leverage multiple channels of communication, actively track interactions, and adjust approaches if engagement numbers are down significantly relative to a normal environment.

4. **Assess and mitigate risk across your research portfolio.** Institutions with research activity must identify those active projects and/or high-stakes proposals that are at risk due to social distancing measures. Armed with this assessment, institutions can appropriately pause projects, ensure remote access to data, and engage funders to keep them abreast.

5. **Communicate early, often, and with empathy.** In times like this, leaders can never communicate enough. Higher-education leaders should be visible to all their constituencies and take a systematic approach that identifies and deploys multiple communication channels; leverages a clear structure that effectively cascades messages throughout the organization; passes information to students, staff, and faculty in a timely manner; and educates stakeholders on COVID-19 as the situation rapidly evolves.

### Medium-Term Considerations

Higher-education leaders will need to make smart strategic moves over the next few months to ensure their institutions’ resilience.

1. **Invest in a robust digital presence.** While crisis communications with current stakeholders is a critical near-term issue, institutions can expect that their entire digital footprint will have increased importance over the coming months. In particular, their online presence will be a factor influencing applicants’ matriculation decisions or creating a first impression among future students. Institutions should put themselves in the audiences’ shoes and pressure-test whether the digital experience delivers across multiple dimensions and make adjustments in areas where it falls short.

2. **Understand how interest and demand in your institution will change.** COVID-19 will have profound impacts on international student mobility, posing a significant financial risk for many institutions. At the same it may spark increased student interest in online and hybrid programs. In order to position themselves to adapt to such demand shifts, institutions should assess their competitive positioning program-by-program and ensure they are offering a compelling value proposition in each one.

3. **Model financial scenarios and mitigate against downside scenarios.** Given the uncertainty of the ultimate impact of the current outbreak, institutions should define scenarios that vary the duration of campus closures and the demand shifts across specific student segments in order to model changes in costs, such as refunding room and board fees, and revenues, such as net tuition. Modeling the financial outcomes of various scenarios will illuminate the range of possibilities and can allow institutions to take proactive measures to be better prepared for any downside case.

4. **Build greater resilience and continuity in operations.** After the immediate dust settles, leaders should spend concerted time on resiliency planning and investing in capabilities that promote more continuous operations no matter what the next crisis may entail.

As serious as the COVID-19 crisis is, it does create an opportunity for those who respond effectively. Leadership can build bridges with faculty, student families, and the local community. And bonds forged in times of uncertainty can deepen loyalties and create ties that bind. In this difficult time, higher education has a tremendous role to play by bracing
its considerable resources and talent to bear on a significant global challenge. To do this institutions must take the right, proactive steps now and in the months ahead.

Please reach out to Tejus Kohari with any questions or comments.